

AN INTERVIEW WITH CHRISTOPHER ROLLASON

- Interviewer: Jaydeep Sarangi

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JS: Please say something about your academic career and literary background.

CR: I read English at Trinity College, Cambridge, obtaining my B.A. in 1975. I have never regretted my choice of subject. The English course at Cambridge concentrated entirely on literature - no linguistics - but also included a number of foreign language and literature options. I was therefore able to study some French- and Spanish-language literature in the original. I did well, obtaining a First, together with the Mrs Claude Beddington Prize awarded by the University English Faculty. I was above all interested in the Romantics and the Victorians, and did my three undergraduate dissertations (that was the maximum allowed) on P.B. Shelley, Lord Byron and - looking forward to the future - Edgar Allan Poe.

After Cambridge I spent a year out teaching English as a foreign language in Spain, and then went to York University (England) for my Ph. D. I chose to do it on Poe. From York I went to the University of Coimbra in Portugal, where I was a member of the English department until 1987. It was there that I completed my thesis: I was awarded my doctorate in York virtually in the same moment as quitting Coimbra. I will not go here into the history of higher education to Portugal in the 1980s: suffice it to say that I left over one issue, namely vocationalism. I am, always have been and always will be 100% opposed (and I do mean 100%) to all vocationalisation of all first degree courses in the humanities in all circumstances whatever. The vocationalising so-called "reforms" decreed by the then Portuguese government were of such a nature that, if I was to be coherent with my deeply-held educational beliefs, I had no option but to leave. I left.

In recent years I have been active as an independent scholar, and have collaborated in diverse ways with universities in different countries. In India, I was Visiting Lecturer in 2002 at Kakatiya University (Warangal, Andhra Pradesh) and Visiting Professor at Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), Delhi in 2006. I have co-edited two books (both published in Delhi), served on the advisory boards of various Indian journals - including Seva Bharati Journal of English Studies, edited by yourself - and published a large number of articles in the fields of literature, language, culture and translation studies. If we also include my translations (short stories, poems and non-fiction) from Spanish and Portuguese, I have been published in some 20 countries. I am a regular conference participant and am a member of various associations: the MLA, the Poe Studies Association, ESSE (European Society for the Study of English), AEDEAN (Spanish Association for Anglo-American Studies) and AEEII (Spanish Association for Intercultural Studies on India). The two last-named reflect my close academic links with Spain, a country I often visit.

JS: Please talk about your parents and teachers, and anyone else who influenced you when you were a young student of literature with promise. Also, when did you start writing critical works?

CR: My parents always encouraged me along the academic and literary path, and I deeply appreciate their support. My father read English at Jesus College, Cambridge; my mother, Classics at Bedford College, London. My father departed this life in August 2007, and I am most grateful to Seva Bharati Journal of English Studies for its kind publication of a tribute to him. He was an active member of two prominent literary societies - a tradition which my mother is ably continuing.

I cannot say that I was strongly influenced by many of those who taught me at Cambridge. The prevalent orthodoxy was a neo-classicism which did not suit me, its heroes being Dryden and Pope. I may say that the Director of Studies at Trinity, Dr Theodore Redpath, did influence me in my orientation towards the Romantics. My first professional publication came in 1980, when I was at Coimbra, as part of a collective volume produced by the department, and here I should thank my then colleagues in Portugal for encouraging me to start writing for an academic public.

JS: How did you get into Edgar Allan Poe, who became the subject of your doctoral dissertation? Did you follow any American model for criticism? Also, did you have any reference of Indian reception of Poe (when you were working for your Ph.D.)?

CR: Poe says in his story 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue' that the analytic and the imaginative always go together. In other words, he gives a major role to intuition, and in my own case, to write a thesis on Poe was essentially an intuitive decision. Back then in the mid-70s, American literature was hardly seen as a major area of study at Cambridge: indeed, it was introduced as such only while I was there! However, having completed an undergraduate dissertation on Poe with success, I had the intuition that I should go on and develop my ideas into a full-blown doctoral thesis.

I wasn't specially influenced by any American critic in writing the thesis. I have since then published twice on Harold Bloom, but in other contexts (anyway Bloom notoriously dislikes Poe). The main influences on my study of Poe were French – psychoanalysts such as Marie Bonaparte, cultural critics such as Michel Foucault, as well as literary critics like Roland Barthes; I should also add as key presences Walter Benjamin, through his very important work on Baudelaire, and, though he didn't write on Poe, Sigmund Freud himself, especially his famous essay on the uncanny.

I have to say that I didn't encounter any Indian criticism on Poe when writing the thesis. That is a gap I shall have to remedy some day!

JS: Who was the first Indian author you got interested in? How did it happen?

CR: I remember how, when I was very young – still at primary school I think – I took out from the local library a retelling of the *Ramayana*. So Rama, Sita and Hanuman were known to me from an early age. Later on I read and was impressed by the *Bhagavad Gita*. However, the first book by a modern Indian author to fall into my hands was none other than Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*, soon after it came out. I read it in the first place to be informed about the controversy around that novel. So many people were taking sides one way or the another without having read a word of the actual book, and I thought, well, if I am going to have an opinion on this let it at least be an informed one. Then it so happened I found the range and sweep and sheer bravado of Rushdie's writing exhilarating. I went on and read his other works. Next I got on to Tagore, as the obvious modern classic, and after that forged ahead to take in R.K. Narayan, Raja Rao and many others. It was not long before I was hooked – Mother India had me in her embrace!

JS: Who are the Indian authors whom you especially like and have particularly worked on so far?

CR: Of the currently recognised crop of major writers in the field of Indian Writing in English (IWE), I particularly appreciate, apart from (most of) Rushdie, the works of Vikram Seth, Vikram Chandra, Amitav Ghosh and Manju Kapur, and have written on all of those figures. I have also written on Raja Rao, Sunny Singh, Githa Hariharan, Arundhati Roy and Basavaraj Naikar, as well as on a number of poets – Jayanta Mahapatra, Anuraag Sharma, Satish Verma. If any IWE writer should be awarded the Nobel Prize (and it is about time), I would give it to Ghosh - even though I don't think he's yet a nominee - for the historical sweep and characterological depth of his remarkably impressive corpus so far. The completion of the trilogy begun with *Sea of Poppies* would be an appropriate moment for him to receive a major literary award.

JS: Since you have worked a lot on Salman Rushdie and Vikram Chandra, can you say a bit more about what is special for you about them?

CR: Well, there is no getting round Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* – it is the book that put IWE on the map, playing a similar role to that of García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* in the Latin American 'boom'. It is also the textbook case of magic realism in its Indian form, though I have noted with interest that among Rushdie's later works, *Shalimar the Clown*, in my view by far the best thing he has written since the fatwa, uses magic-realist effects only very sparingly, whereas the frankly tawdry *The Enchantress of Florence* constantly resorts to what Makarand Paranjape has called 'Rushdie's box of tricks', only to fall flat on its face.

What I find special in Vikram Chandra's work – and I have recently co-edited, with Sarup & Sons of Delhi, the first-ever collection of critical essays on his work (my co-editors being Sheobhushan Shukla and Ana Shukla) – is the exceptional way in which he continues and updates a very ancient tradition of storytelling, very much (and I say this although only his first book, *Red Earth and Pouring Rain*, could be called magic-realist) in the tradition of the *Thousand and One Nights*, which, after all, are believed to have their distant origin in India.

I have published an article on intertextuality in Chandra in which I show how in *Red Earth* he draws on influences as varied as Poe, Borges and the *Thousand and One Nights* while at the same time anchoring his storytelling in the Indian tradition. My co-edited volume reprints that essay, and also has a piece of mine on the Spanish translation of Chandra's volume of stories *Love and Longing in Bombay* and the issues and challenges it raises. That translation is by Dora Sales Salvador, who is also the author of the book *Puentes sobre el mundo*, to my knowledge and prior to the new anthology the only substantial volume published on Chandra – or actually half on Chandra, as it is a comparative study with the Peruvian writer José María Arguedas. I have reviewed that book (it does not exist in English) and published the review in India, and in this connection I would say that it is important that criticism on IWE that appears in languages other than English should get a proper airing in the Anglophone world. Reviews of this kind are, I believe, a valuable tool here as a means of raising awareness of postcolonial criticism as a fully-fledged international phenomenon.

JS: Who are the recent Indian authors whom you have read with interest?

CR: I have already mentioned Sunny Singh, and if we are talking about the works of those who might be called newer or emerging IWE authors, it is her two novels that I find particularly powerful, especially the second, *With Krishna's Eyes*, which wrestles successfully with an issue as fraught as sati. Unfortunately I have not been impressed by either of the two recent IWE Man Booker Prize winners, Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* and Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*.

I felt both ended up reinforcing negative stereotypes about India and fell into a constant trap of sensationalism. It is unfortunate that these two writers have received the Booker at the expense of far better authors like those I have mentioned above, whose works do negotiate India's complexities without resorting to spurious cliché or exoticism.

JS: You have published material on the late critic David McCutchion, a figure associated with Bengal. How did you come across his work? What, in your view, is his importance?

CR: David McCutchion was a college friend of my father's, and I had the good fortune to meet him twice when I was young. I have published an article about his work on Raja Rao. He was a polymath of India studies, with interests including brick temples and Bengali scrolls. As far as IWE is concerned, he was one of the first non-Indian critics to take the new genre seriously and examine it in detail, and his critical essays on Indian writers are still of value today.

JS: Your articles have appeared in Indian journals. Would you mention a few of them? How do you rate Indian journals, and do you find they differ significantly from journals in the West?

CR: I have published in, among others, the following Indian literary journals: JSL and Hispanic Horizon (both from JNU Delhi), The Atlantic Literary Review (Delhi), Kakatiya Journal of English Studies (Warangal), Indian Journal of World Literature and Culture (Kolkata and Bhubaneshwar), Re-Markings (Agra), The Quest (Ranchi), Summerhill (Shimla) and Seva Bharati Journal of English Studies (Kapgari/Midnapore), as well as the Indian Journal of Post-Colonial Literatures (Thodupuzha, Kerala) which is kindly hosting this interview. I have also had pieces in Indian newspapers (The Statesman, Kolkata and The Pioneer, Delhi).

Indian journals do vary. Presentational standards - of formatting and English - could, I fear, often be higher, especially if India is to hold its head up high, as it should and deserves to, in the international academic milieux. What I do note in another direction - and this is not always the case with Western journals - is a boundless enthusiasm and keenness, an infectious love of literature, which I feel has deep roots in the Indian character.

JS: What is your studied view on Indian English?

CR: This is a huge topic, on which I can hardly go into in detail here, but I believe Indian English has by now established itself as a major variant of the English language. There is a standard or general Indian English whose rules are not always quite those of the Queen's English, and there are also regional Indian variations, with hybridization and code-switching with Indian languages. It is likely that within a decade or so Indian English will be recognised as one of the three most prestigious and most-taught variants of the language, alongside British and American English. I have read with interest Nandan Nilekani's account, in his recent book *Imagining India*, of the 'rise, fall and rise' of English in India. English is now clearly on an upswing in India, but India will end up changing English – something that as second-language rather than foreign-language speakers, Indians have the right to do!

JS: What is your view of the postcolonial? How do you see the future of New Writing in English?

CR: The first thing to be said about "new writing in English" is that it is no longer so new. A friend pointed out to me the other day that the first "new literature in English", if we mean by that literature produced in English from outside the centres of power, dates from the late middle ages in the form of the poems of the Scottish Chaucerians, poets like Robert Henryson. Today "new literatures" and "postcolonial writing" both tend, as far as English is concerned, to mean any

literature that is not from Britain or the US; but American literature too was once a new literature in English. I believe both the writing and the teaching of these literatures – Indian, African, Caribbean, Canadian, Australian, etc – have a full and rewarding future before them: today, their exponents win prizes and their study is firmly established in universities. Concerning the term "postcolonial", it was entirely necessary for the period we are now emerging from, but I think the future will demand other terms like "globalised" or "international" literature, or maybe simply "hybrid" writing.

JS: Will Translation Studies be part of the academic apparatus of the future?

CR: Translation Studies is by now an established academic discipline, and has much to contribute to literary criticism since it homes in directly on the interaction between different languages and different literary cultures. I believe it is a discipline with an excellent future, and I have myself delivered and published a number of papers in the field – including, as I mentioned above, on the issues arising from the translation of IWE.

JS: What do you think the role of regional languages and literatures should be in a multilingual country like India?

CR: Here again, I think translation and multilingualism go hand in hand. India has 23 official languages (the 22 listed in the Eighth Schedule to the constitution, plus English) - but how many Indians know any of them other than their own language, Hindi and English, plus possibly Urdu or Sanskrit? How many Bengalis know Tamil, and vice versa? There is surely a case for much more intra-Indian language learning, but if that fails to achieve high priority, then translation will have a major role to play. I am thinking of translation of English or Hindi works into the regional languages, translation from the regional languages into those languages, and translation between regional languages. Exemplary here are the translation of novels by Vikram Chandra and Manju Kapur into Malayalam, and the Sahitya Akademi's project of translating literature from all the official languages into English.

JS: You, along with Rajeshwar Mittapalli, have published a book entitled Modern Criticism. What is the objective of this book?

CR: This volume, which was published by Atlantic in Delhi in 2002, is a 300-page edited collection consisting of 16 essays, mostly by Indian scholars but with some contributors from further afield (Spain, Brazil). Our aim (Rajeshwar's and mine) was to include articles describing or representing schools or aspects of modern literary criticism, or individual critical thinkers. Thus, there are pieces on postmodernism, Norman Holland and reader-response theory, sociolinguistic criticism, feminism and intertextuality, etc; and, more from the postcolonial angle, on psychoanalysis and Indian writing, "Indianness" as a literary concept, African literary theory, etc. We believe the book has been a success: it is still available from a large number of Indian book websites. My own contribution to the volume is an essay on Walter Benjamin.

JS: On the subject of Walter Benjamin, you have contributed material on this German-Jewish philosopher to the website The Walter Benjamin Research Syndicate. What aspects attract you to Benjamin?

CR: Benjamin is, in my opinion, very probably the most important Western philosopher of the twentieth century. As a thinker his only rival is Freud; as a critic I would place him at the century's summit along with Georg Lukács, Harold Bloom and Edward Said. The Walter Benjamin Research Syndicate (WBRS) is the most important and most-visited web resource for material on or related to Benjamin. It is designed and conceived by Scott Thompson from California, and I am pleased to be

the site's co-editor. On WBRS, I have: an extended version of the piece from *Modern Criticism* that I mentioned above (it's on his posthumous masterpiece, *The Arcades Project*); one on his death in Spain in 1940; and one on Benjamin and translation. The latter two have also had print publication. Walter Benjamin is a multifaceted writer who cannot be easily summarised. However, among the facets of his thought that I find of particular interest, I would include his non-linear model of history, his ability to place high culture and mass culture in fruitful dialogue, and his deep and prophetic sense of the connectedness of things, which, I have argued, anticipates the Internet age.

JS: *What do you see as the role of the critic today?*

The role of the critic today is what it always was: to facilitate the understanding of literature and improve the stock of knowledge about it, to keep the classics alive for a new generation with new and challenging interpretations, to guide and advise readers on what new literature to read, to seek out and rescue neglected works from the past, and to transmit an enthusiasm for literature and the written word (today, in whatever medium and on whatever support, e-books included).