5 Whoring After English Gods

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I

It was in my last year at school that I was introduced to Rupert Brooke's poem, 'The Soldier'. Phrases from the poem kept haunting me for the next twelve years, only to stop abruptly one late autumn when I found myself 'under an English heaven'. During those twelve years England had become an obsession. Besides, since leaving school, I had also begun to write poems.

I owe my knowledge and love of the English language to the English and Irish priests at school. To one of them, especially, I am profoundly indebted. Not many years ago, on learning that he was ill, I wrote a poem. Here it is.

> An Englishman, tall, high cheek-bones, rather
> anaemic (his trousers showed under his cassock)
> romped in the field with the boys. It was he
>
> ten years ago taught me language.
> Not so much in class as in the penance study.
> Together, we read *The Death of Socrates*.
>
> The last I heard he was convalescing:
> he has grown old in England. And the syllables
> he taught a boy have grown to poems.[1]

That was the beginning. And the years only helped it to become an obsession. I had entered Don Bosco in my tenth year totally unfamiliar with English. The War was on, and my schooling had been interrupted. I lived with my grandmother for a while in

Srirangam, an island in the Kaveri, to which my imagination constantly returned. Often I used to visit an aunt in nearby Tannirppalli, on the road to Kulitalai. The Kaveri gleamed a few kilometres away from her doorstep. The house itself was in a coconut grove, spiked with bamboo and pipal. The cousins were all tomboys, and loved rough, noisy games and play – especially Sundari. We had a stream in the backyard, and Sundari would drop into it like a pebble from an overhanging branch. She must have been twelve then, with long, black eyes and hair dropping to the knees. We used to romp around the backyard, making eerie noises with pipal leaves and bamboos, and cooling our heels in the stream. Looking back I would like to think of it as an Edenic world.

On my return to Bombay, I spent a couple of years in a Hindi school in the northern suburb of Matunga where we lived. The school no longer exists. To this day I do my multiplications in Hindi. For a few years I had a tutor who used to come home three times a week to teach me Tamil. I did not learn much from him, and because he used to pinch my thighs blue, he was asked not to come any more. I regret I did not again have an occasion to learn Tamil till almost twenty years later. At home, Father taught me to recite, in Tamil, the hymns of the Āḻvārs, the *Nālāyirappirapantam*, especially the *Tiruvāymoḻi* of Nammāḻvār. Also, with father's help, I was able to get over my fear of English. In the seven years (1944–51) I was at Don Bosco, English had become part of me. Little did I then realise that I had paid an exorbitant price.

In college I read English literature, and wrote unevenly. However, a poem of mine bagged the first prize in a poetry contest for students sponsored by *The Free Press Bulletin*. Later, I showed it to one of my professors, who is himself a poet. He said he liked the poem, and that he had no intention of flattering me. And when I was about to take my leave of him, rather overwhelmed, he said, 'I myself don't know whether it's a blessing or a curse to be a poet. Keep writing, all the same.'[2] That was another beginning. I was on the first step, and I recalled with pleasure a line of Cavafy's: 'Coming as far as this is not little.'[3]

In August 1962, I received from a friend in England an unusual birthday present: a poem of mine in a special issue of *The Times Literary Supplement*. In an article in the issue, 'Why Write in English? India's Search for Self-expression', the writer remarks, 'Recent literary creation in India, whether in English or the regional languages, has been almost the monopoly of those well-grounded in

English, and all literary forms have been profoundly affected by English models.'[4]

2

In September 1963, I left for England on a scholarship from the British Council. I was, like most Indians educated in English, certain that I would find myself more or less at home there. I was uneasy in India. And exposed as I was to English ideas and attitudes, I became hypercritical of everything Indian. Indian society was, I felt, deeply neurotic, its feet chained to a grossly exaggerated past. There was, again, something terribly wrong with the Indian character itself. Spiritually bankrupt and powerless to absorb the shocks of the twentieth century, India was a 'nation of sleepwalkers', its people sick in the mind and helpless. The nation had, I kept telling myself, lost its will to live. I decided that England would be my future home. And the English language would help me to belong there. In my ignorance I even hoped for fame as a poet in English. But events were to prove otherwise. The English autumn was a little too much for my hopefully expanding tropical petals. In England, at last, history caught up with me: I found myself crushed under two hundred years of British rule in India. I began to have qualms about my own integrity as an Indian. Had not Emerson said, 'India fell to British character'? My encounter with England only reproduced the by-now familiar pattern of Indian experience in England: disenchantment. Here was an England I was unable to come to terms with. The England I had known and loved existed nowhere, except in my mind. This *other* England I did not know even existed. My disenchantment was total. I felt betrayed. I was no longer a 'body of England's breathing English air'.

I spent my first Christmas in England with an old friend from Bombay, at his flat in Hampstead. We bought a few bottles of Guinness stout and packets of crisps from a pub round the corner. He then put on a record of Ravi Shankar, I think it was *Rāga Bhairavi*. That night was yet another beginning. I had, at last, begun my Indian education. That it should have begun in England was a paradox, but nevertheless, an obvious commonplace. A part of me finally died in England. Should I have made the journey at all? It had broken my life in two. Who was I to blame, fate or the historical situation? It was my tragedy, and the tragedy of men like me, to

have grown up in the twilight of the Raj. I was thirteen when the Union Jack folded up over India. Since then, the English have gone home; but the English language is still with us. Nothing is more incongruous than the presence of the English language in India. English will always remain a foreign language to us. I realised that I could never function as a poet in English. I felt embittered, and was inclined to agree with Victor Anant that we are all 'Macaulay's bastards'.[5] I had a taste of this unsuspected foreignness of English soon after I arrived in England. At St Pancras station, after a pint of beer, I asked the barmaid, 'A matchbox, please.' To my surprise, she smiled and asked, 'You mean a box of matches, luv? And when I asked her what the difference was, she smiled again, and explained. So much for my use of the English language, for which I was undeservedly praised by my English friends. One of them had said, 'Your own use of English is like that of an educated Englishman. If you think it isn't, try to draw up a list of the ways in which it differs, or examples of where you have failed to communicate. That is a challenge. I don't think you can fail to conclude that any differences that exist are not significant.' He was right. I did get my matchbox, after all.

3

After Christmas, I returned to my university in the north of England. It was January. And it had not yet snowed. I almost despaired of ever seeing an English snowfall. And then, one day, it snowed. I didn't go to the university that day. I sat up in my room, and watched the snow fall, inch by inch, for six hours. I felt relieved after that. Cleansed. That day I had begun a poem which I later read over the BBC in London. The poem speaks for itself.

Through holes in a wall, as it were,
lamps burned in the fog.
In a basement flat, conversation

filled the night, while Ravi Shankar,
cigarette stubs, empty bottles of stout
and crisps provided the necessary pauses.

He had spent his youth whoring

after English gods.
There is something to be said for exile:

you learn roots are deep.
That language is a tree, loses colour
under another sky.

The bark disappears with the snow,
and branches become hoarse.
However, the most reassuring thing

about the past is that it happened.
Dressed in tweeds or grey flannel,
its suburban pockets

bursting with immigrants –
'coloureds' is what they call us
over there – the city is no jewel, either:

lanes full of smoke and litter,
with puddles of unwashed
English children.

On New Year's Eve he heard an old man
at Trafalgar Square: 'It's no use trying
to change people. They'll be what they are.

An empire's last words are heard
on the hot sands of Africa.
The da Gamas, Clives, Dupleixs are back.

Victoria sleeps on her island
alone, an old hag,
shaking her invincible locks.'

Standing on Westminster Bridge,
it seemed the Thames had clogged
the chariot wheels of Boadicea to a stone.

Under the shadow of poplars
the river divides the city from the night.

The noises reappear,

of early trains, the milkman,
and the events of the day become
vocal in the newsboy.[6]

Yes, the poem is about the consequences of British rule. And one of the consequences it explores is the loss of identity with one's own culture and, therefore, the need for roots. England was not spared, either. Close study revealed hitherto unsuspected chinks in the impregnable British armour. Since 1939, since Indian Independence, and the gradual loss of empire, since Suez, and since England's ineffectual entry into the European Economic Community, British prestige abroad has dwindled to a cypher. Today, England is a sinking ship, politically scuttled. She has allowed leadership to pass out of her hands. The British way of life is being seriously questioned, both at home and abroad. Brian Chapman comes as close as anyone to diagnosing the nation's ills:

> I take it that there is little doubt that Britain has now reached her lowest point in international prestige for many a long year. . . . It is my contention that the source of many of our present ills is institutional, and lies in a mistaken veneration for old ideas, and a refusal to examine them coolly and objectively . . . and the institutions of British Government have been signally unsuccessful in keeping pace with the modern world.[7]

How utterly opposed to the Byzantium across the 'gong-tormented sea' I had imagined England to be.

On the whole, the Indo-British encounter was an abortive one. British rule disrupted the pattern of the complex societies of India. It was in politics that the British impact on India had its profoundest effect. It did, however, enable a class of Indians to take a look at themselves, their history, literature and thought. On the other hand, the English also spawned that uneasy class of Anglicised Indians, inculcating in them attitudes to life totally unrelated to their milieu. Since Independence, there has been a reaction against this class; but this has, in no way, minimised its influence. In the end, India did survive the Raj and Partition, and did not collapse as was expected of her. Perhaps, British rule did, after all, turn out to

be a blessing in disguise. In a comprehensive study of the impact of English education on Indian intellectuals, and its relation to the rise of the nationalist movement, Bruce T. McCully goes so far as to say:

> National feeling did not germinate of its own accord in the soil of India; rather, it was an exotic growth implanted by foreign hands and influences. Without the existence of the British regime and the element of foreign domination implicit in that system, the beginnings of Indian nationalism would be difficult to envisage.[8]

4

I had gone to live in England, but I returned after a year with a new understanding of myself and of India. The uneasiness was still there, but it ceased to upset me as before. I had returned to India with the intention of identifying myself with her totally. I had recovered from the high fever of colonialitis. Back on Indian soil, under the hot Indian sky, I felt strangely at home. England had been a kind of trial by fire. Though the scars showed here and there, England was out of my system once and for all. I celebrated this renewal, this awakening to life:

> Across the seas a new knowledge,
>
> sudden and unobtrusive as first snow
> transforming the landscape,
> rinses speech, affirms the brown skin
>
> and the heart beating to a different rhythm.[9]

I had been around for thirty years, and felt literally burnt out. Only poetry offered a kind of knowledge I despaired of finding anywhere else: knowledge of oneself. At any rate, that is all I expect of it. 'Exile', the first part of *Rough Passage*, written over four years between 1963 and 1966, is an instance. It ends on this affirmation:

> I shall carry this wisdom to another city
> in the bone urn of my mind.

> The ashes are all that's left
> of the flesh and brightness of youth.
> My life has come full circle: I'm thirty.
>
> I must give quality to the other half.
> I've forfeited the embarrassing gift
> innocence in my scramble to be man.[10]

5

I knew what I was in for. The affair with the English language had been prolonged and tempestuous. It is over now, and I have, as the phrase goes, settled down with Tamil. She is still a shy, obstinate bride; but, like all brides, she will, I am sure, come round. The relationship will then, perhaps, mature into love. For, making poems is like performing the act of love. As Robert Graves observed in another context:

> If you perform the act of love with someone who means little to you, you're giving away something that belongs to the person you do love or might love . . . Promiscuity seems forbidden to poets.[11]

What Graves says of love is also true of writing. The language a poet writes in must, necessarily, be his own, and it must mean everything to him. Only then has he access to conscious thought while keeping in touch with dream, from where all poems begin or, at least, ought to. In a foreign language this is not always possible. Promiscuity in language seems equally forbidden to poets.

My situation in the context of Indian verse in English can be described as fluid. Today, I find myself in a situation of bilingualism, of being at home in two languages, English and Tamil. And this bilingualism has set up a painful, but nevertheless fruitful, tension with regard to poetry. This situation, the state of the Tamil language today, and also my resolution to write in Tamil, are examined in the opening section of 'Homecoming'.

> My tongue in English chains,
> I return, after a generation, to you.
> I am at the end

of my dravidic tether,
hunger for you unassuaged.
I falter, stumble.

Speak a tired language
wrenched from its sleep in the *Kural*,
teeth, palate, lips still new

to its agglutinative touch.
Now, hooked on celluloid, you reel
down plush corridors.[12]

Ever since I moved to Madras in 1971, my poems have become, increasingly, a sort of overture made with the aim of starting a dialogue between myself and my Tamil past. Though written in English, they are closer in style and content to Tamil verse, especially in their use of irony for deflating the pride of the Tamils in their euphoric past. This euphoria expresses itself in an excessive glorification of the Tamil language, to the exclusion of almost everything else. The Tamil poet, Gnanakoothan, deflates this euphoria in an unforgettable epigram:

It's true Tamil is the breath of my life,
but I shan't speak about it to others.[13]

The problem of the Tamil poet today is to invent afresh an idiom free from the stylistic and prosodic conventions of a language with a two-thousand-year-old literary history. 'My tongue in English chains' is a theoretical statement of this problem. In a few other sections of 'Homecoming' I have tried to reach out to a sense of the profoundly Indian – of course, not consciously – often with its complex of family relationships not easily accessible in English, as in 'And so it eventually happened'.

And so it eventually happened –
a family reunion not heard of
since grandfather died in '59 – in March

this year. Cousins arrived in Tiruchchanur
in overcrowded private buses,
the dust of unlettered years

clouding instant recognition.
Later, each one pulled,
sitting cross-legged on the steps

of the choultry, familiar coconuts
out of the fire
of rice-and-pickle afternoons.

Sundari, who had squirrelled up and down
forbidden tamarind trees in her long skirt
every morning with me,

stood there, that day, forty years taller,
her three daughters floating
like safe planets near her.[14]

This leads me on to yet another problem: English forms a part of my intellectual, rational make-up, and Tamil, of my emotional, psychic make-up. Fortunately, the psyche has not been damaged beyond repair, and it is still possible to keep in touch with it. It is from there really all poems begin or, at least, ought to begin. Since there is a choice between one or the other language, the need for a decision becomes inevitable. The decision itself may be postponed or, even if taken, never implemented. But the need is there all the same. The situation, I dare say, is an unenviable one. For me the situation itself is the poetry.

I was born in a village with the unexceptionable name of Tirupparaitturai, where only the passenger trains between Tiruchchirappalli and Erode used to stop for a few minutes. An arm of the Kaveri flexed its muscles outside my great-grandfather's house surrounded by paddy and sugar-cane fields. Later came the exodus to Bombay that was to prove traumatic in my case. Recently, after a lapse of some thirty years, I visited Tirupparaitturai. My impressions shaped themselves into a poem in Tamil. Here is a translation:

I step down from a bullock-cart
at the corner of West Chitra Street
to visit great-grandfather's house.

The sun, an umbrella, nudges me
in the eye. In the backyard,

I climb over the knees of the well

for a moment. It doesn't slake
my thirst. To this day I look
everywhere for the butterfly, Kaveri.[15]

I believe the poets now writing in English are aware of the unenviable situation in which they function. And the situation itself has been exploited by not a few of them.

6

About the time I was putting together my poems for a book – a feat I achieved only some ten years later – it was encouraging to be able to read *The Exact Name* (1965) and *The Striders* (1966), both published within a year of one another. I should like to think that both Nissim Ezekiel and A. K. Ramanujan, each by his own practice, set the pace for, and pointed to the opportunities open to, other poets. Poems like 'Night of the Scorpion' and 'Small-scale Reflections on a Great House', by their vision of an everyday Indian reality expressed in an unobtrusive personal voice, stood out in the reader's mind as signposts indicating the direction poetry in English was likely to take in the future.

Here, I would like to make a few observations about poetry in general. First, the problem of understanding poetry is related to the problem of being a human being, of growing up emotionally and intellectually. Secondly, the poet, by sheer dedication to words, arrives at a truth which may otherwise be impossible for him to attain. And finally, poetry is an ascetic art, of doing without – rather than doing with indulgence.

These observations are not intended to be axiomatic; they are only exploratory. Thus, a poem is not made to give us information, but to awaken a complete, living experience. So, when we are reading a poem, our attitude towards it must not be of explaining ideas, but rather of surrendering ourselves to such an experience. The proposition, two and two makes four, has one meaning and one meaning only – the same for all of us. A poem, on the other hand, can only mean to anyone as much as that person is capable of finding in it. 'It is an error', observed Paul Valéry, 'contrary to the nature of poetry, and one which may even be fatal to it, to claim that

for each poem there is a corresponding true meaning, unique and conformable to, or identical with some thought of the author's.[16] In approaching a poem, we often make the abominable demand that a poem, should be paraphrasable, as if a poem were just an aggregate of statements. A poem is an object made up of words, and for the words to communicate themselves one has to approach the poem with reverence. A poem does not repeat itself; what it says, it says with finality, once and for all. What it says has not been said before, but once said, we recognise its validity for ourselves.

We perceive this validity in Ramanujan's poetry. He often relapses into his own life and writes from it. He follows up a private insight, until it completes itself in a poem that is a world in itself. The impulse to preserve is at the bottom of his poetry. Take, for instance, 'Small-scale Reflections on a Great House'. The poem lays bare, unsentimentally, the matrix of Hindu family relationships. In a traditional Hindu joint family, the constituent members are lineal descendants as well as collaterals within three, and at times even four, degrees of relationship. Economic help, refuge in situations of crisis, the upbringing of children are some of the benefits offered by the joint family. Today however, the trend is towards nuclear rather than joint families, and they come together on occasions such as the performance of *samskāras*, notably initiation and marriage. The family is, for Ramunujan, one of the central metaphors with which he thinks.

Sometimes I think that nothing
that ever comes into this house
goes out. Things come in every day

to lose themselves among other things
lost long ago among
other things lost long ago;[17]

A man's family never leaves him. He takes it with him wherever he goes. It is the one unchanging event around which his life revolves: 'its tiny histories, personal and seemingly insignificant, reflect a concern with the importance of the past, albeit a personal family past.' The epigraph of *Relations*, from a classical Tamil anthology, indicates as much.

Like a hunted deer

on the wide white
salt land,

a flayed hide
turned inside out,

one may run,
escape.

But living
among relations
binds the feet.

Nevertheless, there are many luminous evocations of family life in both *The Striders* and *Relations*. Ramanujan has an eye for the specific physiognomy of a person, object or situation which he then reveals with telling detail. The poems offer a sort of commentary on the Hindu family with its telescopic relationships:

Her saris
do not cling: they hang, loose
feather of a onetime wing.[18]
('Of Mothers, among Other Things')

Father sits with the sunflower at the window
deep in the yellow of a revolving chair,
fat, bilious, witty, drawing small ellipses
in the revolving air.[19]
('On the very Possible Jaundice of an Unborn Daughter')

something opened
in the past and I heard something shut
in the future, quietly,
like the heavy door
of my mother's black-pillared, nineteenth-century

in the twinkle of an uncle's eye.[22]
('Real Estate')

Our sisters were of various sizes,
one was ripe for a husband . . .[23]
('A Leaky Tap after a Sister's Wedding')

in brothers'
anecdotes of how noisily
father bathed, . . .[24]
('Love Poem for a Wife 1')

her two
daughters, one dark one fair,
unknown each to the other
alternately picked their mother's body clean
before it was cold
or the eyes were shut,
of diamond ear-rings,
bangles, anklets, the pin
in her hair,
the toe-rings from her wedding
the previous century . . .[25]
('History,')

and her cousin, six or seven,
sat himself against her; . . .[26]
('Looking for a Cousin on a Swing')

Nothing stays out: daughters
get married to short-lived idiots;
sons who run away come back
in grandchildren . . .[27]

I walk on water, can even bear
to walk on earth for my wife . . .[29]
('It does not Follow, but when in the Street')

I'll love my children
without end, . . .[30]
('Entries for a Catalogue of Fears')

These references are evidence of the poet's assured identity within the family – an identity that must be essential to one who, having spent his formative years in southern India, has since 1960 lived away from it in the United States. This physical displacement has given a focus to his Indian experience, so that the poems emerge as a sort of microcosm of his family history. They are, in effect, a microcosm of the Hindu family, which has enormously contributed to the stability and psychological health of the society for centuries, and ensured the continuity of a rich, traditional culture.

7

Ramanujan's repossession, through his poetry, of the past of his family, and of his sense of himself as a distillation of the past, is to me a signal achievement, and one that was to be of value to other poets who were looking for a kind of poetry to teach them the use of their own voice. I know of poems which, if I had not come across *The Striders* or *Relations*, I should perhaps have written differently. On a visit to Madurai in the summer of 1970, I saw the Vaikai as Ramanujan remembers it in 'A River'.

In Madurai,
city of temples and poets
who sang of cities and temples:

every summer
a river dries to a trickle
in the sand

under the bridges with patches
of repair all over them,
the wet stones glistening like sleepy
crocodiles, the dry ones
shaven water-buffaloes lounging in the sun.

The poets sang only of the floods.

He was there for a day
when they had the floods.
People everywhere talked
of the inches rising,
of the precise number of cobbled steps
run over by the water, rising
on the bathing places,
and the way it carried off three village houses,
one pregnant woman
and a couple of cows
named Gopi and Brinda, as usual.

The new poets still quoted
the old poets, but no one spoke
in verse
of the pregnant woman
drowned, with perhaps twins in her,
kicking at blank walls
even before birth.

He said:
the river has water enough
to be poetic
about only once a year
and then
it carries away
in the first half-hour
three village houses,
a couple of cows

with different-coloured diapers

to tell them apart.[31]

I would like to think Ramanujan's poem quickened my own on the river.

With paper boats boys tickle her ribs,
and buffaloes have turned her to a pond.
There's eaglewood in her hair

and stale flowers. Every evening,
as bells roll in the forehead of temples,
she sees a man on the steps

clean his arse. Kingfishers and egrets,
who she fed, have flown
her paps. Also emperors and poets

who slept in her arms. She is become
a sewer, now. No one has any use for Vaikai,
river, once, of this sweet city.[32]

Both poems attempt to evoke the river historically and as it is today by deploying contrast ironically so that it becomes almost a mode of perception. In Ramanujan, however, the river becomes a point of departure for opposing the relative attitudes of the old and new Tamil poets, both of whom are exposed for their callousness to suffering, when it is so obvious, as a result of the floods. For centuries, Tamil civilisation flourished on the banks of the Vaikai, and the river was celebrated in song, in the *Cilappatikāram*, for instance, as one that was 'ever on the lips of poets'. For me, the Vaikai had lost none of its attractions. It sparked off memories of a Tamil past I was trying to repossess, however incompletely, and, among other things, of an eventful childhood spent in small towns on the Kaveri.

What sets Ramanujan apart from other poets is his unique tone of voice, a feature that accounts for the characteristic style of his poetry. In ordinary speech it is tone that expresses attitudes through the modulation of voice. Tone, therefore, expresses the speaker's attitude towards his subject and towards his audience, and

sometimes towards himself. The person who is speaking takes into account the particular situation, and the situation determines how the thing is to be said. As in speech, so too in poetry, tone is an important factor. Instead of the expressive human voice, words perform this function in a poem. And the speaker in the poem expresses an attitude, through his particular use of the language by his choice of words, imagery and syntax. Since poetry is after all the specialisation of language for the communication of attitudes, the determination of the exact shading of tone in a poem becomes important. Let us go back to 'A River'.

The new poets still quoted
the old poets, but no one spoke
in verse
of the pregnant woman
drowned, with perhaps twins in her,
kicking at blank walls
even before birth.

The reality of the floods does not seem to affect anyone; its havoc goes unnoticed even by the 'new' poets who, one would have thought, could be expected to be socially conscious, but are not. Their claims to be new or modern are exposed. Unable to shake off the burden of the past, they only repeat what the old poets have said. The poem is thus an oblique comment on the sterility of much of contemporary Tamil verse – an opinion which is not overtly stated. It is the speaker's attitude in the poem that helps us to make this inference.

8

By and large, Ramanujan's poems are the products of a specific culture, and it is remarkable how successfully he has translated them into the terms of another culture. This becomes apparent if we examine the use of English in Indian verse generally. One of the basic problems for the poet is to find an adequate, and above all a personal, language. In spite of one or two commendable efforts, it has not been possible to extend the resources of the English language or even to Indianise it, although it is used with distinction for literary purposes. Our use of English has none of the colloquia

reverberations one encounters in African usage, for instance. English in Africa has helped to evolve a dynamic literature, by fusing oral with written literary traditions. Our poets, on the whole, have not taken any risks with the English language. Their use of it remains undistinguished. In no other poet before Ramanujan is there his scrupulous concern with language. He has been able to forge, as we have seen, an oblique, elliptical style all his own. There is something clinical about Ramanujan's use of English. It is an attempt, I believe, to turn language into an artifact. Though he uses the rhythms of familiar everyday speech, he achieves unexpected effects by employing cliché and slang in incongruous contexts. In 'Prayers to Lord Murugan', for example, Ramanujan examines a tradition gone to seed, and invokes its relevance to our own times.

Murukan is the Dravidian god of youth, beauty, war and love, whose praises are sung in the *Tirumurukārruppatai*. With the rise of bhakti literature by about A.D. 600 in the Tamil country, he is displaced by Śiva and Viṣnu. There was, however, a revival of the cult of Murukan towards the beginning of the sixteenth century. Also known as Guha, Kārttikeya, Kumāra, Skanda and Subrahmanya, Murukan is represented as a god with six heads [he was fostered by the Pleiades (Krittikā)], twelve arms, dressed in red, riding a peacock called Paravāṇi, holding a bow and arrow, a sword, a thunderbolt, an axe and a spear. His emblem is the cock. He has two wives, Teyvayānai and Valli. In the tradition of Tamil heroic verse, Murukan is vividly invoked.

> Twelve etched arrowheads
> for eyes and six unforeseen
> faces, and you were not
> embarrassed.
>
> Unlike other gods
> you found work
> for every face,
> and made
>
> eyes at only one
> woman. And your arms
> are like faces with proper
> names.[33]

But there is a difference. Ramanujan does not extol. His tone is throughout bantering, as his use of the words 'unforeseen', 'made eyes at' and 'proper' indicates. 'Unforeseen faces' bristles with paradox. Being a god, Murukan is prescient. 'Unforeseen' would imply that he is unable to see beforehand, or have foreknowledge of anything. Should 'unforeseen' therefore be read as unexpected or unlooked for? Again, endowed with twelve eyes, he looked at only one woman. And 'proper' could mean correct, suitable or respectable, apart from its usual sense in the collocation 'proper/ names', that is, names used to designate individual persons. The poem abounds in verbal paradoxes such as these. Paradox is a form of indirection, and indirection is a feature of poetic language and structure.

Of his own work Ramanujan writes, 'English and my disciplines (linguistics, anthropology) give me my "outer" forms – linguistic, metrical, logical and other such ways of shaping experience; and my first thirty years in India, my frequent visits and field-trips, my personal and professional preoccupations with Kannada, Tamil, the classics and folklore give me my substance, my "inner" forms, images and symbols. They are continuous with each other, and I can no longer tell what comes from where.'[34] I have tried to focus attention, I hope, on the value of Ramanujan's work as a whole to other poets like myself who have found it immensely rewarding.

Notes

1. 'The Word', in Howard Sergeant, ed., *Pergamon Poets 9: Poetry from India*, Oxford, 1970, p. 53.
2. Vinda Karandikar, the Marathi poet. The incident took place in January 1959.
3. From 'The First Step', in Rae Dalven trans., *The Complete Poems of Cavafy*, London, 1961, p. 6.
4. A Correspondent, in the *Times Literary Supplement* (London), 10 August 1962, p. 584.
5. Victor Anant, 'The Three Faces of an Indian', in Timothy O'Keefe, ed., *Alienation*, London, 1960, pp. 79–80.
6. 'Exile 2', in *Rough Passage*, Delhi; Three Crowns Books. 1977, pp. 17–18.
7. Brian Chapman, *British Government Observed: Some European Reflections*, London, 1963, p. 7.
8. Bruce T. McCully, *English Education and the Origins of Nationalism*, New York, 1940, p. 388.
9. From 'Exile 3', in *Rough Passage*, p. 19.
10. From 'Exile 8', in *Rough Passage*, pp. 26–7.

11. Robert Graves, 'The Art of Poetry', in *The Paris Review*, Summer 1969, p. 123.
12. 'Homecoming 1', in *Rough Passage*, p. 49.
13. R. Parthasarathy, '"Three Strains": The State of Contemporary Tamil Verse', in *Sahitya* (Hyderabad), No. 1, 1978.
14. From 'Homecoming 3', in *Rough Passage*, p. 51.
15. Trans. R. Parthasarathy.
16. Paul Valéry, 'Commentaries on *Charmes*', in *The Art of Poetry*, Denise Folliot (trans.), New York, 1961, pp. 155–6.
17. From 'Small-scale Reflections on a Great House', in *Relations*, London, 1971, p. 40.
18. *Relations*, p. 5.
19. *The Striders*, London, 1966, p. 12.
20. Ibid, p. 13.
21. Ibid, p. 4.
22. *Relations*, p. 36.
23. *The Striders*, p. 7.
24. *Relations*, p. 9.
25. Ibid, p. 52.
26. *The Striders*, p. 17.
27. *Relations*, p. 42.
28. Ibid, p. 55.
29. Ibid, p. 1.
30. Ibid, p. 33.
31. *The Striders*, pp. 36–7.
32. 'Homecoming 8', in *Rough Passage*, p. 56.
33. *Relations*, pp. 57–8.
34. Quoted in R. Parthasarathy, ed., *Ten Twentieth-century Indian Poets*, Delhi, 1976, pp. 95–6.