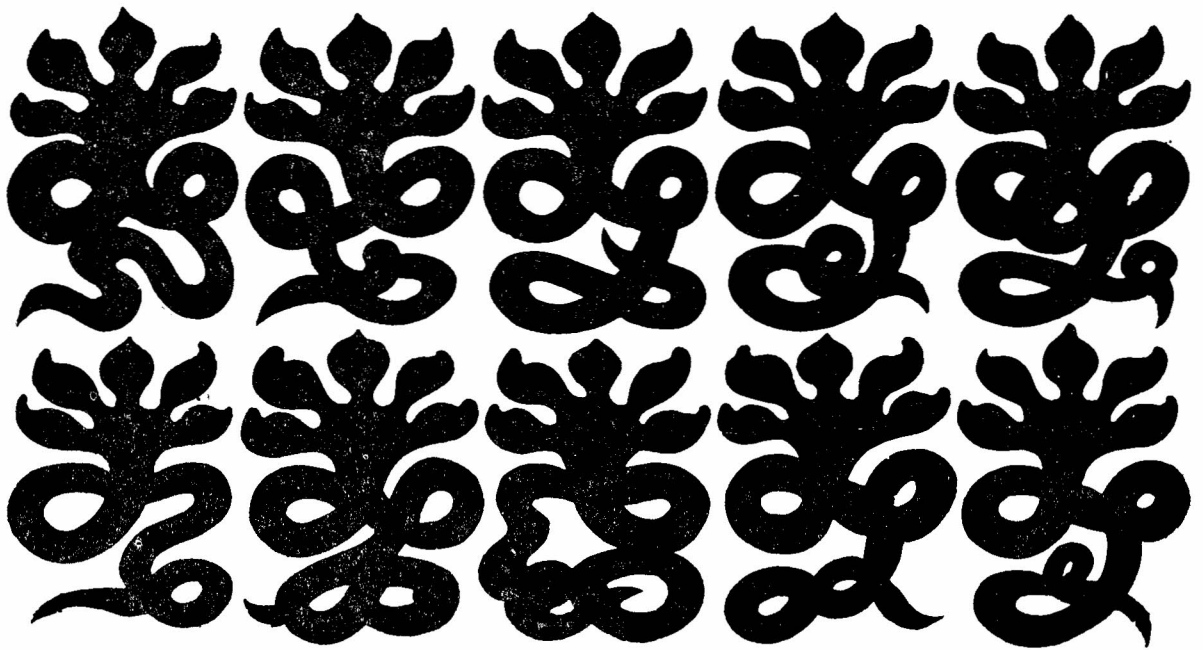


The
SRI LANKA JOURNAL
of the
HUMANITIES



UNIVERSITY OF PERADENIYA

VOLUME XII

NUMBERS 1 & 2

1986
(Published in 1988)

'BUT HOW SHALL I READ THAT SMILE?' -
THE SIGIRI GRAFFITI AND THE MODERN READER

Reading the graffiti has its basis in scholarship, but it is ultimately an activity of the imagination and a mobilization of sensibility. Clearly, there is still room for patient scholarship - Paranavitana himself regretted that more effort had not been forthcoming. While the major contribution to our understanding of the graffiti remains that of Paranavitana, the work of P.E.E. Fernando, P.B. Meegaskumbura, A.V. Suraweera, A.S. Kulasuriya *et al* suggests that new readings and substantial reinterpretations are distinctly possible. The theme of this essay, however, is interpretation as poetry, by poets and readers of poetry, rather than the scholarly determination of the text or the critical exegesis; it is concerned with the words and phrases, the echoes of passion, the play of wit, the perceptions and self-revelations which remain afloat in one's mind after an immersion in the Paranavitana *opus* and other responses to the poetry. They constitute, in the widest sense, a world of discourse, a dynamic system of signals to the imagination of modern readers, evoking a past and enriching the present.

Illuminations can arrive in unexpected ways. Professor E.F.C. Ludowyk, by no means a Sigiri specialist, saw a precious nugget buried in the notes to No. 381 - the comment on the word *සුඛ* (*miyelandhi*). Paranavitana himself had missed the vibrancy of the word he had deciphered, rendering it *sweet-heart* in his translation, though in note 2 to the graffiti he says "the word, therefore, literally means 'little honey-heart'." Fresh and rich - and buried for a thousand years - "this word occurs nowhere else." *Sweet-heart*, after all, is abstract, hackneyed and loose: *honey-heart* is a truly metaphoric melding of experiences.

Professor Ludowyk's celebrated gift for - and commitment to - "close reading" enabled him to restore Paranavitana's discovery to our reading of No. 381, replacing Paranavitana's own more commonplace rendering 'O sweet-heart.' But is මියුරු unavailable to the modern Sinhala poet and reader (or is it that the commonplace has proved more influential?) since Prof. Nandasena Mudiyanse's Sinhala modernization has ගැඹුරු? It is interesting that even in his note to No. 381 in his මිශ්‍රණ මි Prof. Mudiyanse omits any effort to render Paranavitana's gloss "The word, therefore, would literally mean 'little honey-heart'. Modern English provides us with 'honey-heart' - has modern Sinhalese no place for මියුරු and no equivalent for it?

Putting back the word, Professor Ludowyk put back the poetry - or at least some of it. Here are two renderings of No. 381 in modern English. But first the Paranavitana:

'O sweet-heart, O golden-coloured one,
everything that has been ordered by you
(to be done) by me has been done by
myself in an infatuated manner.' Pray
tell (this), what has been said by me,
to the golden-coloured one?¹

Now, the two later versions, both based on Paranavitana

Hail! I speak, a worker in iron:
'little honey-heart,
Golden girl.

1. *Sigiri Graffiti*, vol.II, Oxford, (1956) p. 237
(hereinafter *SG II*).

All you asked of me,
 Passionately, senselessly,
 I myself have done.'
 Pray tell the gold-hued one
 What I have spoken.²

(Ludowyk)

Little honey-heart, golden one,
 All you demanded I have done:
 I am intoxicated!
 Please tell the golden one
 What I have said.³

Perhaps these various versions only illustrate Oscar Wilde's point that a translation cannot be both beautiful and faithful, or - to look at it the other way round - *traduttore traditore*. Each has its virtues - none of them is wholly 'true'. But they all, in their different ways, suggest something of the drama of the original experience, the passing over of aesthetic encounter (with the frescoes) into human response, the arousal of the visitor's imagination to a creative *geste* of its own, an act by which he takes possession of his experience of Sigiri and its paintings. The modern reader, receiving a modern version, can find his sensibility rising to the possession of both the graffito and the experience that evoked it. The word *miyelandhi* and the inditer's attitude of willing enslavement belong within the graffito, the "golden-coloured one" and her silence are the 'events', as it were, which evoked the graffito.

We await modern Sinhala renderings which can bring the graffiti alive for the ordinary reader. Modern European literature abounds in examples of such creative encounters of poets with their pasts. Modern Sinhala poetry does not often seem to have been impelled to such exploration.

-
2. Ludowyk, E.F.C. *The Story of Ceylon*, London, (1962) p.88.
 3. Halpe, Ashley, 'Sigiri Verses' in *The James Thevathasan Rutnam Felicitation Volume*, ed. K. Indrapala, Jaffna, (1975) No. X, p. 97.

It would of course be absurd to maintain that all, or even most of the graffiti are of the highest poetic excellence. Many are of purely sociological interest, or only illustrative of cultural history, while not a few moralistic aphorisms and plain statements remind one rather forcibly that not all verse is poetry, especially in an age where, being the standard form of written expression, it could have an all-purpose character. However, although imaginative leaps of the order of 'little honey-heart' don't occur in every line, there are innumerable points at which the careful elucidations of Paranavitana are lit by a visionary gleam, a coruscation of wit, a glimmer set off by chiaroscuro, the arresting radiance of a bold image. No. 334 has long been admired:

නිල් ක(ටි) රොළ මලෙකැ ඇවුණු වැටිකොළ මල සෙය්
සැකැගැ සිහි වෙන්නෙය් මහකෝල් වන (හ)ය් රත්වත් හුන්⁴

which might be rendered:

A *vatkola* flower entangled with a blue
 katrola flower,
A golden one beside one blue as *mahanel*:
I will remember them as evening falls.⁵

The Irish poet, Richard Murphy, dipping into the translations was struck by

.... I have come to you, O long-eyed ones
 Like the gentle breeze to the moonlight⁶

4. *SG II*, p. 205.

5. Halpé, *op.cit*, No. XXXIII, p. 100.

6. *ibid*, No. V, p. 97.

in No. 175, and by the (admittedly conjectural) reading of No. 207:

She returns look for look,
With eyes like blue water lilies,
But she has lingered long on the mountain—
The stone has gone into her heart.⁷

Prof. Meegaskumbura draws our attention to *ඉඳුන් මිනිවිටි* in No. 50, insisting that the sharpness of the image could never be brought out in a translation.⁸ One of my own favourites is *අඳුන් හිඟිකොන අහස් ලද වෙයි.*⁹

- 'the sky has been yours - in a dream' - in 609.
The whole poem might be rendered

Gold will not buy back the girl you had
Long ago; and here, today,
What have you gained?
The sky has been yours -
In a dream.¹⁰

There is an admirable meeting of the conventional with the inventive in No. 331:

The woman, whose smile is (like) the seeds
of the melon and whose drooping hair
is (like) the cool dark cloud, enticed me,
having given me a look (with a) gentle smile.¹¹

7. *ibid.* No. XVII, p. 98.

8. Meegaskumbura, P.B. *The Language of the Sigiri Poems*. Paper read to the Ceylon Studies Seminar, University of Peradeniya. p. 25. (Cyclostyled) 1984. Accepted for publication in *The Sri Lanka Journal of the Humanities*, Peradeniya.

9. *SG II*, p. 376.

10. Halpé, *op.cit.*, No. XXXVI, p. 101.

11. *SG II*, p. 203.

(She whose smile shows teeth like melon seeds,
Whose downswapt hair is like a cool dark cloud,
She enticed me with a gentle smile.¹²⁾

There is the delicately ironic imaginary encounter of
No. 320:

And one like this! You gods, couldn't I have
her?

'You may admire my hands, if that gives you
pleasure,
Thus she denies me her lips, disdainfully
cruel.

'These flowers around my neck, are they not
beautiful?

- May you find happiness.¹³⁾

One could multiply examples. Professors Parnavitana, Kulasuriya, Ludowyk and Meegaskumbura all have their own lists of poetic excellences and foci of human interest, while Prof. Suraweera, Martin Wickramasinghe and Dr. C.E. Godakumbura are among these who have drawn attention to attractive qualities of the poetry. Their comments show that a good many of these 'records', as Parnavitana calls them, are capable of evoking reader responses of a heightened kind.

The later readers have not seriously questioned the value attached by Prof. Parnavitana to the records, and on the whole the emendations or reinterpretations proposed by later scholars tend, if anything, to increase our appreciation of the immediacy and subtlety of the poetry. Thus Prof. P.E.E. Fernando suggests that the

12. Halpé, *op.cit.*, No. XII, p. 97.

13. *ibid*, No. XXIV, p. 99. I offer a new version of the 1st line as being truer to the spirit of the original.

letters read by Prof. Paranavitana as 'favour' in No. 319 can be better read as *oo* or *touch*, making the whole utterance much more concrete.¹⁴ A more interesting example, perhaps, is Prof. Meegaskumbura's reinterpretation of No. 595 - a very highly regarded poem. Paranavitana's rendering is

The wind blew. Thousands and hundreds of
 thousands of trees, which had put forth
 buds, fell down. The curlew uttered shrieks.
 Torrents came forth in the Malaya mountain.
 The night was made to be of the glow of tender
 copper-coloured leaves by fireflies beyond count.
 O long-eyed one, the message given by you - what
 sustenance does it afford?¹⁵

Prof. Meegaskumbura's suggested version is:

The wind blew. Thousands and hundreds of
 thousands of buds burst forth. In the forest
 the jackal cried. Torrents came forth from
 the mountain. Countless fireflies gave a glow
 to the tender copper-hued leaves. O long-eyed
 one, the message given by you this night -
 what sustenance does it afford.¹⁶

He argues his case very ably in the work under reference.¹⁷

Scholarly integrity must necessarily counsel caution at certain points, as when Prof. P.E.E. Fernando concludes that the Paranavitana reading of, for instance, 196, are not entirely justifiable. (He discusses several

14. Fernando, P.E.E., *Samskriti*, Colombo, (1972) (Special Paranavitana volume). ed. R. Gunawardene and J. Liyanaratne.

15. *SG II*, p. 367.

16. Meegaskumbura, *op.cit.* p. 10.

17. *ibid*, pp. 9 - 11.

other readings as well).¹⁸ But the body of comment available to us does not suggest that Prof. Paranavitana's Ossianic exploit, *The Story of Sigiri*,¹⁹ was anticipated to any substantial extent in his rendering of the graffiti.

As the reader situates himself in and habituates himself to the world of the graffiti, it might occur to him that that world was, in one sense, not as accessible to the individuals who inscribed the graffiti as they can be to us today after the publication of *Sigiri Graffiti* and the critiques of it that have followed. The early visitors obviously enjoyed the privilege of encountering the 'wonders of Sihigiri' - the five hundred ladies of No. 560, 'his Lordship the Lion' (No. 45), the pleasure gardens, the palace; perhaps even the fountains of paradise embodied by Arthur C. Clarke in the Sigiri section of his novel by that name.²⁰ But how many would have paused to read more than a few of the inscriptions before adding their own? The modern reader can dwell with the 'records' in all their variety, treating them as a corpus and also sifting them and perceiving them in interaction. He is sometimes seduced away from, sometimes reminded of, the extraordinary and perhaps unique thing about the graffiti: that they arise from an aesthetic encounter with the frescoes and with Sigiriya. He can translate them into his own idiom - indeed, transmutation is inevitable as the graffiti encounter modern sensibilities.

At times, in fact, one might feel that of all our pre-modern literature it is the graffiti that are closest to modern readers, though they are the earliest poems

-
18. Fernando, *op.cit.*, p. 63-68.
19. Paranavitana, S. *The Story of Sigiri*, Colombo, 1972. The authenticity of the narrative offered in this work has been questioned by most scholars.
20. Clarke, Arthur C., *The Fountains of Paradise*, London, (1979).

extant in Sinhala. There is the refreshing directness combined with a vividly visual and sensuous quality of poems like

Who would not yield to such delights:
Those rosy palms, that rounded shoulder,
That golden necklace, those copper-coloured lips
And those long eyes?²¹

The writer of No. 69 achieves poetic intensity by sheer force of explicit statement:

... My body thrills to you, its hair
stiffening with desire.²²

It is interesting to note how Paranavitana and some other commentators are sometimes unable to 'take' the force and directness of the utterance, softening it down in their renderings. Thus ප්‍රේමිණ becomes the circuitous *in an infatuated manner*, and "loving embrace" has hardly the force of විසර්ගය. I have already noted how විසර්ගය becomes සැඟර and "sweetheart". It is to be hoped that narrow notions of moral and aesthetic decorum will not get between the graffiti and contemporary readers.

The reader who allows his imagination to range over the whole poetic territory opened out by the scholars can pass from the encounter with individual poems to juxtapositions, cross-references and imaginary sequences. Thus the graffiti of Friar Sen (No. 540) can be read as Prof. Ludowyk suggests, as a comment on No. 536, the song of Dapula of Siripura:

When the loving embrace of this long-eyed
one is obtained by me I shall become happy.²³

-
21. Halpé, *op.cit.*, No. XIX, p. 98.
22. *ibid*, No. XXV, p. 99.
23. *SG II*, p. 329-330.

The comment being:

Having been infatuated in form, when desire comes into being, (this damsel) has been considered (by you) in this manner as an (object worthy of) embrace. When (desire) passes away, the infatuation will itself fall, as does what is cast up into the sky. By the abundance of (their) splendour, we know the store of their merit. ²⁴

Reading No. 515 one might think back to poems like Nos. 351 and 69: the first (515) moralistic

Be not enamoured of dalliance;
Pleasure is the path to pain, and pain is
pleasure. ²⁵

placed against

..... among the golden ones
Was one whose cloth was loosened at the waist.
Will she be mine? ²⁶

and

Women like you
Make men pour out their hearts;
My body thrills to you, its hair
Stiffening with desire. ²⁷

24. *SG II*, p. 331-2.

25. Halpe, *op.cit.*, No. XXVI, p. 99.

26. *ibid*, No. IX, p. 97.

27. *ibid*, No. XXV, p. 99.

One could juxtapose

'The king is angry with us,' they think,
The long-eyed ones with tender lips
Standing on this rock
In the sky.²⁸

and

'My lord's not dead, he comes,
Anguished with absence,
Now, yes now, my friend! Come, women, come,
Lean out and look,
My lord is come!'²⁹

A juxtaposition can be quite amusing:

.... my mind in tumult
From the sidelong glances of the golden ones,
I swooned upon the rock³⁰

and

We, being women, sing on behalf of this lady;
'You fools! You come to Sihigiri and recite
These verses hammered out with four-fold efforts.
Not one of you brings wine and molasses,
Remembering we are women!'³¹

One could read Paranavitana's 26, 270 and 347 in relation to each other:

The golden ones within their mountain niche
Vouchsafe no speech
Except the gaze of those unmoving eyes.³²

28,29. *ibid*, Nos. XXXI, XXXII, p. 100.

30,31. *ibid*, Nos. XXII, XXIII, p. 99.

32. *ibid*, No. I, p. 96.

'But how shall I read that smile? Ah
 How did your heart become a stone?'
 'I smiled but to greet you.
 The king who won me is gone.'³³

As you stand there
 Brightening the summit with your radiance,
 I cannot contain myself,
 Oh long-eyed noble-coloured one.³⁴

Or one could explore the treatment of various topoi -
 for instance that of speaking and not speaking, and of
 voiceless communication:

Lovely this woman, excellent the painter!
 She will not speak, but when I look
 At hand and eye
 I do believe she lives.³⁵

Golden-skinned, a gold chain on her breast,
 A *veena* in her hand,
 She speaks to no one, for her lord is dead.³⁶

Champak and lotus buds held in her hands,
 She looks at me, I seem to know her thought:
 But when I look at her she will not speak.³⁷

A petal from her ear has leaped to her breasts
 In one bound: thus it speaks
 Though she herself is dumb.³⁸

33,34. *ibid*, Nos. II, III, p. 96.

35,36,37,38, *ibid*, Nos. XIII, XIV, XV, XVI, p.97-8.

Another way of responding to the poems is to take them in relation to their creators, hearing them as a multitude of voices suggestive of distinctive personalities and varying moods, perceptions and self-revelations. We have already set 'Friar Sen' against Dapul of Siripura, and the over-heated poet swooning upon the rock against the writer who spoke on behalf of the ladies. The graffito of the 'novice from the monastery of Hunagiri' suggests the hair-trigger emotions of adolescence pulsating against the religions neophyte's regard for discipline:

The person who has been spoken about, resides
(here); (therefore) place the wakefulness of
mind (in the door of) hearing and guard it
thoroughly. As her broad smile spreads,
having caused me (fright) my mind trembles
exceedingly.³⁹

So different from the cry 'ye gods! Couldn't I have her?'⁴⁰
or the sensuality of

When I think of you my heart aches,
My blood rages, I cry aloud. Your waist
Fetters me utterly.⁴¹

or the courtly compliment:

The moonstone wall gleams but in your radiance!⁴²

There can be a sophisticated awareness of the aesthetic dimension of eroticism -

Is it not to delight love's devotees
That these nymphs have been painted here?⁴³

39. *SG II*, p. 53-4.

40. See 13 above.

41, 42, 43. Halpé, *op.cit.*, Nos. XX, VIII, V, p. 98, 97.

or a simple appreciation of craft - "lovely this woman, excellent the painter!"⁴⁴

The Sigiri graffiti thus give us the experience of a number of exquisite poems as well as of a world of discourse, and they are vibrant with echoes of their age as well as of the permanent evocative power of art-experience. That power would perhaps be less, and the poems less meaningful, of course, if the graffiti were not taken in the whole context of Sigiri. For example, shorn of context, some of the poems would be quite effective love poems or erotic poems, but *in* context the same poems are something much finer - the creative imagination arousing the memories or dreams of passional experience in tribute to the aesthetic dynamism of the original frescoes.

In these and other possible ways the graffiti 'exist' for modern readers with great subtlety and ambience - more subtly and comprehensively, one might say, than in their own centuries. Discussing their literary merit Prof. Parnavitana suggests several frames of reference, e.g. citing both the Sanskrit criterion of *dhvani* and the Coleridgean concept of the imagination.⁴⁵ My last example echoes the quotation I chose for my title

O long eyed one
I read your message, but
What does it hold for me?⁴⁶

44. *ibid*, No. XIII, p. 98.

45. *Sigiri Graffiti*, vol. I, e.g. p. cxcvii-viii, cxcii.

46. Halpé, *op.cit*, No. XXXVI, p. 101.

We cannot ever hope to "read" the message or the smile in the sense of deciphering them finally: they are neither objects nor pure historic events to be accounted for or classified. Like all art, like Sigiriya itself, they are signals or beckonings to the imagination, inviting those who have ears to hear or eyes to see to shape responses appropriate to themselves in terms of the experience of their own generation.*

ASHLEY HALPÉ

* This article is based on a paper presented by the author at the First National Archaeological Congress held on November 1986 at Colombo.