

# Web of Words: Poetry, Fandom and Globality

by

Amulya Gopalakrishnan

BA, English (2000)  
Delhi University

Submitted to the Department of Comparative Media Studies in Partial  
Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Science in  
Comparative Media Studies

at the

Massachusetts Institute of Technology

September 2006

© 2006 Massachusetts Institute of Technology.  
All rights reserved.

Signature of Author-----

Department of Comparative Media Studies

August 7, 2006

Certified by-----

Professor Henry Jenkins  
Co-Director, Comparative Media Studies  
Thesis Supervisor

Accepted by-----

Professor William Uricchio  
Co-Director, Comparative Media Studies

# WEB OF WORDS: POETRY, FANDOM AND GLOBALITY

by

AMULYA GOPALAKRISHNAN

Submitted to the Department of Comparative Media Studies  
on August 7<sup>th</sup>, 2006 in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master  
of Science in Comparative Media Studies.

## ABSTRACT

This study explores questions of media change, negotiation of literary value and postcolonial hybridity through a study of The Wondering Minstrels, a largely South-Asian community on the Web dedicated to the celebration of English poetry.

I aim to demonstrate how an online community like Minstrels can unsettle hierarchies such as those between writer and reader, high art and fandom, and between metropole and margin, even as it often seems rooted in this logic. While print-culture and literary values are often conflated, this new kind of platform celebrates poetry using the interactive and participatory possibilities of the Web. It garbles protocols of literary appreciation by discussing canonical poetry in an idiosyncratic, personal manner. As a group dominated by South-Asian techno-managerial workers, this is also an account of ways in which globalization and postcoloniality intersect and the new networked society complicates the center-periphery model of cultural traffic. In choosing to informally engage with English poetry as bookmarks for their own lives and remaking the rules of engagement, the Wondering Minstrels is an act of cultural translation, another way of telling the literary legacy of colonialism.

In addition to analyzing the conversation on the website, I draw on selected theoretical work relating to new media, middlebrow culture, reception theory, postcolonial studies and globalization.

Thesis Supervisor: Henry Jenkins  
Professor and Co-Director, Comparative Media Studies

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

A Thing of Shreds and Patches.....	4
Only Connect: The Possibilities of Hypertext.....	10
In Poetry Everything is Permitted: Literary Value and Interpretation.....	24
The Empire Reads Back: Postcolonial Cultural Translation.....	41
Conclusion.....	59

## **A Thing of Shreds and Patches**

One of the most notable facts of our current moment of globalization is how the unprecedented scale of media flows and migrations has drastically reoriented perceptions of one's place in the world.<sup>1</sup> This is the story of one such imaginative border-busting project called the Wondering Minstrels. This community is a digital diaspora built on the postcolonial assessment of English poetry, one that demonstrates how the re-citation of poetry on the World Wide Web makes possible the staging of a vernacular cosmopolitanism<sup>2</sup> and upsets traditional literary hierarchies.

The Wondering Minstrels is a poem-a-day mailing list of over four thousand people, the majority of whom have a South-Asian connection, but includes members from all over the English-speaking world. The group was formed in 1999 by a couple of Indian engineering students who felt the need for a 'more everyday experience of poetry' and to demystify the appreciation of it, and gradually drew in their friends and acquaintances, until it grew to its current dimensions.

The poems are archived and open to commentary and discussion at any time. While the people who run it handle much of the regular poem submissions, those sent in by other members ('guest poems') reflect the heterogeneity and energy of the group. The

---

<sup>1</sup> For a theory of globalization as rupture, of a new emphasis on imagination as a defining social practice of modernity and diasporic public spheres, see Appadurai, Arjun. Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996.

<sup>2</sup> See Bhabha, Homi for a fuller treatment of this idea of vernacular cosmopolitans 'moving in-between cultural traditions, and revealing hybrid forms of life and art that have no prior existence within the discrete world of any single culture', in his introduction to The Location of Culture, p xiii

accompanying comments pay attention to form and technique, as well as biography and shaping context, but the guiding principle is individual connection with the poem, and some personal comment on why a contributor considers it significant or memorable.

While poetry collections abound on the Internet, this inbuilt conversation feature is what many members consider unique about the Wondering Minstrels. It is also one of the most visible online poetry sites at the moment, with very high search-engine rankings.

The students who started Minstrels are all now firmly ensconced in different worlds--a hedge-fund trader in Princeton, an open-source hacker in Dubai and a Google engineer in California. They continue to keep the project running, in the words of one of them, for ‘egoboo reasons’<sup>3</sup> and sheer enthusiasm, and their orientation towards it is strongly marked by their outsider-status from the world of higher literary education and metropolitan cultural legitimacy.

Unsurprisingly, they place great emphasis on the category of the ‘general reader’, the self-schooled lover of words and ideas, free to roam the world and sift through its literary artifacts. ‘A Wandering Minstrel I/ A thing of shreds and patches/ Of ballads, songs and snatches/ And dreamy lullaby’, the WS Gilbert song that the name of the group refers to, is fitting for a group of people who aim for an easy eclecticism and cosmopolitan comfort with the expanses and crevices of world poetry.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup>Part of the vocabulary of the open-source movement and science fiction, ‘the economy of the egoboo is like a currency comprising things like appreciation and reputation’, according to him.

<sup>4</sup> As a group which was formed by alumni of the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT), (who are who are still the most visible members) and their friends, the Wondering Minstrels has a recognizably new-economy profile-- ie, young globally-mobile techno-managerial professionals. Although a large part of the membership does not fit this demographic, the most distinct ‘voice’ in the community belongs to this core group.

As new media emerge, they also renew struggles over meaning, significance, knowledge and power. I'm interested in the World Wide Web's impact on the cultural politics of poetic taste, its liberations and limits.

At one level, studying this group is an examination of the ways in which the Web extends and rejuvenates literary culture and flattens hierarchies though previously unthinkable possibilities for collectivity and participation. The tacit asymmetries in the literary transaction—between reader and writer, between enshrined colonial texts and their reception in the postcolonial periphery, and indeed, between texts of different artistic 'stature' are thrown into radical question by this medium. However, this freedom is constrained by the institutional contexts that shape literary circulation and reception. As Stanley Fish puts it, 'one can respond with a cheerful yes to the question 'Do readers make meanings?' and commit oneself to very little because it is equally true to say that meanings, in the form of culturally derived interpretive categories, make readers' (Fish 336).

I also examine this online poetry community for its implications for norms about artistic judgment, cultural capital and place. Exercising judgments of literary taste is a learned act; a cognitive decoding that is intimately bound up with social location and trajectory. Reading, everywhere, is a habit that relies on a complex system of reference and recommendation.

For those who did not get a headstart at home, a community like Minstrels broaches poetry on *its* terms: as an everyday medium that speaks of ordinary lives and moments in an extraordinary way, one that simply draws attention to the world by drawing attention to language. Sending in a poem, or reacting to someone else's

comments about a poem may be a way of tentatively dipping your toe in the vast ocean of notions built around literary works. Just like other fan communities, through conversation and correspondence, they can inaugurate a space that may prove more humane and democratic than the everyday world. The feeling-oriented, middlebrow aesthetic of *The Wondering Minstrels* is a conversation and counterpractice that challenges conventional classroom approaches to canonical poetry.

Thirdly, I explore these responses to poetry and the ways in which the Empire writes back to the traditional canon of English poetry and evaluates these works in various ways, both resisting and unwittingly replicating its pressures. Tennyson and Wordsworth are an integral part of a standard middle-class school education in India. Babbling brooks and dancing daffodils might not mean very much by themselves in these contexts, but the poems have the capacity to call up deep associations, and it is the act of describing what the poems mean to people who studied them that adds a certain crackle to the texts. As the Jamaican writer Michelle Cliff has written, a more generous, constructive account of this postcolonial situation is the moment when an Indian child imagines the foreign daffodil as a marigold or a Caribbean child as a hibiscus.<sup>5</sup>

This case study is especially meaningful to me, because I joined the *Minstrels* mailing list when I'd just finished my undergraduate education in India, in English literature. It was the first time I encountered a way of reading poetry parallel to the classroom approach that resonated with my own affective experience of reading. With its supple, alive vocabulary, it took an unabashedly personal and personally invested attitude towards a poem that would be unacceptable in scholarly discussion, but is the very stuff

---

<sup>5</sup> Qtd in Kumar, Amitava. *Passport Photos*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000.

of popular response to literature and something I enjoyed thoroughly. The first few years of the internet for me were all about a newfound sense of literary community, and the discovery that the solitary reading act could suddenly stretch into something sociable, shared and satisfying.

At the same time, I often felt frustrated by the way they often foregrounded the poise and artfulness of certain poems and refused to engage with its explicitly stated politics. I occupied a shifting subject-position in regard to the group, often finding it banal or problematic, and occasionally, startling and deeply moving. While the main reason I was part of Minstrels was the way it introduced me to different kinds of poetry and celebrated the familiar, I also found myself fascinated by the particular preoccupations of individual members and what they were talking about when they talked about poetry. For instance, questions of nostalgia and belonging; immigration and in-betweenness, of anglophilia and Indian English, the peculiar rewards and burdens of speaking in forked tongues, and feeling multiple tugs of identification were all recurring themes.

The possibilities for publishing and reception of original poetry on the web is outside the ambit of my analysis, as are debates about the widely bemoaned ‘decline’ of poetry in recent times. In choosing the Internet as the closest real-world exemplification of a borderless world, I am only too aware of the limited constituency I describe, that ‘not all imagined lives span vast international panoramas’<sup>6</sup> and that the Web has meant nothing more radical than a banding of the middle classes, in many parts of the world. I confine my study to a sliver of South-Asian readers, and to an existing online poetry gathering, to investigate how they negotiate issues of identity and literary value. Aside

---

<sup>6</sup> Appadurai, Arjun. Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996. p61.



from a basic interview with the people who run the website, my ethnographic research is based entirely on the poetry and existing body of comments on the website itself. Since I am unaware of the material context of the other contributors, and am conscious of the perils of online ethnography (the basic unverifiability of lives behind the digital versions), I will limit my analysis to the words on the screen, the stated opinions of the group members. I don't claim to prise open their language and interpretive frameworks and provide a more authentic, clear-eyed version—indeed, this enterprise is as much self-reflexive storytelling as anything else, and my own experience and embeddedness in this group inevitably shapes my articulation of its practices.

Literary terms of trade in the real world are still undeniably shaped by institutional inequities, but as John Lennon put it, reality leaves a lot to the imagination. While far from being a digital commonwealth of letters or an utterly utopian reinscription of oppressive legacies, the *Wondering Minstrels* is nevertheless a small symbolic drama of how previously voiceless constituencies seize upon the 'right to narrate'<sup>7</sup> and in Salman Rushdie's words, 'description itself is a political act: to redescribe a world is the first step towards changing it.'<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> Bhabha, Homi. *The Location of Culture*. (Preface to the Routledge Classics edition, 2004. p xx)

<sup>8</sup> Rushdie, Salman. *Imaginary Homelands. Essays and Criticism 1981-1991* London: Granta Books, 1991.

## Only Connect: The Possibilities of Hypertext

‘What is the place of reading, and of the reading sensibility, in our culture as it has become?’<sup>9</sup> is the big, emotionally charged question that looms over Sven Birkerts’ impassioned ‘refusal’ of all electronic media. *The Wondering Minstrels*, I argue, is a telling example of some ways in which the reading act has been reoriented in the digital environment and also of how our relationship to the written word endures, albeit in a profoundly altered manner.

The hype surrounding hypertext and digitality as a diminished cognitive paradigm is only one of a succession of panics about the future of books, an old wine in a new bottle. As Priscilla Coit Murphy has written, reading has been declared an endangered habit with the advent of every new technology from the radio to the fax machine to TV<sup>10</sup>. This kind of zero-sum paradigm that pits all media in competition with each other fails to account for the startling convergence of some aims and the synergy that often intensifies the use of related media. Just like television can plug movies, the Web can also encourage people to pick up a book of poetry, and in fact, *The Wondering Minstrels* explicitly states this as one of its aims.

---

<sup>9</sup> Birkerts, Sven. *The Gutenberg Elegies: the fate of reading in an electronic age*. Boston: Faber and Faber, 1994. 15.

<sup>10</sup> Coit Murphy, Priscilla. ‘Books are Dead, Long Live Books’. In *Rethinking Media Change*. . In *Rethinking Media Change*. Ed Jenkins, Henry and Thorburn, David. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2003.

Words, wrote Pablo Neruda, ‘give glass-quality to glass/ blood to blood/ and life to life itself’<sup>11</sup>. The codex book is a particular, contingent, relatively recent historical development that has somehow become conflated with textuality itself, in the minds of many. The battle lines between ‘book people’ and ‘computer people’ are clearly drawn, but the real differences between these two delivery mechanisms are patently blown out of proportion. As the dean of MIT’s architecture school said, circa 1995, this fetishizing of the book will remain meaningful only to those addicted to the look and feel of ‘tree flakes encased in dead cow’<sup>12</sup>.

‘The changes are profound and the difference is consequential’, writes Birkerts. And yet, all he can come up with by way of argument is the insistence that words on a page are tangible imprints while words on a screen are flickering, insubstantial illusions—one is a thing and the other a mere idea of the thing. Puerile as it may seem, this reduced notion of the digital has been echoed by many theorists, including Baudrillard who regards the effects of digital encoding as being haunted by its ‘true generating formula’, ie, mere binarity, although writing at the time he does, he does not take into account how literary and imaginative texts themselves are reconfigured online.

While it is unclear why pointing out the materiality of the computer or the technology of the book itself are not obvious counter-arguments to Birkerts, the debate is clearly marked by larger tensions, suspicion and scorn on both sides. Certainly, the printed book is far from being relegated into obscurity by its digital avatar just yet, and few people still read entire novels or full-length non-fiction online. However, poetry,

---

<sup>11</sup> Pablo Neruda. ‘The Word’. Cantos Ceremoniales, Plenos Poderes. Random House, New York: 1962.

<sup>12</sup> Erickson, Paul. ‘The History of the Book and Electronic Media’. In Rethinking Media Change. Ed Jenkins, Henry and Thorburn, David. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2003. 106.

with its relatively more condensed form and its different textual ethos presents no such challenges, and could be the ideal medium to examine the contentions of both bibliophiles and technophiles.

Hypertext, according to a famous 1992 piece in the New York Times Book Review titled ‘The End of Books’, provides ‘networks of alternate routes (as opposed to print’s unidirectional page-turning)’ and thus ‘presents a radically divergent technology, interactive and polyvocal, favoring a plurality of discourses over definitive utterance’ and freeing the reader from domination by the author—

Hypertext reader and writer are said to become co-learners or co-writers, as it were, fellow-travelers in the mapping and remapping of textual (and visual, kinetic and aural) components, not all of which are provided by what used to be called the author.

Thus, in the manner of Umberto Eco’s ‘open work’, the textual machinery becomes a matrix of potential texts, only some of which will be realized through interaction with a user.

This relates to Birkerts’ other objection to hypertext, a more serious one—that it erodes the authority of the creator, it promotes an idea of the text as variable, a version rather than an inevitable and singular thing in the world; it robs us of the transcendental illusion that is literature. This is a matter of first-principle disagreement, since the blurring of the bounds between readers and writers is the very quality that makes hypertext instantiate one aspect of Roland Barthes’ ideal text<sup>13</sup>--

The goal of literary work (of literature as work) [which] is to make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text. Our literature is characterized by the pitiless divorce which the literary

---

<sup>13</sup> Qtd in Landow, George. Hypertext 3.0: Critical Theory and New Media in an Age of Globalization. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006.

institution maintains between the producer of the text and its user, between its owner and its consumer, between its author and its reader. (S/Z, 4)

On the Wondering Minstrels, this refusal to enshrine the text is not aggressively confrontational as much as motivated by the need to make poetry meaningful to its readers. For instance, when I joined Minstrels, the first poem I sent in was a poem I'd read in the Times Literary Supplement, by a Welsh poet named Sheenagh Pugh. I'd never heard of Pugh before, and indeed, she was relatively unknown at the time. When I sent in the poem along with my English-major attempt at analysis, I received an email from Pugh herself commenting on my comments, adding to them, mildly disagreeing, but eager to carry on the conversation. She later became a Minstrels member herself, and wryly responding to the disproportionate success of her own poem, 'Sometimes', admitted that she 'mistyped "sorrow" for "snow" and then decided I liked that better. I believe in letting the keyboard join in the creative process now and then. Anyway, here's the text, and if you like it, I'm pleased for you, but I'd be more pleased if you liked something else better!'

The Web makes interactions like that possible, and the juxtaposition of Pugh's comments and mine both framing her poem, neither of which claims ultimate authority, invites other readers to participate in the mystique of the poem's artistry. Rather than destroying the aura of literature, this surrounding conversation only adds to it. As Jorge Luis Borges<sup>14</sup> writes in his book on poetry, quoting Bishop Berkeley,

I remember he wrote that the taste of the apple is neither in the apple itself- the apple cannot taste itself- nor in the mouth of the eater. It requires a contact between them. The same thing happens to a book, or to a collection of books, to a library. For what is a book in itself? A book is a physical object in a world of physical objects. It is a set of dead symbol. And then the right reader comes along, and the words- or

---

<sup>14</sup> Borges, Jorge Luis. This Craft of Verse. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2000.

rather the poetry behind the words, for the words themselves are mere symbols- spring to life- and we have a resurrection of the word. (3)

Borges recognizes that ‘books are only an occasion for poetry’. Could the World Wide Web, the clearest and most powerful exemplification of hypertext, be yet another occasion for the resurrection of poetry?

In some ways the hypermedia environment of the World Wide Web is a difference in degree, an extension of the major advances in democratization and accessibility made by public libraries, for instance<sup>15</sup>. In some other ways, it is a decisive break, a non-linear, multivocal, networked ethos that can subtly change our sense of what a text is and how we react to it.

As the main features of electronic text that distinguish it from print include its *searchability* (as opposed to a physical library), its *links* that connect it to supplementary and related text, and its *accessibility* (a forum for self-publication for writers and for readers, its unprecedented range of familiar and new kinds of material).<sup>16</sup>

For example, one of the founding members of Minstrels wrote, sending in an old beloved poem ‘Abdul Abulbul Amir’ with ‘its lighthearted bloodthirstiness that certain children enjoy’:

Ah, the wonders of the World Wide Web.

I first read this poem a good 15 years ago, in one of those marvelous rainy-day activity books that no one seems to buy any more Abdul and Ivan then dropped off my radar screen for many years, and it was only after starting the Minstrels that I remembered the doughty duo.

From remembrance to recovery, though, was a step both short and sweet, thanks to 'the invisible dragons of the electronic night'. I love technology.

He also mentioned that this poem was ‘best read out loud (or sung by drunken sailors) - with a large crowd of people joining in on the last line of each stanza’, and

---

<sup>15</sup> Browner, Stephanie, Pulsford, Stephen & Sears, Richard. Literature and the Internet: A Guide for Students, Teachers and Scholars. New York: Garland Publishing, 2000.

<sup>16</sup> Literature and the Internet, 169.

indeed, many, many readers chimed in with their memories, and links to raucous choral recitations of the poem.

George Landow, whose work on hypertext remains one of the foundational texts of this field explores the various ways in which the digital environment fulfills several properties of the text and the reader of the future, envisioned by literary theorists *avant la lettre*, by dint of its decentered, polyphonic and networked features.<sup>17</sup>

As Landow writes, hypertext radically undercuts the hierarchy of primary and secondary material because of the way linear sequencing gives way to personalized, meandering pathways and a profusion of entry points into the same material. Most significantly in the case of the *Wondering Minstrels*, hypertext collapses the segregation of main text and marginalia, between the symbolic authority of the poet and the critical response of readers.

Hypertext is especially apt for the special nature of poetical texts, which are ‘recursive structures built out of complex structures of repetition and variation. No poem can exist without systems of “overlapping structures”.’<sup>18</sup> Much more exhaustively than the printed book, hypertext allows fuller treatment of the implicit intertextuality of high literature, of how other texts collaborate with the poem at hand and how these literary topoi, these intertextual frames, as well as other idiosyncratic details add texture and dimension to the poem under discussion. For instance, a poem that alludes to Duchamp’s ‘Nude Descending a Staircase’ links to images of the actual artwork, as well as the poem set to music by a San Francisco group called Chanticleer.

---

<sup>17</sup> See Landow, George. [Hypertext 3.0: Critical Theory and New Media in an Age of Globalization](#) for a comprehensive account of how Derrida, Barthes, Bakhtin, Deleuze and Foucault described protohypertextual situations.

<sup>18</sup> See McGann, Jerome. [Radiant Textuality: Literature After the World Wide Web](#).

Another example, picked at random on Minstrels is a Coleridge poem called Cologne, describing ‘a town of monks and bones/And pavements fang'd with murderous stones’ polluting the river Rhine with its ‘two and seventy stenches’; which fans out into several such footnotes including Coleridge’s most famous poem Kubla Khan; a link to Carl Sandurg’s glorification of Chicago and Patrick O’Reilly’s invective-laden ‘Litany for Doneraille’; as well as a detailed excerpt and commentary on the Indian poet AK Ramanujam who wrote of Madurai, ‘city of temples and poets’ with its squalor and ordinary ugliness that were never appropriate poetic subjects; and then finally, an observation from a minister in Des Moines, Iowa, about the cathedral and feast in Cologne that the poem might be referring to. The poem nestles in this mesh of reference and cross-reference, all of which brings it alive in quirky and various ways.

The fact that Minstrels is located on the Web allows people to write with a far greater degree of informality and stylistic inventiveness than otherwise. Also, the archive itself is a wonderful example of what George Landow calls decentered reading, with its provisional points of focus. It recognizes none of the organizing logics of traditional anthologies, and has a loose-leaf freedom in the way it allows a reader to choose her own point of investigation. The best way to explore Minstrels is to click on the ‘random poem’ option and trawl the collection in a free-form manner. Even the smaller collections of poems run under ‘themes’ follow idiosyncratic routes like ‘Poems on Poetry’, ‘Poems on Mathematics’, ‘The Lays of Ancient Rome’, ‘Anti-love poems’ ‘Sea Poems’, ‘Poems Which Have Given Words to The English Language, ‘Poems and their better Parodies’, etc.



Hypertext has been compared to Deleuze's non-hierarchical rhizome concept<sup>19</sup>-- 'unlike trees or roots, the rhizome connects any point to any other point, and its traits are not necessarily linked to traits of the same nature'. On *Minstrels*, a comment on a poem like Blake's 'Jerusalem' rambles into Shakespearean sonnets, critical extracts on Blake himself, Emerson, Lake and Palmer's rock lyrics, Bruce Springsteen's music, speculation on whether Christ visited England, freemasonry, and heated debate on religion, socialism and patriotism, amid other erratica. On the Web, a poem's allusions and echoes can be followed at the click of a link, and then again, an entire host of readerly experiences takes the discussion into other unpredictable territories.

A striking example is Glyn Maxwell's *Deep Sorriiness Atonement Song*, for a missed appointment at the BBC—a long intricate verse, each line of which is an allusion to a giant goof-up in history or contemporary culture:

The man who sold Manhattan for a halfway decent bangle,  
He had talks with Adolf Hitler and could see it from his angle,  
And he could have signed the Quarrymen but didn't think they'd make it  
So he bought a cake on Pudding Lane and thought "Oh well I'll bake it"

But his chances they were slim  
And his brothers they were Grimm,  
And he's sorry, very sorry,  
But I'm sorrier than him.

The commentary follows some of these throwaway references, supplies links to more information and to other poems mentioned in the poem, and expresses mystification at others. Other members wrote in, correcting and clarifying the notes—a bit about 'nul points' referred, apparently to a Eurovision song contest where Norway broke all records by scoring zero—now cultural shorthand in England for a truly appalling performance. For texts like this that display their own collage and borrowing, the Web-based

---

<sup>19</sup> Landow, George. [Hypertext 3.0](#).

hypertextual context allows a collective intelligence to work on them and provides one-click access to other sources that might illuminate the material.

Of course, the Wondering Minstrels does not fully avail all the capacities of its format, often structuring itself as a printed page with navigation links clustered at the bottom of each comment rather than inserted into the text itself. Also the website itself does not exploit the connecting possibilities of the Internet exemplified in radically participatory online fan communities—as the group moderator suggests, Minstrels is more star-shaped, with the group moderators as the central point, rather than the ‘random graph thing that fandom is, with links forming all over the place’. Much of Minstrels’ novelty is predicated on its being an online phenomenon, the fact that there is virtually no cost in publishing and disseminating it, and the low barrier to reading, on the other side.

Also, it nevertheless permits the poem to be animated in ways previously impossible, it allows for digressions and surprises and marginalia, and all the wacky freedoms that an anthology would not, like links to audio, video and artistic collections. The website has a cellular, alive quality- it is constantly changing and extending itself, adding and accumulating everyday.

More than that, it fulfils the editorial and archival functions that computers can provide to literary studies. Any poem, with accompanying metadata can be searched and found with keywords. When geared towards the traditional ends of literary study, hypermedia can potentially be a vast improvement on the array of Norton critical editions that currently serve as aids to literary study, and provide much greater quantities of information, with intricate detail and better retrieval and organization capabilities. The

electronic poetry archive simply has greater powers of consciousness in comparison to a similar printed book.<sup>20</sup>

However, Minstrels members are themselves far from even considering the Web as a possible alternative to the book. Traditional champions of the book would be proud to see all their standard lines unselfconsciously trotted out by this online community. One member wrote in with Emily Dickinson's homage to antique books, the remote glamour of 'old volumes (that) shake their vellum heads and tantalize, just so'—describing how he felt browsing among old, rare books—

...the 'time machine'-like ability of the book to transport the readers to its own era and finally the crash back to the reader's own time- is entirely magical. Anyone who has read an old, musty-smelling, slightly tattered volume will vouch for whatever is expressed here. Obviously, this feeling is lacking entirely when you read poems/books over the internet!!!

Similarly, sending in a sarcastic poem/riddle from the ancient Exeter book about bookworms, the contributor comments that 'the disparaging comments the author makes about the bookworm could very easily apply to a certain type of scholar. After a thousand years, the criticism remains ingenious and perfectly apt'—and yet, whimsically enough, adds that—

The physicality of language fascinates me. Not just the sounds of words, nor even the feel of syllables rolling in my mouth; I'm equally entranced by weight and texture, the heft of a good book in my hands, the beauty of its pages. No surprise, then, that I love the curlicues and incidentals of medieval illuminated manuscripts such as the Winchester Bible and the Book of Kells.

Certainly, Birkerts would find people after his own heart on the Wondering Minstrels, people whose encounters with poetry are indeed marked by affection, love and often, awe, that the new medium has done nothing to destroy.

---

<sup>20</sup> See McGann, Jerome. Radiant Textuality, 6.

‘We dance around in a ring and suppose/ the secret sits in the middle and knows’, Robert Frost’s aphoristic poem featured on Minstrels prompted comments on the sacred mysteries of poetry, in both the composition and interpretation of it. The fact that the poem and the comment share the same space on the webpage does not destroy the sense of the numinous, but rather, intensifies it.

While the notion of a ‘classic’ work of literature is now more contentious than ever, the Wondering Minstrels certainly bears out Italo Calvino’s famous exploration of the idea, which stresses rereading as the true test, the sense of discovery and inexhaustibility that a superlative literary work contains within itself. Moreover, classic writings ‘come to us bearing the aura of previous interpretations and trailing behind them the traces they have left in the culture (or just in languages and customs) through which they have passed’, writes Calvino<sup>21</sup>. Hypertext is the ideal medium to probe into the accretions, debunk or celebrate a piece of literature that matters deeply, and indeed, do so collectively. The World Wide Web, as the most widespread form of hypermedia enables a polyphonic, combined consciousness to work on the poem.

Sending in a James Elroy Flecker poem called ‘To a Poet a Thousand Years Hence’, a Minstrels member wrote about this online community itself and the spark of connection in sharing poetry across immense spaces--

I have always enjoyed poetry, and I came across this poem first almost 40 years ago and was struck by what it said to me about how poets could communicate ideas across space and time; and also about loneliness. It was reinforced in 1995 when I first discovered email and the web - the last paragraph in particular being particularly poignant.

The last lines in the poem are,

---

<sup>21</sup> Calvino, Italo. Why Read the Classics? New York: Vintage, 2001.

O friend unseen, unborn, unknown,  
Student of our sweet English tongue:  
Read out my words at night, alone:  
I was a poet, I was young

Since I can never see your face,  
And never shake you by the hand,  
I send my soul through time and space  
To greet you. You will understand.

‘Every acquiescence to the circuitry is marked by a shrinkage of the sphere of autonomous selfhood’, writes Birkerts (28). His idea of reading is single-mindedly singular. However, reading is not necessarily a private communing with the ineffable—indeed, as I shall explore further, textual communities of practice crucially determine our ideas of literature.

The Wondering Minstrels represents not merely a shallow lateral connectedness but indeed, what Birkerts expects of ‘communion in an affective, soul-oriented sense’. Minstrels members share their passion for poetry and the written word across the vast global panorama afforded by the Web, coming close to what expatriate Indian writer Amitava Kumar<sup>22</sup> argues for, a poetics of community in South Asian diasporic writing—

This has to be a writing against solitude. For this to happen, poetry will have to step into the world, become worldly, speak from everywhere- like a newspaper, like television, like a friend visiting your home. It will need to inaugurate another politics of affiliation. And disaffiliation...This writing must be one of a movement- both in the sense of an engagement with a mass, and one that is tested on the grounds of the communities it opens, engages, interrogates in dialogue; but also in the sense of mobility, and hence, a political aesthetics that has the swing, the agility of history itself.

While Minstrels itself does not exploit all the potential of the medium, it has led the way for others to further extend the project. For instance, some members of Minstrels

---

<sup>22</sup> Kumar, Amitava. Passport Photos. University of California Press, 2000, 235.

recently started a blog called pō'ī-trē (audiopoetry.wordpress.com); which breaks many of the earlier constraints by being more diverse and democratic by its very format, and even more eloquently crystallizing the exciting possibilities of new media environments for literary texts. Pō'ī-trē is a blog of recorded poetry, both original readings by the poets themselves and by contributors. It includes poetry in all languages and this time, read aloud in the language it was written in, accompanied by the original text, translation and commentary (often borrowed from Minstrels). WH Auden's Oxford accents vie with the heavy Bombay accent of a member reading Wislawa Szymborska, with actor Amitabh Bacchan reading his father's Hindi poetry in his rich baritone, with a scratchy recording of Sylvia Plath, among others—poetry that speaks in many tongues and remains unmistakably itself.

It is a crazy claim to assume that the world has lost its use for reading simply because there is now a different way of access to words. Rather than dire visions of a bookless future, the Wondering Minstrels is an example of how the reading experience expands within the new medium. David Thorburn's concept of a 'continuity principle'<sup>23</sup> might be more a more useful handle on the relationship between the book and the web than the hostility and anxiety engendered on either side by the hollow dichotomy. Literature takes on a life of its own in the online world, just like anything else that enough people are passionate about. After all, Thorburn writes, 'the World Wide Web is more than technology, bandwidth and computers. It is a thing made of language and of history, a Web of Metaphor.' The Wondering Minstrels, a project that could only exist on the Web,

---

<sup>23</sup> Thorburn, David. 'The Web of Paradox'. In Rethinking Media Change: The Aesthetics of Transition. Ed Jenkins and Thorburn. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2003.

is an exercise in amplifying and enriching the power of writing, a celebration of literature that still lets life have the last word.

---

## **In Poetry Everything is Permitted: Literary Value and Interpretation**

‘The affective fallacy is a confusion between the poem and its results...it begins by trying to derive the standard of criticism from the psychological effects of a poem and ends in impressionism and relativism.’<sup>24</sup>

Ever since this New Critical literary injunction was formulated, circa 1949, generations of reader-response critics have pitted themselves against it—to investigate the supposed ‘error’ instead and claim the reader’s experience as generative of literary meaning.

The *Wondering Minstrels* could then, indeed be considered an extended exercise in affective fallacy—as forum that discusses poetry almost purely in terms of its effects, it is also an example of the phenomenon Janice Radway describes as ‘the warm-blooded, embodied sentimentalism and individualism of middlebrow culture.’<sup>25</sup>

Radway has traced this unique middlebrow aesthetic through the rise of Book-of-the-Month clubs in the United States. She explains how it was a highly specific response to a period of massive economic and social change, and how the particular configuration of taste it cultivated was bound up with a growing class fraction of professionals, managers, and information and culture workers (15). She departs from earlier work on

---

<sup>24</sup>.Qtd in Tompkins, Jane. Reader-response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980.

<sup>25</sup> Radway, Janice. A Feeling for Books: The Book-of-the-Month Club, Literary Taste, and Middle Class Desire. Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1997. p121.



middlebrow culture<sup>26</sup> to redefine the middlebrow as a profoundly modernist ideological response to the changes taking place at the time, a material as well as ideological form. I argue that the *Wondering Minstrels* remarkably mirrors several of these traits in a very different postmodern context. As a group dominated by a new globally mobile, techno-managerial class of South Asians, it reflects the tussle of identity and taste that marks their situation.

Literature is an institution and a discourse, and appreciating and *making* sense of a poem involves some degree of familiarity---ability to inscribe it in a poetic tradition, awareness of metaphoric conventions etc, what the reader is implicitly expected to know<sup>27</sup>. Literary taste claims autonomy for itself, but is heavy with what Pierre Bourdieu calls symbolic capital-- an ‘accumulated prestige, celebrity, consecration, or honour’ founded on the ‘dialectic of knowledge and recognition’. Middlebrow culture (*culture moyenne*), in Bourdieu’s terms, is a petit bourgeois phenomenon, organized to provide the outward signs of cultural legitimacy. He claims that this intermediary role ‘halfway between legitimate culture and mass production’ is an ‘avid but anxious, naïve but serious way of clutching’ at high culture, and tragically marked by ‘the middle-class relation to culture—mistaken identity, misplaced belief, allodoxia.’<sup>28</sup> While the *Wondering Minstrels* is unmistakably middlebrow in some ways (especially in its autodidacticism) it is rarely fearful and insecure, and paradoxically enough, also often

---

<sup>26</sup> Most notably Joan Rubin’s ‘Making of Middlebrow Culture’, which links it to the older, genteel culture of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, while Radway situates it emphatically in the institutional changes of modernization.

<sup>27</sup> For a fuller discussion, see Culler, Jonathan. ‘Literary Competences’. In Reader-response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism. Ed. Tompkins, Jane. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980.

<sup>28</sup> Bourdieu, Pierre. Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1984. p323-327

comes close to Bourdieu's contrasting 'bourgeois ethos of ease, a confident relation to the world and the self, which are thus experienced as necessary, that is, as a materialized coincidence of 'is' and 'ought'...casualness, grace, facility, elegance, freedom, in a word, naturalness'.

Bourdieu's relentless categorization includes what he calls the new petite bourgeoisie: 'classified, déclassé, aspiring to a higher class, they see themselves as unclassifiable, excluded, dropped out', and while this is not an entirely inaccurate description of some of the 'global souls' who make up the Wondering Minstrels constituency, it is also highly inadequate and one-sided as an explanation for this heterogeneous group, which cannot easily be summed up by class configurations alone.

One of the most cogent and interesting critiques of this Bourdieuan accounting for tastes comes from John Frow<sup>29</sup>, who recognizes the impossibility, in our current moment, of understanding cultural production in terms of a general economy of value. Frow prefers to think in terms of 'regimes of value', which is irreducible to a single perspective like class, but recognizes that concepts like 'high' and 'popular' culture still continue to organize the cultural field and to produce effects of cultural distinction.

Regimes of value are thus relatively autonomous of and have no directly expressive relation to social groups. In the case of 'high'-cultural regimes, this relative autonomy is an effect of historical survivals and of the relative autonomy of the modern educational apparatus, both of which then give rise to interpretive and evaluative traditions that do not directly reflect class interests. (Frow, 301)

Regarding popular culture, he asserts that 'the mass media work to form audiences that cross the borders of classes, ethnic groups, genders and indeed nations', and thus, for Frow, the 'fundamental' concept of regime is- 'that no object, no text, no

---

<sup>29</sup> Frow, John. 'Economies of Value'. In Reception Study: From Literary Theory to Cultural Studies. Ed Machor, James L and Goldstein, Philip. New York: Routledge, 2001. p301.

cultural practice has an intrinsic or necessary meaning or value or function, and that meaning, value and function are always the effect of specific (and changing, changeable) social relations and mechanisms of significations (301).’

In the case of the Wondering Minstrels, the domains of ‘high’ and popular culture are shifting, overlapping entities— the objects of attention range from traditionally exalted poetry to rap lyrics, and the attention paid to them also takes dramatically different tones from pedantic prosody to unabashed enthusiasm for personal reasons. Other impulses like postcolonial longing and cosmopolitan assertion also shape the protocols of reading and appreciation, further complicating the class-based ‘structuring structures’ suggested by Bourdieu. Frow points out that Bourdieu himself has made it abundantly clear that ‘cultural capital is always at best a partial good: at once an instrument of knowing (and in that sense *potentially* universal,) and an instrument of class distinction. (313).

The Wondering Minstrels certainly recognizes the cultural prestige of poetry, and like the middlebrow culture that Radway describes, aimed at people who want ‘to present themselves as educated, sophisticated and aesthetically articulate’<sup>30</sup> and it is also inflected by the simultaneous impulse to express a more possessive relationship with the poetry. As the founders of the group state on the website, ‘another reason we keep up the show is to challenge the widely held belief that modern poetry - indeed, 'serious' poetry of any sort - is 'hard', that it requires special skills and training to appreciate. This is simply not true, and it's our mission to demonstrate the fact.’

One of the earliest poems run on Minstrels was Alfred Noyes’ romantic ballad, ‘The Highwayman’, staple of schoolbooks across the world, which elicited very strong,

---

<sup>30</sup> Radway, Janice. p5.

personal reactions from people who were usually silent 'lurkers'. 'I lost my mother's poetry book 40 years ago with this poem in it and she has never let me live it down. I am sending her a copy and I know I will now be forgiven. Thank you, thank you, thank you', wrote one member. 'I LOVE THIS POEM SSSOOO..... MUCH! WHEN MY 7TH GRADE CLASS READ IT I FELL IN LOVE WITH IT WHEN THE FIRST LINE WAS READ. I LOVE ALL THE REPITION AND THE ALLITERATION NOYES PUT IN THIS POEM. THIS PEOM IS DEFINATLY ONE OF MY FAVORITES', screamed another. Several people recommended the Loreena McKennitt ('complete and beautiful') and Phil Ochs versions of the poem. 'What a pleasure to find this poem again after so many years! When I was a child, the picture painted by the first stanza made such an impression on me that I took the time to memorize it, and I still find myself repeating it whenever I happen to notice that the moon is a ghostly galleon tossed upon cloudy seas', wrote in one member. Another remarked that 'as a child, I appreciated the thrill of it. As an adult, I appreciate the depth of it.' Most of the reactions emphasized a strong personal connection with the poem, a teacher or mother or lover who brought it alive for them. 'The Highwayman is one of the most heartrending poems I have yet read. When I took in even the first stanza I loved it and even more did it fascinate me when I had finished. ... I am so glad this was posted on the Internet, for I have been searching for it since I read it in my 7th grade language arts class'. 'I learned the poem as a boy in England during WW2. One of our teachers (we called them form masters) used to recite it in the semi-darkness of the air raid shelter, to the rattle of machinegun fire as the Battle of Britain was fought over our heads. The ghostly thrill of the poem did much to alleviate the horror

of the mad world outside. I still get the same thrill when I read it today, more than 60 years later. Thank you for publishing it!’

In a certain sense, the *Wondering Minstrels* is closer to Henry Jenkins’ characterization of fans who recreate media artifacts by virtue of their own intense engagement—they ‘make it real’ by rejigging it for their own purposes—rather than the respectful distance that ‘high culture’ traditionally receives, this interaction is based on a fierce feeling of connection<sup>31</sup>. Most of the guest commentary on *Minstrels* is about gut-feelings of affection, admiration, dislike etc. -- the poem accrues significance through this reworking and what is lost in authorial aura is replaced by a readerly sense of pleasure in the text.

Instead of being a suspect category, sentiment is often defiantly celebrated as a valid approach to a poem. To a contributor’s sheepish admission that a ‘spiritual’ poem called ‘The Touch of the Master’s Hand’ brought a lump to his throat, one of the group moderators responded with some vehemence--

What I find sad is not just that this sort of poetry is falling out of vogue, but that people really *\*are\**, as Frank half-jokingly suggests, ashamed to admit that they like it. Somehow, ‘taste’ and ‘sophistication’ seem to have become equated with a kind of sneering cynicism whose popularity, I think, is attributable to the fact that it is far easier to *\*assume\** than true taste is. Personally, I enjoyed today’s poem (and similar ones like Adelaide Proctor’s “The Lost Chord” [Poem #520], but with the definite consciousness that this was, somehow, a less-than-respectable opinion.

The poem elicited similar strong reactions from other members, who wrote in expressing their enjoyment of the poem and their awareness of how it would not do to say so—‘but I, too, say ‘Phooey’ to those sticks-in-the-mud who can’t appreciate good

---

<sup>31</sup> Jenkins, Henry. ‘How Texts Become Real’. In *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*. New York: Routledge, 1992.

literature that makes sense’, ‘who are so hardened/cynical they can’t be moved by something fine like this’.

This is not to say that heaving emotionality is the rule on Minstrels—indeed many contributors shy clear of gush and prefer judging the poem by its formal properties, its context, or other qualities. However, bloodless appreciation of high art is eschewed in favour of sheer appetite, and affective response is certainly never considered inappropriate. Commenting on Sheenagh Pugh’s ‘Sometimes’, a reader remarks--

This is the sort of poem that puts a gleam into the eyes of manufacturers of greeting-cards everywhere <grin>. No, I take that back. The fact that commercialization often cheapens true emotion should not be used to denigrate the emotion itself. And the poem *is* a good one: sincere, honest, and more than a little bit touching. Not overly subtle (the poet herself deprecates it for this reason), but it doesn't have to be; it says what it wants to say beautifully and well. Who could ask for more?

Much like Jenkins’s description of fan culture, these interactions reveal a mixture of ‘emotional proximity and critical distance’ (278). The readers’ horizon of expectations is reconstructed in each encounter with poetry and with each other, whether it is manifested as translation, adjustment or conflict. For example, James Elroy Flecker’s poem ‘Cargoes’ provoked a flurry of responses, replete with anecdote and affect, making meaning from the poem by placing it in the various contexts of their own lives. One of the members reminisced about his schooldays, forty years ago when he first heard the poem and offended his teacher by laughing out aloud at the sheer impossibility of ‘quinquireme of Nineveh’ because he was a history buff and knew better—

Yes, I said, I could appreciate the beauty of the words, but I still couldn't help laughing at the anachronistic and geographical absurdities. I think that was the first time I was called a "Philistine". I was thrilled.

Another member described how he heard the poem in Glasgow in the early

Sixties and surprised a much-older colleague by reciting it, asking whether it was ‘just that the classics are taught for a little longer in Scotland. Shame they stop teaching such classics as these in the first place’. The same poem inspired a completely different reaction from another member, who associated it with the ‘best and worst memories of English literature at school’—

Best feelings first - the powerful images and the phrases which I can recall 40 years later. However, basically I have always loathed nostalgia and the very idea of having "classics" and a "canon" gives English Lit an inbuilt bias towards the past - particularly with works like this which purport to be descriptive but, on the face of it, appear to be totally false. Why not galley slaves, yellow fever and Oriana cruising the Caribbean?

A member from the Caribbean, however, begged to differ--

To put the question of the historical truth about this masterpiece is a sacrilege. So thrilled to find this exotic poem on your website because I had forgotten some of the words. I have been searching on and off for nearly a year with no success until today. This is a poem set to music that we sang at our High School Christmas Show, forty years ago in Jamaica, W.I. We felt so special as we sang those fancy lyrics on stage but besides that the words seem to transfer us to far away places....

Many, many people wrote in about the astonishing capacity of recall that this poem triggered—how the words ‘dirty British coasters’ and ‘Nineveh’ instantly brought up this poem, learnt decades ago in classrooms across the world.

Perhaps the most accurate way to describe the Wondering Minstrels as a collectivity would be what Tony Bennett calls a reading formation, which he defines as a semiotic apparatus, a ‘set of discursive and intertextual determinations that organize and animate the practice of reading, connecting texts and readers in specific relations to one another by constituting readers as reading subjects of particular types and texts as objects-to-be-

read in particular ways'<sup>32</sup>. Certainly, the various individuals and constituencies in the group, diverse as they are, have to agree on the rules of engagement held in common.

Regimes of value 'allow for disagreement, specifying the terms within which it can be enacted', and responses that fall outside these terms have no place in the group, so a reaction that says 'boring boring boring' is published, but ignored utterly. However, a disagreement on the status of popular song lyrics as poetry is perfectly acceptable, and one that preoccupies many group members. An Eminem submission on Minstrels compared it to Chaucer and John Skelton, tracing similarities between the verve of Middle English, noting that

To be perfectly fair, rap was never intended to be standalone verse - like many other song genres, it works much better with its accompanying music, and tends to suffer when printed in isolation. In particular, there is a certain apparent roughness to the verse rhythms that in actuality is not so much rough as performance-oriented. Rap may scan by sheer fiat in places, but it does so very convincingly. And, more than any other form I've seen, it has raised assonance to the status of a perfectly acceptable substitute for a true rhyme. The assonance mixes freely with the rhyme, and the both work - no mean feat.

The song got mixed reactions- while some members wrote in, 'saddened that Minstrels would choose to dumb down', others like a 53-year old 'Cohen and Dylan fan' expressed his dislike of hip-hop, but acknowledged that this love of words was the foundation for all poetry. While one member claimed to have hated it, another wrote in thanking Minstrels, because 'I am not the age nor do i live where i would have a chance of hearing this, or most likely understanding the words when rapped fast.' She wanted to be directed to other websites where she could 'read more rap songs?' Typical of Minstrels, the entire exchange wandered into a discussion of a similar brawling bit from

---

<sup>32</sup> Qtd in Frow, John. *Economies of Value. Reception Study: From Literary Theory to Cultural Studies*. Ed James L Machor and Philip Goldstein Routledge. New York. 2001. p295.



the Finnish national epic, Kalevala.

In response to a member's sweeping enthusiasm for Joni Mitchell's lyrics as superlative poetry, another member wrote, 'there can be no doubt that song lyrics are (sometimes) poetry. The stuff of poetry is coursing through a very great many of the best songs out there, in almost any genre you can think of.' He cited examples of consonance from Van Morrison, chilling metaphor from Kenny Rogers, general poetic genius from U2, rhyming poignancy from Cole Porter, and then qualified these with a Guns n' Roses song, a mediocre 'poem' but lyrics that work perfectly for the frenetic pace and driving urgency of the song, 'which is what really matters'—

But the thing is that song lyrics are only sometimes poetry. More often than not, they're just there to "fit" or "serve" the music. What the music supplies is intangible and (by definition) cannot be put into words. As a result, when you're looking at song lyrics, you're looking at half a work of art; there's no reason to suppose that that half can necessarily stand on its own.

When song lyrics are discussed on Minstrels, it is often accompanied by the reminder that there is more to it than words, and that we are missing out on (perhaps) the more meaningful dimension of the performance. The lyrics are then discussed with the kind of rapt attention that, say, an epic poem commands. Neither taste is threatened by the existence of the other, or is demeaned in the service of the other, and as a group, the Wondering Minstrels displays a remarkable evaluative bigheartedness in its selection and treatment of poetry. This is characteristic of what Janice Radway describes as the 'disturbing new nebula' of the middlebrow—'formed as a category by the processes of literary and cultural mixing whereby forms and values associated with one form are wed to forms and values usually connected with another' (Radway 128-9). It is also a defining feature of fan culture, which muddies these boundaries by perversely misapplying reading practices suitable to serious work like close scrutiny, elaborate exegesis, repeated

and prolonged re-reading etc, to pop culture ephemera (Jenkins 17).

The Wondering Minstrels is a hybrid beast in many ways, at once celebratory and irreverent, and the group members often take great pleasure in knocking poetry off its pedestal. Submitting one of the most beloved poems in English, Robert Frost's 'Stopping By The Woods on a Snowy Evening', one of the readers praised it for language and form, 'the predominance of soft, sibilant sounds, evoking the 'sweep of easy wind and downy flake' and 'yes, yes, he rhymed 'sleep' with 'sleep' - get over it. :)'; others flooded the page with analysis, anti-analytical diatribes, several requests for help with homework on this poem, and parodies like this—

**Trying on Pants on a Snowy Evening**

The pants fit lovely through my seat,  
But do not reach quite to my feet,  
And I don't have a sales receipt,  
And I don't have a sales receipt.

However, while forums like this can puncture the pretensions that surround the discussion of poetry, they also work in the opposite direction, against the facile dismissal of certain kinds of art. Iconoclasm and provocative opinions have to be convincing, defend themselves in the argumentative fray. For instance, a member wrote in to a haiku by Issa:

With the greatest respect. Is all this haiku stuff just a bit of political correctness. "We" (whoever we are) whupped their ass in the War so let's be nice to them now by pretending that we appreciate this twaddle. Twelve and thirteen-year old kids write this kind of thing at school and are persuaded by addled teachers afraid to stifle the poor little darlings' creativity that it is poetry.

To which another member replied:

Nope, the popularity of the haiku as an art form rests entirely on its own merits. With due respect, can

you think of \*any\* form of art that has achieved an enduring (as opposed to flash-in-the-pan) popularity and critical acclaim purely out of political correctness? Personally I'm quite taken with haiku, and India has afaik never whupped Japan's ass in \*any\* war :) Or do you mean that people praise it because they don't want to appear insensitive by denigrating a foreign form, whether or not they truly like it?

Conceding that 'there may be an element of overgenerosity towards translated literature, particularly poetry', he went on to argue for the rigor of haiku,

What I personally like about haiku is the concentration of the imagery, and the way in which each poem is a free-floating, perfectly self-contained entity. Also, given the almost crystalline rigidity of the form's outer shell, the haiku manages to achieve a wonderful organicness. Furthermore, they don't spoonfeed you - they make you \*think\* (something else I like about a lot of minimalist poetry). Reading a haiku is a far more active experience than reading, say, a narrative ballad a la Kipling - the reader has to supply a lot of context. I'd say this was related to the Zen koan, but I'm uncomfortably aware that I'm going out on a limb every time I talk about Zen, since all my knowledge of it is of the 'popular' sort. Try writing a few senryu, incidentally. It's surprising how much having to squeeze into a 5/7/5 form concentrates and sharpens your thought (though after a while you do come to appreciate that seventeen syllables are far roomier in English than is consonant with true minimalism).

Conversations like this abound on Minstrels, and to greater or lesser extents, they repudiate the notion that poetry is generally speaking, remote or inaccessible to all but a patient few. Even poems that refuse to surrender their secrets like William Carlos Williams's notoriously baffling 'The Red Wheelbarrow', is framed by thickets of voluble commentary.

so much depends  
upon  
  
a red wheel  
barrow  
  
glazed with rain  
water  
  
beside the white  
chickens.

While the person sending in the poem appreciated its simple elegance and evocativeness, its being 'more painting than poem', other members wrote in with all sorts of colliding opinions. There were comments like 'it's stupid. Nothing only depends on a

wet, red wheel barrow sitting beside white chickens’ and ‘I have to say that this poem makes no damn sense, all yall must b on crack if u can understand wut its supposed to mean’, as well as people trying to trace the fascination of the poem in its imagistic nature or the unexpectedness of its line breaks, or people who thought that it didn’t matter what it meant, only the effect it produced. An English teacher called it the perfect poem to teach his seventh-graders to distinguish the literal and the interpretative in poetry. And indeed, many people read their own meanings into it, ranging from Biblical references to statements on death and slaughter, implements and use-value, colors and their significance etc., but the general consensus was voiced by the readers who cast the poem as a call to the imagination, one that didn’t deliver itself to readily paraphrasable meaning, but a reminder that ‘poetry makes people use their imagination. I believe that for some people to make sense of poems they need to have an imagination’ and the ‘so much depends on’ in the poem was in fact, the ability to imagine.

This, and many such examples on the *Wondering Minstrels* are a demonstration of Stanley Fish’s theory that poetry is what is produced when one learns to look with poetry-seeing eyes. He offers an illuminating anecdote, of how he wrote down the names of some of academic colleagues on a blackboard (Jacobs, Rosenbaum etc), and then drew a frame around them and labeled it, and informed his students that this was a religious poem—upon which they immediately applied their familiar tools, interpreting it as an iconographic riddle and imbuing each of the names with their Biblical associations—Fish concludes that acts of recognition, rather than being triggered by formal characteristics, are their source.<sup>33</sup> It is not that the presence of poetic qualities compels a certain kind of

---

<sup>33</sup> Fish, Stanley. *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities*. Cambridge, Mass :Harvard University Press,1980. p43.

attention but that the paying of a certain kind of attention results in the emergence of poetic qualities.

Skilled reading is usually thought to be a matter of discerning what is there, but if the example of my students can be generalized, it is a matter of knowing how to *produce* what can thereafter be said to be there. Interpretation is not the art of construing but the act of constructing. Interpreters do not decode poems, they make them. (Fish 327)

This construction of meaning is a matter of literary competences<sup>34</sup>-- how a poem is read often depends on further frames of intertextual knowingness. For instance, an Arthur Yap poem, 'Scroll Painting' ending with the lines 'I know the stupid bird can never eat the stupid peach' was discussed in light of John Keats' 'Ode to a Grecian Urn'—both poems address the same theme, the stasis and cold perfection of art, and Yap's poem is clearly a reference to the Keats. The reader who contributed the poem, however, had missed the allusion and put a different spin on it—and the Keats reference was taken up and discussed, but not given any more credence on the discussion than other readers' opinions.

Interpretation and evaluation is also a blatantly personal matter on Minstrels, with a tacit acknowledgment that judgments are provisional and individual. For example, one of the members sent in a Seamus Heaney poem, concluding that 'this, finally, is art true to life', and was contradicted by another reader who pointed out the complex braided inseparability of art and life--'Aamir speaks as though poetry in general doesn't actually speak of real life' or that life isn't altered by poetry. A third reader wrote—

This is a beautiful poem, simple and direct. How many poets would notice the way that wet grass will bleach shoe leather? And that young people would ignore this. And the tinkling of slightly harder berries in the bottom of a can. Everything in this poem I did as a child. I couldn't say that about the great heroic Victorian poets.

---

<sup>34</sup> See Culler, Jonathan. 'Literary Competences'. In Reader-response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism. Ed. Tompkins, Jane. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980.

The standards by which value is determined and voiced varies from reader to reader, as does the language of appraisal. These differences often strikes sparks, as with WB Yeats's poems 'Prayer For His Daughter' and 'Leda and the Swan' which started a fiery debate on the idea of politically pointed criticism, political correctness, art and intention. While one of the readers characterized 'Prayer for His Daughter' as 'sexist tripe', 'rant and cant' that lowers Yeats in her estimate, another reader contradicted her with great feeling, pointing out the 'sonority and majesty' of the poem, its 'beauty in language, beauty in structure and beauty in sentiment' 'I do not hear any "boo hoos" in this poem but only the lush, elegiac lamentations of a Poet who was seriously wounded by love', he wrote, and further, 'What is the value of inflating a few residual excrescences so that you can dismiss great works of literature with a Mao-istic flicker of your P.C. index finger? I think this is a very sobering indication of where Things are headed.' This clash between sharply different ways of reading was echoed by the reader who sent in another Yeats poem, 'Leda and the Swan'. While admitting the power of this great and complex sonnet, he described himself as profoundly disturbed by it and quoted a feminist critic who also found it 'troublesome and potentially repugnant to some readers'. To which another member responded, asking exactly how this repugnance grows out of being a feminist critic (and how that's different from simply being a feminist)—that such repugnance, if felt, was a calculated effect of the poem and irrelevant to its legitimacy—he pointed out that

For instance, Pictures at an Exhibition contains a section that is well-accepted as an expression of Mussorgsky's anti-Semitism, makes the work no more or less than, musically, it is. I find Muzak (music that offends no one -- except, of course, people who like music) repugnant but, so what? Any given rape is what it is, and is certainly different, in essence, from its depiction or description, as is murder, assault, burglary and the like. Rape, as a subject, can, like any subject, be described or represented, artistically or otherwise. I hope that concepts such as "troublesome" or "repugnant" are not

the result of the subject, itself, as opposed to, perhaps, a point of view taken by the poet, with which one, to be sure, may fairly disagree.

If someone says that, being a feminist critic, he finds a poem about rape troublesome, then I would expect and want to read an explanation of how he arrived at that finding -- an explanation that includes the specific language in the poem and the specific aspect of his feminism that caused him to so react. Without that, I would find his comments (please forgive me) Maddening.

The first reader responded, qualifying that he did not go at the poem with a single-point feminist agenda, but only as someone conscious of the politics of gender. His rebuttal deftly deflated the challenging tone of the discussion and pointed back to specifics in the poem, explaining that it was not the theme of 'Leda and the Swan' that caused heartburn but that Yeats seemed to '1. glorify the power and sensuality of the rapist - "the feathered glory". 2. accede to the (male) belief that 'women love a bit of force' - "And how can body, laid in that white rush / But feel the strange heart beating where it lies?" 3. use the rape as a starting point for historical and cultural inspiration - "his knowledge with his power".' The discussion raged on, and while it might or might not have persuaded the second reader, it certainly enlarged the terms that are often bandied about in book-talk with more force than nuance.

As Hans Robert Jauss writes, literary understanding becomes dialogical only when the otherness of the text is sought and recognized from the horizon of our own experiences, and these are corrected and extended by the experience of other, whether this otherness is that of recipient and producer, between the past of the text and the present of the recipient, or between different cultures<sup>35</sup>. The Wondering Minstrels offers its members this opportunity to expand their tastes by getting introduced to poems that matter to others in the group, and to elaborate their responses to it. By stripping it of the

---

<sup>35</sup> Jauss, Hans Robert. 'The Identity of the Poetic Text'. In Reception Study: From Literary Theory to Cultural Studies. Ed Machor, James L and Goldstein, Philip. New York: Routledge, 2001. p9.

membrane that keeps it separate from life, it brings to the discussion of poetry the breathing, brawling, improvisatory and inventive character of our everyday.

---



## The Empire Reads Back

Once we accept the actual configuration of literary experiences overlapping with one another and interdependent, despite national boundaries and coercively legislated national autonomies, history and geography are transfigured in new maps, in new and far less stable entities, in new types of connections.

-Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*.

More than any other art form, poetry is a form of sentimental education, observed Joseph Brodsky. What forms does this take on a site like the Wondering Minstrels that both inhabits and estranges the enterprise of English literature? Investigating the protocols of reading that mark this group reveals the complex persistence of colonial histories in a moment of globalization that constitutes a ‘complex, overlapping, disjunctive order that cannot any longer be understood in terms of existing center-periphery models’ (Appadurai 1996). It is also a glimpse into how the participatory possibilities of the World Wide Web and the experience of global mobility have unsettled the traditionally authorized flow of cultural traffic from metropolitan center to postcolonial periphery. This community, I argue, is one of those *international* spaces that postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha envisions as ‘the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the *inbetween* space’, of the Internet (56).

The Wondering Minstrels cannot be cast either as mere belletristic waffle or as a clear feat of postcolonial self-fashioning. Rather, along the lines of Homi Bhabha’s

theoretical project, it is more productively read as an ambivalent point of textual address, an ongoing project of rearticulation and cultural hybridity.

As Bhabha writes—

The enunciation of cultural difference problematizes the division of past and present, tradition and modernity, at the level of cultural representation and its authoritative address. It is the problem of how, in signifying the present. Something comes to be repeated, relocated and translated in the name of tradition, in the guise of a pastness that is not necessarily a faithful sign of historical memory but a strategy of representing authority that in terms of the artifice of the archaic. (51-52)

Terms of cultural engagement are produced performatively; and as the Wondering Minstrels re-cites poetry on the Web, it becomes an arena for the performance of cultural difference, for literary alteration-- and indeed, altercation-- as canonical enclosures are challenged and debated.

To restate the claims of the first chapter, the non-linear, multivocal, networked ethos of the Internet changes our sense of what a literary text is and how we react to it, and this is significant in this context. For as Richard Lanham puts it, ‘the reader of the electronic word is the responsive reader par excellence’, since s/he can ‘genuflect before the text or spit on its altar, add to a text or subtract from it, rearrange it, revise it, suffuse it with commentary.’<sup>36</sup>

The privilege of great literary work, which was to sit still at the centre, now gives way to a Babel of contending assessments that frame it differently, that insistently insert themselves into the reading. For instance, responding to a remark by a Minstrels contributor on the ‘staggering brilliance’ of a poem, another member described how he ‘muttered a quiet bigdeal under my breath, and reread the poem to pretty much no diff. oh well. maybe I expected too much of a stagger.’ The fact that reactions on all these

---

<sup>36</sup> Qtd in Paul Erickson, ‘The History of the Book and Electronic Media’ in *Rethinking Media Change*.

different registers frame and surround the previously-hallowed poem crucially reshapes its reception.

Also, hypertext mischievously disrupts the relationship between marginalia and primary material. The *Wondering Minstrels* is an exercise in collectively and individually asserting ownership over some examples of canonized English literature by the simple act of writing personal comment to it. The ‘reconfiguration of main text and subsidiary annotation’<sup>37</sup> makes enshrined poetry accessible, and forces it into the fray by allowing for personal commentary, for backchat, for flippancy and erudition- and becomes, to repurpose Bhabha’s vocabulary, a new kind of ‘site of extra-territorial and cross-cultural initiation’ with an expanded set of enactive and enunciatory possibilities. The Web also blurs the delineation between public and private, the home and the world- creating a sort of interstitial intimacy between these polarities—a third space, an informal zone where previously small orbits of connection can suddenly span the world.

Although the *Wondering Minstrels* archive has got more diverse of late, it is still dominated by the big names of the English literary pantheon, if ‘dominated’ is an appropriate word to describe a looming presence. Certainly, the tone of the accompanying commentary is largely argumentative and unimpressed, rather than crushed by the symbolic authority of the canon- and yet, sneaking, contradictory tensions occasionally surface—the anxieties of the autodidact, the ambivalence of mimicry as well

---

<sup>37</sup> Landow, 70. According to George Landow, hypertext comes close to Barthes’ notion of an ideal textuality by drawing the reader in-- The goal of literary work (of literature as work) [which] is to make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text. Our literature is characterized by the pitiless divorce which the literary institution maintains between the producer of the text and its user, between its owner and its consumer, between its author and its reader. (S/Z, 4)

as the triumphalist assertion of indigeneity, the championing of differently-formulated humanist values rather than a head-on repudiation of colonial norms.

In Salman Rushdie's *The Moor's Last Sigh*, a drunken artist called Vasco Miranda fumes at the infamous legacy of colonial literary studies<sup>38</sup>--'Bleddy Macaulay's Minutemen...bunch of English-Medium misfits, the lot of you...Even your bleddy dreams grow from foreign roots.'

This accusation is later revisited by Zogioy, the protagonist, only to assert that--

We were not, had never been that class. The best, and worst were in us, and fought in us, as they fought in the land at large. In some of us, the worst triumphed; but still we could say-- and truthfully-- that we had loved the best.(Rushdie 1995)

The Wondering Minstrels is certainly motivated by affection rather than opposition, as the group members reveal how these poems are lived experiences, endowed with an abundance of personal association. They certainly do not appear torn between India and the English tongue they love, but approach this literature with resourceful reading strategies of 'counterpoint, intertwining and integration' (Said 259). This vernacular cosmopolitanism<sup>39</sup> interrogates the idea of the planet as a 'concentric world of national societies' (Bhabha xiv); and this altered approach to international connections carries along with it an awareness of the shaky, constructed character of the nation-fiction.

---

<sup>38</sup> Referring to Thomas Macaulay's 'Minute on Indian Education' (1835), the document that instituted English education in India with the aim of creating a class of clerks, who would imitate their imperial masters 'in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect', and would entrench the Empire by serving as interlocutors between them and the governed.

<sup>39</sup> I borrow Bhabha's term 'vernacular cosmopolitanism' (which measures global progress from a minoritarian perspective) with some caution- I am certainly not making any claims of subalternity for this group- rather, they occupy that peculiar position of privilege and marginality that characterizes the postcolonial elite.

For example, one of the members sent in Rudyard Kipling's 'Recessional' to comment on the ubiquity, the tired repetition of its last line, 'Lest We Forget;' to whip up emotions of chest-thumping nationalism in remembrance of the recent Kargil war between India and Pakistan. His commentary rejects the discursive address of nationalism; asserts cultural difference by reading it differently- by revealing the meaninglessness of the ceremonial sign, its reproducibility across contexts, and to the same hollow ends. As Bhabha writes, 'minority discourse acknowledges the status of national culture- as a contentious, performative space of the perplexity of the living in the midst of the pedagogical representations of the fullness of life.'(220). The commentary goes on to add-

So as I said, I have mixed feelings about this whole Kargil thing and that's why this poem is so appropriate. Because "Recessional" is really all about mixed feelings. Kipling wrote it at the most triumphal peak of the British Empire - Queen Victoria's Jubilee in 1887 when the Empire truly was the greatest power on the globe. The Jubilee was the obvious occasion for celebrating this achievement, yet Kipling chose not to do so. Instead he wrote this poem which warns vividly about the perils of hubris and the transience of power. Watch out, Kipling warns the revelers, none of this is lasting, nor does it matter. And of course, he was right. The British Empire has vanished so completely that today we can even lay claim to its icons - like cricket which everyone now says belongs to the former possessions rather than the home country.

This ambivalence attests to a distinct awareness of the deliberate composition of the national image, and the way that the same language lends itself to utterly different contexts-- causing 'mixed feelings' about the entire enterprise of performing power. For Bhabha, any cultural performance is informed by linguistic difference, the split between the content of a statement and its positionality, so that an act of interpretation is not transfer of meaning, but the active production of it in a third space marked by ambivalence, one that undercuts traditional symbolic fixities-- one that reveals how 'the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew.'(55) The utterances of this group are inflected and altered by their positionality, this 'discursive

embeddedness and address' that revises traditional authority in counter-intuitive ways.

For instance, one of the striking things about Minstrels is the way most members (both Indian and otherwise) seem rather bighearted about Rudyard Kipling, defiantly defending him against the charge of being an apologist for Empire. 'Readers of Kipling's best work have regularly tried to save him from himself', said Edward Said (145); and Minstrels bears him out completely. Says an Indian member, commenting on a Kipling poem--

'The Buddha at Kamakura' should also serve as a rebuttal to those who continue to view Kipling as a heavy-handed imperialist, a relic of bygone colonial days. It's true he sings the praises of the British Empire (more specifically, of the soldiers and scribes who built that Empire), but he is also more tolerant, more honourable, and above all, more *universal* than many of his contemporaries and latter-day critics.

And he had a rare gift of words - his verse, whether the Cockney slang of Tommy Atkins or the pulsing rhythms of the Jungle Book or the archaic patternings of today's poem, is always vibrant and alive, and it sticks in the memory.

To which, another (presumably British) member added-

Kipling was criticised by the establishment of the Empire at the time of his writing for being too close to the native and too close to the native's aspirations. Now he is criticised for being right-wing and imperialistic. When both sides criticise, I think you have it right.

Another contributor mentioned 'that little idea he had about the white man's burden', but rationalized it testifying to how Kipling 'was simply a product of his time'. This striking refusal to allow the blurred, unfinished matter of oppressive histories into the shared pleasure of poetry shows up in another instance, over the discussion of Henry Newbolt's poem, 'A Ballad of John Nicholson' - a poem that the contributor was both 'attracted and appalled by', describing as it did the fanatic, murderous zeal of a British Brigadier during the 1857 war of Indian independence (Have ye served us for a hundred years/ And yet ye know not why?/ We brook no doubt of our mastery,/ We rule until we die).

The contributor of the poem found himself repelled “because, of course, I'm an Indian and see a few more sides than what Kipling or Newbolt saw, but with the dispassionate - and jaundiced - eye of someone who's over a hundred and fifty years removed from the situation, and has nothing to rely on except rather skewed versions from both sides (who were equally guilty of the cruelest atrocities).” To which a British contributor wrote in, offering some justification for Nicholson’s extreme opinions (citing his Afghan experience, his extreme religiosity, and that anyway, British justice was probably a step up from the Mughal attitude to treason). He pointed out that too many British people in India ‘went native’ for them to be dismissed merely as conquerors and exploiters, and this love affair of the British with India is what ‘made us so difficult to dislodge’ and indeed, he himself visited Delhi with his son two years ago and enjoyed every moment. The Indian contributor responded-

See, I don't have any particular beef with the British...what they did, they did. Both good (like welding a country together out of several hundred tiny states ruled by royal families—the Mughal empire covered about 30..35% of India, FYI, and then giving us a set of laws and an administrative framework that is still retained in large parts in modern India, giving us the English language ...) and bad (treating India as a huge source of natural resources - but suppressing industry, passing fairly repressive laws on occasion.)

Does this dialogue testify to a new kind of comparative literature project, an emergent planetarity that ‘writes the self at its othermost’ (Spivak 2003), or to the long triumphant afterlife of Macaulay’s Minute?

In part, this curious characteristic of the group, the tendency to think oneself into the place of the colonizing power, even claiming an Archimedean distance from the histories of domination and exploitation (not to assume that a formerly subjected people are incapable of reactionary stances); is linked to their idea of themselves as occupying a

different, more expansive place, a changed moment that has rendered older animosities irrelevant.

Certainly, this momentum of newness and this implicit universalism is linked to the claims of utopian globalization and the redefinition of cultural traffic that members of the *Wondering Minstrels* seem directly invested in. Interestingly, Rabindranath Tagore's famous prayer, 'where the mind is without fear and the head is held high/ where knowledge is free/ where the world has not been broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls' is read almost as a manifesto for a globalized, upwardly-mobile India-

Each time I read Tagore's poem, it brings tears of happiness into my eyes to see my country finally coming of age - out of the 'dreary desert of dead habit'...Also Gandhi's 'Sabko sammati de bhagwan' - resonate - as we charge as leaders into the knowledge economy of the new millennium!!

Bhabha cites Hannah Arendt's claim that minorities are part of that on-going process of 'human artifice', where 'we are not born equal but become equal as members of a group on the strength of our decision to guarantee ourselves mutual equal rights' (introduction: xxiii); and asserts, with Du Bois that 'a minority only discovers its political force and aesthetic form when it is articulated across and alongside communities of difference, in acts of affiliation and contingent coalitions' (xxii). This alter-native modernity, imperfectly realized as it may be in the real world, finds fuller expression in the fecund, articulate ethos of the World Wide Web.

However, the bitterly solid grip of the colonial past on the postcolonial present also surfaces on *Minstrels* discussions. For instance, Henry Newbolt came up again in a theme on cricket, 'those flannelled fools at the wicket', where an Indian reader railed against his narrow notion of the white man's burden that

does not even extend to the common gardner / labourer class. His 'white man' is the starched, pucca sahib imperialist, educated at Eton/Harrow/Oxbridge, and well-versed in the ways of the sahib, cricket,



tennis and an education in the classics, with a ingrained belief that somehow, the English gentry was put at the pinnacle of creation, to liberate and uplift the rest of humanity.

To which an English reader responded,

I was taught this poem at school and it should be put back on the curriculum straight away, the sentiments are noble and the fact that they can now be ridiculed is a sad comment on how far we have allowed our noble past to be forgotten. I lived in France for many years and they knew how to respect the achievements of their Empire. Half the world laughs at us for what we are but half the world would be uncivilised without us.....or however the quote goes.

He was seconded by another member, who wrote—

It's one of the few poems that moves me to tears whenever I read it -- how anyone can think of it as "Imperialist" simply defeats me. As others have already written, it is about honour and duty, simple virtues which were once taught at school, just as today we teach "citizenship" (whatever that may be).

One of the ways in which the Wondering Minstrels asserts its cultural difference-in-equality is in the way it appropriates Western literary work and cuts through colonial motives to excavate its potentially universal readings. For example, to stick with the Kipling theme, one of his poems ‘The Flowers’, opens with this epigraph--

To our private taste, there is always something a little exotic, almost artificial, in songs which, under an English aspect and dress, are yet so manifestly the product of other skies. They affect us like translations; the very fauna and flora are alien, remote; the dog's-tooth violet is but an ill substitute for the rather primrose, nor can we ever believe that the wood-robin sings as sweetly in April as the English thrush. — THE ATHENÆUM.

The poem itself reminds the (colonial) listener of English posies, ‘Kent and Surrey may —Violets of the Undercliff wet with Channel spray’, ‘Cowslips from a Devon combe —Midland furze afire’ that cause memories to well up; flowers to buy in remembrance for a distant someone, homesick for sweet England-

Far and far our homes are set round the Seven Seas;  
Woe for us if we forget, we that hold by these!  
Unto each his mother-beach, bloom and bird and land —  
Masters of the Seven Seas, oh, love and understand.

The young South Indian woman sending the poem to Minstrels writes- ‘although

manifestly a song for English patriots, there is something in it for everyone' and speaks through the language of colonial nostalgia for England to express her own longing for her faraway home, that she 'can never read this without smelling the scents of parijath, jasmine, champak, kewda (thazhampu), sandal and the myriad other scents of India', and remembering the mynah and the sparrow that twitter in the 'other skies' there.

Much commentary on the Wondering Minstrels is suffused with nostalgia. For instance, the reader who submitted Li-Young Lee's poem 'Persimmons', described how it resonated for him personally--

First comes the manner of speaking of English. By virtue of being a "non-native" speaker, I usually tend to be very imprecise about my pronunciation. I simply have a sound within my head that I had to make up for myself sans any other point of reference for a lot of words. As an example the other day I was using the word Hyperbole. I said hyper-bol and had dropped the 'e'. I was corrected: "the difference between persimmon and precision." Then a few days ago at a gathering, I was quickly asked to say "Thank you" in Hindi, when I realised by the virtue of non-use I had forgotten that sound. It didn't come to me right away.  
"Crickets: chiu chiu. Dew: I've forgotten.  
Naked: I've forgotten."

He then connected the way the poem uses persimmons 'to link the poet with his parents and of the days past. Similarly eating mangoes out of a bottle linked me to summers and mangoes in India and the koel's song.

"I took them and set them both on my bedroom windowsill,  
where each morning a cardinal  
sang. The sun, the sun."

And then there is this great ending:

"Some things never leave a person:  
scent of the hair of one you love,  
the texture of persimmons,  
in your palm, the ripe weight."

Instead of being read as an alien imposition, English poetry becomes a medium to reconnect with memories of Indian childhood, as this reader writes to Tennyson's 'The Brook'--

I also had this poem in the 10th standard, sometime in 1994. I never thought sitting in the class listening to a poem about a brook thousands of miles away written at least a hundred years before my time. It appeared to me about a subject, the brook that was completely alien to me. But the words of the poem today bring joy of the days gone by, the days of my childhood back home in India.

In other obvious ways, the poetry is merely a peg for people to engage with their immediate contexts. As a group dominated by globally mobile Indians, some common concerns often surface under the guise of gut-reactions to these texts. Poetry, as Lila Abu-Lughod demonstrates in her study of Bedouin love poetry<sup>40</sup> can offer a space for self-revelation that is denied by immediate social norms. For example, one of the members sent in a Naomi Lazard poem called 'Ordinance on Arrival', which she compared to the situation of newly arrived immigrants in Canada. The discussion veered into a highly charged one of FOBs and ABCDS (Fresh-Off-the-Boat and American-Born-Confused-Desis, both terms of disparagement for first and second-generation expatriates respectively). Other members chipped in with metaphors for the struggling nature of their identities (using terms like eggs/bananas/coconuts etc-- derogatory slang for 'white' values that have seeped beneath the skin of racial others). This provoked another commentator to point out that Lazard was referring to the permanently and violently dispossessed Palestinians rather than the fight for comfortable citizenship among the class of immigrants that the Indian contributor contained the poem to.

And indeed, it is the preoccupations of this shifting population of relatively affluent

---

<sup>40</sup> Abu-Lughod, Lila. Veiled Sentiments : Honor and Poetry in a Bedouin Society. Berkeley : University of California Press, 1986.

professionals that loom large in the discussion; questions of immigration, nostalgia and belonging that rear their heads most memorably in Minstrels commentary.

For instance, one of the readers sent in a poem called 'Winter '84' by Krisantha Sri Bhagiyadatta about a conversation in a 'corner store' run by an Indian, musing on perceived racism—

I was born and raised in India and have been in Canada for less than a decade but I've never really experienced any racism. That said, my parents who recently moved here (about three years ago) from India, go to great lengths to avoid eye contact/conversations with anyone that speaks different or, in their view, is "very Canadian". They feel unequipped to engage in casual conversations with white folks and so all their interaction with them is typically on a "as needed" basis. And so, if, as it sometimes happens, they're approached by a friendly neighbour who knocks on the door to inform them about a missed fedex delivery or something similar, their first reaction, much like Bhagiyadatta, is always unease and anxiety. Mum will wonder if her cooking is emanating unpleasant odours or if her blaring music (of Nusrat or Bollywood tunes) is causing a nuisance. When they find that it's something to do with fedex and that the "white" neighbour is actually quite a harmless and friendly guy - they're pleasantly surprised and quite relieved.

Discussions on Minstrels are often direct or oblique discussions of readers' own situations, enthusiasms and impatiences. For example, a point of contention was Indian feminist poet Eunice D'Souza's work, around 'whether Indian women of her milieu are as victimized as Ms D'Souza claims', whether her take on oppressive arranged marriages is accurate, or just put in there as a quirky and exotic custom calculated to appeal the foreign readers of her poetry. Thus, when read between the lines, the 'breathless gush' and sentimentality of much of the commentary on Minstrels is especially fascinating for the subtext, for the sociocultural anxieties made manifest through the discursive frameworks of poetry and surrounding discussion.

Even beyond this, however, to describe the workings of the Wondering Minstrels solely as a dominated aesthetic would also be to ignore the genuine classificatory challenge such groups present to the logic of circulation in the literary field.

Certainly, much of the anthology is mired in the etiquettes of colonial education, which still shape the Indian schooling system. Breaking down the submissions by category, one finds that the *Wondering Minstrels* is still weighed down by the profound impact of the English literary canon- which is inevitable when the most significant encounters with poetry even in today's decolonized Indian classroom would be with Blake or Tennyson rather than with comparable voices in contemporary world literature, or even Indian writing. Within a certain kind of conceptual straitjacket, then, the *Wondering Minstrels* can be read as a colonially determined, subordinate and parasitic project- a group of privileged professionals bonding over the canon-fodder that made up their school education.

However, the remarkable fact about *Minstrels* is in the wielding of these texts precisely by those who were meant to be passive objects of pedagogy; the interpretive kinks and off-kilter readings of classroom classics as well as the insertion of texts never encountered there; the democratic jostle of an anthology that springs out of a non-hierarchical collective intelligence; and the *enactment* of the argument over canonical poetry which are, after all, both texts and historical experiences<sup>41</sup>.

An early 'famous' poem that fired a flurry of excited responses was Keats' 'On First Looking Into Chapman's Homer'- which is telling, because it describes the momentous discovery of Greek classical literature through an English translation, by a poet who was himself excluded from the world of privilege and cultural capital.

---

<sup>41</sup> 'If configurations like Anglophone literature or world literature are to have any meaning at all, it is because by their existence and actuality today they testify to the contests and continuing struggles by virtue of which they emerged both as texts and as historical experiences, and because they challenge so vigorously the nationalist basis for the composition and study of literature.' (Said: 317)

Similarly, poems like ‘Lochinvar’, ‘The Highwayman’, ‘Tintern Abbey’ tapped into deep wells of memory and emotional connection.

Many other submissions, however, use this space to write back to poems that were inflicted on them as ‘significant’ poetry. Parodies of famous poems like Wendy Cope’s ‘Waste Land Limericks’ and ‘Strugnell’s Rubaiyat’, Kenneth Koch’s ‘Variations on a Theme by William Carlos Williams’ and Phoebe Cary’s grim/funny re-readings of Shakespeare and Marvell, Adrian Mitchell’s tremendous spoof of Wallace Stevens, ‘Ten Ways To Avoid Lending Your Wheelbarrow to Anybody’ etc. have been immensely popular on Minstrels. Irreverence seems to come with the territory, the familiar postcolonial writing strategies of inversion, paradox and oxymoron, of what James Joyce called ‘two thinks at a time’.

One of the themes running on Minstrels was ‘The Silk Route’, which included poets from Li Po to Marlowe, Graves, Flecker, Cavafy and Browning- and as the group moderator observed at the end of it-- ‘covered a fair bit of ground– historically, geographically, and poetically’--

We started our journey in 8th century China, home of Li Po and his friend Tu Fu. Our caravan then crossed the endless steppes of Central Asia, where we encountered Tamburlaine and his mighty armies on the way to his capital, golden Samarkand of story and song. Next, we climbed the high Pamirs and descended into the orchards and meadows of Rumi's Persia. From Persia, we made our way across the deserts of Araby to the very gates of Damascus. We set sail from a Syrian harbour a few days ago, and now, laden with silk and spice, porcelain and perfume, jade and jewels, we cast anchor in sight of our home port, Venice. You can revisit all the above people, places and times, at the Minstrels Archive.

The Orientalist associations are both called up and punctured- for instance, the person sending in the Flecker poem clearly enjoys the exoticism, ‘dust and distance and magic and loveliness in every syllable’-- but also, in another example, pokes fun at the ‘larger-than-life or at least vivider-than-life imagery’ that the East compels in Western writing. (He quotes a bit from a story by Saki, about a poem describing the amber-drenched dawn,

the amethyst and washed emerald of mango groves-- to which the acerbic response is-- 'I've never seen the dawn come up over the Brahmaputra river', said Bertie, 'so I can't say if it's a good description of the event, but it sounds more like an account of an extensive jewel robbery'.) Interestingly, a British contributor parodies Flecker's famous poem, *The Golden Road to Samarkand* (to bombastically describe the charming town of Ilford, across the Essex marshes) to great comic effect.

Also, several shining examples of the Great and the Good of the English canon are collected under the theme- *Poems Often Quoted by Bertie Wooster* (an allusion to English comic writer PG Wodehouse's immense popularity in India; and a flippant, slantwise angle into poetry by such eminences as 'The Poet Keats' and 'The Poet Burns'). However, refiguring the literary bequest of Empire is only one aspect of the community, which is rich with mixed-up intercultural influences. Incongruous arrangement is part of it's astonishment- the letter C on the archive, for example, is home to writers as diverse as Hayden Carruth, Raymond Carver, Catullus, Constantine Cavafy, Cempulappeyanirar, Mei Yao Ch'en, Harindranath Chattopadhyaya, Geoffrey Chaucer, and GK Chesterton.

Aijaz Ahmed, in his essay on 'third world literature', argues that it comes filtered back to the so-called Third World through a complex set of metropolitan mediations, with the processes of circulation and classifications already inscribed in its texture. Certain authors, genres and questions are privileged by the metropolitan critical avant-garde as appropriate Third-world texts and then received back by these places as a sort of 'counter-canon'. However, I suggest that online communities of letters, through their

participatory platforms, provide a unique chance to break out of the circuits of global elite literary flows, and in some tiny measure, allow newness to enter the world.

The unselfconscious way in which Sukumar Ray's Bengali nonsense-verse is placed along with Edward Lear, Lewis Carroll and Gelett Burgess and indeed, 'The Golden Trashery of Ogden Nashery', or the way ancient Indian poets like Bhartrahari and Nammalwar are part of the same collection that houses Dante and Virgil, casually smashes traditional curriculum logic.

The school system is subverted in other ways by this online anthology. Sending a translation of an Urdu poem by Faiz Ahmed Faiz, one of the group members described his fascination with the genre, voicing the bind of many young Indians who have never learnt the complicated script because the language has been sidelined in most schools, but have experienced the gorgeousness of the language spoken; and have come up against the inadequacy of translations- 'Urdu seems to allow for the expression of sentiments that would seem exaggerated translated, but which work within Urdu.' He then described how he had to juggle English and Hindi translations to get 'some faint, fleeting idea of Urdu', that 'elusive, emotional quality (which) makes it worth reading'<sup>42</sup>.

One of the members wrote in- 'A discovery for me on this mailing list is the large body of Indian-English poems. I feel a bit like Columbus trying to find the new world and discovering India', and wondering about other 'dialects of English poetry'. The large body of poems sent from Australia and the Caribbean, or even Singapore and China and

---

<sup>42</sup> The case of Urdu poetry is a telling example of how the shadow-lines of national borders are disturbed by the World Wide Web. Urdu, the courtly language of Mughal India is marginalized by the Indian schooling system but lingers on in lived culture- it is still the official language of Bangladesh and Pakistan. Online literary salons like *mehfil-e-mushaira* and *urdupoetry* provide poems in the Roman script with glossaries and discussion boards, and attract aficionados across the subcontinent as well as people in the diaspora, with different degrees of familiarity with the poetry.



Canada, sometimes in aggrieved tones ('I'm shocked that AD Hope is missing from Minstrels', or 'I have to say that Southeast Asian poets are rather under-represented in this group, and Singapore isn't exactly the cultural dearth that some people think it is'), creates conversation between formerly colonized regions without metropolitan mediation.

Of course, the global asymmetries of cultural-intellectual distribution remain solidly in place—as Philip Altbach writes, 'industrialized countries using a world language'<sup>43</sup> still dominate the systems which distribute knowledge, they control publishing houses and produce scholarly journals, magazines, films and television shows which the rest of the world consumes. The literary field is materially circumscribed by various metropolitan interests and this has tangible effects on our categories of the literary (Bourdieu, *Rules of Art*).<sup>44</sup>

In all too many ways, globalization follows the tracks of existing (US-driven) geopolitical configurations and former imperial practices.<sup>45</sup> I am not suggesting that the Web as a radically participatory new medium can undo neoimperial cartographies or aspire towards some ideal world republic of letters. Literary judgment is based on the unspoken classifications of cultural capital, on the pulls between recognition and consecration that mark artistic evaluation, and those categories are far from unsettled by

---

<sup>43</sup> Altbach, Philip G. "Literary Colonialism: Books in the Third World." *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*. Ed Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. New York: Routledge, 2006.

<sup>44</sup> However, Bourdieuan class-analysis is complicated in this case by the impulses of postcolonial desire and cosmopolitan assertion. For instance, the extent to which Americana displaces the sway of English literature; how Sting and Eminem are respectable preferences on Minstrels while Indian song lyrics may not quite make the cut yet.

<sup>45</sup> Brennan, Timothy. "From Development to Globalization: Postcolonial Studies and Literary Theory." *The Cambridge Companion to Postcolonial Literary Studies*. Ed Neil Lazarus. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

the demotic, collaborative impulses of the Web. However, the question that Minstrels raises, as a 'live' demonstration of a taste-community in flux, is the issue of how shifts in the larger political field can affect taxonomies of taste and judgment.

The Wondering Minstrels offers the opportunity for a polyphony of voices, for the invention of cultural value in a hybrid third space. The community is an eloquent example of what Edward Said envisioned as 'the voyage in' - whether actual or imaginative émigrés, their incursions prove that 'no longer does the logos dwell exclusively, as it were, in London and Paris' (Said 244). By speaking for themselves, they are no longer merely 'the good object of knowledge, the docile body of difference' (Bhabha 46), but active agents and creative readers of texts who negotiate and reinscribe the forces of cultural centering.

---

## Conclusion

Dislocation and hybridity, at multiple levels, is the theme that runs through my study of the Wondering Minstrels. The project steps across several disparate lines—between metropole and margin; between writing and reading; between high art and appetite; between traditional and new media.

The impulse of poetry itself is one of movement and unexpected discovery—as the Irish poet Roy Fisher said in an interview, the poem ‘has business to exist . . . if there’s a reasonable chance that somebody may have his perceptions rearranged by having read it’. The poem exists as a subversive agent, ‘psychologically, sensuously’, and the aim is to produce a dislocative effect.<sup>46</sup> As an enterprise dedicated to the celebration of poetry, the Wondering Minstrels can traverse imaginative territory as wide and various as the world itself.

However, the unboundedness of Literature is still constrained by the institutions that teach people how to read. As Jonathan Culler writes, ‘reading poetry is a rule-governed process of producing meanings; the poem offers a structure which must be filled up and one therefore attempts to invent something, guided by a series of formal rules derived from one’s experience of reading poetry, which both make possible invention and impose limits on it.’<sup>47</sup> Moreover, in a larger sense, the process of generating meaning and the politics of literary reception on the Wondering Minstrels are

---

<sup>46</sup> Qtd in Kleinzahler, August. ‘Snarly Glitters’. *London Review of Books*. 20 April 2006.

<sup>47</sup> Culler, Jonathan. ‘Literary Competences’. In *Reader-response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism*. Ed. Tompkins, Jane. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980.

shaped by the pressures that act on its core constituency, namely, a globally dispersed postcolonial elite.

Postcoloniality itself is a hybrid cosmopolitan site that disrupts and destabilizes the assumed correspondence between space, place and culture—hopelessly tangling together the erstwhile colonizer and the colonized, creating the uncanny effect of one-in-the-other.<sup>48</sup> This expansive impulse gains extra edge due to its placement on the World Wide Web, which indeed allows the community to be simultaneously ‘locally inflected and translocally mobile’<sup>49</sup> to a far greater degree than previously possible. The social imaginary of this group stakes a claim on the world; and media is a form of mobility, along with physical migration, that enables people to participate in a global public sphere<sup>50</sup>. There is no frigate like the Internet to take us lands away, as Emily Dickinson might have said today.

Of course, I could not possibly ascribe ‘I am subaltern, hear me roar’ motives to the people who participate in this digital diaspora—namely, a class of comparatively well-off postcolonial professionals uniquely positioned to reap the benefits of globalization. They inhabit, rather, the enviable position of being able to claim both marginality and privilege.<sup>51</sup> I also do not mean to deny what Gupta and Ferguson warn against as the dangerous ‘temptation to use scattered examples of the cultural flows dribbling from the ‘periphery’ to the chief centers of the culture industry as a way of

---

<sup>48</sup> Gupta, Akhil and Ferguson, James. ‘Space, Identity and the Politics of Difference’. In *Globalization*. Ed Appadurai, Arjun. Durham: Duke University Press, 2000. p 77.

<sup>49</sup> Cooppan, Vilashini. Qtd in Damrosch, David. *What is World Literature?* Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2003. p22.

<sup>50</sup> Gandhi, Leela. *Postcolonial Theory: a Critical Introduction*. New York: Columbia Press, 1998.

<sup>51</sup> As Homi Bhabha puts it- ‘the globe shrinks for those who own it’.

dismissing the ‘grand narratives’ of capitalism...and thus of evading the powerful political issues associated with western global hegemony.’

Certainly, the complex aftermath of colonialism cannot be altered (even for the tiny clutch of people who are the subject of my study) by this new fluidity made possible by media and migration. The ‘perverse longevity’ of the colonial history is ‘nourished in part, by the ‘persisting colonial hierarchies of knowledge and value’, in which the *Wondering Minstrels* with its cosmopolitics is often complicit—especially in the way it celebrates the literary legacy of Empire while disavowing its violent roots, by claiming newness, a clean break ‘informed by a mistaken belief in the immateriality and dispensability of the past’. (Gandhi 14)

However, in other ways, the group adopts a more thoughtful, ironic approach, not repressing but remembering the trauma of history and yet seeking an emergent space of freedom to celebrate that mixed heritage. In his gorgeous poem, ‘Pied Beauty’, Gerard Manley Hopkins praises God’s glory for ‘dappled things’, ‘skies of couple colour’, and ‘all things counter, original, spare, strange’. So it is with the *Wondering Minstrels*-- the wondrous thing about the project is its capacity to undermine traditional fixities by its ongoing acts of cultural translation, aided by the participatory medium that houses it and the cultural chutzpah of the people who contribute to it, it presents a robust challenge to the logic of keeping things in their place.

## WORKS CITED

- Abu-Lighod, Lila. Veiled Sentiments : Honor and Poetry in a Bedouin Society. Berkeley : University of California Press, 1986.
- Ahmad Aijaz. In Theory: Nations, Classes, Literatures. New York: Verso, 1992.
- Altbach, Philip G. "Literary Colonialism: Books in the Third World." The Post-Colonial Studies Reader. Ed Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. New York: Routledge, 2006.
- Appadurai, Arjun. Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996.
- Birkerts, Sven. The Gutenberg Elegies: the fate of reading in an electronic age. Boston: Faber and Faber, 1994.
- Borges, Jorge Luis. This Craft of Verse. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2000.
- Bhabha, Homi. The Location of Culture. 1994. London: Routledge, 2004.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. The Rules of Art : Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field. Trans. Susan Emanuel. California: Stanford University Press, 1996.  
--- Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1984.
- Brennan, Timothy. "From Development to Globalization: Postcolonial Studies and Literary Theory." The Cambridge Companion to Postcolonial Literary Studies. Ed Neil Lazarus. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.
- Browner, Stephanie, Pulsford, Stephen & Sears, Richard. Literature and the Internet: A Guide for Students, Teachers and Scholars. New York: Garland Publishing, 2000.
- Calvino, Italo. Why Read the Classics? New York: Vintage, 2001.
- Coit Murphy, Priscilla. 'Books are Dead, Long Live Books'. In Rethinking Media Change. . In Rethinking Media Change. Ed Jenkins, Henry and Thorburn, David. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2003.
- Culler, Jonathan. 'Literary Competences'. In Reader-response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism. Ed. Tompkins, Jane. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980.

- Erickson, Paul. 'The History of the Book and Electronic Media'. In Rethinking Media Change. Ed Jenkins, Henry and Thorburn, David. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2003.
- Fish, Stanley. Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities. Cambridge, Mass :Harvard University Press,1980.
- Frow, John. 'Economies of Value'. In Reception Study: From Literary Theory to Cultural Studies. Ed Machor, James L and Goldstein, Philip. New York: Routledge, 2001
- Jauss, Hans Robert. 'The Identity of the Poetic Text'. In Reception Study: From Literary Theory to Cultural Studies. Ed Machor, James L and Goldstein, Philip. New York: Routledge, 2001.
- Jenkins, Henry. Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture. New York: Routledge, 1992.
- Kumar, Amitava. Passport Photos. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000.
- Landow, George P. Hypertext 3.0 : Critical Theory and New Media in an Era of Globalization. Baltimore : Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006.
- McGann, Jerome. Radiant Textuality: Literature After the World Wide Web.
- Neruda, Pablo. 'The Word'. Cantos Ceremoniales, Plenos Poderes. Random House, New York: 1962.
- Radway, Janice. A Feeling for Books: The Book-of-the-Month Club, Literary Taste, and Middle Class Desire. Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1997.
- Rosaldo, Renato. "A World in Motion." Globalization.. Ed. Arjun Appadurai. Durham: Duke University Press, 2001.
- Rushdie, Salman. Imaginary Homelands. Essays and Criticism 1981-1991 London: Granta Books 1991  
 ---. The Moor's Last Sigh. London : J. Cape, 1995.
- Said, Edward. Culture and Imperialism. New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1993.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. Death of a Discipline. New York: Columbia University Press, 2003.
- Thorburn, David. 'The Web of Paradox'. In Rethinking Media Change: The Aesthetics of Transition. Ed Jenkins and Thorburn. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2003.

Tompkins, Jane. Reader-response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980.

Viswanathan, Gauri. Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India. New York: Columbia University Press, 1989.

---