IMPRESSIONS, EXPRESSIONS...

Vyloppilli Sreedhara Menon, whose birth centenary is being

celebrated this year, is undoubtedly one of the most influential

Malayalam poets of the 20th century. Along with Edassery

Govindan Nair and P. Kunhiraman Nair, he is the third in the

later trinity of Malayalam poets, the earlier trinity comprising

N. Kumaran Asan, Ulloor S. Parameswara Iyer and Vallathol

Narayana Menon. Sahitya Akademi joined in his birth centenary

celebrations in a unique way—by organising a translation workshop

at Ernakulam, Cochin, the poet’s birthplace, from 3rd to 7th

October 2011. Most of the participating translators were eminent

professors of English and well-known translators. The workshop

began with an inaugural session which served as a memorial

ceremony for the poet, with senior critics such as Professors M.K.

Sanoo and M. Leelavathi speaking about Vyloppilli’s poems and

the care that should be taken while translating them. Professor

K. Satchidanandan, the workshop director and leading Malayalam

poet who has written a famous poem at the time of Vyloppilli’s

death, dwelt in detail on the various aspects of Vyloppilli’s poems

and the strategies to be adopted in translating them. Readings

of poems by Vyloppilli and also of poems on him, by well-known

poets of the younger generations soon after the speeches, proved

to be literally a poetic tribute to the memory of great poet.

An interesting interlude that presented itself was the

sudden announcement of the run up to the Nobel Prize in

Literature for this year. I got a call from Delhi informing me

that Satchidanandan was in the running for the coveted Prize.

I announced it in his presence, to the participating translators.

However, Satchidanandan corrected me saying that he had been

informed about it during the previous night, and that there was

no real shortlist for the Nobel; whatever listing there was would

be known only after fifty years after the announcement of the

Prize for a particular year, according to Nobel rules, he said. The

present announcement was made by a betting website, which

had been around for some time, he added. Within hours, we

were flooded by mediapersons from both the print and electronic

sections. Satchidanandan repeated what he had told us patiently

to the descending hordes of scribes over the next couple of days.

Vijay Dan Detha from Rajasthani, Mahasweta Devi from Bengali,

and Rajendra Bhandari from Nepali, besides all time favourites

like Milan Kundera et al, were listed in the website, which I

had accessed. Although a speculative list, the existence of

something like that and the names of our dear writers appearing

in it had been cause enough for a little celebration.

When the actual

announcement came, it was

Tomas Transtromer of Sweden

who won the Prize.

Transtromer had been to India

for the World Poetry Festival

at Bharat Bhavan, Bhopal after

the infamous Gas Tragedy.

Malayalam poet D.

Vinayachandran, who had been

invited to the Festival as an

observer, and had ended up

reciting his poems when he was designated to propose a Vote

of Thanks in the function, remembers that Transtromer had been

captivated by his poetry-singing, and that he had seemed fascinated

by Malayalam poetry. Vinayachandran had already translated

Transtromer and published him in the leading Malayalam literary

journal *Bhashaposhini* before meeting him. There were also other

world poets like Kofi Awoonor, Stephen Spender, Miroslav Holub,

Nicanor Parra, Gabriel Okara, and our own poets like K. Ayyappa

Paniker, Arun Kolatkar, Chandrakant Deotale, and many others

from within India and around the globe.

Professor K. Satchidanandan says he had met Transtromer

apparently around the same time in Valmiki Kavya Utsav, in Delhi,

organised by Indian Council for Cultural Relations and, at an

extension of it which was held in Bhopal. He remembers that

Transtromer had reportedly refused at first to celebrate poetry

in that city after the enormous human tragedy that had occurred

there. However, when poet Ashok Vajpeyi, the organiser, had

explained to him that they were going to make a memorial

reading in solidarity with the victims, right in front of the closed

gates of the Union Carbide

factory, he had agreed.

Transtromer and a few

other poets had visited

Thiruvananthapuram, having

opted for that city for their

detailed tour as part of the

Festival, and Ayyappa Paniker

had organised readings for them

there.

Satchidanandan also

reminisces about his visit to

Sweden in connection with a workshop for translating Swedish

poetry into Malayalam and Malayalam poetry into Swedish a few

years ago, as part of an exchange programme initiated by Sahitya

Akademi and the Swedish Government (The Swedish Indian

Literary Exchange, ‘Sambandh,’ in which Swedish literary works

were translated into Indian languages, and vice versa). Transtromer

had then been bedridden, having suffered a paralytic stroke.

*Urangunnavarkkulla Kathukal* (Letters to the Sleeping), edited by

K. Satchidanandan, is the resulting collection in Malayalam

translation, of twenty-one Swedish poets, which opens with

Transtromer’s work. Childhood, nature and memories are the

recurring themes in his poems, says Satchidanandan. The Nobel

Committee has lauded his poetry for their ‘translucent images.’

Let’s look at a short poem by Transtromer:

**Sketch in October**

The towboat is freckled with rust. What’s it doing here

so far inland?

It is a heavy extinguished lamp in the cold.

But the trees have wild colours: signals to the other shore.

As if people wanted to be fetched.

On my way I see mushrooms sprouting up through the

lawn.

They are the fingers, stretching for help, of someone

who has long sobbed to himself in the darkness down there.

We are the earth’s.

(Translated from the Swedish by Robin Fulton)

From *The Vintage Book of Contemporary World Poetry*.

The Nobel Prize has once again brought to the fore the

question as to what literature really is or should be. Simply put,

literature versus literary products manufactured to suit market

tastes, is the real struggle. In other words, ‘pure’ literature against

applied literature, just as we speak of pure art and applied art

or pure science and applied science (technology). All our literary

greats were writers of pure literature. In this struggle between

Literature of Life and commodification of literature, the former

must survive and thrive and serve as the soul to the gross body

that we today generally call ‘literature.’

However, hundreds of Indian English novels and thousands

more in the regional languages of our country that embrace

the simple ‘supply and demand’ market principle, proliferate our

publishing scene now. These are not to be mistaken for efforts

at purely creative self-expression. Market diktats engender the

supply of a peculiar kind of literature. All MNC publishers happily

allow themselves to be led by their noses by a bunch of ‘sales-boys

and girls,’ throwing to the wind the sage opinions and

suggestions of scores of writers as to what is truly original and

creative. See how poetry has been thrown away from the market

for so many decades now. The way the majority of the new

English fiction writers use history and culture in narration,

blindly imitating western models, is best described by the term

‘chutnification’ Salman Rushdie has coined. Now, thousands of

such novels flooding the market cater to the ‘English Medium’

generations, alienated from the cultural history of their own

mother tongues, which, they think, are on the brink of being

consigned to ‘care-homes.’ Publishing houses often get even well-known

writers to write what they want. Sometime ago, an

acclaimed novelist gleefully declared during a book-release function

that she was writing a series of novels according to the formula

supplied by the publisher! I don’t forget that regional literatures

also have their own niche domestic markets in this genre, but

English gets more muscle because of its special status nationally

and globally.

Now, I am not suggesting that popular literature, or ‘easy-reads,’

should be totally shunned. Every leading literature visibly

has a pyramidal structure. Works gradually rising in literary quality

and reaching the apex in the best creative expressions that achieve

aesthetic perfection, while built on the broad base of popular

writing, is the ideal picture. However, the evolving pyramid

should not get stuck as a quadrilateral or a trapezium through

talents rendered stunted for want of publishing platforms. There

is no substitute for real talent and inspired writing; it is an exercise

in futility if someone dreams that sublime fiction can be written

according to some winning formula.

In our ‘In Memoriam’ section, we pay tributes to three

stalwarts—Badal Sircar, Saurav Kumar Chaliha and C. Ayyappan.

Badal Sircar who passed away on May 13, 2011, really needs

no introduction to readers of dramatic literature or theatre

enthusiasts in this country. His anti-establishment zeal and nonconforming

style will certainly be remembered for a long time

to come. Releasing drama from the confines of the proscenium,

into the open spaces of streets, parks and maidans, Badal Sircar

created history. The beacon that he was for Indian theatre is going

to shine despite his bodily demise. A Note by Amar Mudi,

followed by Badal Sircar’s short play, *The Seed* and the essay by

Anshuman Khanna make up our tribute to the great genius.

Saurav Kumar Chaliha (pseudonym of Surendra Nath

Medhi), who departed on June 25th at the age of 81, can easily

be described as the father of the modern Assamese short story.

The reclusive writer never gave away his privacy to the adoring

public, and did not even appear in person to collect the Sahitya

Akdemi Award he won in 1974, and the prestigious Assam Valley

Literary Award. He has led by example, in establishing the fact

that it is the writing, and not the writer, that matters ultimately.

One wishes more writers were like him!

C. Ayyappan who died on August 19th is in many ways

a worthy fellow traveller in the Chaliha School, in writing unique

short stories and resolutely living far away from limelight. Perhaps

the only true Dalit voice in Malayalam short fiction who found

his voice early on and sustained it despite heavy odds, Ayyappan

wrote stories in an inimitable style that often used the guise

of ghosts and spectres speaking. Through this technique, he made

the biting point that the suppressed and oppressed expressed

themselves at least in the form of a disembodied voice. In other

words, he seemed to say that expression can never be suppressed,

whatever the insidious forces that try it. *Indian Literature* had

published his “Spectral Speech” in *IL* 183, Jan.-Feb. 1998, in V.C.

Harris’ translation. In this section too, we are using the story

“Spectral Sacrifice” in his excellent translation, along with the

obituary he has written.

Poetry written by Tibetan refugees living within India and

abroad is carried in the section ‘Writings from the Margins.’ In

the context of the current political climate involving Tibetans,

I wish to clarify that our intention is not anywhere near the

political. As human beings living in our country and elsewhere,

they have their specific literary utterances which the readers will

certainly identify as imploding sensitivity that shatters the idea

of ‘selfhood’ in a people doomed to perpetual uncertainty and

disillusionment. At times, these poetic expressions take on the

quality of a subdued wail. Anyone whose conscience is not dead

will hearken to these voices emanating from a frightening void.

In ‘Tributes,’ we remember Gunturu Seshendra Sharma,

eminent Telugu poet and Fellow of Sahitya Akademi who passed

away four years ago, through the words of his beloved spouse,

Rajkumari Indiradevi Dhanrajgir.

Two great poets are celebrated in the ‘Masters’ section —

Gopalakrishna Adiga, considered to be the father of modernist

Kannada poetry, and Sitakant Mahaptra, who is undoubtedly the

most eminent Oriya poet today.

The Act I of the play we feature in this issue, *The Gift,*

by Sagari Chhabra, had to be reduced to a synopsis (by the author)

at our suggestion, because of space constraints. Any reader who

wishes to have access to the full play, for scholarly research or

obtaining performance rights, has to contact the author directly.

We are planning to begin a new section, dealing with short

fiction in the science fiction genre. Contributions are welcome,

in soft copy to indlit@gmail.com.

*Indian Literature* has been carrying book reviews mostly of

original works in English and also those from regional languages

in English translation. However, there had been a practice of

reviewing landmark books from the regional languages earlier

on. We now intend to revive this practice. Reviews of about

1500 words done by experts on important regional language

literary works are welcome. (We will of course make the final

decision about the suitability of the reviews for publication,

depending on the quality of the language of the review, the

relevance of the content etc.) This way we intent to be truly

serving the cause of Indian literary works even if they are not

in the English language.

A.J.Thomas.