Bishop: left unsaid

- description: what lies underneath?
- diction: what forms are hidden?
- mapping: what was the history?
- losing: what was the feeling?
- travel: what do I (the traveler) desire?
Who am I?

I resemble everyone
but myself, and sometimes see
in shop-windows,
    despite the well-known laws
    of optics,
the portrait of a stranger,
date unknown,
often signed in a corner
by my father.

(“Self-Portrait”)

What am I made of?

- What defines the “I” who speaks in “Elements of Composition”? 
In the course of a casual conversation, he showed me the draft of a poem called ‘Elements of Composition’, which was then a single, long poem of a few hundred lines arranged in about twenty-five sections. It was a meditation on what we call the ‘nature’ of self and poetry, interspersed at various points with passages reflecting on certain ‘epiphanic’ moments in his life. I thought that it was a major poem with the sort of thematic scope, stylistic novelty, and imaginative impact that no Indian-English poet had been able to achieve until then. But Ramanujan was sure that his readers would misread it if he published it as it stood, because they would look in it for traces of earlier poems of a similar kind, from Wordsworth’s *The Prelude* to Eliot’s *Four Quartets*. He also felt strongly that the formal and thematic unity asserted by the long poem contradicted one of his central insights in it, that his own ‘truth is in fragments’.

When he prepared the final manuscript of *Second Sight*, Ramanujan broke up the poem into fourteen relatively short poems.

AK Ramanujan

1929 b. Mysore, British India (Tamil Brahmin family)
1949 BA University of Mysore (MA 1950)
1963 Ph.D., Indiana University
1962–93 University of Chicago (linguistics/South Asian studies)
1966 The Striders
1971 Relations
1973 Speaking of Siva (translations, Penguin Classics)
1976 Padma Sri
1983 MacArthur fellow
1986 Second Sight
1993 d. Chicago
2011 BJP youth wing attacks Delhi U. over “300 Ramayanas”;
OUP withdraws AKR’s Collected Essays then withdraws the withdrawal
As we grew up, Sanskrit and English were our father tongues, and Tamil and Kannada our mother tongues. The father tongues distanced us from our mothers, from our own childhoods, and from our villages and many of our neighbors in the cowherd colony next door. And the mother tongues united us with them….

Sanskrit stood for the Indian past; English for colonial India and the West, which also served as a disruptive creative other that both alienated us from and revealed us (in its terms) to ourselves; and the mother tongues, the most comfortable and least conscious of all, for the world of women, playmates, children, and servants….Each had a literature that was unlike the others’. Each was an other to the others.

Ramanujan writes from within English yet as if outside it.

Ramanujan writes from within English yet as if outside it.


The official Indian literary academy, the Sahitya Akademi, has the motto, “Indian literature is one but written in many languages.” I, for one, would prefer the plural, “Indian literatures,” and would wonder if something would remain the same if it is written in several languages, knowing as I do that even in the same language, “a change of style is a change of subject,” as Wallace Stevens would say.

how allusions work

One knows by now one is no amnesiac king

...

Or so it seems,

as I wait for my wife and watch the traffic in seaside marketplaces and catch

my breath at the flat-metal beauty of whole pomfret
▶ Things Fall Apart, chaps. 1–8 (at least)