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Sites and citations

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University of Adelaide and University of North Bengal

Dominic Symes and Bishnupada Ray

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Abstract:

This collection of poems is a gesture of cross-cultural response that seeks to explore the relationship between place and displacement in the work of two poets, Bishnupada Ray from North Bengal, India and Dominic Symes from Adelaide, Australia. Ray's poetry examines topography as the evidence of scarring, a demonstration of the pain of displacement. Pilgrimage is a strong link between the work of Ray and Symes, with both poets documenting their experience of travel to sites of cultural significance. Symes' poetry shows the possibility for sites to represent a literary inheritance, tracing how poetry is able to be written into and respond to the surface of painting through ekphrasis. Irony is an important tool for both poets in approaching the spectre of colonialism and its ongoing legacy. Ray's poetry examines the full force and significance of geography as an insight into the nature of human domination and oppression, an insight that uncovers the politics of difference in the conventional binaries like mind and body, the spiritual and the physical, and this notion of contrast (a concept held up in the light of its opposite) returns in Symes' poetry through the image of a 'Black Mirror'. The dark truths uncovered in these poems speak to the urgency experienced by the citizens of two countries dealing ineffectively with the climate crisis, to suggest that the suffering inflicted upon the earth is felt equally by the people who inhabit it.

Biographical notes:

Dominic Symes is a poet from Adelaide. He holds a PhD in Creative Writing from the University of Adelaide. His poetry has been published in the *Australian Book Review*, *Australian Poetry Journal* and *Award Winning Australian Writing*. His reviews and criticism have appeared in *Cordite* and *Axon*.

Bishnupada Ray is an Associate Professor of English at the University of North Bengal, India. His poems have appeared in *Indian Literature*, *New Quest*, *Makata*, *Brown Critique*, *Shabdaguchha*, *A Hudson View Poetry Digest*, *Revival*, *VerbalArt* and some anthologies.

Keywords:

Psycho-geography – place and displacement – inheritance (literary and otherwise) – ways of seeing – pilgrimage

Introduction

As an exchange between poets from very different backgrounds, *'Sites & Citations'* is primarily an act of grounding with both poets finding a way to locate themselves within a particular time and place and to respond effectively to the cultural and topographical influences present in that moment. Bishnupada Ray is a poet and academic from North Bengal whose work explores the notion of pilgrimage, contrasting the sacred and mythological aspects of certain sites within India with the colonial scarring of the land and the sense of displacement that he experiences as a poet and citizen. These three poems are displayed first in section one, as they were completed earliest in the collaboration. Dominic Symes, a poet from Adelaide, responds to the idea of pilgrimage through literary inheritance, critiquing the experience of topography both when viewing a canvas and in travelling to a location where an artist worked. These poems are displayed second in section one. The next iteration of the exchange was for each poet to respond to elements in the work of the other that they found to provide thought and inspire creative intervention. These poems are displayed in section two. Ray offered three poems centred around the Tropic of Cancer, demonstrating how it is possible for the poet to stand in the equinoctial point between culture and nature to observe the invasion of culture upon nature and nature's resistance. In response to Ray's ironic and self-critical tone as a way of coping with colonial evisceration of the landscape, Symes' response poems, displayed next, extend upon the ekphrastic concerns of his earlier poems by engaging with Indigenous Australian artworks of resistance. Tonally, Symes' final poem is a pastiche of Ray's fusion between the landscape and the soul, blurring the intimate sphere of frustration with the angst of living within a climate emergency. In the third section of this paper, we each offer reflections on our process, and explore the thematic concerns that we each brought to the collaboration and how we felt they were handled by the other poet. We each offer some elaboration on the specifics pertaining to each of our poems and to what we have learned from the exercise. It is the hope of both co-authors that other poets can take a similar initiative to foreground poetic composition as a way of cultural exchange: of seeing mutual concerns reflected through the eyes of another poet who is able to provide a myriad of fresh perspectives, both technical and socio-cultural.

Section one: poems initially sent by Ray to Symes and Symes to Ray as step one of the collaboration process

'Rite of Passage' by Bishnupada Ray

After visiting Ahalyasthan [1] and Gautam Kund, 25 kms North of Darbhanga Town in North Bihar, during Dusshera in 2012

this stony mythological passage
to the violation of the earth
is surrounded by extreme hardships
the earth has stopped yielding

the crops of our survival
life is at a precarious edge
hanging loose in a seeming balance
possibly waiting for the footstep
that may bring redemption
to the wretched of the earth

but the earth bears with equanimity
our lustful sins
and the ascetic denials
there is no lifestyle edition here
no structure of brick and glass
no communal architecture
but pensive eyes
and the philosophy of the ephemeral
the visitor does not feel at home
his masked feeling betrays all
there is no motorable road in sight
to lead him straight to his pilgrimage
but a silhouette of the road
that might have existed some time
like a wife-beaten broken man

my car groans under the burden
creaking growling but just holding
the line of sanity
through the violent push-ups
breaking down with premature orgasm
to go limp and flaccid
the hope that the passage will get better
after this endless extremity
keeps us going.

*'PretShila (The Stone for the Spirits yet to Attain Liberation)' by Bishnupada Ray
Gaya, Bihar, Dusshera 2012*

the steep flight of steps on this ancient hill
forbade us to climb
yet the name was powerful enough
to draw us to the top
undaunted
we started climbing
the countless steps

on the way up we took frequent rests
exhausted and bitter
with beggars and priests
for not giving us any chance to think
by their constant nagging demands
and pestering

yet they kept the hill alive
and made the stones dramatic
showing the way how to persuade
people to believe
without them it would have been
just a stone and a hill
and no story to be told
from the past to the present

but beware!
all the legends spirits beggars lepers
may vanish unceremoniously
because overlooking the hill
in the distance
there comes Loyola.

'Festival of Light' by Bishnupada Ray
Siliguri, West Bengal, Kalipuja 2012

when the town wore light
and towered over the night
over the darkened water of Mahananda
the illusion of light
appeared to me like unending waves
of eternity towards the skyline
then we plunged into the darkness
of villages and canal road and forests
and drove to the banks of river Teesta
where an idol of goddess Kali was awaiting
the late night awakening and blood sacrifice
the poorest of the poor kept a lighted vigil
the sky also kept a vigil with starry lamps
and the darkness appeared defeated

when we drove back to the town,

a dark cat crossed my path
then jumped into darkness
behind
each wave of light started to break
on the even level of darkness.

'Arriving in Gaeta' by Dominic Symes

'The Mediterranean, at least – the Atlantic is brown – is always just white, white, white.'

—Cy Twombly

shifting landscape blurs days
still jet lagged wednesday eyes half
closed the doors I can't stamp the date
the way we have our tickets
tracks tapping out an exact rhythm
low in the sky the sun you are
asleep on my shoulder your late afternoon
thoughts wound down &
syncing ourselves the slow circularity
like a surging wave of language that
book spine down on your lap
you duck beneath your head
bobbing with each contour
of the coastline & feeling
the words speeding through my
half asleep to the sound of the waves
last night re-reading his quote
re: the mediterranean considered
as white (all white) a white out of
white washing the field of vision
peeling words off the page my eyes
lift up to the window in that moment
waiting to adjust to the dazzling
horizon without marking features
blinding how a life might look in a flash
a brief pause between acts
tranquillity followed by a sense of
action – I must do something do I
wake you reach across you for the camera
inside the lens inside this carriage this
memory I am having again (his)

moving through it unable to capture the absence
I let you keep sleeping let your thoughts
alone but my phone I sneak from my pocket
a photograph a memory trailing like a cloud of smoke
I have it now inherited this memory
to share with you upon waking

'Hymn to Possibility (Shelley)' by Dominic Symes

on the balcony
looking out onto a life not lived
both ancient & immediate
the sea breeze rolls through
up here the air
thins out like greying hair
whispers of it
whipping into his face
sun bronzed but
nonetheless delicate
young bookish
his life book-
ending here
on the promontory
of a premonition
children swept
away by the ocean
swelling with constant
distemper
tossing them
upon the rocky cove
as he is sitting in silence
isolated on this balcony
the last of the amber light
washing back out to the horizon
his wish is to say again
the name of this place
so that it might not vanish
like his appetite
like the light
shifting in his seat
exile is as vast as the view
that stretches out before him
remaining as intimate as a child

not yet named
places people
are words only
rolling over in his mouth
each untied to the last
what is it that holds the world
together in its innermost folds?
of course there is writing
& there is dying too
but if there is writing & not dying
perhaps there is
writing & living forever

'Hymn to Possibility (Twombly)' by Dominic Symes

on the balcony
struck by the quiet
of this almost ageless
moment up here
with the sea birds
holding their pitch
against the breeze
effortless
flags of surrender
tilt to fill the
empty pockets of time
from the zig zag
of a switchback road
I see myself tracing
these same streets
Hadrian might have
& might again
a broad brush
capturing the town's
coarse delicacy
it's not photography
or aerial views
but a gauge of
that vague electrical
hum that once
fired off
filament after filament
like a switchboard

lighting up
inspiration washes in
like waves of sudden light
at the instruction
of the moon
perhaps there is painting
& living forever

Section two: response poems from Ray to Symes and Symes to Ray, sent after reading and reacting to one another's initial poems

'Under the Tropic of Cancer' by Bishnupada Ray

the journey commences
our most daring so far
whether this is a feat
under the tropic of cancer
or a defeat
is hard to tell
the broken path beneath
rises through the patchwork
of smoothness
towards a heart-wrenching
calling
of a far-off land
the mind baulks
and the maps go blind
as the path plunges ahead
like a long-drawn sigh
of uncertainty

a garland falls
on the fallen
those who live short
but live intense
and who travel
through intuition
to a point in an argument
to a logic
and then to a maxim
to sacrifice their life
for a cause
their unhappy spirits
now cry for justice

this smoothness
is like a relief
of an ignorant's adamant
knowledge
the earth moves
from the west to the east
exposing a meanness
or a lack of opportunity
or a lack of discipline
so the onus of self-discipline
falls on the traveller

the two parallel wheels
meant to work in unison
fall on two different surfaces
violating the standard operating
procedure
at this point
matter fails the spirit
and this rough passage
keeps the mind on a roll
and when the sun sets
there is an anxiety in the air
to get back home safe
anyhow
by any means
before the loss
of a life-saving grace.

'Prick' by Bishnupada Ray

After Visiting Sitamarhi, the Point where Sita Entered the Earth

in that enchanted grotto temple
of wish making
I wished to see a fairy queen
who was the true child of mother earth
and who dared to face the quicksand of life
and entered the earth

creation needs a prick
a point where one can see the abyss
and know the mysteries of being

the prime attraction of evil
also deflects evil from the path
to be traversed not without pain

I do not want to see more
seeing more may fill me with anger
all the advantage is lost
in the tortuous path of morality
limited vision spoils the good intention
true vision needs self wisdom
people just increase the confusion
the source of vanity is destroyed
as a curse of the evil eye

with the loss of a thing
the forward path suddenly ends
life on earth
becomes an eternity of regret
of acts done
and the wish they were not done

that whoring attitude pained me
pricked me into the act of creation
in public eye she remained impeccable
but I secretly knew what she was

she deflected evil from my path
but effaced me from the public eye
and put me under erasure.

'Udaigiri Caves, Vidisha' by Bishnupada Ray

these caves were the home
of those who sought divine peace
leaving their caves in Bhimbetka
they dispersed in every direction
and hundreds of years ago
they journeyed to Mada and Udaigiri
to meditate in peace of seclusion
and they made these hills habitable
by carving rocks into caves

now far from the madding crowd
bats and similar unlovely creatures
can find safety of a deserted place
and unseen lizards rustle quickly
into the bush by the stony path
unbearably hot under the June sun
alerted by the incoming footsteps

and right over the Udaigiri hill
distant planes are seen flying past
across the boundless sky
leaving along their flight path
streak of white smoke to create
a veritable tropic of cancer.

'Black Mirror (invasion)' by Dominic Symes

when I put it all together
in my poem
it preaches accuracy
not consistency
what is that anachronism
lost in the temper of the times
tazzy-devilling around the room
eyes darting across
the effaced surface
where bigger pricks
lack the requisite compensation
show them
what they're playing for tonight
what has been here before
shows through
like a cyclone tracing
winds feeding into memories
looking and not seeing
you remember hiding
in the bathroom
for it to pass over
these are screen memories
words and images given to you
suggesting the potential for
more accurate narratives
site of the exhibition shifting

like opinions in a kangaroo court
they pivot and perform
topsoil removed is here arranged
sand parses hands for a photograph
forsaking what is left
monies exchanged
everything arranged
legacies erased
you are my
black mirror

'Black Mirror (aversion)' by Dominic Symes

black mirror
I am yours
as a final thought
before switching from do not disturb
to flight mode
trying to focus
to run the clock down
I will catch you up later
half-awake I poke around
the garden we share
moon-baking we see
a rip in the black
skin of the dream
half-obsured by rumour
& rhetoric shifting across it
to be outside of myself
outside & by myself
each word I utter comes back
arching its spine to memory's
empty palace
beginning in a gallery
dampening the sound
this mute black canvas
its pin-prick stars
retracing steps
trying to unthread myself
from my complicity
I arrive at the dead centre
when I put it all together

'Love in a Warm Climate' by Dominic Symes

I've exhausted every natural resource

all my coal for burning
excoriated & extolled

out of breath
from being shipped offshore

exporting it & me & you & us

what is left?
our empty apartment
its exquisite taps & kitsch appliances

how small in the grand scheme
of asthmatic capitalistic growth
seem our two-minute showers?

or rinsing out our jars before recycling them?
your little post-it notes?

all those generous second helpings?

basically
how you let me gorge myself
on your passive income
& your generosity

never emptying the carton of milk

in case I needed even more time
to torture myself
dreaming up a remedy for
the supply chains that bind us all

I am consciously uncoupling myself
from these severe demands

like a lever longing to be released
or a ladybug crushed
by a too-eager thumb

it's bits of coastline
crumbling into skyline

how the lights stay on all day
in the houses we can't afford to own

where do we go?

homeless

this world is no longer a safe place to live

Section three: reflections on our processes and realisations

Dominic Symes:

When I was asked to be part of this collaboration, I began by writing a list of all of the links that I could draw between my experience and those of a poet living and working in India. I was excited to read Bishnu's work because my list of potential overlaps was quite small. Reading the first three poems that appear in this paper, I felt a shared appreciation for landscape and the mythological implications of a given place, having completed my own aesthetic 'pilgrimage' to the place where Cy Twombly lived and worked in Italy as part of my recently completed thesis. Given how much my own writing owes to the tradition of O'Hara's 'I-do-this-I-do-that' poems, I admired the intimacy in Bishnu's poetic pilgrimages as I felt this was an effective way to cope with the baggage of the potentially mythological (Perloff 1977: 22). Goethe talks about the 'literary soil' that he experienced by the Mediterranean, rich with ancient history; seeing the worlds that he had only read about in books come to life in front of him during his pilgrimage, as captured in his travel journal *Italian Journey* (1786) (Jacobus 2016: 136).

Certainly, I was influenced by Twombly's ability to combine textual and geographical lineage in his paintings. His own work traced the Ancient Greeks and Romans, through the Romantic authors on Grand Tours as well as contemporary poets and artists who had all shared the same stretch of coastline. Considering location and perspective as a concern shared by poets and painters, the two *Hymns to Possibility* imagine PB Shelley and Twombly looking out from the same balcony centuries apart. This approach treats both painting and poetry as the 'product of the creative act that produced it' (Ashbery 1971: ix), placing emphasis on the location the work was made and how the artists were responding to the world around them in a particular moment. By being in the place where Twombly lived, I was hoping to summon some of these influences in my own work to create poetry that was ekphrastic, but which responded to the act of production as the critical feature in the poem, rather than the surface of the painting.

Another ekphrastic-based approach that I used was to write in response to an exhibition, rather than directly in response to one work of art. The two *Black Mirror* poems are influenced by the

palate and technique of Kudjla/Gangalu artist Daniel Boyd in *Untitled (CM)* (2016), but primarily, they treat this work as an entry point for engagement with the themes of the exhibition ‘Defying Empire’ where the work was hung. Like Bishnu’s poems in Section Two, these *Black Mirror* poems trace a surface and narrate the experience of this examination in time. Boyd’s painting is a large black canvas with a lacquered surface, punctured by holes, as if demonstrating a struggle and its lasting impact. The title offers two different lenses through which to interrogate culture in this moment: at the zenith of digital technology, the ‘black mirrors’ that are our smartphones and the post-colonial legacy of white invasion, using the ‘black mirror’ as a device to critique the foundations of a white Australia.

As Bishnu’s poetry suggests, the poet is called upon to offer resistance and to stand in defiance of pervading cultural narratives. *Love in a Warm Climate* addresses the climate emergency and the shared blame that falls upon Indians and Australians for their complicity. In Australia, we physically cut into the earth, leaving scars kilometres long and hundreds of metres deep, in order to extract material that can be shipped to India to generate electricity. Like Bishnu, I am trying to contrast the actions of individuals in the intimate sphere against the enormity of the crisis, reaching the conclusion that perhaps what binds us both is the earth itself, which is increasingly becoming uninhabitable.

Corresponding with Bishnu via email and reading his work, I came to appreciate the vast differences between our experiences, both in the poetic influences that we drew upon and the legacy that colonialism has left upon us. I found that whilst his pilgrimage was about recovery of his own heritage on his own land, my pilgrimage was to Europe, where my family came from only a generation ago to recover some of what I thought might have been my own cultural and aesthetic inheritance. But, while the poems I initially sent Bishnu about pilgrimage and inheritance were written about a period in 2016, when I came to write these more recent poems in response, it was certainly his influence that drew me back to Australia: to this land and the issues that affect its citizens in this moment. The dispossession of indigenous land by European settlers is a pressing concern and one that artists in this country have been addressing for many years. My experience at the ‘Defying Empire’ exhibition provided inroads to this subject whilst still allowing me to work with the ekphrastic poem as a mode of engagement.

Love in a Warm Climate was a response to the confidence Bishnu’s poetry has in confronting universal, metaphysical concepts; ‘divine peace’ and ‘self-wisdom’, trekking ‘the torturous path of morality’. It returns me to the list that I wrote at the beginning of our collaboration of things we might have in common. I had written ‘universal things: love, money, books, climate emergency’ and then ‘specific things: we send them our coal’.

Bishmupada Ray:

In spite of its shrinking domain, the enduring appeal of poetry to the sensitive perhaps lies in its spirit of quest, a sense of pilgrimage that crosses the boundary of the finite. It does so by means of engaging with existential angst and then transcending it by way of a movement from evil to goodness. In this sense poetry of place is poetry of post-contamination, for in the Indian context a place comes with a sense of always already contaminated, its value and meaning

compromised and rediscovered by an irreversible postcolonial experience. Geographical imagination provides an important insight into the nature of human domination and oppression. The influence of the place on the artistic imagination is hardly romantic. A place, like an insulted creature, evokes and invokes self-criticism. The response of the poet, when he makes a pilgrimage through an invisibly marked bruised landscape, is to discover the sense of displacement, the subtle alteration of the very being that gives us identity, to discover the residue of whatever there was originally, however wrong or bad. A place becomes a locus of domination and marginalisation. It becomes a battleground, so to say, in the way the soul becomes a battleground between good and evil. The warring forces are felt as the poet/persona/observer gets fused with the landscape. One thematic aspect of Indianness is the internal colonialism and the resistance, rather than the external; the cultural markers are always found in the form of our attitude towards the womankind and the subaltern, and our sense of hopelessness and guilt.

My poems are all about places located at or near the Tropic of Cancer, the abstract line determining the tropical existence characteristic of an existential angst, expressed in its mythology and topography and in the very journey undertaken in the form of pilgrimage. One cannot avoid noticing the scar, the wound and the displacement which are the source of the feeling of pain in these poems. The poems are little sarcastic and self-critical and border on generalisation typical of Indian condition. Humanity and place share the bond of incompleteness and uncertainty, and evoke a sense of vague yearning of something missing, or which should have been there. The poems express an unsettling sense of ironic discord, some lack, or some poverty that motivates pilgrimage, in order to complete the arc of existence. Life is inseparably conditioned by the intertwining of physical and the spiritual. The topography is slightly tipped towards resolving the spiritual questionings of the soul. An effort is made to describe such a situation in these poems, by juxtaposing the abstract with the concrete.

It is a privilege of the poet to stand at the equinoctial point between culture and nature, the centre and the margin, and to reassess the wholeness that forms lifeworld of a particular space and time, to give expression to the moments when humanity might have gone wrong. Perhaps it is the duty of the poet to preserve the humanity that preserves the bond between culture and nature, which man cannot sustain in the face of progress and history.

Concluding thoughts

This poetic collaboration, put in the perspective of cross-cultural exchange and response, at once solidifies and makes fluid the geographical conditions in which different cultures thrive and accommodate one another. If for Bishnupada Ray the influence of a place ranges from postcolonial to psychological – to a state of existential post-contamination, in which the sense of belonging is inescapably mired in trauma and evil expressed in the way of pilgrimage and mythology – for Dominic Symes the influence of a place is captured as a pilgrimage of a more artistic sort. The canvas' rendering of a place is both matched and mitigated, going back in time and place to distil its essence from the moments of present reality. The ekphrastic quality

of his poetry enables us to see the intertextual nature of our perception of reality, how the abstract impinges upon the perception of the concrete and vice versa. For both Ray and Symes, the privilege of the artist is to stand at the equinoctial point between culture and nature (as represented by a place) in order to transcend the evil or a scar or an inexplicable lack, to something holistic and healing, like the sense of homecoming and being at home, in the midst of the pain of homelessness.

Notes

1. It is said that at this place Ahalya was unburdened by Lord Ram when she was redeemed from her womanly sin of lust and got reunited with her ascetic husband, Rishi Gautam. In mythology, Lord Indra had sex with Ahalya during the absence of her husband. Gautam came back just in time to catch Indra red handed and cursed him. As a result, Indra's penis fell off. Gautam also cursed his wife. Ahalya was turned into a stone and did penance till Ram came to the place and lifted the curse.

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