

David McCutcheon, Pioneer Critic of Raja Rao

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I

David McCutcheon (1930-1972), English-born scholar, Indophile and early critic of Raja Rao, was an authentic pioneer: in his short lifetime, he not only made a major contribution to the study of Bengali temples, but became one of the first scholars to write on the now much-commented subject of Indian Writing in English (IWE), a field in which his work is still regularly read and quoted today. Born in Coventry, David attended that city's King Henry VIII Grammar School. He made it to Cambridge University the hard way, on intellectual merit alone. He read Modern Languages (French and German) at Jesus College. After graduating in 1953, he taught English for two years in southern France. He went to India in 1957. He worked there first as an English teacher at Visva-Bharati University, Shantiniketan, and later, as Professor and then Reader in Comparative Literature at Jadavpur University, Calcutta. He developed a keen interest in Indian literature in English, notably through his friendship with P. Lal, the Calcutta scholar best known for founding the - still very much alive - Writers Workshop, an institution combining the roles of publishing house and literary *cénacle* and dedicated to the furthering of IWE (as testimony to this friendship, we may cite the volume of David's letters to P. Lal published posthumously in 1972). Another of his friends was none other than Satyajit Ray, for a goodly number of whose films David - having become sufficiently conversant in Bengali - provided the subtitles.

1972 saw David's tragic and enormously premature death in Calcutta, from a sudden attack of polio. His work, however, lived and lives on. His collection of 1969, *Indian Writing in English: Critical Essays*, remains in print in India: it offers both general (and still highly valuable) considerations on the IWE phenomenon and close readings of such writers as Nissim Ezekiel, Balachandra Rajan and, crucially for our purposes, Raja Rao. A tribute volume, *David McCutcheon: Shraddhanjali*, edited by P. Lal and consisting of testimonies from the most varied Indian and Western hands, Satyajit Ray included, was published in 1972. David's ground-breaking study of Bengali brick temples, *The Temples of Bankura District*, was published by Writers Workshop in 1972. 2000 of his temple photos are kept in a Calcutta archive, and his collection of Bengali scrolls was bequeathed to Coventry's Herbert Art Gallery. His name is still cited in literary circles with great respect, as befits one who helped open up key areas of subcontinental studies to the West.¹

II

We shall now consider David McCutcheon's critical work on Raja Rao - confining the discussion to Rao's three novels published during McCutcheon's lifetime, namely *Kanthapura* (1938), *The Serpent and the Rope* (1960) and *The Cat and Shakespeare* (1971), plus his essay collection *The Meaning of India* (1996).² It was on *The Serpent and the Rope* that David produced a full-length essay, "The Novel as Sastra" (written in 1962 and republished in his

collection of 1969, *Indian Writing in English*)³ - giving that novel a more extended treatment in his book than any other work of Indian literature.

McCutchion's introduction to his volume includes a couple of closely argued pages on Rao, in which he discusses *The Serpent and the Rope*, *The Cat and Shakespeare*, and the essay "The Writer and the Word."⁴ Rao's essay he found opaque, seeing it as a collection of "enigmatic sutras" and commenting: "Thus ironically a literature which might have been expected to bridge East and West is in danger of having turned uncritically back in upon itself, even to the point of seeming to affirm that the less it is understood by the West, the more it is true to itself."⁵ Rao affirms in his essay: "unless the author becomes an *upasaka* and enjoys himself in himself (which *is* Rasa) the eternality of the sound (Sabda) will not manifest itself";⁶ McCutchion sees a stance of this nature as the rejection of "all inter-cultural attempts at understanding" and as confirming the rather negative view of the West which, he says, Rao held privately: "In private conversation Raja Rao does not disguise his conviction that the West is touchingly immature and Greek philosophy a minor offshoot of Sanskrit wisdom."⁷ McCutchion goes on to affirm: "One wonders whether *The Serpent and the Rope* is to be classified under literature or theosophy," adding, of both that novel and *The Cat and Shakespeare*, that, apparently, Rao's fiction "purports to depict a different kind of mind - outside Western categories, beyond Western criticism." He finds *The Cat and Shakespeare* "richly entertaining and suggestive," while noting that if "the point of view, as in many a modern Western novel, presents actions and thoughts as they occur, without setting them in any exterior scheme of judgement or analysis," the intention seems to be one of representing specifically Indian modes of thought in English.⁸

David also considered Rao in the article "Indian Writing in English,"⁹ placing him among "those Indians who try to create a consciously Indian style." Here he discusses *Kanthapura* - "told by a village grandmother, rambling, digressive and homely, with an odd un-English flavour" - and its celebrated Preface, from which he quotes Rao's dictum that "the tempo of our Indian life must be infused into our English expression."¹⁰ He goes on to comment on *The Serpent and the Rope*, which he sees as "another philosophical epic .. high on the plateaux of the soul" - indeed, a "brahminical novel" - again stressing Rao's project of Indianising English: "In it he has tried to capture the effects of Sanskrit." He finds it somewhat shapeless: "Most of the novel is an interminable incantation, philosophy and reminiscence, swathing a rudimentary plot ... the narrative passages meander and dissolve in the fluid consciousness of the hero." Despite these strictures, McCutchion does paradoxically judge Rao's novel as a success: "Yet Rao carries it off - if you have the patience; it is a consistent, convincing presentation of a particular kind of mind" (namely the narrator Ramaswamy's).¹¹

Before going on to consider McCutchion's fuller, chapter-length discussion of *The Serpent and the Rope*, we may note how his comments on the other two novels and on Rao in general, brief though they are, constitute their author as a critical pioneer, anticipating important later trends in the reception of Rao's work, be it by fellow writers or critics. Salman Rushdie, in his introduction to *The Vintage Book of Indian Writing* (1997), controversially does not include the old master at all in the anthology co-edited by himself and Elizabeth West, justifying this exclusion in his introduction in terms that arguably echo the less enthusiastic side of McCutchion's judgment of *Kanthapura* - which novel Rushdie finds "dated, its approach at once grandiloquent and archaic."¹² Amit Chaudhuri, by contrast, in his rival *Picador Book of Modern Indian Literature* (2001), allots Rao a prominent place, representing him by the first twenty pages (uncut) of *The Serpent and the Rope*,¹³ which he praises as a "great novel," while seeming to distance himself from the main thrust of David's analysis by arguing: "Rao,

or at least his protagonist, ... is not a Hindu mystic, as he has sometimes been made out to be," and finally recasting the British critic's "brahminical novel" judgment by declaring: "*The Serpent and the Rope* is ... a Modernist text written by a cosmopolitan Brahmin."¹⁴ A third prominent IWE figure, Anita Desai, implicitly validates McCutcheon's upbeat philosophical view of *The Cat and Shakespeare* by smuggling a cat called Shakespeare into her novel of 2004, *The Zigzag Way*, which, though set in Mexico, recounts an individual's metaphysical journey in terms that might in some ways recall Ramaswamy's.

In the critical arena, to take *Kanthapura*, McCutcheon's remark on the "un-English flavour" of the book's style, confirming Rao's linguistic programme on the level of the text, is corroborated decades later by Dora Sales Salvador, who, in *Puentes sobre el mundo* (2004), speaks of "*Kanthapura*, del escritor indio Raja Rao, cuyo inglés, militante de la causa independentista india, parece una transposición de su materno kannada" ("*Kanthapura*, by the Indian writer Raja Rao, whose English, born of commitment to the cause of Indian independence, seems to be a transposition of his maternal Kannada"), adding: "Se trata ... de utilizar la lengua que llegó por la vía de la colonización con el propósito de descolonizarla" ("This is a case ... of using the language which arrived by the route of colonisation in order to decolonise it").¹⁵ For *The Cat and Shakespeare*, David's view that this novel aims to "depict a different kind of mind," of a non-Western stamp, succinctly unites psychological and spiritual approaches and thus reads as embryonically anticipating Letizia Alterno's detailed analysis from 2002, "The Mystic Cat." Alterno argues that "the Cat plays a pivotal role in leading, through the agency of Govindan Nair, Ramakrishna Pai, to the Ultimate Reality",¹⁶ thus seeing the novel as exemplifying how "Raja Rao conceives literature as a true spiritual experience, one that is best described by the word *sadhana*," and "writes to achieve spiritual balance through self-analysis."¹⁷

III

"The Novel as Sastra" sets out McCutcheon's views on *The Serpent and the Rope* in detail. The title, equating Rao's fictional narrative with a *sastra* or Hindu scripture, suggests doubts as to whether it is a novel at all. Nonetheless, McCutcheon opens by referring to the ambitious project of the "great Indian novel."¹⁸ He does not believe that such a book will necessarily reconcile Eastern and Western perspectives; Rao's attempt, he feels, is written squarely from the "Eastern" side, for, he argues, "its sensibility and values are uncompromisingly Indian, absorbing all experiences from the point of view of one who seeks Brahman." It appears in any case that McCutcheon does not believe *The Serpent and the Rope* actually is the Great Indian Novel.

For Rao's Cambridge-educated critic, this novel only rather questionably meets the requirements of its nominal form: "Of the more than four hundred pages, few are narrative, most are meditation - an unhurrying philosophical soliloquy on the nature of reality - serpent or rope."¹⁹ He asks: "is this a novel at all?", declaring that "all the central concerns of the Western novel are absent - social relations, psychological motivation, characterisation, judgment, a passion for the concrete ...," and wondering whether it is not, rather, "a book of wisdom," "of discursive enquiry rather than narration."²⁰ He finds it "full of extraordinary analogues, correspondences and echoes," in a mental universe where "all contradictions resolve themselves in ultimate identity."²¹ Though considering the book's greatest fault to be its "philosophical garrulousness,"²² McCutcheon admires its simulacrum of a human mind at work: "the action is Rama's [Ramaswamy's] mind and personality, and our involvement in it is an extraordinary and revealing experience. At any rate I know now intimately and

convincingly what it feels like to be a Western-educated Madrasi Brahman, ... a pilgrim on the road to Travancore."²³ In literary terms, McCutcheon suggests a partial analogy with the stream-of-consciousness fictions of Joyce or Woolf; in sociological terms, he implies that Ramaswamy's melancholy contemplativeness expresses the world-view of a declining social group, a Brahmin caste increasingly out of touch with the realities of post-Partition India ("I am ashamed to say I weep a lot these days ... Sometimes singing some chant of Sankara, I burst into sobs").²⁴ He concludes that *The Serpent and the Rope* "certainly shows one path the 'truly Indian novel' may take," enabling the reader to "experience an authentically Indian mind."²⁵

McCutcheon's reading of Rao's novel, of its strengths and weaknesses, anticipates later currents, both favourable and less so, within that book's critical reception. Letizia Alterno (2004) refers to "The Novel as Sastra" as arguably "the most controversial critical assessment of Raja Rao," stressing that despite his objections on formal grounds McCutcheon was actually, in his notion of the exploration of a mind, "furthering our overall understanding of Rao's *œuvre*" by "setting the scene for an examination of Rao's writing against the backdrop of Indian psychology."²⁶ Other later critics of *The Serpent and the Rope*, if not actually mentioning McCutcheon, appear as continuators of one or other of his insights. These include G. Thirupati Kumar (2002), who extends David's "brahminical" strictures, perhaps rather one-sidedly claiming that the novel's action is "solely and completely determined by the tradition of the [Brahmin] caste" and concluding that "Rao's whole endeavour ... is to celebrate the hegemony of Brahmins in the name of India and tradition";²⁷ and S.P. Swain (2000), who, somewhat more generously, reads the novel as focusing on marriage in typically and traditionally subcontinental fashion, as viewed through "the Indian spirit symbolised by Ramaswamy."²⁸ We may legitimately consider McCutcheon's early reading of *The Serpent and the Rope* as containing the seeds of much of the later criticism of Rao's book and the controversies around it.

IV

To conclude this brief study of a convergence of writer and critic, we may finally ask what it was that attracted McCutcheon to *The Serpent and the Rope*, what there might be in common between Indian novelist and British scholar, and what we can learn for our time from their textual encounter. One element bringing them together was a shared cosmopolitanism. *The Serpent and the Rope* reveals a Rao conversant with the Indian heritage but also with the cultures of England, France and Germany: Ramaswamy passes through not only Benares and Hyderabad, but also Cambridge, London, Paris, Aix-en-Provence and Sète, on his way quoting a vast range of literary texts - Kannada folk-songs or the Bhagavad Gita, but also Dante, Valéry or Rilke. Rao himself is an exponent of multilingualism, with a language range embracing Kannada, Sanskrit, some Deccani Urdu, English and French. David, for his part, had an in-depth knowledge of the cultures of his native England, Germany, France (both he and Rao spent time in southern France) and his adopted India, while his language skills extended beyond English to German, French and a sufficient level of Bengali. McCutcheon, like Romania's Mircea Eliade before him in the pre-Independence years,²⁹ was surely among the first modern-day Europeans to accept India on its own terms, certainly not uncritically but at the same time without a priori (post)colonial prejudices; Rao sought to encompass Europe's realities within his eminently Indian, but also universal, vision of the meaning of things.

Indeed, if McCutcheon can be seen as a "positive Orientalist," putting his Western education at the service of the understanding of India, the Rao of *The Serpent and the Rope* may, in

parallel, be viewed less as an Indian cultural separatist (as McCutcheon sometimes seems to imply) than as a "positive Occidental." Ramaswamy might seem a dyed-in-the-wool Brahmin, but he breaks a founding prohibition by crossing the sea, and finally returns to India, seeking ultimate enlightenment in a Travancore ashram, only after having absorbed into his being the manifold manifestations of Europe, thus regenerating the consciousness of a dying social group by importing fresh energies. Chaudhuri sees *The Serpent and the Rope*, with its transcultural theme, as "one of the first postcolonial fictions,"³⁰ but today we may even read it as going beyond the postcolonial to suggest, through Ramaswamy's absorption of Europe without being overwhelmed by it, a possible road-map for a resurgent India that now seeks, in the epoch of two-way globalisation, to affirm its identity in dialogic fashion towards a West that stands in need of it. Here, we may take as emblematic the passage of Rao's novel in which Ramaswamy's interpretive force transforms a blank slab of stone in his Aix-en-Provence garden into the image of a Nandi bull, vehicle of Shiva, thus metamorphosing the physique of Europe and appropriating it for India:

When we reached home I said, "Look, here's Shiva's bull at our door!", and I showed her the huge flat stone that lay like a squat Nandi at the edge of our garden ... And from then on Madeleine never passed by the garden without either touching the huge hump of the bull, or caressing him and saying, "Here, Bull, here is your feed today."³¹

Of this same image, David McCutcheon said: "A rock becomes a Nandi bull if you call it a bull."³² Today, we may read it as epitomising Rao's highly original synthesis of East and West. That synthesis is itself paralleled in the convergence of Rao and McCutcheon - Europhile but still Indian writer, Indophile but still Western critic - in a strong foreshadowing, not just of the later course of Indian Writing in English, but of an equitable East-West dialogue to come, whose exact contours still remain to be delineated.

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¹ See, for instance, Uma Pamareswaran's use of McCutcheon as an authority in her essay of 2001, "Age, Same Rage" (6-7).

² Rao states: "These essays were written for different occasions mostly from the last thirty years" [i.e. they belong, approximately, to the period 1966-1996] (Rao, *The Meaning of India*, 7).

³ McCutcheon, "The Novel as Sastra" [1962], in *Indian Writing in English*, 83-98.

⁴ McCutcheon states in his introduction (1968) to his book (McCutcheon, "Introduction," *Indian Writing in English*, 9-23) that "The Writer and the Word" was first published in *The Literary Criterion* (Mysore) and then republished in *Critical Essays on Indian Writing in English* (Karnatak University Dharwar) (9, 14). This essay is included in Rao's *The Meaning of India* (153-156), where it is explained (199) that it began life as a lecture at the University of Mysore.

⁵ McCutcheon, "Introduction," 14.

⁶ Rao, "The Writer and the Word," in *The Meaning of India*, 155; quoted in McCutcheon, "Introduction," 14. In the glossary to his book, Rao defines *upasaka* as "follower of a metaphysical discipline" (202).

⁷ McCutcheon, "Introduction," 14.

⁸ McCutcheon, "Introduction," 14, 15.

⁹ McCutcheon, "Indian Writing in English," in *Indian Writing in English*, 25-47.

¹⁰ McCutcheon, "Indian Writing in English," 37; Rao, *Kanthapura*, 5.

¹¹ McCutcheon, "Indian Writing in English," 37, 38.

¹² Rushdie, "Introduction" to *The Vintage Book of Indian Writing*, xvii.

¹³ Chaudhuri, *The Picador Book of Modern Indian Literature*, 398-413; Rao, *The Serpent and the Rope*, 7-26.

¹⁴ Chaudhuri, 397.

¹⁵ Sales Salvador, *Puentes sobre el mundo*, 378.

¹⁶ Alterno, "The Mystic Cat," 63.

¹⁷ Alterno, "The Mystic Cat," 54.

¹⁸ McCutcheon, "The Novel as Sastra," 83.

¹⁹ McCutcheon, "The Novel as Sastra," 84.

²⁰ McCutcheon, "The Novel as Sastra," 85.

²¹ McCutcheon, "The Novel as Sastra," 87, 88.

²² McCutcheon, "The Novel as Sastra," 91.

²³ McCutcheon, "The Novel as Sastra," 92-93.

²⁴ Rao, *The Serpent and the Rope*, 407 (quoted McCutcheon 95).

²⁵ McCutcheon, "The Novel as Sastra," 98.

²⁶ Alterno, "Quest for Guru," 90.

²⁷ Kumar, "Tradition, Caste and Raja Rao," 37, 51.

²⁸ Swain, "The Theme of Marriage," 30.

²⁹ The novelist and anthropologist Eliade spent three enormously formative years (1928-1931) in India, basing himself, like McCutcheon, in Calcutta.

³⁰ Chaudhuri, 397.

³¹ Rao, *The Serpent and the Rope*, 57.

³² McCutcheon, "The Novel as Sastra," 85.