

William Walsh: *Indian literature in English* (Longman Literature in English Series) xi, 219 pp. London and New York: Longman, 1990.

The cover illustration for this stimulating but editorially flawed book is a well-known Kangra painting of Krishna and Radha in a grove. The conventional bucolic scene, tritely symbolic of 'Indianness', sits ill with the diverse, inventive, original, idiosyncratic, self-conscious and unconventional modern English-language literature of the Indian authors discussed inside by Professor Walsh. Just as the illustration begs the fundamental question of literary identity, so the book's easy acceptance of a taxonomy which distinguishes authors such as Ezekiel and Ramanujan from the rest of English literature on the one hand and from contemporary writing in Indian languages on the other is far from satisfactory. But if one overlooks the artificiality of the category imposed by the book's title, there is much of value in the perceptive analysis of the many different authors under review; this study has all the critical insight and warmth of appreciation that is familiar from Walsh's earlier published work.

An opening chapter gives a whistle-stop tour of the authors' cultural history, the route being determined geographically by the assumption that this is indeed 'Indian' literature, and the whistle being blown for some well-chosen contributors to the received perception of twentieth-century Indian sensibilities: Forster, Naipaul, Narayan, Ved Mehta, Nehru, and others. There follows a chapter on non-fictional prose, which moves quickly through a survey of nineteenth-century writing to consider the autobiographies of such figures as Gandhi, Nehru, and Nirad Chaudhuri. Though at some remove from the definition of 'literature' implicitly accepted by the remainder of the book, (and also deviating, in Gandhi's case, from a general avoidance of texts in translation) these autobiographies provide a more valid contextualization of creative writing than could be achieved through an extended discussion of chronological history. Walsh is an engaging guide, always generously sensitive to the aims of his authors while at the same time adept with an incisively critical line: highly appreciative of Ved Mehta's mature writing, for example, he dismisses the early autobiography *Walking the Indian streets* as 'a giggling, adolescent production'.

The next two chapters are devoted to prose fiction. The first considers the 'founding fathers' triumvirate of Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao and R.K. Narayan, while the second continues chronologically ('since there is no convincing pattern of development among these writers discernible to the impartial

spectator') with 'the succession', from Khushwant Singh to the pre-satanic novels of Salman Rushdie. In his analysis of fiction, which is interspersed with generous quotations from the works themselves, Walsh is so clearly in his element that the preceding chapters seem in retrospect to have been little more than introductory. His deft appreciations are a delight to read, especially when he is drawn so very closely to the qualities of an author such as Narayan (to whom he devotes no less than 22 pages). One sees something of Narayan's own gentle meticulousness in the perceptions and the idiom of Walsh's critical analysis: 'Narayan is not a pushing or an obtrusive novelist. He has no anxiety to be tugging at our sleeve or to be giving us a knowing look. He has no message, no doctrine. The half-baked is not an item in his diet.'

The clock is briefly wound back to the nineteenth century to begin a chapter on poetry, though the early part of the period is given only a brief summary. Walsh feels that 'genuine Indian poetry in English really began in the nineteen-fifties', and that the modern reader can ignore 'earlier versifying'. This damning sobriquet applies as much to Tagore's English *Gitanjali* as it does to Aurobindo's *Savitri*, which Walsh describes with characteristic flair as 'a vast onion of a poem of which the layers gradually pull away to reveal nothing'. The concentration here primarily is on Ezekiel, Parthasarathy, Kamala Das, Mehrotra, Kolatkar, and Ramanujan: these and a few others, many of whose works have had little circulation outside India, fall under Walsh's benevolent but all-seeing eye, and the chapter stands as a superb personal introduction to the chosen poets. A concluding chapter on India in English fiction gives a rather more conventional survey of a range of non-Indian authors from Kipling to Scott and Farrell. Useful appendixes give further data on major writers and their works.

This very readable account of Indian writing in English is drastically flawed by an appallingly low standard of editorial presentation, seeming mostly to derive from mistakes at the proof-reading stage. The spellings of Indian words are erratic in the extreme. Proper names in particular are misspelt (often variously) with almost comic frequency, many being rendered virtually unrecognisable. Others are spelt without consistency. There are other, perhaps more serious, lapses: the biographical details of Rabindranath Tagore and Aurobindo are transposed (p. 38); the date of the expulsion of the Parsees from Persia is given as the 'eighteenth century' (p. 152); Bengal is described as 'the Sikh heartland' (p. 11); 'Indras' is the name given to the Hindu 'underclass' (p. 5 and passim); a sentence on p. 67 is an almost verbatim repeat of a sentence three pages earlier. A third level of error comes in the textual quotations, examples checked by this reviewer proving extremely unreliable:

there are major inconsistencies in the extract from Narayan's *Mr Sampath* as quoted on pp. 9 and 79 (and the repeat itself seems more than a little odd); the extract from *The Vendor of Sweets* on p. 15 appears in a different form on p.95; an extract from *A Passage to India* on p. 171 is riddled with inaccuracies. This is a mere selection from a long catalogue of errors. It is a very great pity that such a book should be made virtually unusable by editorial carelessness of this kind.

Rupert Snell