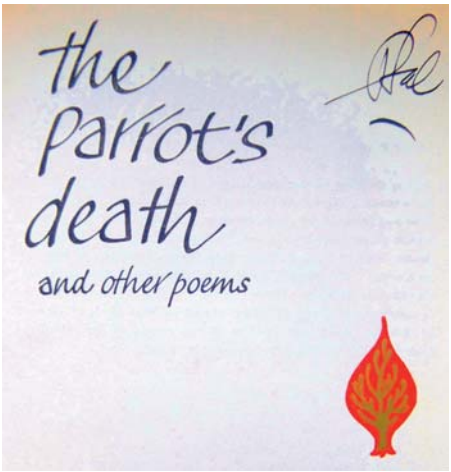
The *New Poets' Manifesto*

P. Lal and Contemporary Indian English Poetry

Our English host was gracious
We were soon at ease:
Or almost:
The Servants
were watching. (Gieve Patel, "Evening")[1]



Before discussing some of the trends in modern Indo-English poetry, I'd like to refer to the principle issues of the debate about the meaning and function of English poetry written by Indians, a debate which has been raging ever since P. Lal published his controversial article in 1951 in the Bombay *The Sunday Standard*, subsequently republished as "Introduction" to *Modern Indo-Anglian Poetry*, edited by Lal and K.R. Rao in 1959.[2] Lal's credo which, according to him, "became the New Poets' 'Manifesto'",[3] is not only to be understood as a piece of critical writing in its own right and as an essential contribution towards the definition of Indo-English poetry but, I believe, has also stood the test of being an accurate prediction of the major development of Indian poetry in English during the last twenty years.

In his attempt to break with the tradition of Romanticism symbolized by such outstanding figures as Sri Aurobindo and Sarojini Naidu, Lal rejected

1 Gieve Patel, "Evening", ed. P. Lal, *Modern Indian Poetry in English: An Anthology and a Credo*, Calcutta: Writers Workshop 1969, 395
2 Cf. P. Lal, ed., *op.cit.*, iv
3 All quotations from the New Poets' Manifesto in: *Modern Indian Poetry in English*, iv–xiii

the idea of "reading poetry for spiritual propaganda or propaganda of any sort" and asked for poetry that "must satisfy me as poetry"; hence, his postulate that poetry "must deal in concrete terms with concrete experience" and "be free from propaganda." Whether the language used by Indians was King's, Queen's or Indian English was of much less importance than the fact that it was a vital language which was made to serve the poets' purpose. Insisting on concrete experience as an essential element of poetry it was logical that "all forms of imitation" were to be condemned while experiments were commendable as long as they did not lead "to excessive obscurity." This means that a poet's liberty to express his most subjective experiences would fail to serve the poem if it impeded or even destroyed communication with the reader. Poetry, above all, had to reflect the age in which it was written. The problem of communication is taken up in Lal's final argument. In the present age of "mass approval and hysteria" there is "the need for the private voice", which ought to make use of the lyric form as the one best suited because of its direct "appeal to that personality of man which is distinct, curious, unique and idealistic." Though this demand on poetry seems to indicate elitist thinking it also means that poetry as an act of communication is a socially responsible act.

It is interesting to compare what Lal had to say almost twenty years later when reviewing what had happened to Indo-English poetry since. In his summary of the demands on the writer to write good writing phrases such as "realistic poetry" and "private voice" do not occur again. Instead, "originality and experiment […] intensity and strength of feeling […] clarity in thought structure […] and vitality" emphasize the relationship between poet and poem but seem to give hardly a thought to the one between the author and reader or author and reality. It would need a critic's investigation to analyze whether the shift of emphasis of the critical argument reflects the development of Indo-English poetry.

Here, it will be less my task to discuss the premises and implications of Lal's concept of poetry than to assess the character and extent of its accuracy by examining a number of poems written by four of the — to my mind — leading contemporary Indian poets: Nissim Ezekiel, Kamala Das, Mary Erulkar and P. Lal. Though my approach and selection is subjective, I am certain that the inclusion of other poets and poems would basically corroborate my findings.

Many of Ezekiel's early poems, it seems, convincingly illustrate Lal's demand for "concrete experience in concrete terms." The reader acquainted with Toru Dutt, Sri Aurobindo, Manmohan Ghose or Sarojini Naidu and

their "poetry […] dedicated to an expression of spiritual vision"[4] is struck by the familiarity of themes and feelings dealt with, by the frequent use of colloquialisms and by the simplicity of structure in poems such as Ezekiel's "Case Study", "Love Sonnet"[5] or "Night of the Scorpion."[6] He often uses topographical settings against which he projects his themes ("Urban", "A Morning Walk"[7] or "In India")[8]:

> The city like a passion burns.
> He dreams of morning walks, alone,
> And floating on a wave of sand.
> But still his mind its traffic turns
> Away from beach and tree and stone
> To kindered clamour close at hand. ("Urban")

Here as elsewhere, Lal's "the din and hubbub, the confusion and indecision, the flashes of beauty and goodness of our age"[9] form an essential part of Ezekiel's poems:

> Barbaric city sick with slums,
> Deprived of seasons, blessed with rains,
> Its hawkers, beggars, iron-lunged,
> Processions led by frantic drums,
> A million purgatorial lanes,
> And child-like masses, many tongued,
> Whose wages are in words and crumbs. ("A Morning Walk")

Whatever location or incidents (e.g., lovers' union in "Marriage", a pilgrimage in "Enterprise"[10]) are intended to serve the poet as a solid and reliable point of reference, they almost invariably prove less so and many of Ezekiel's poems end on a note of doubt or self-doubt, uncertainty or resignation. It is this gradual, almost imperceptible transformation of certitude to a doubtful or questioning attitude which helps the reader gain insight into a new truth. Ezekiel's technique of first arresting the reader's attention by making him remember a well-known experience, by gradually causing him to feel doubtful and by finally summing up for him how wrong he was, can be observed in "Enterprise":

4 V.K. Gokak, *Studies in Indo-Anglian Poetry*, Bombay 1972, 145
5 Nissim Ezekiel, *The Unfinished Man*, Calcutta: Writers Workshop 1960
6 Lal, *op. cit.*, 175–176
7 Ezekiel, *op.cit.*
8 Lal, *op.cit.*, 177–179
9 Ibid., xiii
10 Ezekiel, *op.cit.*

It started as a pilgrimage,
Exalting minds and making all
The burdens light. The second stage
Explored but did not test the call.
The sun beat down to match our rage.

But when the differences arose
On how to cross a desert patch
We lost a friend whose stylish prose
Was quite the best of all our batch.
A shadow falls on us — and grows.

When, finally, we reached the place,
We hardly knew why we were there.
The trip had darkened every face,
Our deeds were neither great nor rare.
Home is where we have to gather grace.

Ezekiel's poems certainly cannot be accused of containing propaganda of any kind; rather, they end more often than not on a banal note (e.g. "Love Sonnet", "Commitment"[11]), and we are not always sure about the intensity and strength of Ezekiel's feelings.

The use of a visible background like the town ("Summer in Calcutta"[12]), the sea ("The Suicide", "Composition"), and airport ("Palam"), the burning ghats ("The Joss-Sticks at Cadell Road"), or a certain season ("Jaisurya"[13]) also characterize many of Kamala Das's poems. Similarly, the frequent use of simple colloquial English, the absence of hard words and the rare occurrence of complicated syntactical structures make her poems comparable with Ezekiel's:

When I die
Do not throw the meat and bones away
But pile them up
And
Let them tell
By their smell
What life was worth
On this earth
What love was worth
In the end. ("A Request"[14])

11 Ibid.
12 Lal, *op.cit.*, 107
13 Kamala Das, *The Descendants*, Calcutta: Writers Workshop 1967, 1–4, 29-35, 10, 23, 27–28
14 Ibid., 5

However, the function, the metaphorical and symbolical content of images such as town or sea, airport or burning ghat differ distinctly from those in Ezekiel's poems. Reality does not prove to be questionable but hides its essential meaning. The search of the self is directed at the truth of life and death ("The Suicide"), of constancy ("Substitutes", "Contacts") and love ("The Invitation", "The Conflagration"[15]):

Bereft of soul
My body shall be bare
Bereft of body
My soul shall be bare

Which would you rather have
O kind sea?
Which is the more dead
Of the two?

Yet I never can forget
The only man who hurts.
The only one who seems to know
The only way to hurt.

Holding you is easy
Clutching at moving water,
I tell you, sea,
This is easy.
But to hold him for half a day
Was a difficult task

But, when he did love,
Believe me,
All I could do was sob like a fool. ("The Suicide")

The intense urge to know is complemented by a strong rejection of temporary, man-made solutions trying to answer the question of who the self is:

I don't know politics but I know the names
of those in power, and can repeat them like
Days of week, or names of months, beginning with
Nehru …
Don't write in English, they said,
English is not your mother-tongue …

15 Ibid., 6–7, 19, 14–15, 20

Dress in saris, be girl,
Be wife, they said. Be embroidered, be cook,
Be a quarreller with servants. Fit in. Oh, . . .
Who are you, I ask each and everyone,
The answer is, it is I . . .
I too call myself I. ("An Introduction"[16])

In what is one of the most well-known contemporary Indo-English poems Das endows each seemingly simple reflection and question with the intense feeling of being personally affected by the concrete world around — politicians, language, skin colour, marriage — and the world inside — loneliness, joy and love, shame and pain. In a much less sophisticated manner than in Ezekiel's poems Das expresses poetically what Lal claims theoretically: the need for the private voice so that that personality of wo/man, which is distinct and unique, can be reached. Das's almost total lack of emotional inhibition, an attitude so alien to the Indian psyche, her obsession to possess and make her own what she can name, make her an exception on the Indian poetry scene. It is this obsession with the truth which enables her to create original poems even when at times the sentiments expressed appear trite ("My love is an empty gift, a gilded empty container, good for show, nothing else …": "Captive"), or the images used are clichés ("There was a time when our lusts were like multicoloured flags of no particular country …": "Convicts"[17]).

In Ezekiel's and Das's poems India, more often than not, is the *locus in quo* which inspired the poet; she serves him as setting and background and generally becomes the "objective correlative" of his and her feelings and thoughts. Though it may be tempting to substitute Lal's "concrete" by "Indian", I believe that this was certainly not his idea when he spoke of poetry. This view is substantiated when we look at Mary Erulkar's poems. A few of them are included in *Modern Indian Poetry in English* while her first collection, *Mandala 25*, was published by the Writers Workshop, an institution established in 1958. It set itself the task to focus "on English creative and transcreative work by Indians, or such work by foreigners as deals with, or is inspired by, Indian life and culture."[18]

A few poems contain overt references to or images taken from India:

16 Lal, *op. cit.*, 104–105
17 Das, *op. cit.*, 17, 26
18 P. Lal, *The Man of Dharma and the Rasa of Silence*, Calcutta: Writers Workshop 1974, Appendix, 14

Let me kneel like a root of lotus.
Lotus in the praying waters, let me fold
my hands to the mystic bud,
firm as the hand of god
god's hand in flickering maya
maya of man's illusory world.
Let lotus of god, lotus of man,
god and man, flesh at last to light. ("The Still Violence"[19])

The poem "Whale"[20] concludes

I come budded, full blooded,
with edens dead in my apple-red arms,
India,
my whale,
my whaler.

Still, these are exceptions rather than the rule. In rendering recurring themes poetically, Erulkar takes recourse more often to images which seem to be uppermost in her mind. She appears to depend on her surroundings, the stimuli she receives and the observations she makes. The distinctive feature of her poetry is not the presence of India but the immediate transformation and symbolization of observations, stimuli and visible pictures into poetic language. Rarely in an Indian poet do we meet with such diverse imagery ranging from unusual poetic topoi like science ("Moon Gate", "The Architecture of Lilacs", "The Infinite Distances of Atoms"), to more conventional ones like religion ("After Estrangement", "The Still Violence", "A Pardon for Judas", "Embarked NOW"[21]); nature ("A Leavetaking", "Evening"[22], "Flying a Kite", "The Gulf Stream"); or womanhood ("Baldela Rose", "Mujer, Mujer", "For a Childbirth", "The Second Wife Speaks"[23]). In her longer poems, however, she succeeds in blending the at times most diverse images into a structured totality:

Where Europe and America build their arches
the pale women lean like fountains in the wind
between the stone images: and there
the iridescent children like bubbles float
in the laburnum-lighted squares.

19 Mary Erulkar, *Mandala 25*, Calcutta: Writers Workshop 1972, 13
20 Ibid., 42
21 Ibid., 15-16, 17, 34, 18, 13, 37, 43
22 Lal, ed., *op; cit*., 163, 165
23 Erulkar, *op. cit*., 21, 22-23, 27, 30–31,44

And in the long snow-candled nights
the women move in moonlight ephemerally,
phosphorescent in jewels and the rare
northern lights of their ice-bound hair,
before the sun comes with gulls and whitewinged air.
("The Third Continent"[24])

Many of her poems are among the most experimental in the contemporary literary scene and excel with their fusion of images, boldness of metaphor, use of rhetorical means and syntactical structures:

Dream. Yes,
in my kindled dream,
in a light black as cornflowers,
and the sun
half a lifetime away,
the lions come hooped in their blazing hair.
Iphigenia,
the hour
of fading lilacs may come too soon;
Annapurna, the bread may lie
unbroken for ever in a beggar's bowl.
The lions await me in their terrible noon.
("The Lonely Departure for Cythera")[25]

It seems, the poet has taken Lal at his word when she insists on her most personal need for the private voice, though at times it is not easy to grasp the full meaning of a poem like the one quoted above, or "Dying, Alcestis Dreams of Him",[26] "The Third Continent" and "Mujer, Mujer". She often appears on the verge of losing control over the abundance of images in face of intensely felt experiences, such as time lost, the immutability of the law of change, the cycle of life and death, and suffering caused by the elusiveness of life. However, Erulkar's poetic sensibility and her creative use of the language make her one of the outstanding and convincing voices of "the confusion and indecision, the flashes of beauty and goodness of our age."

To conclude, it is only fair to ask in how far Lal's reflections on modern Indian poetry in English have been of any bearing on his own work. What,

24 Ibid., 36
25 Ibid., 26
26 Ibid., 48

essentially, makes his poems incomparable with those discussed already is their poise stemming from a certitude, an inner conviction which not only enables the poet to observe in a controlled manner the transience of life, of human passions and thoughts but also to symbolize his belief in a quality of life, the truth of which eludes final comprehension and can at best be grasped poetically as beauty. It is the controlled balance between the mind's understanding of visible reality and a belief in the essential harmony and beauty of life which creates the poems' unique appeal in Lal's collections *Love's The First*,[27] *The Parrot's Death & Other Poems*[28] and *'Change!' They Said*.[29] The following poem may stand for many, excepting perhaps some of a highly personal nature collected in *The Parrot's Death* which are not easily accessible:

> In you something knows,
> After refusal, crying;
> But regret was not in the rose,
> Though beautiful and denying.
> If our hearts learn cruelty
> To lead only to regret,
> Were it not better frailty
> Possessed us yet?
> –As the warm rose, loved by each wind,
> Insensibly gives laughter,
> But does not argue in the mind
> If good or evil after. ("Rose"[30])

In his usually short poems Lal does not often refer overtly to India ("Images at Dawn", "Boat on the Hooghly", "The Refugees at Sealdah Station", "'Change!' They Said", "Jawaharlal Nehru"[31]) but deal with common human experiences like love ("The White Rose", "Nocturne", "I Cannot Say My Love, My Dear",[32] "The Simplest Love", "The Bee's Love"); beauty, including the beauty of nature ("A Song for Beauty",[33] "The Crickets"[34]); the plea for an understanding of life ("For My Daughter", "For My Son Ananda"[35]); and the transience of life ("On Transience", "The

27 Lal, *Love's The First*, Calcutta: Writers Workshop 1963
28 Lal, *The Parrot's Death & Other Poems*, Calcutta: Writers Workshop 1960
29 Lal, *"Change!" They Said*, Calcutta: Writers Workshop 1966
30 Lal, *Love's The First*
31 Lal, *"Change!" They Said*
32 Lal, *Love's The First*
33 Lal, *The Parrot's Death & Other Poems*
34 Lal, *"Change!" They Said*
35 Lal, *Love's The First*

Bronze Girl", "The Old Man"[36]). Similarly, he chooses the simple word or phrase as in "The Bee's Love":

> This bee is sensible,
> Loving fragrance, not flower;
> Saint-like and stone-like,
> Limiting desire.
>
> But lovers are wiser
> Than saints or stones,
> Loving rings round dark eyes
> And brittle bones.
>
> Love like a flower
> Has roots that reach
> Beyond fragrance, beyond power
> Of loving speech.

As a structural device he uses juxtaposition, often of man and nature. Whether the effect achieved is the recognition of analogies or of essential dissimilarity of, to take the examples at hand, lovers and rose or a bee's and man's love is of secondary importance compared to the recognition of their true character. This means that the sequence and structuring of phrases constitutes the meaning of these poems.

> When rains fall
> Is all astir
> My green soul,
> My prisoner.
>
> November,
> Middle age
> Struggles, needing
> More than a cage.
>
> Soul is to cage
> As love to foe.
> My loved one, my bird,
> Take heart and go. ("The Parrot's Death & Other Poems")

Though Lal's poems certainly cannot be called obscure, his succinct style and economic use of the language as well as the, at times, structural

36 Lal, *The Parrot's Death & Other Poems*

complexity of his works characterize them as very personal expressions of common human experiences.

Like Ezekiel, Das and Erulkar, Lal has developed his own distinct style and has proved that modern Indian poets, far from being propagandistic or imitative, not only make creative use of the English language but also succeed in satisfying their wish to communicate their experiences and thoughts poetically as they appeal to the reader's need to gain insight into the different facets of "India's cultural ethos" which Lal spoke of,[37] an ethos shaping the sensibility of the contemporary Indian poet who while being a realistic observer of life around him strives, in the best Indian tradition, to transcend its ephemerality in his quest for truth.

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37 Lal, *The Man of Dharma and the Rasa of Silence*, Appendix, 14