CHAPTER TWELVE

ON READING FITZGERALD’S VYĀSA

After an extraordinary twenty-six years’ wait, the J.A.B. van Buitenen translation of the *Mahābhārata* has been resumed by James L. Fitzgerald and it has been well worth the wait. Fitzgerald is to be congratulated for a vigorous, nuanced, and often deeply moving translation, one for which he had to draw on varied skills and impulses to animate not only the text’s epical and edifying strains as he moves from the *Strīparvan* to the *Śāntiparvan*, but, in the latter, the multigeneric character of the instructions of Yudhiṣṭhira. Although Fitzgerald makes it clear “that many of van Buitenen’s translational conventions are not reproduced here” (p. xvii), one senses many debts and continuities, and, more than that, a similar commitment, even if it takes different forms and uses different idioms, to be daring and often enough amusing, as the text deserves. As van Buitenen did, Fitzgerald also provides well thought-out introductions to the major *parvans* that include valuable state-of-the-field position pieces on their components. Only in the far more extensive and scholarly apparatus does the work feel resolutely different. Along with seven appendices, the endnotes are far more numerous and detailed, and many are signaled within the translation by the degree symbol ° “to indicate the presence of a relevant annotation in the endnotes” (p. vii, n. 5). Scholars may find some of these changes more felicitous than the “serious general readers of contemporary American English” (p. xviii) whom Fitzgerald mentions as his primary target, but in my view they offer a balance that is good for both.

To resume this translation has not, however, meant picking up where it was left off. From the *Udyogaparvan* (Book 5), where van Buitenen exited, to the *Strīparvan* (Book 11), where Fitzgerald picks up, the five books that recount the *Mahābhārata* war still remain in limbo. Fitzgerald tides readers over this gap under the heading “What Happened in the War” (pp. xxiv–xxxi), and outlines the plan whereby the University of Chicago Press will bring out the epic’s remaining books under his editorship (pp. xv–xvi). More interesting than this temporary jump over the war, however, is the exciting opportunity this volume
offers for a new centering of Mahābhārata interpretation. For, though the translation resumes with the Strīparvan, Fitzgerald’s interpretive center of gravity lies in his introduction to the Śāntiparvan (Book 12). Fitzgerald brings special and rare expertise to the Śāntiparvan, for with this volume he has now not only translated and introduced the first two of its three main instructional components—the Rājadharma and Āpaddharma sub-parvans, but has written his dissertation on the third—the Mokṣadharmā sub-parvan,¹ his translation of which will be a further contribution to this overall resumption.

Thus, by an accident of publishing history, this resumption will focus interpretative attention on the Śāntiparvan. I shall argue in this review that this accident may have the fortunate result of encouraging “suspended” readers and reviewers to raise interesting new questions, and hopefully shake up some long-standing assumptions, about the relation of parts to the whole. With that in mind, let me mention a few of Fitzgerald’s most broad-stroke interpretative strategies, situate them in relation to some other recent approaches, and turn to a couple of points where I think his approach is not as fruitful as it could be.

Mahābhārata Reading Strategies

On the broadest scale, Fitzgerald uses the hyphenated term “praśamana-anuśāsana” to describe the double “cooling” and “instructional” character of the book’s title term, śāntī (“peace”). Fitzgerald suggests a sacrificial dimension to this word, as an apotropaic bringing-to-rest or neutralizing of effects—in this case, the effects of war—that reorients Yudhiṣṭhira, beset after the war by grief (śoka, from its root śuc, related by Fitzgerald to things “burning too hot” in Vedic ritual), toward being “fit to rule” (pp. 94–100). Though he is cautious about the ritual dimensions of this interpretation (pp. 97–98, 99 n. 97), I believe it makes a sound contribution to our appreciation of the depth of Vedic resonance that the epic poets repeatedly call upon. More immediately, Fitzgerald speaks of this praśamana-anuśāsana’s four main components—the three of the Śāntiparvan plus the Dānadharmaparvan, the main sub-parvan of the following Anuśāsanaparvan (Book 13)—as “four large