



Australasian
Association
of Writing
Programs

TEXT SPECIAL ISSUES

Number 60 October 2020

ISSN: 1327-9556 | <https://www.textjournal.com.au/>

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To cite this article: Gurav, MR & R Maddox-Harle 2020 'Interview by Mohini R Gurav with Robert Maddox-Harle', in J Sarangi & A Walker (eds) *Indian-Australian exchanges through collaborative poetic inquiry*, TEXT Special Issue Number 60, *TEXT: Journal of writing and writing courses* 24, 2 (October):

<http://www.textjournal.com.au/speciss/issue60/Gurav&MaddoxHarle.pdf>

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Mohini R Gurav and Robert Maddox-Harle

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Abstract:

In this non-peer-reviewed dialogue, Mohini R Gurav interviews Robert Maddox-Harle about his longstanding engagement with Indian poets and poetry, including his work editing anthologies that bring together poems by writers from across the two continents.

Biographical notes:

Mohini R Gurav is an Assistant Professor of English. She has presented research papers at national and international conferences. Most of her papers are published in journals of repute. Poetry is her passion. Her poems are published online on boloji.com, ratemyliterature.com, and poemhunter.com. She is a lover of nature. She is also a research scholar at Mumbai University.

Robert Maddox-Harle (aka Rob Harle) is a poet, writer, artist, and reviewer. His work is published in journals, anthologies, online reviews, and books including *Rupkatha* journal, *Nimbin Good Times*, *Beyond The Rainbow*, the *Indo-Australian Anthology of Contemporary Poetry* (2013), the *World Poetry Year Book* (2014), *Setu* journal, and *Asian Signature* (2013). He has also published three volumes of his own poetry: *Scratches & Deeper Wounds* (1996), *Mechanisms of Desire* (2012) and *Winds of Infinity* (2016).

Keywords:

terra firma – native – *mise-en-scène* – links – green – ecology

GURAV: You are an artist par excellence. How do you rate poetry as a form of art?

HARLE: Thank you for the compliment. I've worked hard for many years in my creative endeavours. I think poetry is possibly the highest form of art. A poet only has a limited number of words to create images and feelings, be involved with contemporary affairs, tell eternal truths, raise consciousness levels, transcend day-to-day material reality, and evoke mystical insights – a tall order indeed! But really, all art forms are equally valid, and as essential to our quality of life as the very air we breathe.

GURAV: When did you start writing poems? What were your muses then?

HARLE: I disliked English lessons at school. In fact, I disliked school itself. But I started writing poetry, stories, and articles a few weeks after leaving school (yes, really). I cannot understand this inner compulsion to write and yet I wrote nothing at school. My first poems were about love, and about dying. You might say Eros and The Grim Reaper were my muses then. The sophistication of the poems was very 'ordinary'; however, the 'feelings' they evoked were powerful and moving. To me, this indicates that a poet is born that way; however, to write good poetry one must *also* learn the 'craft' of writing.

GURAV: What are your contributions to poetry?

HARLE: I have three of my own poetry collections published: *Scratches & Deeper Wounds* (1996); *Mechanisms of Desire* (2012); and *Winds of Infinity* (2015). I am, at present, working on a fourth volume of fairly radical, experimental poetry entitled *The Blazing Furnace*.

I have edited and co-edited many poetry anthologies with my Indian colleagues, particularly Jaydeep Sarangi and Sunil Sharma. These have been very successful cultural works, showcasing some of the best contemporary poets from both India and Australia.

I also have numerous poems published in journals, magazines, newspapers, and so on. I like to have my work published in high readership tabloids because it lets non-poets experience the beauty of poetry.

I have contributed scholarly critical essays and chapters to books concerning other poets both living and long gone. I might add I am not a performance poet, most of my poems have deep layers of meaning and as such require careful reading and contemplation.

GURAV: Can I ask about your interests in poetry writing? Are there any specific areas of interest to you?

HARLE: I have been fairly eclectic in subject matter over the years, though recently I have been writing 'hard hitting' poems concerning contemporary capitalist society, the transmutation of humans to transhuman through mindless

acceptance of technology, and the anti-spiritual effects of bureaucratic, authoritarian religions. I certainly do not write feel good romantic poems nor light and fluffy 'beige' poems about warm summer breezes! I am not suggesting that love and romantic poetry have no validity by any means, just that they are not my cup of Chi!

GURAV: Could you please share one of your best poems with us?

HARLE: Thank you for the opportunity. This was recently published in *Asian Signature*. [1]

White Birds and Epsilons

The white birds silhouette the sky once more
each Spring a reassuring Nimbin return,
soaring to and from their secret cave
deep below the sacred rocks.

The philosophers no longer stir
the old graves serene,
troubled searching souls are now at peace
every searing question silenced
drowned out by the silent roar of smart phones.

The dumbed-down shuffle forth
heads bowed in techno-obedience
texting within a solipsistic nightmare,
techno-bondage with invisible constraints
from which there is no possible escape.

Huxley's Epsilons [2] shuffle in single file
each connected to mind-control-central.
Dame Gorgon Google the keeper of all information
has become the dominatrix of perception,
the whore of spiritual disintegration.

New shiny micro-towers litter the verdant hills
terrifying the old guard with invisible rays,
enraging even wise old Nyimbunji. [3]
Thousands upon thousands of Epsilons drifting,
shuffling past the peeling painted facades,
none shift their gaze from the smart phone screen.
Oblivious to the blueness of the pure sky dome above,
Oblivious to the wise white birds soaring,

Oblivious to the answers they carry.

GURAV: **I have heard about your connection with Indian poet Jaydeep Sarangi. How did you come to be in touch with him? Could you share your experiences with us?**

HARLE: A bit of a long story, I'll try and make it brief. *Rupkatha* journal put out a call for papers; I sent in my poems and techno-surrealist artwork. The editor, Tarun Tapas Mukerjee, liked my works and consequently published them. He suggested I might contact Jaydeep Sarangi and Sunil Sharma. I did this via Facebook (really!) and the rest as the saying goes 'is history'. This was over ten years ago. We developed various projects, and with Jaydeep I have produced seven anthologies published by Cyberwit.net as hard copy books. With Sunil, I have co-edited fiction and poetry anthologies published by Authorspress Books. Bless these two fantastic publishers is all I can say! The books Jaydeep and I have worked on, or contributed to, include: *Poetic Connections: Poems From Australia and India*, (Lonsdale 2013); *Building Bridges: Poems From Australia and India*, (Harle 2013); *Voices Across The Ocean: Poems From Australia and India*, (Harle & Sarangi 2014); *Homeward Bound: Poems From Australia and India* (Sarangi & Harle 2015); *The Land: Poems From Australia and India* (Sarangi & Harle 2016a); *Searching For the Sublime* (Sarangi & Harle 2016b); and *Dancing the Light* (Sarangi & Harle 2020). These anthologies present the work of many well-known, established, and prize-winning poets such as Professor Christopher (Kit) Kelen, David Hallett, D.C. Chambial, Padmaji Iyengar, Vivekanand Jha, and Vinita Agrawal, to name just a few.

GURAV: **What is the scope of these poetic links between India and Australia?**

HARLE: The scope is seemingly unlimited. All these books have had excellent reception and good reviews, and strengthen the literary ties between India and Australia. I am a recluse and Jaydeep is a keen traveller, conference organiser, and promoter of our efforts in many universities and countries, including of course Australia. I understand some books have entered the Indian education system, and the academic works we have done both together and separately have been read widely by the Indian academic community, and to a lesser extent in Australia. Some of our books travelled globally, and were reviewed widely in Australia, India, and beyond. All in all, it has been a positive experience. *Transnational Literature*, [4] and *Writers in Conversation* out of Flinders University in South Australia have been very receptive and helpful with our efforts. The *Nimbin Good Times* and *Beyond The Rainbow* (hard copy literary magazine) opened up publishing opportunities for many Indian poets.

GURAV: **What are your stock images in poetry? Do you have any mentors?**

HARLE: Not sure what you mean by stock images. If you mean regular themes: supermarkets; bureaucratic religions; technology; transhumanism; the evils of right-wing, extreme capitalism. Mentors or poets who really inspire me; Seamus Heaney, Leonard Cohen, Charles Simic, Adrian Rogers, too many to mention.

GURAV: Yes, that answers my question. What are your thoughts on the poetry of Jaydeep Sarangi?

HARLE: Jaydeep is a unique voice in poetry. I find his poems very moving, with one foot in earthly reality and the other in ethereal mystical realms. His poetry has some similarities with Gopal Lahiri (Indian) and Adrian Rogers' (Australian) work. The poems take us out of ourselves into mysterious worlds and different dimensions.

GURAV: Do the internet and social media contribute to the well-being of poetry?

HARLE: This is an important question because the answer is somewhat ambivalent and yet to be fully researched by some young, keen PhD student! Without doubt the net has promoted and increased the visibility of poetry; it has also seen a rather dramatic increase in the volume of poetry being written and 'e' published. But, is the quality of the poetry as high as before the net? My opinion is slightly towards the negative! It is too easy, like mobile phone photography, to put up on social media without revision, peer-review, and careful consideration. Too much poetry hastily written produces poor poetry!

GURAV: How can poetry help to tackle gloom for people who are locked down due to COVID-19 but also active on social media?

HARLE: COVID-19 has created some very strange scenarios because of the lockdowns. But if a person never wrote a poem before C-19 what business have they writing, and hastily 'e' publishing their first attempts at poetry? Yes, by all means write some poems to express feelings about the whole surreal situation, but hold them for a while to make sure they are good enough to 'inflict' on others. Selecting appropriate established poets to read will certainly help heal a gloomy mood, and perhaps inspire all sorts of 'solitary' activities, including writing poetry. As Shelley once said: 'writing poetry is very serious business', not some dilettante Sunday afternoon activity!

GURAV: Do you have any advice for budding poets?

HARLE: Strive for *quality*, not quantity. As poets, we are limited to very few words, unlike writers of novels. Make sure every word is the best one you can think of. Pour your heart out onto the page then carefully revise!

GURAV: Thank you for your valuable time.

HARLE: Thank you Mohini, a pleasure.

Notes

1. See www.asiansignature.com/world-poetry/rob-harle/.
2. Epsilons, the dumbed-down entities from Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932).
3. 'Nyimbunji' in Bundjalung: 'little spirit man with great supernatural powers, he is powerful, wise, generous, and kind'.
4. *Transnational Literature* was at the time of the interview hosted by Flinders University, where the journal was initiated as part of the legacy of Syd Harrex and CRNLE: the Centre for Research in the New Literatures in English. *Transnational Literature* is now jointly hosted by the Research Centre for Transcultural Creativity and Education at Bath Spa University, and affiliated with the J.M. Coetzee Centre for Creative Practice, University of Adelaide.

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