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More than "priestly mumbo-jumbo": Religion and authorship in *All About H. Hatterr*

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This essay proposes an unconventional approach to the late colonial and postcolonial Indian writer G.V. Desani, author of the famously difficult novel *All About H. Hatterr* (1948). The essay draws on heretofore overlooked biographical materials, Desani's own literary journalism, as well as the many revisions Desani made to the novel itself, to argue that Desani's central theme may not be linguistic hybridity, as previously thought, so much as the anxiety of a late colonial Indian author as he struggles to represent an evolving relationship to a kind of Hindu religious practice. Desani's picaresque novel reflects an evident fascination with the Hindu religious authority figures it satirizes; it also contains numerous "self-distancing" mechanisms, including eight separate prolegomena – all of which help to create confusion about the author's responsibility to his text. As he continually revised the novel, Desani introduced new footnotes and appendices to distance himself further from his text, suggesting a continuing anxiety about his own authorship. Finally, this deferral of authorial responsibility, it is posited, may be a mirror of the Hindu religious ascesis Desani practiced in his personal life.

Keywords: G.V. Desani; *All About H. Hatterr*; religion; authorship; biography; India

Although the 20th-century Indian writer G.V. Desani is often mentioned by postcolonial literary critics, he is rarely read, and the central mystery at the heart of his writing is generally ignored. In his widely discussed preface to the 1997 *Mirrorwork* anthology, Salman Rushdie posits originary status for Desani, and places him next to the popular Indian English writer R.K. Narayan. Rushdie also offers an Indianized version of the genealogy of the English novel when he references Samuel Richardson and Lawrence Sterne, whose realism and self-reflexive satirical voice resembles Desani's. Although a neat parallel, it fails to recognize what I will argue is the central contradiction in Desani's work: the way in which Desani's deep personal interest in religion, specifically a kind of esoteric version of Hinduism, coexists alongside the satirical textual play Rushdie describes. Secondly and relatedly, Rushdie's characterization of Desani's attempt to "go beyond the Englishness of the English language" (16) overlooks Desani's deep anxiety, characteristic of the late colonial/early postcolonial moment, about claiming the status of authorship in the English context. Desani appears in Rushdie's analysis as a confident and successful satirist – rather like Rushdie himself – but Desani's religious commitments and his anxiety over his status as a late colonial Indian writer in English create a rather different picture. As Desani's authorial persona writes in the introductory "warning" to *All About H. Hatterr*, "This book isn't English as she is wrote and spoke" (Desani, 1986: 16). Perhaps most importantly, the two objections to the currently prevalent images of Desani I am positing – those of religion and authorial identity – are in fact closely linked within the arc of Desani's career as well

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as in the text of *All About H. Hatterr* itself; it is the task of this essay to show how Desani's twin anxieties may be mutually constitutive.

All About H. Hatterr, first published in 1948, is Desani's only novel. The prose is famously difficult to follow – which might explain why Rushdie's incomplete account of its main theme has prevailed for so long – but it's also possible that some of the critical reticence about Desani comes from discomfort caused by his rather singular religious commitments. In Desani's case in particular, more so than with many other postcolonial writers, ignoring the complex relationship between the projected authorial persona and the biographical context associated with the "real" author behind the text weakens our understanding of *Hatterr*. This is so in part because of the curious opening(s) of *All About H. Hatterr*, which Desani continually modified and expanded in later editions of the novel. However, even with the wild satirical style and numerous narrative framing devices, a straightforward reading of the text is complicated by certain key passages in *Hatterr* itself, as well as the wide array of ancillary and explanatory texts that Desani wrote in the years following its original publication. The gradual revisions Desani made to *Hatterr* seem largely focused on positioning the irreligious meaning of the text at a distance from the persona of the author, Desani, as well as suggesting, perhaps contradictorily, that the text is not so irreligious after all. Desani uses an array of invented pseudo-authorial voices and interlocutors to defer his own presence (and his own authority) in his text, as if to say that he didn't in fact write the novel, or that if he did, it was driven by a demonic impulse to satirize that is in some sense out of his control. Authorial responsibility is deferred, as Desani suggests that the author of the irreligious elements is "Desani" or even the fictional "Hatterr" himself, not Desani. In any case, Desani would argue later, in an essay that appeared in 1978 ("Difficulties of Communicating an Oriental to a Western Audience"), that critics of the novel who see it as primarily satirical are misreading it.

To reproduce all the prolegomena to *H. Hatterr* Desani used over the years would be overwhelming, but here is one example of an epigraph that appeared in some of the earlier editions of the novel (but not the 1970 or 1986 editions):

Indian middle-man (to Author): Sir, if you do not identify your composition a novel, how then do we itemize it? Sir, the rank and file is entitled to know.

Author (to *Indian middle-man*): Sir, I identify it a *gesture*. Sir, the rank and file is entitled to know.

Indian middle-man (to Author): Sir, there is no immediate demand for gestures. There is immediate demand for novels. Sir, we are literary agents not free agents.

Author (to *Indian middle-man*): Sir, I identify it a novel. Sir, itemize it accordingly. (*Hatterr* 1950: 12)

Of the many curiosities here, the most obvious issue might be Desani's decision to stress the nationality of the "Indian middle-man", but not that of the "Author", whom we know to be every bit as Indian as the "middle-man" who is his interlocutor. Another curiosity is, of course, the Author's assertion, subsequently retracted, that his book is not a novel per se but a "gesture". The insistence on gesture, which is itself a rhetorical gesture of a kind, might be read as an attempt to unground the text, to detach it from the weight of literary history. However, while the proposed generic – re-description might free the author from certain sorts of expectations, it also clearly weakens his claims to literary authority. And, of course, the stilted mode of the dialogue, with its hypertrophied formality ("Sir [...]"), suggests that the entire passage is meant satirically.

This epigraph is not the only occasion for referencing the problem of generic instability, and invoking the idea of the "gesture". Taken as a whole, Desani's deferrals and confrontations scattered in these repeatedly revised prolegomena suggest a combative relationship with his readers, publishers, critics, and even himself. But while the play of prefaces in *Hatterr* may seem to make the authentic author harder to identify, the very theatricality of the "gesture" seems to point, despite itself, at the figure of the author (lower-case) who seems to say: "Pay no attention to me, please." In the full introductory chapter to *Hatterr* itself, "Desani" actually says: "Though I warrant and underwrite, the book's *his*. I remain anonymous" (*Hatterr* 1986: 16). Note the intriguing pun, "underwrite", which has an economic connotation, though it is no accident that it also suggests Desani's hidden (that is, *underlying*) authorial presence. Reading against the grain, one grows interested in the very object the text seems to want to hide – Desani himself – which is to say, the question of Desani's biography.

Our justification for a biographical emphasis is partly thematic – this particular text seems to ask us to consider its author – but there are also broader theoretical justifications for carefully injecting biography into the puzzle of Desani's writing. Although the post-structuralist turn in literary studies might seem to have definitively debunked biographicism, this critic would argue that the "author" is not yet "dead", or at least not as dead as some critics have been prone to think. One of the most considered and convincing critiques of Barthes' arguments in "Death of the Author", along with Foucault's subsequent redirection of Barthes in "What is an Author?" comes from Seán Burke, who in his essay "The Birth of the Reader" argues that Barthes' construction of an "Author-God", whose intentions determine all possible textual meanings for literary critics, may be a kind of straw man. In fact, the earlier Russian Formalists, as well as the Anglo-American New Critics, had already displaced the heuristic status of authorship somewhat, and Burke rightly alludes to Wimsatt and Beardsley's well-known injunctions against "The Intentional Fallacy" as driven by a pointedly non-theological concept of authorship.

In "The Birth of the Reader", Burke closely follows the status of authorship through the winding course of Barthes' career, showing that Barthes' seemingly revolutionary rejection of Authorship in 1967/1968 was quickly followed by his return to the Author in a wide range of his later works, including the conventional attributes of authorial distinctiveness: the "voice", the idea of "style", and the oeuvre. Burke pinpoints a moment late in *S/Z*, a work dedicated to meticulously challenging the centrality and singularity of Balzac's authorial voice, as signaling a potential openness for a "return" of the author in Barthes' thinking:

The Author himself [...] can or could someday become a text like any other: he has only to avoid making his person the subject, the impulse, the origin, the authority, the Father, [...] he has only to see himself as a being on paper and his life as a bio-graphy. (Barthes, *S/Z* 211)

This passage turns out to be quite prescient of Barthes' own career trajectory, and Burke goes on to show that in Barthes' later work, it is precisely this author who returns, "through the back door", in works like *Sade Fourier Loyola* as well as in Barthes' experiments with autobiography in essays like "Deliberation" (1979). It is not Burke's point that Barthes contradicts himself, but rather that Barthes seems intensely ambivalent about the concept of authorship, and that ambivalence is both built into Barthes' essay and visible in the career of the critic in which that essay plays a decisive role. Desani, as a divided authorial persona, ambivalent about his own apparently filiative connection to the text he has authored, might be seen to resemble Burke's Barthes. Desani tries, in numerous ways, to make his own person "a text like any other" and strenuously insists that he is not "the subject, the impulse,

the origin, the authority, the Father, whence his work would proceed" (Barthes, *S/Z* 212). The biographical materials associated with Desani, when read against the gesture of disavowal that is figured within his own published literary work, help the reader make sense of that gesture – and, by extension, Desani himself.

Situating Desani, situating *Hatterr*

Although Desani's name is well known amongst readers of South Asian literature, particularly since Rushdie's mention of the book, his *All About H. Hatterr* was only sporadically in print. Up to this point, very little had been said about Desani's complex life, his attitude toward religion, or the way either of these issues is represented in *Hatterr* or Desani's other published writings. Based on what one finds in Molly Ramanujan's limited biographical account in *G.V. Desani: The Writer and His World*, and the work of Desani's student, Todd Katz, on the Internet (www.desani.org), Desani's extraordinary personal history – specifically, his withdrawal into religious seclusion in the 1950s, followed by his reemergence as a writer – is worth briefly recounting, as it sheds light on the deferral of authorial responsibility in the revisions of *All About H. Hatterr*.

Born in Kenya in 1909, Govind Vishnoodas Desani spent his first few years in northern India. He was expelled from an English-language school early on, and ran away from home twice as a teenager. The second time he ran away, at the age of 16, he actually managed to gather enough money to buy his passage to England for a brief jaunt. He returned to England for the second time in 1935, and despite having no university-level education, was widely in demand as a lecturer. In 1936, Desani became a radio broadcaster for the BBC, and he remained in England during the war, doing freelance journalism. Desani wrote *All About H. Hatterr* during these years. The book, published in 1948, was positively reviewed by well-known writers and critics such as T.S. Eliot and E.M. Forster. Only two years later, however, Desani published a short prose-poem called *Hali*, a rather portentous devotional poem that seemed to serve as a repudiation of the anti-religious and anti-serious *Hatterr*.

In 1952, Desani returned to India, and went into total religious seclusion for about ten years, during which time he wrote nothing at all. Later he described this period as a time of total devotion to study of the ritual life of Hinduism and Buddhism (including some occult practices), and travel purely for the purposes of religious study and meditation (he visited Burma, Australia, and Japan during this period). Beginning around 1963, Desani started publishing new stories in *The Illustrated Weekly of India*, India's most widely circulated magazine at the time. Between 1966 and 1967 he wrote a weekly unsigned column called "Very High and Very Low" for the same magazine, which for the first few months was focused largely on religious issues.

Although there is no trace of irony or self-consciousness in the initial columns, Desani's serious tone does not last very long. Within two months, the old, waggish "Hatterr" voice begins to reappear in Desani's columns – along with polyglossic jokes, rambling anecdotes, myriad fictive interlocutors, and a distinctively literary attitude. Even by the final installment in Desani's six-part series on the *Nadi Sastras*, joking references to an interlocutor named "Panah Mia", as well as various absurd and hostile foils, are already appearing (it should be noted that, in the first few months at least, those guilty of "humbug" are the secular doubters, not the *Nadi Sastra* advocates; the mockery becomes more even-handed over time). By 1967, Desani's column becomes more wide-ranging, and addresses topics such as the celebration of various religious holidays (including Eid), as well as general-interest issues such as cricket and the rise of the singer Lata Mangeshkar. The column begins to appear less and less regularly, and finally stops with only a brief editorial note in November

1967. In 1969, Desani left India for good, and took up a position teaching Philosophy at the University of Texas, Austin.

While Desani would publish little fully original or new material after leaving India, he did not stop writing; rather, he dedicated himself to adding extensive new sections to his two major literary works (*Hatterr* and *Hali*), as well as revising the existing sections thoroughly. Desani published a third edition of *All About H. Hatterr*, with a laudatory preface by Anthony Burgess, in 1970. He stayed in Texas even after his retirement in 1981, and published the final revision of the novel in 1986. *Hali and Collected Stories* appeared in 1991, and contained a further revised version of *Hali*, as well as reprints of many of the stories Desani had written for *The Illustrated Weekly* in the 1960s.

In this history, Desani's period of religious seclusion has been generally overlooked. Not much is known about what initially inspired it, although Desani did write an essay in 1973 ("Mostly Concerning Kama and Her Immortal Lord") where he briefly and tangentially describes his life during that period. Though the essay explores a number of topics, the salient passage is Desani's description of his relationship with his Guru during the 1950s:

On this personal theme, I can truthfully say that no man – or indeed woman [...] – influenced me and owned me as he did. He changed the entire course of my life, my choices, and my thinking, during my years in India, after my arrival from Europe in early '52. I met him about the year '53 and some ten years' suffering willed upon me by the gods followed our meeting; and very often a ritual suicide seemed to me the only possible escape. The suffering was caused by his gifts of *vidya* [knowledge] – crafts, the treasures of our tradition, the particular *parampara* of which almost unwittingly, by a conspiracy of circumstances, so it seems now – writing these words in Austin Tx., in the year '73, – I became a lineal heir after him. (16)

Writing in 1973, shortly after his Guru's death, Desani offers a brief moment of apparent autobiographical sincerity that is unique in his published works. He describes a relationship with a man who was perhaps the most meaningful in his life, and that clearly must have been in some sense reciprocal (as his Guru made Desani his "lineal heir"). It was a teacher-student relationship, but it was, as Desani describes, essentially one where his own free will was largely circumscribed. And finally, this was a period of voluntary study and seclusion, one that Desani describes, again presumably sincerely, as "ten years' suffering". It is easy to see from this description why following up on his early literary successes, or continuing to write, might not have been an option for Desani. But again, what led him into this life and what led him to leave it are not fully explored, either here or in Desani's other writings. Desani only indicates that when he left India for travels and study in Australia and Japan in 1962, it was with his Guru's "blessing".

More biographical detail is found in a 1964 *Illustrated Weekly* essay by C.R. Mandy, an Irish friend of Desani's. Mandy, according to Molly Ramanujan, was the former editor of the *Illustrated Weekly*, though no professional connection to Desani is indicated in Mandy's article. Mandy's "All About G.V. Desani" contains helpful details on Desani's manner of speaking (rather *Hatterr*-like, in fact), as well as biographical details about his activities both in England and after his return to India for the second time (in 1952). But most saliently, Mandy describes Desani's approach to religion. Because the text is somewhat obscure and may be difficult to access for many readers, it is quoted at length:

I remember going, in 1954, with a friend to stay with him at a bungalow in the Bombay Ghats. At that juncture Govind was delving into the intricacies of Black Magic and the occult in general. He had a fakir from Varanasi assisting him in the compound. We could hear the raucous, nocturnal cries of chickens in the sacrificial ritual. Govind, in his most

tantrik, saturnine mood, described to us how one could effectively destroy one's enemies and cause dead trees to become alive again. [...]

I next met Govind in Varanasi in 1956. I was ill there as a result of sunstroke and he came daily to the hospital with gifts of jalebis and buttermilk. [...] He was still in his dark period. He had wished as an experiment to be buried alive at Varanasi, but the Commissioner had refused permission. He was then devoting much of his time to *sadhana* – *mantra yoga* practices. (Mandy 42)

Again, it is clear that Desani's religious explorations are not in the least casual. Mandy describes this as a "dark" period, and also suggests elsewhere in the biographical essay that Desani was often morose during this period – a mood Mandy attributed to Desani's preference for life in England. Desani's behavior – in which ritual suicide is again mentioned – seems troubling, perhaps even a matter for serious psychiatric intervention. But Mandy actually intimates that eccentricity as well as an interest in religion preceded Desani's return to India: Desani's house in Chelsea smelt overwhelmingly of incense, and it is suggested that Desani slept in a coffin in that house. One cannot help but think that the apparent friendship between G.V. Desani and C.R. Mandy must have been severely strained by the publication of this essay. However, one should be cautious in presuming to "know" Desani in any comprehensive way from these biographical scraps ("biographemes", as Barthes might describe them), particularly since they are so fragmentary. Desani's demeanor and his anglicized style are equally evident both before 1952 (in *Hatterr*) and after 1962 (in the *Illustrated Weekly* columns and stories), but the religious part of his life remains largely unrecorded, and therefore inexplicable in the main. Perhaps Desani's reticence is by design, as one of his goals in his Tantric religious practice would have been the renunciation of ego and all semblance of individualism, which presumably includes writerly ego and distinctive literary sensibility. Signs of the tension between Desani's literary and religious temperaments are, of course, rampant in the novel itself, and become especially pronounced in the revisions that Desani made to it over the course of 40 years.

Reading *Hatterr* and its revisions

All About H. Hatterr is not very long, in comparison to, for instance, *Ulysses* or *Finnegans Wake*, but it often has the polyglot complexity and density of allusions seen in Joyce's two master works. Since no annotated edition of the novel has been published, it is often difficult for critics and students to interpret. The form and story of the book are also so uneven as to resist straightforward interpretation or evaluation. Despite these challenges, strong critical readings have been attempted in recent years by Srinivas Aravamudan. Fittingly, Aravamudan's work on Desani has itself been revised: his first mention of Desani was in an anthology called *Transcultural Joyce*, while a second, more thorough reading appears in his book *Guru English*. The title of the novel, as Aravamudan points out, is "a metonym of British colonial authority, alluding as it does to the idea of the *topiwalla* [...]" At the same time, it is an obvious reference to the Mad Hatter in *Alice in Wonderland* (127). The fact that H. Hatterr (the "H", he informs us, stands for "Hindustaniwalla") experiences most of his life in the novel semi-naked, and repeatedly loses or is swindled out of his European dress, supports Aravamudan's point about the colonial context of the novel. Hatterr's frequent disrobing is in some sense a kind of carnivalesque reversal of the trope of colonial authority, and an embrace, perhaps, of the undisciplined life of the naked and marginal "native".

The later editions of *All About H. Hatterr* seem to suggest a novel desperate to defer its beginning. *Hatterr* opens with a bewildering array of prefatory materials: in addition to

Anthony Burgess's preface to the 1970 edition of the novel, there are *eight* separate prolegomena, including three epigraphic "warnings" directed to the reader, one preface by "G.V. Desani", and one preface by "Hatterr" himself. There is also a second title page after the publisher's title page, in the style of an 18th-century sensational tale: "The Autobiographical of H. Hatterr Being Also a Mosaic-Organon Of Life: viz. A Medico-Philosophical Grammar As to this Contrast, This Human Horseplay, This Design For Diamond-Cut-Diamond H. HATTERR by H. HATTERR".

Apart from the 1970 Anthony Burgess preface, it is clear that all these prolegomena are in fact part and parcel of the world of the novel. Even Desani's own "proper", 24-page preface is written in the voice of a highly idiosyncratic novelist-persona, who repeatedly asserts that it is not he ("Desani") who has written the subsequent text, but his friend, H. Hatterr. However, periodically, "Desani" seems to forget himself, and acknowledges that he has written a novel (this novel), in a rather strange style on account of his awkward relationship with the English language, that he has been trying and failing to get published. In the main preface, Desani encounters a number of literary and publishing figures, including one whom he refers to as "Betty Bloomsbohemia":

So to Betty Bloomsbohemia [...] I was summoned, Come Monday: but bagged Tuesday. I was questioned so closely. Honouring me, as I never was ever! She insisted that I *do* explain the *ABC* of the book. Awed, I did the best I could. [...] There are *two* of us writing this book. A fellow called H. Hatterr and I. I said to this H. Hatterr, "Furgoodnessakes, you tell 'em. I am shy!" And he tells. Though I warrantee, and underwrite, the book's *his*. I remain anonymous. [...] As for the *arbitrary* choice of words and constructions you mentioned. Not intended by me to invite analysis. They are there because, I think, they are natural to H. Hatterr. But, Madam! Whoever asked a cultivated mind such as yours to submit your intellectual acumen or emotions to this H. Hatterr mind? Suppose you quote me as saying, the book's simple laughing matter? Jot this down, too. I never was involved in the struggle for newer forms of expression, Neo-morality, or any such *thing*! What do you take me for? A busybody? (*Hatterr* 1986: 16–17)

Here, Desani seems to be deferring responsibility for the strangeness of the text that follows, by suggesting the book is Hatterr's rather than his own, although the "true" authorship of the fictional work is nevertheless always clearly understood. There is a slippage between the two personae even in the space of two or three sentences: "the book's *his*. I remain anonymous" can suggest that the "I" who is "anonymous" (or nameless) is nevertheless the "I" of the author, responsible for the text at hand. Desani seemingly forgets himself again amidst other disavowals; at one point he asserts that the true author of the text is H. Hatterr, rather than himself. But then, at the end, he returns to himself: "Jot this down, too. I never was involved in the struggle for newer forms of expression." Also notable are Desani's expressions of mock humility and deference ("a cultivated mind such as yours"), which might be read as a form of passive-aggressive "sly civility".

On the question of form, Aravamudan places Desani's work in the tradition of European epics and mock-epics, mentioning *Hatterr*'s Joycean allusiveness and its many references to *Piers Plowman*, *Everyman*, Shakespeare's entire oeuvre (aggressively misquoted), *Tristram Shandy*, *The Golden Ass*, Joyce's *Ulysses*, *Huckleberry Finn*, and a host of others. Aravamudan suggests that Desani's novel "is reminiscent of the mock-epic structure of *Ulysses*", but at an even higher level of reflexivity: "Joyce's high modernist epic, itself a mock epic, is raised by Desani to the third degree: *Hatterr* is a mock-Joycean novel and hence a mock-mock epic" (Aravamudan 129). *Hatterr*, in short, employs a Wakean method in a form that resembles a shorter *Ulysses*. And it is self-conscious about its relationship to *Ulysses*, to such an extent that Aravamudan, quite rightly, refers to it as a "mock-mock epic". Elsewhere in his essay Aravamudan makes the point that the characters Banerji and

Hatterr, whose conversations at the end of each episode make for some of the most entertaining material in the later editions of the book, are in some sense opposite faces of a single Orientalist archetype – Hatterr as the Guru (here mocked by Desani), and Banerji as the eager Anglophilic “Baboo”, who quotes Shakespeare in one breath and Freud in the next. Desani reads the “Baboo” as the quintessential colonial “mimic man”, and Desani’s novel as a satirical critique of the discourse of mimicry:

The baboo’s consciousness is a complex racist testament. He apes the Englishman – his accent, demeanor, and dress – thus edifying the glory of English culture, even as his very aping is a performative parody that decenters, interrogates, and exposes the pretentiousness of the model. At the same time, the baboo is living proof of the impossibility, and hence the comedy, of his aspirations; the more the baboo imitates the Englishman, the more he is oblivious of his failure to “pass” even as it is comically obvious to the others, that he is not English, and can never pass. (Aravamudan 135)

Here I differ somewhat from Aravamudan in that I see Desani’s novel, and Desani himself, as disinterested in nationalism and disinclined to make a motivated critique of a certain colonial mentality. The novel is not fully in control, one might say, of the target of its critique, nor is it entirely consistent in making the critique that Aravamudan describes. The deconstruction of mimicry and Babu English in Aravamudan’s account certainly applies to Hatterr’s “pal”, Banerji, but it is unclear whether it applies to Hatterr himself.

For Hatterr is neither a mimic-man nor a Babu, but a kind of blank template, who despite his mixed descent and partial education in a convent school (his aborted formal education resembles Desani’s own experience), is much more comfortable amongst other Indians than the British. In fact, although a species of Englishness has a strong presence in the novel through Banerji, the English characters who physically appear in the novel are few and far between. Hatterr’s most extended encounter with the English themselves is through a Cockney-speaking couple who have a travelling circus, and in India – a reversal of the “traveling oriental circus” common in the west at the time. The Smythes do exploit Hatterr – indeed, as part of their act they force him to strip naked, and lie flat on the ground while a lion named Charlie eats raw meat that is positioned on his chest. It is hard not to read the incident as a kind of allegory of Orientalist exploitation, in which the Indian/Oriental is served up on a platter for British applause.¹ If read this way, this surrealist allegory of colonialism would be only one of the outright condemnations of British authority to appear in the novel, and it is dwarfed by the myriad encounters that Hatterr has with Hindus and Hinduism in the text.

Indeed, for the most part, Hatterr’s “performativity” in Desani’s novel is not directed at a particular audience so much as at his own spiritual quandaries. While he often enters into the guise of a holy man for spurious reasons (in one episode he does it to avoid the threat of litigation over a financial transaction), the Hindu tradition sometimes seems to get the better of him. And there are moments of apparently sincere religiosity in the novel, which seem to undercut the conventional reading of the book as a pure parody of religious charlatans. One has to ask why Desani is, after all, so obsessed with religious charlatans, and why Hatterr falls under their spell so frequently and so thoroughly.

It begins to be clear that the religious life and religious preoccupations are not so much a choice for H. Hatterr as a kind of calling, an inescapable component of his life as an unattached man in colonial India. The best example of this sense of calling might be in Episode III, “Archbishop Walrus versus Neophyte the Bitter-one”, where Hatterr (on the run from an over-zealous lawyer) meets another man dressed as a “recluse”, and recognizes that he too is a charlatan:

I recognized the jiggery-pokery style. If that young feller was a genuine holy man, worthy of worship and honor, I am John Bunyan (1628–1688)! [...]

The trump-card of us Balaamite fellers is the mumbo-jumbo talk: the priestcraft obscurantisms and subtlety: ([...] *Wherefore, pious brethren, by confessing I lie, yoiks! I tell the truth*, sort of topholy trumpeting-it, by the Pharisee G.V. Desani: see the feller’s tract *All About* [...], publisher, the same publishing company): a language deliberately designed to mystify the majority, tempt ‘em to start guessing, and interpreting our real drift, and allegory, what the hell we mean: pursue our meaning on their *sthula* (gross), the *sukshana* (subtle) and *para* (supreme) planes, and levels, and *still* miss the issue and dash their heads against the crazy-paved rock of confusion. (Hatterr 1986: 120)

This passage is extraordinary, and it is not surprising that it has been cited previously (by Aravamudan, Molly Ramanujan, as well as M.K. Naik). For here we have the voice of “Hatterr”, the first-person protagonist of Desani’s work, apparently pointing to the published form of the book in which he exists only as a fictional character, as an example of the “jiggery-pokery” style of “us Balaamite fellers”. That is to say, for Hatterr, Desani’s book is a perfect example of priestly “mumbo-jumbo”. As logically tricky as it is, this passage does appear to be a kind of heuristic key to the book as a whole, and it suggests a refusal of both sincerity and “meaning” in the interest of self-reflexivity, *mise-en-abyme*, and satire. It also blurs the line between “Desani” and “Hatterr” again, and completes the fusion of their respective narrative voices.

And yet Hatterr has no trouble in positively and literally identifying himself as a religious charlatan in the passage above. And note also the biblical reference to Balaam, whose donkey was made to speak by the Angels, and who gave testament on behalf of the God of the Hebrews against his will. “Balaamite” may be a way of characterizing speech (and perhaps, writing) as driven by a kind of compulsion, rather than individual agency; one thinks of the confusion over Gibreel Farishta’s agency in Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses*. Neither Hatterr nor Desani (since the two are conflated in the above passage) are fully in control of their language. The “mumbo-jumbo” speaks through them, and the content of that mumbo-jumbo appears to be somewhat overdetermined, as both literary obscurity and theological discourse.

Just a few pages following this passage comes its direct opposite: an apparently sincere religious revelation in Hatterr’s voice:

All objects by the Ganges are asleep.

In my copper begging-bowl there is a steely blade of curved light, an illumed scimitar, silver, brilliantly glossed, and it is reflecting the scene.

The scene in the miniature is mostly grey and green, and there is still some colour in the shadows. [...]

Then I see the slate-coloured hedges on the bank of the river. They are calm: one with the mass of the surrounding forms. Silhouetted against the star-lit sky, the forest is still, blended into the yonder hills.

Not a thing is separated from another.

Everything is in a universal embrace: a slumber of love!

Blessed by the stars and the little crescent moon, caressed by her waves, the deathless spirit of Ganga, too, sleeps. (Hatterr 1986: 130)

This passage continues for more than three pages, with no irony and little self-consciousness. It is finally interrupted by Hatterr's colleague, who is eager to get their planned robbery of a man known as "Diamonds and Rubies" underway, at which moment the novel slips back into picaresque mode.

It is difficult to know what to make of passages such as the one just quoted, which seem to sincerely embrace the spirituality and sacredness of the Ganga. It might, however, caution us about the danger of conflating H. Hatterr's and Desani's various comic *situations* with his (or their) generally suppressed inner life, which remains tied to an at least potentially sincere attachment to Hinduism. That perspective is expanded on by Desani in an essay published in 1978 called "Difficulties of Communicating an Oriental to a Western Audience":

As far back as in 1951 [...] I said H. Hatterr was a portrait of man, the common vulgar species, found everywhere, both in the east and the west [...] Anyway, my man does not, thoughtlessly, imitatively, deny God or infer God or presume himself to be God from somebody else's formula. He has a direct realization of God. He has a religious experience by the Ganges, in spite of what he himself says about it. It is sacred. If a professional book reviewer or an aspiring critic cannot see this, he or she is deficient as far as I am concerned, and he or she is not making a statement about H. Hatterr but about himself or herself. (403)

In short, Desani asserts that the interest in religion in the novel is utterly sincere, and only a very deficient literary critic could possibly mistake it for satire. But what Desani fails to answer in this apparently conclusive statement is why, if Hatterr has a transformative experience of God, he is subsequently made to experience more charlatanry for another four episodes, apparently none the wiser for it. Nor does it explain adequately why Desani wrote the novel as an apparent satire, rather than as a "sincere" spiritual quest, in the manner of his prose-poem "Hali".

Desani's later insistence on the sincerity of the "Ganga" passage does not explain much about the main episodes of the novel, but it does underline the ambivalence he apparently came to feel about the novel he had authored. Traces of this ambivalence were actually evident earlier, beginning with the 1951 edition of the novel (Desani's first revision), which contains a few significant "afterthoughts" and footnotes to the original 1948 published text. One footnote inserted near the end of the long preface follows a string of rhetorical questions:

If it is the assassination you have been seeking, though not quite knowing it yourself, and this book seems likely to lead you to it, and certainly to the deserving of it, why be sorry? Why not make a song about it? Why suffer an anonymous letter-writer's conscience? (*Hatterr* 1951: 10)

The "assassination" here refers to "Desani's" account of a fortune-teller's prediction earlier in the preface that he would shortly be assassinated. And the reference to "an anonymous letter-writer's conscience" follows an earlier mention in the preface. The footnote in question follows the word "conscience", and appears only in the 1951 edition:

(Writing this in July 1948.) No. No conscience trouble. In fact, I have made several corrections in the text, and even added a new chapter, the last one, called *Appreciation*. (11)

The question that is being raised is what in the original text might have provoked the bout of conscience being denied. The same preface has a new endnote found only in the 1951 edition:

October 1950, and I see the memorable events of my recent past are again III. I. The publication of *H. Hatterr*. Through H. Hatterr I offered a portrait of man. I found him entertaining. II.

The publication of *Hali*. Through *Hali* I offered my ideal of Man. He made me unhappy. III. And now I have fallen a prey to a mortal consuming anger for the offence caused me by Man. I am provoked by the past and I am oppressed by the present. I think I must learn to pray if I am to be relieved of this grievous passion I feel. (11)

The final sentences are both cryptic and strangely prescient. From the early 1950s onwards, Desani would commit himself deeply to a religious quest, which is already hinted at here ("I must learn to pray [...]"). The language of this afterthought suggests second thoughts about "Hatterr", and even a measure of frustration about his comparatively more sincere "Hali", which Desani would later come to prize as a work superior to *Hatterr*. All the same, he extensively revised *both* texts through the 1960s and 1970s, after his reemergence as a waggish columnist in the *Illustrated Weekly*. Some of the changes in *Hatterr* in particular are accretions – the novel continued to sprout epigraphs (or "pseudoepigraphs", as Aravamudan refers to them, because they were written by Desani himself).

Intriguingly, Desani's myriad revisions are in fact predicted within the text of *Hatterr* itself, in passages that thematize the author's inability (like Sterne's Tristram Shandy) to finalize his book. The prediction appears also in Episode III, where Hatterr is positioned as the platter on which the lion eats his dinner. Hatterr, wild with fear, starts to have a series of hallucinations, including a sequence where he imagines his own funeral, with Circe-like, trans-generic surreal vividness. Among the hallucinations is one where he experiences a strangely bookish "appendectomy":

"Man alive," I said, protesting to him, and pointing at my appendix, "what will you do with it? It is mine, do you hear? It is more valuable to me than the entire contents, every blessed page of it! I am myself an apothecary. My old man and I are friends of Ampeve, the physicist. Personal friends of Leo Tolstoy. [...] Here is my card. My heraldic motto is *per ardua ad aspidistra*! That's my family trademark. [...] Suffering colly-wobbles! What good is an appendix without the autobiographical? Shan't let you get rid of it. No ballet-booted Publisher has the right! I have had a command to write my autobiographical! Divine voice! I will be immortalized! The Confession of the Greatest Splendid Failure! Swear by Very Lights, don't take away the appendix, do you hear me?" (*Hatterr* 1986: 92–93)

Given the self-conscious and self-reflexive performance I have stressed in my reading of Desani's novel, it is difficult not to read the above plea to be allowed to keep an appendix as a figure for the writer's plight. It is certainly there in the situation: British authority figures (whom he feels are his social inferiors) have ordered him to the centre of the ring to be the central figure in a public spectacle. In response to the operation, Desani whips out his card complete with heraldic motto, a desperate assertion of legitimacy, which seems to be as much tied to Desani's physical presence in England as it is to his trespassing in the arena of high literary authorship.

Fittingly, during this traumatic performance Hatterr imagines himself not as being eaten alive by the lion but in surgery having his "appendix" removed. The joke is, of course, that the appendix is a *literary* appendix, and that its incipient removal by the publisher is a challenge to his divine right to autobiography. Amidst the archaic English expressions ("colly-wobbles" could indicate either appendicitis, or diarrhea), the citation of obscure physicists and Russian novelists, and the bowdlerization of the motto of the Royal Air Force ("per ardua ad astra" becomes "per ardua ad aspidistra"), are further reflections of Desani's anxiety about how his book will be received. Crucially, the assertion of the authorial right to an Appendix here also seems to point forward, to the appendices to *All About H. Hatterr* that Desani had not yet begun to write. By contrast to more confident modern authorial personae, who strove for the forthright inclusion of everything in their experience and knowledge

in their texts, Desani, only partially joking, is begging the circus-masters and the lion they control to let him keep his Appendix, the "Confession of the Greatest Splendid Failure".

Note

1. For this observation I am grateful to Christina Hoffmann, a graduate student in my fall 2005 seminar on "Global English".

Notes on contributor

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Poems for a bicultural journey: An interview with Gerrie Fellows

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Gerrie Fellows,
photographed by Morven Gregor

Introduction: Glasgow, 5 February 2009

It seems difficult to define Gerrie Fellows in national terms. She was born in New Zealand, where she spent part of her childhood, and then moved with her family to England, to settle finally in Scotland. Now she lives in Glasgow, where we met last February. Her magnificent books of poetry are not easy to define either, given the collage and intertextual techniques she uses and the personal way she explores her multicultural influences. She has published four collections, *Technologies* (1990), *The Powerlines* (2000), *The Duntroon Toponymy* (2001) and *Window for a Small Blue Child* (2007), and her poems have appeared in different anthologies of contemporary Scottish writing.

Gerrie Fellows has managed to introduce innovative perspectives into British poetry, concerning the incorporation of Scottish literary voices into postcolonial writing. In the last two decades, Scottish culture has been analysed from a postcolonial perspective, mostly in terms of its complex relation with England and its mutual participation in an asymmetrical Britain. One of the earliest examples of such an interest is "A Questionnaire on Celtic Nationalism and Postcoloniality", by Stuart Murray and Alan Riach (published in the journal *SPAN* in 1995). The questions posed by the authors in the questionnaire sought to consider whether postcolonial studies could be appropriate to analyse the sort of cultural

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