

A Source in Sorcery:
The Black Hen and the Posthumous Poet
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The Collected Poems of A. K. Ramanujan, published posthumously in 1995, gathered three collections the poet had published during his lifetime. It added a fourth group of sixty poems selected from more than one hundred he had been readying for publication at the time of his unexpected death in 1995. This selection called *The Black Hen* was made by eight persons of Ramanujan's close circle of colleagues, friends, and family. Molly Daniels-Ramanujan who arranged and edited them has written a "Note" on *The Black Hen* (Poems 278–81), and Krittika Ramanujan, a "Preface" (Poems xv–xvi). It also carries a detailed "Introduction," genuinely marked with personal feeling, by Vinay Dharwadker (Poems xvii–xxxviii). The insights it offers on the themes and images through the early volumes are clearly helped by Dharwadker's familiarity with Ramanujan's unpublished poems, then appearing for the first time as *The Black Hen*. While the editors and compilers of the newest poems are certainly helpful in enlarging and reordering our perspective on the Ramanujan canon, the eponymous poem itself has not so much been glossed as glossed over.¹

A posthumous selection invites questions regarding certain proprieties of inclusion, ordering, and sequencing of the poems, and any significance a reader might see in such an assemblage. First, since "The Black Hen" gives the volume its name, and is placed first in this selection, we wonder whether it was Ramanujan's choice. Besides its aloofness as a fragment whose allusive opening suggests a further linkage with other narratives, "The Black Hen" prompts speculations. Have we heard a "black hen story" before? If its source belongs to the poet's history of reading, and not to the ordinary readers' memory,² its claim to any titular significance is moot. Bruce King suggests an alternative, mindful as he is to the obscure pronominal reference ("It") with which the poem

opens. “*The Black Hen* takes its title from the first poem in the selection, in which the coming of ‘it’,” observes King, “presumably poetry or the poetic image but also philosophical insight and death, is something that must come naturally from growth over a period of time the way leaves appear on a tree” (301). Why does *it* come “*as the black hen*” (emphasis added) to the poet? I want to propose an allegorical significance this volume seems to gain as we learn more about Ramanujan’s black hen. Let us assume, to begin with, that “The Black Hen,” a very short, epigraph-like, poem of thirteen short lines, is indeed an opening gambit the poet would not have wanted his readers to miss. It is a meditation on the art and craft of poetry:

It must come as leaves
to a tree
or not at all (*Poems* 195)

Few readers will fail to mark the Keatsian allusion in the opening lines; fewer poets among them will disagree with the ideal of creation it echoes, creation that knows no hard labour and deliberate execution. Set against this ideal is “the black hen” whose menacing arrival bespeaks stern attention to a pattern the laborious craft imposes upon a *maker* of verse. The poem continues,

yet it comes sometimes
as the black hen
with the red round eye

on the embroidery
stitch by stitch
dropped and found again

and when it’s all there
the black hen stares
with its round red eye

and you’re afraid (*Poems* 195)

And yet, we cannot be sure that the hen's threat is to the making of verses, given that the poet wonders what if the hen turns out to be unappeasable "when it is all there," still unrelenting in its frightening stare. Rather disquietingly, the poet's realization seems to play now on the vocational hazard of *making* verses in an ironic recognition of the word's etymology that obliges him to consider *unmaking* what he has made for his pleasure. Perhaps the suggestion goes a little deeper than this when he begins to think of the uses of *disenchantment*, for "the black hen" prompts in him a reflection of a kind of ethics poets tend to neglect. Is he free from the passion he has set out to assail?

If we are persuaded by Ramanujan's two ways of looking at the poet's art (one, free, natural and self-indulgent; the other, forced, laboured, and frightful), we are apt to look for such thematic continuities and paired contrasts in the poems that follow "The Black Hen" in the new collection. It is here that the editors and compilers of this volume might have helped, perhaps by telling us how the Keats intertext has a contrastive parallel in the black hen. And, why *the* black hen? Ramanujan certainly knew one. His source, I believe, is the tale of "the black hen" as recounted among Katherine Briggs's *British Folk-Tales and Legends*:³

A great many years ago, there was a large fairy ring of particularly lush green grass in one of the meadows of a certain remote parish on the western fringe of Dartmoor, and within this magic circle a jet-black hen and chickens were occasionally to be seen at nightfall.

The vicar of the parish was an extremely keen student of sorcery, and possessed a large collection of books and manuscripts dealing with the perilous subject of black magic.

One day, while the parson was conducting a service in the village church, one of his servants happened to visit his study and, finding a large volume lying open on the table, began to read it aloud. He had read no more than half a page when the sky became dark, and the house was shaken violently by a great wind. The servant, deeply absorbed in the book, read on; and as the storm increased in fury, the door flew open, and a black hen and chickens entered the room.

The creatures were of normal size when they first appeared, but they gradually grew larger and larger, until the hen became as big as a prize bullock. At this point the vicar, who was in the midst of his sermon in the pulpit of the church, suddenly closed his discourse, and abruptly dismissed the astonished congregation, saying that he was needed at home urgently, and hoped he would arrive there in time.

When he entered his study the hen had grown so large that it was already touching the ceiling. He quickly threw down a bag of rice which stood in a corner of the room, and while the hen and chickens were busily engaged in picking up the grains, he had time to reverse the spell. (Briggs 328)

There is perhaps the peculiar and dreaded fascination such opening poems as “The Black Hen” hold for readers of any collection. Having read this short poem, one might be haunted by the twice-repeated “red round eye” of the hen, a detail the poet himself must have found rather difficult to forget through his last days. How hard he had struggled to quieten this ghost-hen we cannot tell, but the compulsion to do so is perhaps suggested by his line, “stitch by stitch/dropped and found again.” The crucial evidence of the poet’s source is missing; however, we are apt to wonder why something as forceful as a sorcerer’s spell seems to work on him. We sense besides, much like Krittika Ramanujan, that “[t]he poems are ... full of a frightening darkness” (*Poems* xv). The Dartmoor Hen’s tale casts a relieving light on this “darkness.”

The trouble with a posthumous text is that its hermeneutic circle seems to widen at once as fresh bio-bibliographical sources surface. As Jeremy Tambling observes in his study of the posthumous, “the past and the present are caught up in the mutuality of the posthumous” (23), and in the resultant disarray, the authorial intention becomes all the more crucial. For one thing, how do we know whether the poet would have preferred to keep his source a secret, or he would have chosen instead to give it away in his ‘Notes and Acknowledgements’? For another, we cannot be sure either that Ramanujan believed, much like the lyric persona of *Little Gidding*, that his black hen would speak better to us in *his*

absence: “And what the dead had no speech for, when living, / They can tell you, being dead ...” (Eliot 215).

The spell once cast, it would seem that even the sorcerer must wait for the opportune time to undo its effects. For now, therefore, we are left with this strange spell whose allegorical significance continues to cast strange shadows on “The Black Hen,” a poem otherwise undistinguished by the deeper metaphysical or other resonances readers have come to look for in vintage Ramanujan. This, in other words, is no *death* poem *tout court*; King rightly suggests various possibilities for “it” (301–03). Nor does this poem forebode anything eschatological directly, unless a reader is alerted to the fact, as the editors here often do, that it leads the rest in a *posthumous* volume. Ramanujan was alone among the Indian English poets of his generation to confront death dispassionately, if endearingly, in the liveliest of his poems. One might even think of him as a poet who courted forms of death as relentlessly as those of life. It is doubtful indeed if he ever sang a full-throated paean to life. It would therefore come as no surprise to us that among *The Black Hen* poems appears “Death in Search of a Comfortable Metaphor,” composed, as the editors’ footnote reads, on “16 March 1992 [the poet’s sixty-third birthday]” (*Poems* 273). Ramanujan’s preoccupation with death had much to do, as a matter of fact, with his professional studies. Forms and figures of death fascinated him *precisely for their continuing and still vibrant manifestations* among the living. His work in assorted prose assembled and commented on classical and medieval Tamil, Kannada, and Sanskrit texts; folkloric motifs and tribal verses; the ancient Virashaiva and Vaishnava traditions of memorial tribute and rites of the dead. His multiple allegiances as a teacher, translator, poet, anthologist, and folklorist had made him cross and recross thresholds that often seemed adjusted to look on life and the living from across a “dead” perspective, and vice versa. No wonder, to many of his colleagues in the United States and India, Ramanujan sometimes came across as ‘not quite being here’ all the time. And, after his death, at least one colleague of his for many years has spoken of his strange “presence” among them, now felt more acutely than ever during his lifetime. “Even two years after his death ...,” writes Keith Harrison, “there is something more poignant

and even paradoxical about [Ramanujan's] loss and that is the persistent sense of his presence among us" (ix).

While we cannot be certain that Ramanujan would have preferred to keep "The Black Hen" where it now stands as the first poem of a group and would have seen the collection as *The Black Hen* poems as the editors and compilers see them, the poem's source in sorcery suggests a crucial link between poetry, the occult, and the magic of words. The sorcerer and the poet keep secrets as befits their trades. And Ramanujan was not quite averse to explaining to his Western readers that the wisdom of the Vedas is vouchsafed to a Brahmana who alone has access to the mysteries of creation. In some of his poems we see Ramanujan assume the persona of a Brahmana, albeit ironically, but his enviable status as a priestly magician of sorts becomes his poetic mask. Quoting a Nammaḷvār poem in his "Afterword" to *Hymns for the Drowning*, Ramanujan glosses the Vedic *viprās* whom he calls the "quivering seers," and comments in a footnote: "The root *vip-* in *vipra* denotes "trembling, quivering," etymologically related to the English word 'vibration.' The root *vip-* is also used to describe the mystical intoxication of the Vedic poets, who have been inspired by the gods. But later, a *vipra* is (only) a Brahman by birth, sacraments, and knowledge" (*Hymns* 120–21).

An entirely ironic, if circumstantial, allegory informs "The Black Hen" poem, therefore, when we reflect on its folkloric source. Here we have a committed group of insiders (the servant) reading a poet's papers (the large volume lying open on the table) when the poet (the parson) is away. A crucial difference in these parallel scenarios is that the poet is dead and gone, while the parson of the tale can (and does) return when evil strikes in order to reverse the spell. I feel tempted, however, to revise the *dead-and-gone* phrase; the poet is dead indeed but not yet "gone." A revenant, he *returns* now in the discovery of "The Black Hen" folk-tale in the light of which we must now read his poem. In both cases, readers trespass on the privacy of a conjuror/creator. What they read is something that is not yet meant for them, what might not therefore be ready for them to access unless under strict authorial/proprietary supervision. That such meddlesome curiosity will cause grievous error because it is not given to such readers to foresee, much less handle, the consequences

of their action, is the folkloric moral. Beyond this, it may neither be necessary nor instructive to press the parallel further, except to concur with Tambling yet again that the *posthumous* “cannot be enlisted either on the side of life or death, and its undecidability allows thoughts of either other state to intrude on to the meaning that is being preferred.... To read texts of the posthumous is to reflect on this undecidability of meaning, and to see either state as allegorical of the other” (24). *The Black Hen* illustrates this best when we consider the folkloric source to which it stands in a strangely posthumous relationship. Let us recall that the Dartmoor hen’s threat of the normal turning abnormal and tragic runs through this volume, an insight the hen gives us only several years after the poet’s passing, and the publication of this posthumous collection. And “yet it comes sometimes/ as the black hen” now perhaps sounds less alarming but more ironic than what the poet in his life had probably intended. This, indeed, renders the eponymity of “The Black Hen” most appropriate for Ramanujan’s posthumous volume of poems. Nothing, again, resonates more in such circumstances than an intertext whose *posthumous* recognition relates us to a text whose life extends beyond the death of a writer, and still beyond its posthumous publication. In a manner of speaking, with such a posthumous recognition *The Black Hen* begins a new life.

Notes

- 1 This holds good for a still later and longer discussion. See Daniels-Ramanujan.
- 2 Mehrotra comments that [the allusions in Ramanujan’s later writings] “range over many disciplines—literature, philosophy, psychology, anthropology, religion, folklore—and from the *Taittiriya Upanishad* to L. P. Hartley. This is less an indication of his reading, wide as it was, than of the way his kinship-seeking mind worked....” (Mehrotra 299).
- 3 Ramanujan cites Briggs’s *Dictionary* in his “Notes and References” to his *Collected Essays* (579–80). “The Black Hen [slightly shortened]” from Coxhead’s *Devil*, appears here in Part B, Folk Legends, Volume II, p. 622. My page reference, however, is to Briggs’s reprinted text in *British Folk-Tales*.

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