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Fax: [48 12] 422-67-93 ; E-mail: zjkapera@vela.filg.uj.edu.pl

FOLIA ORIENTALIA
VOL. 35 1999
PL ISSN 0015-5675

RENATA CZEKALSKA

NIRĀLĀ

(on the 100th anniversary of the poet's birth)

Outline of Nirālā's biography.

Nirālā, one of the four great founders of Chāyāvād and the man who 'freed' Hindi poetry, was born on the 28th of February 1899¹ in Mahiśādal (Bengal, Madinipur district). Although his real name was Surajkumār Tevarī, he signed his works under the name of Sūryakānt Tripāṭhī (in the years 1917-1918), and from 1923 under a pen-name 'Nirālā'. He was born in a Kānyakubj Brahmin's family, coming from a small town called Goṛhakolā in Uttar Pradesh (Kanauj region). His mother died when he was three years old. His father was an officer in the court of Mahiśādal's maharaja.

Due to the geographical position of his birth-place he grew up in a multi-lingual atmosphere. His mother tongue was Hindi, more precisely – a dialect of eastern Hindi from the Kanauj region: *Baisvārī*. This was the language spoken in the future poet's home; this was also the language of Nirālā's letters throughout his life. His second native language was Bengali. The knowledge of Bengali played a major role in Nirālā's literary development as through this language he could acquaint himself with the works of Rabindranath Tagore and with the experimental poems of the young poets from Calcutta.

His primary education he received at home. In 1907, when he was eight years old, he was sent to Mahishadal High School. Similarly to Rabindranath Tagore, young Tripāṭhī showed an inborn indisposition towards any kind of schools and exams. According to one of the anecdotes, during his maths examination he was apparently copying Padmākar's poems. So it was not surprising that he finished his schooling in the ninth standard. Later it was

¹ Year of Nirālā's birth given according to Śarmā R., 1969. (A different year 1896 can be found in Rutkowska T., Stasiak D., 1992, p. 157).

only self education. All his free time he devoted to reading English, Hindi, Bengali and Sanskrit works on literature. He also took music lessons. The beautiful voice, that nature gave him, he used later on for recitations of his poems.

In 1911, when he was twelve years old, he was married to an eleven year old girl, Manohrādevī. After marriage she still lived in her parental home so the young husband constantly travelled between his wife's home and his own. In his in-law's house were born both his children: a son, Rāmkrṣṇa, in 1914 and a daughter, Saroj, in 1917.

Manohrādevī was the first person, who made Nirālā notice his far from satisfactory knowledge of *Kharī-bolī*. She convinced him to start reading literary journals like *Sarasvatī* (*Sarasvati*) or *Maryādā* (*Boundary*). Also through his wife's influence he acquainted himself with the poetry of Tulsīdās.

Life did not spare Nirālā tragic happenings. In 1917 his father died; a year later during a flu epidemic died his wife, his brother and his brother's wife. Sūryakānt Tripāṭhī was left as the only bread winner in the whole family. Not only for his own two children, but also for the four children of his brother. After his father's death he took over his post, but very soon he left it. Collecting taxes from poor peasants or forcing them to pay duties through jurisdiction did not lay in his nature. At the age of twenty, without higher education, with six children, he chose one of the most materially uncertain professions: writing.

Together with all the children he moved to Calcutta. There he started working as an editor for the journal called *Samanvay* (*Union*), started by Vivekānanda and being published by Ramakrishna Mission. He worked for Ramakrishna Mission for two years. At that time he became interested in *Vedānta* philosophy. Traces of that interest could be found in his works.

In 1923 Nirālā started working as a staff member for a new journal, *Matvālā* (*Drunk*). In this journal he published his first poem *Gaye rūp pahcān* (*Recognition of the shapes which have gone*), signing it as Nirālā (*nirālā* meaning: strange, unusual, original, extraordinary, was supposed to be a parallel to *matvālā*). Since then in Hindi literature he will be known only as Nirālā. In *Matvālā* he also published one of his most popular poems, *Juhī kī kalī* (*A jasmine bud*), written in 1917. The poem has been named by the critics the clearest and purest example of Chāyāvād's poetry.

In 1928 he moved to Lakhnau and started working for a publishing house. There he met Premchand. There he also published many of his works, even those written a lot earlier. He started writing novels, essays and short stories. All his best works were written at that time – collections of poems: *Parimal* (*Fragrance*) and *Anāmikā* (*Nameless*), as well as a long poem entitled

Tulsīdās (*Tulsidas*). It was also the time when he had to fight the literary critics who accused him of writing works that “spread ill thoughts and killed literature”². In spite of the accusations of being mentally ill, he was uncommonly popular in Lakhnau. He was eccentric in the way he dressed and the way he behaved. Tall and handsome, he wore traditional clothes (*lungī*, *kurtā* and *cappal*) and, being a Brahmin, ate meat.

After a few years he moved to Allahabad, at those times the centre of Hindi literature. His house soon became a place of meetings for poets, writers and poet-students. In Allahabad he met Sumitrānandan Pant, Jayaśankar Prasād and Mahādevī Varmā. This had a great impact on his literary life. Thanks to Prasād's protection Nirālā's collection of poems *Gītikā* (*A song*), written in 1936, has been approved by the critics. Prasād named *Gītikā* “a great gift for Hindi literature”.

Saroj-smṛti (*In the memory of Saroj*), an elegy written for a prematurely dead daughter, has similarly high artistic level. But the last years in Allahabad were for Nirālā marked by an illness and finance problems, apparently caused by his generosity (e.g. helping the *ṛkṣa* drivers). Although his popularity constantly grew, he lived humbly. To those who visited him, he was supposed to say: “Nirālā is dead. The one you are looking for died long ago”³. In reality though he worked creatively till the end of his life. A collection of poems *Sāndhyā kālī* (*A song of twilight*), published after his death, can be compared with his best works.

Nirālā died on the 15th of October 1961.

Historical and literary background.

The literary output of Nirālā was a creative factor in three literary periods. Against this background, his artistic achievements gain their proper meaning and context.

1. Chāyāvād

The history of Chāyāvād fits between the two world wars. But similarly to many currents, periods and epochs – precise dating is the question of undertaken interpretative criteria. Due to this fact, the historians of literature give different dates: 1920-1935, 1914-1939, 1918-1939. The most convincing date of the beginning of Chāyāvād is the year 1920 – a moment when

² acc. to Śarmā R., 1969, p. 201.

³ *ibidem*, p. 442.

Mahāvīrprasād Dvivedī officially resigned from being a leader of literary life in Hindi literature.

Similarly to Europe, also in India these were the years of serious changes, most of all because of the struggle for independence. In 1930 Nirālā wrote: “only fighting is the way to gain independence”.

Chāyāvād, also known as Indian Romanticism, was a poetic school that gave a challenge to the tradition of conservative forms. The programme of Chāyāvād has no comparison in the whole of Hindi literature. It originated as an opposition towards the former epoch, that was artificial and indiscriminately loyal to the rules of traditional poetry written in *Braj* and poetry written in *Kharī-bolī* during Hariścandra's and Dvivedī's times. The poets of Chāyāvād have rejected this kind of poetry, stating that it was “indistinct, bland, material and rough”⁴. On the other hand, their poetry being linked with Symbolism and Mysticism (but different from the Mysticism of Bhakti), was of an undefined nature. It was inexpressible and elusive – like a shadow. This is why the name of the epoch comes from the word *chāyā* (shadow, reflection, gleam).

The ‘revolution’ of Chāyāvād happened under the influence of English poetry. Nearly all the poets, who created the Indian school of Romanticism, possessed an English education, acquired mainly in the schools of Victorian Calcutta. They all studied English literature⁵.

In Indian tradition a poet had no right to express his own thoughts and experiences: ambitions, joys, frustrations – were not suitable for poetry, they were too personal, too earthy. The individuality of an artist was covered by a thick curtain of patterns compulsory for each literary period. Due to all that, the new concept of an artist and his role in a society, brought to India from the West, was the herald of Chāyāvād. “English Romantic poetry gave me the freedom to look at life anew, it broke the traditional shackles and ensured me, that the experiences of life of any man are worth recording”⁶.

The tide of English Romantic literature came from Bengal with Svāmī Vivekānanda. Numerous Indian intellectuals and writers (also Nirālā) stayed under the influence of his speeches about socio-religious aspects. His spirituality formed modern India (at least according to some historians). When the Nobel prize was awarded to Tagore, and his poetry being so close to life and nature had become an example for the whole generation, also Nirālā started understanding nature as an equivalent of sentiments.

⁴ Varmā D., 1963, vol. I, p. 325.

⁵ see Kowalska-Soni A., 1968 II, p. 29.

⁶ Harivamś Rāy ‘Baccan’ [in:] Kowalska-Soni A., 1968 II, p. 29.

One of the main characteristics of Chāyāvād was the revolutionization of *Kharī-bolī* dialect. At that time it was already recognised as the standard Hindi and became the most refined vehicle of poetry. *Braj* was almost completely neglected about 1940. Indian Romanticism gave a great opportunity to those artists for whom poetry was not a profession but a passion. Due to the language, lyrical poetry became closer to common people but it was still difficult and exclusive when it came to understanding its vast symbolics, key-words, Sanskrit vocabulary and concise thought.

Under the influence of English literature the traditional poetics had been dropped. A new style appeared, new meters and new kinds of literary works: ode, sonnet, elegy. Similarly to the English Romantic poets also the originators of Chāyāvād were experimenting with words and meters, writing poetry in free verse, constructing new images and idioms. They discovered the melody of a poem and the function of rhythm⁷. Their words were carefully chosen to create musical tones and fulfil a lyrical picture. They avoided consonant clusters, so common in the rhetorical school of *Braj* but, according to the Chāyāvād poets, creating the unnatural character of poems. Poems were supposed to soothe the moods of the readers and be pleasantly sounding.

The poetry of Chāyāvād aimed to create a new aesthetics and new beauty. The poets invented new words with the help of prefixes and suffixes. They avoided the old ways of creating poetic images. They were creating new metaphors. The old means of expression, like alliteration, they transformed into vocal harmony. They liked playing with words. This practice led to a resignation from the exclusive comparisons on behalf of their suggestiveness, richness of forms, styles and manifesting the individuality and independence of poets.

2. Pragativād

In about 1935, the epoch of Chāyāvād was coming to an end. At this point Hindi poetry started developing in different directions. The most popular of them were: Rāṣṭrīya Kāvya, started by Maithilīśaraṇ Gupta; Hālāvād, with Baccan; Rahasyavād with Mahādevī Varmā and finally Pragativād.

In the period of the awakening of the Indian independence movement, Marxism had become popular especially among intellectuals and in literary circles. Even Mahatma Gandhi declared: “I am also a Communist minus

⁷ “Nirālā's greatest achievement was giving poetry to music and bringing music closer to poetry”, Śukl R., 1961, p. 176.

bloodshed”⁸. Both the ideas: freedom and Marxism, had a significant influence on spiritual life in India.

Pragativād was not a literary movement as such. It was more of an intellectual current. It discovered and defined a new way of viewing social issues, the people and history. The main subjects of poetry were not nature or sentiments any more but a man, his poverty, his lack of freedom, Indian women trapped in the rules of tradition, a peasant or a factory worker.

Some of the poets of Pragativād were under the influence of the Communist party, formed in 1934. They wrote paeans about the revolution of 1917, the red flag, the party and treated literature like a vehicle of propaganda.

Another group was formed by those, who (like Nirālā) described the poverty, political slavery, degradation, economical exploitation, but avoided political propaganda. They wrote realistic poems about ordinary people, their life, every day problems, political situation⁹.

Whatever the literature of Pragativād gained in the sense of becoming realistic, it lost in the sense of aesthetics. Some of the writers understood beauty as usefulness. Although they resigned from using meter and old figures of speech, they still employed simplifications and didactics. The political doctrine brought their works closer to the common people, but it made their poetry artistically insipid. Simple and close to the point, the language of this poetry contained a lot of the elements of the spoken idiom. Also the syntax was close to the common way of speaking.

3. Prayogvād and poetry of the Independence period.

At the beginning of the 1940's a new tendency appeared in Hindi poetry. It was Prayogvād, or Experimentalism. The movement was started by an anthology of seven Hindi poets, which was published in 1943 and entitled *Tār Saptak* (*The seven strings*).

Tār Saptak announced a new literary current, which was fully formed a little later, after independence was gained. Ajñey (Saccidānanda Hirānanda Vātsyāyan) is treated as the founder of this movement. Prayogvād rejected the Romantic concept of tradition, conventions of poetics, and did not accept the poetry of Pragativād. Due to the experimental poets, Hindi poetry came under the influence of western avant-garde literature. Solitude of an

⁸ [in:] Pandey I. P., 1975, p. 102.

⁹ “Progressivism starts with Marxism at its base. So far it is all right. But why should I look down upon other philosophies of life? Love and non-violence of Mahatma Gandhi are equally great means to achieve human welfare”, Añcal [in:] Pandey I. P., 1975, p. 103.

individual, his perplexity, helplessness towards progress in the atomic epoch, the fall of moral values – these were the main subjects of this poetry. It underlined the intellectual crisis of the Indian middle class, lost in the new political, historical and moral situation.

The poets put a lot of stress on the harmony of the language, they experimented with words, used exaggeration, hyperbole. Publication of the next two anthologies, *Dūsra Saptak* (*The second seven*) in 1951 and *Tīsra Saptak* (*The third seven*) in 1959 – put Prayogvād for good into the history of Hindi literature. Finally it has been named as the movement for New Poetry (Nāi Kavita). This movement carried on the experiments with versification started by Nirālā. In Nāi Kavita dominated free verse. Even if rhymes were used, they were mostly irregular and only a small quantity of poems consisted of stanzas. The poets stopped using Sanskrit epithets; they went back to the native *tadbhava* and the borrowings from Persian, Arabic and English. Their poems resembled those from Chāyāvād on the level of images, but were natural and simple, free from Romantic pathos. Nāi Kavita is mostly a poetry of reflection, covering every-day experiences, discussing the sense of history and modernity.

Nirālā's literary work.

1. Poetry.

Nirālā published thirteen collections of poems, containing over 1000 poems. His poetry is difficult. The reader is expected to possess erudition and knowledge of a few foreign languages (e.g. English, Urdu, Sanskrit, Bengali, etc.). The poet did not avoid using dialects. This is probably why he was not commonly liked. His works demanded thinking and imagination.

Its other characteristics were sincerity and originality. Nirālā was just about the only poet in the period of Chāyāvād, who really cared about social problems. When Prasād constantly praised the golden past and Pant described the idyll of country life, Nirālā wrote about the poor and called for a revolution. At the same time he improved his literary skills and experimented with new forms of expression.

To his historical achievements belongs the fact, that he was the forerunner of free verse poetry in Hindi. In that respect he played a role similar to the one of Walt Whitman in English literature¹⁰.

¹⁰ see: Bandopadhyāy M., 1994, p.102.

The brave usage of free verse by Nirālā caused mixed reactions among the critics and admiration among the readers. Nirālā himself wrote in the preface to his first collection of poems: "The way a man can be free, poetry can also be free. Free poetry, not bound with rhymes, is never of small significance for literature. But quite the contrary, from this kind of poetry the awareness of independence is born and this is a condition of the success of literature"¹¹.

Rich in its contents and form, the output of Nirālā is also difficult to systematise and characterise. This versatile author possessed a vast spectrum of interests: from personal experiences through mythological past, the present India, to social problems. He employed all kinds of poetic forms: from traditional meter, through free verse, *gazal*, *bhajan*, epic fragments, satire, elegy, to folk songs.

Considering the development of Nirālā's interests, his literary output could be divided into three periods: initial, middle and final.

The initial period.

Nirālā's first poem was *Juhī kī kalī*. Most probably it was written in 1916, though some literary critics suggest that it should be dated three or four years earlier. The poem in a very subtle way describes the relationship between a jasmine bud and the wind, but this only creates the background for metaphysical allusions.

The first collection of poems published by Nirālā was *Anāmikā* (1923). The second part of this collection appeared 16 years later, in 1939. In the preface Nirālā has written: "*Anāmikā* was published thanks to Mahāvīrprasād Dvivedī. He was first to appreciate my work. The journals quite frequently sent back my poems; I was fed up. The truth is, that if not for him, Nirālā would not exist. I gave such a title to this collection because I did not want it to be ever forgotten"¹².

The wish of the poet was fulfilled. *Anāmikā* is quite a unique collection, logically composed primarily due to employing free verse. It also questions the puritanical ideals of the former poets. It contains 56 poems, preceded by a three-stanza poem, *Gīt* (*A lilt*). In this collection also, Nirālā's two longest poems are included: *Saroj-smṛti* and *Rām kī Śākti pūjā* (*Rama's worship for Śakti*).

Rām kī Śākti pūjā can be linked with the mythological theme, taken from the Puranic tradition. It describes the sacrifice prepared by Rāma for

goddess Śākti, before fighting demon Rāvaṇa. The poem is a particular fusion of two traditions: the first one following Śiva and the second Viṣṇu. The influence of Ramakrishna Mission in Calcutta (where Nirālā worked) could be noticed in this work. The language of the poem is highly 'sanskritized' and therefore not clear. The critics interpreted the work as an allegory of Nirālā's own creation.

The elegy *Saroj-smṛti* was written after the death of Nirālā's daughter. In this poem the author crosses the boundaries of Chāyāvād's poetry by enclosing strictly autobiographical themes. The elegy is also a kind of an account of whatever the poet has achieved in his artistic life. He remembers unfulfilled aims and life failures. The climax of the poem is Saroj's wedding ceremony, which is compared to the one of Śakuntalā. In despair Nirālā confesses:

My life is just a chain of sorrows

*is there anything I can say today, that I have not said before?*¹³

Also in a poem *Vanbelā* (*Forest jasmine*) he sums up his work. He wonders what sort of life he would have had if he had been born as a maharaja's son. Those thoughts are disturbed by a jasmine flower. It is a metaphysical dialogue between the lyrical subject and nature. In this poem Nirālā with extreme ease changes from descriptions of nature to autobiographical confessions.

In *Anāmikā* there is also a realistic poem – a portrait, *Toṛtī patthar*. (*A woman breaking stones*). The heroine of the poem is a young woman, working on the building of the road to Allahabad. A similar theme appears also in the poem *Dān* (*Donation*), describing a person walking, enjoying nature and observing a Brahmin on a bridge feeding monkeys and a beggar getting swear-words instead of charity.

The next collection of Nirālā's poems, *Parimal*, was published in 1929. In the preface Nirālā stated, that he was a follower of the western concept of free verse and a defender of the freedom of opinions.

Another collection, *Gītikā*, contained 101 songs about love, nature, beauty of man. In this collection Nirālā managed to assimilate the Indian and western concept of music in Hindi poetry. In the compact lyrics he employed paradoxes from 18th century English poetry as well as assonances. He kept the inner rhythm of verse and used words of double meaning (like in the 17th century English poetry). In this volume he mixed some complicated poems with very simple ones in the form of folk songs.

¹¹ Śrīvāstav P., 1997, p. 7.

¹² Nirālā, 1994, p. 7.

¹³

Duhkh hī jīvan kī kathā rahī

kyā kahūm āj, jo nahīm kahī (Nirālā, 1994, p. 98).

In 1939 Nirālā published a long poem *Tulsīdās*, dedicated to the famous poet. The poem consists of 106 stanzas. Against the background of the setting sun (a symbol of Hindu tradition) and the rising moon (a symbol of Islam) he introduced some legendary happenings from Tulsīdās's life, trying to convince the readers to follow some of the hero's characteristics, e.g.: honesty, sacrificing oneself for others, nobility. In Nirālā's eyes Tulsīdās's works were supposed to support India spiritually during the Muslim rule. He also appealed to his contemporary poets to look for ideas in Tulsīdās's works.

The middle period.

In 1942 appeared *Kukurmuttā* (*A mushroom*), a satirical long poem, written in free verse. The story is built on the opposition: rich man – poor man. Artistically this is work of a slightly lower level.

In 1943 was published another volume, *Aṇimā* (*Invisibility*), where 44 poems were included. Nirālā returns to some mystic themes from *Gītikā*. There are also poems dedicated to Prasād, Buddhā, Mahādevī Varmā. Some poems are about love. A poem *Maiṇ akelā* (*I alone*) has become popular. The poet expresses his grief, loneliness and sadness:

*I am alone,
Seeing
The dusk of my days.*¹⁴

In 1946 Nirālā published two volumes: *Naye pāṭte* (*New leaves*) and *Belā* (*Time*). The first one is a collection of several kinds of songs. The author experimented with ghazals using either a mixture of Hindi and Urdu or applying traditional Persian meter to standard Hindi. As for the themes, most of the poems are about love, but there are also some discussing patriotic problems, some satirical ones about Nehru and high society. In *Naye pāṭte*, Nirālā included poems from the war period. They are satirical in character and full of bitter irony, e.g. the poem *Sphaṭik-śilā* (*A crystal rock*), where a pilgrim sees Sītā in a girl bathing in a stream. Some poems are political. They show, for example, Nehru's propaganda aimed towards peasants and give a precise description of Indian countryside. The simple language of the whole collection was almost an insult to Indian literary tradition and the purists, who were always drawing a thick line between literary and spoken language.

¹⁴ *Maiṇ akelā
dekhtā hūm, ā rahī
mere divas kī sāndhyā belā* (Nirālā 1992, p. 12)

In spite of Nirālā's private opinion, by which *Belā* was the best realisation of his metaphysical poetry, the works of his last years have been awarded such credit.

The final period.

In the third period of his literary life Nirālā turned towards partly reflective and partly religious poetry. This interest developed from personal reasons (poverty, illnesses, disappointment in the independent India), he moved away from politics and social problems and came closer to spiritual meditation. At this time he published four collections of poems: *Arṇā* (*Adoration*, 1950), *Ārādhnā* (*Worship*, 1953), *Gītguṇj* (*A song of a bumble-bee*, 1954, an extended edition appeared in 1959) and *Sāndhyā kāklī* (published posthumously in 1969).

These volumes consist of series of short, compact lyrics. They are an attempt to dive into the very meaning of truth and a kind of poet's testament. The main sentiments are regret and calmness. Only the last volume is sad and pessimistic. But in this last period on the whole the strength of Nirālā's words and his sensitivity towards the world reached almost the level of a manifesto.

The last poems of Nirālā are particularly difficult to translate. The Hindi used in his last creative years is full of idiomatic expressions and the borderline between his own reflections and common human ideas is not clear. This happens not only in the religious poems but also in the pictures describing country life as well as in the passages calling for the rain – Nirālā's favourite symbol.

2. Prose.

Nirālā wrote several novels: *Apsarā* (*Nymph*, 1931), *Alakā* (*Alaka*, 1933), *Nirupamā* (*Nirupama*, 1936), *Prabhāvatī* (*Prabhavati*, 1936), *Kullībhāt* (*A gargling bard*, 1939), *Billesur bakriha* (*Shepherd Billesur* 1942)¹⁵, *Coṭī kī pakar* (*Catching a plait of hair*, 1946), and *Kāle kārṇāme* (*Black chronicles*, 1950).

His short stories were published in five collections: *Lilī* (*Lily*, 1934), *Sakhī* (*A friend*, 1935), *Sukul kī bībī* (*Sukul's wife*, 1941), *Catur camār* (*A clever tanner*, 1945) and *Devī* (*A goddess*, 1948).

In his novels and short stories Nirālā presented a realistic picture of mid-

¹⁵ *Kullībhāt* and *Billesur bakriha* are sometimes classified as novels and sometimes as essays or sketches.

dle class life as well as the problems of the poor exploited by the rich. For example, *Nirupamā* is a jolly satire on the rich Bengali community. The author makes fun of the fall of one young Brahmin's social status. Life forced him to do the job of a shoe cleaner. In *Kullībhāṭ* some autobiographical themes can be found, especially those connected with Nirālā's wedding and his younger years.

Nirālā's essays on literature and socio-political subjects were published in four volumes: *Prabandh padmā* (*A composition of lotus*, 1934), *Prabandh pratibhā* (*A composition of light*, 1940), *Cābuk* (*Whip*, 1942), *Cayan* (*Selection*, 1957).

Nirālā is also the author of three plays: *Samāj* (*Society*), *Śakuntalā* (*Śakuntala*) and *Uṣā Aniruddha*. (*Usha and Aniruddha*). They have never appeared in print.

He also wrote a few biographies, among others: of Rāṇā Pratāp, Rāmakṛṣṇa Parāmahaṇsa, Vivekānanda and Dhruvā. He is also the author of a commentary to Tulsīdās's *Rāmcaritmānas*, a part of which he translated into *Khaṛī-bolī*. A concise version of *Mahābhārata*, a few translations from Vedic literature, a translation of Vātsyāyana's *Kāmasūtra* from Sanskrit and a translation of Vivekānada's *Rājayoga* from Bengali also are to be included in Nirālā's literary output.

The outcome of Nirālā's literary life was collected and published in eight volumes under the title of *Nirālā racnāvalī* (*Nirala's work*).

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TOMASZ GACEK

DIACRITICS IN THE ANALYSIS OF THE MIDDLE PERSIAN BOOK SCRIPT

1. Introduction

Probably no one would take a risk of building a complete description of a phonological system today without the useful tool of the analysis of distinctive features.

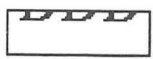
However, I do believe, such an analysis is desirable not only in the field of phonology. I think it has excellent prospects in some other spheres, in which that possibility has been rather neglected.

I would like to discuss one possible implementation of the method of description based on analysis of diacritics in the field of writing systems and more precisely in the deciphering of the Middle Persian Book Script.¹

The need for systematic and coherent method of description is best felt, when the matter is really complicated and, as a consequence, when not acting in a well organised way one soon gets trapped in insoluble paradoxes and the description gets unpredictably complicated.

2. Distinctiveness in the field of script

Elements of a system of signs, the complexity of which goes beyond the level of traffic lights usually may be divided into smaller (and this time indivisible) units, that is diacritics (gr. *diakrítēs*), which although do not possess their own meaning, differentiate signs of the system.²

e.g.:  - where any of partly visible letters may be both 'D' and 'B'. What renders possible the recognition of these signs is the upper part - here not visible.

¹ Called also (though rather improperly): Book Pahlavi. The last term is well established in the literature on the subject, as well as its abbreviation 'BP', which I adopt, too.

² A. Weinsberg, *Językoznawstwo ogólne*, Warszawa 1983, p. 31.