

# READING AUSTRALIAN POETRY IN THE INDIAN CLASSROOM

PUSHPINDER SYAL

In India, Australian poetry is read as part of courses in 'Commonwealth literature' or 'new writing in English', though some universities are now beginning to offer full courses in Australian literature. As Australian literature is read in comparison with literatures from India and Africa, a comparative and cross-cultural focus is quite evident. In some ways, we see Australian literature as being located in a similar situation to that which exists in other 'post-colonial' cultures – that is, attempting to define its own identity and attempting to reshape a given language to new experiences in a new land. But it is also seen as different. In it, the sense of racial and cultural difference in relation to Europe is not foregrounded as it is in the case of many other post-colonial literatures. However, there is a sense of being different from Europe, not least because of the geographical apartness, in addition to the experience of being in the position of both the coloniser and the colonised. While other post-colonial literatures draw from indigenous cultures and traditions to counter the European influence, Australian writing tends to be closer to the English literary tradition, drawing from it while forging its own traditions from contact with the land. As other new literatures in English also face the 'anxiety of influence' *vis a vis* the English tradition to various degrees, and attempt to exploit the possibilities of cross-fertilisation, the ways in which that tradition is being reworked becomes an important focus of inquiry.

In reading some of the works of Australian poets such as Judith Wright and A.D. Hope in India, the focus is invariably on comparison with English poets on one hand and with Indian tradition on the other. In the case of Judith Wright, for instance, there is often an enthusiastic response, and this can be traced, among other things, to the presence of the philosophical element in her poetry. Critics of Wright and contemporary poets who have commented on her work such as A.D. Hope, Rodney Hall and others have emphasised the philosophical, metaphysical and mystical themes that emerge in her poetry, and similar observations are often made by students reading Wright in India. Secondly, these readers pick up on the idea of the centrality of nature in her poems, linking it with the Romantic poetry which they have read. Finally, there is Wright's use of the English language, and the way in which her poems are structured – the dialogic, argumentative and rhetorical devices that she uses – that create a communicative style helpful in developing identification with the reader. Each of these points is related to a particular aspect of her work that has cross-cultural implications, and will be discussed in detail below.

Thematically, there are links between Wright's poetry and Indian philosophical thought. We see in it the interplay of dualities and the constant effort to resolve them into singleness, leading to an achievement finally of a monastic unity in which these dualities are reconciled: time vs eternity, death vs life, renewal and regeneration vs destruction, and the reconciliation of the faculties of the mind, heart and imagination. This is evoked in the very titles of her poems: 'Woman to Man', 'Clock and Heart', 'The Harp and the King', 'The Two Fires'. Shades of Sufi thought, of the Gita and of Chinese thinkers develop in her work until they reach a point of culmination in her later poetry. They are

also reflected in the professed beliefs that poetry is an exploration of the principle of love, of identification with nature, and a self-abandonment through participation in the life of nature. These beliefs lead to a mystical stage, where poetry appears not to be created by willed conscious effort, but is controlled by something beyond the individual. As A.D. Hope observes of her later collection of poems 'The Other Half', 'the stance is that of listening for the prompting of a voice from beyond, as that of the earlier poems was that of deliberately looking for some vision of illumination to be supplied by the objective world itself' and that the 'mystic's subsumption into the life of nature, his willing abandonment of self in the ecstasy of being part of the all, seems to be eroding and dissolving the conscious practice of poetry as an art: The poem becomes the symbol of the reality beyond, as in the poem 'The Vision' in which the vision of the mystic is described as seeing the reality beyond the mask of the world, its 'real forms', 'the world beyond the world', the mystic's joy in seeing this harmony and in 'knowing the human ends in the divine'. The mystic sees beyond 'pride, greed and ignorance, the world's three veils' – the veils of *ma ya* illusion, at the real forms that exist. But these too are, to a great extent, incomprehensible:

And yet these too, moved in that second world . . . and men the instruments in some high battle where god incomprehensibly warred on God.

There is an awareness that what has been seen is not the complete truth, or the end of seeing, and this leads to the prayer that:

vision and action know their proper limits and knowledge teach him more humility.

As Hope has pointed out, there is a sense here of the poet as mystic, transcribing visions, rather than a conscious artist and maker. The point has also been made that the poems become explicitly allegorical and declamatory.

Perhaps this is a valid judgement to make. However, in reading these poems in our classes in India, we did not see any conflict between 'visionary' poetry and 'crafted' poetry; we felt that these conditions existed together in Wright's work. This awareness was made possible by our study of the critical works of the Indian poet-mystic Sri Aurobindo which the students read as part of the course in Indian literature. Aurobindo expresses ideas regarding the nature of poetry and the role of the poet in his essays titled 'The Future Poetry'. In these, Aurobindo expounds a theory of poetry based on the *mantra*:

The mantra, poetic expression of the deepest spiritual reality, is only possible when three highest intensities of poetic speech meet and become indissolubly one, a highest intensity of verbal form and thought-substance, of style, and a highest intensity of the soul's vision of truth. All great poetry comes about by a union of these three elements . . . but it is only at the highest level of these fused intensities that the Mantra becomes possible.

The *mantra* arises from *matra* or metre, that which appeals to the ear and gives pleasure, but the auditory pleasure is of the highest kind only when it is transmuted into a deeper delight of the soul, which is *Ananda*, a delight which is interpretive, creative, revealing, formative. The poet's sense of technique is an inspired sense, not an intellectual one. The perfection of sound-movement and style come entirely from the soul's vision, an inspired rhythm from an innate revealed world.

These, and similar ideas in Aurobindo's work, serve as a framework in which we could place some of Wright's abstract, philosophical poems. These ideas, that help to define some of the greatest religious and spiritual poetry of their own culture, also helped the Indian students to relate to poetry from another culture. The awareness of the perspective given by Aurobindo was instrumental in visualising the philosophical content of Wright's poetry not as some kind of limitation or poetic failing, or aspiration to something not properly 'poetic', but as an attempt to make poetry answer to some deeply-felt needs of the human spirit. The moral and social concerns voiced in Wright's poetry in what Hope calls 'the instructional mode' are in consonance with what is understood in India as the function of poetry, though Western readers may have moved away from applying this criteria.

That Judith Wright applies the tenets of an older English tradition in her writing is evident in the relationship with nature expressed in her poetry that was there in the earlier English verse. The imagery, though complex, is drawn from nature by generality of reference to objects in nature e.g. tree, rock, stone, flower, seed etc. For Indian students this centrality of nature appears to be in continuity with the English Romantic poets, who are still read very avidly in India. Wright herself has given importance to the influence of the Romantic movement in Australian writing in her essay 'Romanticism and the Last Frontier'. In this, it is the recognition of nature as a living whole, guiding and inspiring man that is seen as Romanticism's greatest strength, and this is what has shaped the perceptions of early Australian poets in responding to their land. In India too, we are still not so far away from those connections with nature that make our response to Romantic poetry so immediate, and a parallel chord is struck in Wright's poetry. The English tradition works as an influence in both Indian and Australian literature, and studying Wright's poetry affords an opportunity to see how the tradition is being reworked and transformed, since it concerns changing perceptions of nature and of man's relationship with it, a different kind of questioning of culture and civilisation to that in nineteenth-century England. Other connections, such as the impact of industrialisation, the increasing materialism, the ever-present nuclear threat, being common concerns, serve as links between the two cultures.

The reading of poetry is primarily and foremost a contact with language, and text, and a participation in the form of discourse that is set up by the rhetorical and structural organisation of the text. If the language is English, operating in a different cultural context from the 'native' English, there is a certain set of dynamics involved that pertain both to the structure of the language as well as the changes that have been brought about in the course of its appropriation into another context. Though Wright is an English speaker, and the context in which she writes is also English-speaking, the language she uses still indicates a different context of signification. This works through the discourse of the poems that establishes a dialogue between persona and addressee in order to explore different points of view. Such dialogic structures make it easier for readers to see different aspects of a complex issue or theme, by drawing readers into a direct interaction with the text. For student readers, it becomes a means of 'opening' of the text and understanding how linguistic and discourse features link and how particular motifs and pre-existent forms are reworked.

In the famous title poem of Wright's collection 'Woman to Man', the speaking voice elaborates on the unfolding drama of creation. We assume that it is a feminine voice because the subject and the interpersonality is declared in the title itself. This is reinforced by the recurrence of 'I' with female attributes and the 'you' in the oppositional, which are reconciled subsequently to 'our' in the second and third stanzas. Oppositions

are stated through the working of sets of contrasts: night/day, dark/light, hunter/chase, maker/made, question/reply; these are linked structurally through the repetition of the coordinator 'and' and the immediacy of the situation by the deictic 'this'. The poem is a model of balance till the very last line, where a personal and emotive voice speaks out of the declarative syntax: 'oh hold me, for I am afraid'. This line is a culmination of the growing sense of mystery in the last stanza, and overturns the placidity and control of the earlier stanzas. The overturning of the balance raises questions for the readers - about the speaker's professed fears, the mystery of creation, the relationship of woman and man. The features of dialogic structure act as frames for the exploration of the relationship, and provide clues to the understanding of some of the more complex ideas in the poem.

Similarly, in 'The Harp and the King', there is a dialogue between the king, who represents old age, mortality and human failure; and the harp which represents time. Within the framework of this dialogue is located the discourse on time, the past and the future, morality and redemption. The harp's dominance in the seesaw of arguments can be interpreted as symbolic of the dominance of time, which is both frightening and comforting. (In the title too, the harp has precedence.) There is an oddness, a kind of archaism about this dialogue between an animate, human participant and a non-human one - also, the harp is an old-fashioned musical instrument. Hall has made the observation that Wright uses a language that is often outside contemporary speech, a formal rhetoric born out of a first encounter with the task of 'learning the land'. This tendency is found in many poets writing in the 'new-englishes'; the Nigerian poet Wole Soyinka says that it is a part of the effort of going back to the roots of a language - in the case of English, the Anglo-Saxon words. This is evident in Wright's choice of a simple uncluttered diction - the images of nature conveyed through the simple root words rather than an elevated diction. These features of diction and of sound-patterning combined with the dialogic structure with its alternation of voices, builds up a sense of familiarity and rapport with Indian readers probably because their own knowledge and use of English contains these features, as distinct from the contemporary native-speaker British English.

In another poem 'The Beanstalk, Meditated Later', the dialogic structure is used to rework the traditional tale to which it alludes. The poem takes us into the context of the story, with the first person 'I' recounting the background, and then works out the whole dialectic between an ambiguous Jack and an equally ambiguous giant. The questions asked by the speaker are pointed: 'Who was my father? See where that doubt leads . . .' and 'What farmer saved the seed I sowed?' The anxiety and fear of the giant who still 'tramples in the sky' reaches a degree of neurosis, because, implied in the killing of the giant is the killing of the father - the speaker, Jack, is the giant's son. This is a new twist to the tale. The narrator's fear is born out of questions regarding 'our generations and our fate' because now he is old (in the place of the giant?) and is threatened by his son in turn. The narrator concludes with a determination to regrow the beanstalk and make the son, rather than the father, its victim.

The poem works on several levels. It is an ironic reworking of the original story. There is an element of self mockery in the speaking voice, and its colloquial and conversational tone, use of asides and incomplete sentences imply a doubtfulness about the narrative point of view. Yet on another level, it is a serious poem, a 'meditation' on conflict and mistrust between the generations, the insidious infiltration of the past, the suspicion of the 'son', and fear of the future. These complexities are the cause of difficulty for the student reader, the shifts, ambiguities and ironies requiring several readings and discussion. This is perhaps because of the students' lack of familiarity with the mode of

narration and the building up of interpretation on the basis of one operative allusion: the story of Jack. In contrast to this, a poem like 'The Two Fires' poses less difficulty, because in the latter there are references to nature and natural imagery rather than the dominance of allusion, and the language and diction which may appear archaic or 'grandiloquent' to an English reader, does not strike the Indian readers as odd or inappropriate. It is part of the expectation that they have of poetry, being more attuned to the sounds and diction of some of the traditional English poetry. These traditions of reading are based on a particular notion of poetry and readers often resent the subversion of that notion.

Perhaps it is for the same reasons that the response to A.D. Hope is different from the response to Wright. Irony is a dominant mode in Hope's poetry, and it takes more effort to discover how this irony works in the texts. For instance, some students found it difficult to understand the working of irony in Hope's poem 'Australia', and interpreted the poem as being a straightforward criticism of his country by the poet. The reasons for this could be traced to the working of irony and the operation of deixis in the poem. The poem explores the dialectic between the Australian and the European tradition in several ways. Of the seven stanzas in this poem, the first five are a catalogue of Australia's lacks and deficiencies: she is without 'songs, architecture, history'. However, the last two stanzas overturn the negative list of attributes with the introduction of one word 'yet'. The cumulative images of the earlier stanzas are counterpointed with the evocative noun in the sixth stanza: 'home', in the predicate phrase 'turn gladly home'. Among the oppositions in these last stanzas, the 'lush jungle of modern thought' that is European civilisation is countered by the 'Arabian desert of the human mind' (civilisation is equated with jungle, while desert is home). From a distanced perspective in which the country is described in the third person, and its people predicated as 'second hand Europeans', there is a shift to a near perspective in the last two stanzas. While home is all the negative things which have been attributed to it earlier, it is now associated with the verbs 'hope' and 'escape'. The Europe which was contrasted favourably earlier on is now 'civilisation over there', distanced as 'the chatter of cultured apes'. The shift in reference from 'here' to 'there' in the case of Australia and Europe is a reversal: 'there' becomes 'here' and vice versa. The poem is built upon a specific sense of place and positioning indicated by these dietetics, and it is this which becomes a puzzle for the Indian reader, for whom 'over there' could as well be Australia as Europe. It entails an upsetting both of what Australia as well as Europe mean. For this reason, such a poem demands a discussion of the tension between cultures, and since in this context it derives from a difference of place rather than race, it also demands an exploration into the structure of reference in the poem, a close attention to the linguistic features of the text that lead to the structure and subversion in it: signalling to the 'real' statement of the poem i.e. the poet's ambivalence towards his country, the attempt to appropriate its maligned and mocked features into the imagination, the awareness of the possibilities offered by the 'desert', the rejection of the 'other' world. Brought up on traditions of didactic verse, Indian readers are less aware of these strategies of subversion in poetry; in this regard, teaching Hope's poetry is a challenge, since it offers a different sort of reading opportunity.

Hope's poetry is also characterised by the manner in which allusive and deviant tracks are taken up from a topic or theme. As the poems are dependent on some amount of learned or classical allusion, background knowledge, particularly of English literature, is required. Allusion is the basis for poems such as 'Persons from Porlock', which begins with a quotation from Coleridge's Prefatory Note to 'Kubla Khan', describing the intrusion of a person from Porlock in the midst of writing the poem. The poem starts on

a note of familiarity: 'poor S.T.C.' From being a person who obstructed Coleridge's creativity, Porlock becomes a world and a way of life. Unlike Coleridge, who escaped Porlock's influence in his other work, the modern poet is surrounded and overcome by Porlock. Taken over by the spirit of Porlock, all he can write is a Porlockian 'Kubla Khan':

Amid this tumult Kubla heard from afar  
Voices of Porlock babbling round the bar

Hope works with the Coleridge lines in his poem as Eliot did with quotations in 'The Wasteland' – using one half of the quotation and completing it with a line that rhymes with the earlier one, but conveys a contrast with it. This is immediately evident to those readers who are familiar with the original and the ironic effect becomes clear. In the above instance it is also clear that by using a technique similar to Eliot's, Hope also indirectly alludes to Eliot. There is a tacit reference to this by the sound similarity between 'Porlock' and 'Prufrock' and reinforces the similarity in both being representative of the mundane, trivial and mock-heroic in a world distanced from creativity and imagination.

The ease with which Hope picks up the quotation from 'Kubla Khan' and incorporates it in the poem as a punch line at the end, signals that he is familiar with the tradition and is asserting his freedom to exploit it in the manner he wishes, often for parodic and ironic effect. In 'Persons from Porlock' and other poems, Hope creates inter-textual montages by manipulating pre-existent material in building up new textual structures. This results in a complexity of reference in terms of exclusion or inclusion of earlier contexts.

Though the reading of Hope's poetry in the Indian classroom is a more complex exercise than the reading of Wright, it does afford an opportunity for developing an awareness of inter-textuality and its functions. In this regard, even some of Wright's poems, such as 'The Beanstalk . . .' are relevant. But it is also a challenge for the teacher, since the awareness has to come from close reading and discussion rather than explanation. As Indian students had not read extensively in modern poetry, and being second language learners of English had a different sense of the English language, as well as different notions regarding the nature of poetry, these factors were crucial in determining their response. Approaches that encouraged them to interact directly with the text proved to be helpful in creating a deeper awareness, particularly the awareness that irony, like straightforward rhetoric, is also a mode of connecting and signifying, as in Hope's poem 'Australia'. A part of the whole enterprise of placing poets such as Hope and Wright on the literature syllabus along with other writers in the new literatures in English is to encourage the development of interactive textual and inter-textual approaches, and to bring out some of the dimensions of cross-cultural situations.