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Review of *After* by Vivek Narayanan

Vivek Narayanan, *After* (New York: The New York Review of Books, 2022). 610 pp. Softbound. ISBN: 978-1-68137-646-2.

Vivek Narayanan's *After* is a translation into twentieth century American English verse of Valmiki's Sanskrit *Ramayana*. It is composed of four books: "City and Forest," "Dreams and Nightmares," "War," and "After." Valmiki's *Ramayana* consists of six *kandas* and a seventh one, whose addition is controversial and depends on which manuscript of Valmiki's *Ramayana* is consulted. The title of Valmiki's seventh book is *Uttara*, which, Narayanan notes, can be translated as "simply *After*" (602), hence the title of Narayanan's translation. There is a long history of translations of the *Ramayana*, some of which are far removed in style, flavor and feeling from the original Sanskrit *Ramayana*, especially the English ones. R. K. Narayan's translation is commonly found in bookstores, a shortened modern prose version based on the Tamil classic, *Kamba Ramayana*. Another example is William Buck's retelling in modern American English prose. Robert P. Goldman's project of a scholarly and densely annotated translation of the *Valmiki Ramayana* is in seven volumes and translated by members of the *Ramayana* Translation Consortium. Leonard E. Nathan in a long note in the introduction to the first volume states that, "[t]he notion of attempting a verse translation was early aban-

doned because there is no equivalent of chanted prosody in modern English poetry¹, and anything less would have yielded the sort of doggerel employed by some earlier translators."² Narayanan spares us from this doggerel in his fine modern verse translation.

The *Ramayana* has always been meant to be retold in a contemporary way. The editors of the online edition of Valmiki's *Ramayana*, which Narayanan uses as one source for his translation, introduce it as "an epic poem of India which narrates the journey of Virtue to annihilate vice" and define it as "a *smṛiti* which is translated as 'from memory'."³ In other words, it was originally an oral poem that was performed. More importantly, the editors state, "We in India [...] are presently concerned with what Srimad Valmiki['s] *Ramayana* tells us, rather than when it was told."⁴ Narayanan's aim is "to reanimate the *Ramayana*, in English, as poetry" (1). He states that he worked "from a close study of the sound and strategies of the original" Sanskrit; that "the key to the *Ramayana*'s greatness lies in its innate multiplicity, its resilience, and its potential for being retold" (1). In short, Narayanan "makes it new", as Ezra Pound once said, which "making new" is making poetry contemporary.

At the beginning of the *Ramayana*, Valmiki hears the wailing of a bird which has been pierced by an arrow from a hunter's bow while copulating with its mate in the forest. By means of the force impelling Valmiki's curse the *shloka* is born, the meter of the *Ramayana*.

¹However, Allen Ginsberg did attempt a modern English chanted nine-syllable verse line in a translation of Tsongkhapa's "Bodhi Mind," a poem by the fourteenth and fifteenth century Tibetan Buddhist monk and philosopher.

²Vālmīki, *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki: An Epic of Ancient India, Volume I, Bālakāṇḍa*, translated by Robert P. Goldman (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 95.

³"Valmiki Ramayana: Home Page," <https://valmikiramayan.net/index.html>.

⁴*Ibid.*

He utters the curse with the self-control of a sage. In other words, his righteous anger and the grief he suffers from the bird's death compel him to tell the *Ramayana* in a measured way. He is astonished that his utterance is, according to the commentator K. V. Sarma, a "rhyming verse"⁵, and "of equal feet and equal measure"⁶ worthy of being accompanied by a lyre, according to another commentator, Usha Choudhuri. Then Valmiki bathes in the Tamasa River before contemplating his astonishment at the event and his discovery of a new meter. He repeats the verse to himself in sorrow at the sad fate of the bird. Brahma tells him that what he has uttered is but only verse; that it should not be thought through. In short, Valmiki is the founder of Sanskrit poetry⁷, and it was instigated not only by his anger and grief but inspired by a pun based on the slight phonetic change induced by the lateral "l" upon the voiceless sibilant fricative "sh" in the word *shloka* from *shoka*. Here is Narayanan's "telling" of the incident:

Still worried by the verse
I blurted it out
Briefly mortified But Brahma
just smiled & said

*So you invented a verse form!
What's the big deal? There's
Nothing to be worried about
Then he said: I put it there*

You'll use it to tell the whole Ramayana (12)

Thus we hear Brahma speak in colloquial American English.

Hopkins defines the shloka as "a stanza of

two verses (hemistichs) of sixteen syllables each, restricted to a certain extent as to the place where heavy and light syllables (or long and short vowels) are permitted. Originally the stanza consisted of four verses of eight syllables each [...]"⁸. Here is an example of two *shlokas* as rendered into English by Narayanan in the first poem of his first book, "Valmiki Discovers the Shloka Meter:"

Why would He kill like that
so pointlessly? Before I knew it
a curse had left my lips
In the newest meters:

*Warrior you'll live forever in infamy
for snuffing half
of a pair joined as one
in the ritual of love* (11)

The first stanza is twenty-eight syllables and the second twenty-nine, which amounts roughly to two shlokas, at least according to the requisite thirty-two syllables of a shloka according to Hopkins.

Narayanan's first book, "City and Forest," covers Valmiki's first three kandas of the *Ramayana*: Bala Kanda, Ayodhya Kanda, and Aranya Kanda. His second book, "Dreams and Nightmares," covers the fourth and fifth kandas, Kishkindha and Sundara. It includes a poem entitled "Notes on the Burning of Lanka," which describes how Hanuman (the wind god's son) sets Lanka on fire with his tail acting as a torch. Part five of this poem is a section addressed to the poet Raúl Zurita and his translator, "To Raúl Zurita and Anna

⁵K. V. Sarma, "Vālmiki-Rāmāyaṇa: an ocean of suggestive poetry," *Indologica Taurinensia*, no. 19-20 (1993-94): 295-302, http://www.asiainstitutetorino.it/indologica/volumes/vol19-20/vol19-20_art25_SARMA.pdf, 296.

⁶Usha Choudhuri, "The Rāmāyaṇa myth of poetic creation." *Indologica Taurinensia*, no. 19-20 (1993-94): 69-77, http://www.asiainstitutetorino.it/indologica/volumes/vol19-20/vol19-20_art06_UCHOUDHURI.pdf, 70.

⁷Hopkins (1902) is dismissive of the idea that Valmiki invented shloka verse and calls this notion "a palpable bit of self-glorification" on the part of Valmiki and goes on to make the analogy that since the Greek epics were based on the "general rhapsodic phraseology of the day" (65), so this must be true for "the two Hindu epics" (65). Thus, Hopkins ignores the fact that Valmiki was making an utterance under the influence of poetic inspiration from the well of the unconscious, and as Robert Duncan would say, "bending the bow between life and death".

⁸E. Washburn Hopkins, *The Great Epic of India: its character and origin* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1902), <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/wu.89009453291>, 192.

Deeny Morales.” In it he responds to Zurita’s response in his installation (*The Sea of Pain*) to the War in Syria and the problematical status of images: “The image’s dharma is to manipulate [...] / He [Hanuman] doused his tail [...] / the origin of poetry is in violence” (213). Hanuman’s simian tail is cool, thus protected from the burning torch much as television images are a cool medium, according to Marshall McLuhan, by which the viewer is protected from the violent images of war emitted from its screen.

In *After*, Narayanan emulates Ezra Pound’s project in *the Cantos*. According to Heller, “Pound [...] reorders and displays historical elements until ‘all ages are contemporaneous’, until his poem ‘contains history’.”⁹ According to Robert Duncan (a favorite American poet of Narayanan’s), the mythopoeic weavings of poetry make for the contemporaneity of ancient and current events. In other words, according to Duncan, “Man’s myths move in his poetry as they move in his history.”¹⁰ Narayanan’s second book, “Dreams and Nightmares,” ends with a poem about the Romantic painting by Fernand Cormon depicting the death of Ravana (1875), the slayed King of the Rakshasas, and is addressed to the painter: “Cormon [...] Ravana dead by / the sword in his buckskin hilt by the last strewn / arrow [...] how it is not just you that speaks / into the jointed future” (219–20). This poem is followed by “Book Three: War.” The first poem in “War,” “Not Sita, but a Phantom,” is a poem about Ravana’s vengeful son, Indrajit, who conjures a simulacrum of Sita to try and fool Hanuman and the armies of bears and monkeys. With one stroke of his sword he cuts the simulacrum of Sita in two,

“from clavicle to hip” (227). A few poems later there is the poem, “To Shrikant Verma,” an example of twentieth century Indian history inserted into Narayanan’s *Ramayana*. Shrikant Verma was a prominent Hindi poet and “a major Congress party functionary,” who, according to Narayanan “was implicated in various intricate ways with the authoritarianism and violence of [Indira Gandhi’s] leadership” (599). The second part of “War” deals with, according to Narayanan, “killings and torture performed by the Indian state in the past twenty years or so” (261). It is a litany of accounts of torture in Kashmir and obituaries of Maoist insurgents in the forests of central India. “Book Four: After” is about separation and death after the reunion of Rama and Sita. Sita is banished by Rama because he is convinced that it is not honorable for a king to accept Sita as his wife any longer because of her stay in captivity with Ravana. Rama’s brother Lakshmana dies because he willingly sacrifices himself for Rama rather than cause the death of Rama.

The *Ramayana* is not a relic of the past nor has it ever been. It has always been in translation to be understood anew. In short, there are many Ramayanas. In “Sentences Toward Another Manifesto of Translation Practice” in “Book Four: After” Narayanan states that “[t]ranslation is the new art of the possible” (539). “Every translation is a collaboration among many, including all those who have come to this terrain before you [...] All poetry is translation” (540). One can simply state that Vivek Narayanan is in the same company as Ezra Pound and Fernando Pessoa with respect to the art of translation.

Matthew Keenan¹¹

⁹Michael Heller, *Conviction’s Net of Branches: essays on the Objectivist poets and poetry* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1985), 104.

¹⁰Robert Duncan, *Fictive Uncertainties: essays by Robert Duncan* (New York: New Directions Books, 1985), 16.

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