

Introduction

Michael Madhusudan Datta (1824-73 C.E.), exceptional as poet and playwright in both English and Bangla (also known as Bengali), in many ways typified educated Bengalis of his day when East and West met constantly in the administrative capital of Britain's East Indian colony. His name itself, one part Christian-European (Michael) and two parts Hindu-Indian (Madhusudan Datta),¹ calls attention to the clash as well as the accommodation of cultures that took place in South Asia at the height of the two hundred years of her colonial period, a period that would end upon the stroke of midnight dividing the 14th from the 15th of August, 1947, with the concomitant partitioning of British India into the independent nation states of India and Pakistan. Datta's magnum opus, *The Slaying of Meghanada* (*Meghanadavadha kavya*) (1861), needs be seen, very much like its author, as simultaneously both extraordinary and representative. It is an extraordinary piece of literature, a sophisticated verse narrative in nine cantos; it is utterly representative of the cosmopolitan culture of mid-nineteenth-century India.

Bengali literary historians yet today mark with his text and its year of publication the divide between the so-called pre-modern and modern eras in Bangla literature. From the vantage point of the 21st century, it may seem strange to refer to a time in the 19th century as modern. It remains, however, the way that moment is viewed from within Bangla cultural history, and justifiably so, particularly today, when "modern" can imply

¹ For most of his life, he used "Dutt" as the Anglicized spelling of his surname. In 1866 while in Europe, he writes his main benefactor back in Calcutta, the renowned Isvar Chandra Vidyasagar, "I am 'published' Barrister as Michael Madhusudan Datta, Esquire. You might drop the vulgar form 'Dutt'"; Ksetra Gupta, ed., *Madhusudana racanavali* (The Collected Works of Madhusudan) (rpt., 1980; Kolkata: Sahitya Samsad, 1974), 618. I accede to his wishes expressed in that letter and refer to him as Datta.

passé in a here-and-now world self-characterized as postmodern. But modern contrasts with traditional, and it is this meaning of modern that pertains to Datta's poem. His narrative does not deny, negate, or ignore the traditional. It does, though, contrast with what preceded it. Datta's *Meghhanada* marks a major shift in imaginative perspective, a shift in the Bangla literary sensibilities of its day. Bengal during the 19th century and on into the beginnings of the 20th century took the lead on many fronts. It was said then that what Bengal thinks today, the rest of India thinks tomorrow. Similarly, what happened in Bengal as exemplified in the works of Datta would happen later throughout India. Modernity in the literatures of South Asia began in 1861, and began with Michael Madhusudan Datta.

BACKGROUND

Call it a fluke of history, but Kolkata (formerly known as Calcutta)—not Mumbai (Bombay), not Chennai (Madras), not the Asian banking hub of Hong Kong—became the Second City of the British Empire.² Chartered in the year 1600 by Queen Elizabeth when Shakespeare strode the English stage, the East India Company later that same century chose the Bengal area of the Indian subcontinent for its commercial headquarters. Calcutta did not exist before the British merchants, Job Chanock prominent among them, set up shop along the banks of the Hooghly just north of the mouth of that river which empties into the Bay of Bengal. In the year 1990, Calcutta officially and with panache celebrated its 300th anniversary. Back in its infancy, business, as it is wont to do, turned to politics. And after Robert Clive had defeated in 1757 the Nawab of Bengal,

² South Asian names and the spellings of names in the Roman alphabet have changed over time. In the case of place names, I shall from here on use the English spellings current during Datta's lifetime and call Kolkata Calcutta and Chennai Madras.

Sirajuddaula, in the Battle of Plassey north of Calcutta, the Company sued for and got the *dewani* or revenue-collecting authority for the region. The Company was, so to speak, now really in business, seriously. It would remain so throughout the 18th century and through much of the 19th, until the latter half of that century when following the Sepoy Rebellion of 1857—seen from another perspective as the First Indian War of Independence—the crown assumed authority, dissolving the East India Company and taking unto itself India, figuratively its crown jewel.

The 19th century had begun in Calcutta with a hotly contested colonial debate temporarily resolved, a debate that pitted Orientalists against Anglicists. Both designations referred to the British colonial administrators, not to the indigenous Indian population. The label Orientalist at the beginning of the 1800s meant something far different from the connotations that same term has assumed since the publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978). Said's book changed forever the way we look at other cultures, other peoples. Orientalism, since Said's sea-change study, refers to the political acts—whether intended by the actors as political or not is immaterial—by which the West has defined and thereby created the Orient, and created it as its own other, nowadays capitalized and nominalized into "the Other." Orientalism now refers to an attitude, a view of the Orient held by the West, the Occident. Orientalism is expressed through words as well as representation via other media, through books and reports, through drawings and paintings, through museums of various sorts. Overt military conquest and even economic conquest are quite another matter. Orientalism points to what might best be called a narrative conquest, as opposed to a physical conquest. Orientalism, in the post-Saidian sense, had deprived and still does deprive the non-

Western cultures of agency in the making of their own identity. That is to say, these cultures were and are defined by the West for the West's own purpose, which is fundamentally, in Saidian terms, imperialistic even today. From the Saidian perspective, both the Orientalists and the Anglicists of 1800 were Orientalists. Both contributed to the British colonial enterprise and particularly to the justification for colonialism. Both saw India in need of British tutelage in order for the people of that land to become something other than, better than, what they were. In Calcutta of the early 19th century, however, the so-called Orientalists (in a pre-Saidian sense) were those who argued in favor of both the classical as well as the vernacular languages of India. They were those who, in many cases, studied these languages and valued the literatures written in them. The Anglicists, on the other hand, tended to see little merit in the indigenous texts and indigenous knowledge systems, though they would concede the utility of learning native tongues as a means by which to rule the colony. Anglicists felt that the English language itself and the literature and the culture and the knowledge conveyed through English were superior to anything found in India.

At the start of the 19th century, the Orientalists among the British colonialists had won the day temporarily. Lord Wellesley, then Governor-General, the chief executive officer in India of the John Bull Company, as it was sometimes called—John Bull being figuratively to Britain what, in some ways, Uncle Sam is to the United States—proved sympathetic to the Orientalists' view of how to administer the colony and of what value to place upon the languages of India. It was Wellesley who established in 1800 the College at Fort William, said fort being the British military stronghold in Calcutta and the symbol of colonial power. Fort William College, which began instruction the following year in

1801, came into being for the express purpose of training young British administrators so that they could better perform their duties in the colony. The college provided instruction in several of the languages of India, languages that would serve this new administrative cadre well. It was an institution—the Asiatic Society of Bengal, established in 1784 being another—where the languages of India and at least some of the texts in those languages were taken seriously. How seriously and in what sense the Orientalists took these South Asian languages seriously can be glimpsed somewhat through the subjects for "Public Disputations and Declamations" staged during the initial decade or so of the college's existence. For the first of these public displays of the linguistic competence of the Company servants, in 1802, topics were proposed for three of the languages taught at the college: Persian, Hindustani, and Bengali. Bengali's topic, pejorative as well as paternalistic in the extreme, was the following: "The Asiatics are capable of as high a degree of civilization as the Europeans." And, two years later, the topic for disputation in Bengali by the college's students reveals more clearly the Orientalists' position vis-à-vis South Asian languages per se: "The translation of the best works in the Sanskrit into popular languages of India would promote the extension of science and civilization."³ Orientalists would say yea; Anglicists would say nay, arguing that there was nothing in those ancient texts that could advance science and civilization.

In 1813, the British parliament passed a renewal of the East India Company's charter, reaffirming the Company's right to operate in India but at the same time redefining and refining the Company's responsibilities in terms of Britain's then currently envisioned colonial mission. The Charter of 1813 recognized education of the colonial

³ Sisir Kumar Das, *Sahibs and Munshis: An Account of the College of Fort William* (New Delhi: Orion Publications, 1978), 150.

subjects as a major principle upon which the colonial enterprise should be based. Gauri Viswanathan show how and how well this new commitment to the education of the natives fit with the overarching efforts of the British to consolidate power in their colony.⁴ The commitment to education, however, could hardly be considered one-sided and the concern of the imperialists only. In 1816 a group of the leading Hindu gentlemen of Calcutta established Hindoo (the older spelling of Hindu) College "to instruct the sons of the Hindoos in the European and Asiatic languages and sciences."⁵ Hindoo College survives today as Presidency College, the premier institution of its sort in the state of West Bengal and undoubtedly one of the finest colleges in all of India. There were then and had been long before the advent of the British the *tol*, a traditional school for the learning of Sanskrit, and the *madrasah*, a school for Islamic education. The Company had even financed the establishment of two educational institutions, the Hindu College in Benaras and the Calcutta Madrassah, its version—albeit in imperial garb—of those more traditional schools. But here was a college (the "junior division" of which being what is now called a "school") that disseminated learning of both the European and Asiatic sort—its curriculum and its medium of instruction eventually becoming decidedly more European than Asiatic.

A decade after its founding, Hindoo College had increased considerably the importance ascribed to English. Of Hindoo College, cultural historian Sushil Kumar De writes:

⁴ Gauri Viswanathan, *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1989].

⁵ Sushil Kumar De, *Bengali Literature in the Nineteenth Century, 1757-1857* (Kolkata: Firma K.L. Mukhopadhyay, 1962), 480.

The institution was meant to supply liberal education in English, but prominence was given to the study of English language and literature, and from 1826 [carried into effect in 1827] all lectures were delivered in English. For the first time English language was cultivated in this college, not as done before to the slight extent necessary to carry on business with Europeans, but as the most convenient channel through which access was to be obtained to the literature of the West.⁶

At this very point in time, an amazingly charismatic and brilliant young man joined the faculty of Hindoo College, in March of 1826, a month shy of his seventeenth birthday. His name was Henry Louis Vivian Derozio. Though born in India, he had Portuguese blood in his ancestry, as the name might indicate, Derozio took his schooling at the Dhurmtollah Academy in Calcutta, run by a "free thinking" Scotsman. The young Henry likewise developed into a free thinker, a questioner of religion. He was also a poet, among the first Indians to write poetry in English, and quite patriotic Indian poetry to boot. The most famous of his compositions, a sonnet, begins, "My country in the day of glory past." Derozio's country was India, and he was proud of it.⁷

Hindoo College appointed the soon-to-be-seventeen Henry Derozio to teach English literature and history, which he did passionately. His syllabus—strictly speaking, the college's syllabus for "the first three classes"—from which he taught, in 1828, reads like a course in Western Civilization: Oliver Goldsmith's histories of Rome and England; William Robertson's *The History of the Reign of the Emperor Charles V with a View of the Progress of Society in Europe, from the Subversion of the Roman Empire, to the*

⁶ Ibid., 481.

⁷ Ibid., 486ff.

Beginning of the Sixteenth Century; William Russell's *The History of Modern Europe: with an Account of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire; and a View of the Progress of Society, from the Rise of the Modern Kingdoms to the Peace of Paris in 1763; in a Series of Letters from a Nobleman to His Son*; John Gay's fables; Alexander Pope's translations of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*; John Dryden's *The Works of Virgil*; John Milton's *Paradise Lost*; and one of Shakespeare's tragedies.⁸ But Derozio did far more than that just teach in the classroom. Around him gathered a coterie of Hindoo College students, by upbringing Hindus, but nonetheless attracted to this smart, charming, young, questioning, atheistically inclined teacher. Derozio's residence in Calcutta developed into the gathering spot for many of these students, who collectively came to be known as Young Bengal. These college-going intellectuals were eager to assimilate many of the more progressive ideas to which they had been exposed, were equally eager (some of them) to explore their own cultural past and willing (some of them) to speak out against British abuses of power in India as well as to denounce what they viewed as superstitious, obscurant practices among their fellow Hindus, including parents. Their outward acts of defiance against orthodoxy included, most notably, eating beef and imbibing alcohol—both taboo among good Hindus of the day.

Derozio and the atmosphere of Hindoo College were not the only forces to challenge Hindu orthodoxy. The Charter of 1813 had granted Christian missionaries, long held at bay by official Company policy, greater access to India. But even prior to that, the Bengali Hindu community felt the sting of sanctimonious Christian criticism. In part in response to such criticism of, among other things, idolatry and the myriad gods

⁸ Ibid., 488.

and goddesses of the Hindus, Ram Mohun Roy (1772-1833) and associates established in 1828 the Brahmo Sabha (The Assembly of Brahma), subsequently recast and renamed the Brahmo Samaj (The Society of Brahma). Purified Hinduism, of Ram Mohun Roy's creation, consisted of a monotheistic religion, devoid of any anthropomorphic deity. The "Brahma" here is not the god that is part of what is sometimes referred to as the triumvirate of Brahma-Vishnu-Shiva but instead the abstract principle of "brahman," ethereal divinity pure and simple. This re-envisioned Hinduism, grounded upon the ancient Hindu sacred texts known as the Upanishads, formed the basis for the Brahmo Samaj's theology. Brahmoism was still Hinduism, but it looked very much like a form of Christianity without Christ. Though from one perspective still Hinduism, the Brahmo Samaj became viewed by orthodox Hindus as apostasy. And Hindus, in many cases, rejected Brahmos, even their own blood relatives, as outcasts.

During that same year of 1828 the tide had begun to turn within the colonial administration against the Orientalists and in favor of the Anglicists. William Bentinck took up the mantle of Governor-General in 1828. During his tenure, the College at Fort William closed its doors.⁹ Other institutions of learning, catering to the cultivation of South Asian languages and knowledge systems, suffered from a lack of official colonial administrative support. Bentinck was the first of the truly anti-Orientalist, pro-Anglicist Governors-General. And it was while he governed that the Orientalist-Anglicist controversy solidified into just that, a real controversy. In the words of one of the

⁹ A somewhat comparable institution, Haileybury College, had been opened in England in 1805 and continued to serve as training college for young civilians headed for Company service in India. The philosophy driving that educational institution would appear to have been far more Anglicist than Orientalist from the very outset, interested in fully preparing the new recruits before they could become corrupted by actual India; Sumanta Banerjee, *The Parlour and the Streets: Elite and Popular Culture in Nineteenth Century Calcutta* (Kolkata: Seagull Books, 1989), 34-35.

Anglicists, Charles Trevelyan, the Orientalists' objective "was to educate Europeans in the languages and cultures of the East" while the Anglicists sought "to educate Asiatics in the sciences of the West."¹⁰ Trevelyan's pronouncement came out in a publication entitled *A Series of Papers on the Application of the Roman Alphabet to All the Oriental Languages*, issued from Serampore's Mission Press in 1834. The title itself makes evidently clear the thrust of the Anglicists. They even wanted to Anglicize the Bangla alphabet. Serampore, a village north of but close to Calcutta, was headquarters for the Baptist missionaries, William Carey prominent among them. Carey had been and continued to be a champion of the Bangla language, not just for the language qua language but also for its utility as a proselytizing vehicle. He had served as the first and most prominent professor of Bangla in the Fort William College. But, as David Kopf notes in his richly documented history of this period, even Serampore College, feeling the pressure from the Anglicists during the Bentinck period, Anglicized its curriculum and thereby "lost its attractiveness to Indians."¹¹

The Indians' reaction, in general, to Anglicizing curricula may not have been as obvious or as negative as Kopf's statement implies. It should be kept in mind that the Hindu gentlemen who founded Hindoo College in 1816 intended its curriculum to include prominently "European . . . languages and sciences." What did bother a number of guardians of students who attended Hindoo College was not the curriculum per se but the extracurricular activities and growing influence of the college's star instructor, Henry Derozio. These Hindu parents and guardians feared this charismatic teacher might cause

¹⁰ David Kopf, *British Orientalism and the Bengal Renaissance: The Dynamics of Indian Modernization, 1773-1835* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1969), 241-42.

¹¹ Ibid.

their children—his students—to reject the Hinduism of their forefathers and convert to Christianity or join the Brahmo Samaj, both equally sacrilegious moves.

Throughout the 19th century but particularly in the first half of it in the intellectual crucible of Calcutta, Christianity represented not just a religion but also an intellectual, even civilizational, tradition. Christianity stood for the European Enlightenment. It stood for Western Civilization. Christianity subsumed within it the literature of Milton, to be sure, but also that of Shakespeare and that of Virgil and Homer—however incongruent with Christianity these latter pagans might seem—and all the other texts included in the Hindoo College syllabus from which Derozio and his colleagues taught. As Datta would put it in an essay written toward the middle of the century in 1854, Christianity, the British, and the English language itself were all three civilizing forces and should be brought to bear on India. Quite spectacularly, albeit bombastically, Datta employs in that essay the Virgilian conceit of Aeneas approaching Carthage, having left Troy behind on his destined journey to Italy and empire. India, "this queenly Hindustan," as he puts it, is Dido. Britain, particularly the British imperial advent into India, is a fair-haired, virile Aeneas. Datta begins this essay of his entitled "The Anglo-Saxon and the Hindu" with an epigraph in Latin from the Aeneid, (Bk IV)—*Quis novus hic nostris successit sedibus hospes?*—which he translates: "Who is the stranger that has come to our dwelling?" The answer: It is the Anglo-Saxon. It is the Anglo-Saxon, who brings with him his language:

I acknowledge to you, and I need not blush to do so—that I love the language of the Anglo-Saxon. Yes—I *love* the language,—the glorious language of the

Anglo-Saxon! My imagination visions forth before me the language of the
Anglo-Saxon in all its radiant beauty; and I feel silenced and abashed.¹²

And this Anglo-Saxon, in the course of Datta's essay, becomes transformed from Aeneas into the Crusader. But unlike Aeneas—who leaves Dido, who in turn, distraught, commits suicide—Datta's Crusader has a mission to perform in that land to which he ventures. "It is the glorious mission, I repeat, of the Anglo-Saxon to renovate, to regenerate, or—in one word, to Christianize the Hindu."¹³

Though Datta was himself a Christian convert, he was clearly less concerned with the theological side of Christianity in this essay than with Christianity as a civilizing force. Derozio, in many ways an atheist and accused of being such—he denied it—represented and had preached that same civilizational Christianity to his students, inside and outside the classroom. And some within the Hindu elite community were sorely afraid for their sons. One of Derozio's students, Krishna Mohan Banerjee, who would convert to Christianity and become the Reverend K.M. Banerjee, the most prominent Bengali Christian cleric of his age, described the tenor of some of the discourse associated with Derozio and his students, at Derozio's own quarters and at a debating club known as the Academic Association:

The authority of the Hindu religion was questioned, its sanctions impeached, its doctrines ridiculed, its philosophy despised, its ceremonies accounted fooleries,

¹² Gupta, *Madhusudana racanavali*, 638.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 639.

its injunctions openly violated and its priesthood defied as an assembly of fools, hypocrites and fanatics.¹⁴

Anxiety within the Hindu community ran high. Rumors circulated disparaging Derozio, impugning his moral character. On April 23, 1831, Hindoo College's managing committee called for Derozio's dismissal from the faculty, a decision taken by the Hindus only, for the British members had recused themselves from this matter that concerned Hindus and Hinduism fundamentally. In his letter of resignation dated April 25th, solicited by and addressed to H.H. Wilson, who was officially known as the Visitor of the College but was in fact the person in charge of the college administratively, Derozio denied the allegations made against him and decried the managing committee's refusal to allow him to testify in person before it. Wilson, feeling obliged to abide by the wishes of the committee, accepted Derozio's resignation. By quirk of fate, eight months later, in December of 1831, the twenty-two-old Henry Louis Vivian Derozio died of cholera. His legacy, however, lived on palpably and profoundly, in those labeled Young Bengal. Nearly six years after Derozio's death, Madhusudan Datta would be admitted to this college's junior department (school), starting in 1837, when he was thirteen years old. He would remain at Hindoo College, both junior and senior divisions, for the next five years, five truly formative years of his life. If biographer Suresh Chandra Maitra is correct, these five years were not just formative but literally transformative of Datta, who had

¹⁴ De, *Bengali Literature*, 491.

been, writes Maitra, a "tongue-tied" (*mukhacora*), shy youth.¹⁵ By the time he left that college, Datta had become a boldly expressive, utterly confident young man.¹⁶

Two years earlier, in 1835, Thomas Babington Macaulay had issued his famous (or infamous, depending upon one's perspective) minute on education. Macaulay, a committed Benthamite Utilitarian, as were many in Britain at this time, had come to India only the year before and had been made presiding officer of the Committee on Public Instruction. The title itself calls attention to the importance placed upon education, a desideratum-*cum*-justification of Britain's colonial enterprise. It was the committee's charge to select, in the interest of improving the education of Indians, the language through which Company-funded schools would give instruction. The question itself, whether English or one of the South Asian languages should become the sanctioned medium of instruction, formed the very crux of that ongoing Orientalist-Anglicist controversy. From his minute, one can infer that the committee was unanimous in rejecting any of the Indian vernaculars, Bangla among them. Even Persian seems not to have been considered seriously. Only Sanskrit, Arabic, and English remained in contention, and the committee split down the middle on Sanskrit and/or Arabic versus English. Macaulay opted for English. In his minute he asserted:

¹⁵ Suresh Chandra Maitra, *Madhusudana Datta: jivana o sahitya* (Madhusudan Datta: Life and Literature) (Kolkata: Puthipatra, 1975), 33.

¹⁶ Concerning his age and the year when he entered Hindoo College, the earliest biography of Datta gives thirteen and 1837; Yogindranath Basu, *Maikela Madhusudana Dattera jivana-carita* (A Biography of Michael Madhusudan Datta) (5th ed.; Kolkata: Chakravarti, Chatterjee, and Co., 1925), 25 and 48. The editor of Datta's collected works cites Brajendranath Bandyopadhyay's opinion—that the year was 1833—noting that the college magazine (March 7, 1834) mentions Datta reading aloud at the college's awards ceremony; Gupta, *Madhusudana racanavali*, xi. More recent biographers, first Maitra and then Ghulam Murshid, opt for the date given in the earliest biography. Maitra cites overwhelming evidence of a second, older Madhusudan Datta at Hindoo College in the early 1830s; *Maikela Madhusudana Datta*, 32-33. Murshid agrees with Maitra; *Ashara chalane bhuli: Maikela-jivani* ("Fooled by Hope's Deception: A Michael Biography") (2d ed.; Kolkata: Ananda Publishers, 1997), 28.

I have no knowledge of either Sanscrit or Arabic. But I have done what I could to form a correct estimate of their value. I have read translations of the most celebrated Arabic and Sanscrit works. I have conversed both here and at home with men distinguished by their proficiency in the Eastern tongues. I am quite ready to take the Oriental learning at the valuation of the Orientalists themselves. I have never found one among them who could deny that a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia. The intrinsic superiority of the Western literature is, indeed, fully admitted by those members of the committee who support the Oriental plan of education.¹⁷

Hindoo College, already an English medium institution, was unaffected by the pronouncement, but such a statement reaffirmed the correctness of their position for those who attended the college or supported its educational philosophy. The essence of Macaulay's decision had been urged by a number of the educated Bengali elite including such a notable figure as Ram Mohun Roy. Roy had argued in a letter to the Governor-General more than a decade earlier against Sanskrit both as a medium of instruction and as a purveyor of (worthwhile) knowledge:

The Sanscrit language, so difficult that almost a lifetime is necessary for its acquisition, is well known to have been for ages a lamentable check to the

¹⁷ Thomas Babington Macaulay, "Minute on Education," in *Sources of Indian Tradition*, ed. by Wm. Theodore de Bary (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1958), 2:44-45.

diffusion of knowledge, and the learning concealed under this almost impervious veil is far from sufficient to reward the labor of acquiring it.¹⁸

And no matter how insulting Macaulay's 1835 minute might appear to be, it was meant less as a snub of India's cultural heritage than as an endorsement of English as a medium through which all knowledge, of India's heritage as well as of European arts and sciences, should be transmitted to the educable Indian population. The way Macaulay saw it,

Within the last hundred and twenty years, a nation which has previously been in a state as barbarous as that in which our ancestors were before the Crusades, has gradually emerged from the ignorance in which it was sunk, and has taken its place among civilized communities. I speak of Russia. . . . The languages of Western Europe civilized Russia. I cannot doubt that they will do for the Hindoo what they have done for the Tartar.¹⁹

But education, specifically education in and through English, was not for everyone, Macaulay conceded. So what should be the goal of the Company's educational policy? Macaulay is clear about his objectives:

In one point I fully agree with the gentlemen to whose general views I am opposed. I feel with them, that it is impossible for us, with our limited means, to attempt to educate the body of the people. We must at present do our best to form

¹⁸ Ram Mohun Roy, "Letter on Education," in *Sources of Indian Tradition*, 2:40-43.

¹⁹ Macaulay, "Minute on Education," in *Sources of Indian Tradition*, 2:47.

a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect. To that class we may leave it to refine the vernacular dialects of the country, to enrich those dialects with terms of science borrowed from the Western nomenclature, and to render them by degrees fit vehicles for conveying knowledge to the great mass of the population.²⁰

As outrageous as Macaulay's statement on the goals of education might appear ("to form a class . . . of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect."), the Company's educational policy proved, to a degree, successful. Hindoo College, in a sense, had preempted Macaulay's minute. It was already producing those persons described by Macaulay. Michael Madhusudan Datta epitomizes the perfect Macaulayan product, acculturated to English tastes, notably in literature. Little wonder, then, that Datta began his literary career writing in English.

MICHAEL MADHUSUDAN DATTA

He was born January 25, 1824, of the Common Era—the year 1230 by the Bangla calendar. His father Raj Narain and mother Jahnabi were then residents of the village of Sagardari in the district of Jessore, which now lies within the borders of Bangladesh. At the *nama-karana* or "name-giving" ceremony, his parents called him Madhusudan or quite literally "the slaying of the demon Madhu," a feat accomplished by Vishnu and thus one of that god's many epithets, besides being a rather common Hindu name at the time.

²⁰ Ibid., 2:49.

Madhusudan was the first issue of this couple. They had two other children, boys who both died young leaving Madhusudan for all practical purposes an only child.

The family was not poor. Datta's father practiced law. As was necessary for anyone in the legal profession in those days, Raj Narain spoke Persian, the language of the law courts, a legacy from the Moghul empire perpetuated by the British East India Company until the 1837 when English replaced Persian in the colonial legal system. Calcutta, as opposed to a village in the hinterland, would naturally be the place to practice law. It was to Kidderpore, a neighborhood (then little more than a village) near Calcutta's harbor that he moved his wife and son, when Datta had reached the age of eight. Raj Narain plied his profession in the colonial courts of Calcutta, the *Sudder Dewani Adalat* (chief civil court), attaining considerable renown and the wealth that often goes with reputation. He has been described as "one among the three best-known and highest-paid lawyers" at this time.²¹ The other two, moreover, appear to have been formidable rivals: Ramaprasad Roy, Ram Mohun Roy's son, and Prasanna Kumar Tagore, a cousin of Rabindranath's grandfather, Dwarkanath Tagore.²² However, Datta's most recent as well as thorough biographer, Ghulam Murshid, dismisses such statements about the elevated status of lawyer Raj Narain as pure fabrication.²³ Be that as it may, the family seems to have lived quite comfortably, at least through Datta's student days.

Whether from his father or not, Datta had learned Persian, as is evident from his ability to recite Persian *ghazal* verse, entertaining fellow Hindoo College students with such recitations. His primary languages, though, were Bangla and English, Bangla being

²¹ Amalendu Bose, *Michael Madhusudan Dutt* (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1981), 9.

²² Maitra, *Maikela Madhusudana Datta*, 28.

²³ Murshid, *Ashara chalan bhuli*, 19-20.

his mother tongue. And from his mother, we are told by his biographers, he heard—in Bangla, naturally—the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, Hindu India's two great epics. English, not Bangla, may have been his first language, if not chronologically, at least with respect to his command of it. By the time he became a young adult, he had attained a phenomenal command of the Queen's English. He flourished and felt comfortable in an English-medium environment. He read literature in English, much of it English literature or European literature in English translation. An excerpt from the first essay that we have of his, entitled "On Poetry Etc." and in English, shows his precocity:

It is the misfortune of the modern Muse to be loaded with ornaments which too often veil her native charms:—To illustrate this, we need not go very far: The works of a famous living poet—"Anacreon Moore" will serve our purpose:—Beautiful as the poetry of this writer is, where is the reader who does not feel a sort of sickening refinement in many passages—a collocation of epithets and expressions which often prove destructive of that effect which naked simplicity would produce—Tom Moore, lavish as he is in his similes of "flowers" and "stars", "breezes" and "Zephyrs", has never written a better line of poetry or given a sweeter description of a flower than Spenser. When the latter sweetly warbles of the—

"Lily, ladie of the flowering field"

Fairy Queene.²⁴

²⁴ Gupta, *Madhusudana racanavali*, 622,

Another essay, written in 1842 after he had been at Hindoo College for a number of years, garnered a prize, a gold medal, presented to him with great fanfare at a public meeting. Following the simple title of "An Essay," that prose piece bore the lengthy subtitle of "On the importance of educating Hindoo Females, with reference to the improvement which it may be expected to produce on the education of children, in their early years, and the happiness it would generally confer on domestic life."²⁵ English was clearly his forte.

Thanks to Gour Dass Bysack (also spelled a number of different ways, by Datta himself, including Gour Dos Bysac), his best friend at Hindoo College and one to whom he dedicated a number of his poems, we have examples of his college poesy, including an acrostic based on Bysack's name:

AN ACROSTIC

G-o! simple lay! And tell that fair,
O-h! 'tis for her, her lover dies!
U-ndone by her, his heart sincere
R-esolves itself thus into sighs!
D-ear cruel maid! tho' ne'er doth she
O-nce think, for her thus breaks my heart
S-ad fate! oh! yet must I love thee,
B-e thou unkind, till life doth part!
Y-oung Peri of the East! thou maid divine!

²⁵ Ibid., 622-23.

S-weet one! oh! let me not thus die:

A-ll kind, to these fond arms of mine

C-ome! and let me no longer sigh!²⁶

Poetry was his passion, but Hindoo College, as its charter declared, attended to education in both the arts and the sciences. And Datta, through one of his poems, acknowledges that other branch of a college education:

Oh! how my heart exulteth while I see

These future flow'rs, to deck my country's brow,

Thus kindly nurtured in this nursery!—

Perchance, unmark'd some here are budding now,

Whose temples shall with laureate-wreaths be crown'd

Twined by the Sisters Nine: whose angel-tongues

Shall charm the world with their enchanting songs.

And time shall waft the echo of each sound

To distant ages:—some, perchance, here are,

Who, with a Newton's glance, shall nobly trace

The course mysterious of each wandering star;

And, like a God, unveil the hidden face

Of many a planet to man's wondering eyes,

And give their names to immortality.²⁷

²⁶ Ibid., 438.

The "future flowers" are, of course, his fellow students in the Hindoo College "nursery," some of whom would likely blossom into prominence in their adult careers. For those successful in the arts, there will come fame, indicated here by the very European image of the nine Greek muses and the laurel they twist into crowns. Nowhere is there mentioned Sarasvati, the Hindu goddess of the arts and learning; Datta had yet to find his Indian roots. And there are those among his colleagues who would make their mark in the sciences, who would develop the perceptive eye of a Sir Isaac Newton, and go on to reveal something of the mysteries of the heavenly bodies and by so doing become famous. The arts—narratively speaking in this sonnet and in Datta's estimation generally—come before the sciences in many ways. After all, he contended elsewhere, Shakespeare, with some schooling, could learn what Newton knew, but Newton, without the native talent of a Shakespeare, could never learn to write like him.²⁸

Datta would introduce sonnets, of which the above is a somewhat idiosyncratic example with its rhyme scheme of abab cddc efef gg, into Bangla literature when later in his career he turned to writing in his mother tongue. There are precious few notable Bengali poets from the time of Datta to the present who have not composed Bangla sonnets. That poetic form remains to this day extremely productive in Bangla literature. After its introduction into Bangla, it migrated to Marathi poetry and to various other South Asian literatures. The history of the sonnet in South Asia, in languages other than English, dates from 1860 when Datta wrote to a friend, "I want to introduce the sonnet into our language," and then included his Bangla sonnet entitled "*Kabi-matribhasha*"

²⁷ Ibid., 454.

²⁸ Nagendranath Som, *Madhu-smriti* (Remembrances of Modhu) (3d ed.; Kolkata: Vidyodaya Library, 1989), 8; Murshid, *Ashara chalane bhuli*, 39.

("The Poet's Mother Tongue"), subsequently revised and renamed "*Bangabhasha*" ("The Language of Bengal").²⁹ Beneath his poem he asked rhetorically, "What say you to this my good friend!" And he adds, "In my humble opinion, if cultivated by men of genius, our sonnet in time would rival the Italian."³⁰ Five years later, in 1865 while living in Versailles, France, Datta would send Victor Emanuel a sonnet on Dante, "a little oriental flower," as he called it, composed in Bangla with both an Italian and a French translation done by himself, on the occasion of that poet's 600th birth anniversary.³¹

True to his love and esteem of poetry, Datta aspired from his Hindoo College days to become a poet. He ardently wished to be physically a part of England and English-*cum*-European culture. That sentiment gets articulated again and again during this time in his life.

I sigh for Albion's distant shore
Its valleys green, its mountains high;
Tho' friends, relations, I have none
In that far clime, yet, oh! I sigh
To cross the vast Atlantic wave
For glory, or a nameless grave!

My father, mother, sister, all
Do love me and I love them too,

²⁹ Gupta, *Madhusudana racanavali*, 41.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 556.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 602.

Yet oft the tear-drops rush and fall
From my sad eyes like winter's dew,
And, oh! I sigh for Albion's stand
As if she were my native-land!³²

No matter that he was an only child and had no sister, the sentiments expressed were heart-felt. It was as if he had two native lands, England and Bengal, emotionally as well as intellectually, though to date he had never left Bengal. Datta wrote the poem in 1841. It would take him a score of years and some dramatic changes in his life before he would actually sail off to England in 1862 to study for the bar at Gray's Inn. But his poetry could, and would, precede him. Possibly emboldened by his receipt of the gold medal for that essay of his, as noted above, he sent off in October of 1842 some of his poetry to a couple of British journals, informing his friend of this in a feigned offhanded yet typically effervescent manner, in English, of course:

Good Heavens—what a thing have I forgotten to inform you of—I sent my poems to the Editor of the *Blackwood's* Tuesday last: I haven't dedicated them to you as I intended, but to William Wordsworth, the Poet. My dedication runs thus: 'These Poems are most respectfully dedicated to William Wordsworth Esq, the Poet, by a foreign admirer of his genius—the author.' Oh! to what a painful state have I

³² Ibid., 438.

committed myself. Now, I think the Editor will receive them graciously, now I think he will reject them.³³

In that same month he wrote to the editor of *Bentley's Miscellany*, London:

It is not without much fear that I send you the accompanying productions of my juvenile Muse, as contribution to your Periodical.

He identified himself thus:

I am a Hindoo—a native of Bengal—and study English at the Hindoo College in Calcutta. I am now in my eighteenth year,— "a child"—to use the language of a poet of your land, Cowley, "in learning but not in age."³⁴

The Irish poet Thomas Moore had published in 1830 his biography of George Gordon Lord Byron (1788-1824), who, coincidentally, happens to have died the same year Datta was born. We get a sense of the intellectual excitement felt by Hindoo College students as we learn of Datta and Bysack reading that same biography, one lending it to the other, and of Datta's exuberance upon reading it. And then he, in one of his typically confident assertions, writes to Bysack in November of 1842,

³³ Ibid., 519-20.

³⁴ Ibid., 520.

I am reading Tom Moore's *Life of my favourite Byron*—a splendid book, upon my word! Oh! how should I like to see you write my "Life" if I happen to be a great poet—which am almost sure I shall be, if I can go to England.³⁵

The poems mentioned in the letters above, though they got to England by post, were never published. For the time being, he could "sigh for Albion's distant shore," and he could revel in the intellectual ferment that went with being a student at Hindoo College. But that was about to change, dramatically.

Toward the end of 1842, Datta's father decided it was high time his eighteen-year-old son wed. Datta reacted with abhorrence to the very idea of marriage at this moment in his life, and specifically to the type of bride his father had chosen for him. A spate of letters to Bysack, four in three days at the very end of November, reveals something of Datta's state of mind at that moment.

I wish (Oh! I really wish) that somebody would hang me! At the expiration of three months from hence I am to be married;—dreadful thoughts! It harrows up my blood and makes my hair stand like quills on the fretful porcupine! My betrothed is the daughter of a rich zemindar;—poor girl! What a deal of misery is in store for her in the ever inexorable womb of Futurity! You know my desire for leaving this country is too firmly rooted to be removed. The sun may forget to rise, but I cannot remove it from my heart. Depend upon it—in the course of a year or two

³⁵ Ibid., 524.

more, I must either be in England or cease "to be" at all—*one of these must be done!*³⁶

"At the expiration of three months from hence I am to be married;—dreadful thoughts!" So dreadful to him were those thoughts and so strong were his desires to go to England that Datta made a momentous decision well before the expiration of that stated three-month period. He opted to convert to Christianity. It might have been his father's plan to get him married that precipitated Datta's conversion leading to, or so he fervently hoped, a passage to England.

There were those Hindoo College students who had fallen away from Hinduism and either joined the relatively new Brahmo Samaj or converted to some form of Christianity. The Rev. K.M. Banerjee can be pointed to as just such a former Hindoo College student, and Rev. Banerjee in 1842 was the most prominent Bengali Christian convert in Calcutta, in all of British India, for that matter. And it was to Rev. Banerjee that Datta went to discuss his contemplated conversion. In his reminiscences, Rev. Banerjee confirms what the epistolary evidence has already hinted at: Datta evinced little genuine interest of any sort in Christianity per se, certainly not the fervor of a committed convert-to-be. Writes Rev. Banerjee,

. . . I was impressed with the belief that his desire of becoming a Christian, was, scarcely, greater than his desire of a voyage to England. I was unwilling to mix up the two questions; and while I conversed with him on the first, I candidly told

³⁶ Ibid., 525-26; letter dated and timed, "Kidderpore, 27 Nov., [1842,] Midnight"

him that I could lend him no help as regarded the second question. He seemed disheartened and came to me less frequently after that.³⁷

Datta's father opposed his son's plan completely and seemed bent on thwarting him. He hired *lathials*, professional toughs, enforcers who wielded sticks or *lathis*. To ensure that their prize and future convert not be kidnapped by his own father and kept from them, the Christian authorities housed Datta in Calcutta's Fort William. And these same authorities allowed for but few visitors to see the illustrious Hindoo College student who turned nineteen that January, 1843. Bysack did get permission to meet once with his good friend, but the meeting was cut short by one of the British caretakers, "lest I should be," as Bysack put it in his reminiscences, "tampering with his new faith." It was a faith or "new light," Bysack recalled, the slightest glimmer of which had not been seen by any of Datta college friends prior to that point.³⁸ Whatever might have been Datta's real reason for converting, the baptism took place, on February 9th.³⁹ He recited his own four-stanza poem, titled "Hymn," for the occasion.

Long sunk in Superstition's night,
By Sin and Satan driven,—
I saw not,—cared not for the light
That leads the blind to Heaven.

³⁷ Quoted in Basu, *Maikela Madhusudana*, 124.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, appendix, 4.

³⁹ Murshid, *Ashara chalane bhuli*, 65.

I sat in darkness,—Reason's eye

Was shut,—was closed in me;—

I hasten'd to Eternity

O'er Error's dreadful sea!

But now, at length thy grace, O Lord!

Bids all around me shine:

I drink thy sweet,—thy precious word,—

I kneel before thy shrine!—

I've broken Affection's tenderest ties

For my blest Savior's sake:—

All, all I love beneath the skies,

Lord, I for Thee forsake!⁴⁰

The consequences of Datta's conversion were in some cases predictable, in others not. The marriage his father had negotiated for him did not take place, a consequence Datta desired. He had to withdraw from Hindoo College, a consequence not anticipated. Some ten years later, he would have been allowed to stay enrolled there, even though not a Hindu. In 1843, however, Hindoo College did not abide a convert.⁴¹ His newly acquired Christian co-religionists, Europeans primarily, so eager to have him join the church, on the whole cooled noticeably once he had become one of them. Nevertheless,

⁴⁰ Gupta, *Madhusudana racanavali*, 467.

⁴¹ Murshid, *Ashara chalan bhuli*, 71.

Datta, ever the good student, seems to have applied himself to the study of Christian theology more conscientiously than anyone, Rev. Banerjee included, might have predicted. But, probably the most coveted consequence of his conversion, a chance to go to England, failed to materialize, though the desire stayed strong.

After a hiatus of nearly two years, Datta returned to college in November of 1844, with financial help from his father, who though unhappy about the conversion had not disowned his only son. This time it was Bishop's College, however, just across the river from Calcutta and an institution, as the name implies, with a Christian orientation. He was officially a lay student and neither European nor Anglo-Indian, which put him in the minority on all counts. He remained a student there for three full years and took his classes seriously, as both the brevity and in some cases the content of his letters to Bysack indicated.

Bishop's College, 27th January 1845

My dear Friend,

It is a matter of regret to me that I haven't been able to answer your two very kind letters ere this; but if you were to know how my time is engaged here, I am sure you would excuse me. However, at anytime that is convenient to you, I should be extremely happy to see you as well as the friends you intend to bring with you. By the bye, you ought to address me in the following manner.

"M. Dutt Esqr. or Baboo" (if you please) Bishop's College; and nothing more. I must beg pardon for this short letter, but upon my word, I can't afford a minute more; so good-night.

Yours ever the same.⁴²

The instructions on how to address him came after twice admonishing Bysack in previous short notes. The postscript for one of those read: "You write on the back of your letter 'To Christian M. S. Dutt from G. D. B.' *I do not like it.*" The last line of another declared: "I do not like 'My dear Christian Friend M. etc.'"⁴³ To be noted here and in the letter above are both his attitude and his name, or rather his initials.

Concerning his attitude: The aversion to being labeled "Christian," as though such a rubric were an essential part of his identity, need not be taken to imply that Datta felt himself somehow less than a committed Christian. He may have had ulterior motives for converting, but, as Ghulam Murshid argues, he became a serious student and practitioner of the religion. At one point, possibly due to the influence of another student who had come to Bishop's College from Mauritius to prepare for a life of missionary work back home, Datta even considered becoming a Christian missionary.⁴⁴ Yet his Christianity was probably always more intellectual than emotional, more cerebral than visceral. A Christian he remained throughout his life, but his devotion would be first and foremost to literature.

⁴² Gupta, *Madhusudana racanavali*, 528-29.

⁴³ Ibid., 528.

⁴⁴ Murshid, *Ashara chalane bhuli*, 84.

Concerning his name: Datta did not become "Michael" upon his conversion to Christianity—was not given any new, baptismal or Christian name at all—but remained simply Madhusudan. There is in fact no reason to expect a change of name or an additional name to be bestowed at the time of conversion. The Reverend Krishna Mohun Banerjee, Datta's senior and himself a Bengali convert to Christianity, took no Christian or English name but remained Krishna Mohun (K.M.) Banerjee throughout his lifetime. Murshid includes in his biography a photocopy of the pertinent page from a baptismal registry where, under the column labeled "Child's Christian name," we find one word, "Modoosoodan." The following year, after Datta had enrolled in Bishop's College, his name appears on the college's registry as simply "Mudhoosooden Dutt," [sic] no "Michael."⁴⁵ Datta's admonitions to Bysack concerning the manner in which he should be addressed are all made while Datta is at Bishop's College. The "M" in "M. Dutt Esqr.," "Christian M.S. Dutt," and "My dear Christian Friend M." can only stand for Madhusudan, not Michael, for "M.S." perforce must be the abbreviation of Madhu Sudan. The name Michael becomes evident only after he has left Calcutta and is residing in Madras. It appears in full on a page of a marriage registry (1848); it appears as an initial only on the cover of Datta's first book, *The Captive Ladie* (1849), where the author is given as "M.M.S. Dutt."⁴⁶ The first "M" quite obviously stands for Michael. "Michael," then, turns out not to be any official baptismal name but rather Datta's assumed Christian-*cum*-Anglo-Indian moniker, adopted by him probably after his arrival in Madras but definitely before his marriage some seven months into his stay there. Precisely when and why he chose to prefix this particular English-Christian name to

⁴⁵ Ibid., 66; photocopy of the relevant page from the college registry appears on page 88.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 107.

his—and not Matthew or Mark or the name of one of the other archangels such as Gabriel—we may never know, for he does not call attention to his new name or the circumstances surrounding his choice of it in any of his letters that we have.⁴⁷

It was in 1847 that the course of Datta's life had begun to change again. His father, once one of Calcutta's most sought-after lawyers (he was what is known as a "vakil"), had fallen on relatively hard times.⁴⁸ Raj Narain's relationship with his only son became strained, even more so, it would seem, than following Datta's conversion. The specific causes and the depths of the emotional rift are hard to fathom with any certainty. Quite probably the father's new and reduced economic status affected the way he viewed his son, still a student in need of financial assistance at age twenty-three. Moreover, in what would appear to be an effort to obtain a Hindu (as opposed to a Christian) son both to perform his religiously sanctioned funeral rites and to carry on his lineage, the senior Dutt took a second wife—then a third wife, for his second wife died almost immediately after marriage. Datta's mother Jahnabi seems not to have been terribly upset with her new domestic situation.⁴⁹ For a Hindu gentleman of that day to have more than one wife was not uncommon, though a segment of the Bengali intellectuals protested strongly against polygamy. No issue, male or female, ever came of his father's other marriages.

⁴⁷ I want to thank Rachel Fell McDermott for questioning today's generally held but erroneous belief that Madhusudan became Michael Madhusudan upon converting to Christianity. It was due to her prodding that I came to see the obvious, which, like the "purloined letter" of Edgar Allen Poe's story of the same name, has been in plain view all along.

⁴⁸ Amalendu Bose sees a direct connection between the decline in his income and the decline in the importance of Persian, which Raj Narain spoke, as a useful language in the courts; *Michael Madhusudan Dutt*, 26. Persian, however, had begun its decline a decade earlier and probably had no bearing on his financial situation. Other biographers suggest that Raj Narain had, for reasons unknown, been disqualified by judges from pleading appeal cases; Murshid, *Ashara chalan bhuli*, 86.

⁴⁹ Murshid, *Ashara chalan bhuli*, 87-88.

Whether the father's marital situation exacerbated the problem between father and son can merely be surmised.

The only direct evidence we have of his mental state around that time comes in two forms: a short note to Bysack, the last such note to be written from Bishop's College, and a statement in a subsequent letter to Bysack, written more than a year and a half later. The initial sentence in the first of these, dated "Bp's Coll: 19th May, 47," reads: "Since I last heard from you I have been almost half dead with all manner of troubles."⁵⁰ The second letter, the very next communication from Datta to Bysack, begins as follows:

Madras Male Orphan Asylum

Black Town, 14th February, 1849

My Dearest Friend,

By my truth you wrong me! It is impossible for me to forget you—and you may rest assured that I have often and often thought of you with feelings of deeper love than many whom I know. When I left Calcutta, I was half mad with vexation and anxiety. Don't for a moment think that *you alone* did not receive a valedictory visit from me. I never communicated my intentions to more than 2 or 3 persons.⁵¹

On December 29, 1847, Datta, "half mad with vexation and anxiety," had boarded a ship for Madras, fleeing the city of his father, fleeing a father who quite possibly stood

⁵⁰ Gupta, *Madhusudana racanavali*, 530.

⁵¹ Ibid.

in need of financial help or emotion support or both. The son knew well no one in Madras, where his ship dropped anchor offshore in January 18th.⁵² It was through Christian connections, first established at Bishop's College among fellow students who hailed from Madras, that Datta found a place to live in the Black Town neighborhood, and soon thereafter a job as a teacher (the official title was "usher") in the Madras Male Orphan Asylum, also situated in Black Town. Calcutta likewise had its Black Town neighborhood, though the Dutts of Calcutta did not live there; Black Towns, for better or worse, formed part of the British colonial cityscape.

In the East India Company's India at this time, orphanages served the children of the Europeans. Just how European the child had to be was not necessarily relevant. The father would certainly be a European of some sort, for there has not been found a single recorded marriage between an Indian man and a European woman until that between Michael Moodiu Sooden Dutt [sic] and Rebecca Thompson McTavish, on July 31, 1848.⁵³ When Datta joined the orphan asylum staff, two months after landing in Madras, Rebecca was a student in the counterpart institution for girls, the Madras Female Orphan Asylum. Four months later, Michael, 24, and Rebecca, 17, wed in a church-solemnized ceremony, following the procedure known as the reading of the banns.⁵⁴ In the letter cited partially above, the return address for which is the orphanage, Datta continues to Bysack:

⁵² Murshid, *Ashara chalanē bhuli*, 94. Other biographies have him leaving Calcutta earlier in December and arriving the day before Christmas.

⁵³ Ibid., 100, 102.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 103, n.29.

Since my arrival here, I have had much to do in the way of procuring a standing place for myself,—no easy matter, I assure you,—especially, for a friendless stranger. However, thank God, my trials are, in a certain measure, at an end, and I now begin to look about me very much like a commander of a barque, just having dropped his anchors in a comparatively safe place, after a fearful gale!—Here's a smile for you, my boy!

Your information with regard to my matrimonial doings is quite correct. Mrs. D. is of English parentage. Her father was an indigo-planter of this Presidency [Madras Presidency, one of three such administrative units in British India at this time—Calcutta Presidency and Bombay Presidency being the others]; I had great trouble in getting her. Her friends as you may imagine, were very much against the match. However, "all is well, that ends well!"⁵⁵

Of Rebecca's "English parentage," we have learned, thanks to the diligent work of Ghulam Murshid, that her father Robert Thompson, whose occupation according to Rebecca's baptismal records was "horse artillery brigade gunner," had married Catherine Dyson, identified in those same records as "Indo-Britton" or, translated into other nomenclature, Anglo-Indian. Catherine's father had been English (accounting for the surname Dyson) and her mother South Asian, a father-mother combination possibly analogous to that of Rudyard Kipling's famous Kim, a lad born in India who could blend into the "native" population when he wanted to, a lad whose Irish father, Kimball O'Hara, had served with a military unit and later the railway in India and whose mother is,

⁵⁵ Gupta, *Madhusudana racanavali*, 530-31.

curiously, never mentioned by name.⁵⁶ Rebecca's father's name shows up as Dugald McTavish and hers as Rebecca Thompson McTavish in the Archdeaconry of Madras' marriage registry. Robert Thompson dies in 1844, orphaning Rebecca and her siblings. Dugald McTavish, an employee on an indigo plantation but not the plantation owner, despite what Datta implies in his letter to Bysack, seems to have given refuge to the widow Catherine Thompson and possibly some of her children. In 1848, however, Rebecca is living in the Madras Female Orphan Asylum. Dugald McTavish plays the role of her guardian. She pays her respects to him by using his surname as hers in the registry.⁵⁷

In that same letter—it is a lengthy one, making up for better than a year of silence—Datta tells Bysack of the first book he is about to publish, at his own expense. Preceding that is almost an aside, responding to the announcement by Bysack of the death of his father. Datta's gesture at condolences represents the sum total of statements from him reflecting his religious self at this point in time. "I am sorry to hear of your severe loss, but, I trust, you have sense enough not to murmur against One whose wisdom is infinite and who is—merciful God!" There is Datta, the Christian, and his

⁵⁶ In *Kim*, Kipling immediately declares his hero to be "English," but how English is he? In Kipling's words, Kim was "white—a poor white of the very poorest. The half-caste woman who looked after him (she smoked opium, and pretended to keep a second-hand furniture shop by the square where the cheap cabs wait) told the missionaries that she was Kim's mother's sister; but his mother had been nurse-maid in a Colonel's family and had married Kimball O'Hara, a young colour-sergeant of the Mavericks, an Irish regiment. He afterwards took a post on the Sind, Punjab, and Delhi Railway, and his Regiment went home without him. The wife died of cholera in Ferozepore, and O'Hara fell to drink and loafing up and down the line with the keen-eyed three-year-old baby." Rudyard Kipling, *Kim* (New York and Scarborough, Ontario: New American Library, 1984), 19. That Kim's mother served as a "nurse-maid in a Colonel's family" does not, quite obviously, preclude her from being "half-caste," just like the woman who is said to have looked after Kim. I thank Amanda Hamilton, who studies the Anglo-Indian community in nineteenth-century India, for calling my attention to Kim's wonderfully ambiguous pedigree.

⁵⁷ Murshid, *Ashara chalan bhuli*, 102-3.

Christianity—understated, matter-of-fact, and almost perfunctory. He shows much more enthusiasm for his impending publication:

You will, I am sure, be surprised to hear that, though beset by all manner of troubles, I have managed to prepare a volume for the press. This will be my first regular effort as an author. The volume will consist of a tale in two cantos, yclept the "Captive Ladie" and a short poem or two. I must give you a description of my "Captive." It contains about twelve hundred lines of good, bad and indifferent octo-syllabic verse and (truth, 'pon my honour!) was written in less than three weeks.⁵⁸

The slim book, entitled *The Captive Ladie*, contained the title poem and a lesser verse narrative named "Visions of the Past." Those two, juxtaposed as they are, can be seen as indicative of things to come. The visions in "Visions of the Past" are Christian ones, of Adam and Eve and the Fall and the hope for divine grace, all presented in a very Miltonic meter:

They wept—but not in dark despair—they wept
As Guilt—all penitent—when, Mercy! thou
Dost plead—nor plead in vain—in gentle strains
To justice stern to win redeeming grace! (from "Visions of the Past")⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Gupta, *Madhusudana racanavali*, 531.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 478.

"The Captive Ladie," on the other hand, takes as its subject the elopement of Prithviraja, the raja of the Delhi region, and the princess of Kanauj, who is the captive of the first canto. The second and final canto concludes with the defeat, toward the end of the 12th century, of Prithviraja at the hands of Muslim forces that had invaded Hindusthan from the west, led by Muhammad Ghuri. It is historical; it is heroic; and it is Indian.⁶⁰ The meter of "Captive" is Byronic, octosyllabic, as Datta declares in his letter, but an octosyllabic that avoids as well as any of the English Romantics the "fatal facility" of saccharine singsong, which Bryon had warned against in his introduction to his poem "The Corsair." The events—couched in Byronic sensibilities also, somber and lush at the same time, tragic and romantic in tone—mark symbolically the fall of Hindu hegemony over north India.

'Tis morn:—along the Moslem line,
Ten thousand spears all brightly shine,
And many a flashing blade is bare,
And voice of triumph on the air,
As column'd warrior's onward press,
With all the haste of eagerness,
When Vengeance sternly wings the feet,

⁶⁰ And, looked at differently, "The Captive Ladie" is also "Orientalist," Rosinka Chaudhuri tells us in her study of nineteenth-century poetry by Indians, primarily English-language poetry; *Gentlemen Poets in Colonial Bengal: Emergent Nationalism and the Orientalist Project* (Kolkata: Seagull Books, 2002), 108. "Orientalist poetry" by Indians is that which "used form and style borrowed from English poetry and themes taken from Orientalist translations of Indian classics [by such Englishmen as Sir William Jones and H.H. Wilson] or the ancient and medieval history of India [compiled by the likes of James Tod among others]"; *ibid.*, 152. But "Orientalism," a term today with many valences, need not be inferred as negative here, for Orientalist poetry of this kind, writes Chaudhuri, contributed to the engendering of a nationalism of sorts, a nationalism that "signified pride in, and an awareness of, an indigenous culture and tradition"; *ibid.*, 132

To rush where falchion'd foe-men meet;
On—on they press,—'tis idlesse all,
There stirs no foe on yonder wall,
And wide the portals gape and far,—
Deserted—lone—as if no War
Rag'd round to crush—destroy and mar!—
'Tis noon—and from his car on high,
The sun looks down, his burning eye,
Now sees the Crescent's blood-red wave,
Gild fall'n Husteena's lowly grave, (from "The Captive Ladie")⁶¹

Of significance in this pairing of two poems in Datta's first published book is the contrast in thematic focus between Eden, the Levant, and Christian concerns, in "Visions," and India and a South Asian setting in "The Captive Ladie"—Husteena (Hastina) being the name for the capital city associated with present-day Delhi. He had used Indian material before in his poetry. But the prominence given here to the South Asian thematic matter hints at a comparable change of priorities taking place in Datta himself, from aspiring to become a noted poet in English to that of devoting his creative energies to writing in his South Asian mother tongue. He is by no means turning his back on English literature. He is, though, looking more favorably toward Bangla at this point in his life. In February of 1849 prior to the publication of "Captive," Datta penned a letter to Bysack requesting copies of the Bangla retellings of both the Ramayana and the

⁶¹ Ibid., 507.

Mahabharata.⁶² Later that same year, in August, he writes his college friend again, setting down his daily regimen of language study, which begins at 6 a.m. with Hebrew, ends at 10 p.m. with English, and includes Latin and Greek, as well as Tamil, Telegu [sic, Telugu], and Sanskrit. Datta asks rhetorically, self-assuredly: "Am I not preparing for the great object of embellishing the tongue of my fathers?"⁶³

In the spring of 1849, Datta had copies of his "Captive" sent to Calcutta—to Bishop's College, to friends and respected Bengali acquaintances, to John Elliot Drinkwater Bethune, who was president of the Council of Education at the time, and to the most prominent periodical publication, the *Hurkaru*, in hopes of a favorable review. He tells Bysack toward the end of April that his book "is rising into popularity here [Madras]."⁶⁴ To Bhoodeb Mukherjee, a former Hindoo College classmate and someone who became a leading Bengali intellectual of his day, Datta writes in May: "The Captive has met with a pretty fair reception here," prefacing that with "I have some intention of republishing it in London with my new Poem."⁶⁵ By June, however, the tide had turned. The *Hurkaru* deprecated the book. Datta tried to appear undaunted in a letter to Bysack at the beginning of that month:

I find that your "Hurkaru" has been somewhat severe with me. Curse that rascal, his article reached me like a shaft which has spent its force in its progress. Know, O thou noble youth, that I have girt my loins to do battle manfully, even as a gallant knight, who seeks the loftiest guerdon on this earth—the Poet's crown of

⁶² Ibid., 531.

⁶³ Ibid., 538.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 534.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 535.

laurel-leaf! Methinks, that after the praises I have received from some whose claims to bestow them are indubitable, I can afford to stand a little abuse.⁶⁶

Bysack himself was less than enthusiastic. Datta counters, "You seem to consider the 'Captive' a failure, but I don't. For look you, it has opened the most splendid prospects for me, and has procured me the friendship of some whom it is an honour to know." In that same letter he adds, "Remember, my friend, that I published it for the sake of attracting some notice, in order to better my prospects and not exactly for Fame." And, he reasserts, "I tell you the 'Captive' has produced a favourable sensation here."⁶⁷

Then came Bethune's patronizing appraisal of *The Captive Ladie*, sent not to Datta but to Bysack, who had presented Bethune with a copy of the book:

He might employ his time to better advantage than in writing English poetry. As an occasional exercise and proof of his proficiency in the language, such specimens may be allowed. But he could render far greater service to his country and have a better chance of achieving a lasting reputation for himself, if he will employ the taste and talents, which he has cultivated by the study of English, in improving the standard and adding to the stock of the poems of his own language, if poetry, at all events, he must write.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 536-37.

⁶⁸ Quoted in Basu, *Maikela Madhusudana*, 159-60; Bethune's letter dated July 20, 1849.

Bysack agreed completely with Bethune. In his letter to his friend, in which he paraphrased Bethune's letter to him, Bysack admonished Datta to do what the Englishman urged:

His advice is the best you can adopt. It is an advice that I have always given you and will din into your ears all my life. . . . We do not want another Byron or another Shelley in English; what we lack in a Byron or a Shelley in Bengali literature.⁶⁹

Bethune would become a founding member of the Vernacular Literature Society the following year.⁷⁰ In a way, such a society might seem to be antithetical to the Anglicists' and Macaulay's desideratum in his minute of 1835 of producing "persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect." But times had changed, and so had the Company's educational goals. The colonial enterprise needed less the educated, sophisticated brown-skinned "Englishman" and more the capable bureaucrat, competent to function in offices throughout the colony, fit to handle the quotidian minutia of empire.⁷¹ Datta, in many ways, epitomized the absolute success of Macaulay's and the Anglicists' original project. He was the equal of the English in taste and intellect. He and his kind may have become, in a certain sense, a threat, or at least credible competition. What better way to neutralize that competition than for Englishmen like Bethune to support a vernacular literary society?

⁶⁹ Ibid., 160-61.

⁷⁰ Nilmani Mukherjee, *A Bengali Zamindar: Jaykrishna Mukherjee of Uttarpur and His Times, 1808-1888* (Kolkata: Firma K.L. Mukhopadhyay, 1975), 169-70. The Society formally started in 1851; planning had begun the previous year.

⁷¹ Viswanathan, *Masks of Conquest*, 142-65.

As noted above, Datta had shown interest in Bangla texts, the Hindu epics of his childhood, even prior to the publication of his first book of poetry in English. Poor notices in the English-language press for *The Captive Ladie* combined with Bethune's and Bysack's frank directives may have encouraged Datta's move away from English and into the field of Bangla literature. It took ten more years, however, before the first of his Bangla pieces, a five-act play based upon an episode from the Mahabharata, appeared. Meanwhile, he continued to write in English. Besides carrying out his duties as a schoolteacher, Datta edited or assisted in the editing of several English-language journals: *Madras Circulator and General Chronicle*, *Athenaeum*, *Spectator*, and *Hindoo Chronicle*. Under the pseudonym of Timothy Penpoem, he also published a number of his own poems in these periodicals. And his reading of literature, in a number of languages including English, never ceased. The breadth of that reading cannot but impress. In his essay, "The Anglo-Saxon and the Hindu," which he wrote and delivered as a public lecture in 1854 or possibly somewhat before that time, he makes reference to Eva and Topsy from Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, employing the disparity between the two of them to reinforce the disparity between the glorious Anglo-Saxon and, in Datta's colorful rhetoric, the degraded Hindu.

You now see before you, as it were, on a stage, two actors—the Anglo-Saxon and the Hindu. One of them is indeed well-graced, ravishing the eyes of the audience with his manly beauty—enchanting the ears of the audience with the dulcet tones of his voice! The other, I fear, is ill favoured, worn out by the

ceaseless waves of time, hoarse and dissonant as an untuned harp, as an unstrung lute. . . .

And then the parallel pairings, Octavius vs. Brutus, Eva vs. Topsy, to emphasize the nature of the central pair, the Anglo-Saxon vs. the Hindu:

Octavius feasting in the tent of the luxurious Antony, the golden goblet blushing and sparkly with the delicious blood of the vine of sunny Italy in his hand, the chaplet of dewy roses on his head; Brutus sternly watches the purple current of life, ebbing out from the ghastly wound inflicted by his own suicidal hands! Eva, with the transplanted rose of the West, blooming on her cheek, the blue heaven of her eyes beaming with cloudless sunlight; and poor Topsy—the degraded daughter of a degraded race, standing before her like a ghastly phantom, an unearthly vision! Flowering Youth, decaying age; radiant beauty, hideous deformity; exulting valour, pallid fear; sparkling diamond, dim crystal;—but why should I multiply such images? The contrast is indeed very great!⁷²

Stowe's book came out in 1852. A mere year or so later, in far-off Madras, Datta had obtained a copy of the book and already read it.

Datta's father died in 1855. His mother had passed away several years before that. Bysack wrote his friend to inform him of his father's death and to tell him to return to Calcutta to ensure his inheritance. Datta replied in late December that year, saying,

⁷² Gupta, *Madhusudana racanavali*, 630-31.

among other things, "Yes, dearest Gour, I have a fine English wife and four children."⁷³ He arrived in Calcutta in February 1856, alone. Rebecca and their four children never joined him. Instead, he took up with another European lady, Henrietta Sophia White, someone he had known in Madras who followed in to Calcutta. Michael Madhusudan Datta seems to have had no further contact with Rebecca. Henrietta would bear him a daughter and two sons—a fourth child was still born—and remain his lifelong companion, whether legal wife or not is to this day unconfirmed. No records of divorce or remarriage have yet been discovered. In 1862 he realized his dream, his overriding fixation, when he finally journeyed to England, to study law. Henrietta would eventually join him, but in Versailles to where he had repaired, for it was cheaper to live there than in London. Still then, in France they and their children passed their days in virtual penury. After having been called to the bar in London, he returned home to Calcutta in 1867. That same year, though not immediately, Datta got accepted as a barrister by Calcutta's High Court, but only after overcoming serious opposition to him on personal grounds from some of the local legal establishment who knew the flamboyant poet by reputation. Henrietta and children followed him back to India. There he practiced law intermittently and with limited success.

Though he continued to write, Datta's productive days as poet and playwright, for all intents and purposes, had come to an end. A volume of his Bangla sonnets appeared in 1866, while he and the family were still in Europe. In 1873, the year of his death, he managed to complete a play, though never got the chance to polish it to his satisfaction. His prose version of the Iliad, entitled "The Slaying of Hector," remained half completed.

⁷³ Ibid., 539.

Michael and Henrietta died within three days of each other in June of 1873 in Calcutta, suffering from what would appear to have been consumption, the quintessential Romantic's disease of the 19th century, though the cause of their deaths was never specifically identified as such. Bysack observed Datta during his last days, "gasping under the excruciating effects of his disease, blood oozing from his mouth, his wife lying in high fever on the floor."⁷⁴ Biographers have listed liver, spleen, and throat ailments, and also dropsy (edema) due to cirrhosis of the liver. Ghulam Murshid, the latest of those biographers, adds to that list heart disease.⁷⁵ Michael Madhusudan Datta was but forty-nine when he succumbed, and Henrietta, thirty-seven.

The period between 1858 and 1862—two years after he had returned from Madras and right up to when he went to England—was a time characterized by the editor of Datta's collected works as a veritable "festival of creativity." In this span of five years, Datta published five plays, three narrative poems (one of four cantos, one of nine, and the other eleven cantos long), and a sizeable collection of lyrics organized around the Radha-Krishna theme, all in Bangla. Along with all of this, he found time to translate three plays from Bangla into English—one, a Bangla rendition of a Sanskrit drama, "Ratnavali"; another, his own original play, "Sermista," based upon an episode from the Mahabharata; and a third translation, that of "Nil Darpan" by Dinabandhu Mitra, the politically controversial piece depicting cruelties inflicted upon the peasantry by British indigo planters in Bengal.

The first of these English translations, along with the Bangla version from which he did the translation, served as the impetus for Datta to begin his own career as a

⁷⁴ Basu, *Maikela Madhusudana*, appendix, 20.

⁷⁵ Murshid, *Ashara chalan bhuli*, 346.

playwright and poet in Bangla. The incident concerning how Datta came to pen his very first piece of literature in Bangla—the Bangla original of his play "Sermista"—is related by Bysack in his essay of reminiscences. He had taken Datta to a rehearsal of Ramnarayan Tarkaratna's Bangla rendition of "Ratnavali," the drama originally composed in Sanskrit by Harsavardhana (606-647 C.E.). Tarkaratna, an accomplished Sanskrit scholar and also one of the earliest playwrights in Bangla, had translated the Sanskrit drama into Bangla. Tarkaratna's Bangla play was to be performed on the stage of the short-lived but highly influential Belgachia Theatre, a theater founded and supported by the brothers Pratap Chandra and Isvar Chandra Singh. As per the custom at the time, the local British elite would be invited to attend, and for their sake an English translation needed to be prepared. Bysack had persuaded the Singhs, who were known as the rajas of Paikpara, to engage Datta to do the translation, for Datta, Bysack well knew, was a master craftsman with the English language. After attending the first rehearsal and even before he had embarked upon the translation, Datta, according to Bysack, said to him, "What a pity the rajas should have spent such a lot of money on such a miserable play. I wish I had known of it before, as I could have given you a piece worthy of your theater."⁷⁶ Bysack writes that he laughed at the very idea of his friend, who had never before composed anything in Bangla, now implying that he could produce a play in Bangla. A week later Datta handed Bysack a draft of the first act of what would be a five-act play, utterly Shakespearean in formal characteristics, about the triangular relationship involving the king Yayati, his wife Devayani, and Sermista, daughter of the

⁷⁶ Basu, *Maikela Madhusudana*, appendix, 13.

Asuras' monarch but also both servant to Devayani and mother, illicitly, of children by Yayati.

The first staging of "Sermista" took place in September of 1859. Even before that, the rajas of Paikpara had urged Datta to turn his hand to drama of another sort, the domestic farce, "just to show the public that we can act the sublime and the ridiculous both at the same time and the same actors."⁷⁷ Midway through the 19th century, the originally high ideals of the Derozio-inspired Young Bengal group—an earnest, enlightened quest for knowledge coupled with a rejection of what they viewed as demeaning superstition—had been misinterpreted by some to mean aping the British and flouting social norms. In particular, patronizing dancing girls, eating meat, and drinking alcohol, along with speaking a modicum of English, came to symbolize, for some, their "enlightenment." One of two farces Datta penned during this period—commissioned for the Belgachia Theatre in 1859 but suppressed by the proprietors out of fear of protests coming from Young Bengal types—held these misguided libidinous, carnivorous, brandy-quaffing "liberals" up to ridicule by depicting members of a bogus "River of Knowledge Society" [*jnanatarangini sabha*] as carousing with queans, all the while spewing catch phrases of social reform interlarded with pretentious exhortations to be free and enjoy oneself.⁷⁸ Such societies—real societies—had been a prominent feature of the Calcutta scene in the second quarter of the 19th century. Datta himself, if we have the right Modoosooden [sic] Dutt, had become a member of just such an organization, the

⁷⁷ Gupta, *Madhusudana racanavali*, liv; Isvar Chandra Singh's letter dated May 8, 1859.

⁷⁸ *Ekei ki Bale Sabhayata?* [Is This Called Civilization?], in Gupta, *Madhusudana racanavali*, 241-54.

Society for the Acquisition of Knowledge, while still a student at Hindoo College.⁷⁹ The subsequent pseudo Young Bengal mimic-men, however, whom Datta now satirized, convinced the rajas not to stage Datta's drama. The Belgachia Theatre, begun in 1858 with the performance of "Ratnavali," for which Datta had made a translation into English, closed its doors for good in 1859, after staging "Sermista," but without bringing Datta's satires to the boards.⁸⁰

Failure to get his most recent plays performed did not curtail Datta's creative exuberance, though he later expressed some regret: "Mind you, you broke my wings once about the farces; if you play a similar trick this time, I shall forswear Bengali and write books in Hebrew and Chinese!"⁸¹ The two farces were published in 1860, thanks to the financial support of the rajas, who felt, no doubt, embarrassment at having to scrap the actual staging. Datta had in 1859 already started a fourth drama, even before finishing the first. And he cast "Padmavati," name of both the play and its heroine, entirely in Indian settings and with Indian characters, though its inspiration came from Greek mythology. This sort of incorporation of other traditions, of "Indianizing," of literary cross-fertilization set the pattern firmly for things to come. "The Slaying of Meghanada" is a riot of such incorporations, from Milton, Tasso, Homer, Virgil, and Dante, cross-fertilized with the Hindu epics and much, much more from the Hindu tradition, all very

⁷⁹ Goutam Chattopadhyay, ed., *Awakening in Bengal in Early Nineteenth Century (Selected Documents)* (Kolkata: Progressive Publishers, 1965), 1:lxix-lxvii. As noted earlier, there were two Madhusudan Datta at this time, both associated with Hindoo College. This may be the senior one, not our poet.

⁸⁰ Only two plays were performed at this important and innovative theater, one for which Datta produced a translation and one his original composition. The premature death of the younger of the Paikpara rajas kept the doors of this theater closed for good; Asutosh Bhattacharya, *Bamla natyasahityera itihasa: prathama khanda, dvitiya bhaga, madhyayuga (1873-1900)* (History of Bangla Dramatic Literature: volume one, part two, middle period (1873-1900) (3d ed.; Kolkata: A. Mukherji and Co., 1968), 426.

⁸¹ Gupta, *Madhusudana racanavali*, 575; letter written to the actor Keshav Gangopadhyay, after finishing his drama "Krishnakumari" in September of 1860. The play was not performed until February of 1867, the very month Datta returned from Europe.

Indianized. He had, in fact, prepared himself, as he wrote from Madras to Bysack, prepared himself "for the great object of embellishing the tongue of [his] fathers."

THE POEM

The Slaying of Meghanada (*Meghanadavadha Kavya*)—a poem (*kavya*) on the slaying (*vadha*) of Meghanada, the eldest son of Ravana, Rakshasa monarch—tells of Meghanada's third and final fight in defense of the Rakshasa clan, his demise, and finally his obsequies. Meghanada and the Rakshasas are characters drawn from the larger tale, the Ramayana. That epic—the name itself means the wanderings (*ayana*) of Rama—recounts the adventures of prince Rama while away from the kingdom of Ayodhya in a self-imposed fourteen-year exile in the forests to the south. During those wanderings, Ravana kidnaps Rama's wife Sita, who accompanied her husband into exile. It is this act that brings about the present war on the island of Lanka, the central event of the entire epic. Rama and his brother Lakshmana, together with an allied army of "southerners"—identified as monkeys and bears in most texts—have invaded the island kingdom, there to confront the Rakshasa forces.

With respect to epic literature, the South Asian situation differs markedly from the European. Although Homeric tales are many, there is but one Iliad and one Odyssey. And if we look to the modern European languages—say, English, French, and German—we find various epics but not standard English, French, or German versions of the classical epic narratives. There is no English Iliad, with an identifiable English poet or author. There are any number of English translations of Homer's Iliad—Chapman's, Pope's, Lattimore's, Graves', Fagles', and Lombardo's to name a few. But these are

translations and are so identified. In India, on the other hand, a number of modern languages have within their literary traditions a Ramayana or, in most cases, several Ramayanas that tell Rama's tale following basically the Valmiki text but, at the same time, are in many ways original compositions in and of themselves, not translations from Valmiki. In Hindi literature, for instance, there is the Rama epic composed in the 16th century by Tulsidasa known as the *Ram Carit Manas* (the holy lake [*Manasa*] of the acts/character [*carita*] of Rama). Hindus in the Hindi-speaking areas of India look with pride to Tulsidasa's narrative as the authoritative Ramayana. I do not mean to say that Valmiki's Sanskrit version is unknown in that language area. But by and large it is through Tulsidasa's telling of the tale that the Hindi-speaking populace knows Rama's story. The situation is similar in other modern Indian languages, including Bangla. Bangla literature possesses a most popular—again, one could say authoritative or standard—Bangla Ramayana composed by the poet Krittivasa, thought to have lived during the 14th/15th century. Here too Krittivasa's Ramayana is viewed with pride as a Bangla original, not a Bangla rendering of the Sanskrit epic.⁸²

Certainly the greatest difference, other than the language itself, between Valmiki's Ramayana and the later epics by Krittivasa and Tulsidasa is found in a particular aspect of the characterization of Rama. Rama in the older text was essentially a mortal prince, a young warrior. The first and last books of Valmiki—considered by scholars to be later

⁸² The classic studies of Ramayanas in Bangla remain Dinesh Chandra Sen's *The Bengali Ramayanas* (Kolkata: University of Calcutta, 1920) and more recently Asit Kumar Banerjee, ed., *The Ramayana in Eastern India* (Kolkata: Prajna, 1983). For a brief discussion of some of the variations among Rama narratives, see Edward C. Dimock, Jr., Edwin Gerow, C.M. Naim, A.K. Ramanujan, Gordon Roadarmel, and J.A.B. van Buitenen, *The Literatures of India: An introduction* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1974), pp.72-80. For a more in-depth examination of aspects of the diverse Ramayanas in several different linguistic traditions, see Paula Richman, ed., *Many Ramayanas: The diversity of a narrative tradition in South Asia* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, Oxford: University of California Press, 1991).

additions to the text—speak of Rama as one of the incarnations of Vishnu. In contrast, Krittivasa's and Tulsidasa's Rama has become inextricably the god Vishnu. No longer is the fight between Ravana and Prince Rama a fight between mighty warriors with god-given weapons and extraordinary powers. It has changed radically, changed into a fight between good god and bad demon. The demons become even further transformed, in these vernacular Rama tales, into devotees of sorts of Vishnu, the very god whom they battle. A transformation—transformations can be seen as part and parcel of the Ramayana tradition—takes place in Datta's Rama tale as well, but in the opposite direction. Rama, the apotheosized prince of Krittivasa's pre-modern text, returns to his mortal—mostly mortal—persona. He is, however, still Rama, a nineteenth-century Rama, a creation of the colonial encounter.

The Slaying of Meghanada starts, *in medias res*, with a knowing nod to the opening lines of Milton's *Paradise Lost*. It ends by evoking the cremation scene from the final book of the *Iliad* wherein are performed the obsequies for Troy's greatest warrior. The eighth canto of *Meghanada* has Rama, Datta's antagonist, proceeding to the netherworld—and these are Datta's own words—"like another Aeneas."⁸³ In this land-beyond-the-living, Rama passes through a gate emblazoned with the Dantean admonition: "By this path sinners go / to suffer constant sorrow in the realm of sorrows—you / who enter, give up all hope as you step inside this land!" (8:207-9) Such palpable presences of Milton-Homer-Virgil-Dante notwithstanding, Datta's epic remains throughout, and through and through, a partial embodiment of the Ramayana. In narrating this episode from the Ramayana—the slaying of Meghanada (resonant with,

⁸³ Gupta, *Madhusudana racanavali*, 558.

intentionally, the slaying of Priam's son Hector)—Datta shows sympathy for the traditionally opposing side, that of Lanka's king Ravana and his Rakshasa clan, in much the way Milton makes sympathetic his Satan. *Meghanada* is a text wherein East meets West quite obviously, where literary traditions blend in the adept hands of Datta to become the epitome of the cultural assimilation, selective as it was, taking place in the elite Bengali population of Calcutta during the 19th century. The period has been labeled the Bengal Renaissance for its reinvigoration and reconfiguration of the Hindu past and for the florescence of the literary arts. (Muslim Bengali literary historians are apt to refer to the same period as the Hindu Renaissance rather than the Bengal Renaissance, for it had a very Hindu tone to much of it.) *Meghanada* and its author are, each in his own way, perfect metonyms for their times.

LITERARY SLEIGHT OF HAND

The Slaying of Meghanada has much to do with deception, an artful and literary sleight of hand. It is a slice of the Ramayana, but it is more than that, and different from that. Furthermore, the deception is not always concealed but trotted out boldly, proclaimed proudly. Datta writes in a letter to a friend, "People here grumble that the sympathy of the Poet in Meghanad is with the Rakshasas. And that is the real truth. I despise Ram and his rabble while the idea of Ravan elevates and kindles my imagination; he was a grand fellow."⁸⁴ There is no doubt that the poem itself conveys precisely those sentiments. Yet, when examined closely and contrasted with its most proximate and prominent literary source, the Bangla Ramayana of Krittivasa (15th century C.E.), and

⁸⁴ Ibid., 562.

even with the more distant but more pervasively influential text, the Sanskrit Ramayana of Valmiki, it becomes crystal clear that Datta has not altered the characters of Rama and Ravana. They are in *Meghanada* what they are in the more traditional Ramayanas. But the deception—and quite obviously Datta enjoys deceiving his reader—works.

Any number of critics could be cited who insist that Datta's Rama and Ravana become something other than what they are in the mainstream Hindu tradition. For instance, Rabindranath Tagore wrote that Datta created a Rama who was "more timid than a woman."⁸⁵ Ashis Nandy tells us, "As is well known, Meghnadvadh retells the Ramayana, turning the traditionally sacred figures of Rama and Lakshmana into weak-kneed, passive-aggressive, feminine villains and the demons Ravana and his son Meghnad into majestic, masculine, modern heroes."⁸⁶ But a comparison of the characterizations of Rama and Ravana in both Datta's text and Krittivasa's Ramayana calls Nandy's statement into question. Consider the following pairs of passages, when Rama takes the fallen Lakshmana upon his lap and weeps uncontrollably. First, from Krittivasa's older text:

Having won the battle, Raghunatha [Rama] withdrew;

Holding Lakshmana upon his lap, he cried profusely.

"At what star-crossed moment did I leave Ayodhya?

My father, Dasharatha, ruler of the realm, succumbed.

Sita, daughter of king Janaka, the stunning beauty of my life,

⁸⁵ Rabindranath Tagore, "Meghanadavadha kavya" ("The Slaying of Meghanada"), in *Rabindra-racanavali, acalita samgraha* (The Collected Works of Rabindranath Tagore: Out-of-Print Material) (Kolkata: Visvabharati, 1962; first published in *Bharati*, August, 1882) 2:80.

⁸⁶ Ashis Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983), 19.

In broad daylight, Ravana kidnapped her, whisking her away.
Now I've lost my fondest sibling, you, young brother Lakshmana;
What need have you of kingdom's comforts? Let's back to the forest.
Oh Lakshmana, the treasured son, the darling of Sumitra,
What shall I say to her to stem the gushing of her tears?
I brought away with me the treasure she'd held tied to her sari;
Then upon the ocean's shore, Providence turned foul for me.
At my misfortunes, Lakshmana, it's you who always sympathized,
Why then now so heartless that you do not respond to me?
Everyone will ask for news, if now I were to go back home,
Where would I find the nerve to speak of your demise?
For my sake, brother, do not die;
I shall take you with me, go begging in some distant land.
I have no need of royal wealth, nor have I need for Sita;
I shall cast myself into the sea, grief-stricken over you.
From dawn to dusk, throughout the whole wide world,
Am I to be notorious, remembered for your death?
Get up, brother Lakshmana, before you drown in blood,
Why oh why did you accompany me to banishment?
It is on account of Sita that you have lost your life,
But you, my Lakshmana, I hold as equal to my life.
While bartering for gold, I used a gemstone as inducement;
Complicit in your death, I've stained our Raghu family name.

Why did I enter into warfare with the likes of Ravana?
What being stole the treasure-trove containing my life's breath?
The greatest among warriors, that Arjuna of the Pandavas,
Compared with him, you, Lakshmana, are an ocean of more skill.
Such a Lakshmana like this of mine that Rakshasa slew;
I can never more return back home, to the land of Ayodhya.
It was my father's orders that I obtain the royal parasol and sceptre;
But in this matter, stepmother Kaikeyi intervened amorally.
To keep my father honest, I went off into exile,
To which responded Providence, "Ah, all is lost, ruination!"
Then from the heavens came the call, from the assembled gods,
"Don't cry, weep not, O Rama, you'll have Lakshmana back again."
Rama heaved a heavy sigh, intoning, "Brother, O my brother."
And thus wrote Krittivasa of Rama's lamentation.⁸⁷

Compare that passage from Krittivasa with the comparable scene in *Meghanada* where Rama laments the seeming loss (he will be miraculously revived) of his brother Lakshmana:

Once their lord regained consciousness, he, grief-stricken, chided—
"When I renounced the kingdom and went to live in exile
in the forest, Lakṣmaṇa, as night set in, O expert

⁸⁷ Harekrishna Mukhopadhyay, ed., *Krittivasi Ramayana* (Kolkata: Sahitya Samsad, 1957), 351-52.

archer, bow in hand, you, at the door of our hut would stand
alert to guard me. Yet here today in the Rākṣasas'
enclave—this day, this very city of the Rākṣasas! —
I, among foes, here founder in these perilous waters.
Still then, O great-armed one, you forsake me seeking respite
upon the ground? Who will rescue me today, please tell me?
Stand up, brave one! Since when do you not heed your brother's words?
But if by some ill luck of mine—I who am unlucky
always—if you have indeed abandoned me, then tell me
honestly, you who are to me much more than life, for I
must hear. What misdeed is hapless Jānakī at fault for,
in your opinion? Day and night she weeps as she, confined
by Rākṣasas, thinks of Lakṣmaṇa, her husband's brother.
How did you forget—Brother, how could you ever forget
this day the one who like a mother always cared for you
so warmly. O pinnacle of Raghu's clan, she, a clan
wife, shall she remain incarcerated by Paulastya?
Is it right that you should rest before you first destroy in
combat such a wicked thief—you who are invincible
in battle, bold as omnivorous fire? Arise, my fierce-
armed one, victory pennant of the Raghu clan! Minus
you I am helpless, a charioteer whose chariot
is missing wheels. With you supine on this bed, O hero,

Hanumān is powerless, a bow without its bowstring.

Aṅgada wails pitifully; friend Sugrīva, noble-

minded, is heartsick; good charioteer Vibhīṣaṇa,

Karbūra supreme, he too mourns; a host of heroes grieve.

Get up, console these eyes, my brother, by the gaze of yours.

"If, however, you have tired of this awful war, then,

O archer, let us go back to our forest home. Sītā's

rescue, fondest one, is not to be—that luckless woman.

It is not for us to vanquish Rākṣasas. But if you

do not accompany me, how shall I, Lakṣmaṇa, show

my face upon the Sarayū's far shore where Sumitrā,

your mother who so loves her son, laments? What shall I say

when she asks me, 'Where, O Rāmabhadra, is the object

of my love, your little brother?' How shall I answer to

your wife, Ūrmilā, and to the people of the city?

Stand up, dear child. Why do you turn a deaf ear today toward

this plea your brother makes, for love of whom you quit the realm

with its amenities and took to the forest? Out of

sympathy, you always used to cry whenever you would

see these eyes of mine moist with tears. Tenderly you dabbed those

teary rivulets. Now I am drenched with water from my

eyes, yet you, who are to me much more than life, will you not

so much as glance my way? Lakṣmaṇa, does such behavior

ever suit you, brother (you who are renowned throughout the world as one devoted to his brother!), you who are my everlasting joy. All my life I held firm to *dharma* and worshipped the gods—and is it this the gods have given in return? O Night, compassion-filled, you who nightly make the flowers, withered by the summer's heat, succulent with drops of dew, revive this blossom. You who are a fount of nectar, god of nectar rays, pour down your life-bestowing juices, save Lakṣmaṇa—save beggar Rāghava, kind one."

The foe of Rākṣasas, forlorn, wailed upon the field of battle cradling his dearest younger brother. All about the warrior throng howled with sadness, just as howls a stand of stately trees at midnight when winds blow deep in the forest. (Canto 8: 17-78)

If expressing one's emotions outwardly can be characterized as "weak-kneed" and "feminine," in Nandy's words, then Rama is that. But he is that both in Krittivasa's Ramayana and in Datta's poem. There has been no fundamental alteration of Rama's character. Ravana, like Rama, expresses human emotions when confronted with the loss of his sons and does so in both the fifteenth-century sacred Ramayana and in the nineteenth-century secular *The Slaying of Meghānada*. How does one account for Nandy's and others' reading of Datta's text and their conclusion that Datta changed Rama into a weak-kneed, effeminate character? How does one account for the more general claim that Datta turned traditional heroes into villains and villains into heroes? A major

part of the answer lies in the strategic deployment by Datta of subversive similes. Such similes embellish, as all similes do, but at the same time link incongruous actors or objects, thereby inviting homologation of characters where no similarity formerly existed.

Take, for instance, the scene early in *Meghanda's* first canto, the sumptuous assembly hall in which Rakshasa monarch Ravana sits:

The umbrella-bearer held the parasol;
ah, just as Kāma might have stood in Hara's anger's flame,
unburned, so he stood on the floor of that assembly hall,
as bearer of the royal parasol. Before its doors
paced the guard, a redoubtable figure, like god Rudra,
trident clutched, before the Pāṇḍavas' encampment's gateway!
Constant spring breezes delicately wafted scents, gaily
transporting waves of chirping, ah yes! enchanting as the
flute's melodic undulations in the pleasure groves of
Gokula! Compared to such an edifice, O Maya,
Dānava lord, how paltry was that jeweled court built at
Indraprastha with your own hands to please the Pauravas!

With this set of four similes, subversion has begun. Datta does not say that the umbrella-bearer is Kama, which would imply that Ravana is god Shiva; nor that the assembly hall is either the Pandavas' camp or their Indraprastha assembly hall, which would imply that Ravana is Yudhisthira, eldest brother among the five Pandavas; nor that

the surrounding gardens are the pleasure groves of Gokula wherein god Krishna acts out his divine love-play. He says that the assembly room is wonderful, and uses similes ostensibly to make more vivid the scene depicted. But the implications, however tenuous, are there. Juxtaposition of actors in the simile and main narrative invites homologation, or the indirect linking of Ravana with gods Shiva and Krishna and with the Pandavas, winners, after a fashion, and sympathetic heroes of the Mahabharata war.

Were this the only time such an association occurs between Ravana and the heroes of Hinduism, one might assume the connection inadvertent or even just an overly ambitious reading of a poetic conceit. However, these sorts of similes occur again and again and are built round three clusters of Hindu mythology: the Mahabharata epic (concerning the war between the Pandavas and their cousins, the Kauravas), Vaishnavism (concerning Krishna and the Gopis), and Shaktism (concerning the mother-goddess and Shiva). Another of the many examples is found in the seventh canto, containing Ravana's retribution for the slaying of Meghanada. Once Ravana has learned of his son's death, he summons the Rakshasa troops and readies himself for battle. A series of conceits describes the mustered army:

As the Dānava-quelling Caṇḍī, born from the power
of the gods, laughed jauntily while she, Satī, armed herself
with godly weaponry, so in Laṅkā armed the corps of
fearsome Rākṣasa—in war a wrathful Ugracaṇḍā.

After much fighting, Ravana fells Lakshmana. With his son's death avenged, Ravana retires with his army from the battlefield back to the walled city:

The Rākṣasa

legion marched into the city—as ferocious goddess
Cāmuṇḍā, victorious in battle, having vanquished
Raktabīja, returned shouting, dancing wildly, a smile
upon her bloody lips, her body drenched in streams of gore!
As the gods en masse sang Satī's praises, so the bards with
joy extolled in victory songs the Rākṣasas' army!

Candi is not just a powerful, awesome being. She is THE Hindu goddess. That the Rakshasas should be compared to her is ironic as well as subversive, for according to one myth the goddess was created from the combined power of the gods for the express purpose of destroying such god- and man-harassers.

Without question, one of the most intriguing features of Datta's epic continues to be his characterization of Rama (along with brother Lakshmana) and the Rakshasas, much of which lies under the surface in those wily subversive similes that are both traditional—use traditional mythic material—and modern. Such similes act subliminally, and the variety of reactions to Datta's achievement reveals how well he hid his persuaders. The final canto of *Meghanada* ends, somewhat as the entire work began, with intimations of Ravana's defeat by Rama—in keeping with the traditional Ramayana. But, the subversive similes, among other narrative strategies, have skewed the reader's

usual response to the tale such that we are now not quite sure whether to anticipate Ravana's death with culturally sanctioned joy or with disquieting, guilty sorrow.

FILIAL PIETY

The Slaying of Meghanada has much to do with the father-son relationship. From the very inception of the story, we find Meghanada, Ravana's eldest son—and only remaining son, all the others having been killed in the war—enjoying a well-deserved retreat for rest and recreation. He had not merely overcome but actually killed in combat the main aggressor against his father and their insular kingdom of Lanka. As he lounges with his wife and her many fawning handmaidens, word comes to him through a goddess disguised as his childhood wet nurse that his father's supposedly slain nemesis, Rama, has somehow revived and threatens once again the island's walled city, also referred to as Lanka. The gods have intervened, justifying such action by a certain mythic logic: Inevitably, according to the Ramayana and Hindu mythology generally, Ravana must be destroyed by Rama, and Ravana cannot be destroyed—according to the logic here—until all of his able-bodied warrior sons have been defeated. It is unseemly, by Hindu social etiquette and therefore by the etiquette of the gods, also, that a father should be put in jeopardy when he has an adult son to fend for him. Upon being notified by the goddess-*cum*-wet-nurse, Meghanada immediately ceases his sensual indulgences and rebukes himself for failing his father in this moment of great need. The scene with its fulsome luxury owes much to Torquato Tasso's *Gerusalemme Liberata*, a text Datta had been reading with delight at this precise time. (While working on the third canto, he wrote to a friend, "I am just now reading Tasso in the original—an Italian gentleman having

presented me with a copy. Oh! what luscious poetry. If God spares me for some years yet, I shall write a poem, a Romantic one in the *Ottava Rima* or stanzas of eight lines like his."⁸⁸) But Meghanada is no Rinaldo, the hedonistic, arrogant Christian Crusader, who needs to be coaxed back into the fray. Nor is Meghanada an Achilles, proud but pouting over the poaching of his female companion by a fellow Achaian. Meghanada's emotions and motivation at this point—love of and duty toward father—have less in common with either Rinaldo of Tasso's tale or even the Iliad's Achilles than with Rama, his father's adversary and hero of the Ramayana.

Two very human and very male features drive the Ramayana: libido and filial piety. Rama is not forcibly exiled for fourteen years from his paternal kingdom of Ayodhya. Quite the contrary. His father, Dasharatha, begs him not to go. Dasharatha, in fact, dies of a broken heart, following the departure of his eldest son Rama. It is Rama who chooses exile, in order to preserve the integrity of his father, as Rama notes in the Krittivasa-composed lament cited above: "To keep my father honest, I went off into exile." Years earlier, Dasharatha, overcome by passion for his youngest of three wives, had promised Kaikeyi that their son, Bharata—as opposed to Rama, Dasharatha's eldest son by his first wife—would be installed upon the throne when he, Dasharatha, chose finally to abdicate. In addition, before allowing her husband to engage in sex with her, Kaikeyi demanded a second boon, which required her husband's eldest son to be sent into exile for fourteen years, thereby physically removing him from the kingdom and making less likely any challenge to her own son's rule. Dasharatha, at the moment addled by lust, assented. When it came time for Dasharatha to step down from the throne, he dearly

⁸⁸ Gupta, *Madhusudana racanavali*, 557.

wanted to install in his place his virtuous eldest son—not that the other three sons were unvirtuous. It was Rama who insisted that he go into exile and by so doing kept his father true to his promises. Bharata, son of Dasharatha by Kaikeyi and himself a paragon of virtue, refused to ascend the throne, instead agreeing only to care-take it in Rama's absence. He placed a pair of Rama's sandals on the throne in his stead.

Like Rama, Meghanada is his father's eldest son. Like Dasharatha, Ravana, motivated by sexual desire for a woman, has placed his son (and his entire kingdom) in jeopardy. Again like Rama, Meghanada comes to his father's aid willingly. Again like Dasharatha, Ravana, the loving father with true paternalistic instincts, wants not to place his son in harm's way. But it is the son, in both cases, who insists upon courting danger (exile, battle) and supporting his father over that very father's objections.

If the wanderings of Rama—the Ramayana narrative per se—can be seen as predicated upon Dasharatha's immoderate libido, then the attack upon Lanka by Rama and his forces needs to be understood in terms of Ravana's similarly immoderate sexual desire. It is Ravana's sister, Surpanakha, who creates the problem. While wandering in forests away from Lanka, Surpanakha spies Rama and his brother Lakshmana. She is smitten by the handsome Rama and makes amorous advances towards him. Rama, toying with her, sends her to Lakshmana, who mocks her and ends up harming her, cutting off her nose. Surpanakha returns to Lanka bent on getting her brother to avenge her humiliation. She motivates him through her description of Rama's wife Sita, inflaming Ravana with lust for the now fancied gorgeous woman. Ravana demands the assistance of a fellow Rakshasa by the name of Marica, who transforms himself into a golden stag and entices Sita, who in turn begs Rama to go capture the deer for her.

Ravana, disguised as a holy mendicant, manages to kidnap Sita in Rama's (and Lakshmana's) absence and spirit her away back to the isle of Lanka. The justification for Rama and company to invade Lanka and attack Ravana and his Rakshasas is first and foremost to retrieve Sita. No matter what the reason for the war, whether it is caused by his paternal aunt or by his own father, Meghanada comes to that father's aid, the ever-dutiful son.

Reinforcing the theme of filial piety, Datta employs one of his many epic similes in the very first canto, alluding to yet another son who comes to his father's aid in time of need. As Ravana surveys the battlefield on which his last-but-one fallen son Virabahu lies

. . . Likewise Virabāhu—crown-gem of warriors—
 fell, crushing hostile heroes, as Ghaṭotkaca, raised in
 Hiḍimbā's loving nest, like a Garuḍa, had fallen
 at the time Karṇa, wielder of Kālaprṣṭha, let fly
 his missile called Ekāghnī to preserve the Kauravas.

And here too, there is a suggestion of libido gone astray. Ghatotkaca, a warrior of tremendous size, was born from the illicit relationship between one of the Pandavas—heroes of that other Hindu Indian epic, the Mahabharata—and a Rakshasi by the name of Hidimba. Rakshasas (Rakshasi being the feminine of Rakshasa) in general are endowed with the power to assume various forms at will. Hidimba, in the guise of a voluptuous beauty, engaged in coitus with the Pandava Bhimasena. Following the birth of their son

Ghatotkaca, Bhima, who along with his four brothers was already in a polyandrous marriage to Draupadi, abandoned both son and mother. But Ghatotkaca, steadfastly faithful, vowed to come to his father's aid whenever and wherever called to mind. It was during the main battle narrated in the Mahabharata, between the Pandavas and their cousins, the Kauravas, that Bhima thought of his son. Immediately Ghatotkaca appeared and fought effectively on the side of the Pandavas, killing many Kauravas before being slain himself by the projectile called Ekaghni (literally, "single-slayer," able to kill anyone, but only one), launched from the bow named Kalaprstha (literally, "black-back") by the warrior Karna. Even when slain, Ghatotkaca, that mountainous being, was able to kill additional enemy merely by falling on them.

Meghanada ultimately is killed, as the title to the poem implies. In the ninth and final canto, he is cremated along with his still living wife (the two are seen transported to Shiva's heaven in the chariot of Fire—Agni's chariot). His father eulogizes him, and all the Rakshasas of Lanka mourn his passing. The battle will resume after the poem ends, for Ravana yet lives and must be vanquished—can be vanquished now⁸⁹—by Rama, in keeping with the Ramayana from which comes Datta's elaborated episode. But the tale of loyal, selfless son Meghanada is now complete.

Datta tells us in one of his letters how it pained him to kill off Meghanada. "It was a struggle whether Meghanad will finish me or I finish him. Thank Heaven. I have triumphed. He is dead, that is to say, I have finished VI Book in about 750 lines. It

⁸⁹ This hierarchy of vulnerability is implicit from the very beginning of the war: Ravana will be the last to die. In *Krittivasa* it is made explicit as follows: "But for Virabahu and Indrajit, there are no warriors; once they have perished, Ravana shall be destroyed"; and "If Virabahu does not die, Ravana will not perish"; Mukhopadhyay, *Krittivasi Ramayana*, 330 and 335.

cost me many a tear to kill him.”⁹⁰ Meghanada, after all, represents the ideal son, the son that Datta himself had failed to be. Rather than honor his father's wishes and marry, he had rebelled, going so far as to leave his father's cultural community and become a Christian. Rather than come to the aid of his father when his father's fortunes had taken a turn for the worse, Datta the son had fled Calcutta for Madras, returning briefly once following his mother's death and then coming back permanently—abandoning his wife and four children in Madras—to claim his patrimony only after his father had passed away. Meghanada gave his all for his father. Even Ghatotkaca sacrificed himself for the sake of his father. Rama, though faithful to his father, had in fact left him and gone south into self-imposed exile, thereby causing Dasharatha's premature death. It is Meghanada, not Rama, who served his father best. It is for Meghanada and, I submit, for himself as a failed Meghanada-like son that Datta is grieving, a cathartic sort of grieving.

HUMANISM

The Slaying of Meghanada has much to do with a mid-nineteenth-century, Bengali Hindoo-College-fostered humanism. It shows up prominently in the characterizations of the main combatants—Rama, Ravana, and the eponymous Meghanada. Though Hindu gods always have had their human aspect, to wit, Shiva as the marijuana-smoking irresponsible husband, they are also divine. Rama, considered to have been an actual, historical prince, has long since been apotheosized into one of the incarnations of the god Vishnu. As opposed to the Mahabharata, the Ramayana is a sacred text, the mere hearing of which confers religious merit onto the listener. The

⁹⁰ Gupta, *Madhusudana racanavali*, 557.

Ramayana's Rama, for all his foibles, is understood to be a god. Not so for Datta's Rama. This nineteenth-century Rama comes to us shorn of his divinity. Bengali Marxists in the middle of the 20th century noted gleefully this humanizing of deified Rama by Datta and hailed the poet of *Meghanada*, however anachronistically, as a good Communist fellow traveler.⁹¹ It is not just Rama who gets humanized at the hands of Datta. Hanuman, the monkey god and ally of Rama, becomes in Datta's poem neither god nor monkey.

Datta had no problem making human both Rama and the opposing Rakshasas. Recasting Hanuman proved more difficult. Datta struggled initially with Hanuman's simian nature, as we see in his letters to Raj Narain Bose. In May 1860, while composing *Meghanada*, Datta writes:

I must tell you, my dear fellow, that though, as a jolly Christian youth, I don't care a pin's head for Hinduism. I love the grand mythology of our ancestors. It is full of poetry. A fellow with an inventive head can manufacture the most beautiful things out of it.⁹²

The dilemma seems perfectly clear. For Datta, it was a matter of separating out the mythological from the religious in the Ramayana, something akin to the proverbial classical Indian goose that could extract from a mixture of milk and water the milk and drink it, leaving only the water. But the mythological so extracted included a flying monkey named Hanuman who could transport a mountain like Gandhamadana. That sort of Hanuman seems to have been unacceptable to Datta, too god-like perhaps, too super

⁹¹ *Marksavadi* no. 5 (September[?] 1949): 132.

⁹² Gupta, *Madhusudana racanavali*, 547.

monkey, certainly. In the end, Datta has the mountain come to Lanka on its own rather than have Hanuman transport the mountain from the mainland, across the sea, and to Lanka. Before that, however, Datta humanizes Hanuman, but does so without making him explicitly into a man. In July of 1860 he writes:

Excuse the rambling letter and let me hear what favour the glorious son of Ravana finds in your eyes. He was a noble fellow, and, but for that scoundrel Bivishan, would have kicked the monkey-army into the sea. By the bye, if the father of our Poetry had given Ram human companions, I could have made a regular Iliad of the death of Meghanad. As it is, you must not expect any battle scenes. A great pity! Adieu, praying God to bless you and yours,

I am, dear R., ever yours affectionately,⁹³

And several letters later:

I have resumed Meghanad and am working away at the Third Book. If spared, I intend to lengthen this poem to ten Books and make it as complete an epic as I can. The subject is truly heroic; only the Monkeys spoil the joke—but I shall look to them.⁹⁴

Datta did indeed "look to them," as he puts it, transforming what he clearly acknowledges as monkeys, in his letters, into something else in his poem.

⁹³ Ibid., 551.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 556.

Let us consider for a moment the imagined geography of the Ramayana's world. The tale of Rama's wanderings is, after all—despite its appeal throughout the South Asian subcontinent and Southeast Asia—a "North-Indian," or what could be called "Aryan-centric," epic. Today one might even call it an "Orientalist" epic, in the Saidian sense of that term, for the Ramayana clearly makes those imagined characters living to the south into the Other, demonizing some, animalizing others. In particular, those living in the imagined southern portion of the subcontinent proper include monkeys as well as bears, animals all. And it is here that Datta resisted the influence from his Ramayana-poet predecessors. His southern warriors become just that, southern and warriors. It is left to the reader to infer a simian nature in them, or not, as he or she so chooses. No such nature is actually denoted.

Take, for instance, the occurrence of Hanuman and of Sugriva in the first canto, where Ravana surveys the opposing forces arrayed against him. Writes Datta,

At the northern gate stood guard the king himself, Sugrīva,
a lion of a hero. And Dāśarathi watched the
western gate—alas, downcast without his Jānakī, like
the lotus-pleasing moon without his moonlight!—backed up by
Lakṣmaṇa; the wind's son, Hanumān; and best of comrades,
Vibhīṣaṇa. The opposition ranks had surrounded
golden Laṅkā, just as a hunting party deep within
the densest jungle, cautiously with teamwork ensnares a
lioness—whose form is charming to the eye, whose force is

furious, like goddess Bhīmā!

Of note is the manner in which Sugriva and Hanuman are identified—by proper name with an accompanying epithet: "Surgriva, a lion of a hero" and "the wind's son, Hanuman." This practice of employing proper names, sometimes with and sometimes without identifying epithets, is followed consistently throughout *Meghanada*. If the epithets conjure up a monkey god in the reader's mind, so be it. Never does Datta suggest as much. Never does he use any of the several terms for monkey in Bangla. On the other hand, never are Hanuman and company referred to explicitly as men, either.

In the third canto, there comes a time when Hanuman tries to impede the movement of Meghanada's wife, Pramila, as she and her attending entourage of women head for the Rakshasas' walled city of Lanka. Nrimundamalini, her maidservant, insults Hanuman by referring to him as all manner of animal. Writes Datta,

The attending Nṛmuṇḍamālīnī (that wrathful, hot-tempered woman) twanged her bow inflamed, shouting threateningly,
"Barbarian, bring here at once that lord of Sītā! Who
wants you, you wretched little beast! We, by choice, have not struck
the likes of you with our weapons. Does the lioness pick
a quarrel with a jackal? We spared your life, now scamper
off, jungle-dweller! Simpleton, what is there to gain by
killing you? Be off with you, call the lord of Sītā here,
and your master Lakṣmaṇa, and call that blemish on the

clan of Rākṣasas, that Vibhīṣaṇa! Foe-conquering
 Indrajit—his wife is pretty Pramīlā—that woman
 now will enter Laṅkā, by force of arms, to worship at
 her husband's feet! What man of arms, you fool, can block her way?"

The insults, of course, are rhetorical. Still then, Datta has nicely associated Hanuman with his more traditional animal character without actually making him so. He, in a way, has his cake and eats it too. He lets someone from within the narrative call Hanuman an animal while he, the poet, does not.

When Datta refers to Rama's southern allies collectively, he does so not as monkeys but as "southerners" (*dakṣhinatya*), pure and simple, "those who dwell within the southern regions." In the seventh canto, Rama speaks to his supporters:

Save my clan, my honor,
 and my life, supporters of the Raghus, and rescue her,
 the Raghu wife, incarcerated by the wiles of that
 Rākṣasa. You have bought this Rāma with the coin of your
 affection; by conferring generosity, now bind
 firm with a noose of gratitude today the entire
 Raghu line, O *you who dwell within the southern regions*."

In the ninth and final canto, Lakshmana has been revived. Rama's forces shout for joy. Ravana, distraught, having thought Lakshmana slain, is reported to by his minister as follows:

Hands cupped in deference, that best of ministers replied
with regret. "Who comprehends gods' *māyā* in this world of
māyā, Indra among kings? Gandhamādana, sovereign
among mountains and a god by nature, came himself last
night bearing a panacea and resuscitated
Lakṣmaṇa, O king. That is why their legions shout for joy.
As at winter's end a snake possesses twice the vigor,
likewise champion Saumitri shows a renewed spirit—now
intoxicated by the wine of valor. And so too,
with Sugrīva, *the southerners* are enlivened, like a
herd of elephants, my lord—one hears—with its lordly bull."

Though the southerners are here likened by simile to a herd of elephants, Lakshmana is compared to the herd's lordly bull. Neither part of the simile is anything but flattering. Nowhere are the southerners referred to as animals literally, neither as monkeys nor as any other sort of beast. To be noted is the absence of Hanuman as the transporter of mountain Gandhamadana. In Valmiki and Krittivasa, it is Hanuman who uproots the panacea-bearing mountain and flies it to Lanka. In *Meghanada*, it is the mountain itself to whom Datta attributes divine qualities, and we know that mountains in

Hindu mythology once had wings and used to fly. Hanuman, by his very absence here in this passage, is looking more and more the human warrior, less and less the flying monkey god of the traditional Ramayana.

TRANSFORMATIONS FROM CANONICAL TEXTS

The Slaying of Meghanada has much to do with the internalizing of the Western literary canon taught and consumed at Hindoo College in the first half of the 19th century. Datta wrote his poem for his Bangla-speaking audience, but he expected them—the educated among them—to see and appreciate his incorporation within it of a rich sampling from the Western classics. Part of the beauty of the poem stems from perceiving the manner in which Datta folds text into text. To paraphrase and at the same time play with the wording of Macaulay's 1835 minute on education cited earlier: *Meghanada* is a text that is utterly Indian in language and imagery but "Young-Bengal" Indian, "Bengal-Renaissance," "mid-nineteenth-century-educated" Indian in taste, in morals, and in intellect. The educated Bengali Indian of that day knew his Shakespeare, had read his Homer. To his friend Raj Narain Bose, in 1860 upon finishing the first canto, Datta wrote:

It is my ambition to engraft the exquisite graces of the Greek mythology on our own; in the present poem, I mean to give free scope to my inventing powers (such as they are) and to borrow as little as I can from Valmiki. Do not let this startle you. You shan't have to complain again of the un-Hindu character of

the Poem. I shall not borrow Greek stories but write, rather try to write, as a Greek would have done.⁹⁵

In the same letter, Datta adds ten lines of his own poetry, identifying them as the opening lines to the second canto of *Meghanada*, adding:

You will at once see whom I imitate;
"Who of the gods impelled them to contend?
Lantona's son and Jove's—" Cowper's Homer's Iliad.
Milton has imitated this—
"Who first seduced them to that foul revolt?
The infernal serpent"—Book I

But in the following letter, he tells Raj Narain that he has reconsidered that "exordium" for the second canto, stating that it will be quite different. The very next letter came with a manuscript of the complete second canto. And a letter later, Datta tells Raj Narain:

As a reader of the Homeric Epos, you will, no doubt, be reminded of the Fourteenth Iliad, and I am not ashamed to say that I have intentionally imitated it—Juno's visit to Jupiter on Mount Ida. I only hope I have given the Episode as thorough a Hindoo air as possible.⁹⁶

⁹⁵ Gupta, *Madhusudana racanavali*, 551-52.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 554.

The appropriation of literary texts along with their transformation was by no means confined to works from the Western canon. Datta's primary source of inspiration is, of course, the Ramayana, a canonical Indian work of literature. Datta saw himself very much a part of the Ramayana tradition, as is obvious from the invocation that begins the fourth canto, an invocation that includes a litany of classical Sanskrit poets who composed literature of various sorts on the Rama tale, both poetry and dramas. He ends by including in his list of artistic ancestors the Bengali poet Kṛttivāsa:

I bow before you, guru among poets, before your
lotus feet, Vālmiki. O crown-gem upon the head of
Bhārata, I, your slave, humbly follow after you just
as the wretched poor follow as camp followers of an
Indra among kings when that king goes on a pilgrimage
to a sacred spot. Meditating day and night on foot-
prints you have left, how many pilgrims before me have gained
entrance to fame's temple, by subduing world-subduing
Śamana—to become immortal. Śrī Bhartṛhari;
scholar Bhavabhūti, called Śrīkaṇṭha; a man of marked
mellifluence, Kālidāsa—known throughout Bhārata
as the favorite son of Bhārati; most captivating
Murāri, epitome of his namesake's melodic
flute; and poet Kṛttivāsa, a repository of
achievements, ornament of this Bengal. —O forefather,

how am I to sport with regal geese upon the lake of
 poetic *rasa* if you do not guide me? I shall string
 anew a garland after plucking blossoms tenderly
 from your literary garden. I strive to beautify
 our language with divers decorations, but where shall I
 (impoverished me!) obtain that gem cache, Ratnākara, if
 you do not help? Show compassion, lord, to this needy one.

Valmiki is that poet, or collectively those poets, referred to as the "first poet" (*adi kavi*) to whom is attributed authorship of the authoritative Sanskrit Ramayana. Bharata stands for the Indian subcontinent. Death—one name for the god of death is Samana—subdues all the world but can, of course, be defeated by reputation when one's name lives on. Then comes a litany of real poets, Bhartrihari, Bhavabhuti, Kalidasa, and Murari, all composers of literary works in Sanskrit on the topic of Rama and his wanderings. The list of his "forefathers" ends with Krittivasa, author of the Bangla Ramayana so dear at this time to Datta's heart. Ratnakara, whose name quite literally means "gem mine" and who, through penance and devotion to the god Rama, became transubstantiated into the poet Valmiki himself, is asked by Datta in this apostrophe for assistance in his own poetic endeavor.

Though the Ramayana constitutes the primary South Asian text informing Datta's narrative, it is by no means the only one from that tradition to be folded into *Meghānada*. The Mahabharata, India's other major Hindu epic, shows up in a number of similes but also figures prominently in the eighth canto, where, in Datta's own words, "Mr. Ram is to

be conducted through Hell to his father, Dasaratha, like another Aeneas."⁹⁷ There is no question but that the *Aeneid* provides much of the framework for Rama's descent into the netherworld, where we also find clearly traceable references to Dante's *Inferno* and Milton's *Paradise Lost*. During the descent, there is even an image drawn verbatim ("pillar of fire," *agni sthambha*) from the Bangla translation of the Bible, an image of the fiery staff that goddess Maya takes with her to illuminate the nether regions. The hell Rama visits, however, is not that of the *Aeneid* or the *Inferno* or any other Western work of literature. The hell in *Meghanada*, with its four directional gates and its 84 punishment pits, some of them specifically named and all of them situated in the southern region, is that netherworld known as the city of Yama, Hindu god of the dead. It is the nether region as depicted in the Bangla Mahabharata.

That same Mahabharata, composed in Bangla by Kasiramadasa (17th century), provides the name of and some of the personality of one of the new characters, Meghanada's wife Pramila, introduced into Ramayana lore by Datta. Literary scholars, knowing Datta's range of reading, have seen in Pramila—as she appears in canto 1 (the loving bride), canto 3 (the warrior woman), canto 5 (the loving wife again), and canto 9 (the faithful widow-*cum*-suttee)—aspects of not only Tasso's Armida but also his Clorinda, Virgil's Camilla, and Homer's Andromache. Datta, moreover, endows Meghanada's spouse with many of the qualities of an idealized Indian wife. But it is the Bangla Mahabharata source text that dominates, particularly for Pramila as Datta depicts her in the third canto. In the Mahabharata, the "Ashvamedha Parva" (horse-sacrifice book), Pramila appears in her own queendom, a strong warrior sovereign who confronts

⁹⁷ Ibid., 558.

Arjuna. It is after the great Bharata war between the Pandavas and Kauravas in which all Kauravas are killed. Yudhishtira, eldest of the Pandavas, suffers remorse, tries to commit suicide by starvation, but is admonished against such a sinful act by the sage Vyasa, who counsels him to perform a horse-sacrifice as expiation. In such a sacrifice, a horse is decked with silver and gold, allowed to wander at will for a year throughout the world, but must be protected by an accompanying entourage from anyone who might seek to possess it. In effect, those into whose realm the horse wanders are expected to acknowledge the sacrificer's superior power. To the forehead of Yudhishtira's horse was affixed a shiny gold mirror, signed by Yudhishtira with a warning: "This horse shall roam the earth at will— / Should any warrior there impede / The sacrificial stallion, // Him I shall best, by strength of arms, / Shall free this equine, then complete / The *ashvamedha yajna*." At the completion of its wanderings, the horse is beheaded.

Yudhishtira and one of the Pandava twins remain in Hastina, while Arjuna and the others troop behind the free-roaming horse. In various kingdoms, it provokes crises or battles, all of which Arjuna somehow surmounts. At one point, the horse enters Pramila's queendom, a land inhabited solely by women warriors—this, the result of a curse. As Pramila, foremost of the warrior women, tells Arjuna, she was the son of a raja who while hunting one day chanced upon Shiva and Parvati making love in the forest. Parvati caught sight of the peeping monarch and, mortified with embarrassment, cursed him along with his army (among which was his son) to be women and remain in the woods. If a male child somehow were born to any of them, he would die after his twelfth year. Initially Pramila appears hostile to Arjuna, defying the great Pandava warrior. It is this aspect of her that, in some ways, defines her character. She is strong and confident,

able to stand up to any man. No matter that in the end she agrees to relinquish the horse and requests Arjuna to wed her. She remains, symbolically, the defiant woman warrior.

Datta drew upon this lightly sketched character (the Pramila episode occupies only two of the more than a thousand pages in one printed version of the Bangla Mahabharata) for his own Pramila, who in canto 3 defies Rama and with her entourage of armed women enters the walled city of Lanka. We have confirmation, in one of the satirical farces Datta wrote the year before, that his Pramila has links to that character in the Mahabharata. As already mentioned, Datta had been commissioned by the Paikpara raja brothers to write two social satires. "Is This What's Called Civilization?" (*ekei ki bale sabhyata?*) mocks those pseudo Young Bengal men who, without the benefit of schooling such as that which Hindoo College imparted to the likes of a Michael Madhusudan Datta, caroused and visited brothels and pretended to know English, all in the name of being cultured, Western, "civilized." The targets of the second of the two satires, "Hair on the Back of the Old Coot's Neck" (*bura salikera ghare rom*), were those of the landowning class or zamindars who took advantage, sexually and otherwise, of the poor peasants living on their property. The latter work has as its main character the old lecher landowner by the name of Bhaktaprasad, who lewdly eyes one of the young peasant girls. To himself he muses, with comical bombast and an air of resignation, that he might not be able to have his way with her. "After conquering the entire world, oceans and all," says Bhakta in a theatrical aside, "was not Partha (Arjuna) in the end bested at the hands of Pramila?" (act 2, scene 1). This same Pramila of the Bangla Mahabharata will be fleshed out and transformed into Meghanada's wife in *Meghanada*.

The Meghanada character in Krittivasa's Bangla Ramayana does not have a named wife, though his wives, plural, are said to number 9,000. Valmiki, in the Sanskrit Ramayana, gives Meghanada no wife at all. Meghanada, however, already had acquired a wife in two other South Asian texts to which Datta had access, though he does not list their authors in the litany of poets to whom he pays homage in the passage cited above. In neither of these other two texts is she named Pramila but rather Sulocana ("she of beautiful eyes") instead. One of the texts is a Ramayana written in Bangla some seventy years prior to *Meghanada*. Its authors were Jagata Rama and his son Rama Prasada, and their Ramayana became designated the Jagadrami Ramayana, from the prime author's name. The other text or rather texts are the various scripts for the Ramlila, literally, "the divine play [*lila*] of Rama."

Ramlila scripts come, if not verbatim at least in essence, from the Ramayana, most often the Hindi Ramayana by sixteenth-century poet Tulsidasa. Ramlila dramas are annual enactments by real people of the mythic clash between Rama and Ravana, culminating in the defeat of the Rakshasa sovereign. They usually get staged out-of-doors, often but not always progressing from one location to another throughout the town or village in which the performance takes place. And they are performed pervasively throughout northern India.⁹⁸ Moreover, they were also performed in Calcutta during Datta's lifetime. We know this from one of the most significant works of Bangla literature of this period, *Sketches by Hutom, the Owl* (*Hutoma pencara naksha*). In that book, the character Hutom, from his bird's-eye vantage point, draws verbal sketches illustrating buffoonery and the absurd among everyday people and common events in

⁹⁸ See Norvin Hein, *The Miracle Plays of Mathura* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), and Philip Lutgendorf, *The Life of a Text: Performing the Ramcaritmanas of Tulsidas* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, Oxford: University of California Press, 1991).

contemporary Calcutta. One of those sketches bears the title "Ramlila." Though Hutom shows the reader more of the characters on the periphery surrounding the performance, it is the Ramlila enactment, held in the garden of one of Calcutta's wealthy elite of that day, that serves as the central event and motivation for the actions sketched.

The Ramlila, no doubt, was at that time in the middle of the 19th century part and parcel of Calcutta culture. Furthermore, as evidence that Datta would have been acquainted with the Ramlila, we have the statement of his best friend, Bysack, indicating that he, and thus other cosmopolitan Bengalis, knew well this non-Bengali dramatic form: "The Hindustani Ram Jatra and Ram Lila are performed with great *éclat* mostly by professional people. The Bengalis, on the other hand, . . ." ⁹⁹ In the Ramlila scripts one finds Meghanada with wife, one and only one wife, and a wife who has the name Sulocana. Though Ramlila scripts vary in length, depending upon the number of days over which the drama is to be enacted, many of them contain the audience-pleasing scene of not just the slaying of Meghanada but also his cremation. In these Ramlilas, Sulocana mounts Meghanada's funeral pyre and becomes a "suttee," the common English spelling of the word *sati*, meaning "true wife." (Suttee had been legislated illegal by the British East India Company in 1829.) Datta concludes his epic in similar fashion, with Meghanada's wife—Datta names her Pramila—becoming a suttee and being taken by the god of fire, Agni, up on high to Shiva and Durga's heaven.

The Jagadrami Ramayana (1790-91) likewise incorporates the cremation of Meghanada and has his wife, Sulocana, mount the funeral pyre and become a suttee. It seems quite probable that the Jagadrami Ramayana's Sulocana herself as well as the

⁹⁹ Basu, *Maikela Madhusudana*, appendix, 15.

cremation of both Meghanada and wife come directly from the Ramlila, or more precisely from Tulsidas' Ramayana (Ramcaritmanas) mediated through the Ramlila. And, it is from the Jagadrami Ramayana or the Ramlila or a combination of the two that Datta takes a part of the character of his creation, Pramila. But Pramila and Sulocana are not the same person. Though Sulocana and her entourage of female attendants proceed both to Rama's encampment and to the walled city of Lanka, as do Pramila and her women in *Meghanada*, Sulocana and company do so not "like the Amazonians as described by Michael Madhusudana Datta, but as devotees of Rama," writes Dinesh Chandra Sen.¹⁰⁰ The Amazonian nature stems from the Bangla Mahabharata.¹⁰¹

The cremation proper is lavish; the symbolism, pointed. The pyre becomes like an altar for Durga, the form of the goddess most widely and warmly worshipped by Hindu Bengalis. What the Ramlila is to much of northern India, Durga Puja is to the Bengal region. These two Hindu religious events—Durga Puja and the Ramlila—take place simultaneously, in both real and mythic time. It is Durga's puja which gives rise each year to the largest public festival in the Hindu Bengali community. Symbolically, once a year, in the autumn, Durga—also known as Parvati and by more than a hundred other names—returns home, just as married daughters everywhere in Bengal return home to their parents' household. She arrives on the sixth day of the waxing moon; stays for

¹⁰⁰ Sen, *Bengali Ramayanas*, 251.

¹⁰¹ Bishvanath Bandyopadhyay has written a persuasive article demonstrating the correspondences between Sulocana of the Jagadrami Ramayana and Datta's Pramila; "*Pramilara utsa*" ("The Origins of Pramila"), *Desh*, 22 Phalgun, 1388/March 6, 1982, 9-10. Bandyopadhyay concedes that there is little if anything of the warrior woman in Sulocana. But that aside, the two female characters and their actions are too alike for the similarities to have been coincidental. Dinesh Chandra Sen had earlier suggested that Datta must have read the Jagadrami Ramayana; *Bengali Ramayanas*, 251. In a letter to the editor, following publication of Bandyopadhyay's article, a reader wondered in print whether we can trust the Jagadrami Ramayana as a credible, legitimate text; Sushanta Sarkar, "*Pramilara utsa*," *Desh*, 20 Caitra 1388/April 3, 1982. I have no answer for him. Furthermore, he asks, why have literary historians been so disinterested in this text? Again, no answer from me.

the seventh, eighth, and ninth days; and on the tenth day must return to her husband's house—to Shiva's home on Mount Kailasa. During her stay—during the Durga puja festivities in Bengal—she is honored ritually, with sacrifice. The tenth day, called "the victorious tenth" (*vijaya dasami*) is a bittersweet time for all Hindu Bengalis, since the goddess (the symbolic daughter) must depart for yet another year. The image of the goddess is on that day immersed in the Ganges whereby she (her spirit) travels upstream to the Himalayas and her husband's home. Left behind, once the water has washed away the clay, is "the empty / splendor of an idol's frame without its life-like painted / image, at the end of an immersion ceremony"—so Datta depicts the wife of Meghanada on her way to the cremation pyre. And with that cremation—comparable to the immersion of the goddess—the ninth and final canto of *Meghanada* draws to a close. In Hindu mythic history, with all its many tales intertwined, Rama is said to slay Ravana on "the victorious tenth," the very day Parvati departs for Mount Kailasa. It is with the slaying of Ravana that Ramlilas, of no matter how many days' duration, end. By concluding his epic with a reference to that tenth day of Durga puja, Datta has effectively foreshadowed the inevitable demise of the Rakshasa king, in accordance with the traditional Ramayana.

There is yet another canonical text that informs part of the last canto of *Meghanada*, and that is the Iliad, the twenty-fourth and final book of that Homeric epic. Ravana's farewell address to his daughter-in-law and slain son recalls those of Andromache, Hekabe, and Helen to the corpse of Hector. Where Priam had extracted from Achilles a promise to cease hostilities for eleven days (nine to mourn, one for cremation and burial, and one to build a grave-barrow), Datta's Ravana requests seven. (In the Jagadrami Ramayana, hostilities cease for a day only.) *Sraddha* or ceremonies

honoring the dead vary in length among Hindus from caste to caste. A week is not an uncommon period of time for such an activity. The Rakshasas weep for their beloved prince, "seven days and seven nights."

ÉPIQUE À CLEF

There has always been some question as to what if anything in political terms Datta meant by *Meghanada*. He composed and published the poem only a few years after the Sepoy Rebellion of 1857, but no mention of that ever appears in any of Datta's extant letters. Bengali intellectuals of this period seemed little concerned by, unaffected by, that rather significant event in British colonial history. Datta clearly had a sense of history, however. His first published piece, "The Captive Ladie," took the defeat of the Hindu king Prithviraja and the symbolic start of Muslim hegemony in north India as the underlying subject matter for his romantically tragic tale of love and death. From his letters, we know that he was receptive to the idea, despite his false modesty, that he himself might write a national epic: "The subject you propose for a national epic is good—very good indeed. But I don't think I have as yet acquired sufficient mastery over the 'Art of poetry' to do it justice. So you must wait a few years more. In the meantime, I am going to celebrate the death of my favourite Indrajit."¹⁰² Raj Narain Bose had suggested as subject matter *Simhala Vijaya* (Victory over Simhala [Sri Lanka]), which, Datta tells Bose rather nonchalantly, "I have forgotten the story and do not know in what work to find it; kindly enlighten me on the subject."¹⁰³ It happened to be a subject dear to Bose's heart and one about which he later wrote, while extolling the virtues of Bengalis

¹⁰² Gupta, *Madhusudana racanavali*, 546.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 564.

as a people: "Prince Vijay Simha, who was banished from his homeland by his father and with several followers boarded an ocean-going vessel, proceeded to Simhala, and conquered that aforementioned island and by whose name, Simha, that Simhala island came to be known—he was a Bengali."¹⁰⁴ It would have been a national epic depicting the conquest of Sri Lanka by a Bengali, with the Bengali being the vanquishing hero. Instead, Datta wrote about almost the same topic, the conquest of Lanka, but with the hero, Prince Meghanada, the vanquished.

Datta mined what came to be the source book for another historical tradition, a work that captured the fancy of many Bengali intellectuals in the 19th century, James Tod's *Annals of Rajasthan*. Tod's *Annals* seemed somehow to provide Bengalis, Datta included, with a sense of the Indian heroic. Datta took the plot for his drama "Krishnakumari" from Tod. The Bengali novelist Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay (1838-94), in his search for truly heroic Indian characters, would follow Datta and others to that same source book by Tod. Datta, as already noted, thought poorly of "Ram and his rabble," preferring the "grand fellow" Ravana. Chattopadhyay later in that same century would write equally disparagingly about the Bengali Krishna, so popular in the Radha-Krishna songs then and even now. Though he did not refer to the lover of Radha as rabble, Chattopadhyay rejected that Krishna completely while at the same time professing his admiration for a different Krishna, a grander fellow, so to speak, the Krishna of the Mahabharata, the Krishna who did not engage in (divine) erotic sport with Radha and the gopis but instead drove warrior Arjuna's chariot into battle and counseled killing one's enemies. First Datta, then later Chattopadhyay, would take this critical look at Bengali

¹⁰⁴ Raj Narain Basu, *Se kal ar e kal* (Then and Now) (2d ed.; Kolkata: Bangiya Shahitya Parishad, 1956; ed. based on the 1st ed, pub. 1879), 95.

cultural heroes of the day and find them wanting. Each writer in his own way would try to discover the truly heroic, which in both cases meant reformulating one's own tradition slightly while at the same time looking outside the immediate confines of one's dominant popular culture.

The gestures by Datta toward Indian history and national epic, and his reformulation of the Indian heroic aside, the question remains as to the political significance, if any, of *Meghanada*. Does Datta's text in some way presage or encourage, as Chattopadhyay's writings would do, a nationalist consciousness among Indians and thus participate in the nationalist movement that was to emerge in the last quarter of the century? Can his poem be read sensibly as allegory? Is it in some meaningful way an *épique à clef*? The writer and critic Pramathanath Bishi thought so:

Michael Madhusudan Datta's era was a time of not insignificant social change in Bengal. Such a minor revolution had not taken place in Bengali society for quite some time. It was not just that many of the English-educated Bengali elite of that day imbibed the foreigners' alcohol—British culture itself acted upon their minds like some sort of intoxicant. Each and every English book appeared in their eyes like a bottle of spirits. They forgot their mother tongue; they converted to Christianity in hopes of becoming pukka Western gentlemen and in furtherance of those aspirations even spelled their names in English in the most contorted of ways; and they nurtured fantasies of being able to dream in English. Disgust toward "Ram and his rabble," the sparking of one's imagination at the idea of Ravana and Meghanada—those attitudes were not peculiar to Datta.

Many of his contemporaries had the very same feelings. What was native seemed despicable; what was English, grand and glorious. Such was the general temperament. Ravana and his son stood as the symbolic embodiments of such a scenario. Ravana's grandeur, Ravana's heroic nature, Ravana's golden Lanka, Ravana's animus toward Rama—all of these utterly captivated the educated elites. Though Datta may have written Lanka, he was thinking England. Blending the above-mentioned attitudes with the contemporary societal situations, Datta cast Ravana's character as representative of the English-educated segment of society. He built up Ravana to such proportions that none could be greater—hence, by comparison, Rama and Lakshmana appear diminutive.¹⁰⁵

Read this way, *Meghanada* becomes all that much more tragic. The cultured, cosmopolitan Indians, the Hindoo-College-educated class, the Calcutta elite that had enriched themselves with the literature and science and philosophy coming from the West and in turn would enrich their own culture, as Datta is enriching his—those sorts of Indians were doomed to defeat at the hands of the traditionalists, the parochial, provincial but powerful majority who had tradition on their side. But tragic heroes are heroes nonetheless. In defeat, Meghanada becomes, by the rules of tragedy, the victor, capturing one's imagination. Likewise, it will be the vanquished elites who in many ways become the victors and, during the next decades, will contribute to the emerging nationalist debate.

¹⁰⁵ Pramathanath Bishi, *Bamla sahityer naranari* (Men and Women in Bangla Literature) (rpt. 1966; Kolkata: Maitri, 1953), 25.

A different interpretation of Meghanada comes from William Radice, who finds the key to this epic in a combination of xenophilia and xenophobia. The xenophilia need hardly be argued. It is patently clear in the liberal borrowings from Western literature. Datta and the Hindoo-College-educated elite could be said to love the foreign, epitomized by Western literary culture. On the other hand, the xenophobia, reasons Radice, has much to do with nationalism.

To trace the nationalist or xenophobic strain in Madhusudan requires subtlety and empathy: one must be prepared to read between the lines sometimes, to look for the deeper implications of his writing. But there is an upper layer, so to speak, which is obvious. Patriotism does not necessarily imply xenophobia, but it is xenophobia's *sine qua non*—and patriotism Madhusudan had in abundance.¹⁰⁶

As part of his effort to "read between the lines," Radice "look[s] closely at Book VI, for evidence of implicit xenophobia—not so easy to detect as the xenophilia of the epic's Miltonic verse-form, Virgilian structure and Homeric tragic pathos."¹⁰⁷ It is in this canto, or book 6, that Lakshmana actually slays Meghanada.

Radice tells us something of the reading experience. Readers of Meghanada, he says, see Lanka as "home." The Rakshasas are "us," the "insiders"; Rama and his cohorts

¹⁰⁶ William Radice, "Xenophilia and Xenophobia: Michael Madhusudan Datta's *Meghnad-badh kabya*," in Rupert Snell and I.M.P. Raeside, eds., *Classics of Modern South Asian Literature* (Wiesbaden, Germany: Harrassowitz Verlag, 1998), 147.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 150.

are "them," the "outsiders."¹⁰⁸ The "us" here corresponds to Hindu India whose surrogate becomes Meghanada, slain while performing a very Hindu sort of worship to the Hindu god Agni.

We have, in short, in Book VI of Madhusudan's masterpiece, an intense and impassioned projection of the shameful and humiliating defeat of the champion of the 'insiders' by the dastardly and immoral tactics of the 'outsiders'. Is it too far-fetched to suggest that this reflects the shameful subjugation of Hindu India by the alien, outcaste British?¹⁰⁹

"Ram and his rabble," in Radice's reading, take on the symbolic value of colonial power in opposition to traditional Hindu India. In Bishi's reading, Ram et al. serve symbolically as traditional Hindu India itself, countering and encumbering the Westernized educated, modern (vs. traditional) Indians of nineteenth-century Calcutta. Both of these allegorical, historicized readings, it should be noted, come from the 20th century, not from an audience contemporary with Datta.

RECEPTION, ASSESSMEN

Datta himself provides us, through his letters, with a number of reactions to his poem. All of them ring positive, which should hardly come as a surprise, given his self-confidence and ebullient personality. *Meghanada* was published in two installments, cantos 1-5 in January of 1861 and then cantos 6-9 in July of that same year. After

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 152.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 163.

bringing out the first installment, and having finished the sixth canto, he bragged to Raj Narain Bose:

The poem is rising into splendid popularity. Some say it is better than Milton—but that is all bosh—nothing can be better than Milton; many say it licks Kalidasa; I have no objection to that. I don't think it impossible to equal Virgil, Kalidasa and Tasso. Though glorious, still they are mortal poets; Milton is divine.¹¹⁰

And throughout that year, up to and beyond the publication of the second installment, he wrote that same Raj Narain, often including some mention of his cherished epic composition:

On the whole the book is doing well. It has roused curiosity. Your friend Baboo Debendra Nath Tagore [Rabindranath's father], I hear, is quite taken up with it. S--- told me the other day that he (Baboo D) is of opinion that few Hindu authors can "stand near this man," meaning your fat friend of No. 6 Lower Chitpore Road, and "that his imagination goes as far as imagination can go."¹¹¹

Some days ago I had occasion to go to the Chinabazar. I saw a man seated in a shop and deeply poring over Meghvanad. I stepped in and asked him what he was reading. He said in very good English—"I am reading a new poem, Sir!" "A

¹¹⁰ Gupta, *Madhusudana racanavali*, 557.

¹¹¹ *Ibid*, 558.

poem!" I said, "I thought there was no poetry in your language." He replied —
"Why, sir, here is poetry that would make my nation proud."¹¹²

I have not yet heard a single line in Meghanada's disfavour. The great Jotindra has only said that, he is sorry poor Lakshman is represented as killing Indrajit in cold blood and when unarmed. But I am sure the poem has many faults. What human production has not?¹¹³

In July of 1962, Datta finally reached England, the land of his dreams. The month before, he had written Raj Narain announcing his departure but also the republication of *Meghanada*:

Meghanad is going through a second edition with notes, and a real B.A. has written a long critical preface, echoing your verdict—namely, that it is the first poem in the language. A thousand copies of the work have been sold in twelve months.¹¹⁴

Lest we think the above epistolary evidence all puffery and self-congratulation, it should be noted that one of the leading Bengali authors and emerging intellectuals of the day, Kaliprasanna Simha (1840-70), felt so moved by Datta's literary accomplishment that he convened—in February of 1861, a month after the first installment of *Meghanada*

¹¹² Ibid., 561.

¹¹³ Ibid., 564.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 567.

appeared— a public assembly at which he honored the poet, with words of praise and a "silver claret jug," at least that was the way Datta himself described the object in one of his letters. Simha came from a wealthy family and had both the time and the money to pursue matters that interested him. Much younger than Datta, he had at the tender age of 13 founded one of those societies for the acquisition of knowledge, his being called the Society for Encouraging Learning (*Vidyotsahini sabha*). Simha studied at Hindoo College but completed his education at home. In his teens he had composed several dramas. He took an active part in the current social reform movements, such as promoting widow remarriage and opposing both polygamy and prostitution. Between 1862 and 1864, he published his popular and genre-breaking social commentary, *Sketches by Hutom the Owl*, in which, as noted above, there is reference to the Ramlila performances in Calcutta at this time. With help from Sanskrit scholars, Simha translated the entire Sanskrit Mahabharata into Bangla, no mean feat by one of the prominent litterateurs of the day. It was this Kaliprasanna Simha who personally presented Datta with that expensive token of his—and the like-minded Bengali intelligentsia's—sincere appreciation for Datta's extraordinary artistic accomplishment. He and his fellow Bengalis recognized full well that that piece by Datta was something the likes of which had never before been seen in the Bangla literary world. A new era had begun, and they wished to acknowledge the event properly.

The Slaying of Meghanada went through six editions during Datta's lifetime, testimony in and of itself of the poem's positive reception generally.¹¹⁵ Following Datta's death in June of 1873, an obituary appeared in Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay's journal,

¹¹⁵ Gupta, *Madhusudana racanavali*, xxxiii.

Bangadarshan, the premier Bangla-language journal of the day. It was penned partially by Chattopadhyay himself and included two poetic tributes to Datta by other poets. For his part, Chattopadhyay began by saying that Bengal had now learned to cry, that Bengalis openly, unabashedly were weeping for a Bengali poet. He then lavished praise upon Datta, mentioning no work of his specifically, not even *Meghanada*, but ranking Datta as one of the two finest poets Bengal had ever produced—Jayadeva, a Bengali of the 12th century who wrote a single work and that in Sanskrit, the *Gitagovinda*, being the other poet of distinction.¹¹⁶

A number of years later, in 1881, a piece on *Meghanada* came out in that same journal, authored not by Chattopadhyay but by one of the staff writers, which the author of the article himself regrets, claiming that only Chattopadhyay could do justice to Datta's poem. Be that as it may, this author goes on to examine the Meghanada character in detail, citing passage after passage from the text proper. When it comes to Meghanada's noble and brave response to Lakshmana in Canto VI, in the slaying scene, the author says he deems it unnecessary to be specific, assuming that all of his readers know that part of the poem by heart:

Were I to be capable of conjuring up before you in its entirety that unprecedented scene of the temple of the Nikumbhila sacrifice, I would be able to convey to you the magnanimity of Meghanada's character. But such is hardly

¹¹⁶ *Bangadarshan*, 2:5 (August, 1873), 232.

necessary. We know full well that that particular section of the poem is imprinted in searing letters of fire upon the hearts of educated Bengalis.¹¹⁷

What drives the narrative, that is to say, what causes the death of Meghanada, so the author concludes, is the truth of the axiom that the sins of the father are visited upon the son. "Due to the faults of the father, the son is destroyed; it is an ancient notion. This very truism, however, is the essence of *The Slaying of Meghanada*."¹¹⁸ It is his father, Ravana, who seals Meghanada's fate and causes his demise. But in a more generalized, abstracted sense, it is Fate itself that seals his fate, a fate beyond Meghanada's control. The "modern scientific fatalist" [*adhunika baijnanika adrstabadi*], according to the author, says the same thing. *Meghanada*, our author declares, had been built upon the solid foundation of fatalism. The majority of the world's immortal poetry, he states forthrightly, has this philosophy as its unifying principle.¹¹⁹ This "modern scientific fatalist" aside—whatever our author might have had in mind when he wrote those words in 1881—to be noted here is his inclusion, by inference, of *Meghanada* among "the world's immortal poetry."

As one might expect, not everyone gave *Meghanada* unqualified praise. A certain young man, destined to become the most celebrated Bengali writer of all time, found Datta's poem lacking. Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), born the very year in which *Meghanada* appeared, declared straightforwardly and unequivocally that the work failed, that it was no epic at all. Tagore, twenty-one years young at this time, may even have

¹¹⁷ Bangadarshan, 8:6 (September, 1881), 262.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 263.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 264.

been responding indirectly to the laudatory criticism of less than a year earlier in *Bangadarshan*, which he and almost all educated Bengalis read religiously. "In *mahakavyas* [literally, 'great poetry,' but also 'epic']," he wrote, "we want to see a grand personage; we want to see grand feats accomplished by that grand personage."¹²⁰ None of that do we find in *Meghanada*, concluded Tagore. Nothing as glorious as the defeat of the Trojans by the Greeks. Nothing immortal in the characters, not in Meghanada himself, certainly, not in Ravana nor Rama nor Lakshmana.

Tagore then spoke of a parallel world that we all inhabit, peopled by characters from myth and fiction, a world that is different for different cultures with different mythic and literary traditions. It is a world, unseen, whose inhabitants, without our consciously knowing it, affect our very thoughts and lives. We know these people. They are, in some sense, alive for us. Shakespeare's Hamlet frets and dithers, worries and wonders about his father, his mother, his uncle. Hamlet is "real," he "lives," Tagore would say, a permanent inhabitant of that world of immortal, memorable characters. What characters has Datta created with his *Meghanada* who now take up residence in that parallel universe of the imagination? The answer Tagore gives to his own rhetorical question is, none. Datta has added no lasting, living character to the Bengali reader's mind, not a new sort of Meghanada, not a Pramila, his wife, not a different Ravana, with personality and unforgettable character, to accompany us in life.

It is the task of the *mahakavi* [literally, "great poet," but also "epic poet"] to create all those immortal companions. Now I ask you, how many new inhabitants has

¹²⁰ Rabindranath Tagore, "*Meghanadavadha kavya*" ("The Slaying of Meghanada"), in *Rabindra-racanavali, acalita samgraha* (The Collected Works of Rabindranath Tagore: Out-of-Print Material) (Kolkata: Visvabharati, 1962; first published in *Bharati*, August, 1882) 2:78.

Michael [Madhusudan Datta] sent off to live in that all-pervasive poetic world that surrounds us? If he has sent not a one, then which of his writings are you going to call *mahakavya*?¹²¹

Obviously not *Meghanada*:

I have not dissected *The Slaying of Meghanada* limb by limb and examined each—I have critiqued its fundamental substance, the source of its very life's breath. And, I found it had no breath of life. I found it was no *mahakavya* at all.¹²²

Tagore subsequently explained away his attack on Datta's text as just so much juvenile exuberance:

Previously, in the heat of youth's brash overconfidence, I had penned a harshly critical piece on *The Slaying of Meghanada*. The juice of the mango yet unripe is full of acid—likewise, immature criticism is acerbic. When other skills are found in short supply, that of poking-jabbing-clawing-scratching becomes finely honed. I, by drawing bared nails across this immortal poem, had been looking for the easiest way to elevate my name to immortality.¹²³

¹²¹ Ibid., 79.

¹²² Ibid, 81 (misprinted as 79).

¹²³ Rabindranath Tagore, *Jivanasmṛti* (Reminiscences); cited in *Rabindra-racanaṇali, acalita samgraha*, 2:718.

Youthful, misguided egotism, Tagore implied, propelled his actions. Harold Bloom a century later would identify this behavior as "the anxiety of influence."¹²⁴ Here was a genius, Tagore, encountering a genius of his previous generation as well as encountering a work of genius, *Meghanada*. He, Tagore, needed to "misunderstand," to "misperceive," in order to control and to avoid being controlled by it and by Datta. It is a classic Harold-Bloomian case of misprision, as Bloom calls it. It is the anxiety of influence acted out by the twenty-one-year-old Tagore, the Nobel laureate to be.

Meghanada—Datta's Meghanada—has no doubt taken his place among those living in the parallel world of literary characters of which Tagore spoke. Pramila—not the Pramila of the Bangla Mahabharata but Datta's Pramila, of *Meghanada*—is living there too. To simply aver that such is the case rings hollow. To prove the existence of particular characters in his mind-based world is near impossible without the testimony of some other member of the Bangla-speaking community who could say, "yes, they live in my parallel universe." We do have some evidence, albeit inconclusive, in the form of Bengali given names. Meghnad Saha, born in 1893, was to become a world-renowned nuclear physicist. His given name—the spelling reflects the Bangla pronunciation of Meghanada—is uncommon among Bengalis, as far as I know. I presume he became the namesake of the character Datta created. Meghanada is also known as Indrajit, ("victorious" [*jit*] over Indra), and Indrajit is a rather prevalent name among Hindus in Bengal. But Indrajit serves as an epithet for more than Meghanada. A number of gods defeated Indra, a Vedic god whose prowess in the later Hindu period had waned. Indrajit can stand for Vishnu. The prevalence of Indrajit as a Bengali man's given name does not

¹²⁴ Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973).

necessarily tell us anything about the presence or absence of Datta's Indrajit in the parallel world of literary characters. Of real live Pramilas, there are two Bengali women about whom we know, one of them because of the fame of her husband, Kazi Nazrul Islam (1899-1976), a most prolific poet, composer and singer of song, political magazine editor, and all-around charismatic figure. Nazrul Islam actually named his wife, undoubtedly after Datta's dramatic heroine.¹²⁵ He knew *Meghanada* well, having some years earlier adapted Datta's epic poem to a dramatic folk genre called *letogan*.¹²⁶ And there lived one Pramila Nag, whose birth date is unknown and who died in the Bangla year 1303 (1896-97 C.E.). We know little about her, other than the fact that she was a poet.¹²⁷

The more persuasive proof that Datta's characters had gained entry to the parallel literary universe of the mind comes in the form of a Ramayana told by one Dhan Gopal Mukerji (1890-1936). He was a Bengali, resident in the United States of America and one of the very few public intellectuals from India in the States during this period. He contributed to a book entitled *What Is Civilization?*, brought out in 1926, introduced by Hendrik Willem Van Loon (author of *The Story of Mankind*), which contained additional contributions by, among other notable personages, Maurice Maeterlinck (Belgian poet and philosopher, Nobel laureate in 1911, two years prior to Tagore) and W.E.B. Du Bois (leading African-American intellectual, editor of the mouthpiece journal of the N.A.A.C.P.). Two years earlier, in 1942, Mukerji had published a children's book, *Hari*,

¹²⁵ It was Abdul Mannan Syed, the current Executive Director of the Nazrul Institute, Dhaka, who called my attention to the fact that Nazrul renamed his wife. Such a practice, of course, was not unprecedented. Rabindranath Tagore's wife's name had been changed—from Bhabatarini to Mrinalini—by the Tagores on the occasion of her marriage into the family.

¹²⁶ Karunamaya Goswami, *Kazi Nazrul Islam: A Biography* (Dhaka: Nazrul Institute, 1996), 15.

¹²⁷ Subodh Chandra Sengupta, ed., *Samsada Bangali caritabhidhana* (Samsad's Biographical Dictionary of Bengalis) (Kolkata: Sahitya Samsad, 1976).

the Jungle Lad. He responded to Katherine Mayo's critical *Mother India* with his *A Son of Mother India Answers* (1928). And in 1930 there appeared his *Rama, the Hero of India: Valmiki's "Ramayana" Done into a Short English Version for Boys and Girls* (E.P. Dutton & Co., New York). Of note is the claim in the title that the retold tale draws upon Valmiki's Ramayana. When it comes to the chapters named "Indrajit's Fall" and "Indrajit's Funeral," Mukerji's so-called Valmiki Ramayana transmogrifies into something based squarely upon Datta's *The Slaying of Meghanada*. There is no funeral for Indrajit (Meghanada) in Valmiki's epic. There is in a Ramlila performance, but Mukerji's depiction of the funeral procession matches uncannily that described in *Meghanada*. And, Mukerji mentions Meghanada's one and only wife—no name, just the designation "wife"—who emerges out of Datta's text, not from Valmiki's or even Krittivasa's Ramayana. That Datta's Meghanada and wife had so blatantly and effortlessly assumed their places in this retelling, by a Bengali, of the Ramayana belies Tagore's youthful assertion that no characters from *Meghanada* were meet to enter the immortal literary world. They were indeed meet, and they did enter.

Over the years, Tagore's was not the only voice to negatively criticize Datta's poem. Pramatha Chaudhuri (1868-1946), editor of one of the most prestigious avant-garde literary magazines of the early decades of the 20th century and himself a close friend of Tagore, disparaged *Meghanada* for being foreign, too foreign. It was not of the soil, so to speak, and therefore did not smell right—didn't smell at all, oddly enough.

Since the seeds of thought borne by winds from the Occident cannot take root firmly in our local soil, they either wither away or turn parasitic. It follows, then,

that *The Slaying of Meghanada* is the bloom of a parasite. And though, like the orchid, its design is exquisite and its hue glorious, it is utterly devoid of any fragrance.¹²⁸

Except in the eyes of Tagore, Pramatha Chaudhuri, and a few others, Datta's *The Slaying of Meghanada* has maintained its status from its publication to the present as a worthy piece, nay, a masterpiece of Bangla literature—and not just written literature but staged drama too. It was dramatized by the great Bengali playwright Girishchandra Ghosh in the 1877 and performed on the boards of the National Theatre, which had come into existence during that decade of the 1870s.¹²⁹ Previous to that, there had been a staging of another dramatized version at the Bengal Theatre, in 1875; Haraprasad Sastri, literary scholar of renown, did his own rendition, producing it in 1899.¹³⁰ And, Kazi Nazrul Islam, as noted above, adapted *Meghanada* to a dramatic folk genre called *letogan*. Edward Thompson, in his study of Tagore that appeared in 1926, had cause to mention Datta and his signature poem: "He [Datta] keeps an almost unbounded popularity, and there can be very few among Bengal's thousands of annual prize-givings where a recitation from his chief poem is not on the programme."¹³¹ And still today, *Meghanada* is performed in the theater to rave reviews and appreciative audiences in Kolkata, done by a cast of one man acting out the many parts. Datta's text lives yet.

¹²⁸ Pramatha Chaudhuri, "Sabuja patrera mukhapatra" (*Sabuj Patra's* Manifesto), in *Nana-katha* (Miscellany) (Kolkata: By the author, 3 Hastings Street, [1919]), 109-10.

¹²⁹ Introductory notes by Abinash Chandra Gangopadhyay speak of this production of *Meghanadavadha kavya* as the first production mounted at the newly renamed National Theatre; see Debipada Bhattacharya, ed., *Girisa racanavali* (The Collected Works of Girishchandra Ghosh) (Calcutta: Sahitya Samsad, 1964) 147.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 29, 31.

¹³¹ Edward Thompson, *Rabindaranath Tagore: poet and dramatist* (2d ed.; London: Oxford University Press, 1948), 16.

ON TRANSLATION

Just a word or two on my translation process: The meter I have adopted is a compromise between the original Bangla and the manner in which Datta suggests, in a personal letter, that his meter should be read.

You want me to explain my system of versification for the conversion of your sceptical friends. I am sure there is very little in the system to explain; our language, as regards the doctrine of accent and quantity, is an 'apostate', that is to say, it cares as much for them as I do for the blessing of our Family-Priest! If your friends know English, let them read the *Paradise-Lost*, and they will find how the verse, in which the Bengali poetaster writes, is constructed. The fact is, my dear fellow, that the prevalence of Blank-verse in this country, is simply a question of time. Let your friends guide their voices by the pause (as in English Blank-verse) and they will soon swear that this is the noblest measure in the Language. My advice is Read, Read, Read. Teach your ears the new tune and then you will find out what it is.¹³²

The most common meter in pre-modern Bangla literature goes by the name of *payar*, which designates a scansion system—that is to say, a way of counting poetic feet—as well as a couplet structure. Traditional *payar* couplets display end rhyme. Each line of the couplet consists of fourteen syllables, generally divided in some sort of

¹³² Gupta, *Madhusudana racanavali*, 548-49.

meaningful way with a caesura or break after the eighth syllable. The couplets tend to be semantically self-contained. What might be thought of as a sentence or a clause could spill over from one hemistich to the other, but not from one couplet into the following couplet. For example, from Kṛtṭivasa's *Ramayana*:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
<i>bhag-na-</i>	<i>du-</i>	<i>ta</i>	<i>ka-</i>	<i>he</i>	<i>gi-</i>	<i>ya</i>	<i>ra-</i>	<i>va-</i>	<i>na</i>	<i>go-</i>	<i>ca-</i>	<i>ra</i>	

The bearer of bad tidings went to Ravana and said:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
<i>vi-</i>	<i>ra-</i>	<i>ba-</i>	<i>hu</i>	<i>pa-</i>	<i>re</i>	<i>vart-</i>	<i>ta</i>	<i>su-</i>	<i>na</i>	<i>lan-</i>	<i>ke-</i>	<i>sva-</i>	<i>ra</i>

"Virabahu fell, now hear the news, O lord of Lanka."

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
<i>so-</i>	<i>ke-</i>	<i>ra</i>	<i>u-</i>	<i>pa-</i>	<i>re</i>	<i>so-</i>	<i>ka</i>	<i>ha-</i>	<i>i-</i>	<i>la</i>	<i>ta-</i>	<i>kha-</i>	<i>na</i>

On top of sorrows came more sorrow at that time;

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
<i>sim-</i>	<i>ha-</i>	<i>sa-</i>	<i>na</i>	<i>hai-</i>	<i>te</i>	<i>pa-</i>	<i>re</i>	<i>ra-</i>	<i>ja</i>	<i>da-</i>	<i>sa-</i>	<i>na-</i>	<i>na</i>

Raja Dasanana tumbled from his lion-throne.¹³³

¹³³ Mukhopadhyay, *Kṛtṭivasi Ramayana*, 335.

Note the end rhymes: *cara/svara* and *khana/nana*. Note too the self-contained nature of the lines, ending with a punctuation mark, at least in my literal English rendering.

Datta took that basic *payar* structure, retained the fourteen-syllable line, discarded end rhyming, and allowed for enjambment. That is to say, his poetic lines flow across the weak boundaries within a line, suppress the sense of a couplet structure altogether by not exhibiting couplet rhyming, and come to an end, meaningfully, anywhere within the line, not just at the end of a line. He names his meter *amitraksara chanda* ("unfriendly-letter meter," i.e., unrhymed meter) or, in other words, the Bangla version of blank verse, a major innovation in Bangla prosody at the time. From a scene somewhat comparable to that narrated above from Krittivasa's Ramayana, Datta writes in *Meghanada*:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
ni-	sa-	ra	sva-	pa-	na-	sa-	ma	to-	ra	e	va-	ra-	ta,

This news of yours is like a nightmare,

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
re	du-	ta!	a-	ma-	ra-	vrin-	da	ya-	ra	bhu-	ja-	ba-	le

Oh messenger! By whose strength of arms the immortals

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
ka-	ta-	ra,	se	dha-	nurd-dha-	re	ra-	gha-	va	bhi-	kha-	ri	

are harassed, that wielder of the bow the Raghava beggar

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14

va- dhi- la sam- mu- kha ra- ne? phu- la- da- la di- ya

has slain in face-to-face battle? With flower petals . . .

The rhyming is gone. The second line runs into the third: "By whose strength of arms the immortals are harassed, . . ." The fourth line completes one sentence and begins another, with only a prepositional phrase.

In my translation, I hold to the fourteen-syllable, unrhymed line displaying enjambment, though I make no effort to force my lines to be coterminous with the original. The four lines above I render as follows:

"This news of yours, messenger, is like a nightmare! Beggar

Raghava in face-to-face battle slew the archer who,

by his strength of arms, has harassed even the immortals?

[Did Providence,] with flower petals, . . .

My lines of poetry are neither in Miltonic iambic pentameter nor are they equivalent in sound to Datta's. As Datta notes in his letter cited above, Bangla does not exhibit the "doctrine of accent and quantity." Put differently, Bangla does not have stressed and unstressed syllables. The iamb relies on stress patterns in English, specifically that of two syllables, one unstressed followed by one stressed, as in the snippet from *Paradise Lost* that Datta quotes in another letter:

Who first seduc'd them to that fowl revolt?

Th' infernal Serpent

Though I cannot and should not avoid stress within words, for that is natural to the English language, I have tried to avoid an iambic pattern, or any other pattern, of stress.

Bangla, as Datta tells us, cares as much for stress as he, a Christian, cares for the blessings of his natal family's Hindu *purohit*. Stress is used in Bangla for emphasis, but all syllables within an individual word receive equal stress. One should keep this in mind when encountering the innumerable proper names in Datta's poem. The reader, of course, is free to pronounce them in anyway whatsoever in English but might want to try giving each and every syllable equal weight: *RA-GHA-VA*. If any syllable is going to receive stress, it should be the first: *RA-gha-va*, instead of *ra-GHA-va* or *ra-gha-VA*.

I have adhered to Datta's own paragraph divisions. He does indent, and so do I. In most cases I have reproduced his punctuation, also. All parentheses in my translation are to be found in his original. I must admit to diminishing slightly the number of exclamation marks, however. Datta, in his letters, in his poetry, and in life, is exuberantly exclamatory.

Datta's language is extremely rich, appropriate to the elevated style frequently found in art epics, or what is sometimes called secondary epics. I have made an attempt to reflect some of that grandeur with the lexicon upon which I draw. Datta liberally uses epithets as appellatives and modifiers. I chose not to double-translate those. That is to say, I have either let the epithet stand untranslated in the poem (but explained in the

glossary) or rendered it into its literal meaning. For example, in the initial line we have "Virabahu," a character whose name means "he whose arms (*bahu*) are 'virile' (*vira*) or strong." I leave this appellative epithet as a proper name and do not double-translate it into "strong-armed Virabahu." Comparably, in the third line we have the goddess "of ambrosial speech (*amrtabhasini*)," an epithet for the goddess Sarasvati, also known as Bharati. I translate this literally but do not include the proper name, Amrtabhasini, or add the word Sarasvati, which does not appear here in the text at all. When, in lines 7 and 8, the reader finds "the hope of Rakshasas" and "conqueror of Indra" and "Meghanada" (literally: "cloud [*megha*]-noise [*nada*]" or "thunder") all together, she or he can rest assured that all three epithets occur in the original text: *raksasabharasa / indrajit meghanade*. I treat two of these as adjectival ("the hope of Rakshasas"; "conqueror of Indra") and one, the final member of the series, as an appellative epithet ("Meghanada").

Datta employs his epithets as poetic ornamentations in several ways: their variety adds a lushness to the text, their tonal qualities often provide alliteration, and their literal meanings can transform these epithets into metaphors in their own right. In lines 16-19, for example, Datta plays off of the literal meanings for three epithets he places there. Mrtunjaya, a name for Shiva, means "victorious over death"; the poet Valmiki also became victorious over death, by virtue of his "immortal" poem, the Ramayana. Varada, literally the "giver of boons" (here referring to goddess Sarasvati), is praised for the boon of hers that made Ratnakara (Valmiki's name before he became a poet)—"ratnakara" means both "mine (*akara*) of gems (*ratna*)" and "the ocean," which is a mine of pearls and other gems—into a veritable ocean or mine of poetry himself. Rather than tease the epithets for resonances here or in footnotes to the poem, I let the reader have the

satisfaction of doing that on his or her own. A glossary is appended to the translation to assist those unfamiliar with the mythology of Hindu India.

Let me conclude with a Bengali reader's experience of reading Datta's meter. At age nine Nirad C. Chaudhuri was asked by his father to memorize passages from *Meghanada*. His father claimed that only those who read Datta's blank verse properly could be considered cultured. For decades after the epic came out, Chaudhuri tells us, "bridegrooms were challenged by their sisters-in-law to prove their culture" by reading the *Meghanada*. Of his own acculturation to the new meter, this *amitraksar chanda*—the verse structure that Datta had his friend read Milton in order to fathom—Chaudhuri recounts:

My father very carefully checked our tendency to stop at the end of the lines—a particularly important precaution because Michael had taken over as the foundation of his blank verse the fourteen-syllable rhyming couplet, and we, finding the metre to be the same, unconsciously read blank verse like couplets and made it sound incredibly grotesque. My father showed us how to read this blank verse—exactly like prose, with attention only to the sense and the punctuation; and he said, if we did that, the rhythm would come out as a matter of course. I did so, and after a little practice with my father, began to recite the rolling verse paragraphs with complete ease.¹³⁴

I invite the reader to recreate Chaudhuri's experience of Datta's poem.

¹³⁴ Nirad C. Chaudhuri, *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968), 186.