

British Poetry and I

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Lest the title of my brief piece seem pretentious, let me hasten to point out in all humility that a writer, even as in the present case a very minor one, has to relate to the various traditions that have a bearing on his work on a one on one basis, largely without the mediation of academic criticism or theory. My aim, in other words, is modest – not to present a comprehensive, critically astute picture of British poetry but, rather, a memoir of my engagement with it.

What “it” is, however, requires some unpacking. It’s only nowadays that one hears of British poetry or British literature. Not that, “Britain” or “British” do not have an impeccable, ancient etymology; but when it came to talking about the literature of the British Isles, it was subsumed under the rubric “English,” which functioned synecdochically, and was not objected to. And so we have Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch’s *Oxford Book of English Verse* (1900, 2nd edition 1919) and its successor, Helen Gardner’s *The New Oxford Book of English Verse* (1972); and Philip Larkin’s *Oxford Book of Twentieth Century English Verse* (1973). Q, to use Sir Arthur’s pseudonym, included not only Irish, Welsh and Scotch poets but a few Americans as well. Helen Gardner, for reasons of space, limited herself to poets born in the British Isles, but included Ezra Pound because he had played a crucial role in the development of modern poetry in England. Larkin too limits himself to “writers born in these islands (or resident here for an appreciable time),” but confesses to breaking his own rule; he includes Derek Walcott, for instance.

“English poetry,” then, did at one time mean poetry in the English language; and if attempts were made to restrict the sense geographically it was more because of the limitations imposed by the acceptable size of an anthology than any sense of cultural exclusiveness. Even when the rubric “British” was used it was used inclusively to cover everything in English from the Empire; witness David Lester Richardson’s *Selections from the British Poets from Chaucer to the Present Day* (Calcutta, 1840), which included Derozio and Kasyprasad Das.

The present usage of “British,” however, is restrictive but not unproblematic. Strictly speaking, it should refer to the British Isles but not to Northern Ireland; and so the editors of the Bloodaxe anthology *The New Poetry* (1993) in their introduction declare their purview to be “British and Irish writers,” and include immigrant British poets. Andrew Motion and Blake Morrison in their anthology *The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry* (1982) include, without any apology, poets born in Northern Ireland, and in fact showcase Seamus Heaney as the contemporary poetic star. Heaney wasn’t pleased, though, and published the reasons for his refusal to be called British in a satiric poem in *The New Yorker*.

But enough of hair splitting. “British lit” is a label that has come to stay, especially after the Thatcher administration decided to promote it rather than “English lit,” which is now seen as divisive and hegemonic. It’s worth mentioning that Andrew Motion in a Foreword to a recent reprint of Larkin’s anthology notes that today the latter’s inclusive use of the label “English” “would be likely to start a riot.”

When I first encountered poetry, or rather verse, in the English language in kindergarten, my teachers and I were innocent of controversies related to labels. The prescribed pieces were memorized rather than analyzed. I was neither enthusiastic about them nor apathetic. I must have

relished the jaunty rhythms that seem to be a sine qua non of poetry for kindergartens.

I had a little nut tree
Nothing would it bear
But a silver nutmeg
And a golden pear

I still remember this opening stanza, no doubt because I gave a recitation of the rhyme (a lackluster performance by all accounts) at a school function.

Delving into the rhymes background I am delighted to find that it might have had something to do with the marital adventures of either Henri VII or Henry VIII. Nursery rhymes are always fraught with significance far removed from the supposed innocence of childhood.

A few years later, in secondary school, we did Walter de la Mare's "If I were Lord of Tartary," a poem conducive to enjoyable daydreams. I think there was something by Longfellow as well though I cannot recall what it was; but I remember my friends and me declaring that his name was memorable.

Till my mid-teens I was not a poetry buff, and any suggestion that I might scribble a poem would have been dismissed as absurd. But I had friends who affected interest in poetry and spoke with familiarity of John Keats and William Wordsworth and Lord Byron. One of them briefly piqued my interest by telling me in a conspiratorial undertone that Percy Bysshe Shelley – a notorious man – had a poem with the line "The golden tresses between her thighs." I asked him to show the poem. He did not have it. We combed a selection of Shelley's verses that we found in the school library. To no avail. Even the internet is no help. But I cling to the belief that such a line belongs in a little erotic gem of a poem that will come to light one day.

Then, in my last year in secondary school, I had some sort of a conversion experience (epiphany would be too strong and pretentious a word to use here). Our literature teacher was Brother Hobart, a loveable Irish-American eccentric who opened up my sensibility to the unique beauty of poetry and at the same time inculcated a key lesson in the art of writing. He would take a poem, read it out or ask one of us to read it out, and then involve the whole class in the exercise of producing a critical appreciation. He would ask us to suggest sentences or phrases, or pause in mid-sentence and challenge us to continue. It became palpable that the business of writing was a game of trying out sentences and revising them till one felt one had got it right. Two very different poems stick in my mind from those halcyon days. One was Robert Herrick's "Daffodils," which left behind an abiding admiration for the delicate Caroline lyric. I hadn't seen daffodils yet, and the Internet wasn't there to provide a visual feast of the exotic bloom. But it didn't matter. The *karuna rasa* evoked by the euphonious lines was perfectly realized.

The other poem was D. H. Lawrence's "Snake." It opened up the universe of free verse, of whose existence I had been completely unaware. The simple diction gave instant access to the dramatic situation presented in the poem. I was transported instantaneously to "the deep, strange-scented shade of the great dark carob-tree." The carob tree was as unfamiliar as daffodils, but that mattered not a whit. The adjectival fanfare, blithely breaking a common rule of good writing, brought the tree to life. Above all, the sinuous rhythms of conversational language, masterfully exploited, brought home to me how great poetry could be created without the pillars of meter or rhyme.

The poetry in traditional forms that I warmed to, like Herrick's "Daffodils," would never have

induced me to essay poems of my own. Their beauty was linguistically remote though they might effectively convey an emotion or feeling or mood. There were a number of such poems encountered in my secondary and higher secondary classes that have stuck in my memory, but I couldn't have taken any of them as a model: Charles Lamb's "The Old Familiar Faces," Thomas Moore's "The Light of Other Days," Laurence Binyon's "For the Fallen," Rupert Brooke's "The Soldier," John Masefield's "Cargoes." Greater poems in the canon, perfect though they were, seemed even more remote: Shakespeare's Sonnet 18, Shelley's "To a Skylark," Keat's "Ode to the Nightingale" (an admirer of the hard-boiled Hemingway, I couldn't stomach the opening phrase, "My heart aches").

No, it was Lawrence who set me scribbling verse – free verse. I would later learn that Lawrence's inspiration was Walt Whitman, the first great poet to write exclusively in free verse. Surely it was no accident that Whitman was American. Being American, he wasn't – as I am not or any South Asian is not – born to the King's/Queen's English and the iambic pentameter. I know this is a brash generalization, and like any generalization, must be taken with more than a grain of salt. After all, the finest iambic pentameters in twentieth century verse come from Robert Frost. And in South Asia, Dom Moraes and Vikram Seth have proved themselves as skilled at turning out iambs as any poet born in the Home Counties. Still, I think it is undeniable, very broadly speaking, that the "barbaric yawp" of the American vernacular or the spicy intonations of Indian Varieties of English are more conducive to poeticizing in free verse. This is by and large true even of those of us who speak what I would like to call the Maharaja's English. Among British poets, those well removed by class or regional affiliation from the ambit of King's/Queen's English and the iambic pentameter happily take to free verse.

As I began my higher secondary studies, I chanced upon a review of contemporary poetry reprinted from some British paper. One of the poets dealt with was Philip Larkin, a new name to me, and quoted the most famous lines from his earlier period: "Hatless, I take off/ My cycle clips in awkward reverence." I was bowled over. At about the same time I got hold of the Penguin anthology *New Writing in America* and thrilled to Allen Ginsberg's ecstatic chant "Kral Majales": "And I am the King of May, which is the power of sexual youth." It would probably be accurate to place my work in the uneasy no-man's-land between the "cool" poetry of Larkin and the vatic utterances of the Beat Generation, and among the latter the zany performances of Lawrence Ferlinghetti rather than the visionary Ginsberg.

My focus in this brief note ought to be on the British side of my literary inheritance, so let me elaborate on its precise nature. It was in my higher secondary days that I also came upon T. S. Eliot and realized that he occupied a central position in the tradition of modern poetry in English. Despite various attempts to dislodge him, I believe he remains unassailable. I took to heart his dictum that no *vers* is *libre* for the serious poet. His urban imagery and urbane sensibility, his irony, as well as his jazzier experiments, as in "Fragments of an Agon" ("Under the bam/ Under the boo/ Under the bamboo tree") map out the modern tradition as it has evolved till today. But Eliot cannot be seen in isolation from Imagism, which I regard as having laid the foundations for modern poetry in English. It was Anglo-American, linking Pound, Amy Lowell, H. D. and William Carlos Williams with Richard Aldington, F. S. Flint and D. H. Lawrence. The minimalist agenda of Imagism focused on a few essential aspects: the centrality of the poetic image, the importance of cadence, based on "the musical phrase" rather than meter, the emphasis on concreteness, and on a spare idiom shorn of adjectives. Yeats, though not a card-carrying Imagist, absorbed its lessons; his poem "A Coat" could pass off as an Imagist manifesto.

W. H. Auden comes next. Like Eliot he straddles the Atlantic and has been influential on both sides of the pond. A master of traditional as well as free forms, he has extended the stock of poetic imagery to include aspects of modern technology and modern power-play, aeroplanes and barbed wire and filling stations. Dipping into him one can come upon cues for new poems. The same holds, though to a lesser degree, for Louis McNiece and Stephen Spender. Dylan Thomas fascinated me in my youth, but he remains memorable for only a handful of poems; but I learned to read poetry aloud from his recorded readings.

From my childhood till my early adulthood is also roughly the time when the three major collections of Larkin came out. I am sure this is not sufficient reason to claim that we shared the same mental climate. But on the basis of my reading of Larkin over more than half a century I can claim that his wry anti-Romantic poetry is congenial to my sensibility, though his verse forms can never be mine.

Life is first boredom, then fear.
Whether or not we use it, it goes,
And leaves what something hidden from us chose,
And age, and then the only end of age. (“Dockery and Son”)

Larkin’s dismissal of the “myth kitty” was equally congenial. I do not possess a mythopoetic imagination, and Eliot’s reliance on myth had always seemed excessive to me. Larkin helped me shake off the notion that the mythopoetic method was a privileged one in modern literature.

Among Larkin’s younger contemporaries there were some who formed a group that called itself, somewhat tautologically, “The Group.” Founded by Philip Hobsbaum, it included Peter Redgrove, Edward Lucie-Smith, Peter Porter, Zulfiqar Ghose and several others. For ten years or so the poets met regularly to discuss their work. Several poems by one poet, previously circulated, would be subjected to rigorous analysis. As described in Hobsbaum’s *A Theory of Communication* (1970), these meetings have important lessons for anyone interested in poetry workshops. Besides, I find the aim of these poets to write “frank autobiographical poems” and a “poetry of direct experience” quite congenial.

More directly useful for me was the best-selling (half a million copies sold) Penguin Modern Poets, Volume 10, *The Mersey Sound*. The three Liverpoolian poets Roger McGough, Adrian Henri and Brian Patten were fresh, accessible, and, oxymoronically, lively and melancholy. They were as exciting as the three Beat poets, Ginsberg, Ferlinghetti, Corso, in Volume 5 in the same series. There were other interesting British poets outside the mainstream, like Christopher Logue or Adrian Mitchell or Jeff Nuttall, from whom I could learn something about turning present-day reality, including its political aspects, into direct, non-academic poetry.

As for more recent British poetry, I have not tried to keep up with it, preferring to read desultorily, and now and then finding things I enjoy. But by and large, writers do not find it very useful to make systematic studies of their peers from younger generations; some sort of generation gap opens up; the younger writers differ significantly if subtly in their ways of looking at the world, and in the idiom they employ. And yet, it is important to look at what younger writers are doing, if only to make sure that the generations comprehend each other sufficiently to keep tradition alive. I could put together a substantial anthology of interesting young British poets of diverse hues while recognizing that their approach to the craft of verse isn’t what comes naturally to me when I scribble. Perhaps, in subtle ways, I am also absorbing poetic elements from them.

Note: Presented (in absentia) at the two-day international seminar on “Re-reading British Poetry across Time and Space: Themes, Issues and Perspectives” at the University of Gaur Banga, Malda, India on March 12-13, 2019.