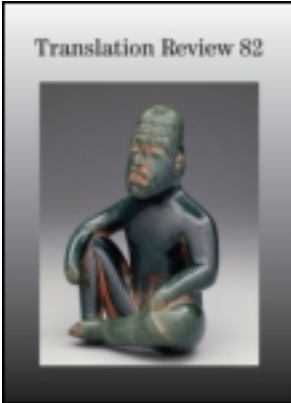


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Songs of Kabir by Kabir

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NOTES

1. Ginzburg, "My Vocation," 58.
2. Boyers, "An Interview with Natalia Ginzburg," 14.
3. Ginzburg, "My Vocation," 61.
4. *Ibid.*, 60.
5. Ginzburg, "Prefazione," in *Cinque romanzi brevi e altri racconti*, 10.
6. Garboli, introduction to *Cinque romanzi brevi e altri racconti*, viii.
7. Lewis, "Introduction," in Ginzburg, *The Complete Short Stories*, 5.
8. Boyers, "An Interview with Natalia Ginzburg," 12.
9. Quoted in Paulicelli, "Natalia Ginzburg and the Craft of Writing," 154.
10. Boyers, "An Interview with Natalia Ginzburg," 13.
11. Ginzburg, *The Complete Short Stories*, 56.
12. Ginzburg, *Cinque romanzi brevi e altri racconti*, 383.
13. Boyers, "An Interview with Natalia Ginzburg," 29.

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Kabir. *Songs of Kabir*. Translated by **Arvind Krishna Mehrotra**. New York: New York Review Books Classics, 2011. 144 pp.

Reviewed by Mani Rao

We will never know who Kabir really was or how his compositions were received by audiences somewhere in north India sometime in the fifteenth century, but the idea of Kabir is definite—definable and recognizable. Materially poor, spiritually laden, and flaunting an antiestablishment attitude, Kabir remains a popular hero in India. Contemptuous of the futile worldly pursuits of contemporary society, Kabir is revered as a saintly rebel. Deflating pretense and grandiosity, and outspoken to the point of appearing brutal and contemptuous, Kabir is considered the supreme truth-teller of his day. Devastated by love for the "master" or the god Rama (depending on the recension), Kabir is his culture's premier *bhakti* poet. Not fitting into Hindu or Muslim denominations, Kabir is north India's sufi mystic. He knows *something*, his admirers think.

Kabir's voice has a set tone despite—or because of—centuries of construction by a collective imagination. This voice speaks in a consistent poetic style: Kabir poems are dialogic, serve up a twist in the last line, and "write" the Kabir name into the work. When the reader runs into that apt, incisive proverbial *doha* (couplet), she or he knows it has to be Kabir. The Kabir-ness of Kabir compositions is so baffling, so delightful, that lovers of his poetry do not care to see it altered. In *Songs of Kabir*, translator Arvind Krishna Mehrotra carefully approximates the qualities of the original.

The archive of Kabir materials is complicated. As Mehrotra explains, “[t]he Kabir corpus, necessarily, is about not a single text but families of texts,” and “[s]eparating the authentic from the spurious in Kabir is a hopelessly tangled affair.”¹ With text this unreliable, it seems only smart not to translate literally. Like Rabindranath Tagore, Ezra Pound, and Robert Bly before him, Mehrotra translates to the spirit rather than to the letter. Tagore’s translations had for their source the 1910 collection of Kshiti Mohan Sen, who in turn relied on various oral sources and was familiar with a 1903 publication. Mehrotra relies on sources he considers “substantially more authoritative,” including the 1961 Parasnath Tiwari’s *Kabir-Granthavali*, along with his sense that “there can be no authoritative edition of this supremely anti-authoritarian master.”² Surely, it is this recognition that helps Mehrotra match crosshairs with the time-honored notion of Kabir.

The appropriation of this Kabir-idea by collective imagination has already resulted in the contemporizing of content. Explaining how the open-ended corpus of Kabir undergoes revision as it passes from performer to performer, Mehrotra provides a fascinating example of the inclusion of a railway metaphor in a Kabir song. Mehrotra’s translation fulfills this tradition of expectation, updating vocabulary to suit modern tastes. Mehrotra’s Kabir jokes about “Deathville”³ and “Fearlessburg,”⁴ for instance, and makes reference to “dreadlocked Rastas”⁵ and “milkmaids.”⁶ Interestingly, although many references point to internationalism, Mehrotra also shows (flaunts? betrays?) his Indian origin in his language structure through, for example, his use of “[t]hree milkmaids are churning”⁷ rather than “three milkmaids churn,” and the *desi* proverbial construction “what has happened has happened.”⁸

Such linguistic siting points to a subject worth exploring in more detail—is it just revisions in vocabulary that we see in this translation, or is there more? I take a cue from Romila Thapar’s analysis of the transformations in the play *Sakuntala*: “when a theme changes in accordance with its location at a historical moment, the change can illumine that moment, and the moment in turn may account for the change.”⁹ Compare these lines from Mehrotra’s prefatory note:

Tagore: “As the night-bird Chakor gazes all night at the moon: so Thou art my Lord and I am Thy servant.”

Bly: “As the owl opens his eyes all night to the moon, we live as the great one and the little one.”

Mehrotra: “I’m the grub to your ichneumon fly.”¹⁰

Although these three translations do not share the same source (Mehrotra’s has no *chakor* bird), the various lines convey different power relationships. Still more evidence comes from Pound’s translation, not cited by Mehrotra, perhaps because it uses the same simile as Tagore, the *chakor* bird, or because Pound’s is not really a translation, but is based on an available English translation. The “translation” displays Kabir’s subservient position in this poem:

Thou art lord, and I servant,
As the lotus is servant of water.
Thou art lord, and I servant,
As the Chakora is servant of moonlight
And watches it all the night long.¹¹

Tagore’s and Pound’s Kabir feel an adoring subservience for (say) the divine; Bly’s is conscious of distance and duality, while Mehrotra’s is powerless, helpless, soon dead. Is Mehrotra’s Kabir a cynic (or a realist) even in contexts of devotion? The validity of this question could be reexamined on the basis of a larger selection of comparisons if the sources only made it possible. In the introduction to *The Bijak of Kabir*, translated by Linda Hess and Sukhdev Singh, Hess writes about the different characters of three Kabir traditions or collections (Punjab, Rajasthan, and Uttar Pradesh/Bihar): “In the

western-based Guru Granth and Pañcvāṇi there also appears a softer, more emotional Kabir who sings of ecstatic insight, who experiences passionate longing for and tormented separation from a beloved, or who offers himself in utter surrender, as a servant or beggar, to a personified divine master."¹² Mehrotra's translations are mostly of the *Granthavali*, which comes from the Western tradition (and refers to Punjab). If Hess's point is a fact, Mehrotra's Kabir is harsher than his previous incarnations. Mehrotra accentuates the sardonic in Kabir with slang and cusswords, as in:

You must be mad, says Kabir,
Not to sing of Rama,

And to screw up your life.¹³

Or

And wipe the bootlicker's smile
Off your face.¹⁴

Songs of Kabir has a structure friendly to the general reader. Notes are integrated into the poems, so one does not have to flip to appendices and footnotes, while detailed scholarly analysis (as in the Hess–Singh translation) is avoided, as are diacritics. Still, one feels “let in” on this fascinating tradition of ideas. The poems are organized thematically, but except for the first section, “Upside Down Poems,” the titles of the remaining sections are fuzzy. It is not clear, for instance, what thematic distinctions call for separate sections in “Waiting to Be Kissed” and “Color of Rama.” Despite a strong antipundit section, *Songs of Kabir* has only one anticaste poem. I do not know if this is a function of the source or the selection. On the whole, *Songs of Kabir* is a thin collection, considering the sheer volume of the Kabir corpus. One way to look at its publication is to acknowledge that, now, Anglophone readers have more of Kabir, together with the substantial (and excellent) Hess–Singh translation of the Eastern tradition.

Readers familiar with Kabir will recognize some common themes, from the simile of a person and a clay pot (a popular Indic theme) to the trope of eating people (perhaps more uniquely Kabir than Indic). From Hess–Singh's *Bijak*:

Mother, I've poured glory on both families!
I ate twelve husbands at my father's house
and sixteen at the in-laws.
I tied sister-in-law and mother-in-law
to the bed, and insulted
brother-in-law.
I burned the part in the hair of that hag who nagged me.
In my womb I got five
plus two plus four.
I ate the neighbor-lady for breakfast
along with the wise old mother.
Poor thing!¹⁵

From Mehrotra's *Songs*:

Chewing slowly,
Only after I'd eaten

My grandmother,
 Mother,
 Son-in-law
 Two brothers-in-law
 And father-in-law
 (his big family included)
 In that order
 And had for dessert
 The town's inhabitants.¹⁶

Notice how, compared to the Hess–Singh Kabir, Mehrotra's speaks in more emphatic statements, beginning every line in upper case. His line breaks hang climactically and he uses stanza breaks for breathing space, employing terse finales and packing resonance into a few words, as these three short lines demonstrate:

Friend,

 You had one life,
 And you blew it.¹⁷

In this brief verse, one is reminded of the term *nirvana* as well as its literal meaning—"blowing out"—and the irony that Kabir's reference here is to the opposite of the concept. Kabir's critique of the world has been intensified, this is Mehrotra's update.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mani Rao is the author of eight poetry books and a translation of the Sanskrit *Bhagavad Gita* (Autumn Hill Books, 2010). Her website is www.manirao.com.

NOTES

1. Mehrotra, "Introduction," xxiv, xxix.
2. *Ibid.*
3. Kabir, *Songs of Kabir*, 26, 67.
4. *Ibid.*, 21.
5. *Ibid.*, 25.
6. *Ibid.*, 17.
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.*, 78.
9. Thapar, *Sakuntala*, vii.
10. Mehrotra, "Introduction," xxx.
11. Kabir, "VII," in *The Translations of Ezra Pound*, 414.
12. Kabir, *The Bijak of Kabir*, 7.
13. Kabir, *Songs of Kabir*, 69.
14. *Ibid.*, 27.
15. Kabir, *The Bijak of Kabiri*, 61–62.
16. Kabir, *Songs of Kabir*, 53.
17. *Ibid.*, 78.

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Liliana Ursu. *A Path to the Sea*. Translated by **Liliana Ursu, Adam J. Sorkin, and Tess Gallagher**. New York: Pleasure Boat Studio, 2011. 130 pp.

Reviewed by Mihaela Moscaliuc

The Romanian poet Liliana Ursu's first book in English, *The Sky behind the Forest* (Bloodaxe Books, 1997), which she translated with Adam J. Sorkin and Tess Gallagher, was named a British Poetry Book Society Recommended Translation and was shortlisted for Oxford's Weidenfeld Prize. Bruce Weigl facilitated Ursu's American debut with translations included in *Angel Riding a Beast* (Northwestern University Press, 1998), and Sean Cotter transported her into American culture, establishing her reputation as a major European poet with his *Goldsmith Market* (Zephyr Press, 2003) and *Lightwall* (Zephyr Press, 2009), the latter a finalist for the PEN USA 2010 Literary Award in Translation. *A Path to the Sea*, another beautifully chiseled, collaborative translation among Ursu, Sorkin, and Gallagher, secures Ursu's reputation as a singular, resonant voice on the international scene.

In *A Path to the Sea*, Ursu gives us what Gallagher in the "Translator's Note" calls a precious "silken web" that she "weaves between continents," cultures, histories, and languages.¹ As we are ferried to Sibiu, the poet's birthplace; Romania's capital Bucharest; the magical monasteries of Bukovina; then Lewisburg, San Francisco, and Louisville, in poems that feel as warm and intimate as the holy alcoves of Ursu's peregrinations, we start to see the world as Ursu does: stripped down to its essence, conceived in spirit, human connection, and memory. As the poet declares in "I Refuse to Write about My Heart," she could "describe anything easily," especially all the material world with which she coexists "in reciprocal disdain."² However, she has little interest in that. Her poems both assist and reenact searches for self-knowledge and sacredness and, as they forge paths through the mundane—toward the archetypal sea of life/death/renewal—they gesture, always, toward revelation. Ursu whittles experience into lyrical narratives that are as refreshing and transporting as linen drying in the spring breeze. If we bury our faces, lips or closed eyes in them, as does the former Siberian prisoner of her poem "Scene with Wash on a Clothesline,"³ we might experience, if not spiritual ecstasy, then something akin to it.

Under communism, poetry nourished the Romanians' spirit and fueled intellectual appetites. Post-communist euphoria pulled much of the Romanian intelligentsia, including some of the most admired poets, into the whirlpool of politics; new markets altered the nature of old appetites and displaced the need for poetry. Some poets built extravagant villas and stopped writing. The nineties generation took charge of the new realm of possibilities opened by the closing of half a century of systemic silencing and produced works that—to borrow Ursu's words—"enter the bloodstream."⁴ Hunger for newness and individuation, the (re)discovery of the Beats and the New York School poets, and an acute awareness of local realities gave rise to trends and coteries—such as the "young lions," the "fracturists," the "workshop[ers]"—that produced a good deal of exciting post-(post-)modern poetry and started reshaping the Romanian poetic landscape. One of its less felicitous byproducts is its slow un-souling, which Ursu laments, if obliquely, in her work.