

## Ajñeya translates Ajñeya: the *Nilāmbarī* poems

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Rupert Snell

Not content with being a creative writer in numerous genres, Saccidānand Hirānand Vātsyāyan 'Ajñeya' (1911-1987) was also his own translator and critic. Writing as 'Vātsyāyan', he wrote with apparent objectivity on works published under his pen-name, 'Ajñeya'<sup>1</sup>; and as 'Ajñeya' he presented various selections of his Hindi verse in English translation, often with the collaboration of the American poet and translator Leonard E. Nathan<sup>2</sup>. Translation for Ajñeya was more than simply a way of reaching the wider audience that he so deserved and desired; it also involved a reassessment of the work itself, a second perspective on what had first been written in Hindi. As he himself put it, 'Trying to translate a poem is one way of knowing it better'<sup>3</sup>.

This observation is the starting-point for this short paper on Ajñeya's poetry, in which I have tried to 'know it better' by looking closely at some of the verses translated in the English volume *Nilāmbarī*<sup>4</sup>, published in 1981 with a dedication to Ila Dalmia. Some of the poems also appear in the 1976 collection *Signs and Silence* (though the later versions have in many cases gone through some revision). The original poems are mostly from the period 1965 to 1980, and appear in the second volume of Ajñeya's collected verse, *Nilāmbarī*<sup>5</sup>. Unlike *Signs and Silence*, whose long prefatory section 'Pages from an Undated Diary' (comprising translated extracts from *भवन्ती*) is self-referential in tone, the *Nilāmbarī* poems are allowed to stand for themselves with only the briefest of introductory notes by the poet. Hindi literature has by and large been ill served by its translators, and there are hardly more than a handful of translated works that reflect even dimly the quality of the originals. *Nilāmbarī* is certainly one such book; it shows Ajñeya's gift for an intimacy of feeling matched by an overarching breadth of vision, and communicated by a great sensitivity to English as the target language.

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<sup>1</sup>'Ajñeya' is the spelling used in the *Nilāmbarī* collection: elsewhere, Ajñeya adopts the more fully romanised spelling 'Agyeya'.

<sup>2</sup>Leonard Nathan was Professor of Rhetoric at the University of California, Berkeley.

<sup>3</sup> Agyeya, *Signs and Silence*, Delhi, National Publishing House, 1976, p. 5.

<sup>4</sup> Ajñeya (Sachchidananda Vatsyayan), *Nilāmbarī* (Delhi: Clarion Books, 1981).

<sup>5</sup> अज्ञेय, सदानीरा — सम्पूर्ण कविताएँ (२ खंड ) (दिल्ली, नेशनल पब्लिशिंग हाउस, १९८६).

Given the limitations of space, a selection of the shorter poems has been chosen for discussion here, even though this has necessarily meant passing over some very significant poems such as ‘Winter Ode’ (हेमन्त का गीत), ‘Borrow in the Morning, Lend at Night’ (उधार), ‘Tightrope dancer’ (नाच), and the sequence ‘Sea Signets’ (सागर-मुद्रा); but many points relating to style and to the techniques of translation in the shorter poems do apply more generally.

It is necessary to be clear about the nature of this contrived process of criticism, and about the perspective from which these few examples of poetry have been both written and viewed. Because of the particular circumstances of Ajñeya’s background, there is a certain circularity in this process. First, Ajñeya was a poet in a language which he described as being, for him, ‘an artificial or an artistic or an acquired Hindi, not the natural language or speech’; he remarked that ‘from the very beginning the language I was using was a language that I had neither been born to nor breathed in but a language that I had imbibed’<sup>6</sup>. Though Ajñeya was Panjabi by birth, his father’s career as an archaeologist gave him a peripatetic lifestyle which brought him into contact with a variety of Indian languages and cultures outside the Panjabi- and Hindi-speaking areas; it also gave him an early initiation into the world of antiquity, an experience which was to be broadened by his later travels in the West, leading to a consciousness of the universality of human experience in dimensions of both geographical space and historical time. For Ajñeya, Hindi was not so much a mother-tongue as an adoptive tongue, and his relationship to it, although fully intimate, has a deliberate and self-conscious quality which singles him out from his contemporaries. His familiarity with the English language and its literature, and with European culture, is another important facet of his creativity: he is one of a small number of Hindi writers whose poetic imagination draws almost as freely on European allusion as it does on the more familiar and domestic Indian sources. And if Ajñeya feels the need to profess himself an outsider (or perhaps a convert) to the world of Hindi, then the author of this paper must own up to his own audacity as a reader of Ajñeya’s who came to Hindi only in adulthood, and who cannot cast off entirely the baggage of a Eurocentric world-view.

Despite the many qualities of Ajñeya’s auto-translations (which I hope will be made evident by what follows), almost every example provides some support for Robert Frost’s inelegant but incontrovertible maxim that ‘poetry is what gets lost in translation’. Given the gulf between the phonetic and semantic characters of source- and target-languages such as Hindi

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<sup>6</sup>Lothar Lutze, *Hindi Writing in Post-colonial Literature: a Study in the Aesthetics of Literary Production* (Delhi, Manohar, 1985) p. 84.

and English respectively, it would be surprising if it were otherwise. This paper investigates the chapter-and-verse of this process of loss; more positively, it aims to show how Ajñeya exploits sound and form in the service of meaning: how connections of sense and sentiment are reinforced by phonetic parallels, rhyme, and features of phrase and line construction. Given the complexity and culture-specific nature of this process, which depends so much upon semantic fields established over centuries of language use, the possibility of a given figure of speech being genuinely and fully ‘translatable’ is largely a matter of mere chance. When such chances do occur, there is a special delight in the resulting translation; when they do not, there is consolation in the fact that the failure of the translation helps us to appreciate more keenly the qualities and inner workings of the original poem.

A good starting point is ‘Dawn in Winter’, which succeeds in conveying much of the bittersweet feeling of the original Hindi poem *शिशिर का भोर* –

*शिशिर का भोर*

उतना-सा प्रकाश  
कि अँधेरा दीखने लगे,  
उतनी-सी वर्षा  
कि सन्नाटा सुनाई दे जाये;  
उतना-सा दर्द कि याद आये  
कि भूल गया हूँ,  
भूल गया हूँ . . .

DAWN IN WINTER

Faint spread of light  
giving shape to darkness.  
Soft fall of rain  
giving voice to silence.  
Slow throb of pain reminding me  
That I have forgotten,  
I have forgotten

The poem is almost painfully intense in both languages. The verse consists of a series of three propositions, each introduced by a verbless phrase: in the Hindi, each proposition begins with the word ‘उतना’; in the English, a similar phrase construction is repeated three times in ‘faint spread of light...soft fall of rain...slow throb of pain’. This thrice-repeated structure links in our minds the three elements described by the poem: the light, the rain, the pain. The three-part series is what in Hindustani musical terms would be a *tihāī* — a repeated pattern consummated and resolved by a climax<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup>The Hindi poem actually ends in suspension with three dots, a convention which in English creative writing is mostly restricted to showing interrupted speech. (Whether by design or by accident, the English poem approximates the same effect by omitting a full stop.) Regarding the logic of the printing convention in which these three dots are aligned with the head-line of the Nagari characters, see Rupert Snell, ‘The Hidden Hand: English Lexis, Syntax and Idiom as Determinants of Modern Hindi Usage’, *South Asia Research* 10, No.1, (May 1990), pp. 53-68.

Although the two versions share this structure, various shifts of emphasis mark the English poem. Firstly, the substitution of specific and distinctive adjectives in ‘*faint spread...soft fall...slow throb*’ for the Hindi’s repeated ‘उतना-सा’ diminutive construction gives the English poem a more literal and closely defined sense, less open in reference than the original; it also detracts from the interconnectedness of the three propositions, whose sequence is effective precisely because it equates, through the repeated ‘उतना-सा’ phrase, the objectively observed ‘light’ and ‘rain’ with the subjectively felt inner ‘pain’ of the narrative voice. The second significant shift in the English translation is one which is to appear many times in the *Nilāmbarī* poems, and relates to the literary effects determined by linguistic choices — namely the selection of voice (in the grammatical sense) and the transitivity of verb constructions in the Hindi and the English respectively. Indicative transitive verbs in the English phrases ‘light/ giving shape to darkness...rain/ giving voice to silence...pain reminding me’ suggest a direct causal link between the two halves of each proposition; by contrast, the Hindi subjunctive and intransitive verbs suggest a spontaneous process in which the darkness, the silence and the recollection simply *happen*, rather than being actually *caused* to occur — ‘कि अँधेरा दीखने लगे...कि सन्नाटा सुनाई दे जाये...कि याद आये’. The literal meaning may be similar; but the radically augmented implication of *causality* marks a distinct shift in the poetic sensibility of the verse.

Transitivity is again an issue in the short poem *समाधि-लेख*, which in some respects finds a closely literal reflection in the English ‘Epitaph’:

*समाधि-लेख*

एक समु’, एक हवा, एक नाव,  
 एक आकांक्षा, एक याद :  
 जो सब थे मुझे प्यारे :  
 इन्हीं के लाये मैं यहाँ आया ।  
 यानी तुम्हारे ।  
 पर तुम कहाँ हो ? कौने-से किनारे ?

EPITAPH

A sea, a wind, a boat,  
 A yearning, a memory,  
 I loved them all:  
 They drove me to this ground.  
 — That is, you did.  
 But where are you? On what shore?

The opening two lines comprise a simple list, translated literally: only Ajñeya’s innovative use of colons, lending gravity and significance to the pivotal clause ‘जो सब थे मुझे प्यारे’ which they isolate from the rest of the poem, distinguishes the Hindi here. But even in such a simple clause as that just quoted, the English version is characterised by a more specific sense of ‘agency’, eroding the open-ended reference of the original; whereas the Hindi maintains as verb subjects the five listed items of the opening lines, further subjugating the ‘I’ both grammatically and by

placing it late in the sentence order (literally ‘which all were to me dear’), the English strides in with a determined transitive verb and an immediate affirmation of ‘I’ as subject: ‘I loved them all’. This change introduces an atmosphere of banal agency and self-determined causality which is alien to the spirit of the poem, where the self is subjected to influences not of its own determining. That sense of agency in the English is augmented in the next line, where the verb pattern ‘I loved them...’ is echoed by the similar syntax of ‘They drove me...’. The subtlety of the Hindi here derives from using a participial construction in ‘इन्हीं के लाये मैं यहाँ आया’ (literally ‘through their bringing I came’) in which the action is one of influence and inspiration rather than the more crude insistence of the English ‘they drove me’; the Hindi has a gentler aspect, perfectly captured phonetically by a sequence of soft vowels and semi-vowels, the relationship between the actions of ‘bringing’ (‘लाये’) and ‘coming’ (‘आया’) itself being reflected in alliteration between the two verbs. Finally, the participial construction provides (apparently spontaneously, although that spontaneity of course conceals the poet’s skill) the rhyme-word ‘तुम्हारे’, linking in a rhymed trio the three vital elements of the poem: ‘प्यारे...तुम्हारे...कौने-से किनारे’.

In another very short poem, *काँपती है*, specific features of the Hindi and English languages force a wide distinction between the two versions.

*काँपती है*

पहाड़ नहीं काँपता,  
न पेड़, न तराई;  
काँपती है ढाल पर के घर से  
नीचे झील पर झरी  
दिये की लौ की  
नन्ही परछाई ।

THE MOUNTAIN DOES NOT TREMBLE

The mountain does not tremble  
Nor the trees, nor the valley:  
It is the small glow of the light  
From the house on the hillside  
Mirrored in the lake  
That trembles.

The Hindi poem is a small miracle of compression: its first section is expressed in just seven words. The English on the other hand is lumbered with the wordiness of the definite article: the space-greedy word ‘the’ appears no less than eight times, accounting for 25% of the poem’s length — poor substitute for the conciseness of the original. Semantically, too this ‘the’ is burdensome: *पहाड़ नहीं काँपता* has the untranslatable benefit of being both general and specific — ‘a/the mountain does not tremble’, which again leaves the Hindi poem more openly allusive than its English counterpart.

The poem depicts the frailness, but also the persistence, of human existence, expressed by the little phrase ‘नन्ही परछाई’, the ‘small glow of the light’ (‘glow’ is closer in tone to *tadbhava*

‘परछाई’ than literal ‘reflection’, with its Latinate ring). A contrast is made between the permanence of the immoveable hillside — a mountain is, after all, अचल — and the tentative flickering of the lamp symbolizing the vulnerability of human life amidst the inanimate landscape. In English the phrase ‘the small glow of the light’ sits securely in the centre of the verse; but in Hindi the ‘नन्ही परछाई’ is held over until the very end of a long and elaborate construction — ‘ढाल पर के घर से / नीचे झील पर झरी / दिये की लौ की / नन्ही परछाई’; coming at the very end of the poem the phrase is singled out, given a privileged and exclusively isolated position in which its full effectiveness is emphasized. In this position, ‘नन्ही परछाई’ caps the verse by providing the long-awaited subject for that long pre-modifying phrase: not until this final point do we come to know the resolution of the *positive* counter-statement to the *negative* opening line, पहाड़ नहीं काँपता. Since Hindi is a ‘subject-object-verb’ language, in which a rhetorically neutral sentence order will always place the subject *before* the verb, the holding back of the subject until sentence-final position also gives it added poetic emphasis. The subject-word ‘परछाई’, when it does finally arrive, is found to have been trailed by an anticipatory sequence of *-p-* alliteration which began in the poem’s title, continued through the first four lines, was briefly suppressed in the fifth, and recurs here for a last time. And in the Hindi version, the repetitive का/ की /के construction suggests the connectedness of things (compare the repeated ‘उतना-सा’ in the previous poem), lending an integration to the vision of the poem which is less fully apparent in the English.

‘Integration’ is a key word in the character of Ajñeya’s verse. Each poem grows organically from the seed of its own idea, giving a natural and unforced progression from line to line. This sense is carried not just intellectually or semantically by the logic of a poem’s narrative, but also phonetically by a close harmony of alliteration, rhythm and rhyme. Another short poem, equally compact in both versions, shows this clearly.

कोहरे में भूज

कोहरे में नम, सिहरा

खड़ा इकहरा

उजला तन

भूज का ।

बहुत सालती रहती है क्या

परदेशी की

याद, यक्षिणी ?

TREE IN FOG

Wetly shivering

Whitely slender

Birch tree

Ghostly in the fog.

Does the thought

Of the traveller far away

Hurt too deeply, *Yakshini* ?

The English version manages alliteration between the opening of the two first lines; but the Hindi poem has many more tricks up its phonetic sleeve. The first verse is dominated by a sequence of words ending with long *-ā* vowels — ‘सिहरा / खड़ा इकहरा...उजला...’ and ‘का’; and against what Ajñeya calls the ‘full resonance’<sup>8</sup> of these long vowels the monosyllables of the key words ‘नम’ and ‘तन’ stand out in sharp contrast. Then in the second verse, words with *-ī* endings take over — ‘सालती रहती-परदेशी की...यक्षिणी’, accompanied by a smooth sequence of soft dental consonants and semi-vowels. The alliteration is neither showy nor obtrusive: it is not surface decoration, but an integral part of the construction of the poem. The effect is compelling: when the poem is so integrated as a sequence of *sounds*, then the reader feels an intuitive acceptance of the *meaning* of the poem also.

Lexis, line construction and word order are also highly significant components of the Hindi poem’s effect. The translation ‘wetly’, a necessary contrivance for the alliteration with ‘whitely’, is poor translation for the softer, labial, misty moistness of ‘नम’; the Hindi word is foregrounded here by a transformation of the title of the poem ‘कोहरे में भूज’ into the opening phrase of the first line ‘कोहरे में नम’ (‘भूज’ is then withheld until the end of the verse; compare the treatment of ‘नन्ही परछाई’ in the previous poem). Harsher criticism might be reserved for the adjective ‘ghostly’, far too macabre a choice for the delicacy of this poem (and perhaps prompted subliminally by a भूज / भूत parallelism?<sup>9</sup>). In terms of prosody, progressive erosion of line length from first to last line leaves the tree standing alone and isolated at the end of the first stanza: verse construction reproduces verse content. A similar effect is achieved in the first line of the second stanza, where the extended participle construction of ‘सालती रहती है’ suggests the painful duration of suffering, while the conversational tone of the line, with interrogative ‘क्या?’ *following* the clause it governs, suggests the intimacy of a personally felt concern.

A formal integration of sound and meaning is found in many of the Hindi poems. Although most are in free verse, many have a formal construction which echoes the tight composition of classical Hindi poetry. To some extent this is a function of grammar, as for example when the position of the verb at the end of the sentence guarantees a rhyme. The poem *अलाव* is bound together by a sequence of rhyming gerunds:

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<sup>8</sup> *Signs and Silence* p. 16.

<sup>9</sup>I owe this suggestion to Gopal Gandhi.

अलाव

माघ : कोहरे में अंगार की सुलगन ।  
अलाव के ताव के घेरे के पार  
सियार की आँखों की जलन  
  
सन्नाटे में जब-तब चिनगी की चटकन  
सब मुझे याद है : मैं थकता हूँ  
पर चुकती नहीं मेरे भीतर की भटकन ।

CAMP FIRE

January: glow of embers lighting up the fog.  
Beyond the globe of warmth  
The eyes of the jackal: coals aflame.  
The silence broken now and then by flying  
sparks.  
I remember it all. The memory wearies me  
But the wanderlust within me is not sated.

The Hindi composition here is really striking. The outer lines of each of the two stanzas all show a rhyming gerund, always feminine: 'की सुलगन', 'की जलन', 'की चटकन', 'की भटकन'. Further interconnections appear in the alliteration of 'अलाव...ताव'; 'पार...सियार'; 'चिनगी...चटकन'; 'मुझ...मैं...मेरे'; 'थकता...चुकती'; 'भीतर...भटकन'. The poem unfolds as it proceeds, with one alliterative sequence flowing into the next. The English version contents itself with a fairly literal translation of meaning, not bothering to reproduce these elements of form. Another change in the English is that it again introduces a more causal, transitive aspect to the verb constructions, a process parallel to that referred to in *शिशिर का भोर* above: 'glow of embers *lighting up* the fog', and 'the silence *broken* now and then by flying sparks', 'the memory *wearies* me'; the explicit causality of these wordings takes away a sense of the spontaneity of events and replaces it with a more assertive statement of the way things are, and are made to be.

Lexis is again an important issue here. The advantageous monosyllable of the opening word 'माघ' is unmatched by the polysyllabic 'January', whose length dissipates the wintry drama. The progressive sequence 'सुलगन...जलन...चटकन', beginning with a smoulder and ending with a crackle, is belied by the insipid choices 'glow...lighting up...aflame...flying', whose lack of grammatical parallelism (compared to the Hindi's sustained sequence of gerunds) again detracts from the poem's power; and the English imagery remains within the semantic field of 'light', whereas the Hindi progresses from light to onomatopaeic sound with the line 'सन्नाटे में जब-तब चिनगी की चटकन' (in which the staccato, jabbing 'जब-तब' adds to the shock of the crackling sparks).

The opening lines of the sublime poem *देहरी पर*, too long to quote in full, are the best example of the integration of sound in Ajñeya's verse composition. A detailed reading of this

poem, and a comparison with its English version, would revisit many of the points concerning form and structure already made above.

देहरी पर

मैं जगा : जागते ही मुझे लगा  
कि मैं ने एक सपना देखा था ।  
सपने का कुछ भी याद न आया  
सिवा इस के कि ऐसा मुझे लगा  
कि मैं अभी-अभी सपना देखता ही जगा ।

ON THE EDGE

I woke up feeling I'd had a dream,  
Though I could remember nothing about the  
dream  
Only the feeling: I'd woken up from a dream.

The Hindi verse, occupying five lines with weak end-rhyme, is shot though with internal rhyme and alliteration, giving it a strong unity of construction and a sense of organic wholeness. The formula 'जगा...लगा...लगा...जगा' is a set of cornerstones for the construction of the verse (distantly echoing the repeated syllables of Giridhar's Braj *Kuṇḍaliyās*); within the stanza, alliteration based on the consonant *-k-* forms a mesh of sound stretched between these points. The short, cautious lines of the verse suggest the partial consciousness of someone groping their way from sleep to wakefulness: each line adds step-by-step to the accumulating meaning. The English lines, by contrast, are contracted to just three, each a fuller and grammatically more complex statement and hence less suggestive of that half-dreaming state. And as the poem continues beyond this initial extract, we come to see the significance of the Hindi title, literally 'on the threshold [of awareness]' — a sense which is lost in the English phrase with its dramatic intimation of impending crisis.

Two further examples of poems integrated by rhyme in the Hindi are *जो पुल बनायेंगे*, and *काल की गदा*, in both of which a sequence of future-tense verbs links the short lines.

जो पुल बनायेंगे

जो पुल बनायेंगे  
वे अनिवार्यतः  
पीछे रह जायेंगे ।  
सेनाएँ हो जायेंगी पार  
मारे जायेंगे रावण  
जयी होंगे राम;  
जो निर्माता रहे  
इतिहास में  
बन्दर कहलायेंगे ।

ON BUILDING BRIDGES

Those who build bridges  
Will inevitably  
Be left behind.  
The armies will cross over  
The Ravana's will die in battle  
The Ramas be acclaimed as victors:  
The builders  
Will be known to history  
As monkeys.

काल की गदा

काल की गदा

एक दिन

मुझ पर गिरेगी ।

गदा

मुझे नहीं भायेगी<sup>10</sup> :

पर उस के गिरने की नीरव छोटी-सी ध्वनि

क्या काल को सुहायेगी ?

TIME'S HAMMER

Time's hammer

Will fall on me one day.

I shall not like the hammer

But will Time relish

The too small sound

Of its falling?

In the first poem, a backbone of future-tense verbs leads progressively from the head of the poem to its foot — or rather to its tail. At first the impersonal ‘जो पुल बनायेंगे’ leaves us uncertain about which particular bridges are being discussed; then we come to realise the Ramayan context; and finally the tail of the poem invokes the image of Rama’s monkey army. The last section begins with the same word ‘जो’ that opened the poem, anticipating the sense of rounded conclusion that the phrase ‘बन्दर कहलायेंगे’ brings to the verse. The construction is such that ‘बन्दर कहलायेंगे’ caps the whole poem — neither Ajñeya nor indeed Hanuman would object if we called it a ‘punchline’ — and yet at the same time it is fully integrated with the rhymes that precede it. One thinks of the couplets of Bihārī or Matirām, in which the closing syllables are a key to unlock the meaning of the whole verse.

The image of the Ramayan’s monkey builders may be lost on non-Indian readers; it is an image which links levity with piety, and Ajñeya’s subtle injection of irony allows the whole poem to be at once humorous and serious. The poor unsung monkeys are the subalterns of Rama’s army, and represent metaphorically a much broader category of beings in our own world who despite their heroic bridge-building efforts are never mentioned in despatches.

The line construction of the two versions is closely similar, and a contrast with the generally vernacular and colloquial tone of the poem is equally well caught by Sanskrit ‘अनिवार्यतः’ in the Hindi and by Latinate ‘inevitably’ in the English, both words being polysyllabically suggestive of a formalised destiny beyond the control of the individual. But the Hindi lines ‘मारे जायेंगे रावण / जयी होंगे राम’ bear sophistications denied to any English translation: the plural number of the subjects may be taken as either numerical (as insisted upon

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<sup>10</sup> Corrected from नायेगी on the basis of the poet’s recitation of this poem.

by the English ‘The Ravana’s...The Ramas’, complete with definite articles), or as honorific, such as might be considered the due of figures such as Rama and Ravana. The superfluous addition of definite articles also detracts unnecessarily from an effective parallelism with the final item in the series: ‘*The* armies...*The* Ravana’s...*The* Ramas...*The* builders...[but] *monkeys*’. Furthermore, the semantic opposition in the Hindi between ‘मारे जायेंगे’ ‘will be killed’ and ‘जयी होंगे’ ‘will be victorious’ is itself playfully contradicted by a close phonetic parallel in ‘जायेंगे / जयी’, suggesting that both winners and losers alike are involved in the game of life at a more prestigious level than the poor neglected bandar-log.

The second of these short poems, *काल की गदा*, makes similar use of future tense rhymes — ‘गिरेगी, भायेगी, सुहायेगी’. The formal quality of this structure saves the Hindi from lapsing into the slight fainness which somehow mars the English version. The Hindi poem gives the ‘गदा’ a line all to itself in the second stanza, emphasising its stark drama (it is after all a mace or club, rather more apocalyptic an instrument than the humble domestic ‘hammer’); and alliteration between ‘गदा’ and ‘गिरना’ suggests an inexorable connection between the weapon and its falling — the dharma of the गदा is necessarily to *fall* on somebody.<sup>11</sup> The poem’s purpose is to contrast the finality of that falling, whose effect is certainly terminal, with the almost inaudible sound of the blow, suggestive of the insignificance of individual mortality. The poet chooses some special vocabulary to convey this important contrast: the Hindi has the paradox of a ‘नीरव ध्वनि’ — a ‘silent sound’; the English turns for poetic effect to ‘too small sound’, an adjectival expression which in neutral speech would be predicative, not attributive (in everyday language we might well say ‘my salary is too small’; but only in wistfully self-pitying mood would we talk of ‘my too-small salary’). In both languages, then, specialized poetic diction in this line is chosen to emphasize the central statement of the poem.

Ramayan motifs are found again in the poem *भले आये*, an intimate address to Rama. This appears in English in a fundamentally altered form with the title ‘Thank You, God’, where the personal connection between devotee and deity is played down very considerably, and the darbar imagery of the Hindi poem is dispensed with altogether. So radical is the re-writing of the English version that a detailed stylistic comparison with the Hindi original would be

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<sup>11</sup>The ‘hammer’ motif is used again in a poem by Ajñeya quoted in an essay on ‘The time order of experience’ (where he quotes himself alongside Bhartrhari, Donne, Baudelaire, Fitzgerald/Khayyam and D.H. Lawrence): ‘I am simply a sack puffed out with air, / Tied at the mouth with ageing, / And promised to death: / And yet there’s this other thing, this love, / That can set me free right in the middle of life. / This child of an instant can toss aside, / As if in play, Time’s stunning hammer. (S.H. Vatsyayan, *A Sense of Time: an Exploration of Time in Theory, Experience and Art* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1981, pp. 20, 30.)

inappropriate here; but the point remains that the translator has judged the specifically Indian myth-motif unfit for travel, and has substituted a more universal imagery for the specifically Indian figure of Rama.

If Ramayan-based poems demand some knowledge of Indian narrative, there are many others whose point of reference is outside India, and which reflect Ajñeya's citizenship of a broader cultural world. The same irony which Ajñeya brings to Rama's monkey allies is brought to bear on contrasted conceptions of love amongst the Greeks and the Egyptians respectively:

विषय : प्यार

यहाँ  
हेलास के द्वीपों में  
हम अपनी बहुओं को प्यार करते हैं  
और चाहते हैं कि वे  
जैसी हैं उस से कुछ दूसरी होतीं ।

वहाँ गिब्त में  
वे वेश्याओं को प्यार नहीं करते  
पर चाहते हैं कि वे  
जैसी हैं वैसी ही रहें,  
वैसी ही रहें !

CONCERNING LOVE

Here on the isles of Hellas  
We love our wives  
And wish they were somehow  
Different from what they are.

There in Egypt  
They don't love whores  
But like them always to remain  
What they are.

Footnotes to the Hindi text gloss Hellas as the Greek archipelago, and गिब्त as a name for Egypt. Such commentary is helpful, but ultimately unnecessary, since the irony of the poem is universal, and equally accessible through both languages. The English reader, however, has no access to the pun of the Hindi title 'विषय : प्यार', which can be read as either 'Subject: love' or 'Sexuality: love'. ('Affairs of love' would be a weak adumbration of the pun.) And again the relatively bland wording of the English version shows by contrast the harmonious sophistication of the Hindi: a correspondence between the first and second verses is closely maintained, as in so many poems, by linguistic structure — here the appearance of a 'जैसा' construction at the close of each verse. Finally, the concise Hindi clause 'वैसी ही रहें' allows that beautifully plangent repeat which injects such strong yearning into the conclusion of the poem — 'वैसी ही रहें, वैसी ही रहें !'

Turning now to a poem whose formal elements in the Hindi are closely matched in the English, we find one of the strongest poems in the *Nilāmbarī* collection.

कल दिखी आग

दीखने को तो  
कल दिखी थी आग  
पर क्या जाने उस के करने थे फेरे  
या उसमें झोंकना था सुहाग !

चिह्न तो सब दिखता है  
पर दुजिब्भा है विधाता —  
उस का लिखा पढ़ा तो सब जाता है  
पर समझ में कुछ नहीं आता ।

— और सपना सुन  
बताता है सयाना  
जजमान हैं बड़भाग  
जिसे कल दिखी थी आग. . .

AS FOR VISIONS

As for visions — I dreamt last night  
Of fire:  
Who knows if it was of Love's sacrament  
Or a crematory pyre?

Fate sends no omens,  
Speaking with a double tongue.  
We read what has been written:  
We do not comprehend.

The soothsayer hears the dream  
And interprets. He is sure  
The client is greatly blessed  
Who saw Fire the night before.

Here, the English is as much a commentary on the Hindi as it is a straightforward translation. The shift in languages has meant also a shift in cultures, and the ritualistic Indian symbolism of fire has had to be represented quite differently in its English form. How skilfully the translation catches the *dhvani* of that second couplet, while quite radically altering the actual wording; and the Hindi rhyme of 'आग. ...सुहाग' is well caught in 'fire...pyre'. (The 'आता' rhyme-scheme of the middle stanza anticipates and is complemented by बताता in the final stanza; the seer's pronouncement is thereby formally linked to the meditations of the middle stanza, and is given an emphasis appropriate to the resolution of the poem.) The English poem has a life of its own. Its use of the noun 'visions' is more explicit than the Hindi's allusive use of the simple verb 'दिखना'; it suggests a context of Christian metaphysics, reinforced by the words 'sacrament' and 'blessed'<sup>12</sup>, and creating a new set of cultural allusions to replace the images inherent in the Hindi words 'विधाता, सयाना, जजमान, बड़भाग' as well as in the specific references to the performance of Indian marriage and funeral rites. In a process noted above, the assertiveness of active/transitive verbs in the English lines 'We read what has been written:/ We do not comprehend' again contrasts with the passive/intransitive Hindi equivalents. Above all, the English poem is marked by the most forceful weapon in the armoury of the roman script — the use of capital letters: 'Love' in line three and 'Fire' in the last line are lent a drama which elevates them from everyday usage and adds weight to their symbolism.

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<sup>12</sup>There is also a pseudo-biblical quality to the grammar of English 'Who saw Fire...', in which the relative pronoun 'who' stands as independent clause subject.

Similar issues are at play in the next poem, whose Hindi version is the fourth in a sequence of twenty-seven poems having the running title चक्रान्त शिला. Eight of the poems in this cycle are translated in *Signs and Silence*<sup>13</sup>, and one of them, under the separate title ‘As the light fell’, appears in an amended form in *Nīlāmbarī* :

चक्रान्त शिला - ४

किरण जब मुझ पर झरी  
मैं ने कहा :  
मैं वज्र कठोर हूँ —  
पत्थर सनातन ।

किरण बोली :  
भला ? ऐसा !  
तुम्हीं को तो खोजती थी मैं :  
तुम्हीं से मन्दिर गढ़ूँगी  
तुम्हारे अन्तःकरण से  
तेज की प्रतिमा उकेरूँगी ।

स्तब्ध मुझ को  
किरण ने  
अनुराग से दुलरा लिया ।

AS THE LIGHT FELL

As the light fell upon me  
I said:  
I'm hard as rock  
As the prime rock.

The light said: Ah,  
Is that so?  
Then it's here I quarry  
For a new tabernacle.  
From the self of your self I will hew  
A shape of fire.

My self, shattered,  
The light held lovingly then.

What is striking here is the distinction in vocabulary choices between the two poems. The Hindi is much more specialized than the English — ‘किरण’ is not just ‘light’, but rather ‘shaft of light, ray’; ‘झरना’ is not just ‘to fall’, but rather ‘to cascade, flow’; ‘वज्र-कठोर’, is not just ‘hard as rock’, but specifically ‘adamantine’ (and furthermore comprises a metaphorical adjectival compound, compared with which the analytical simile ‘hard as rock’ has a very prosaic ring); the Sanskrit loan ‘तेज’ has meanings of luminosity and radiant power (perhaps further enhanced in some perceptions by the senses of Persian-derived तेज़ ) well beyond the semantic range of humdrum ‘fire’. Ajñeya has again settled for an English version much less culturally marked than the Hindi; and although some changes are culture-bound, such as the effective rendering of ‘मन्दिर’ as ‘tabernacle’ (or ‘shrine’ in the *Signs and Silence* version), the movement from original to translation is generally one of impoverishment of sense. In lines such as ‘तुम्हारे अन्तःकरण से / तेज की प्रतिमा उकेरूँगी’ the Sanskritic vocabulary of the Hindi locks into a grid of meaning derived from and redolent of the Hindu tradition, whereas the English is

<sup>13</sup>*Signs and Silence*, p.145.

denied such specific cultural significance. Yet the poetic quality of the Hindi is well matched in the English when the hard, sharp, ‘rock’ imagery of the earlier lines gives way to a softness of both meaning and sound with the *-l-* alliteration<sup>14</sup> of the last lines: ‘अनुराग से दुलरा लिया’ and ‘the light held lovingly then’.

The general argument of this paper has been that subtleties of Ajñeya’s Hindi poetry have not always been adequately reproduced in the English translations, which can only hint at the poetic qualities of the originals. It is appropriate to conclude with a counter-example — a poem which, for this reader at least, ‘works’ better in English than in Hindi.

जाड़ों में

लोग बहुत पास आ गये हैं ।  
पेड़ दूर हटते हुए  
कुहासे में खो गये हैं  
और पंछी (जो ऋत्विक् हैं)  
चुप लगा गये हैं ।

IN THE WINTER

People suddenly come too close. Trees  
Recede into mist.  
Birds (the litanists)  
Fall silent.

The verb constructions chosen in the Hindi here seem unnecessarily cluttered: compound verb constructions with ‘जाना’, further extended by ‘होना’ auxiliary, make for an unwelcome prolixity (‘आ गये हैं, खो गये हैं, चुप लगा गये हैं’) which compares unfavourably with the smooth economy of the English clauses; the long phrase ‘पेड़ दूर हटते हुए / कुहासे में खो गये हैं’ is managed in English in less half the length, with little loss in significance. It is not that the English phrasing is identical in sense to the Hindi (‘चुप लगा गये हैं’, for example, has a more active connotation than ‘fall silent’; and the enjambement of ‘Trees / Recede into mist’ is not a typical Ajñeya feature), but rather that the overall effect of the English seems, on this one occasion, poetically superior. The translator has judiciously banished the English definite article; only in ‘the litanists’ is it allowed to stand, and here as substitute for what in Hindi has necessarily to be a full relative clause with ‘जो’. The success of the translation, however, pivots on the perfect lexical choice of ‘litanists’, which evokes precisely the recondite and specialised allusion of the Hindi ‘ऋत्विक्’ .

An analysis of *Nilāmbarī* suggests that some quite specific cultural and linguistic factors underlie the distinction separating the English poems from their Hindi originals, and a brief

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<sup>14</sup>The Hindi alliteration actually exploits the additional phonetic parallel of *-l-* and *-r-*, inaccessible to the English.

survey of these may be appropriate as a conclusion to this paper. The first and most obvious factor is the culture-bound references of certain of the Hindi poems; this has been seen in *जो पुल बनायेंगे* / ‘On Building Bridges’ and *कल दिखी आग* / ‘As for Visions’, where allusions specific to an Indian world of meaning have either to be universalized (as where ‘Rama’ becomes simply ‘God’ in ‘Thank you, God’), or left for readers to interpret as best they can (as in the Ramayan references of ‘In Building Bridges’, the un glossed ‘Yakshini’ of ‘Tree in Fog’, or indeed the playfully untranslated Hindi title of the collection, *Nīlāmbarī*<sup>15</sup>), or replaced by approximations drawn from Western/Christian culture (as where the Indian motifs of *कल दिखी आग* are transposed into a Western world of symbolism in ‘As for Visions’).

Other translation issues relate to linguistic contrasts between Hindi and English. The most basic of these concerns phonetic and grammatical features of Hindi which are difficult to reproduce in a non-Indian language: the syllabic construction of Hindi makes for a particular effectiveness of alliteration, shown to great advantage in lines such as the incomparable ‘सन्नाटे में जब-तब चिनगी की चटकन’ (from *अलाव*), whose sublime exploitation of consonant sounds would be enough to make most translators throw up their hands in despair.

At the level of the sentence, there are two structural features in Hindi which have no close parallel in English. Firstly, sentence construction tends to be paratactic: clauses form autonomous units within the sentences they belong to, and may thereby be foregrounded for some special poetic effect. An example is the relative-correlative ‘जैसी / वैसी’ construction in *विषय : प्यार*, which maintains a close formal parallel between the two stanzas of the poem; the final line ‘वैसी ही रहें’ derives its full emotive effect from the fact that it stands isolated and alone, whereas the equivalent phrase in the English loses impact by being embedded within the longer clause ‘But like them always to remain / What they are’. Secondly, the analytical nature of the Hindi language allows the inter-connectedness of things to be seen clearly, like a clockwork mechanism whose various cogs and wheels are seen through a glass case: the long list of genitive case relationships expressed through a repeated use of ‘का’ in the poem *काँपती है* has already been pointed out in this regard (and it is no accident that the concept of ‘connectedness’ appears many times throughout the discussion of Ajñeya’s verse).

Another relevant linguistic category is a composite one in which a combination of the mood, voice, transitivity<sup>16</sup>, tense and aspect of verb formations all contribute to the capacity in

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<sup>15</sup>*Nīlāmbarī* is the name of a somewhat obscure *rāga*, but also signifies ‘the azure sky’.

<sup>16</sup>Hindi makes a far greater formal distinction between transitive and intransitive verbs than does English, where a single verb form typically does duty for both: Hindi टूटना and तोड़ना are

Hindi for expressions which are characteristically impersonal, passive, non-finite (in both grammatical and general senses), non-assertive, spontaneous, non-causal, and in other ways marked by an open, circumspect and tentative quality. Various examples from the *Nilāmbarī* poems have shown the English verb constructions to be more categorically determined in respect of their causality than their more open-ended Hindi equivalents; the direction from Hindi original to English translation is always one in which statements become increasingly finite, with a limiting of choices, possibilities, allusions and poetic ambiguities. The English versions tend as a result to become more literal, earthbound and prosaic than the originals.

Finally, Ajñeya's poetry is also marked by extreme economy of expression, especially in the short poems discussed here. This economy is facilitated by general features of the Hindi language, such as the absence of a definite article, and the potential for compounds on the model of Sanskrit; but it is further aided by Ajñeya's own felicitous selection of concise verb forms. Future tense verbs in the poems *जो पुल बनायेंगे* and *काल की गदा* show an economy unmatched by their English translations: the blithe acceptance of destiny suggested by the succinct 'गदा...गिरेगी' is unavoidably diluted in the English 'hammer...will fall', simply because the English future tense necessarily includes the auxiliary 'will'. Some contrivance may occasionally overcome this problem with the English, as in the sixth line of 'On Building Bridges' where the future auxiliary is suppressed in the elliptical 'The Ramas [will] be acclaimed as victors'; but English futures still hinder the flow of the poem, whereas the Hindi futures provide it with its structural *raison d'être*, the end-rhyme. Auxiliaries are of course highly prominent in Hindi verb formation also (imperfective and continuous tenses — 'जाता है / जा रहा है' — depend upon them), but Ajñeya's poetry very frequently avoids such lengthy formations, whether by ellipsis, or by choosing a non-finite verb, or by preferring a synthetic verb form such as a subjunctive. Through such choices, the poet partially avoids the lengthy 'verb+auxiliary' formations so characteristic of modern Hindi (and approximates instead to the verb economy available to the poets of old Braj and Awadhi, whose concise verse metres would not accommodate prolix auxiliaries on the modern Khari Boli pattern); we see here a distinction between Ajñeya's poetry and so many other examples of modern Hindi verse where countless lines routinely end with auxiliary 'है'. When Ajñeya does give auxiliaries free rein, he does so knowingly. Thus in the long poem *नाच* (not quoted in full here), a constant repeat of a line cadence with auxiliary verb construction (...नाचता हूँ / ...देखते हैं/ ...दौड़ता हूँ etc.) builds a

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both covered by English 'to break', and cf. further pairs such as खुलना/खोलना 'to open', फटना/काड़ना 'to tear', and so on.

tension symbolic of the unremitting compulsion of the tightrope dancer's performance; when reference is at last made to the releasing of the rope from one or other pole, this tension is momentarily relieved, and the open vowels of subjunctive forms celebrate the possibility of escape: ...छुटी हो जाये —/; but the relief provided by this imagined possibility is short-lived, and the inexorably repeated imperfective verbs immediately resume (पर तनाव ढीलता नहीं / और मैं इस खम्भे से उस खम्भे तक दौड़ता हूँ).

The suppleness of Ajñeya's language and his subtle dexterity in the manipulation of word order recall the deceptive simplicity and musicality of a poet such as Tulsīdās; his work combines the refined poise of a classical tradition with an immediacy of feeling associated with the romantics; and it embraces many worlds of reference. *Nīlāmbarī* is a remarkable work, reflecting the mature output of a poetic talent. It is in the nature of reflections that they do not quite fully reproduce in every detail the clarity of the original image; but a comparison of the source with its imitative version only intensifies our appreciation of the former.

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Page references are to the second volume of *सदान्तरा -- सम्पूर्ण कविताएँ* (दिल्ली, नेशनल पब्लिशिंग हाउस, 1986); and to *Nīlāmbarī* (Delhi, Clarion Books, 1981).

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