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After Macauliffe: The Wondrous Liberty of Puran Singh[1]

ABSTRACT: Belonging to the generation after Macauliffe, one of the first Sikhs who sought to spread the message of the Gurus in English was Professor Puran Singh (1881-1931). In his unusual life, he combined the practice of his profession with a passionate search for the expression of all-embracing spiritual realities. This drew him to the poetic interpretation of the message of the Sikh Gurus, in part inspired by his strong identification with the poetry of Walt Whitman, and resulting in a very different approach from Macauliffe's to translating the Sikh scriptures. The paper includes some discussion of the broad context of the complex interweaving of literary and religious trends across different parts of the British empire in the early twentieth century, paying particular attention to parallels between India and Ireland.

KEYWORDS: Puran Singh, Sikh, Macauliffe, Japan, Swami Rama, Bhai Vir Singh, Forestry.

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[1] The original version of this paper was presented at the conference on 'Representing Sikhism' held at University College Cork to celebrate the death centenary of M. A. Macauliffe on 15 March 2013. I am most grateful to Professor Brian Bocking for his invitation to participate in that memorable occasion.

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Introduction

The passage of time since its first publication in 1909 has, if anything, only enhanced the reputation of Macauliffe's great work. Although there have been many subsequent full and partial translations of the *Adi Granth* and other Sikh scriptures, Macauliffe's renderings of substantial scriptural selections still retain a useful authority. And the comprehensive coverage of the early Sikh tradition as represented in hagiography as well as in scripture, which is provided in the six volumes of *The Sikh Religion: its Gurus, Sacred Writings and Authors*, has never been superseded in English. So it is good to have the chance to celebrate in a journal published in his own country this centenary of the death of this Irishman who did so much to bring a sympathetic understanding of the foundational Sikh writings to the wider awareness of an English-reading public.

My own contribution to these proceedings of the conference on 'Representing Sikhism' does not, however, focus specifically on Macauliffe himself, or on his predecessors like Ernest Trumpp, the insensitive and much maligned pioneering translator of the *Adi Granth* which was published for the Government of India in 1877. Instead I propose to move somewhat forward in time, and look at the work of one of the first people born into the Sikh community itself to attempt a series of imaginative presentations of the message of the religion and its scriptures in English.

This was Professor Puran Singh, born forty years after Macauliffe, in 1881, and so still in his twenties when *The Sikh Religion* was published. Puran Singh was a rather extraordinary character of many talents, a maverick not at all in the mould of the generally sober-sided intellectuals who shaped the Sikh renaissance in the early twentieth century. So I will begin by saying something about his unusual life. Then, since he was a voracious reader open to many influences, I go on to sketch the broader context of his writings in English, which are themselves often equally remarkable in their vividly unusual presentation of Sikh themes, before finally talking about Puran Singh's approach to translating the hymns of the Gurus, which was so different from Macauliffe's.

Life[2]

Puran Singh was born into a Khatri Sikh family long in the Pothohar area around Rawalpindi in north-western Punjab. He was born into quite

[2] Puran Singh's own account of some of the formative experiences of his early years was compiled around 1924 as *On Paths of Life*. The best account of his life as a whole is the vivid memoir by his widow Maya Devi Puran Singh, translated as *Puran Singh: A Life Sketch*, which may be supplemented by his daughter-in-law Basant Kumari Singh's *Reminiscences of Puran Singh* (for bibliographical details see *References*).

modest circumstances – his father was an official in the revenue department – but he was always naturally very gifted and did well in the education system established by the British in the Punjab, first at school in Rawalpindi then at college in Lahore, the provincial capital.

He had still not graduated when his life was completely changed by a bold scheme launched in the Sikh community to send two students to Japan to study science in Tokyo. Puran Singh was one of those selected, and so he set out in 1900. His account of the trip to Japan in his autobiography reveals what an extraordinary experience this must have been for a young man in his teens. And the difficulties must have been enhanced by having to learn not only Japanese but also German, the language of scientific instruction in Tokyo.

But the first hand experience of what was then Asia's premier independent country was clearly overwhelming. He fell in love with the Japanese way of life and with Buddhism, and the Buddha remained a figure of reverence to him throughout his life. He was also hugely impressed by Kakuzo Okakura, the art historian whose English writings made a major impression in the West. His sense of freedom in this new environment was enhanced from quite another direction by the gift of a copy of Walt Whitman's poetry, and the great American poet was to remain a permanent influence for him. He also made contacts with other Indians, including nationalists working against British rule, and himself started a nationalist journal in English called *The Thundering Dawn*.

The early 1900s were not only the age of anti-imperialist nationalism, in India as in Ireland, but also the era in which the appeal of Indian spirituality first came to make a major impact in the West, pioneered by the profound impression made by the Bengali Swami Vivekananda as the declared representative of Hinduism at the Chicago Congress of Religions in 1893, which led to the conversion of several Westerners to the Hindu tradition which he represented. These notably included the Irishwoman, named 'Sister Nivedita' by Vivekananda, but who was born as Margaret Elizabeth Noble into an Ulster Protestant family in Co. Tyrone. Among those who soon followed in Vivekananda's footsteps was Swami Rama Tirtha, another brilliant young Punjabi, born ten years before Puran Singh, who abandoned his family and his academic career as a professor of mathematics in one of the university colleges of Lahore to become a sannyasi living a life of ascetic renunciation. Swami Rama Tirtha went to America, where he too made a great impression, and then in 1902 to Japan. When he met Puran Singh there they experienced a mutual sense of profound identification. Rama Tirtha, who anyway had a disconcerting habit of signing his letters to everyone as 'From your own self, Rama Tirtha',[3] saw himself in Puran Singh, while Puran Singh himself came

[3] Another striking illustration of Rama Tirtha's ecstatically monistic world-view appears in a short English poem of his: 'All the secrets so clear! / One to me far and near, / I

completely under Rama Tirtha's spell and gave up his Sikh appearance to become a shaven renunciate wearing the ochre robe of the sannyasi.

On his return to India in 1903, his family were shocked not only by his radically altered appearance but by his refusal to go through with the marriage they had arranged for him. Only when his dying sister appealed to him to grant her this last wish did he finally agree to get married, but he insisted on maintaining his sannyasi dress and way of life even after the mysterious passing of Swami Rama Tirtha in 1906, when he vanished into a Himalayan river. Simultaneously, however, Puran Singh used the training as a chemist which he had acquired in Tokyo to embark on the first of a series of enterprises in Lahore and set up in a partnership to manufacture essential oils. But he soon fell out with his partners and in a fit of rage destroyed all the equipment he had assembled.

His longest period of employment was in government service, as a chemist working in the newly established Imperial Institute of Forestry in Dehra Dun, where he specialized in the extraction of oils and other substances from trees – an official report he produced during this period on the production of tannin from mangrove bark at the state factory in Rangoon (Singh, P. 1912)[4] is interesting testimony to his professional competence, and its sober tone is in notable contrast to the ecstatic style he favoured in his literary work. The title 'Professor', which distinguishes him from several other Puran Singhs, dates from his position on the faculty of the Institute of Forestry.

In 1912, at a Sikh Congress held in Sialkot, Puran Singh came into close contact with his older contemporary Bhai Vir Singh, whose outstanding combination of the gifts of a creative writer with the learning of a profound scholar enabled him to become one of the most significant figures in the simultaneous creation during the early twentieth century both of modern Sikhism and of the modern Punjabi literature with which it was intimately associated. The immediate influence of this latest guide led Puran Singh to another abrupt change of spiritual direction, and he reverted to the Sikh observance he had abandoned over a decade previously in Japan.

Although he was a government employee, Puran Singh continued throughout this period also to support the cause of Indian independence. His circle included the activist Lala Har Dayal, another brilliant Indian of his generation, who founded the ultra-nationalist Ghadar party in America before later writing a PhD at SOAS (London) on *The Bodhisattva Doctrine in Buddhist Sanskrit Literature.* While Puran Singh himself took no active part in revolutionary activities, it seems that one of his assistants took picric acid

stretch in Infinity / Sinks in Me all affinity./ I am Life, I am manna! /Hosanna! Hosanna!' (Singh, P. 2003, 227).

[4] For a brief appraisal of his scientific work, see Virk, 1998.

from his laboratory to make the bomb used in the unsuccessful attempt to assassinate the Viceroy in Delhi in 1912.

Before too long, Puran Singh became frustrated with working at the Institute of Forestry, and took early retirement on grounds of ill health in 1918. In the following period of his life, he moved with his usual restlessness from one place to another. His expertise in the chemical exploitation of plants and trees took him to various places, first to the princely state of Gwalior where he successfully established plantations of eucalyptus and rosha grass, which is grown for the production of palmarosa oil, but he eventually quarrelled with the maharaja. Later he was granted a holding of forest land in District Shekhupura in the Punjab. There too he successfully planted acres of rosha grass, and found himself much at home with the simple Muslim tribesfolk of the area. When floods destroyed his crop, he once again lost everything, but only welcomed the freedom it gave him to pursue his literary activities at an increasingly hectic rate – in the attractive memoir which she recorded many years after his death, his widow Maya Devi (Singh, M.D.P. 1993, 96) recalls that he took only 17 days to produce a complete Punjabi translation of Tolstoy's novel *Resurrection*, which while admittedly not so long as *War and Peace* still comes to 500 pages in the latest Penguin version. These years after his retirement from the Forestry Institute marked the period of his forties in which he undertook most of his literary activity, which was brought to an end only by his premature death from tuberculosis in 1931.

Writings

Throughout most of his adult life, Puran Singh combined the practice of his profession with a continuing passionate search for the experience and understanding of all-embracing spiritual realities. He was a notably fluent and prolific writer who composed with equal facility in English and in Punjabi. Besides being a very fast writer, he was famously also an impatient one who gave little attention to revisions of what he wrote. Later memoirs recall him covering the pages at furious speed while lying propped up on a bed (by contrast, it is hard not to imagine Macauliffe methodically working away at a substantial desk). In the apparent absence of any sort of full scholarly bibliography, it is hardly possible to establish a precise inventory of Puran Singh's non-scientific publications of original and translated works on literary and religious topics. Their history is anyway complicated by some having been published in London, and others in India, while yet other titles unpublished in his lifetime were later bequeathed by his family to the Punjabi University in Patiala, who published them for the first time from the 1960s onwards.

In India today Puran Singh is chiefly remembered for his writings in Punjabi, and as an important figure in the Punjabi literary renaissance

which was being spearheaded by Sikh writers in the early twentieth century, i.e. at around the same time as the Irish literary revival, with which it has some notable similarities.[5] Besides a volume of essays, Puran Singh's Punjabi works include three volumes of poetry.[6] All are similar in character to his English books, and all have titles opening with the word *Khullhe* 'Open', which gives an idea of the typically wide-ranging freedom of their form and contents. Puran Singh's place in Punjabi literary history is particularly associated with his having been the first to write free verse in a language whose poetry was traditionally always written in metrical lines with strong rhymes. While living in the west Punjab in the 1920s he typically did once the break this mould, when he was inspired to compose a collection of rhymed and metrical poems. Equally typically, however, he got into a rage one day and destroyed his entire manuscript, so they were never published.

Here, though, I want to focus on his work in English. Besides scientific writings and the political journalism published in his journal *The Thundering Dawn*, Puran Singh's English publications also included short pamphlets on Sikh religious topics of a quite conventional kind.[7] A closer investigation would certainly round out his literary profile by unearthing much more occasional material of this kind, as well as the numerous translations of Western classics into Punjabi.

But even as it is, his dozen or so published books alone constitute quite a considerable oeuvre. About half were published in London between 1921 and 1926. They comprise three books of original poetry. The first was entitled *Sisters of* the *Spinning Wheel and Other Sikh Poems, Original and Translated* (1921), followed by *Unstrung Beads* (1923), and *The Temple Tulips* (1923), besides *Nargas: Songs of a Sikh* (1924), containing a translated selection of Punjabi poems written by his revered mentor Bhai Vir Singh. In prose, he published an enthusiastic biography of his own first guru in *The Story of Swami Rama: the Poet Monk of of the Punjab* (1924); a detailed manifesto setting out what he believed true poetry should be, entitled *The Spirit of Oriental Poetry* (1926); and an introduction for English readers to the history of the Sikh Gurus, incorporating many individual touches, called

[5] While a comparison between the two movements would be rewarding, it is important to note many important differences, notably the fact that while the Irish language was already marginalized as the speech of a significant section of the Irish population, Punjabi was always a vigorous spoken language, and the achievement of the Sikh revivalists was to create a modern standard Punjabi as a literary language. See further Shackle 1988.
[6] *Khullhe Maidan* (Open Fields), *Khullhe Ghund* (Open Veils), *Khullhe Rang Asmani* (Open Colours of the Sky), collected in Randhawa 1965 and translated in Singh, G. 2005.
[7] One example is his 1908 booklet *The Victory of Faith: The Martyrdom of the Four Sons of Sri Guru Gobind Singh*, which interestingly predates his reconversion to Sikhism in 1912.

The Book of the Ten Masters (1926).[8]

Besides these, there are also the books posthumously published from Patiala. *On Paths of Life*, written around 1924, is a prose memoir containing particularly vivid pictures of his childhood in the Pothohar and his formative time in Japan. Also dating from 1924 is *The Bride of the Sky*, a poetic play whose spiritualized characters speak in even loftier abstractions than those found in the verse plays of Yeats and his Irish contemporaries. The poetic novel *Prakasina: a Buddhist Princess* is similar in character. Following from his published book on *The Spirit of Oriental Poetry,* Puran Singh completed an extended essay in 1928 on *Walt Whitman and the Sikh Inspiration.* And his earlier book on the Sikh Gurus is counterbalanced by the freer approach of *The Spirit Born People*, also apparently written around this time. His last book appears to have been *Spirit of the Sikh,* an extended study written at different times between 1923 and 1930 which incorporates many of his favourite themes. This was left as a substantial typescript, subsequently edited in three volumes and published by the Punjabi University as a part of its celebration of Puran Singh's birth-centenary in 1981.[9]

Contexts and Influences

Puran Singh was inspired by a notably wide range of influences. In this respect he is rather different from most writers on Sikhism, who tend not to look much beyond the Sikh tradition itself. To understand how these various influences could interact with another, it is helpful to refer to the

[8] It is not always possible to establish precise bibliographical details for the original editions of titles cited in this paragraph. The editions consulted for this paper (also listed in the References) are: *The Sisters of the Spinning Wheel and Other Sikh Poems, Original and Translated*, intr. Ernest and Grace Rhys (London and New York: J M Dent and Sons, 1921), 2nd ed., intr. Sant Singh Sekhon (Patiala: Punjabi University, 1994); *Unstrung Beads: Prose and Poetry from the Punjab*, intr. Ernest Rhys (London: J M Dent and Sons, 1923); *The Temple Tulips*, intr. S S Sekhon (Patiala: Punjabi University, 2001); *Nargas: Songs of a Sikh by Bhai Vir singh,* tr. Puran Singh, intr. Ernest Rhys, 1st ed. (London, J.M. Dent and Sons, 1924), 2nd ed. (Patiala: Punjabi University, 2000); *The Story of Swami Rama, the Poet Monk of India*, 2nd ed. (Lucknow: Swami Rama Tirtha Pratishthan, 2003); *The Spirit of Oriental Poetry*, [1st ed. 1926], 2nd ed. intr. M S Randhawa (Patiala: Punjabi University, 1969); *The Book of the Ten Masters*, [1st ed. 1926], 2nd ed. (Amritsar: Singh Brothers, 1995, repr. 2010).

[9] Bibliographic details of the posthumously published books cited in this paragraph are: *On Paths of Life*, intr. M S Randhawa (Patiala: Punjabi University, 1982); *The Bride of the Sky (A Poetic Play) and Other Poems*, with an intr. Sant Singh Sekhon (Patiala: Punjabi University, 1995); *Prakasina: a Buddhist Princess,* intr. K S Duggal (Patiala: Punjabi University, 1980); *Walt Whitman and the Sikh Inspiration*, intr. Darshan Singh Maini (Patiala: Punjabi University, 1982); *The Spirit Born People* (Amritsar: Singh Brothers, 1997, repr. 2007); *Spirit of the Sikh (Meditations on Religion and the Spiritual Experience), Part I* (2000), *Part II, Vol. 1*(2002), *Part II, Vol. 2* (2004), all intr. Gurbachan Singh Talib (Patiala: Punjabi University).

wider cultural context of the time.

In Puran Singh's formative years before the outbreak of the First World War, the British empire was at its zenith. The worldwide network of imperial communications and the spread of the English language encouraged a hitherto unprecedented transmission of ideas and literary models through a publishing industry centred in London, but whose books were often consumed as avidly in Asia as in Europe. At the same time, the imperial system also encouraged the growth of nationalisms committed to ending of British political supremacy in favour of the independence of local territories. Just as in Ireland, so too in India generally and the Punjab in particular, the nationalist programmes which laid such emphasis upon the need to develop the local languages and their literary traditions were somewhat paradoxically articulated in English as the dominant language of all elite discourse.

Indeed, English had by this time already begun to achieve its present international status, and it was because he chose to write in English that the work of Kakuzo Okakura made such an impression on Puran Singh and many others in the early twentieth century. Okakura was primarily concerned with promoting the artistic and cultural traditions of Japan – he is best known for *The Art of Tea*, his classic study of the Japanese tea ceremony which inspired the cult of 'tea-ism'. But his wider claims that Asian culture was fully equal to that of Europe naturally also made a powerful appeal to Asian nationalist sentiment, and his book *The Ideals of the East*, beginning with the ringing sentence 'Asia is one', was published from London in 1903 with an enthusiastic introduction by Sister Nivedita, whose conversion to Hindu spirituality also led her to a passionate identification with the cause of Indian nationalism.

The spiritual and the political were far from being antitheses during this period, as will have been apparent from our summary account of Puran Singh's life. Indeed, the very fact that India appeared to excel the materialist West in the richness of its spirituality made it easy for nationalist thinking to identify itself with that distinctively Asian religious tradition. In the case of Puran Singh, this link was first formed by the impact made on him by Swami Rama Tirtha, through whom he came to identify so powerfully throughout his life with the monistic ideas of the Vedanta.

For Puran Singh, the broadening of horizons effected by his embrace of the mysteries of the East was importantly complemented by influences from the West. The gift by an American friend in Japan of Walt Whitman's famous *Leaves of Grass* made a huge impression on him, and he never lost his love and admiration for the great American poet. Not only was the typical form of Puran Singh's own English and Punjabi poetry greatly indebted to the style of free verse favoured by Whitman, but the breadth of his thinking too owed much to Whitman's inspiring example, in particular

to his passionate embrace of identification with the whole of being. In this respect, he was also indebted to the inspiration he took from other nineteenth-century prose writers of similarly exalted outlook, and he frequently refers in his writings to the great American Transcendentalist Emerson, and to Thomas Carlyle (whose *Heroes and Hero-Worship* he translated into Punjabi).

Puran Singh was thus very much in tune with a certain international strand of thought and writing when his poetry started to be published in London in the 1920s. Here his books seem to have found a remarkably ready place in that corner of the market which had been established a few years before by the spectacular success of the English version of the *Gitanjali* or 'Offering of Songs' by the great Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore.

Exemplifying the now sometimes overlooked connections between India and Ireland during this time, the success of the *Gitanjali* was due in large part to its extremely enthusiastic endorsement by Yeats, who took it on himself to touch up Tagore's English and wrote a glowing introduction to the book. An extraordinary consequence was the award in the following year of the Nobel prize for literature to Tagore, not for his magnificently rhymed and metred Bengali poetry, but for the English *Gitanjali* which is written in a poetic prose which seemed perfectly adapted to convey a poetic vision of the mysterious East.[10]

Characteristics

Tagore, though, was always something of a special case, and it was certainly unusual at that time for an Indian author, especially one who never came to England, to be published in London. Puran Singh's books were mostly published by the firm of E J Dent, and came with enthusiastic introductions by Ernest Rhys, a prolific man of letters who is chiefly remembered as the founder of the Everyman Library and who had earlier authored an enthusiastic study of Tagore. Once published, however, Puran Singh's poetry seems to have found a ready reception with that section of the reading public which was hungry for wisdom from the East.

One review of his first book of poems *Sisters of the Spinning Wheel* explicitly said that 'those readers familiar with the work of Tagore will appreciate this book, since it gives them a further insight into the delicate beauty of Indian poetry'. The spiritual dimension so important to Puran Singh was appreciated by Rev. Dr Jacks, editor of the *Hibbert Journal*, who thought it a 'strange and wonderful book . . . as I got into the atmosphere, it began to glow with an inner radiance. It requires and rewards the meditative reading which is so rare'. And the *Daily News* reviewer called it

[10] For the genesis of the *Gitanjali* and the role of Yeats in its success, see the introduction to the new Penguin translation (2011) by William Radice.

'the first book in English giving us an idea of the power and beauty of the Sikh poetry'.[11]

In a sense, Puran Singh only ever wrote one book, since the characteristic themes which obsessed him sooner or later surface in all of them, and give them their highly individual tone. His poetic philosophy is set out in *The Spirit of Oriental Poetry*, which draws upon his wide reading in a variety of languages, including Sanskrit, Persian, Hindi, Urdu and Punjabi, as well as other writings which he knew through English. The book draws a fundamental divide between genuine poetry which gives direct expression to the spirit, and artificial verse whose technical skill cannot disguise the essential emptiness of its content. While the former is naturally identified mainly with the East and the latter with the West, Puran Singh is quite eclectic in his categorizations, with his beloved Whitman clearly qualifying as one of the world's genuine poets, while many Indians including the Urdu master-poet Ghalib are grouped with such technical wordsmiths as Tennyson, one of Puran Singh's pet hates.

Although Puran Singh is thus quite equivocal in his judgement of Tagore, his own English poems[12] are very much in the lofty style of poetic prose which won the *Gitanjali* so many admirers, as in his poem *The Wandering Minstrel*:

> My religion is a simple love-song freed from the strings of my *vina.*
>
> As it flies in air like a voice of Heaven
>
> My song gathers the voices that resound in the memory of ages,
>
> And I sing of the painful tales of a thousand hearts, the stories of a thousand wars of love.
>
> (Singh, P. 2001, 17-18)

Echoes of Whitman are never far away, as in a later verse from the same poem:

> I am not vast, I am small and selfish, my passion is personal, I always am like a babe in its mother's lap:
>
> I do not think, I drink milk of the sweetness of love and I sleep and sing the peace of slumber.

At times his close devotion to Whitman can strike an exaggerated note. This is particularly evident when the iconic image of the great American poet in

[11] These extracts from reviews are appended to Puran Singh's second collection *Unstrung Beads* (1923).
[12] Critical studies of Puran Singh's poetry include: Maini 1979, 63-79; Dulai in Brown 1999, 155-171 and Singh, G. 2004.

old age, taken before his death in 1892, with flowing grey locks and a full beard, leads Puran Singh into assimilating him into his own extremely strong glorification of the *kes*, the uncut hair which is one of the distinguishing marks of the orthodox male Sikh. Perhaps because of the very fact that Puran Singh was a re-convert to Sikhism after his younger years as a shaven monk, his prose becomes extraordinarily lyrical when talking about the 'sacred tresses':

> When the Guru touched my hair and blessed me, how could I bear my hair being shorn? I nestle the fragrance of His touch in my tresses. I am the bride. They, of the modern era, have bobbed the bride, but the Sacred Braids of Christ still remain the most beautiful adornment of a man's or woman's head. The lightning spark is concealed in the wool of the wandering cloud of the sky, and life-spark of the Guru is hidden in this sheaf of hair. The tresses of hair are as clouds round a snowy peak. They always gather, they always rain, rain. In my sacred tresses flows the trinity of Ganga, the Jamna and the Godavari (Singh, P. 1966, 37).

So it is that in Puran Singh's exuberant imagination, the essential harmony of Whitman's poetic message with that of the Sikh Gurus is seen to have its outward counterpart in the long hair and beard which he favoured in later life:

> Come with me here (he writes) where I have rediscovered the pulse of the universe beating in wonderful sympathy with the life of the Guru's disciples. And it is only here, sitting by me that you would also discover the secret of that beautiful wild abandon of the leisure-loving Walt Whitman 'loafing' on the sands in the full glare of the sun. Curiously enough (he continues), he has also, at last let his beard flow like a miniature Niagara. His tuft of silver hair is speeding like a little glacier from the Rockies. This man in shape and in thought and sympathy is verily a Sikh (Singh, P. 1982b, 4-5).

The core of Puran Singh's work lay in a remarkably appealing re-presentation of the message of the Sikh Gurus as an outstanding expression of the great Perennial Philosophy whose wisdom has been the guiding force for humanity throughout the ages. So, in contrast to the usual focus on chronology which shapes most accounts of Guru Nanak's childhood, Puran Singh begins his story of the Sikh Gurus with an entirely spiritual focus:

> He came like a song of heaven, and began singing as he felt the touch of the breeze and saw the blue expanse of sky.
>
> He was a child of smiles, and his eyes were silent and wise; he loved quiet of soul. He loved joy and thought.
>
> (Singh, P. 1926b, 21)

For Puran Singh, the essence of Sikhism lay in the Gurus' teaching of Nam and Simran, or loving meditation upon the universe of life, realising that the infinite is manifested in the finite while also being constantly aware that true religion demands the active practice of charity to our fellow humans rather than the sort of self-absorbed philosophical contemplation which he frequently castigates in the intellectualizing followers of the Hindu Vedanta.

Puran Singh as Translator of the Scriptures

Puran Singh therefore deserves to be celebrated as one of the first Sikhs with the gifts necessary to transmit the spirit of the religion to a Western audience. Few of his successors have been touched with his poetic imagination, and few have matched his linguistic and literary gifts.

These qualities are also displayed in his translations from the scriptures, which are very different from Macauliffe's, which he criticised as being too literal (Singh, P. 1926b, 13). Although Puran Singh evidently loved and knew the scriptures very well, his versions are often very freely done, being more transcreations than translations. He was typically very critical of scholarly interpretations of the scriptures as opposed to the sort of free poetic rendering of the spirit which he identified with Walt Whitman. In a telling passage in the *Spirit of the Sikh* he writes:

> Contrasted with Whitman's true Sikh way of singing and his lyrical expansion into the very infinity of life and his 'melting away' into the joy of the Infinite found in the soul gleaming with vistas of the Eternal, and whole of him a dew-drop glistening with the light of God on a lotus leaf: contrasted with this, Tennyson, Shakespeare, Milton, Yeats and Tagore seem like wax-toys set in glass cases (Singh, P. 2002, 43-4).

He was equally dismissive of the sober scriptural scholarship as practised by the leading Sikh reformers of the period, of which Macauliffe's work is an English reflection:

> Historical criticism, aiming at literal accuracy and exactness, comes riding on a tempest to a clumsy old end of hopeless inaccuracy. The historian is right in abstracting general humanities of olden times which were exactly as they are now. Stories and true histories; man always has been like himself. . . Closely-written pages with foot-notes and references cannot nourish the soul of a people (Singh, P. 1923, 7-8).

Puran Singh's own versions aim to capture the spirit, not the letter. With his identification of the same kind of cosmic consciousness in Walt Whitman as in Guru Nanak, Puran Singh can be very effective in conveying the Guru's

tone, as in the great hymn included as the first *shlok* before the third stanza of *Asa ki Var,* which repeats the word *vismad* 'wonder' to convey the wondrousness of the universe. With his usual painstaking accuracy, Macauliffe begins:

> Wonderful Thy word, wonderful Thy knowledge;
>
> Wonderful Thy creatures, wonderful their species;
>
> Wonderful their forms, wonderful their colours;
>
> Wonderful the animals which wander naked;
>
> Wonderful Thy wind; wonderful Thy water; . . .
>
> (Macauliffe 1909, 221)

Puran Singh, by contrast, is struck by the similarity of Guru Nanak's invocation with the incantations of Whitman's *Song at Sunset*:

> Illustrious every one!
>
> Illustrious what we name space, sphere of unnumber'd spirits,
>
> Illustrious the mystery of motion in all beings, even the tiniest insect,
>
> Illustrious the attribute of speech, the senses, the body . . .
>
> Wonderful to depart!
>
> Wonderful to be here! . . .
>
> Wonderful how I celebrate you and myself!
>
> (Whitman 2004, 503-4)

And this enables him to produce a rather inspired version of Guru Nanak's hymn:

> O wonder is the voices
>
> O wonder is the mystery of this riddle,
>
> O wonder is forms of Beauty
>
> O wonder is the colour of Beauty
>
> O wonder is Nudity of souls,
>
> O wonder is the wind blowing
>
> O wonder is the water flowing . . .
>
> (Singh, P. 1982b, 43-5)

In keeping with his dynamic view of the Gurus' poetic expression of their teachings, Puran Singh was keenly aware of the impossibility of producing definitive English translations. As a final example, let us take the beginning of the first stanza of Guru Nanak's *Japji*. Macauliffe's stolidly reliable English prose uses 78 words to reproduce the original's concise 34:

> By thinking I cannot obtain a conception *of Him*, even though I think hundreds of thousands of times.
>
> Even though I be silent and keep my attention firmly fixed on Him, I cannot preserve silence.
>
> The hunger of the hungry *for God* subsideth not though they obtain the load of the worlds.
>
> If man should have thousands and hundreds of thousands of devices, even one would not assist him in obtaining God.
>
> (Macauliffe 1909, 196).

Puran Singh, in the first of the translations from scripture included in *Sisters of the Spinning Wheel*, – his first collection of poetry which he wrote in only eight days! – allows himself greater freedom in 96 words:

> Beyond thought, no thinking can conceive Him, not even if the minds of men should think for ages and ages.
>
> Nor silence can grasp Him, even if the minds of men meditate on Him for ages and ages.
>
> Nor can He be known by gaining the worlds; for man's desire is never satiated, even though all the worlds laden with gold fall to his share.
>
> No human thoughts can carry man far.
>
> The movements of his mind, the thousand acts of wisdom of the world, leave him dark; nothing avails.
>
> Vain are the ways of men.
>
> (Singh, P. 1921, 63).

Puran Singh returned to *Japji* a few years later, and in *The Spirit Born People* he produced a quite different version, headed 'The "Japuji" in Brief', which compresses the essence of the same lines into a freely rendered 27 words:

> Thou art beyond the wings of thought,
>
> Thou art beyond the plumbings of silence.
>
> Without Thee desire is not sated,

> And all wise proposings sink with sorrow.
>
> (Singh, P. 1997, 96).

In defence of this version's greater freedom, he says:

> Some of you will say this is not a translation of *Japuji.* True it is not the million readings we can have of it, but it is one of those readings. Music has an infinite number of moods and means. Moreover, this translation is absolutely literature. I should be a blasphemer if I were to give any sense differing from that of the Guru in my translation of His hymns. I like the short rendering given above better than that I gave in 1921 in *The Sisters of the Spinning Wheel* and I like some of the passages in my earlier version. And when out of the million more renderings I have yet to give in centuries to come, I shall have selected the best, pearl-like in their beauty, and have strung them on a thread of light, I shall then make still other translations and become so vain with pride of wearing the garland, that then perhaps my ambition of translating *Japuji* will have its first crude fulfilment (Singh, P. 1997, 98-9).

We must always acknowledge our debt to the reliable scholarship of careful men like Macauliffe, but what a wondrous liberty there is in Puran Singh's impossible ambition!

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