

# Marginalized Communities, Poetic Transcendence, and the Guardianship of Literature in Desai's India and Wordsworth's Scotland

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By choosing as an epigraph for her 1984 novel *In Custody* a passage from Wordsworth's "Rob Roy's Grave," itself part of his *Memorials of a Tour in Scotland, 1803*, Anita Desai affiliates Wordsworth's verses about the Highland "Robin Hood" with her account of the efforts of an adjunct Hindi lecturer at a regional university to turn his career into something of significance through interviewing the greatest living Urdu poet, the "custodian" of a language radically marginalized within postcolonial India. If Desai had not called attention to her novel's connection to Wordsworth's poetry, it is unlikely that any one would associate these writers' works with one another. In several novels over the past three decades, Desai depicts postcolonial Indian middle-class life in an eloquent but spare modernist prose that would seem to owe much to E. M. Forster, Virginia Woolf, and Ford Maddox Ford, but to be far from the declamatory lyricism of Wordsworth and his contemporaries. Writing from the heart of an ascendant empire, spokesman for an ascendant middle class, a male writer consciously affiliating himself with the "great tradition" of Spenser, Shakespeare, and Milton while formulating a "new poetry" meant to reform but also revitalize the national literature of the world's dominant power, Wordsworth would seem to speak from a position radically distinct from Desai. She writes in subtle, allusive English from the postcolonial periphery of the former empire, speaking to an educated Indian middle-class readership increasingly disempowered by global capitalism, mass media popular culture, and religio-political fanaticism, a woman addressing the patriarchal legacies of classical

Indian literature and culture as well as Indian and Western modes of middle-class gender formation, a half-Bengali, half-German writer addressing a nation internally divided and (unlike Wordsworth's England) given to profound doubt about its identity, direction, and mission in the world. The most obvious connection between Wordsworth and Desai is that, in memorializing Rob Roy, Wordsworth pays homage to his resistance to English cultural and economic colonization. Going beyond the common observation that English colonization of Scotland served as a "dress rehearsal" for British colonialism's worldwide expansion, however, Desai suggests that devotion to literature, the impracticality of which is highlighted by its marginality within university politics, is ultimately, if paradoxically, a powerfully anticolonialistic force.

In Desai's novel, Urdu serves in part as a metaphor for all literary discourse, whose effacement within postindustrial global society resembles the effacement of ethnic, regional cultures (such as that of Rob Roy's Highlanders) and languages (such as Urdu) within modern nation-states.<sup>1</sup> Urdu evokes a peculiar imperial history. After the Mughal emperor Akbar (1556–1605) unified northern India by winning the allegiance of both Hindu and Islamic nobles, creating a social order marked by material splendor, religious tolerance, and cultural syncretism, Akbar's system was unravelled by Aurangzeb (or Alamgir), who reigned from 1658 to 1707.<sup>2</sup> Aurangzeb re-imposed a specific tax on non-Muslims, sought to create a "pure" Sunni Islamic society, and pursued a ruinous conquest of the Hindu kingdoms of the Deccan plateau (Wolpert 156–86; Hintze). Persian was the administrative language of the Mughal empire. Urdu, "the *lingua franca* of the Muslim élites in those areas of India which were under their direct rule both before and after the British established their rule in India," developed alongside Hindi in northern India, for "until the development of modern Urdu and Hindi literature and until the rise of the movement for the spread of Hindi in the nineteenth century, the terms Urdu, Hindi, and Hindustani equally described the standard, spoken, urban language of the north. Even today, as a spoken language, Hindi and Urdu cannot be distinguished for purposes of ordinary discourse" (Brass, *Language*

127, 128–29). Writing and cultural politics differentiated Urdu and Hindi from one another: “in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries especially, a large and vital body of literature was written in Urdu in Persian script, frequently drawing on Persian also for vocabulary and literary symbols” (129). Notably, “it was with the decline of the Mughal Empire that the literary development of Urdu became possible; at the same time, the Persianization of Urdu began to play an important role in the maintenance of cultural identity after this decline as a way of reinforcing links with the Muslim power of the past” (Majeed 191–92). Early Urdu poetry evoked a Mughal glory already fading, measuring itself against and distinguishing itself from Persian, even as its structure and vocabulary testified to the creative power born of intermingling heterogeneous cultures and ethnicities (191–97). After the British made Urdu an administrative language in 1837, the pre-independence Muslim League promoted it as the national language of India’s Islamic population (Brass, *Language* 156–78; Majeed 197–99). Urdu became the official language of Pakistan (though the maternal tongue of only a minority of Pakistanis). Muslims and Hindus contributed to Urdu literature until the Hindi movement of the late nineteenth century began to advocate “both the use of the Devanagari script in administration and education and the Sanskritization of Hindi by drawing vocabulary from Sanskrit rather than Persian” (Brass, *Language* 129; also see 129–36).

The emergence of two literary languages, promoted by competing nationalisms, from a common, polyglot, spoken discourse underscores connections between modern cultural identities and specific “readings” of history—connections that may in part be seen as emblematic of how standardized vernaculars and print-culture facilitate, as Benedict Anderson suggests, nationalist “imaginings” of pre-modern “communities” as being far more homogeneous, monolithic, and ideologically restrictive than they actually were.<sup>3</sup> In part, however, the emergence of distinct Urdu and Hindi literary languages reflects fundamental, “non-imaginary” divergences, rooted in specific texts and the cultural practices they sustained, separating how Muslim and Hindu Indians con-

ceived the divine, reality, time, human identity, and thus the “truth” of history.<sup>4</sup> Even as they projected “imagined” homogeneities upon complex, polyvalent pasts, Indian religious nationalisms, however “derivative” of Western models, revived pre-modern, non-Western conceptual and imaginative frameworks in ways that accentuated and uncovered, as well as constructed, what the early advocate of Hindu nationalism Vinayak D. Savarkar (1883–1966) called “an organic national being”—not an “absence of all internal differences” among a people, but rather the “oneness of a people in relation to the contrast they present to any other people as a whole” (117).<sup>5</sup>

Nineteenth-century Hindu nationalist consciousness and historiography was strongly influenced, as has been frequently noted, by Western Orientalist scholarship, which posited a Hindu/Sanskrit “classical age” under the Gupta Empire (320–c. 700 CE) followed by decline, fragmentation, and subjugation to “backward” Muslim rule.<sup>6</sup> A nationalism that conceived itself as striving to return to past glory encouraged the Sanskritization of Hindi.<sup>7</sup> The Sanskrit heritage inscribed in Hindi served at once to undercut British colonialistic pretensions of Western cultural superiority and to allow Hindu conceptual and imaginative frames of reference to structure the dominant discourses of Indian nationalism (Gandhi’s no less than Savarkar’s), thus countering the alternative past glory already evoked through the Persianization of Urdu, itself a nostalgic, idealizing gesture responding first to the political, material decline of empire and then to British colonialist historiography’s iteration of the “myth of Muslim backwardness.”<sup>8</sup> Within postcolonial India, Urdu evokes memory of conquest and hegemony, exemplified by Aurangzeb’s reign, but Urdu’s roots in a pluralistic, heterogeneous north Indian urban culture also evokes memory of Akbar’s creation of a society transgressive of the purities later constructed by Islamic and Hindu identity politics, a society in turn evocative of pluralistic impulses within India’s pre-Islamic past, especially the interpenetration of Vedic, Buddhist, and Jainist thought in classic Sanskrit literature and the ecumenicalism attributed to the Mauryan emperor Ashoka (269–232 BCE).<sup>9</sup> On the one hand, Urdu exemplifies culture’s implication

in triumphant violence (derived from a Turkish word meaning “camp,” Urdu “was spoken in the camps or courts of the Muslim invaders, who entered India from the eighth century onward [Brass, *Language* 128]) even as it underscores the complicity of literature with mystifying idealizations of the past in the service of hegemonic ideological visions. On the other hand, Urdu’s distinctive blend of Persian vocabulary with indigenous north Indian linguistic structures discloses the capacity of literary culture at once to conserve the difference of the (conquered, subjugated) other, and to mold new coherence and power through placing seemingly antagonistic heterogeneities into mutually modifying contact.

By portraying how her Hindi lecturer protagonist comes to be “in custody” of his love of Urdu poetry, Desai suggests—in contrast to much contemporary critical theory—that when language becomes literature, its preservation becomes, despite the embeddedness of language in colonizing projects and literature in idealizing nostalgia, an inherently anticolonial activity. Being “in custody,” as Desai’s novel comes to define it, articulates the resistance of spiritual values to material ones, of cultural-historical particularity to homogenizing forces, of the past—inscribed, even if distorted or idealized, in poetic memory—to the tyranny of the present.

Juxtaposing paternalistic and ethical connotations of “custody” or “guardianship,” Desai’s title also evokes traditions of “guardianship” rooted in Indian culture. The privilege of the Brahmans derived from their being custodians of Vedic revelation and Sanskrit literature; by virtue of such custody, they were guardians of the other classes (Wolpert 26–30, Larson 57–65, Vivekananda, 56–75). Although privilege followed from a colonization depicted in the classical epics as a triumph over lawless demons (the Sanskrit term for dark-skinned pre-Aryan people, *dasa*, came to mean “slave” [Wolpert 25]), Brahman guardianship was understood as a spiritual practice that, ideally, should unite pious devotion to the sacred texts with their conservation and transmission. Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902), whose exposition of Hinduism to the West anticipated and influenced Gandhi’s, noted,

“From time immemorial Indians have seen the mightiest royal power tremble before the frown of the ascetic priest, devoid of worldly desire, armed with spiritual strength [...] The foundation of the priestly power rests on intellectual strength, and not on the physical strength of arms. Therefore, with the supremacy of the priestly power, there is a great prevalence of intellectual and literary culture [...]” (62, 64).

Just as the ascendancy of priestly over royal power signified, according to Vivekananda, “the first advent of civilization, the first victory of the divine nature over the animal, the first mastery of spirit over matter” (64) (indeed, *sanskriti* means “civilization”), so the articulation of hierarchy and the checking of rapaciousness instituted through priest-mediated sacrifice, fire offerings, in Vedic times (c. 1500–600 BCE) came in Indo-Sramanical times (c. 600 BCE–300 CE) to be sublimated into a type of spiritual self-immolation, “ascetic or disciplined meditation (*yoga*), and focussed or single-minded devotion to a personal god (*bhakti*)” (Larson 65–66).<sup>10</sup> By Indic times (c. 300–1200), loving devotion (*bhakti*) to a personal god (Rama, Shiva, Krishna, Kali, etc.) co-mingled with, or modulated into, subordination to a spiritual master (especially as Buddhist and Jainist thought interfused Hinduism): “Thereafter from medieval times to the present, a focus on exuberant love and devotion directed to a particular deity or to a particular *guru* has been an important component of Hindu spirituality” (Larson 85).

A disciple was expected to give himself over to his teacher’s, guru’s, custody even as he acted as the guru’s guardian, divesting himself of egotism in service to another so as to become receptive to spiritual understanding (Gold, Larson 93–94).<sup>11</sup> Mahatma Gandhi further linked guardianship to service by arguing that economic disparities were not unjust as long as the well-off acted as trustees for the poor, as long as their privilege translated into service—a duty (*dharma*) traditionally associated with the subordinate *shudra* class.<sup>12</sup> Just as precolonial Indian Islamic piety encouraged disciples to place themselves in the custody of Sufi masters in ways that resembled the submission of Hindu disciples to their gurus (indeed, the tombs of Sufi saints were treated as sacred

sites by Hindus as well as Muslims), so the Mughal dynasty evoked a notion of political guardianship akin to both Gandhi's and that inscribed in the *Ramayana* by linking legitimacy to the Persian notion of the "circle of justice": in return for taxes supporting state power, the king was obliged to shield peasants from oppression.<sup>13</sup> Claiming descent from both Tamburlaine and Genghis Khan, the Mughal emperors modified the Turko-Mongol institution of *nawkari*, in which a warrior assumed a new identity in service to his master, into the *mansabdari* system, in which Muslim and Hindu nobles received administrative custody of lands held in trust for the emperor, to whom they owed loyalty in return for his guardianship (Streusand 33, 109–14, Wolpert 129–30).

Desai suggests that in a post-imperial world of secular disenchantment, in which liberation (either personal or national) seems to open up only a dispiriting scramble to "make a living," literature remains the improbable, seemingly ineffectual, custodian of attributes that are both aristocratic and revelatory, and thus exacts from us a tribute of alienation and loyalty. At first, the differences between *In Custody* and *Memorials of a Tour in Scotland, 1803* seem merely to underscore the distance between a Romantic optimistic faith in the immanence of poetic meaning and sublimity in everyday life, and a postcolonial psychic and political landscape marked by complete disillusionment (loss of faith in freedom and transcendence, moral or material progress, and in domesticity as a vehicle for personal happiness, social solidarity, and ethical agency).

Both works describe a journey (from Grasmere to Scotland, from the dusty town of Mirpore to Delhi). Both describe contact with poetry rooted in a minority culture. Both describe a return enriched by the encounter. But whereas Wordsworth portrays his Grasmere home as "this fairest spot on earth" of "happy fields, abodes so green" ("Departure," ll. 17, 18; *Poetical Works* 225), Desai depicts Mirpore as arid, dusty, "lack[ing] history," "never fundamentally changing and in that sense enduring," and the protagonist, Deven, experiences it as a "cruel trap" (19).<sup>14</sup> Wordsworth seeks out Scotland and its poetry to

increase by variety an already abundant happiness, "To cull contentment upon wildest shores,/ And luxuries extract from bleakest moors" (ll. 25–26; *Poetical Works* 225); Deven desperately turns toward the poet Nur, whose name means "light," for redemptive contact with "another realm, [...] the domain of poetry, beauty, and illumination," that would "cast [...] away the meanness and dross of his past existence" by allowing him to approach "a new and wondrously illuminated era" (40). Wordsworth returns to the "near-approaching good that shall not fail" (XVI, l. 8; *Poetical Works* 234) of home and hearth; Deven meets his wife's "stony face, her sulks or her open fury" (65), because, having "aspire[d] towards a telephone, a refrigerator, even a car," which magazine ads had assured her could be hers "in easy installments" (67), she is embittered by the penury that befalls an academic spouse. Whereas Wordsworth easily integrates Scottish poetry into Grasmere, the ballad of "The Blind Highland Boy" (234–36) becoming "A Tale Told by the Fire-Side" (234) for his children, Deven's encounter with Nur strips him of the social and economic securities that come with anonymous academic mediocrity. If Wordsworth's lyricism provides a standard against which to measure the immiseration of the postcolonial present, Deven's experience provides a standard against which to measure the naïve hopefulness of a Romantic vision unknowingly reflective of national, bourgeois expansion. Indeed, it is easy to read Wordsworth's incorporation of the archaic charms of Scottish poetry into his sensibility as an instance of the egotistical sublime, an aesthetic manifestation of the colonization England pursued toward Scotland after the 1707 Act of Union.<sup>15</sup>

But "Rob Roy's Grave" complicates such a reading. Wordsworth declares Rob Roy to be "as *wise* as brave" (l. 13), for "in the principles of things/ *He* sought his moral creed" (ll. 19–20; *Poetical Works* 231) [Wordsworth's emphasis]. Rob Roy's resistance to English power is ascribed to his resistance to laws that serve early capitalist interests, "statutes" that "stir us up against our kind" (ll. 22, 23). Not only is an unnatural, asocial self constructed by law, but artificial mechanisms of power are created (hunting and land use regulations) that allow the



wealthy and well-connected a consequence unrelated to personal merit. Wordsworth imagines Rob Roy contrasting the authority of natural law—what “find I graven on my heart [...] tells me what to do” (ll. 31–32)—with the illegitimacy of positive law in ways that lead him to proclaim the words Desai cites in her epigraph, “That they should take, who have the power,/ And they should keep who can” (ll. 39–40). This passage connects a Romantic expressivist theory of value—the truth is what I feel in my heart—with a proto-Nietzschean aristocratic morality: the Highland Chief has authority because his martial prowess, personal presence, and integrity inspire allegiance. Power belongs to those who can take it openly, not to those who hide behind lawyers. Power should articulate, in Nietzsche’s phrase, an “order of rank” that is not imposed but disclosed.<sup>16</sup>

All this might seem to reveal Romantic ideology’s political analogue: just as the genius poet naturally appropriates the outer world to enrich his intentional subjectivity, so the genius statesman naturally takes and keeps what his powers allow, as does the imperialistic nation-state: “All kinds, and creatures, stand and fall/ By strength of prowess or of wit” (ll. 49–50), so “The Eagle, he was lord above,/ And Rob was lord below” (ll. 59–60), or such would have been the case if positive law had not tyrannized over Scotland. Here, it might seem that an appropriative, hierarchical attitude was being naturalized through what Jerome McGann characterizes as a stratagem central to Romantic ideology—“the emergence of the concepts of Romantic Nature and Imagination as touchstones of stability and order. [...] In moments of crisis the Romantic will turn to Nature or the creative Imagination as his places of last resort. Amidst the tottering structures of early nineteenth-century Europe, poetry asserted the integrity of the biosphere and the inner, spiritual self, both of which were believed to transcend the age’s troubling doctrinal conflicts and ideological shifts. [...] Ecological Nature is the locus of what is stable and orderly, and it is related to Imagination as a set of vital hieroglyphs is related to an interpretative key” (*Romantic Ideology* 67–68).

Rather than identifying Rob Roy with a political variant of an egotistical sublime, however, Wordsworth contrasts him with the figure who in his poetry frequently exemplifies the ethical dangers of appropriative egotism – Napoleon. Had he been born later, Wordsworth claims, Rob Roy *could* have been a Napoleon, but he *would not* have been, for, placing the liberty of the other above will to power, Rob Roy declined to conflate the affirmation of natural power, natural order to rank, with imperialistic egotism. Therefore, Rob Roy was “the poor man’s stay/  
The poor man’s heart” and “all the oppressed, who wanted strength/  
Had [his] at their command” (ll. 109–12). By seeking his “moral creed” in a nature that simultaneously legitimates qualitative distinctions and resists reduction to naturalization, conceptuality, doctrines and ideologies, Rob Roy contests British imperializing forces in ways that follow from an ethics irreducible to his own time-bound conceptual-ideological frameworks and ego-structure: “For Thou, although with some wild thoughts,  
Wild Chieftain of a savage Clan!  
Hadst this to boast of: thou didst love/  
The *liberty* of man” (ll. 101–05) [Wordsworth’s emphasis].

David P. Haney points out that “an emphasis on ‘liberty’ grounded on the individual ego and its willed, rational ideals is in Wordsworth’s developmental psychology an attractive but immature state, associated with the excesses of the French Revolution and his own early enthusiasm for it,” for “liberty as exercised by the autonomous rational ego” is “arbitrary, potentially violent,” and so “in need of a grounding outside the self” (“Wordsworth and Levinas” 362). This kind of “liberty,” co-extensive with Napoleonic will to power, is antithetical to the “liberty” guarded by Rob Roy’s natural power. Warning against positing “any monolithic notion of the Wordsworthian ‘self,’” Haney observes that Wordsworth “assumed the Coleridgean distinction, explicitly borrowed from Schelling but also implicit in the Protestant tradition, between the ‘absolute’ self and the very different individual self that is the source of individual choice” (362–63).<sup>17</sup> The distinction between an egotistic, desiring self and an ‘absolute’ self – one congruent with the divine and ultimate reality – lies at the heart of Hindu piety. In

*The Bhagavad Gita*, Arjuna tells Krishna, “the mind is restless, [...] impetuous, self-willed, hard to train; to master the mind seems as difficult as to master the mighty winds” (6:34, Mascaro 72), but Krishna responds, “Brahman is the Supreme, the Eternal. Atman is his Spirit in man” (8:3), “for if a man thinks of the Spirit Supreme with a mind that wanders not, because it has been trained in Yoga, he goes to that Spirit of Light. He who remembers the Poet, the Creator, who rules all things from all time, [...] who shines like the sun beyond darkness, far far beyond human thought; and at the time of his departure is in union of love and the power of Yoga [...] he goes to the Spirit Supreme, the Supreme Spirit of Light” (8:8–10, Mascaro 77–78).<sup>18</sup> Even though Wordsworth’s Protestant background emphasizes the boundedness of individual identity in a way Hinduism does not, both Western and Indian traditions posit an “absolute” self, disjunctive with a willful, rapacious self, that is distinguished by receptivity to a radical transcendence of conceptuality, openness to the Light “far far beyond human thought.” Moreover, late eighteenth-century European encounters with Sanskrit literature directly and indirectly shaped the German idealist theorizing of identity that Wordsworth absorbed through Coleridge.<sup>19</sup>

Wordsworth attributes the ethical difference between Rob Roy and Napoleon to the former’s so subordinating egotistic “passion” (l. 25) to the “principles of things” disclosed in receptive contact with nature, or what stands above and against individual will, that he transcends the conceptual-historical horizon in which he is situated – he is more than just another “Wild Chieftain” “with some wild thoughts.” Within Wordsworth’s poetry, the openness of our best selves to such transcendence and the ethical agency that follows therefrom is most clearly revealed in our capacity for experiencing the sublime. Noting that, for Wordsworth, both nature and other people provide occasions for contact with the sublime, experienced as a superceding of, a breaking apart of, intentional subjectivity, Haney argues that “the ethically productive experience of otherness resides neither in a mystical union that simply effaces the self, [...] nor in a resistance that simply throws the self back on its own autonomy [...]” (“Wordsworth and Levinas” 365).

By encountering the transcendent Other, that which resists the colonizing gestures of our ego-structures, we are taught simultaneously not to make a god of the ego and to recognize the infinite breaking miraculously through the “container” of the immanent in ways that lead us to acknowledge the other’s constitutive liberty (as opposed to the arbitrariness of subjective willfulness) as a trace of the divine that we are obliged to respect and protect.<sup>20</sup> By choosing as an epigraph Wordsworth’s verses implying an analogy between natural political and poetic power, Desai affiliates her novel with Wordsworth’s suggestion that poetic strength may be seen as affirming a natural (not naturalized) order of rank even as it checks its own imperialistic impulses out of an ethical regard for the other’s freedom.<sup>21</sup>

This notion of just power informs Deven’s experience of being at once in the custody of and custodian of the poet Nur, Urdu, and literature. Just as Nur is aged, patronized, and bullied, so both Urdu and literature seem bereft of power, for power – in Desai’s time and text, unlike Wordsworth’s – has become dissociated from culture. Murad, Deven’s manipulative friend and editor of the small Urdu journal for which Deven is to interview Nur, demands, “and where are the readers? Where are the subscriptions? Who reads Urdu any more?” for “Urdu – language of the court in days of royalty – now languishes in the back lanes and gutters of the city. No palace for it to live in the style to which it is accustomed, no emperors and nawabs to act as its patrons” (15). Similarly, Nur asks, “how can there be Urdu poetry when there is no Urdu language left? It is dead, finished. The defeat of the Moghuls by the British threw a noose over its head, and the defeat of the British of the Hindi-wallahs tightened it” (42). Both Murad and Nur express chauvinistic contempt for Hindi – “That language of peasants [...] The language that is raised on radishes and potatoes” (15), “Those Congress-wallahs have set up Hindi on top as our ruler. You [Deven] are its slave” (42) – but Deven’s Hindi students ask with equal contempt, “why should we waste our time learning Hindi when we can pick up some useful skills that will help us find employment?” (182), and one of Deven’s colleagues laments, after reading a postcard of

Disney World from a friend who teaches biochemistry in Indiana, that they should have studied “something scientific, something American,” for then they “would have had a future” (185–86).

Urdu is doubly marginalized. Not only has Hindi prevailed in a politically motivated culture war, but contemporary modalities of power, unlike those of Wordsworth’s time, have come to marginalize literary culture altogether, for literary culture has become tangential to contemporary power’s articulation and irrelevant to its networks of patronage. Assuming guardianship of Hindi, no less than Urdu, blocks one from having a postcolonial future because the only disciplines valued, both within and outside the university, are technical ones perceived as serving crassly materialistic ends and thus having a place within new, impersonal, transnational networks of power. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri describe these networks as “empire” – in which the “declining sovereignty of nation-states and their increasing inability to regulate economic and cultural exchanges” yield a new “*decentered* and *detrterritorialized* apparatus of rule that progressively incorporates the entire global realm within its open, expanding frontiers” (xii). But Desai suggests that the more postcolonial society seeks to accommodate itself to such a decentered global “empire” structured by consumerism, lifestyle production, and image consumption, the more it becomes incapable of articulating reasons why the ego should constrain its appropriative impulses, which in turn leads to a collapse of discipline and civility, making even technical endeavors ultimately exercises in futility. Without subscribing to Fredric Jameson’s generalization that all third-world narratives are national allegories,<sup>22</sup> we may nonetheless see that Nur exemplifies the condition of precolonial cultural legacies and Deven, structurally disempowered, disillusioned, and fearful that he is “trapped,” embodies at least one form of postcoloniality. Likewise, the failure of Deven’s project to interview and tape-record Nur, sabotaged by a combination of venality, nepotism, incompetence, red-tape, insufficient funds, self-indulgence, lack of authority, and conflicting self-interested agendas, is emblematic of a larger inability to build either individual or national futures, exemplified by the novel’s description

of a workman, the day before the board of trustees visit the university, screwing new light bulbs into ceiling lamps, “his long face morose with the knowledge that within a few weeks all would be stolen or smashed again” (93).

Whereas Hardt and Negri express the sanguine hope that “individual potentialities” unleashed by the fluid boundaries, flexible hierarchies, and hybridized identities of “empire” will ultimately subvert its hegemonic control over what they call “biopolitical production” (for subversion, see 353–413; for “biopolitical production,” see 22–41), Desai’s story suggests that the mere stimulation of novel desires – to tape-record an Urdu poet as a coup for a regional Indian university which will “empower” a Hindi lecturer – need not challenge the structural and psychological conditions that, as Deven anticipates from the beginning, promise only failure. When the bus carrying him on his initial journey to Delhi swerves to miss, but hits, a dog, Deven is “sadly disappoint[ed]” that “he was not travelling up to Delhi on this important occasion in a style more suited to a literary man, a literary event,” for “he had never found a way to reconcile the meanness of his physical existence with the purity and immensity of his literary yearnings”; but he also wonders whether the dog’s death is “an omen” (25–26). Throughout the novel, Deven is haunted by the suspicion that he should interpret seemingly trivial events as signifying the inauspiciousness of his endeavor.

The relationship between “the two axes pure/impure and auspicious/inauspicious” (Marglin 4) has been the subject of much cultural scholarship.<sup>23</sup> T. N. Madan notes, “the everyday (ordinary language) use of the word *subha* [auspicious] refers, it seems, most frequently and directly to time and to temporal events in relation to particular categories of people. [...] The adjective *subha* is applied in everyday speech to actors (*karta*) when they are seen performing actions which are conducive to joy and well-being (*subhakarya*) or when they symbolise these states” (12, 14). By contrast, *suddha* (purity) connotes “fullness or completeness in the specific sense of perfection [...] *Suddha* and its opposite *asuddha* are attributes of animate beings, inanimate objects and places

[...]" (17). Notably, contact with dogs, as well as with low-caste Hindus and non-Hindus, is conceived as impure, polluting, for Brahmans and upper-caste Hindus (19). The relationship between purity and auspiciousness is diversely articulated in different texts and among different regions and classes, but in general the impure is inauspicious because it pollutes one in ways that disable one from performing tasks that are peculiarly one's own (such as a Brahman's task of reciting the Vedas, or a woman's task of giving birth): "a person must watch out, when he sets out from the home on an important errand, lest somebody symbolizing obstruction or failure and, therefore, inauspiciousness, should be encountered [...]" (19). Ronald Inden argues that in their original Vedic context, "inauspicious signs predicted the diminishment of a human master's, lord's or overlord's domain, often depicted as female," and that "personal purity (*suci*) was concerned with the 'competence' (*adhikara*) of a master to act with respect to his domain. Acts of purification increased or restored a person's competency" ("Kings and Omens" 33, 34). Since "the exercise of care or self-restraint" is commonly viewed as allowing one to avoid contact with much that is polluting (Madan 18), for one to fall habitually or chronically into a condition of disabling impurity, to be the recipient of constant signs of inauspiciousness, would denote not just bad luck, but also ethical failure (indeed, the notion of *karma* largely obviates the distinction [Carman 115, Wolpert 81, Larson 68, 82, 86–88, 93]).

By portraying Deven as incessantly haunted by intimations of inauspiciousness, as when he hears in the "electric crackle" of his nylon shirt "an embodiment of Sarla's [his wife's] malice and mockery" (25), Desai suggests that his lack of confidence reflects not just realism or weakness, but also a half-acknowledged awareness that he is in a state of disabling impurity, that he has allowed himself to be polluted by what is 'impure' in the postcolonial world shaped by global, postindustrial 'empire.' To the extent that Deven's disabling impurity is mirrored in the other characters, and reflected in the public, institutional world the novel portrays, Desai sketches a postcolonial nation peculiarly suited for comic, satiric depiction, for it is, like Yeats's colonized Ireland, a

realm where “only motley is worn” (“Easter 1916,” l. 14).<sup>24</sup> Raising the spectre that Deven and his society can have no future, that disabling impurity is all there can be, Desai suggests, rather like Julia Kristeva in relation to contemporary Europe, that far from encouraging subversion by liberating new, fluid possibilities, “the culture of entertainment, the culture of performance, the culture of the show” that “empire” makes ubiquitous denotes a “crisis of the subject,” a crisis in the possibility of imagining, representing, and thus *forming* a subject (be it European or postcolonial). This in turn forecloses the possibility of revolt to the extent that totalizing relativism and consumerism place “the very notion of culture as revolt and of art as revolt [...] in peril [...]” (*The Sense and Non-Sense of Revolt* 6).<sup>25</sup>

Within Indian contexts, loss of agency, surrender of power, retreat into cultivated indifference may be psychologically and culturally tempting. When Deven asks whether the dog struck by the bus is dead, a fellow traveler replies, “Fortunate for the dog if it is [...] Birth and death, and only suffering in between,’ he added, quite cheerfully. [...] ‘When God calls us away,’ he went on, ‘it is a blessing’” (26). Deven’s neighbour evokes the notion, central to mendicant, ascetic traditions within Hinduism, and to Buddhist and Jain monasticism, that release (*moksha*) from the suffering – the agitation, grief, illusions, attachments and delusions – between birth and death, endured anew in each reincarnation, can only be achieved by cultivating indifference to material conditions and worldly values, which culminates in total renunciation (*sannyasa*) (Carman 109, Larson 86–87, 89, 93–95, 150, 156, Wolpert 45–48, 81). Mendicant asceticism appears directly in the novel when, walking through the anarchic, fetid Delhi slum of Chandni Chowk in search of Nur’s residence, feeling “his feet [...] enmeshed in the sticky net” of a recurrent nightmare “in which he struggled towards an unspecified destination but was repeatedly waylaid and deflected,” Deven is “waylaid” by “an ash-smeared *sadhu* wearing a python draped over his neck and shoulder and a garland of marigolds on top of his head but nothing on the lower regions,” who “thrust[s] his begging bowl at Deven’s face [...]” (31). Coupling the inauspicious sign of the dog



with the neighbour's "impassive" (26) appeal to the solace of *moksha*, and connecting both the nightmare of incompetence and the reality of squalid urban impoverishment with the "impediment" of the mendicant holy man, Desai evokes a tradition of cultural critique that runs from James Mill's colonialist history to V. S. Naipaul's travel narratives, a tradition suggesting that India is a "wounded civilization" because its devalourization of this life, its fixation upon *moksha*, renders it indifferent to material, historical realities, making it susceptible to the kinds of incompetence that forfeit power – be it to Islamic invaders, neocolonialist administrators or global networks of capital.<sup>26</sup>

Desai implies that this critique cannot simply be dismissed, for Deven's distinctive incompetence is bound up with his effort to use literature to achieve a type of *moksha*. When he enters his classroom, seeing his students' expressions "of boredom, amusement, insolence and defiance," he looks "away quickly" and focusses "upon the door at the far end of the room, the door that opened on to the passage, freedom and release" (12). In pursuit of "freedom and release," he has long practiced the "trick of ignoring his class and speaking to himself, or someone outside, invisible," an "invisible student outside the door, the ideal one" (13). Similarly, when overcome by a sense of the inauspiciousness of his mission, Deven asks himself why he has bothered to make the effort, why he has not "been content to recite his verse, draw solace from it and impress others with the source of his solace" (27).

Clearly, Deven is disabled because his contact with literature is "impure"; it serves egocentric ends and encourages antisocial, unethical withdrawal. In Hindu terms, Deven makes pursuit of *moksha* an excuse to evade the duties enjoined by *dharma*.<sup>27</sup> John B. Carman points out that in "classic Hindu thought, [...] 'ethics' was distinct from 'philosophy,' i.e. *dharmaśāstra*, reflection on *dharma*, was in a different sphere from *darsana*, reflection on the path to *moksha*" (109). *Dharma*, commonly translated as "righteousness," involves living in society, meeting civic and familial responsibilities, creating wealth and instituting justice. It requires both empowerment (the competence associated with auspiciousness) and self-restraint (*dharma* enables but also "takes pre-

cedence over *artha* and *kama*,” the former denoting “both power and wealth,” the latter “the satisfaction of desires” [115, 110]). Power, as idealized in the Sanskrit epics, ensures a just and prosperous society by affirming the qualitative distinctions that allow a proper order of rank (*dharma-artha-kama*), while giving each value its rightful due (the good is neither monolithic nor totalizing). Such governance in turn leads to the progressive “preponderance of pure matter (*sattva*) over passionate matter (*rajas*) and dull, heavy matter (*tamas*),” and the “temporal auspiciousness” that enables just power to regulate self and society is particularly manifest in married women and in the king or prince (114).<sup>28</sup>

Thus, the understanding of power that Wordsworth ascribes to Rob Roy may be seen as broadly consistent with that articulated by the *dharma-artha-kama* triad. When natural distinctions constitute legitimacy, power purifies itself through guardianship and service, even as wealth and pleasure flourish because, not despite, their subordination to “higher” authority. On the other hand, Deven’s perception of his wife as a sign of his own failure, as a woman uninspired, conventional, materialistic, and so emblematic of all the “dull, heavy matter” weighing upon himself and the world around him, suggests that she epitomizes inauspiciousness, the improbability that he will ever resemble a triumphant, virtuous prince (the prototype of which is Rama). Similarly, when Deven feels his feet “enmeshed in the sticky net of the nightmare” of his incompetence, the imagery of “sticky net” evokes the dull heaviness of *tamas*, which Desai implies in postcolonial contexts is inseparable from anomie, meaningless, the threat of never being able to form oneself into a subject capable of shaping a significant future.

Against all such forces, literature, like Rob Roy, offers us the unexpected guardianship of uncolonizing and uncolonizable power. When Deven first sees Nur, “it was to him as if God had leaned over a cloud and called for him to come up [...]” (39). It has often been noted that confronting Nur’s frail humanity—his senility, vanity, grasping, sensuality – forces Deven to understand that literature does not offer “release or escape” (203), that it cannot be a refuge from life, because art and

life are bound together.<sup>29</sup> Deven's encounters with Nur are as comically deflating as Marcel's encounters with the novelist Bergotte in Proust, and for much the same reason: taking literature to be transcendent in the sense of allowing us "release or escape" from a banal, everyday world, Deven and Marcel expect the writer as a person to be larger than life (Proust 93-97, 546-60).<sup>30</sup> But even as Desai's novel counters the ascription of a false transcendence to literature, it affirms a genuine transcendence. By stressing that Deven perceives Nur as "the deity" who is issuing "the summons for which he had been waiting all these empty years" (39), by having Deven experience mounting the stair to meet Nur "as if sloughing off and casting away the meanness and dross of his past existence" to approach "a new and wondrously illuminated era" (40), Desai affiliates Deven's reverence for Nur with that of a disciple for a guru, for "the Indian guru may be seen by disciples as the image of a deity," and he "charms his disciples and berates them, helps them in matters human and divine, and teaches through trial and obstruction" (Gold 3). Moreover, Deven apprehends Nur in terms consistent with North Indian traditions of devotion to *sants*, "hindi poet-singers remembered from the fifteenth century and still visible today," not only because poetic achievement is taken as a revelation of natural, transcendent power, but also because "*sant* tradition in some of its variants exalts the guru at the expense of ritual and gods. [...] Sometimes he appears as a being within, or the supreme transcendent Lord; at other times he is described in very human terms, as if he could only be a living master" (3). The *sant*'s "apparition" (*darshan*), his manifestation through physical appearance and discourse, dispenses a kind of grace to those who come in contact with it (36-40). Through "willful surrender of one's body, mind, and wealth" to the *sant*, one comes to be shaped by his attributes and to participate in his power; a poem attributed to the most celebrated of *sants*, the fifteenth-century poet Kabir, famously describes the guru "as a dyer [...] slowly drawing the devotee's spotted cloth [...] through his sweet, liquid colors" (24, 26).

While Deven certainly mingles North Indian cultural patterns into naïve, selfish expectations of what literature and Nur may do for him,

Desai's narrative vindicates that culture's insistence that transcendence is possible, that the poetic word may be its vehicle, and that divestment of egoism is its pre-condition. When Deven first hears Nur's voice, he feels "some taut membrane of reservation tear apart inside him and a surging expansion of joy at hearing the voice and the words that could only belong to that superior being" (38). Loss of "reservation," of the habitual disillusionment and diffidence that mark his disabling impurity and preponderance of *tamas*, is akin to a deflowering, a prologue to (re)birth. When Deven begins to recite Nur's poetry, the words are suffused with memory of "his father recit[ing] them to him" (44). Deven shares with his now deceased father a guardianship that, like Brahman guardianship of Vedic hymns, acknowledges the irreducibility of power and meaning to material terms. Indeed, his masterful recitation (*sud-dhauccharana*) is a type of empowering purification (Madan 17).

At the same time, "he began to be overcome by the curious sensation that he was his own mother [...] and that [Nur] was a child, his child, whom he was lulling to sleep. He understood completely, in these minutes, how it must feel to be a mother, a woman. He had not known before such intimacy, such intense closeness" (44–45). The recognition of natural power, the giving of oneself to the custody of another sufficient to appreciate the poet's words, allows a transcendence, including a transcendence of gender identity. Rather than leading to "escape and release," the aesthetic superiority of great art detaches us from the insecurities and interests of the self enough to induce, at least fleetingly, the "intense closeness" of maternal, absolute responsibility for another.<sup>31</sup> Openness to the apparition of a natural order of rank, far from colonizing us to hegemonic power relations, opens us simultaneously to responsibility and intimacy, allowing the *artha* and *kama* in the custody of *dharma* to enter into our range of competence. To the extent that poetry emancipates us from egoistic self-enclosure, it is indeed a revelation of the divine: it "enters into [our] midst like some visitor from another element [like a *sant* at a moment of *darshan*], silencing [us] all with wonder" (167). Likening a mosque's dome to the "cool, high-minded, and remote" perfection of art, Deven comes to un-

derstand that were poetry, like technical disciplines, to offer answers, to “be practical,” as opposed to teaching, like Nur, through “trial and obstruction,” it would cease to contain questions and problems in their perfect shape: “and were it not perfect, and constant, [...] it would be nothing” (192). Such perfection conserves the purity that makes constancy possible, a virtue of the temporal realm, and as such integral to dharma.

Desai does not suggest that literature makes us moral in a simple way. Nur’s extravagant appetites, his willingness to be surrounded by self-interested flatterers, and to treat the recitation of verse as a condiment of revels (51-57), reflect not simply personal weaknesses, but also the desire to recreate, in a vulgar, debased way, a simulacrum of the splendour associated with the Mughal court.<sup>32</sup> It is consistent with the nostalgic chauvinism of his politics, and calls attention to the prominence of nostalgic idealizing in motivating Urdu poetry, and by implication other literature. Nur’s readiness to treat Deven’s tape-recording sessions as opportunities to hold court and extract tribute in food and drink contribute mightily to the project’s failure (150–69).

Notably, the only person at the university who shares Deven’s respect for Urdu poetry, Siddiqui, head of the one-man Urdu Department, exemplifies the complicity of culture with both privilege and nostalgic self-indulgence. The last heir of a Muslim nawab family, Siddiqui gets the university to provide Deven funds for tape-recording Nur, but then evades both any effort to make the project succeed and all responsibility for its failure. Haunted by forebodings, Deven comes one evening to Siddiqui’s house, “one of the last of the large old villas of Mirpore” (132), surrounded by the bazaar, and in complete disrepair. Siddiqui, sitting on the terrace “much in the attitude of a grand landowner, a man of leisure and plenty” (133), invites Deven to a revel with his houseboy and other boys recruited from the bazaar (135-38). Siddiqui’s villa – isolated, stagnant, decrepit – carries a symbolic weight similar to that of ancestral mansions in Rushdie’s *Shame*, Garcia Marquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!*, and Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher” – self-enclosure, in-breeding,

self-aestheticizing delusion collude to ensure the swallowing up of any future by a past whose impurities are utterly disabling. Portraying Siddiqui deliberately losing at poker to his houseboy while fondling his knee and promising to get him to "make it up" (138) to him later, Desai associates the decaying villa with pederastic practices linked both to masculine privilege and idealizing poetry in Islamic, Persian and subcontinent contexts.<sup>33</sup>

If poetry memorializes, and so reproduces, problematic aspects of a community's past (here, wealthy upper-class males inducing impoverished, lower-class youths into non-reciprocal sexualized power relations), it also engenders specific allegiances that may contract one's sympathies, reducing one's responsiveness to a particular Other because one is, as in exclusive devotion to a personal god (*bhakti*), already taken up by a different Other.<sup>34</sup> When Nur's young second wife, a former "dancing girl," sends Deven her own Urdu verses, challenging him to overcome his assumption that only males "have a right to brains, talent, reputation and achievement" (196), Deven cannot find the "courage" (197) to read them: "he did not have the will or the wherewithal to deal with this new presence, one he had been happy to ignore earlier and regulate to the grotesque world of hysterics, termagants, viragos, the demented and the outcast" (197).<sup>35</sup> While the novel leaves deliberately unclear whether Nur's wife uses feminist tropes self-servingly, as it leaves unclear whether her poetry has literary merit, it is clear that Nur's "presence" occupies so much space in Deven's imagination, and consumes so much energy, that he is unwilling and perhaps unable to assume the burden of a "new presence." Thus, with knowing injustice he leaves the poetry unread.

Despite its own susceptibility to debasement and misuse, literature nonetheless opens us to transcendence through disclosing a power irreducible to material rewards or coercion, a power that outlives the cultural politics that occasion it. To the extent that it purifies us, enabling ethical agency, literature places us in custody much as a guru places his disciple in custody, demanding effacement of self as the price of illumination. The light that literature bestows allows us to breach the totali-

ties that both dominant power relations and our own egotism would maintain, while demanding the discipline necessary to guard such differences as Urdu language and literature, a discipline that confounds both chauvinistic notions of cultural 'purity' and reductions of culture to naturalized hegemonies. Indeed, literature's custody works against the potential abuse of the disciple-guru relation and the potential arbitrariness of *bhakti*, exclusive devotion to a personal god and by extension to a particular master, community, or culture, for the disciplines necessary to 'see' literature's 'light' entail both a critical independence sufficient to receive, and affirm, another's aesthetic power, and a respect for heterogeneous goods and values sufficient to apprehend how diverse voices and powers enter into the master's custody. Deven discovers that the British Romantics have been the greatest poetic influence upon Nur (156-57). Thus, custody of Urdu literature requires an appreciation of its dialogue with British Romanticism, which in turn requires emulation of Nur's, and by implication literature's, opening of the self to modification by the other.

Such openness contests the kind of drive for 'purity' exemplified by the names Muslim and Sikh separatists give their homelands, Pakistan and Khalistan, both meaning "Land of the Pure," as well as the way that *shuddhi*, purification, is deployed in the discourse of Hindu militancy.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, in resembling a *sant*, Nur embodies the co-mingling of Hindi and Urdu, Hindu and Muslim, in north Indian culture, just as the interpenetration of classical Persian and British Romantic influence in his poetry suggests connections between the critical independence of poetic genius and affirmation of cultural diversity inscribed in pluralistic iconoclasm of Kabir, the foremost *sant*: "in scoffing at the worship of any image of the Lord, Kabir appears to transcend the norms of Hinduism and Islam both. Popular legend has Kabir the abandoned son of a Brahman widow raised by Muslim parents. Seen to combine the attributes of both Hindus and Muslims through the story of his birth and adoption, he mocks the empty rituals of both communities at the time of his death," by, "the story goes," providing no body for his Hindu disciples to cremate or his Muslim disciples to bury (Gold 59).

Contesting the notion, popular in recent decades, that personal freedom and social emancipation are served by debunking literature's transcendent aspirations as mere "Romantic ideology,"<sup>37</sup> Desai suggests that in assuming a Brahman-like guardianship of that transcendence we allow a power akin to Rob Roy's to be placed at the command of marginalized individuals and communities. Deven acquires a direction by permitting his experience of Nur's greatness to overcome his lack of self-confidence: "he had accepted the gift of Nur's poetry and that meant he was custodian of Nur's very soul and spirit. It was a great distinction" (204). By presenting Deven as representative of postcoloniality, Desai implies that only acceptance of a "shining honor" (203) akin to that bestowed upon a disciple or a mansabdar can ground an identity resistant to marginalization within a homogenizing global system. When Deven at last ceases trying to use Nur to promote himself, realizing that his "friendship" with Nur entails inescapable, unending responsibilities – "he would have to pay for the funeral, support the widows, raise his son" (204) – the power manifest in Nur's poetry comes to his aid, allows him to act rather than react for the first time, to liberate himself from subservience to degrading masters and his own fear. The power that Nur's poetry transmits is akin to the *baraka*, "blessing," a Sufi master (*pir*) bestows upon a disciple, but more fully resembles a guru's transmission of grace: "Malik Sahib [...] once said that his work as guru was the fulfillment of a debt: he had taken spiritual gifts from the culture (sanskriti, the 'sanskritic' heritage), and now he had to give them back," for through the guru, one "realizes the identity of the individual self (*jivatma*) with the universal self (*paramatma*)" (Gold 190, 184, 185). Once Krishna's luminous poetry makes this congruence clear, Arjuna is willing to do battle, for he perceives that "freedom and release" (*moksha*) comes not in flight from the obligations of dharma, but rather in the performance of dharma purified of selfish interests and attachments (*Bhagavad Gita* 10, 13, Mascaro 84-88, 99-102, also Kirpal 134-35, 137-38).

Within the context of a dual responsibility – to Nur's poetry and to those its power might open to transcendence – Deven is similarly pre-



pared for an analogous battle, even as he achieves a heroic resoluteness that recalls Mughal valour: “the day would begin, with its calamities. They would flash out of the sky and cut him down like swords. He would run to meet them” (204). Desai does not suggest that Deven, any more than Rob Roy, will “win,” but rather that in the struggle against totalizing, degrading forces, literature’s power, like Rob Roy’s, will serve those it shelters from total exploitation and will transmit a legacy, like that transmitted to Wordsworth from Rob Roy’s grave, of natural power purified through its guardianship of the liberty of the other, enabling us to “support the widows, raise [the] son,” and otherwise partake of the quotidian services that mark auspicious modes of freedom.

## Notes

- 1 For the economic and political effacement of indigenous Highland culture, see Clyde 21-96, Pittock 98-152, and Colley. For the marginalization of Urdu in postcolonial India, see Brass, *Language* 182-234. For ideological and personal connections between “civilizing improvement” in Scotland and British colonization in India, see Phillipson and Carnall; also see the discussions of Thomas Babington Macaulay in Kidd 274, and Wolpert 214-15.
- 2 For Akbar’s reign, see Wolpert 126-34; for his encouragement of religious and cultural pluralism, see Streusand 114-22, 137-38, 148-53.
- 3 For Anderson, nationalism emerged in nineteenth-century Europe because homogeneous communities were “imagined,” largely through the effects of print-culture, in ways that projected fictive, monolithic identities upon linguistic, ethnic groups. For discussions of Anderson’s thesis in relation to Indian nationalism, see Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments and Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World—A Derivative Discourse?* For a critique of Anderson, stressing the role of religious, ethnic, and geographical particularity in forging national identity long before the nineteenth century, see Hastings.
- 4 For discussions of theological, philosophical, and political differences between Hindu and Muslim traditions, and the substantive role of those differences in shaping modern subcontinent nationalisms, see Larson, esp. 142-77, Van Der Veer, and Embree.
- 5 For Islamic separatism and its association with Urdu poetry, see Iqbal 149-57. Iqbal was the most celebrated twentieth-century Urdu poet. In *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World*, Chatterjee argues that India’s nationalisms,

- largely creations of the Western-educated middle classes, were culturally “derivative” phenomena.
- 6 See Schwartz 1-75; Inden, *Imagining India*; Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments*; Guha, “On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India,” 37-44.
  - 7 On Western admiration of the Sanskrit canon, along with efforts to accommodate it to various Western categories of meaning and value, see Inden, *Imagining India* 97-117, McGann’s discussion of Sir William Jones 126-35, and Carnall. For an example of how a conception of the Indian past motivated nationalism, see Sri Aurobindo 92-105.
  - 8 See Brass, *Language* 138-41. It has frequently been noted that Gandhi, while advocating a secular state and religious ecumenicalism, deployed specifically Hindu frameworks and symbolism in the independence struggle. See Wolpert 301-03, Larson 191-208, Van Der Veer 94-99, and Seth 72-106.
  - 9 On pluralism and dialogue within the Upanisadic meditation upon Vedic scripture, and among Hindu, Buddhist, and Jainist traditions, see Larson 62-101; on Ashoka, see Wolpert 61-69.
  - 10 On Vedic sacrifice, see Larson 58-65, Inden, *Imagining India* 232-62. On Indo-Sramanical culture and piety, see Larson 65-75, Wolpert 55-87. The periodization used here is Larson’s.
  - 11 Also see the portrait of the “sage Visamitra” and his relation to the youthful Rama in Venkatesananda 1-46.
  - 12 On Gandhi’s casting of mastery in terms of self-mastery, on his “feminizing” of ascetic power, see Van Der Veer 94-99; on his association of independence with Rama’s just rule, see 174. Seth notes that Gandhi argued that “no one *varna* or caste was superior to another in terms of birth. In terms of office, however, a brahmin would be superior to others if he was true to his *dharma* of protecting the weak against the strong, but not if he were to prey upon the other castes” (93). For the debate over whether Gandhi equivocated on the issue of caste, see Larson 199-213, and Ambedkar 141-48.
  - 13 On Sufism in India, see Wolpert 117-18, Larson 108-19, Gold 173-74, 190-95, 201-10. On the notion of just power in the *Ramayana*, see especially Hanuman’s disapproval of Sugriva, king of the vanaras (“monkey” or indigenous people), for his forgetful self-indulgence after Rama restores him to his rightful throne (Venkatesananda 198). By contrast, Rama’s rule is “characterized by the effortless and spontaneous prevalence of dharma. [...] The brahmanas (priests), the warriors, the farmers and businessmen, as also the members of the servant class, were entirely free from greed, and were joyously devoted to their own dharma and functions in society. [...] People were endowed with all auspicious characteristics and all of them had dharma as their guiding light” (349-50). For the “circle of justice,” see Streusand 26-27.

- 14 The description of Mirpore as “without history” echoes the critique of Indian culture V. S. Naipaul presents in *An Area of Darkness*.
- 15 For Romantic aestheticizations of Highlands culture and history, see Clyde 100-01 and 116-49, Dorothy Wordsworth, esp. 98-101 and 180-218. For the ease with which Whig historiography and aesthetic appreciation fit together, see Kidd 185-215, 247-67 and Edwards 92-121.
- 16 Wordsworth’s evocation of Rob Roy is remarkably consistent with what the historical record suggests. While Rob Roy’s power rested upon his cattle-rustling skills and thus the money he was able to extract for ‘protection’ services, he used that power, by all accounts, to protect his clan, care for the destitute, support – out of unrequited loyalty – the Jacobite cause, and resist the increasingly oppressive authority of great lords allied with English power, esp. the Duke of Montrose (see Tranter). In contrast to contemporary neo-Nietzscheanisms, which tend to view all qualitative distinctions as arbitrary cultural-historical constructions, Nietzsche employed notions of “order of rank” and “breeding” to affirm, against a “democratic,” relativistic, leveling European bourgeois culture, the reality and life-enhancing value of qualitative distinctions (see esp. *The Will to Power* 457-550, paragraphs 854-1067).
- 17 For the “absolute self” in Coleridge, see Haney, *The Challenge of Coleridge* 248-56.
- 18 On the origins of Krishna (“Black”) in a pre-Aryan local god, and the articulation of “discipline in action” (*karma yoga*) in the *Bhagavad Gita*, see Wolpert 71, 81; on the relation of self and absolute (atman and brahman) in the *Gita*, see Larson 87-88.
- 19 In his Introduction to *The Bhagavad Gita*, Mascaro notes that the first English translation appeared in 1785, and that in 1802 Alexander Hamilton, returning from India, taught Sanskrit to Friedrich von Schlegel, whose brother August later translated the *Gita* into Latin (9). On connections between Friedrich Schlegel’s and Schelling’s responses to Kant, and Coleridge’s relation to Schelling, see Haney, *The Challenge of Coleridge* 138, 211, 213-14, 217-18.
- 20 Haney points out that there is a Levinasian current within Wordsworth’s and Coleridge’s work that is suspicious of, and works against, tendencies towards an egotistic sublime. At the same time, Haney notes, to the extent that Wordsworth and Coleridge connect the self with the transcendent (in ways akin to how *atman* and *brahman* are connected), they depart from Levinas’s stress upon the alterity of the transcendent, the irreducible otherness of the Other. See “Wordsworth and Levinas” 360-81, *The Challenge of Coleridge* 173-262, *William Wordsworth and the Hermeneutics of Incarnation*.
- 21 John Williams notes that in “Volume Two of *Poems 1807*,” Wordsworth “begins with the ballad ‘Rob Roy’s Grave.’ The need for national moral regeneration is implicit in the imagined soliloquy of the outlaw; it is an outsider’s appeal to a natural law, a ‘simple plan’ (simple as the verse style), and it expresses

- Wordsworth's own beliefs, himself an outsider alienated from an inhumane establishment" (143).
- 22 See Rosemary Marangoly George's critique of Jameson's argument that Third World narrative should be read as national allegories.
  - 23 For a review of the scholarship, see Marglin 1-10.
  - 24 The depiction of India as a nation without a future, as prone to enact tragedy as farce, may be seen as reflective of an early 1980s disillusionment, shaped by endemic stagnation and corruption, along with the division of political possibilities between the alternatives of Indira Gandhi's authoritarianism and her opponent's ineffectual, anarchic partisanship (see Wolpert 371-422, Larson 226-56, Tharoor 23-78, 112-38, 199-274).
  - 25 Also see 1-64, *Crisis of the European Subject* 113-62, *La révolte intime* 7-116. By assuming that the release of multiple potentialities is uncomplicatedly emancipatory, Hardt and Negri replicate the Marxist tradition's tendency to associate the good with an unleashing of human powers that fails to confront the reality, noted by Terry Eagleton, that "human powers are far from spontaneously positive," and so ignores "the need to discriminate among human powers" (222-23).
  - 26 On James Mill, see Inden, *Imagining India* 45-46, 54-57, 90-93, 165-73, Carnall 221-22, 226. See Naipaul, *An Area of Darkness* and *India: A Wounded Civilization*.
  - 27 This danger is already noted within classical Sanskrit literature itself, as when, for example, Rama must dissuade his younger brother from fleeing the rigours and agitations of kingship for the "freedom and release" of ascetic retreat in the forest (Venkatesananda 94-120), or when Krishna must persuade Arjuna, despite the latter's desire for "release" from temporal cares and the ambiguities of action, to partake in this worldly battle against political forces that, if unopposed, would make power the servant of rapacious will (*The Bhavagad Gita* 1-2, Mascaro 43-55).
  - 28 The articulation of just power is indissociable from the 'civilizing mission' of culture, as exemplified in Rama's freeing the vanaras from despotic, violent rule, and then educating the rightful king, Sugriva, in the practice of *dharma* that guarantees justice by civilizing both the soul and society (see Venkatesananda 175-222).
  - 29 See Kirpal 127-38, Bande 168-69, and Afzal-Khan 84-87.
  - 30 For another modernist deflation of Romantic-inspired idealizations of writers, see Mann 37-57.
  - 31 The centrality of the maternal in Desai's meditations upon how "freedom entails responsibility" (77) is discussed in relation to Desai's other novels by Chakravarty, who notes that the "task of mothering" leaves one "open to the possibility of exploitation; but then, as Desai's texts repeatedly suggest, this is a risk that the gift of love must entail" (89). For the figure of the maternal

- in Indian national identity, see Roy 128-73; for the relation of the maternal to cow veneration in Hindu psychic and political identity, see Van Der Veer 85-94. For the association of maternal tenderness with divine transcendence in the Islamic traditions, see Wehrs, *African Feminist Fiction and Indigenous Values* 69-104, "The 'Sensible,' the Maternal, and the Ethical Beginnings of Feminist Islamic Discourse" in Djébar's *L'Amour, la fantasia* and *Loin de Médine*. For the relationship between aesthetic and ethical forms of transcendence, see Haney, *The Challenge of Coleridge* 29-72, Wehrs, "Levinas, Goethe's *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*, and the Compulsion of the Good" 215-42.
- 32 Wolpert notes that the "Great Mughals, whose reigns span the entire seventeenth century, have with good reason become universal symbols of power and affluence, of tenderness and cruelty, brutal and poetic," for Jahangir, Shah Jahan, and Aurangzeb maintained courts that "reflected a new syncretic patina of civilization that was a blend of Indian, Persian, and Central Asian manners and mores," and "the custom of draping both male and female figures with jewels, diaphanous veils, and peacock feathers, and the delight in song and dance, intoxicating drink, and the pleasures of the harem are habits and traditions at least as deeply rooted in Indian as in Persian soil" (149, 150, also see 150-57).
- 33 For the status of pederasty within Islamic contexts, see Murray, "The Will Not to Know" 14-54. For contemporary practices, see Mujtaba 267-74. For the pederastic strand in Sufi mysticism and neo-Platonic medieval Arabic, Persian, and Turkish poetry, see Wafer 107-31 and Murray, "Corporealizing Medieval Persian and Turkish Tropes" 132-41.
- 34 In this way, literary culture contributes to the problem identified by Derrida in *The Gift of Death*: our ethical responsibility to any particular Other tends to work against our ability to be ethically responsible to all the other Others.
- 35 On Desai's treatment of sexism in Indian culture, see esp. Chakravarky, Bande 42-71, 90-139, and Afzal-Khan 61-67, 74-84.
- 36 For the relation of the quest for purity to political separatism, see Wolpert 416-17, 443-46, and Van Der Veer 58-73, 99-105, 141-46. For the violence that accompanies quests for "purified" identities, see Pandey 1-13, Guha 34-62, Brass, *Theft of an Idol*. For the 1983-84 crisis over Sikh separatism, and the relation of Sikh piety to guru-*sants* and quests for purity, see Larson 234-44, Van Der Veer 53-56, 73-77, Embree 113-32, and Brass, *Language, Religion and Politics in North India* 277-400.
- 37 Critical endeavors to "situate" the text have worked against conferring a residual Romantic, vatic authority to literature to such an extent that, far from viewing reader and writer in terms of disciple and guru, contemporary criticism frequently places writer and text under such suspicion that the question of why one should bother to read at all becomes pertinent (see Spolsky 64-65, 84-104). Spolsky's study, like Eagleton's *Critical Theory* and Lentricchia's *After the New*

*Criticism*, delineates how criticism tends to value, and to find, what the critic already assumes to be right and true.

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