

Book Review: *Leela* by Navtej Bharati and Ajmer Rode (Language: Punjabi), Second edition, 2019, Basant Foundation (Canada) and Autumn Art (India), Rs 995; \$ 49.95.

Rajesh Sharma

Navtej Bharati and Ajmer Rode are Punjabi-Canadian poets. They are brothers, and Bharati is the elder of the two. They co-produced *Leela* twenty years ago, in 1999. The book, published in the UK and Canada, elicited considerable critical appreciation and won the Anad Foundation Award. In 2019, the book has been republished with revisions. Some poems have been dropped, including a few, which could have been retained. Several new poems have been added. In its reincarnation, *Leela* is 1223 pages long – 170 pages more than in the original. But not all that has been added is poetry. Some of it is encyclopedic information– the multimedia demon breathing down poetry’s delicate nape – probably intended to add contextual depth and width for the reader, who would not venture beyond the book in hand. One wonders what kind of reader of poetry would expect to be so indulged. Perhaps the addition of information comes from anxiety: that poetry needs something more these days to retain its readership.

But the poets aver otherwise. In the preface to the new edition, they speak of a resurgence of poetry, and as evidence present the so-called Instagram poetry with its millions of followers. In the preface to the earlier edition they had proclaimed the coming millennium as an ‘epic millenium’, filled with hope and happy possibilities. Twenty years later, they seem convinced that their dream is close to being realized. But I am afraid they overlook the fact that in spite of the progress until now, the road ahead to general happiness remains long and difficult. In the twentieth century, poetry both spoke the truth to power and tried to tackle the subtle stratagems of hegemony. Poetry which is instantly consumed by millions because it sells as ‘expression’ may not have inherited even the rags of that poetry (who can forget the poets persecuted and murdered?). It may have instead sold itself to power, and so betrayed its obligation to the Muse and to freedom. So no reason for celebration there, unless one is data-drunk and weighs only the statistics of production, circulation and consumption.

In folk memory, the word *leela* evokes Krishna’s playful doings. In the speculative philosophical traditions of Shaivism and Advaita, *leela* refers to the cosmic play: the world as a play of appearances, as no more than its creator’s imagination. The creator of the play veils himself in his creation (which exists *in* him *as* his imagination), yet lets it play freely. The reality of the world is, in this view, of the order of shadows – shadows but not of anything; it is of the order of fiction – yet not as mimesis; of the order of imagination *as such* – not of something outside itself.

The significance of this profound (and poetic) speculation is that it frees art from metaphysics. Art demands to be met on its own terms and not as imitation or representation of something. Art as art, under its own law. Free of the burden of sin, of the fear of lapse, of the determinations of origin and arrival, predestination and salvation. This conception of art reminds one of the works of Shakespeare, of Cervantes, of Gogol, of Borges, indeed of all those who affirm that art knows no law other than its own. Reading them you wonder if truth is not fiction and

fiction truth. Bharatamuni, the ancient sage and aesthete, thought of the Creator as the first poet and the world as the first poem. So when you turn over the first page of *Leela* and read these words on the white of the verso in small self-effacing letters, you know here is an ancient poetics and philosophy revisiting us: “The world as creation is the *leela* of the invisible; poetry, of the human being.”

Not that Bharati and Rode’s *Leela* does not carry an implicit manifesto. But it does not fear what exceeds it; it does not predestine or overrule the poetic. The poets gladly, reverentially let the poetic *be* howsoever it asks to *be*. They listen, assent and comply. But when a poem is not knocking on the door of the inner sanctuary and yet the poet wants to write, the outcome is forced, stilted: “In Memory of Gurbhagat Singh” (Bharati 534), “The Spinning Top” (Bharati 684), “Words Murdered” (Bharati 685), “Things and Their Shadows” (Bharati 796), “The Court of Taxila” (Rode 798) and “The Fate of the Seed” (Rode 799) are instances of the kind of poetry that could have been edited out, in the new edition at least. No doubt, given the conditions of the making of *Leela* some unripe poetry was to be expected: the objective of the poets was to write a great deal at the speed of thought. But the Muse does not take orders.

Bharati and Rode fail to ride the current whenever they try to pin a situation, an idea or a concept in poetic discourse. *Shastra* can aid *kavya* but cannot become its chief purpose: the definitive, settled discourse of the disciplines of thinking, as the Sanskrit poet Rajashekhara says, is essentially different from the poetic discourse which suggestively, liquidly, creatively ventures into the unthought and refuses to be corralled. Bharati’s “Tradition” (660) eventually fails for this reason. So also does his “Let’s Become Children Again” (883): actually, this fails doubly because a high didactic note drowns out melody and suggestiveness.

And yet *Leela* makes, for the greater part, enchanting poetry. It is a celebration of sensibility, a festival of the senses. *Devata*, in the Upanishadic lore, denotes, among other things, a luminescent, divinized sense. Far from denying his senses, a fine poet cultivates them to an extraordinary degree and sensuously apprehends (and transmits) even inwardness. Both Bharati and Rode see, hear, touch, smell, taste, yet do it with a lightness that defies gravity and with a luminosity that leaves not even darkness opaque. This is how they avow earthiness and embodiment, in a transcendence *in* immanence. The reader experiences the freshness and clarity of rain-washed air.

Politically too, *Leela* stands on a firm ground, neither lured by airy romance nor indulging in political posturing. The epigraph and preface affirm, with muted urgency, a cosmopolitan ethic of hope and responsibility: the poems are an effort, the poets write, to hold on to greenery in the face of a spreading desert, to proclaim faith in a shared human legacy, to honour the courage which keeps humanity alive against all that would destroy it. This is a poetics that embraces life, the world, existence – a poetics of gratitude and acceptance. It enables the poet to transmute even rage into irony:

When I look at the earth

I forget to look at anything

And I often think

what have I done
to receive
the gift of the earth? (Bharati 259)

Leela is play, not spectacle. There is no angry gesticulation, false sentiment, self-consoling nostalgia. Here is simple, honest poetry – in sentiment, thought and word – with the right blend of reminiscence, presentness and forethought (Rajashekhara’s vintage trio of *smriti*, *mati* and *prajna*).

Good poetry is an aesthetic-cognitive dialectic of the poet and the poem, the poem and the world, the world and the poet. It is a making, a forming, not just an expression. In the poems as much as in the preface, Bharati and Rode return frequently to reflect on four things and their relationships: poetry, self, language, world. What the reflections signify is that poetry for them is a sustained engagement with several things at several levels and only as such does it prompt, provoke, challenge, trouble, embarrass, enable, undo, let create.

The shared engagement makes the work of the two poet brothers appear mutually indistinguishable at times, an effect heightened by the fact that both at their best are poets of extraordinary intensity and sensitiveness. Yet there are fundamental differences. Rode not only acknowledges but welcomes the mediation of the intellect: in his invocation, he asks the Muse to arrive of her own will, unforced, spontaneously, though only after the thought and deliberation she might consider necessary. Bharati, on the other hand, would wait on the Muse, expectantly, prayerfully, in an attitude of self-consecration (35). He aspires for a radical simplicity; his is a pursuit of deconditioning, of self-undoing to the point of unbeing in order to just be: an unselfconscious rearrangement – not Rimbaud’s “conscious derangement” – of the senses. Rode preeminently is a poet of the penetrative quest, of self-conscious probing; he does not wait upon but goes after. Bharati’s “Millipede” (253) and Rode’s “Snail” (254) exemplify each poet’s distinctiveness. Bharati’s attitude is illustrated also by his poem “Before Poetry” (499):

After the gust has passed
I gather the fallen leaves
that have yet some murmur left.

This is a view of poetry as a serendipitous, sublime remainder. Or surplus? In the economy of the gift, the remainder and the surplus may be the same. Hari Prasad Chaurasia once spoke of the music emanating from his flute in public performances as a leftover of the feasts that took place in the privacy of his chamber of Krishna worship.

My favourites in this tome of poetic plenty are Rode’s “Primal Spark” (37) and “Grant a Little More of Light” (653). Here is a part of the first:

I have just bathed
in your dawn.

I wait for you
in clothes I received on birth.

How can I wait in clothes not fresh
for you?

Your hand will arrive
in the Sun's first ray
and touch my naked body.

In each pore the sense
will throb.

...

Come,

I will pour the bowl of moonlight
oozing from my limbs
upon your feet.

I will sit holding my body against yours
to hear the tales
written in the primal spark,
to see the play
of beginnings and ends.

This is poetry of cosmic intuitions: the reader experiences an “ardour” (to use Adam Zagajewsky’s beloved word), a fire leaping from the page into his soul, unravelling the meaning of *leela*, the cosmic play. “Give a Little More of Light” is poetry – sensuous, layered – as pilgrimage. Its essential miracle is the marriage of heaven and hell, lighted up by a procession of flaming metaphors that pass like mirrors, each catching the essential miracle in a specific drama on a different plane. The poem opens with a prayer for cleansing and rejuvenation, moves on to a rendezvous with the self in the image in a mirror, goes on to ponder on a relationship poised on protected mutual distance, returns to the memory of childhood to reclaim lost innocence, plunges into the “soiled mystery” of poetry itself made paradoxically translucent in the concretion of an idea, begins a descent into the abysses of the self in which the poetry’s archetypal harmonies abide silent and waiting, springs back up into the lighted regions of consciousness, plunges again into abysses but this time those harbouring dark forces of ruination – to soar finally into cosmic mist to find the way back to the earth and to mortal reunion. The culmination foreseen is not a release, not some kind of salvation, but fulsome mortality exalted (as affirmation and transcendence at once) in love.

Leela is life lived as it, loved as it is. Playfully, in acceptance and gratitude, yet not without hope for something greater and kinder yet to come.

[All translations from Navtej Bharati and Ajmer Rode are mine]

Works Cited

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Rajesh Sharma
Professor and Head,
Department of English
Punjabi University
sharajesh@gmail.com
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