Where did the years go? I still think of *The Absent Traveller* as “Arvind’s new book”, but to my surprise a quarter-century has slipped by since his marvelous ink dried on the page. It is often said that successful translation of poetry can only be achieved by one who is a poet in their own right — which fortunately is the case here, as Arvind Mehrotra’s English verse is a true source of delight: see his *Collected Poems 1969-2014* (Delhi 2014).

Turning now to his translations from Hāla’s Prakrit poetry, here is our first example:

पउर-जुवाणो गामो मृह-मासो जोअणं पई ठेरो।
जुवाण-सुरा साहीणा असई मा होउ किं मरउ॥

*Tight lads in fields,*
*A month in spring,*
*A cuss for a husband,*
*Liquor in the rack,*
*And she young, free-hearted:*
*Asking her to be faithful*
*Is asking her to die.*  
(p. 15)

The distance that Mehrotra has covered in bringing this ancient poem to a modern audience becomes apparent if we compare his version with the literal prose rendering of Radhagovind Basak (*The Prakrit Gāthā-Saptāśati*, Calcutta 1971 p. 44). Perhaps the only rhetorical feature that is common to the two translations is the concept of the simple “list”: with so many things stacked up against her, the protagonist has no chance of remaining faithful or chaste.
The village is full of young men; the month belongs to the spring season; (she possesses) youth; her husband is old; and there is old ale (too). (Under these circumstances) will she die, if, being independent, she does not become unchaste?

Under these circumstances…it is easy to see that a translator does indeed need a poet’s touch to preserve the life of the original. Perhaps halfway between the two lies the verse version by Peter Khoroche and Herman Tieken (Poems on Life and Love in Ancient India: Hāla’s Sattasaṭ, Albany 2009, p. 130):

A village full of young men,
Spring, youth, an aged husband,
Strong wine, nobody to tell you what to do:
The only way to avoid going astray
Is to die.

This gives us a very clear sense of the poem’s meaning, but it is the spare, naked language adopted by Mehrotra that makes his version stand out among the three: his willingness to inject new idiom into his translations “brings them across” very successfully to the English readership. In this next poem we move from the theme of love to a naturalistic description, referring wrily to the ways in which we blithely misidentify what we think we see in the world before us:

ंdv३matraअi३ईकगंdv३matraअi३ईठर
सोtोंdv३matraअi३ई8tभुअंगं
मंdv३matraअi३ई6हसोजीहइ
ंdv३matraअi३ठेलहइसंतtो।
मंdv३matraअi३ई6हसsकंdv३nnaअhalnह-वtर-झरो
ंdv३matraअi३ई8tसpोंdv३matraअi३ई8पअइलालं॥

‘This must be
A mountain stream’
Thought the buffalo
Drooling over a snake
In fierce summer heat.

‘I’ve reached
Black Rock Falls’
Thought the snake
Drinking up the slabber.  (p. 44)

Here too we can compare Mehrotra’s creative verse with Basak’s dutiful prose rendering (p. 121):

The buffalo, afflicted by the (summer) heat licks by his tongue (the body of) the serpent taking it to be a hill-stream, and the snake drinks (the flow of) the saliva of the buffalo, taking it to be a spring through black rocks.

And again Khoroche & Tieken take the middle path:
Parched by the heat, the buffalo licks a snake,
Taking it for a mountain rivulet,
And the snake licks the buffalo’s spittle,
Taking it for water falling from black rock.

While truly appreciating the Khoroeche & Tieken approach, which enables them to offer a translation of the whole text rather than the smaller selection undertaken by Mehrotra, the latter’s bold imagery wins the day for me. In particular, the conceit of the two creature’s spoken thoughts, and the identification of कंद्वन्ना अहलनह (Sanskrit कंद्वन्ना - पशर - झरो, as elucidated by Basak) as an actual location with a proper name (marked by capital letters, the secret weapon of the roman script), lends a great sense of locale and hence personality to the poem.

Many of the tropes and conceits of the poetry in the Sattasaī became stock images for use by poets living a millennium and a half later than the supposed author King Ḥāla, who lived in the first century AD. Here is Ḥāla, with Mehrotra:

Afraid of mid-day heat,
Even your shadow
Stays under your feet:
Come into the shade, traveller.  (p. 5)

And here is a couplet from the Braj Bhasha Satasaī (= Prakrit Sattasaī = Sanskrit Saptašati) of Biharilal, with my translation:

Settling within the dense wood,
lurking deep with the house:
at summer’s noon, even shadow seeks shade.

Biharilal drops the notion of this poem being addressed, seductively, to a passing ‘traveller’ (Prakrit पहिज, Sanskrit पतिक), and the ‘invitation to come inside’ is left as a mere inference; in fact this is in almost every sense a new poem, even if its author was clearly aware of, and indebted to, the tradition of the Prakrit version.
One of the special features of Mehrotra’s brave work is his willingness to superimpose a modern idiom onto these ancient verses. As a closing example, here is a verse about a girl’s ignorance of the procedures of love-making:

िणvुt-रआ वि वहू सरज-विराम-टिडं अवाणाण्।
अविरअ-हिदआ अण्ण पि कि पि अम्बि ति चिन्तेद ||

This time we begin with Basak’s prose rendering (p. 35):

The young lady having enjoyed a (full) dalliance, but not being conversant with the method of cessation of dalliance [,] thinks that there yet remains something further to happen because her mind did not want interruption.

Khocho & Tieken (p. 79) are decidedly more specific in their interpretation of ‘(full) dalliance’:

The wife who had already reached her climax
But did not realize that that was the end of that
Remained in a state of excitement
Expecting something more.

Here the translators bring out the innocence of the girl and deliver the climactic sense of the narrative more fully than the overly shy Basak. But it takes Arvind Mehrotra’s uncompromising style to lend the poem a modern idiom:

Ignorant of how it ends,
The bride, having come,
Looks up as if to say
‘Go on’. (p. 13)

This seventeen-word miniature typifies the way in which Mehrotra radically interprets or reinterprets the Sattasaṁī. The book has the further advantages of a brief introduction by the translator and a succinct ‘Afterword’ on Prakrit poetry by Martha Ann Selby. All in all, The Absent Traveller is a one of the finest examples of ancient Indian literature being brought to a modern readership.

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