

## The Grove and the Tower

(A Dilettante's Contemplation)

For R.P.G.

The monkey Hanumān entered and gazed upon that lovely grove, which resounded with the songs of birds. That lovely grove was surrounded on every side by trees of silver and gold. It was made still more beautiful by flocks of birds and deer. It had the splendor of the rising sun... As he searched for that blameless, fair-hipped princess [Sītā], the monkey startled birds that had been peacefully sleeping. And as the flocks of birds flew off, they struck the trees with their wings, letting loose showers of blossoms of every color. Covered with blossoms, Hanumān, son of Māruta the wind god, resembled a mountain of flowers there in the midst of the aśoka grove. And when the creatures there saw the monkey racing in all directions through the stands of trees, they all thought he was the spirit of springtime.

[Description of the monkey divinity Hanumān, searching for Sītā in the aśoka grove in Lankā.]

-- Vālmiki, Rāmāyana (Sundarakāṇḍa 12.5-6, 9-12. Trans. R.P. Goldman and S.J.S. Goldman.)

A few weeks ago I flew down to Berkeley from Seattle with my wife, Julie. She'd enrolled in a low-residency chaplaincy program headquartered in Berkeley, and would be attending her first three-day class at the Chaplaincy Institute, located just northwest of the eucalyptus grove that stands at the West Entrance to campus, only a few blocks from the apartment building where I lived my senior

year at the University. (The building is still there.) I hadn't been back to Berkeley since the early spring of 1983, when I came with my first wife, Diane, who died in 2004. On that trip, I don't remember visiting or even thinking about the eucalyptus grove - though it seems unlikely that I wouldn't have at least mentioned it to Diane, seeing as in my Berkeley days (1972-6) it held an important place in my mental ecology. I would often walk past it on my way to and from classes. But on this recent trip with Julie, as soon as I dropped her off Thursday morning at the Chaplaincy Institute for her first day of class, and then saw how close it was to the West Campus entrance, I remembered the eucalyptus grove, and knew I had to revisit it - which I did the following day, on my way to see my old Sanskrit professor, Robert Goldman, whom I hadn't laid eyes on since the end of freshman year, 46 years ago.

As it happened, I hadn't gone on with Sanskrit after that year-long introductory course. Though I had done well, I had found the language very difficult - not just the alphabet and grammar (44 letters! Eight cases!), but also the set of rules governing the transformation of certain word endings in conjunction with the initial sounds of the following words. (This system is known as Sandhi.)

So after freshman year I took no more Sanskrit, reasoning that I already had enough on my mind with all the courses in Latin and Greek I had to take for my Classics major - not to mention the modern literature electives I wanted to take (because my mind needed them, too). But though by now I have forgotten almost all of the Sanskrit grammar and Sandhi I learned in Goldman's class (as well as much of the alphabet, alas!), I never did forget the handful of Sanskrit verses he had us memorize. In fact, the main reason I wanted to see him now was to surprise him by reciting the five sets of verses (ślokas) I still remembered. Over the past 46 years I had made a point of reciting them regularly to myself, in the hope of one day seeing Goldman again and reciting them for him. Since I didn't know when that day might come, it had always seemed a good idea to keep my ślokas in good working order. But the truth is, even if I ended up never seeing Goldman again, I still wanted to always remember those verses. To forget any one of them would have been an unforgiveable lapse - the betrayal of a promise I had made to myself a long time ago, to always uphold high standards of beauty and excellence: saundarya ca śreṣṭhatā. (And, just for the record, I believe that splitting your infinitives is just

fine, and has nothing to do with upholding high standards of beauty and excellence.)

I still on occasion have dreams about being back in that class. There was the lovely Kathleen Cornell -- a sophomore, as I recall (an older woman!) -- who announced one day that she was getting married, whereupon I instantly experienced an absurd but undeniable pang. There was "Zavadowski" -- tinted glasses, wild hair and scruffy beard, whose name Goldman would always pronounce with gusto. (I never did get his first name, and for my purposes, he never had one; he was always just "Zavadowski".) There was Fred Slimp, an older student from Texas, who was also studying Classics; we would sometimes greet each other in Sanskrit. ("Bhō Śri Slimp, mahāśayā"!) There was a married woman with glasses named Catherine, with an Indian last name that ended in a retroflex "ṭ" - Phaṭ or Bhaṭ -- one of my favorite sounds. (I liked hearing Goldman pronounce her last name as well.) And there were others whose names I never learned, but who made an impression nonetheless: a mustachioed biker guy who'd flunked the course the first time around, and was doggedly taking it again; and another sophomore -- was he a friend of Kathleen's? -- with a goatee, who was deep into Jungian psychology.

Goldman himself was a striking presence, with a full black beard and straight hair down nearly to his waist -- but always impeccably groomed and tied back in a neat pony tail. He often wore loose-fitting Indian clothing - long-sleeved, collarless cotton shirts and baggy pajama-pants - and sandals. He had adopted also the typically subcontinental gesture of assent: a rolling, head-wagging motion with eyes half-closed, which he would employ in response to our correct answers. (It gave me particular satisfaction to be able to elicit this gesture from him.) I knew even then that he was a serious scholar, but there was also detectable, behind the sober, scholarly punctilio, a latent sense of humor, and (even more important) a gentle kindness about the eyes and mouth. His voice was soft - the tone of scholastic authority - and I don't remember him ever raising it, not even when, one day, a saffron-robed Hare Kṛṣṇa devotee found his way from Telegraph Ave. to the back of the classroom, where he sat chanting very quietly, under his breath. Goldman appeared not to notice him, though perhaps this was just another instance of his gentle kindness, and his tolerance.

His teaching assistant was Pandit Bhatta, from Mysore. Bhatta invariably wore a white collared shirt with the sleeves rolled up, black slacks, and black shoes. He

recited Sanskrit in a slightly hoarse voice, and wrote it on the blackboard in a rapid scrawl that, as I progressed in the course, it gave me pleasure to be able to decipher. During the Winter Quarter of '73 we met in the forestry building, for some reason, and I also found pleasure in this rather apt unlikelihood. (One of the first sentences we had learned in Sanskrit, demonstrating a basic Sandhi transformation, was "Rāmō vanam gaccatī": "Rāma goes to the forest.") All in all, that first-year Sanskrit class, along with a seminar in Proust in translation I took senior year with the redoubtable Thomas Flanagan (later the author of a distinguished trilogy of novels on Irish history), are the two academic memories of Berkeley that I most cherish. It's no wonder I should cherish the Proust class - reading Proust's novel in its entirety changed my life; but I'm still trying to figure out exactly why that Sanskrit class was so important to me. (I suspect it may have had to do with those high standards of beauty and excellence mentioned earlier.)

So that Friday, on my way through West Campus to Goldman's office in Dwinelle Hall (I had been to his office only once before, during freshman year; I remember one wall completely lined with Sanskrit texts, and still vivid in my mind is a multi-volume set bound in bright red cloth), I

stopped off at the eucalyptus grove. Though "stopped off" makes it sound too casual. My visit to the grove was as deliberate as the plan to see Goldman. For the grove, you see, had always been a kind of locus for me. (The word seems appropriate here, perhaps because of the aura of venerability and mystery - yet also precision - invoked by Latin nomenclature.) A locus -- in my personal lexicon, anyway -- is a place of concentrated energy, partly invested by the visitant themselves, no doubt, but also registered by them as partly there already, long before they came. I suppose the stand of eucalyptus was my agnostic's version of a sacred grove. And perhaps my sense of all this was enhanced (or maybe even prompted) by a book Julie had been reading recently called The Hidden Life of Trees, which documents the amazing ways in which trees communicate with each other, as parts of an emergent living system.

I was impressed by how much taller the eucalyptuses had grown since I'd last been here. The towering trees, with their shredding bark and their dryly whispering, elongated olive-green leaves, were emblematic to me of California, and my California youth. I had been away from these trees a long time - over twenty years back east, teaching in Massachusetts and then on Long Island, where

they knew not eucalyptus; and now, since I'd moved to Seattle from Long Island a year and a half ago to live with Julie, I was away from them once again. (They know not eucalyptus in Washington State, either.) So it was sweet to be back among them, if only briefly this time. They held so many memories. I had grown up among the eucalyptus trees lining the streets of Pacific Palisades - not only the tall ones, with the hard, silver-green acorns that we used to have wars with (they really hurt when you got hit with one), but the shorter ones, too, with their fuzzy red blossoms and hollow brown seed-pods with the hole on the end. On our street, Tracy Hudson (the tomboy next door) and I used to swing out over the roadway on long, Tarzan-style ivy vines that hung from the tall eucalyptuses abutting the Souths' lawn. And later on, much later, when I was in graduate school at USC, there had been a stand of eucalyptus on a walk I often took at lunchtime through the grounds of the Huntington Gardens and Library in San Marino, where I was writing my dissertation (on English Romantic poetry). The first time I happened upon this grove and entered it, I recognized it as a locus of contemplation, "...to which/I often would repair, and thence would drink/As at a fountain" (Wordsworth, from the "spots of time" passage in The Prelude [1805 version], 11.382-4).



On these walks, my mind activated by all the tea I had drunk at lunch, it was pleasurable to let that activated mind, infused also with all the reading of Romantic poetry and criticism I had been doing, drift and wander among the dry eucalyptus bark and leaves in the grove at the Huntington. Those times of Romantic reverie came back to me now during the few minutes I sat in the West Campus grove. It was good to be back.

From the grove I went on to Goldman's office, passing by the Campanile on the way. This tower is a famous landmark, and, along with Sather Gate, an icon of the University. The design for the tower was taken from the Campanile of Piazza San Marco, in Venice, which I knew well from my junior year abroad in Italy. Our program was headquartered in Padua, about a 45-minute train ride away, so I took every opportunity I could to get into Venice. Emerging onto the Piazza from any one of the narrow side streets feeding into it, and suddenly finding yourself in the magical locus - like being in the middle of a giant charmed square -- with the cathedral and the tower arrayed in splendor before you, was a mind-expanding experience; and the low murmur of the crowd gathered in the wide-open space only added to the grand effect. On our honeymoon in '83 - summer of the same year we'd gone to Berkeley in the

spring - I made Diane close her eyes until we were in the middle of the square. When she opened them, she cried. I remembered that moment now, too.

The Department of South and Southeast Asian Studies was housed with Classics on the top floor of Dwinelle. Classics had been my major, but I had no particular desire to see any of their faculty. The only Classics professor I'd ever really liked, the pixilated Greek epigraphist Leslie L. Threatte (the first day of class, he wrote the correct pronunciation of his name on the blackboard in International Phonetic Spelling: θrit), was now retired, and I didn't recognize any of the other names on the department roster. The assistant in the main office told me Goldman wasn't in -- which, though disappointing, was really no surprise, as it was a Friday in the middle of summer; but I had come prepared, with paper and pen, to write him a note, which I now did. It ended up being longer than I expected - both sides of an 8x11 yellow foolscap sheet. I named the aforementioned students of SKT 101-3 (1972-3), and told him the class had left such an impression on me that I still sometimes dreamed about it. I said I had come by to recite the ślokas he'd taught us 46 years ago, and put my email address at the end.

I didn't expect to hear back from him for a while -- if at all - and so on Monday morning, I was surprised and excited to find his email waiting in my inbox, with the subject heading, "Your Letter". It was a characteristically gracious reply. He called my letter "charming", and said he was "moved" to hear from me after all these years. He was sorry to have missed me on Friday - as it happened, he'd been in his office on and off that day, though apparently the people in the main office hadn't been aware of this. He said he'd be delighted to hear me recite the ślokas the next time I was on campus. In my (immediate) reply, I said I hoped to be back next year - maybe as early as January, when my wife's classes at the Chaplaincy Institute resumed after the holidays. (I would be teaching in the fall, and so wouldn't be able to get down then.)

As soon as we got back to Seattle, I went on Amazon and found his books: the published, revised version of the painstakingly-typed photocopied sheets (remember, this was the early 70's -- the pre-PC era; the Sanskrit was all handwritten) that he'd composed as the textbook for our class, and which I'd kept for years in a loose-leaf ring-binder (but which hadn't survived the move back east); and also his magnum opus (mahāpustaka): a seven-volume

translation of the newest critical edition of the Vālmiki-Rāmāyaṇa, put out by Princeton University Press, each volume buttressed with a hundred-page introduction, and exhaustive notes. I began to get excited again as I contemplated buying one (or more) of the volumes.

I have a thing for "definitive" editions and biographies, as well as complete sets and collections. They create a yearning in me to possess them. The idea of the "definitive" study or presentation of a subject engenders a throb of expectational excitement in the region of my solar plexus that is impossible to ignore. Along with this telltale throb comes the insistent belief that the purchase and possession (especially the possession) of the "definitive" text in question -- and it helps if it has been hailed by the relevant authorities as "magisterial" -- will edify me in a way that will cause me to become an ever-so-slightly better person. The possession of a definitive text seems to guarantee the acquisition, along with it, of a kind of virtue, or perhaps several: intelligence, knowledge, edification, wisdom. But of course it never quite works out that way. The purchase of definitive texts only guarantees the desire for more. It is a kind of intellectual materialism, I know -- analogous perhaps to Chögyam Trungpa's "spiritual materialism" -- but

I can't seem to shake it. (Nor do I really want to.) The idea of a text having received the intellectual imprimatur (literally: "let it be printed") of the relevant authorities is for some reason deeply gratifying.

In any case, the prospect of Goldman's Rāmāyaṇa series was irresistible to a votary of the saundarya ca śreṣṭhatā, and I ended up ordering three of the Princeton volumes: the first (Bālakāṇḍa), the fifth (the much-beloved Sundarakāṇḍa, or "beautiful book", narrating the arrival of the monkey divinity Hanumān in Lankā (now Sri Lanka) to rescue Sītā, who is being held prisoner by the demon King Rāvaṇa), and the sixth, the Yuddhakāṇḍa, detailing the epic battle between the forces of Rāma, aided by Hanumān and his monkey minions, and the demon army of Rāvaṇa, who is ultimately defeated, and Sītā freed to rejoin Rāma. The Yuddhakāṇḍa volume alone measures 3" thick (in paperback): 1655 pp., including 1159 pp. of notes. Go Goldman!

The perusal of these volumes turned out to be an event for me - though one unconnected with the actual reading of the poem, which I have done sparingly. Then again, reading through the poem - or even just the Sundarakāṇḍa -- was never really my intention. My intention was rather to contemplate the idea and the fact of the poem -- and above all, to contemplate Goldman's scholarly achievement.

(Though to be fair, he'd had several collaborators in the massive enterprise - including his wife, Sally J. Sutherland Goldman; but he was the general editor of the seven-volume series, the sole translator and annotator of Volume 1, and the co-translator and -annotator, along with SJSJG, of Volumes 5, 6 and 7. Go Goldmen!) The sustained contemplation of this achievement was the task I set myself in ordering Volumes 1, 5 and 6. But "task" doesn't put it quite right either, because that makes my project sound onerous, when it is far from that. (Well, maybe not that far, actually; but onerousness in the cause of virtue is not a bad thing.) It partakes, rather, of the saundarya ca śreṣṭhatā; it is redolent of Keats' sublime "realms of gold".

Now in my contemplational endeavors regarding these texts I am, admittedly, a total dilettante: only one year's study of Sanskrit, and most of that now forgotten (except for the ślokas Goldman taught us, and which I will never - Hanumān willing - forget). But my dilettantism is not necessarily a defect here; indeed, dilettantism may even be one of the main features of the personal essay. I make no claim to being a scholar; I wish only to enjoy - to contemplate - the scholarship of others. Above all, the quintessential scholarship of my old professor. For it

seems to me that Sanskrit scholarship, in the vastness and comprehensive detail of its corpus, traditions and methods, is the quintessence of all scholarship. And Goldman, mahāshaya that he is ("great sage", as he once jocularly greeted me, and as Fred Slimp and I used to greet each other thereafter), is a scholar of scholars. The real deal - as well as the occasion of my dilettante's pleasure here. (Though I suppose that last phase is rather redundant, the original Italian meaning of "dilettante" being "one who delights", or "delights in".)

But my delight is a bit more complicated than might seem. For it is tinged with regret -- more than a touch of regret. Regret at the road not taken - the life of scholarship I chose not to pursue, and that seems now to beckon, temptingly, from the far distance. But that ship has sailed. In the event, I became a writer and teacher - a generalist - instead of a scholar. A teacher of writing and literature, and a writer of memoirs and personal essays (the great majority of them still, and perhaps forever, unpublished - lacking the aforementioned imprimatur of the relevant authorities). To echo Nietzsche, I "became what I was" - what I already had it in me to be: a writer and a teacher, not a scholar. Nietzsche wrote also about amor fati. Love what is. Embrace your fate. Could it have

been otherwise? Probably not; but isn't that just the point? It is one thing to accept fate, though, and quite another to love it. Nietzsche said we must love it. And here I have been fortunate. I have loved, and continue to love, the life of writing, and teaching undergraduates. And I do not think I would have loved the life of higher scholarship. I delight in the dilettante's pleasures, such as they are. And they are considerable. Atō bravāmi Astū iti. "And so I say, Let it be." I have become what I was. And yet, one cannot help but wonder... It is the lot of the writer, if they are any good at all, to wonder...

My first two years at Berkeley, I thought I might be preparing for a career as a classical scholar - a life devoted (not unlike Goldman's) to the study of the dead tongues - in my case, Latin and Greek. And I had thought, when I enrolled in Goldman's class, that the study of Sanskrit would be a kind of auxiliary to Classics. But soon enough I found out this was far from the case - that the field of Sanskrit language and literature, as Goldman was laying it out before us (albeit in bits and pieces only, as prescribed by our introductory course of study), was much vaster and more daunting than I had imagined. This ancient offshoot of Proto-Indo-European was no ancillary aid to the study of Classics, as I had ignorantly



assumed when I first signed up. It was a world unto itself -- a vast "treasury of kings" (Ruskin), whose ornate literary glories surpassed the beauty and excellence -- not to mention the volume -- of even the classical canon.

So although I managed to keep my head above water in that first-year class, I went no farther. I sensed my limits, and decided to stick to the Mediterranean; the Indian Ocean was just too enormous for me. And after junior year abroad in Italy, the idea of a life in any kind of scholarship seemed no longer tenable. Something in me had changed. The creative juices that had gotten flowing again when I took a class in fiction-writing the Spring Quarter of sophomore year began to wash over me that year in Italy, and when I returned to Berkeley and took Flanagan's class in Proust in translation my senior year, the notion of becoming a Classics scholar now seemed too small an ambition, and even a little petty. I wanted to be a writer - an autobiographical writer. Reading Proust had made that clear to me.

No, I am not a scholar, nor was meant to be. Am an attendant contemplator, a visitor to the grove, not a resident there. Goldman is a resident - a lifelong resident, you might say, of the aśoka grove in Lankā where Hanumān, to his great delight, discovered Sītā. Goldman

lives in the grove, and works in the tower. The grove and the tower are lovely places to be - lovely places to live, and nice work too, if you can get it. I didn't, though. I didn't even try. Although I'd been accepted into Berkeley's graduate program in English, I decided, for various reasons, to go to USC instead. A PhD from Berkeley would probably have opened doors for me that remained shut for someone with a degree from USC. But that's OK. I had a taste of the grove and the tower as an undergraduate, and that was fine. More than fine. It was enough -- for my purposes, anyway. Astū. I acquired a lifelong taste for contemplation, and its pleasures. The pleasures of the text, and the grove. And it seems to me that the pleasures of the text are not unlike the pleasures of the grove. They are both contemplational. A text - the right text, anyway, one that comes at the right time of your life, like Proust, or the Rāmāyaṇa: rich, ornate, and deep as the ocean - that kind of text is a grove for the mind. An aśoka grove, or a eucalyptus grove. A place to repair to, for the nourishment of the mind. A Keatsian bower of the imagination, that gives both solace and gentle stimulation. A locus that recalls the past, but also registers one's expectational hopes for the future. A Wordsworthian "spot of time", where thoughts of the past and the future come

together. A place to contemplate desires forgone, but not forgotten.

Diane used to say, when I'd sometimes come home laden with books from our local independent bookstore on Long Island: "But Josh, it's not in a book." I know she was right - but I still have not been able, even with Julie now, to break myself of the inveterate habit of book-buying. (Witness the recent Goldman splurge.) The next book - surely the right book, this time -- ever beckons from the middle-distance. And it seems to me -- right as Diane was, in one sense -- that in another sense it is in a book after all. And what there is in a book is more than a book. It is the grove: that ideal place that I will never possess, the grove that I will only visit, not live in, like Goldman and the other blessed spirits of the tower. I did not "go on that blessed path" (parāṃ gatīṃ -- Kālidāsa). I took another path. And that, as another poet said, has made all the difference.