

The News from That Strange, Far Away Land: William Carlos Williams' Indian Son(g)

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In his later years, William Carlos Williams entertained a long epistolary relationship with the Indian poet Srinivas Rayaprol (1925-98), one of a handful who contributed to the modernization of Indian poetry in English in the first few decades after the independence from British rule. The two met only once or twice, but their correspondence, started in the fall of 1949, when Rayaprol was a graduate student at Stanford University, continued long after his return to India, ending only a few years before Williams' passing.

Although Williams had many correspondents in his life, most of them more important and better known literary figures than Rayaprol, the young Indian from the southeastern state of Andhra Pradesh was one of the very few non-Americans and the only one from a postcolonial country with a long and glorious literary tradition of its own. More important, perhaps, their correspondence occurred in a decade – the 1950s – in which a younger generation of Indian poets writing in English was assimilating the lessons of Anglo-American Modernism while increasingly turning their attention away from Britain to America. Rayaprol, doubly advantaged by virtue of “being there” (i.e., in the Bay Area at the beginning of the San Francisco Renaissance) and by his mentoring relationship with Williams, was one of the very first to imbibe the new poetic idiom from its sources, and also one of the most persistent in trying to keep those sources alive and meaningful, to him if not to his fellow poets in India.

However, unlike other Indian poets who went to America after him (A.K. Ramanujan, G.S. Sharat Chandra, Meena Alexander, Agha Shahid Ali, or Saleem Peeradina, for example), Rayaprol neither

settled in what he described (to Williams) as “the only country in the world where I can live comfortably,” nor felt entirely at home in his own country, where he *did* settle to lead a double life, as a successful professional, husband and father by day, and a saturnine, isolated and frustrated poet by night.

The fact that his hometown of Hyderabad was far from the cultural centers of the nation (particularly Bombay, which in the 1950s through the 1970s was a cradle of new poetic and artistic talent), and that his work as a civil engineer required frequent travel and long periods “in God-forsaken holes building dams, powerhouses and the like,” did not help advance his literary career. As a result, despite his poetic output and literary contacts (with Williams, but also with Williams’ publisher James Laughlin, and a few other writers and editors¹), Rayaprol fell off the map of modern Indian poetry in English as it was being drawn, and has never been truly rehabilitated; so that, today, his name is more commonly associated with the poetry prize named after him than with his own poetry.²

What follows is an analysis of the relationship between the two poets as it transpires from their unpublished correspondence and published verse. It is meant to add a new piece to the expanding mosaic of Williams’ epistolary network and legacy; to take a first step toward a better understanding of Williams’ influence on modern and contemporary Indian poetry in English; and to begin a serious assessment of Rayaprol’s poetry and its relevance in the poetic landscape of postcolonial India.

The son of a prominent Telugu poet and scholar from Hyderabad,³ Srinivas Rayaprol was among the very first Indian poets who went to study abroad immediately after the Independence, and who went to America instead of England. He was born Rayaprolu Srinivas Marthandam⁴ in October 1925 in Secunderabad, Hyderabad’s twin city,⁵ and educated at Nizam College (Hyderabad), Banaras Hindu University (Varanasi) and Stanford University, where he earned a master’s degree in civil engineering in

1950. Despite his claim that engineering was his father's decision rather than his own (he would have chosen literature), there is no doubt that the locale of his graduate studies proved beneficial to his literary calling as well. In fact, for a young poet coming of age in the late 1940s, the Bay Area was *the* place to be, and there are clear indications that the reluctant technologist from a small South Indian town took good advantage of it, consorting with members of the San Francisco Renaissance, hanging out with poets and artists, and enjoying what the place had to offer, culturally and otherwise. It was, as it would be for dozens of other Indians after him, an intensely formative and liberating experience:

I was not free, not white, not twenty one when I landed one very cold January morning at Idlewild [i.e., John F. Kennedy International Airport]. I ... indulged in literature and the arts with the Berkeley crowd, saw Hollywood, lived with the Veterans at Stanford Village, went for my weekend pleasures to San Francisco, marveled at the Golden Gate, attended the cathouses at Vallejo and Tijuana, got a thrill out of American Football, ate all sorts of food, drank gallons of California wine, got mistaken and ill-treated as a negro, got into fights ... drove up to the mountains and down to the lakes, listened to Dizzy Gillespie and Bela Bartok, got mixed up with the Greenwich Village crowd ... spent hours in the Museum of Modern Art with Calder's mobile over the staircase, and Brancusi's bird, got stranded at Niagara Falls (Canadian side) as I did not have a re-entry permit, enjoyed snow and woke up late on Sunday mornings. And I wrote and practiced poetry! (Rayaprol 1968, 31-32)

At Stanford he enrolled in a poetry class but soon found himself at odds with his teacher, the influential poet and critic Yvor Winters, whose emphasis on formalism and the rational turned him off, while his peremptory attitude produced in him a discouraging "father complex." He started looking

elsewhere for a more congenial mentor, and soon found one in William Carlos Williams, whom he approached by letter in the fall of 1949.

More accessible than Stevens or Pound (the other two early modernists Rayaprol admired most), Williams had managed to combine his artistic, professional and personal life without any of them taking over, jeopardizing or constraining the others. He was a renowned poet, a good doctor, a family man and a respected member of his community. This and his poetic achievements made of Dr. Williams a role model for the young Rayaprol, concerned as he was already about the challenges he would have to face, and the decisions he would have to make, upon his return to India. As he writes at the beginning of his first letter: "You at least have been able to connect the prose and the passion in life. You are not only a good poet but perhaps an excellent doctor."

What, in his case, made a choice between "prose and passion" difficult if not impossible at the time, thus sharpening the edge of the problem, was Rayaprol's insecurity about his still unproven poetic talent and skills. Although the two poems he enclosed to his introductory letter are missing, Rayaprol's closing remarks about Winters are a clear indication of the kind of poetry he wanted – or, more likely at this point, did not want – to write, and the type of poetic advice he was willing to seek and accept. Winters is described as "the most intelligent man I have met in this country," but the affinity ends there, since

He does not approve of my poems. I do not approve of his theories ... besides he affects in me a strong father-complex. Hence I try to please him. I even write heroic couplets. They are just terrible. (Rayaprol to Williams, 22 Oct. 1949)

The “father-complex” re-surfaces six months later, in a letter dated Palm Sunday, 1950, in which Rayaprol addresses the issue more explicitly and (now that the two are corresponding regularly) with new self-confidence:

Winters wanted to run me through a groove, outside of which he felt no poetry could be written and my father wanted to make a successful man out of me (and he felt, quite truly I suppose, that everyman should have enough to live, as such I should study engineering and not Literature) and it seems I am falling out of both their patterns and forming one of mine. You never tried to deviate me but rather gave me the first sense of intellectual freedom. (Rayaprol to Williams, 2 Apr. 1950)

This “sense of intellectual freedom” was the direct result of Williams’ genuinely responsive and sensible attitude, which brilliantly defines his first reply (sent barely two days later) and remains consistent throughout their decade-long correspondence:

The solution is without solution except writing. If you write well you have the solution in your hands, if you write poorly that’s an end to it. (Williams to Rayaprol, 24 Oct. 1949)

Whether he already knew of the disagreement between his college teacher and his chosen mentor or not, Rayaprol must have felt vindicated by Williams’ dismissive remarks about Winters:

Winters is an old acquaintance, by letter. We don’t need to discuss wither [*sic*] his critical position or his methods of attack. I disagree with him top and bottom as heartily as you seem to.

His very intelligence seems to unseat him. It is not at all necessary for you to follow him. (*Ibid.*)⁶

Even more encouraging must have felt Williams’ view of contemporary poetry as an evolving landscape rather than an enclosed field defined by opposing sides:

The whole point is that versification is at this moment and necessarily in a state of flux preparatory to a realignment on a broader basis. To fix one's self on the standard neo-classic metres is to destroy the whole basis of present day opportunity. You are aware of this and therefore you distrust Winters. (*Ibid.*)

At the same time, Williams' straightforward words of advice more than compensated for his tactful glossing over the sample poems that Rayaprol had attached to his introductory letter:

Search for your own metrical unity and learn, through a lifetime to unite its elements into alignments suitable to your mental and emotional climate wherever you happen in your life to fix your orbit. Go on from there.

You are on the right track. Have courage and keep an eye to windward. Someone has got to find the new way. It may be you. Your poems I take for what they are, beginnings. Write again if you want to. (*Ibid.*)

Prompted by such promising beginnings, the correspondence continued at the rate of one or two letters per month, most regularly during the following year. Half of the surviving letters (ten from Rayaprol and seventeen from Williams) date from 1950; although for the first three months of the year we have to rely entirely on Williams' letters (dated January 6, February 10, February 12, February 23, March 10 and March 15), since Rayaprol's are missing.

Among other things, we learn that sometimes in early January, or perhaps later, Rayaprol visited the Williamses while in New York City for the winter holidays. An official invitation to "come out to this suburb ... for a little supper and some talk," either "next Tuesday evening" (i.e., January 10th) or "perhaps Sunday" (January 15th), is contained in a letter dated January 6th, together with detailed instructions on how to reach the home at 9 Ridge Road by bus from Midtown Manhattan. Yet no further mention of the visit is made in Williams' next three letters, until on March 10th he regrets that "You

came and went so fast that I suppose if I met you on the street I wouldn't know you." Whether in January or later, the visit obviously took place and enhanced their relationship. Back in India, Rayaprol will remember nostalgically the event:

Ah nuts Bill, I am lonesome for the place by the fireplace at 9 Ridge Road, where I'd discovered my self-decided parent. And a lonely cold night at 9 Ridge Road when Mrs Williams brought me an extra blanket. I remember most what I must need to forget. (Rayaprol to Williams, 16 May 1954)

To which Williams will reply, almost two years later,

I too vividly remember your visits here though I had forgot the snow and Flossie's part in supplying you with an extra blanket one cold night also the log fire! We are bound more to our past than we know, infinitely more. (Williams to Rayaprol, 3 Oct. 1955)

The deepening of Rayaprol's reliance on Williams' advice on literary as well as other matters may have also been a consequence of his move to Denver in early 1950, where he worked at the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, eventually adding an evening job at the public library to "make some money to waste in Europe," until he left the United States a year later. The move put an end to his student days and started a more challenging and disquieting period, in a city that proved to be less cosmopolitan and intellectually stimulating than either San Francisco or Berkeley (let alone New York); a place – to borrow Saul Bellow's expression – where "the material weight of American society" would prove impossible to elude and hard to come to terms with.

We learn of this relocation only indirectly, when, in a letter dated February 10, Williams mentions that he has written to James Laughlin asking him to introduce Rayaprol to Stewart Cosgriff, a banker Laughlin knew in Denver.⁷ In the same letter, Williams promises to "write later of the poems"

Rayaprol had evidently enclosed to one of his missing letters from early 1950. Two days later he follows up with the comment “These are good, unevenly good but good. I think they should be printed. DON’T destroy them but begin to submit them to the magazines.”⁸ He then points out a few typographical errors, and concludes suggesting possible venues: “The Pastorale [for Paul Klee] I’d send at once to *Partisan Review*, just on a chance. The others might go to Karl Shapiro at *Poetry*.” At the bottom of the page he lists a couple more: *IMAGI*, edited by Thomas Cole, and *Poetry New York*, started in 1949 as the continuation of the *Yale Poetry Review*. If Rayaprol took a chance with *Partisan Review*, nothing came of it; but he sent some poems to Cole, who apparently accepted one of them, and also to Karl Shapiro, who did not.

Rayaprol’s move to Denver increased his poetic output but also his insecurity, which in turn culminated in occasional bouts of depression and hypochondria. Judging from William’s replies, the six or seven missing letters from January-March 1950 must have contained as many poems, together with threats of destroying them and complaints about magazine rejections and real or (more likely) imagined ailments.

Williams was, at this time, at the peak of his fame and about to enter the final phase of his poetic achievement, which would result in such important collections as *The Desert Music* (1954), *Journey to Love* (1955), *Paterson V* (1958) and *Pictures from Brueghel* (1962). On March 15 he received the National Book Award for *Paterson III* and *Selected Poems*, both published the year before by New Directions; ten days later he was invited to read his poetry at the Museum of Modern Art; and in July he and Floss were guests of the Yaddo artists’ retreat in Saratoga Springs, where he had an opportunity to concentrate on the next chapter of his *magnus opus*. He duly reports on these and other goings-on to

his young Indian friend, to whom he also discloses his growing dissatisfaction with Laughlin over the publication and circulation of his books.

Yet in spite of his reputation and achievements, Williams is never critical of Rayaprol's literary efforts or existential problems, generally encouraging the former while attributing the latter to his youth and cultural displacement. His comments tend to be level-headed and grounded in common sense, typically combining bits of practical advice, literary as well as medical and psychological:

I don't know why your hands sweat but I'll bet it ain't fatal. My guess is it's due to a general nervous tension from the lostness of your position out there in a completely strange place, at a mile altitude and among people that are no more your kind or even kin than spiders on a monkey. (Williams to Rayaprol, 23 Feb. 1950)

This is followed by a physiological explanation of sweat as a consequence of nervous tension, after which comes a bit of literary wisdom ("When you feel lost in admiration of anything, read it again"), counteracting Rayaprol's enthusiasm for Paul Valéry, and the letter ends with an encouragement and an exhortation:

I want to see what came of your lonely observation of the falling snow observed all that Sunday. Keep writing, seldom destroy anything (not at least at once) but wait to see how it will look the year after next. No one knows what he has written when he has written (perhaps Valery, but even he doesn't really know).

Supper is ready. Write again and I will always answer you no matter how long it may take. (*Ibid.*)

Even more encouraging is Williams' attitude towards rejections from magazine editors:

Don't think I don't still get rejections, plenty of them – from everybody and printed ones too. Try and pay no attention to them hard as that may be. Just keep writing. Write enough for a book (...) Don't mind if you don't at once get past the door; the longer you remain unadmitted the greater the likelihood that you are yourself. (Williams to Rayaprol, 15 Mar. 1950)

And two weeks later: "You should be glad that people (the magazines) do not accept them (at your age) it is the first sign of worth" (Williams to Rayaprol, 29 Mar. 1950).

As for Williams' actual feedback to Rayaprol's poetry, it alternates words of encouragement and appreciation, which tend to be rather generic if genuine, and far more insightful and useful comments on specific technical aspects. But even when criticizing the use of a certain word, as in the case of "complicacies" in "For a Nun in a Waiting Room," Williams' advice is not to change it but rather "Leave it alone [and] watch it and see what it does as time passes."⁹ This is a rather more constructive response, stressing as it does an organicistic approach to poetry, marked by the idea that a word or a phrase that sounds inappropriate and "alien" in a line or a stanza, may over time adapt to the new environment and be enriched and signified by it. (Alternatively, it may not adapt and remain strange, or even become stranger – and the same may happen of entire stanza or poem.)

In other cases it is Rayaprol who, struggling with his metaphors, asks for advice. On March 25 he sends Williams three poems, explaining that with the third of them he has "attempted at a certain new imagery" but he is not sure he has succeeded. What bothers him is the sixth stanza, of which he provides two versions. In the first the woman's breasts are compared to flowers and her thighs to "the roof of this world," while her belly is "riper than summer wheat." Version number two compares breasts to flowers, thighs to summer apple-trees, and belly to the "roof of this world." He admittedly prefers the first version but finds the comparison between thighs and roof awkward, and the ripeness of summer

wheat a cliché “which may be saved only by the word belly.” The second version, on the other hand, sounds “more exact but less poetic.” Williams’ response is quick, straight to the point, and more reassuring than Rayaprol may have expected. Not only he declares the poem Rayaprol’s best and most felt to date, but also emphatically confirms his friend’s feelings about the two versions of the problematic stanza, and does so in a most congenial way:

Why man, the thighs as the roof of the world is the finest and clearest thing in the whole poem – anybody can see it instantly – it is a magnificent affirmation. Your trouble in that stanza is not there but in what follows about the wheat which is too worn an image to serve. But you have the answer to your dilemma right in your hand: the belly is the apple tree. When you have developed that image – the summer and perhaps later apple tree you’ll have your poem secure. But do not change that about the thighs which is superb.¹⁰ (*Ibid.*)

In the first two published instances of the poem, now called “Legend,”¹¹ Rayaprol will follow his mentor’s advice and stick to the first version of the stanza, changing only the “summer wheat” to “summer trees.” In *Selected Poems* (103), the “summer trees” will become again “apple-trees,” as in the discarded metaphor of the epistolary version. What neither correspondent mentions, however, is that the image of the thighs as apple-trees, which Rayaprol thought “more exact but less poetic,” came straight from Williams’ “Portrait of a Lady,” which opens: “Your thighs are appletrees / whose blossoms touch the sky.”¹² Was Rayaprol, in his remarks on the two versions of the problematic stanza, discreetly acknowledging his debt towards his mentor, while at the same time distancing himself from it? The borrowing shows the relevance as well as the limited extent of what is being borrowed. Williams employs the single simile of thighs and trees, and blossoms touching the sky, to suggest a metaphor of fecundity; all within the condensed space of a closed couplet. Rayaprol instead adopts his mentor’s basic

metaphorical ingredients (thighs, trees, blossoms and sky), but expands them into a quatrain whose rich and sensuous imagery owes more to Indian folklore than to Williams' imagism.

Overall, despite the number of poems he receives from his young Indian friend throughout the year 1950, Williams appears to be more consistent and spontaneous in praising Rayaprol's epistolary prose, while his comments on the poems are usually in reply to specific requests for criticism. When these requests become more insistent, because ignored or evasively fulfilled, Williams voices his preference in terms that are more explicit and revealing than if he had attempted to criticize the poem in question.

In your last letter, the one I did not answer, you especially asked my opinion of a poem. I admired it but not as much as I like your prose. I can't give you a detailed criticism – for it would go into the whole realm of the poem itself to involve us in more difficulties of expression than I can afford to spend at this time. I liked the poem: voila. But to make a poem is to force what is contained in a letter such as this last into another set of values, sensual, concrete "things", like pieces of jade (if you will) or lead or wood. It is to make, and that I do not yet see in you as a poet. (Williams to Rayaprol, 28 Jun. 1950)

However, as time goes by and new poems are sent Williams' way, his feedback becomes gradually more positive, and his acknowledgment of progress being made in the art and craft of poetry more explicit: "Your best, technically (to my taste) so far – and most "realized" in feeling. I like it." (Williams to Rayaprol, 15 Oct. 1950)¹³ And a few months later, in reply to what is probably Rayaprol's last letter before his departure from the United States:

Your best letter, shd be published along with the poems just as it stands. You seem to have found something in the non-representational idea (as you believe it to be) for these verse[s] are

smoother, show greater command of the language in which they are written than anything of yours I have seen heretofore. (Williams to Rayaprol, Jan. 1951)

What Williams must have found attractive in Rayaprol's letters, besides his skills at observing, analyzing and describing his experiences (or, as he put it, his "fine eye and an able brain quite unHindu and unUS"), is the impromptu moody character of his prose, constantly moving between internal modulations and external stimulations. The letter dated March 25, in which the two versions of the problematic stanza are discussed, provides an example among many. Within the span of a few paragraphs, Rayaprol praises Brecht over Mayakovsky; compares the "Children Crusade 1939" to Italian Neorealism; mentions re-reading Rilke, his "first discovery in great modern poetry;" touches on Kafka, Klee and Berg (who, like Rilke, "seemed to think pretty similarly and yet in each the expression was through a different medium"); then moves on to describe his regular dinners at a place where they "serve wonderful spaghetti for 70 cents," and whose lovely yet terribly shallow waitress he is fantasizing about and would like to seduce, but... The next paragraph combines comments on Shakespeare and on the self-consciousness of the Indians in Denver, with whom he obviously has nothing to do and share. Then it is the turn of the American, with his "shirt-sleeve attitude toward work" (which he likes), his inability to laugh at himself and general lack of self-consciousness (except for artists and, sadly, "negros"), and his defiant insularity, which altogether prompt him to conclude

And even tho' I know that America is the only country in the world where I can live comfortably, I'd rather choose Europe, especially France. In America I am always a foreigner enjoying both the benefits and the disfavor which go with being one. I will not be happy in India because I cannot write as I would wish to there, and because European, rather I should say Western as against Oriental, Culture interests me more. (Rayaprol to Williams, 25 Mar. 1950)

Nevertheless, he is determined to “go back to India (...) and give myself wholly to the ideals which the thought of India awakes in me.” Whatever these ideals may be, the decision and its possible, or predictable, implications (“work as an engineer, write for the people, start a magazine, etc.”) imply both resignation to his father plans and resilience in pursuing, against all odds, a literary career of sorts. Needless to say, the resulting, inevitable conflict will persist, unresolved, haunting his adult life and affecting his poetry, not always in a positive way. But once the decision is made, Rayaprol starts preparing himself for the move.

2.

In February 1951, at the end of three years of “thrilling intellectual and emotional life,” Rayaprol returned half regretfully to India, where his life would follow the course he had both prefigured and complained about in more than one of his letters. He pursued a career in civil engineering, working on government projects in remote areas that would require him to spend long periods of time away from home; got married, raised three daughters, learned how to deal with the “frustrating business” of life, and eventually settled into a comfortable middle-class existence in his hometown of Secunderabad, far from the main cultural centers of the nation and even farther from his American past, which now started to seem increasingly like a dream. Meanwhile, he managed to cultivate a small but fruitful poetic garden, publishing (at his own expense) a short-lived literary magazine and three books of verse, reaching out to old and new contacts in America and Europe, and trying to keep abreast of the latest cultural developments, in his home country as well as in his intellectual homelands. In the end, however, neither professional success nor family bliss, let alone literary rewards (which failed to materialize anyway, due in part to the shortsightedness and parochialism of Indian literary criticism) seem to have

helped him overcome a deep-seated sense of disillusionment, an innate and compulsive need to escape – from life, “from desire / and the million doubts / of being born” – and the overall feeling that his ultimate achievement was to have “succeeded in achieving failure.” As he wrote in the preface to his last collection:

I think I have achieved most of what I wanted to: reach the top of my profession ..., publish a magazine in English from a remote town in India during the fifties [and] publish two books of English poetry in the days when Indian English was not acceptable to the Cambridge crowd.
(1995 10-11)

And yet, “[l]ooking back on all this, I feel that life had [*sic*] always been eluding me.”¹⁴ Far from being a consequence of the “peaceful conformity” of life (i.e., of being “middle-aged / and competent / and monied [*sic*] and loved / among other things / Husband and father / friend and inadequate lover”¹⁵), these feelings accompanied Rayaprol since his student days (the “escape” lines quoted above are from a letter to Williams, dated Easter Sunday 1950) and fed his poetry, which may be read as a sustained effort to articulate this malaise and come to terms with the “million doubts and desires” it generates. Geographical and cultural distance – the distance between a country which one poet will never see again (at least not with the same eyes), and another country which the other will never visit at all (and, indeed, can hardly image) – tends to affect and characterizes the second half of the correspondence between Rayaprol and Williams. If the scant descriptions that Rayaprol sends now and then help bring “that strange land” closer to his correspondent in New Jersey, it is but an illusory impression. As Williams will admit in his shortest and most dismissive note, hastily handwritten on August 5th, 1951, “nothing can make it real to me. It is too far away and I shall never know it.” This is followed, two years

later, by an even more laconic and conclusive “It is inconceivable for us to imagine your life in India” (Williams to Rayaprol, 26 October 1953).

While the thirty-something letters they exchanged between January and December 1950 are emotionally intense and intellectually stimulating, the twenty-five that survive from the next seven years (1951-58) are not only sparse, but also dominated by ordinary events (health issues, family matters, publishing updates) and the practicalities of everyday life (like postal options and delivery issues across continents). The year 1951, in particular, is a period of adjustment for both poets. Rayaprol finds himself struggling to readjust to his old country and new life there. Although his letters for 1951, 1952 and most of 1953 are missing, they must have been fewer and farther apart than ever before, and from Williams’ replies to some of them we learn of his disappointments, frustrations and vague plans to go to work in Brazil. “This period of adjustment must be a tough time for you,” writes Williams on May 29, 1951; and a year later: “Take it easy. What the hell did you expect? Did you think that India was going to be a picnic for you?”

Williams’ adjustments had other causes. On March 28, 1951, strained by a hectic reading schedule and the effort to complete his autobiography, he suffered a stroke that, in spite of the rapid recovery, affected the entire right side of his body and his speech. This forced him to downsize and eventually give up his medical practice, and to reduce the amount of time spent writing – especially letter-writing – because of problems with his eyes and his concentration. But even so, he continued reading, touring and publishing, bringing out no less than seven books in six years, including the much-delayed autobiography, a novel, a volume of essays and one of letters, and three major collections of poetry.

As for Rayaprol, his increasingly sparse letters provide glimpses of domestic life (now including a wife and a daughter, soon to be followed by a second and eventually a third); outbursts of frustration about being “cooped up” in “God forsaken” places, building dams for the Government; and nostalgic flights backward, in time as well as space. These updates are interspersed with grumbling updates about his literary activities, which are not as productive or rewarding as his “terrible ambitions” would like them to be. Thence his discontent, bitterness and duplicity, which will deepen over time and clot much of his poetry from the mid-1960s onward.

Yet neither his efforts are entirely fruitless, nor his American contacts all unresponsive. In January 1952 *Poetry* publishes two of his poems,¹⁶ Less than two years later, he is one of the eleven poets featured in the “Perspective of India” supplement of *The Atlantic Monthly*.¹⁷ Rayaprol’s inclusion in the *Atlantic* supplement raised his profile in India and editors started asking him for contributions,¹⁸ which in turn prompted him to seek more substantial opportunities to get published in the West. In May 1954 he asks Williams to edit his letters to him for publication in *Botteghe Oscure*, *New World Writing* or the *New Direction Annals* (a project that would never materialize), adding that he is also trying to put together a “taut small volume of verse” (which will eventually materialize, although too late for Williams to see it). Soon, however, Rayaprol’s energies will be largely absorbed by what is perhaps his most original contribution to Indian literary culture in the period immediately after the Independence.

Conceived when Rayaprol was in America, and inspired by the many little magazines he had had the opportunity to sample there, *East and West* (as it would eventually – and most appropriately – be called) was meant as an international literary magazine featuring poetry, short fiction and nonfiction, as well as reproductions of works by contemporary Indian artists (Rayaprol to Williams, 25 Mar. 1950). The main goal of “presenting modern Indian writing to the rest of the world” was to be achieved through a

publication issued “from an obscure Indian town,” yet elegantly designed and combining both Western (mostly American, although Europeans feature as well) and non-Western (i.e., Indian) contributors, in the hope that such a diverse and inclusive formula would ensure an international distribution and readership. For the most part (and for the short life of the magazine, which ran for just five issues, from the spring of 1956 to the fall of 1959), these plans were carried out largely thanks to Rayaprol’s contacts in the United States, his persistence in pursuing them, and his single-handed editorial and financial management of the whole enterprise.

The magazine showcases Rayaprol’s literary and artistic allegiances, which were always primarily to American and European (i.e., Continental) culture, and this attitude only increased with the passing of time, giving rise to a sorrowful feeling of being cast away on a remote land, serving “a fixed period of slavery” far from the wellsprings of Western civilization. His letters to Williams contain a wide range of references to ancient and modern poetry, fiction, drama but also painting, sculpture, architecture and music, often accompanied by peculiarly original comments. He asks his mentor if he has read Valéry (Williams admits he hasn’t, “or very little of him”); finds Kafka’s diaries more interesting than *The Brothers Karamazov*, and Kafka as a diarist “more conscious than Gide;” although forty years later, in a brief note appended to one of the *Selected Poems*, he will remember

that mad rush ... all the way from New York, to a little Rue in Paris, to see Gide, and then suddenly to see pasted across one of the urinals on the Boulevard a faded newspaper front carrying a larger than life picture of André Gide, beret and all, dead. Only these few weeks!
(1995 79)

And the note ends: “Has not Paul Valéry said somewhere, ‘Lapses are my starting point. My importance is my origin’” (*Ibid.*).

Although introduced by a self-commiserating statement (“Life has always been a series of elusions for me”), the note is actually a subtle homage to the deceased writer, who probably would have appreciated the detail of the newspaper announcing his death “pasted across one of the urinals” (at least, in Rayaprol’s understanding of him, since his comparison with Kafka ends with the comment that Gide’s “great charm is the importance given to trivial matters like feeding a pet cat and the unimportance accorded to a death in the family”¹⁹). And in “Forebears,” placed at the beginning of *Selected Poems*, he thanks (in this order): Eliot “of the most precise cut;” Auden, “human on my faithless arm;” the “great Gide whose honesty was more than one could bear;” Valèry “dining in lonely rooms;” Kafka “hallucinating / Behind crowding walls;” Rilke and Lorca “at opposite ends;” “dear Eluard of the soft lips / Chanting of Liberty in my schoolboy’s notebooks;” and

the Americans, bless them all

The two Williams: one on Rutherford’s Ridge

And Tennessee lost amidst the sweet bird of youth

Stevens strumming his blue guitar on Sunday mornings

And Hart [Crane] whose heart was mine

Till he gave it to the wave. (*Ibid.* 15)

These forebears, perhaps with a smirking reference to Winters, are called “Not teachers ... / But Practitioners of Poetry / Play writers and prose makers / Craftsmen, artificers and artisans.”

If he is aware of recent developments in Indian poetry in English (and he must be, to some extent, since in the early 1950s the *Illustrated Weekly of India*, under the new editorship of C.R. Mandy, published some of his poems together with those of Kamala Das, Nissim Ezekiel, Kersey Katrak, P. Lal, Dom Moraes and other young English-language poets), this does not come through in his letters from

this period, which are punctuated by requests of updates from America (“And where is Christopher Isherwood these days?”), as well as complaints about the scarcity of publications available in India, and the general difficulties of keeping track of cultural developments in the West.

Curiously, the only contemporary Indian author Rayaprol mentions in his correspondence is the Bengali Buddhadeva Bose, who notoriously called Indian poetry in English a “blind alley, lined with curio shops, leading nowhere” (1963, 178). In *East and West*, alongside Bose’s translations of his own poems, he would publish such English-language poets as Monika Varma, Pradip Sen, the Irish-born C.R. Mandy, and P. Lal, the Calcutta-based founder of the Writers Workshop, whose two militant anthologies, *Modern Indo-Anglian Poetry* (1959) and *Modern Indian Poetry in English: An Anthology and a Credo* (1969), were partly conceived as a polemical response to Bose’s exclusive views of Indian literature. But for the most part, Rayaprol saw *East and West* as a showcase of contemporary Indian literature in the native languages, which in spite of sections devoted to Gujarati and Hindi, are mainly represented by Bengali and Telugu authors, the former because of Calcutta’s traditional role as literary center, the latter due to Rayaprol’s own cultural and linguistic background.

East and West was Rayaprol’s major literary effort in the second half of the 1950s, absorbing most of his resources, energies and free time while he was “leading the sober, unexciting life of an Engineer in Government service,” and “making a good husband, a good friend, a good citizen,” etc. As the title implies, the magazine was a meeting ground as well as a vehicle to convey Western authors to India and vice versa. Launched shortly after Rayaprol’s inclusion in the *Atlantic* supplement of October 1953, which made him “sort of known” in India,²⁰ the magazine was also meant to help its editor gain some kind of literary reputation, in the hope that this might eventually lead to a book publication of his own poems – either in India or, preferably, abroad. At a deeper and more personal level, though, the

magazine offered Rayaprol a much needed opportunity to keep his umbilical connection with America (and, more broadly, the world outside) alive.

As far as Bill Williams was concerned – “the doctor in whose admiration and distant love I have lost heart and mind,” as he had written years before in his “American Journal” – this connection was growing thinner and dimmer. The reason was mainly Williams’ age and failing health. A month before the publication of the *Atlantic* supplement he had turned seventy. A year before that, in mid-August 1952, he had suffered a second, major stroke, and a third one will hit him on October 11, 1958, the day after a reading at St. Peter’s College, in Jersey City, which will prove to be his last public engagement of this kind (Mariani 743, 748-749). In between these two episodes, there had been the awful affair of the Library of Congress consultancy (*ibid.* 651-659, 666-667),²¹ resulting in a severe state of depression which forced him to be hospitalized for two months in February-April 1953 (659-665). “What a pleasure to hear from you! And what has not happened since the last time I did hear from you!” – Williams writes to Rayaprol on May 15, 1953, less than a month after his release from Hillside Hospital in Queens – “At least we’re still both alive and you ... have recently married!” And Rayaprol one year later, in reply to the only other letter he received from Williams in that eventful 1953:

Dear Bill:

How the time flies. Your letter was of Oct 26, and here I am some six months later trying to reply [to] you. You, whom I could hardly wait for a reply from. But not from any indifference let me assure you. Circumstances and the busyness of my present day living conspire to dim the fondest of memories that when the thought does come on a sudden like a storm, the sad reaction stays on for days like a numb pain.

Why should I write a poem Now
 that most of me is dead
 in the act of living
 That the long fingered trees which reached
 the snow to my early bed
 stand now rooted to the earth...

So I started the other day. Yes Bill most of me is now dead. I am leading the sober, unexciting life of an Engineer in Govt service; and trying of course to be as good in it as I am equipped with. I am making a good husband, a good friend, a good citizen; Call me Mr. K.
 But that is only the skin of me. Scratch it and you will find me selfconscious and overfull of humility, sensitive to the point of pain, intellectual and uneasy. My present living seems something false, a fixed period of slavery which I am serving, and from which when I am liberated, I will fly me off to the Eiffell [sic] Tower or the Empire State. There to be part of the million perversions and million excitements which my self is really constituted of. (Rayaprol to Williams, 16 May 1954)

Once the excitement of the wedding preparations and ceremonial obligations is over, Rayaprol's old demon, his deep-seated sense of "darkness and emptiness," comes back to haunt him – only fiercer and more difficult to subdue now that his responsibilities (professional, familial, societal) increase and accumulate. The only positive notes (or, more precisely, the only notes of positive concern) in Rayaprol's letters from this period regard his efforts to keep *East and West* afloat, which Williams-wise result in reiterated requests for contributions. But Williams writes back that his "cubbard is bare," and it has

been getting so for some time. As early as September 1955, in replying to Rayaprol's letter announcing his intention to go ahead with the magazine, he writes

As far as I am concerned I can be of no assistance to you for though I expect to have a new book of poems out in a month I have written nothing since that composition and perhaps never shall ... Absolutely nothing either in prose or verse. (Williams to Rayaprol, 12 Sept. 1955)

Thence his suggestion that he contacts "Jim Laughlin of Ford Foundation who always seems about to enplane for India for something of the same interest" (*ibid.*). One more year passes and Williams' tone shows, for the first time, traces of emotional wear.

I'm very happy that you have had the desire to keep writing me and wanting to communicate with me through beautiful things. Maybe it would have been better had we never met... but don't let's talk of that. Don't take so much on ourselves. Let's be more impersonal, pretend we never knew each other, that, strange to say brings us closer together in the admiration of fine work. It takes the curse out of too great an intimacy. (Williams to Rayaprol, 7 Aug. 1956)

Their correspondence is now trickling away in sparse updates, literary or otherwise, and complaints about postal failures in delivering copies of each other's works. Until, after a prolonged silence filled by Rayaprol's repeated expressions of concern, Williams writes a letter which, despite vivid comments on mundane topics, sounds almost like a parting note, acknowledging the sad fact that

Nothing can bridge the gap of distance and years for us except the written word, letters and without some knowledge of the intimacies of your life in India even that becomes more and more difficult. (Williams to Rayaprol, 11 Feb. 1958)

And the letter ends with a postscript describing the aurora borealis observed the night before, when his fifteen-year-old grandson called on the phone to tell him about the show, and

the northern lights filled the northern and western sky, red and a luminous transparent green, otherworldly in view of the stupid fuss about “sputnik” and space travel. (*ibid.*)

The spectacle was impressive enough that the next day he mentioned it in writing to Rayaprol (and also to John Thirlwall), in what appears to have been his last letter to his only, and lonely, Indian son.

3.

America was Rayaprol’s poetic mistress and poetry lab. With her and in her he could do what Mother India would not have allowed him at home – especially with a father who wanted to “make something of him and to shape him into whatever he believed.” The relationship proved to be fruitful and long-lasting. Approximately half of Rayaprol’s published poems were written in the United States between 1948 and 1951. Of at least a dozen of them he sent first drafts to Williams, and final versions to various literary magazines, some of which eventually published them. As he explains in the afterword to his first collection,

Though the poem “Sometime” was written in Berkeley, California, in 1948, and the poem “Skull Shape” was written in Secunderabad, India, in 1960, I must admit that most of these poems were born during my three year stay in the United States of America from 1948-51. (1968 31; 1995 9)

Bones and Distances was followed by a much shorter and more pessimistic collection, *Married Love and Other Poems* (1976), and eventually by the retrospective *Selected Poems* (1995). All three books were published by Writers Workshop, the Calcutta house founded in 1958 by P. Lal and a group of other writers, which was instrumental in publishing the early works of most Indian English poets: Meena

Alexander, Agha Shahid Ali, Keki Daruwalla, Nissim Ezekiel, Adil Jussawalla, Jayanta Mahapatra, A.K. Ramanujan, Vikram Seth, and others.

Selected Poems might as well have been titled *Collected Poems*, since Rayaprol's selection included practically everything he had published before or deemed worth publishing, i.e., his first two collections preceded by forty-three "Later Poems," some actually dating from 1949-51,²² while others traceable (thanks to external or internal evidence) to the period from the mid-1950s to the early 1990s. This section also features a number of poems with explicitly American or Indian settings and themes, something almost entirely new with respect to Rayaprol's prior collections. In more than one instance, the proximity or juxtaposition of poems with American and Indian subjects is suggestive in ways that exclude the possibility of it being purely accidental. This is particularly true of two poems that confront each other on facing pages, "For Mulk Raj Anand" and "All American."²³ Two irreconcilable yet specular portraits: one depicting an individual (or, more precisely, the poet's reaction to a black and white photograph of his subject); the other describing a type, "The kind of face / that photographs so well in *Time*." The former portrait begins with a bold yet ambiguous statement:

You have similarities
with Picasso:
I mean in the ugliness
of your bare body.

Although the first half of this quatrain may suggest a tribute to Anand's stature as a pioneer of Indian English fiction, the reference is to Picasso's work – i.e. to his (portrayed) bodies rather than his own "bare body." If the second couplet retains some ambiguity in this regard, the sense is made clear in the next stanza ("For was it not he / that showed us beauty / in ugliness"). This esthetic paradigm ("beauty

in ugliness”) allows Rayaprol to confront his fascination with the nakedness of the aged writer’s body (“with a woman’s flabby breasts / and sensuous folds of flesh”), and to translate it into a form of spiritual communion and devotion that is curiously reminiscent of India’s mystic-poets of centuries ago:

What I mean is,
You hold a fascination for me
wholly physical
and your body seeks my betrayal.

But it is just another way
to say
that our minds have met
a long while ago

and your words have stripped
my soul naked
As I now lust
For your body that breaks
in black and white
upon my hungry eyes.

On the other hand, “All American” proves to be a false paean to American face values, and what begins as a tribute of sorts (“I like the American face / successful, clean shaven”) ends in a far less amiable exposition of the “body’s supremacy / over the mind.”

The section ends with a sequence of poems set on a bus to Los Angeles, on the Berkeley campus, in downtown Denver, and possibly in another location, which might be Williams' neighborhood in Rutherford, New Jersey. All have the fragmentary and graphic immediacy of journal entries, recording small incidents, miniature scenes, or disrupting events witnessed or experienced by the poet in his American years. In "Yesterday," the poet as young foreign student records how the only passenger who sits next to him on the bus, while "Other men and / other women stood / with blank eyes / and unlovely faces," is an old man with beautiful eyes. Yet this small redemptive factor turns out to be the source of the sarcasm in the poem, as the beautiful old man is actually blind, which explains his sitting unconcerned between two "blacks" (the Indian and an old African American woman).

"Opening Day ... University of California" is a quasi-apocalyptic view of the first day of class at UC-Berkeley. The images accumulate and grow in metaphorical intensify. The "mighty womb" throws "open its iron portals / intending, perhaps to release the floods," while instead thousands of students pour in, each "in private pursuit / of the common fruit," making the stranger feel overpowered, "like a broken bow / wearied, and on a sudden, old." Yet, interestingly enough, the pulpish succession of "octopus-feet and scorpion-tails," "Deserts in aery suspension and dried-up oases," creeping automobiles and men and women scuttling like innumerable larvae, is partially and temporarily contained, if not offset, by a peaceful view of "hoary Rockies" (most likely the Sierra Nevada) squatting "like Indian cows" against the blue sky!

"Portraits of America" is a sequence of eleven minimalist sketches of everyday scenes. Four of them are of snow falling or fallen on trees, porches and the poet's overcoat. Titled "Snow 1," "Snow 2," etc., and placed two at the beginning and two at the end of the sequence, they were partly inspired by Rayaprol's visit to Rutherford, in January or February 1950. "I want to see what came of your lonely

observation of the falling snow observed all that Sunday,” Williams wrote on February 23, 1950, to his young Indian pupil. And six months later Rayaprol, planning his next visit to the East Coast as he gets accustomed to the “business of going back” to India, remembers how “Returning to Rutherford one day, I found the snow broken on the fences” (Rayaprol to Williams, October 1950). In the first “portrait” (“Snow 1”), the same snow will be lying “on the rail / like a broken snake;” and in the last (“Snow 4”) it will be covering a little pyramidal tree sitting “forlorn / like a dog / in the rain.”

The remaining sketches portray a landscape marked by desolation, dissatisfaction, alienation, and loneliness fed by the false promises of consumerism (“the pneumatic satisfactions / of a rose he had never lipped”). The (Denver) Capitol building at night²⁴ shining “like an embalmed corpse;” a business executive “sunning himself / on the synthetic sands;” old men in a park, sitting and staring, “pants worn / souls torn,” on benches “browned by birdsheet / and rain;” department store windows and used car lots exposing the two faces of a consumer culture in which needs, expectations and desires are continually aroused without ever being satisfied.

Rayaprol’s American past and Indian present eventually come together in “The Golden Gate” (1995 17), a poem whose subject is neither the landmark bridge nor the strait it spans, but Vikram Seth’s celebrated novel in verse, which was published in 1986 and won the Sahitya Akademi (India’s National Academy of Letters) award for English two years later. Written in the first person, as a book recommendation to a friend named Jag, “The Golden Gate” first introduces the author of *The Golden Gate* as

A fellow Stanfordian who does us proud

For the likes of us who are still around

That were part of the still familiar scene

Berkeley to Stanford and all that lay in between

And wanted to do it but didn't

Plain fact was perhaps we just couldn't

Then it voices, in a blunt nutshell, what is Rayaprol's most caustic pronouncement on contemporary

Indian writing in English,²⁵ beginning with a jab at

all Indo-Anglians that are trying to vend

Their latest versions of our Great Culture

For the Western Vultures

And like most of our time

Indians do well in a foreign clime

How I dread to think of Vikram's fate

If he'd stayed behind in his native State

And tried to produce a similar Tome

Of similar happenings here at home.

More than likely in the fate that might have been Vikram's, had he stayed home, Rayaprol saw his own present state of provincial isolation, frustration and failure, which his "terrible ambitions" made all the more difficult to bear. The rhyme scheme throughout the poem is more typical of Seth than Rayaprol (who rarely rhymed at all), with a peculiar choice of half rhymes that range between the onomastic playfulness of "Jag/bug," "June and Jane/Charlemagne," or "Gate/Seth," and the mordant satire of "Great Culture/Western Vultures." The one rhyme that encapsulates the bitterness and the sadness at the heart of the poem, however, is "didn't/couldn't." The reason is painfully simple. Seth managed to do what Rayaprol had dreamed of doing but didn't (perhaps because he just couldn't): while at Stanford, he

drifted away from and eventually abandoned his economics studies to devote himself to poetry – a decision that would lead to a successful and rewarding (artistically as well as financially) literary career. Even though “The Golden Gate” is not about the bridge or the strait, it draws on the implicit symbolism of the name of both to express in verse, using Seth’s achievement as a case in point, Rayaprol’s view of America as “really the place where all the talent is” — the golden gate to self-affirmation, achievement, and success.

As for “the likes of us who are still around,” they include, most significantly, Kenneth Pettitt, a friend Rayaprol had met in Berkeley and who is the dedicatee of one poem,²⁶ the subject of another,²⁷ and a frequent contributor to *East and West*. But the expression also alludes to those who are not around anymore, and among these a young man in particular figures, either openly or by implication, in more than one of Rayaprol’s later poems, as we shall see shortly.

4.

On 26 October 1953, Williams sent Rayaprol a poem representative of the technical innovation that would characterize his next two poetry collections:

The poem which I enclose is one of my recent ones. I expect to have a book of them published in February. All will be made after the same fashion, an assembly of three line groups arranged after a pattern which offers the artist, with much freedom of movement, a certain regularity. I hope you see the advantages which it offers. (Williams to Rayaprol, 26 October 1953)²⁸

If Rayaprol saw these advantages, he neither commented on nor experimented with them, since no mentions of Williams’ innovation is made in any of his subsequent letters, nor traces of it may be found

in his own poetry. This may seem odd, considering that their correspondence is coextensive with the period when

Williams' poetics underwent two important changes: in 1951-52 taking up the triadic descending form that characterizes most of the poems in his collections *The Desert Music* (1954) and *Journey to Love* (1955), and then in 1956-58, away from that form toward the sparer, more concrete poems that make up most of *Pictures from Brueghel* (1962). (MacGowan 1989)

Both the triadic line displayed in the first two collections, and the tercet arrangements that characterize the third, would be adopted and adapted by generations of poets from the 1960s onward, Indians included. Triadic lines appears, for example, in the early verse of the experimentalist Pritish Nandy (b. 1951);²⁹ while A.K. Ramanujan (1929-1993), a much more accomplished poet and a fine scholar to boot, used two-, three- and four-line variants of the variable foot (in at least one case indented leftward instead of rightward), as he used, more extensively, tercet arrangements in his English and Kannada verse. Further occurrences of both forms may be found in the work of younger poets, such as Agha Shahid Ali (1949-2001), Sudeep Sen (b. 1964), Vivek Narayanan (b. 1972), and Purvi Shah (b. 1972). As for Rayaprol, however, none of his three published collections contains instances of the triadic form, and tercet arrangements appear only in a couple of cases,³⁰ while couplets or quatrains, or variable stanza patterns (alternating couplets, tercets and quatrains), are used frequently. This indicates that, despite his long relationship with Williams and early exposure to Williams' major technical innovation, Rayaprol neither was influenced by it nor shared his mentor's life-long concern with poetic measure. It also shows that, once back in India, Rayaprol had started moving away from his "self-decided parent" and all he had represented and meant to him. In his letters from Secunderabad, he is no longer the fledgling young poet who would send samples of his work, wishing "to be criticised, perhaps corrected or whatever you

may please,” but a working husband and father, burdened with growing duties and responsibilities (now including the self-assigned task of editing and publishing a little magazine), and with no more than a nostalgic feeling for “the country to which I owe not only my education but my personal emancipation.”

Further evidence of this subtle separation process may be detected in Rayaprol’s curt dismissal of another of Williams’ literary sons, Allen Ginsberg, whose first book, *Howl and Other Poems*, was published on November 1st, 1956 and reviewed in the Summer 1957 issue of *East and West*. What seems to have piqued Rayaprol, more than the title poem itself (which he quickly brushed aside as “bad poetry but effective enough in the manner of a sexy detective story”), is Williams’ endorsement of the book and its author:

How this book ever merited an introduction by a poet of the stature and fine mind as Dr William Carlos Williams is beyond the imagination [*sic*] of this reviewer except perhaps because as he says, he knew this young poet living in Paterson, NJ “when he was younger and I was younger”, and perhaps because Ginsberg in some of the poems like “An Asphodel”, “Song”, “Wild Orphan” and “In back of the real”, begins to sound like Dr Williams himself...³¹

Never mind that the poems in which Ginsberg “*begins to sound like Dr Williams himself*” [italics added] date from 1952-54, and therefore precede the others in the book; what raises questions about Rayaprol’s judgment (and its underlying motives) is the implication that Williams’ endorsement was a consequence or an extension of his influence on the younger poet from Paterson. While Williams was indeed a major influence on Ginsberg’s early poetry, the placement of the four poems in question at the end of the book speaks in favor of the others (“Howl,” of course, but also “A Supermarket in California,” “Transcription of Organ Music,” “Sunflower Sutra,” “America,” and “In the Baggage Room at

Greyhound”), which collectively form its *pièce de résistance* and show Ginsberg coming into his own as a poet.

In Rayaprol, on the other hand, we don’t see such a quick and spectacular development, simultaneously assimilating and transcending his mentor’s influence; but we don’t see such a clear evidence of this influence either. Whatever signs of Williams’ influence we may detect in his poetry, they manifests themselves mainly in the creative borrowing of certain images rather than in the adoption of specific poetic forms and metrical structures. For example, besides the woman’s thighs compared to apple-trees, discussed above, Williams’ “eaten moon” (“Observe / how motionless / the eaten moon / lies in the protecting lines”)³² reappears in Rayaprol’s “Between chimney teeth the eaten moon glows.”³³

The rather limited and superficial nature of Williams’ influence on his mentee’s poetry may have cultural as well as personal reasons, such as Rayaprol’s (southern) Indian background and his coming of age, as a writer *and* a citizen, at a particular time in the history of his country; his bilingualism, offset by his choice of English over Telugu (his “father tongue”) as language of literary expression; and the pronounced differences – in personality, temperament and attitude – between the two men, which naturally shape and define their poetry. Rayaprol’s self-centered dysphoria, inherent bitterness, and general pessimism are in evident contrast with Williams’ optimism and creative engagement with the world, and the self as part of it, which found constant and constantly evolving expression in his verse. “I have always had a feeling of identity with nature, but not assertive,” said the septuagenarian poet to his interviewer, Edith Heal, in 1956:

I have always believed in keeping myself out of the picture. When I spoke of flowers, I *was* a flower, with all the prerogatives of flowers, especially the right to come alive in the Spring. (1958 21)

Spring is indeed a motif that, recurring in the work of both poets, fitly illustrates the differences in feeling, mood, and attitude between them. “Here it is spring again / and I still a young man!” begins Williams’ early poem “The Late Singer.”³⁴ Decades later, Rayaprol will use the first line as the title of a poem in his debut collection, whose first two stanzas read

And sorrow in this eager air
 has the sudden smell of stones
 washed by man-walked streams

 certain cotton charms
 and the green round of her arm
 proclaim the dull return of spring.³⁵

The same difference may be seen in two very different epistolary announcements of the coming of the new season. “Spring is here, and all the trite accompanied feelings,” writes Rayaprol from Denver, on April 2nd, 1950; a statement that Williams seems to echo, four years later, in his much more positive and joyful “But spring is here today, such a day as you rarely see, the air sparkling, a fairly strong warm wind and the sky a pure turquoise” (Williams to Rayaprol, 30 May 1954).

Rayaprol, unlike his mentor, did not show signs of any particular “feeling of identity with nature,” but he certainly was always more or less in the picture; sometimes more than it would have been necessary to make the poem stand on its own feet. In fact, the more he keeps out of the picture

and the better his mentor's influence may be felt and appreciated, especially in Rayaprol's efforts to look at the world around him and try to describe it in words and images that are original and suggestive. As in the case, for example, of the much anthologized "Oranges on a Table" (1968 7; 1995 93), which "acquire / the subtle distinction / of Mahogany

No longer

a thought

on the tree

in spring

But nude

as green

It's [*sic*] body

a summer-arm

yellow and slow

woman close.

Not an ultimate order

of the orange sky

but the angular

desire

of the stone
 that blocks
 the river's run.³⁶

The variant spelling of “mahogany,”³⁷ in the first stanza, is peculiar enough to suggest a Freudian slip. The oranges on the table, as they acquire a “subtle distinction” (an euphemism for a transmutation or a sea-change), embody the prolonged agony of still life, or life that appears to be still alive although in reality (as the name for these art works in Romance languages makes clear) is already dead. Stone-dead, or dead as the stone whose “angular desire ... blocks the river's run,” in a closing that is somehow reminiscent of “the sudden smell of stones / washed by man-walked streams,” in the poem quoted above.

Rayaprol's borrowings tend to engage in a sort of discursive relationship with their models, as with Williams' famous poetic statement, “No ideas but in things,” which resonates in Rayaprol's less radical, although no less discerning, “You must love the object / As you would the idea.”³⁸ And there is also the case of the dog in the rain, which is one of a handful of images that Rayaprol uses repeatedly (bones and distances, and the garden that has ruined the gardener, are a couple of others). It brings the “Later Poems” to a close, as we have seen, and it appears at the very beginning of *Bones and Distances*, in the previously mentioned “Dogs in Ruin,” which ends “love is all / for a dog in the rain.” But it also makes a surprise – and rather surprising – appearance in Williams' “To My Friend Ezra Pound,” a poem he dated 30 June 1956 and mailed the same day to his friend at St. Elizabeth's Hospital, and whose middle stanza contains the lines “If I were a dog / I'd sit down on a cold pavement / in the rain.”³⁹

For the most part, the nature of such borrowings is often complex and elliptical rather than simple and straightforward. “This Is Just to Say” (1995 25), for example, borrows the title from Williams’ poem, but instead of celebrating life and its surreptitious pleasures (in Williams’ case, eating somebody else’s plums) mourns the death of a close friend. The identity of this man, “whose life has filled my life [and] whose death will diminish me,” as well as the dating of the poem itself, may be inferred from a couple of lines that Rayaprol would use in the dedication of the inaugural issue of *East and West*, “to the memory of | CHRISTOPHER SRIPADA (1927 - 1956) | “Graves will not remember him | And flowers have forgotten his face.” Murthy V.N. “Christopher” Sripada does not seem to have left traces other than in Rayaprol’s poetry and papers, and even these are minimal. Like Rayaprol, he was from Secunderabad, studied civil engineering (earning a bachelor’s degree from UC Berkeley in 1951), but writing was his real passion. Unlike his friend, however, he did not live long enough to see his writings published, and it was largely thanks to Rayaprol if some of them were eventually featured in the pages of *East and West*. Because of their affinities, their shared experiences, and the early bond they created between them,⁴⁰ Sripada’s premature death affected Rayaprol deeply. In addition to dedicating the first issue of his magazine to him, and of publishing some of his work in subsequent issues, he remembered Chris, or Christoph (he never uses his Indian name) in two of his most heartfelt and intimate poems, one (“This Is Just to Say”) written on the occasion of his death, which occurred not long before the launch of the magazine, and the other six years later, in Prague, where Rayaprol spent the spring and early summer of 1962 for work. This later poem, titled “A Taste for Death” (1972 10; 1995 77) begins as a fond memory of their life as roommates in Denver, where

Shared we such a room
on Sherman Street, only

this is Washingtonova
 And several years dead now

I open the closet and find
 bottles of wine, poems
 in my typewriter and stories
 on yours, rejection slips

and cigarette stubs on the parquette floor

The poem may have been prompted by somebody or something Rayaprol saw in Prague's Washington Street:

Only dead now, these several years
 Your self turns up to meet me
 on these stone paved streets
 And I cannot remember your eyes

By triggering both a deceptive sense of recognition ("Your self turns up to meet me") and its failure ("I cannot remember your eyes"), this spectral encounter creates the need for a closure of sorts:

Shall we say Cristoph
 the pact is ended
 and I cannot turn a sudden tear
 for the memory of your love

Whatever this pact may have involved, the wish or the need to end it now seemed to include Rayaprol's American past as well. In his last letter to Laughlin, sent from Prague around the time this poem was conceived, if not composed, he writes: "The USA seems to me already a remote island which I may have visited in my dreams." And continues, almost condescendingly,

I shall write to Dr. Williams. He was a kindly old man who was more than a friend to me in my years in the US – but someday reading in the obituary columns of the Time magazine that the great pediatrician of Rutherford has passed away, I wonder how I shall feel about it. (Rayaprol to Laughlin, 3 May 1962)

If he did write to him, the letter has not been preserved. As for his feelings on reading of Williams' death, on March 4, 1963,⁴¹ they don't seem to have left traces in his poetry or elsewhere.

Notes

¹ The letters that Srinivas Rayaprol and William Carlos Williams exchanged over a period of roughly ten years (October 1949 – February 1958) are preserved in two institutions in North America. The Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University holds twenty letters from Rayaprol, which were acquired directly from Williams (together with other manuscripts and papers) in the 1950s, and today form part of the William Carlos Williams Papers (YCAL MSS 116). The William Carlos Williams Collection at the University of Texas at Austin includes thirty-four letters from Williams to Rayaprol, which were donated by the latter to Harry Ransom Center in or before 1995. Efforts to locate missing letters in other Williams collections (e.g., the Poetry Collection at the University at Buffalo and the Lilly Library, Indiana University Bloomington) have produced no results, which suggests that such letters (mostly from Rayaprol

to Williams) are misplaced or lost. Nineteen letters between Rayaprol and James Laughlin (eleven from Rayaprol and eight from Laughlin) are part of the New Directions Publishing Corp. Records (MS Am 2077) at the Houghton Library, Harvard University. Other Rayaprol letters I was able to locate in North American repositories include: six to or from Karl Shapiro and Henry Rago of *Poetry* (Chicago), preserved, with the annotated typescripts of two of Rayaprol's poems,¹ with the Poetry records in the Special Collections Research Center, The University of Chicago Library; and one to James Purdy, in the James Purdy Papers (YCAL MSS 44) at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

² After making an early appearance in a few anthologies published in the late 1950s to the early 1970s (notably Margaret O'Donnell's 1963 *Anthology of Commonwealth Verse*, and P. Lal's 1969 controversial manifesto *Modern Indian Poetry in English: An Anthology and a Credo*), Rayaprol is absent from the more selective and canonically conscious collections edited in the next three decades by such contemporary Indian poets as Saleem Peeradina (*Contemporary Indian Poetry in English: An Assessment and Selection*, 1972), R. Parthasarathy (*Ten Twentieth-Century Indian Poets*, 1976), Keki Daruwalla (*Two Decades of Indian Poetry, 1960-1980*, 1980), Arvind Krishna Mehrotra (*Twelve Modern Indian Poets*, 1992), A.K. Ramanujan and Vinay Dharwadker (*The Oxford Anthology of Modern Indian Poetry*, 1994), and K. Satchidanandan (*Signatures: One Hundred Indian Poets*, 2000). He then reappears, a decade later, in a triad of anthologies characterized by a more inclusive approach, Jeet Thayil's *Bloodaxe Book of Contemporary Indian Poets* (2008), which includes no less than nine of his poems, and Eunice De Souza's *Both Sides of the Sky: Post-Independence Indian Poetry in English* (2008) and *These My Words: The Penguin Book of Indian Poetry* (co-edited by Melanie Silgado, 2012).

The publication of the first two of these later anthologies (actually three, if we consider the Indian edition of the Bloodaxe Book) coincided with the institution of the Srinivas Rayaprol Poetry Prize,

established in 2008 by the Srinivas Rayaprol Literary Trust and administered jointly by the Trust and the Department of English, University of Hyderabad, where the poet's literary collection is housed. The prize is awarded annually to a young Indian poet writing in English by a jury consisting of established poets and academics (Thayil read his own poetry at the launch of the prize, in October 2008, and was a jury member in 2011).

³ Rayaprolu Subbarao (1892-1984) was born in a scholarly family from eastern Andhra Pradesh. A poet, translator (from the Sanskrit of Kālidāsa, Śaṅkarācārya and Vālmīki) and academic (as professor and head of the Department of Telugu at Osmania University, in Hyderabad), he was one of the pioneers and leading representatives of the Romantic movement in Telugu poetry, against which a younger and more politically engaged generation of "free verse" poets, led by Srirangam Srinivasa Rao (Sri Sri), revolted around the middle of the twentieth century.

⁴ Srinivas Rayaprol was a literary pen-name (Rayaprol to Laughlin, 12 April 1962).

⁵ Both formerly in Andhra Pradesh but, as of 2 June 2014, in the newly-created state of Telangana.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 24 October 1949. In his review of *The Complete Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams, 1906-1938* ("Poetry of Feeling," *The Kenyon Review* 1, no. 1 [Winter, 1939], 104-107, Winters had called Williams "an uncompromising romantic," criticizing his poetry for its lack of ideas and concentration on the concrete. At the same time, he acknowledged that Williams "raises the metrics of free verse and poetry in free verse to the highest level at which they may be found," calling the collection "indispensable to anyone seriously concerned with American poetry," and predicting that "the end of the present century will see him securely established, along with Stevens, as one of the two best poets of his generation." On his part, Williams deplored Winters' transformation from an early experimental and imagist poet into a highly formalist one, his rejection of Modernism (which resulted in harsh

assessments of Moore, Crane, Eliot, H.D., Pound and Stevens), and his strongly judgmental and dogmatic attitude as a critic and teacher.

⁷ The Salt Lake City banker Stewart Cosgriff (1903-82) had relocated to Denver in 1948, to become vice president of the Denver National Bank. In the late 1930s, together with other Salt Lake City businessmen and community leaders, Cosgriff had founded the Salt Lake City Winter Sports Association, which was instrumental in transforming the mining town of Alta in a prominent ski area. James Laughlin, a passionate skier, became involved in Alta in 1941, and from 1950 until his death in 1997 was the major stockholder in the Alta Ski Lifts Company and Alta Lodge. Cosgriff managed Laughlin financial transactions out West, thence Williams' reference to him, in a July 7, 1947 letter to Laughlin, as "your banker" (Witemeyer 140-1). See also Cosgriff's obituary in the *Deseret News* (May 28-29, 1982), A11.

⁸ Williams to Rayaprol, 12 February 1950.

⁹ *Ibid.*, Ides of March 1950.

¹⁰ Williams to Rayaprol, 29 March 1950.

¹¹ *Poetry* 79, no. 4 (January 1952), 198-199; *Bones and Distances* 17.

¹² First published in *The Dial* LXIX, no. 2 (August 1920), 162.

¹³ Unfortunately, the poem in question is unidentified.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ "Middle Age" (1972 14).

¹⁶ "The Man Who Died of a Fever" and "Legend," *Poetry* 79, no. 4 (January 1952), 198-199. This will be followed, seven years later, by Rayaprol's inclusion in an Indian issue guest-edited by the British Sri Lankan poet and critic (Meary James Thurairajah) Tambimuttu. S. Rayaprol, "Three Love Poems," *Poetry* 93, no. 4 (January 1959), 224-225.

¹⁷ *The Atlantic Monthly* 192, no. 4 (October 1953). Rayaprol is represented by “The Man Who Died of a Fever” (p. 149), reproduced by arrangement with *Poetry* (see Rayaprol to Shapiro, 16 May 1954).

¹⁸ Rayaprol to Williams, 16 May 1954.

¹⁹ Rayaprol to Williams, 10 June 1950.

²⁰ “After having got a poem of mine in the Indian Supplement of the Atlantic I have become sort of known in my own country and editors have started asking me for some little contribution” (Rayaprol to Williams, 16 May 1954).

²¹ In January 1953, soon after receiving the news that he had been awarded (with Archibald MacLeish) the Bollingen Prize for poetry, Williams learned that the Library of Congress had decided to abruptly cancel his appointment as Consultant in Poetry as a result of the “loyalty processes” of the McCarthy years.

²² “The Jesuit” is mentioned in Williams to Rayaprol, 10 March 1950, with the comment: “There is a neatness about your work that, in a sense, I don’t like. And yet what can you do? Precision is doubtless your greatest talent.” “Poem” and “For John Everyman, Poet” are enclosed to Rayaprol to Williams, 10 June 1950 (the former in a shorter version titled “Lines for a Mother”). And “Shakuntala” was included in Rayaprol to Williams, 24 December 1950-11 January 1951.

²³ Previously published in *Married Love and Other Poems* (15) with the title “I Like the American Face.”

²⁴ Rayaprol’s first Denver address, 1573 Sherman Street, is about a block from the Colorado State Capitol.

²⁵ Interestingly, and perhaps not accidentally, “The Golden Gate” faces “10 Downing Street,” which ends “Is this the India that I have come back to? / – tempted by Gandhi’s gospel and Nehru’s call / after

centuries of slavery. Have we come to this? / Bound by the shackles that we overthrew not so long ago” (*ibid.*, 16).

²⁶ “Oranges on a Table” (1968 7). The dedication is dropped in *Selected Poems*, where most dedications (except to Williams, Brancusi, Klee, and Jamini Roy) are.

²⁷ “Dear Ken” (1995 55-56).

²⁸ Although no poem is enclosed with the letter as preserved, the excerpt above indicates it was an example of the “variable foot.”

²⁹ See, in particular, *From the Outer Bank of the Brahmaputra* (New York: New Rivers Press, 1969).

³⁰ One of them being the verses included in the May 16, 1954, letter quoted above (“Why should I write a poem Now...”) – verses that are openly, if not mockingly, imitative of their model, as they were in the rhyming scheme of “The Golden Gate.”

³¹ S. Rayaprol, “The Poetry of Protest,” *East and West*, no. 4 (Summer 1957), 90. The other books reviewed are: Leslie Woolf Hedley, *Zero Hour* (1957), William J. Margolis, *The Anteroom of Hell* (1957), Jay Pell, *Spectre in the Fantastic Laboratory* (1956), all three published in San Francisco by Inferno Press; William Pillin, *Dance Without Shoes* (Francestown, NH: The Golden Quill Press, 1956); C.V. Velupillai, *In Ceylon’s Tea Garden* (Colombo: Harrison Peiris, 1956); and James Purdy, *Don’t Call Me by My Right Name and Other Stories* (New York: William-Frederick Press, 1956). Hedley, Margolis, Pillin, and Purdy were frequent contributors to *East and West*. C.V. Velupillai (1914-84) was a Tamil trade unionist and member of the Ceylon parliament who described, in verse and prose, the harsh conditions of the tea plantations workers in Sri Lanka. With the exception of Margolis and Purdy, Rayaprol’s assessment of these books – and of American “protest poetry” in general – is overwhelmingly negative.

³² "To a Solitary Disciple," first published in *Others: An Anthology of the New Verse* (New York: Albert A. Knopf, 1916), then in *Al Que Quiere!* (1917) and *The Collected Earlier Poems* (1951).

³³ "Crabs in the Reine" (1968 5-6).

³⁴ First published in the London literary magazine *The Egoist* VI, no. 3 (1919), 38; collected in *Sour Grapes* (1921), *The Complete Collected Poems, 1906-1938* (1938), and *The Collected Earlier Poems*.

³⁵ "Here It Is Spring Again" (1968 15).

³⁶ "Oranges on a Table" (1968 7; 1995 93).

³⁷ All the examples of "mahogany" in the Oxford English Dictionary are from the eighteenth century.

³⁸ "Dogs in Ruin," in *Bones and Distances* and *Selected Poems*.

³⁹ The poem was first published in *Neon* 2 (1956), 8, and included in Williams' last collection, *Pictures from Brueghel and Other Poems* (1962).

⁴⁰ "I and Chris were the dream children, walking down Kingsway in Secunderabad, dreaming of the world. We lived in a second class city in middle class families but we had big ambitions. We felt we were the stuff genius is made of and there was some truth in that. We had problems of money, and undersanding parents, conventions, and moronic companions and many moments of dullness. But we were there first" (1995 11).

⁴¹ The obituary in *Time* magazine, Rayaprol's likely source of information, ran on March 15: "Pediatrics: He's Dead," *Time* LXXXI, no. 11 (March 15, 1963). This was the same obituary that Allen Ginsberg read on the campus of Hindu University in Benares, on March 20th (Schumacher 389; Morgan 369). The same day he recorded the event in a poem called "Death News:"

Walking at night on asphalt campus

road by the German Instructor with Glasses

W.C. Williams is dead he said in accent
 under the trees in Benares; I stopped and asked
 Williams is Dead?
 (...)
 Stood on the Porch
 of the International House Annex bungalow
 insects buzzing round the electric light
 read the Medical obituary in Time
 (1968 48; 2006 305)

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