

book review

The Kama Sutra and Then Some

Nabokov, Joyce and Philip Roth are just three of the myriad influences in this ambitious romance of India.

LOVE IN A DEAD LANGUAGE

A Romance
By Lee Siegel
Illustrated. 375 pp. Chicago
The University of Chicago Press. \$25

by Tom LeClair

Lee Siegel's new novel, "Love in a Dead Language," is a novel masquerading as a translation of and commentary on the Kama Sutra. Since that Sanskrit book of love synthesizes hundreds of earlier texts and may or may not have been written by a man named Vatsyayana, who may have lived between the first century B.C. and the sixth century A.D., let's begin with Siegel, an American professor of Indian religions who has published over the last 12 years three increasingly quirky books about India that contribute features to this new one.

"Laughing, Matters" (1987) describes, classifies and analyzes comedy in Sanskrit literature and, in its last 60 pages, reports Siegel's humorous attempts to gather pop-culture comic materials in contemporary India. In "Net of Magic" (1991) the author's experiences with New Delhi street magicians supplement and then overwhelm his scholarly study of "wonders and deceptions" in Indian books. "City of Dreadful Night" (1995) begins with Siegel's traveling to India to interview wandering tellers of horror stories. When he can't find an informant in Benares, where Hindu corpses are burned, Siegel makes up a storyteller and a tale out of "Dracula" and his knowledge of Indian lore.

When Roth is killed, the character Siegel refuses to complete the translation and leaves the task to Anang Saighal, Roth's only graduate student. Also American born, the son of an Indian father and Jewish mother, Saighal fills gaps in Roth's text, edits his confessional journal, provides commentary on both, reveals his own loveless life, discusses his study of "Trishram Shandy" and writes long footnotes on earlier Kama Sutra commentaries, one of which Saighal may have invented to criticize his mentor. In his six-page bibliography, Saighal lists the three books by Lee Siegel that I've mentioned, an earlier one entitled "Sacred and Profane Love in India" and many items that don't exist.

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Prof. Leopold Roth of California, records his lust for an American-born Indian girl in his class, prepares a special translation of the Kama Sutra to help seduce her and maneuvers the girl, Lalita Gupta, into a "group" study tour of India that is really a Roth tutorial in sex and love.

The "game of love" in the Kama Sutra supplies the plot for Siegel's literary game. Like Vatsyayana's clever lover, Roth uses ploys to deceive his wife, trick Lalita's parents and misdirect her boyfriend so Lalita will go to India. While Roth is plying her with romantic lectures on the Taj Mahal, the free-spirited, expletive-spouting student is playing around with a young American she meets. Roth does manage to sleep with Lalita in Khajuraho but not because of the erotic statuary there or Vatsyayana's devices. Instead, Lalita pitied her 50-something guide and continues with him because she has fallen in love with India and with herself as an Indian.

Like Humbert Humbert, Roth begins with a fancy prose style, lush and lilting with alliteration, and like Professor Kimbore in "Pale Fire," Roth has cross-cultural delusions, but he's just realistic enough -- bumbling Leopold Bloom as American academic -- to support the almost-December and May story until the "romance" (Siegel's subtitle) becomes a murder mystery. To elicit early sympathy, Siegel gives Roth an eccentric childhood with parents who acted in movies about India, a series of wacky lovers who exacerbate his Indian obsessions that don't exist.

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"Letters," of juggling six earlier books and a new one in the air." "Love in a Dead Language" is balls, saucers and torches -- letters, musical notes, formulas, designs, paintings, photographs plus a pullout board game.

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"Not text, but texture," the poet John

Shade says in "Pale Fire." Siegel replies with poetic texture and multiple texts -- mirror, backward and upside-clown texts, intertexts and hypertexts. Not Vatsyayana's synthesis but syncretism. Siegel fakes contemporary facsimiles -- a term paper by Lalita, screenplay fragments, pages from a Classics Comics Kama Sutra, a scientist's technical study of snails' sexual slime, a letter of recommendation in academic jargon, newspaper articles. With these he mixes quotations from older texts connected to India: correspondence from Laurence Sterne's friend Mrs. Draper and from the Kama Sutra translator Richard Burton's wife, Isabel; a travel account by the 19th-century amateur indologist Edward Sellon; meditations on the Orient by the 17th-century English playwright Nathaniel Lee. The history Siegel doesn't gather he creates -- letters to Lee by the intrepid traveler Thomas Lovell, reminiscences by Francis White, a gung-ho Victorian Bengal Lancer.

Siegel's inventions, new and old, are too lovingly done to be mere parody. They are revels in languages -- in specialist or popular discourses -- presumed dead. While the novel's historical texts, both actual and imagined, give pleasure, they also tell an incisive history of Orientalism, Europeans' construction of Indian sexuality, the elision of exotic and erotic from which Roth and Lalita suffer. And since Roth finds anti-Semitism in the Orient,

Siegel shows racism travels both east and west.

"Love in a Dead Language" has paper chases and derivation quests, fine-print notes and multilingual puns. Even spaces between words get attention. Like Professor Roth, Professor Siegel plays verbal charades, inserting or closing up a space. One example: "penis" becomes "pen is." When I found "le clair de lune," this LeClair was Kinbore, certain "Love in a Dead Language" was for me, another professor. It's obviously not for every reader, and yet its fundamental and ingeniously varied theme is for everybody. Like snails, we may do sex by chemicals, testosterone and pheromones, but we love in language, dead or alive. Lalita's father calls Dr Roth "Dr. Ruth." Dr. Siegel advises all lovers.

Magicians whom Siegel interviewed swore the Indian rope trick -- the ultimate deception -- was possible. Unlike magic acts, a novel need not top fictions that precede it. Ultimately, I think, Siegel's professional need to clarify, or his lover's desire to please, sometimes censors the artist's urge to let language loose. If a reader is confused by a plot development or allusion, Saighal soon shows up to explain. The novel's who-dunit element panders, unsuccessfully I'd guess, to plot-seeking readers. Siegel ardently caresses words, relishes their sound and appearance on the page, but the seduction narrative in Roth's journal more often sounds like Philip Roth's Zuckerman than Nabokov. If "Love in a Dead Language" isn't a free-standing rope, it's a major laughing matter and deserves space on the short, high shelf of literary wonders.

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Mad, Bad and Dangerous to Know

Lord Byron had affairs with men, women, children and relatives

BYRON
Child of Passion, Fool of Fame
By Benita Eisler
Illustrated. 837 pp. New York
Alfred A. Knopf. \$35.

by Claude Rawson

In popular imagination, Byron is often seen as the textbook Romantic, with his revolutionary politics, his scandalous private life, his lameness paraded as the mark of Cain. A darkly brooding outsider, an exile from his native land, a swashbuckling hero of foreign wars of liberation, he comes across as a heady poetic amalgam of James Dean and Che Guevara. But Byron was also a coolly arrogant English lord, whose espousal of popular causes expressed a lofty patrician radicalism and who despised the foreigners whose struggle for independence he led (without seeing much fighting) from above.

Being a lord was more important than being a writer, as Benita Eisler points out (not, of course, for the first time) in this lively biography. He regarded other Romantic poets as low-born hacks, "would-be wits and can't-be gentlemen," as well as political conservatives and turncoats. Though always strapped for money, he at first refused payment for his writings, as unlordly behavior. He later relented, when he needed what he called "brain-money... what I get by my brains" to finance his overloaded love life.

His poems and plays reflect a similar split. On one side, there are the so-called Byronic heroes, satanic figures blighted by secret sorrow or guilt, exiled in lonely places, given to excess or revolt: poetic projections of the scandal-ridden, congenitally deformed outsider, the Byron whose locks of hair and miniature portraits were coveted by generations of star-struck female admirers.

On the other side is the poet of "Beppo" and "Don Juan," whose flip urbanity and hard-edged precision make him the master of serious light verse, of a colloquial tradition in English poetry that derives from Butler and Swift and looks forward to T. S. Eliot's *vers de soie* and some of Auden's best poems. Byron gave to this style a special patrician spin, a lordliness that was both a class gesture and a uniquely personal flourish. It is this manner that perhaps corresponds most closely to the Byron of the personal letters and journals and has some claim to be more expressive of the "real" Byron, except that there would be no real Byron to express without the dark Romantic side. The two overlap, but do not really blend. Byron practiced both styles more or less si-

This book astutely identifies links between Byron's defiance of prevailing moral codes and his political radicalism, distinguishing him from Rousseau and from his fellow patrician Shelley, whose moral and political rebellion was part of a principled opposition to society. Unlike Shelley, who sought to abolish authority rather than transgress against it, Byron "would never propose living outside society, and he had no real interest in reform; he wanted to break laws, not change them." He belongs broadly to the class of aristocratic rebel, whose lordly ways claim as his birthright freedoms that the lower-born can aspire to only through successful rebellion

multaneously in different works, but normally kept them well apart, and faltered when he failed to do so.

"Don Juan," his masterpiece, shows how determined he was to keep them apart. The hero, a genial, comically fictional self-projection, is the antithesis of the demagogically transgressive Don Juan of European tradition. Byron's Juan shares with the others his irresistibility to female admirers, but nothing else. He is no sexual predator. He seldom initiates his liaisons, and lets the women call the shots. He is passive (in pursuit, not in performance), more wooed than wooing, a guileless version of the laid-back aristocrat whose satisfactions come without effort. This English version of the good-hearted seducer, seduced into seducing, derives from Henry Fielding's Tom Jones rather than from the adventurer Juan of dramatic and operatic tradition, who appear lumbering upstarts by comparison.

Byron's life was lordly and rakish. In the family seat of Newstead Abbey, the young lord imitated the blasphemous and orgiastic practices of the Hell-Fire Club. He and his friends, wearing monkish dress, drank Burgundy from a human skull and, "after reveling on choice viands, and the finest wines of France," one of his guests wrote, proceeded with unmentionable "evening diversions" until the small hours. In addition to several renowned and high-profile heterosexual romances, as well as a string of humbler amours with maidservants and prostitutes, he had a series of homosexual attachments. Pedophilia, incest, masochism, cross-dressing (he danced in woman's dress with a Greek boy and liked his women to wear men's clothes) were part of his

repertory. His most scandalous mistress, Lady Caroline Lamb, married to a future prime minister, liked to dress as a pageboy. He appears to have told her she reminded him of John Edleston, his most beloved homosexual lover, a Cambridge choirboy who had died of consumption.

His liaisons were extraordinarily complex. Lady Melbourne, Caroline Lamb's mother-in-law and enemy, worked hard to divert Byron's attentions to her own niece Annabella Milbanke, whom he married. While courting her, he pursued several other affairs, including an incestuous liaison with his half-sister, Augusta, and apparently bedded the elderly Lady Melbourne to boot. These practices continued into his marriage, which ended in a spectacular separation and Byron's permanent exile in a cloud of allegations about incest and sodomy. Each of the women got to see Byron's correspondence with the others, which created a network of bizarre complicities and mutual power plays as well as jealousies and bruised egos. When his wife gave birth to their daughter, Byron had a nervous breakdown, threatened to kill them both and ordered them out of the house. He accepted with greater equanimity the births of his daughter by his sister and of another daughter by Shelley's stepsister-in-law, Claire Clairmont (the true fathers may have been Augusta's husband and Shelley himself, though Byron seems to have been reasonably satisfied of his paternity in both cases).

Eisler's account of Byron's appalling marriage and its termination is a page turner. The seesawing moods and volatile allegiances of Byron, his wife, Annabella, and his paramour half sister, Augusta, are reported with sensitive understanding. On Byron's treatment of women and his often cruel and intensely neurotic behavior she nothing extenuates nor sets down aught in malice. Some writers on Ted Hughes might do well to emulate her refusal to resort to cheap shots of the vengeful pack. Eisler brings out not only the importance of homosexual activity in Byron's life but its sheer dailiness, taken for granted as a natural complement to a highly active heterosexuality. The ease with which he and some of his friends switched from one to the other would be thought extraordinary today. Their sexual freedom was striking in its disregard for gender, an attitude that Byron admired in Greece and Turkey but that seems also to have been well developed in his school and undergraduate (Harrow and Cambridge) circles, if not in English society at large, well before he traveled to those countries.

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ron needed social codes in order to establish his contempt for them, and he had a soft spot for dictators who used absolute power as the enabling condition for unfettered gratification or sweeping conquest: the sensualist-loving despot of Albania, Ali Pasha (with whom he formed a mutually admiring friendship), or Napoleon, for whom Byron nursed an ambivalent hero worship not uncommon among intellectuals of the Romantic period.

Byron briefly entertained fantasies of becoming a Whig leader. His maiden speech in the House of Lords was praised as "the best speech by a lord since the Lord knows when," but his patron Lord Holland predicted that he would never "excel ... in Parliament." Meanwhile,

on March 10, 1812, "Childe Harold" created an instant sensation, and Byron was famous overnight. Poetry, not politics, was to be his access to the lime-

light.

The weakness of the book is its skimpy treatment of Byron the writer. There is too little about his intellectual life, the literary traditions to which he belonged, the other poets (English, classical, Italian) who shaped the various styles of his poems. Eisler's comments on the poems themselves are banal and sometimes imprecise. For example, her description of some lilting Byronic rant as "savage Swiftian irony" suggests a sloppy reading of both writers (Eisler seems accident-prone on the subject of Swift), and her view of "Don Juan" as "the War and Peace" of English poetry" will hardly do.

The author is the Maynard Mack Professor of English at Yale. His most recent book is "Satire and Sentiment 1660-1830." This review appears through the courtesy of NYT Book Review.

poem

Eviction: A Scribble Dedicated to Displaced Denizens of Tanbazar and Nimgali

by Moh'd Zamir

When I saw you
Promenading among the multitudes
I balked at and flinched back
For fear of being beckoned by you
As you used to do
In your heyday.
To me
You were a hound
My whole being obsessed with you
The senile being in me
Used to be rejuvenated
On being coddled by you
And I used to have myself a ball
In your cushy lap.
Now in your rainy day
To you
I am a man in the moon
Not on it
Perpetration of cruelty to you
Brings diabolical pleasure to me.
I joined the vociferous chorus to condemn you
In a language most mordant
For corrupting the society
On being warranted by morality.
I no longer admit
Let alone vouchsafe
That yours is a calling
As old as the city itself
On being seized with pusillanimity.

