

Searching for perspectives (Second Foreword)

If "South-Indian Horizons" refers to horizons of knowledge regarding South-India, as I understand my colleague, one might want to add that horizons can not only be retrospective and prospective, but that they depend, by their very nature, on perspectives. Jean-Luc Chevillard gives us a brief history of the development of South-Indian studies, beginning in the 17th century (not without pointing out that this beginning was preceded by other beginnings), and now bordering on the 21st, from the perspective of a Tamilist and a linguist. That of a French linguist, to be sure, and accordingly his reconstruction of a *param-parā* comprises a considerable number of French scholars. Other people would have strung together other *param-parās* — mine, for example, as being neither French nor a linguist, but German and a philologist (a difference usually clearer to philologists than it is to linguists), would have looked considerably different. We have in common, however, love for Tamil and a point in time — luckily, I have to add, for this is what enables us to work together in raising a platform and searching the landscape of Tamil studies for perspectives.

Incidentally, the *param-parā* given by my learned friend does not end with the name of the jubiliary, Francois Gros, and neither would have mine (though for other reasons)¹, but in another sense of perspective his name could be standing, along with a very few others, in the first place of another lineage, namely as godfather to a, small but distinct, sub-discipline of European University studies that started perhaps in the late 1950s: *Caṅkam*. *Caṅkam* studies — title for the scholarly preoccupation with the earliest testimonies of Tamil literature, as a designation often criticised, even depised, but nevertheless persistent, as these things tend to be. Of course, scholarly preoccupation with these texts actually began much earlier. As is well known, about the end of the 19th century there was a movement in Tamil Nadu itself, a movement of resurrection: a rediscovery, respelling and re-edition of a nearly forgotten body of literature, and a subsequent re-writing and often virtual re-inventing of a Tamil past. For some reasons not yet sufficiently understood European academics missed the better part of the first century of this process. Apart from a few stray remarks and attempts at translation, as such those of G.U. Pope from the *Puṛaṇāṅṅūru*² — the discourse has been largely left to Indian scholars, astonishing all the more since one smaller part of it, the bulk no doubt made up

¹ Mine would have included, for example, a figure like Graul [1814-1864], who, nearly inconceivable, translated the *Akapporuḷ Viḷakkam*, one of the great medieval treatises on poetics, into German as early as 1857. (Graul 1857: "Die Tamulische Bibliothek der Evang. Lutherischen Missionsanstalt in Leipzig. III. Übersetzung von Nampi's *Akapporuḷ Viḷakkam*." ZDMG 11 (1857) 369-395.)

² See G.U. Pope, *Tamil Heroic Poems*, rep. SISSW 1973, p. 3f. [A collection of English translations from the *Puṛapporuḷ Venṇā Mālai* and from the *Puṛaṇāṅṅūru* that appeared originally in the *Asiatic Quarterly Review* the *Siddhanta Deepika*, and the *Tamilian Antiquary*, and were posthumously published in book form in 1910].

by contributions in Tamil, has from the very beginning been in English.³ (What does this mean? Was there a European audience that for once — and why? — did not take an active part, but confined itself to the role of spectators?⁴ Why the need among Tamilians, then, to use English as a medium at all?)

Only after editions had been available for a considerable time, an arduous task completed for the most part by about 1920, and after much had been written on Tamil history in a broad sense of the word — let us call it, for convenience's sake, cultural history — are the first European voices raised, more timidly than one is used to hear, mostly on historical or linguistic details.⁵ The first major presentation of *Caṅkam* literature, as a representative of an early South-Indian culture, in the English language seems not to have been printed until nearly 30 years after its completion. I refer to Marr's *The Eight Anthologies. A Study in Early Tamil Literature*, a book quoted today, in its 1985 edition, among the bare two handfuls of *Caṅkam* "classics", while it was written as early as 1958, for as such it is mentioned in Kailasapathy's *Tamil Heroic Poetry* (another classic) from 1968.⁶ It succeeded, in any case, by about two decades of most intensive work in the field, Indian, European and American, producing several outstanding publications, as well as most of the philological tools, such as they are.⁷ This is the era of the first (comparatively) widely read translations into European languages, and two of them deserve special mention not only for their high quality, but because they represent two trends in the strategy of dealing with Classical Tamil texts.

One is, of course, Ramanujan's famous collection of translations of poems chosen from the *Kuruntokai* of 1967, entitled *The Interior Landscape*, which not only gives a concise introduction into the *Caṅkam* imagery technique, but what are so far the most beautiful and suggestive English renderings of a selected choice of anthology poems, indeed of any Tamil poetry in English. Here we see at work (and at its best) the purely literary form of translation, with no claim to literal precision and faithfulness to philological detail, indeed no philological annotation at all. The other is Gros's *Paripāṭal* of 1968, also, to be sure, a rendering of a Tamil text in elegant French, but differing from Ramanujan's work in several significant respects. Firstly, Gros did not select a number of special poems, the raisins in the cake, but he chose to come to terms with the

³ One of the most influential works of this movement, reprinted to this very day (SISSW 2000), is Kanakasabhai's *The Tamils 1800 Years ago* from 1904.

⁴ Unlike in other fields of Indian studies, as for example Vedic, where almost all early editions were accomplished by European scholars, there is not a single European contribution among the editions of the early Classical Tamil corpus.

⁵ Here, apart from some French contributions already mentioned, I am thinking mainly of Zvelebil's papers on syntax. The perspective is here not yet predominantly that of a field of literature in its own right, but that of a history of the Tamil language, early Classical Tamil being viewed as an interesting precursor of "modern" Tamil.

⁶ See K. Kailasapathy: *Tamil Heroic Poetry*. Oxford University Press, London 1968, ref. on p. 274.

⁷ Most remarkable among them are the Trivandrum series of indices to nearly all the texts in the corpus and to some beyond it, most of them endowed with individual text grammars, some of which have sadly never been printed.

text of one whole anthology as it stands (in this case, alas, one whose transmission is incomplete). Secondly, he also gave the Tamil original (according to his preface, based on the edition of Cāminātaiyar), so that the reader can conveniently follow what he has been doing. Thirdly, he added an appendix with philological and explanatory notes.

If we look back on that book after more than 30 years, we may acknowledge that it represents a high-water mark of *Caṅkam* philology. Many translations of many texts, still not of all of them, have followed. Some texts have been translated several times, and when we look into the anthologies of selected poetry, we find that for some of the more famous poems we have up to six, or even more translations. All of them have been literary, in one sense of the word or another. Up to this day there is no tradition of philological translation in Classical Tamil. Not that other kinds of translations have not been produced, by Indian scholars, and, sad irony of history, produced within the very same institution, the French Institute in Pondicherry, that was the arena for Gros's work. There remain unpublished, in the library of that institute, the only existing complete translation of the *Akanāṅṅūru*, by V.M. Subramanya Ayyar, as well as a translation of the *Narriṅṅai*, by N. Kandaswamy Pillai. Both try to give a faithful English rendering of the wording, admittedly in doubtful cases — and these are many — just following the commentary tradition, but with at least a serious attempt at being literal, and often giving additional explanation. Both these works are superior in quality to many that have been printed. Why were they not printed? Is it simply because their English is not up to normal standard quality (whatever that might mean in the case of a *lingua franca* used by scholars of such different linguistic origins)? Were they not beautiful enough?

I think here we have hit a sore spot in our general idea of understanding. If something — especially if it professes to be poetry — sounds beautiful, it does not give offence in the target language, and this makes us believe we have understood the original. This problem is obvious even and already with Gros's work on the *Paripāṭal*. It is beautiful and it is careful, printed with the original text in parallel and with notes, but there is something that does not fit into place. There are large portions in the *Paripāṭal* (and not only there) that are not translatable in a philological sense of the word.⁸ They don't make syntactical sense. Perhaps Gros had something like that in mind when he speaks, in his "avertissement", of the ambiguity of the text.⁹ Now it is high time to lay this problem open. It is extraordinary how little these things have been discussed.

⁸ For observations concerning this most interesting topic, also with reference to the Kalittokai, see T. Takahashi, "Before Grammar: Issues on Reading Some Classical Tamil Texts" (Lecture given at the 17th European Conference on Modern South Asian Studies, Heidelberg, 13th Sept. 2002. *Kolam* www.uni-koeln.de/phil-fak/indologie/kolam).

⁹ See first (unnumbered) page in F. Gros, *Le Paripāṭal*, Institut Français d'Indologie Pondichéry 1968: "Là où le tamoul, en effet, juxtapose indéfiniment les mots pour un foisonnement d'images et de sons, la traduction, payant son tribut à la "clarté" française, doit exposer à grand renfort d'outils grammaticaux des liens logiques que les poètes préférèrent indéterminés et choisir un seul sens quand ils cultivent le multiple ou l'ambigu."

Who has set the norm that nearly everybody has followed, for more than 30 years?

A change of perspective? A different horizon? One horizon more? What characterises a great many of the articles in this volume, and not exclusively those written by the younger generation of scholars, is an attempt to come to terms with what has been done already and what has been left to be done. After a comparative dearth of about 20 years Tamil studies now seem to be in a phase of reconsolidation, and of course the concerns of the day are not only — or even not mainly — focussed on Tamil as a classical language. But what we like to believe most of us have in common, a connectedness in diversity, is not only the language Tamil, or the Dravidian languages, but a need for reorientation, and for communication. If the volume presented here carries some trace, some echo of such a common endeavour, we will have achieved something useful.

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