

Spiritual Poetry in the Tropics: A Reading

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Spiritual poetry has a strong pulse in the tropics. It is nestled within a current tidal surge of new writing in Far North Queensland. North Queensland Writing is IN –and the soul songs of our poets are coming to light. My main focus today is on the grass root poets and spiritual poetry emerging right here and now. First a few introductory points, then a brief overview to place today's work within a historical framework of spiritual poetry

The culture of a country or nation is always apparent in art forms. Poetry is one of the fine art forms which exhibits its special character and powers by means of selected language. Poets choose the medium because they have something to say and because they are skilled in the use of poetic devices to hold attention. This is a personal perspective and spiritual poetry for me reveals the songs which spring from the poet's inner journey. They emerge from encounters with life experiences—be it the continuum of life and death; mystical experiences or peak moments of wonder and mystery.

There is a twin connection between culture and spirituality. "CULTURE" from Latin Cultura : To till, to cultivate, improvement by mental or physical training, way of life of a people. So CULTURED infers cultivated, enlightened. "SPIRITUALITY"—there are pages on this, but the state or quality of being spiritual...spiritual character ... is linked with the culture of the land and the way of life of a people. Culture and Spirituality are not fixed states, but can be reflected upon to gain an overall picture of trends or development. A study of spiritual poetry in particular shows definite trends since colonization to current writing.

By now you will have recognized my English-Kiwi accent. My passion for spiritual poetry grew during my 30 year diploma studies with Trinity College, London. I was fed and nurtured on classical poets like Jesuit priest Gerard Manley Hopkins, *-Glory Be to God for Dappled Things*, Matthew Arnold, Wordsworth and Dylan Thomas *Do Not Go Gentle into That Good night*. In New Zealand I was a writer influenced and closely befriended by Post Transitional poets (Hemi) James K. Baxter, Hone Tuwhare, and Sam Hunt who shaped the development of spiritual poetry in a young country.

Now, Queensland is a comparatively young nation and parallels of development can be noted. Boundaries between religious, spiritual or inspirational poetry are blurry but to clarify my framework of historical development today I have drawn basic categories and am not including translations of indigenous oral spiritual traditions.

The basic trends

Early settlers to Queensland brought with them the cultural baggage of Victorian Europe. Cultural baggage also meant a culture of separatism with Scot, Irish, English shown in poetry. Stuck with traditions of Victorian prosody plus English words that were not appropriate for the new country, for the main part verse was a simple rollicking jocular commentary on pioneer pursuits. New Zealand historian J. C. Reid wrote: "*few literary occupations are more depressing and less rewarding than a study of N.Z. verse before 1890.*" I have the same feelings about Australia and the Queensland nation which separated from New South Wales in 1859 .

One of the first major spiritual voices in Queensland was Brunton Stephens. Mary Hannay Foott and George Essex Evans wrote traditional verse forms and bush poetry but strands of religiosity came through no better than the latter's final lines in *The Grey Road*.

*O Christ who trod the thorny path
And bore the bitter load,
Have mercy then on weary men
Who tread the long grey road.*

This depicts the exhaustion and weariness of settlers setting up homes and pitted against a new environment.

Moving into the 20th Century

Traditional metrical rhythms and rhyme remained intact with little free verse. Most spiritual poems focused on loss of place and separation from loved ones. Transportation of words in poetic literature remained difficult and the change of seasons had to be adapted to. (See for example "Practicing the Anthem" by curate's wife Ada Cambridge contrasting Christmas church in Victoria and England.) Poets still led to overly sentimental religious verse.

Following World War 1 and through the 20's James Devaney was the leading figure. The first anthology of Queensland verse came in 1924. Literary societies were established and in 1936 Paul Grano founded the Catholic Poetry Society. Poets James Picot and Brian Vrepon were members. Grano was also later instrumental in the formation of *Meanjin Papers*. Does that name still ring a bell today?

A new generation of poets came into light in the 40's and 50's amongst them Judith Wright and Gwen Harwood and John Blight. They could be likened to their NZ counterparts, Post Transitional poets who brought poetry out of a long Victorian shadow into the confusing light of 20th Century thought and action.

Here and now

Contemporary spiritual grass roots poetry in Australia is strong. In the Tropics it is unique. The culture of Far North Queensland is still in the process of defining itself. The life

of the people is linked with the land, the lush tropical environment, the wonder and majesty of sea and the burgeoning vibrant life force in all directions. The challenges of life and natural disasters in the tropics are met by settlers from all corners of the world. This is an accepting multi-faceted society which also still retains strong traditional religious roots whilst other sacred traditions are becoming integrated into everyday life. Religious poetry is revealed in church newsletters and on the net. Strands of spiritual poetry glimmer through the *Connect* magazine, anthologies from writers groups like Tropical Writers, *Under One Sky* from Licuala Writers, and *Trident* from Ravenshoe poets. It is not always in the public domain—it is an intimate creative force. It is not lofty or didactic but personal often subtle or understated. As a mentor, a poetry assessor and workshop tutor I read much original descriptive verse that praises the environment—but at a psychic touristy long lens distance.

The spiritual poetry I want to introduce today follows the pattern map of the whole history I outlined earlier. It shows dimensions of separation, transition to settlement, and the soul lyrical wonder of tropical surroundings through the individual writer's inner journey to this place at this time. I present the work of a handful of contemporary tropical grass roots poets writing in Cairns today. They are: Margaret MacIsaac, Diana Messervy, Paul Innes, Letizia C. De Rosa, Diane Andrews, Magda Palmer Cordingly, Christine Eyres., Hank West, Hayley Hohn and myself Hazel Menehira,

THEME OF SEPARATION

A poem dedicated to the migrants who built Cairns, the regions of FNQ.

“Circumstantial Traveller” by Letizia C. De Rosa

When two roads meet, the winds of change
echo many goodbyes.

Some proclaim:

‘Here lived a family who has left us. They left for a
better life, to avoid the strife. They left for another country.’
Those left behind don’t understand.

The future and the past meet at the traveller’s crossroads
where bitter winds howl - they’ll never return home.
The circumstantial traveller has no home.
Leaving is painful, arriving is final.
Their children have no past.

“Tide” by Christine Eyres

Rushing seaward
yellow brown black leaves
plastic drink bottles
a bald tennis ball
mangrove spears bob vertical
lost children seeking place to root

“Homeland” by Hayley R. Hohn (first stanza)

The seas they separate us.
Yet deep within my heart
I feel a longing stirring
The longer we're part.
Your shores I've never seen before
And strange as it may seem
I feel the ties between us
Like a tightly sewn seam.

THEME OF LETTING GO FOR A NEW LIFE

“Lain dormant” by Hank West

A long time have I lain dormant hidden *within* my soul,
buried beneath the earth of mistrust,
violence and rejection,
a stranger to my own self
clawing my way out of a deep pit.
Whole again, true again, self again,
strong enough now to be who I am
No longer shaped by others lives,
no longer held by others needs,
no longer anyone to blame,
free from the strait jacket of strangers' minds uncomprehending differences.
Strong enough now to heal and whole, walking into a new world,
a new man, no anger, no hate, glad to be alive.

“Repentance” by Margaret MacIsaac

The road of repentance is long and hard.
Paved with broken pots.
Splintered wood.
Shards of glass.
I stagger. reel,
Stumble,
Fall.
How easy to lie
To be skinned by the sun.
Carrion for birds of prey.
But this journey demands to have an end.
So rise and crawl
With bloody hands
And knees torn raw.
Until at last all debts are paid.
The rest so sweet.
The peace so deep.

THEME OF HOPES AND DREAMS

“Please Pray And Hope And Imagine And Dream” by Paul Innes

Please pray and hope, imagine and dream,
And let in your mind, light be shed,
Don't dwell or cry, or be ashamed or redeemed,
On what's been done and been said,
Conjure, create, manifest and meditate,
On anything new in your head,
Wonder and search for fresh ideas,
Be curious, suspicious not mislead,
Inevitably your desire will fulfil itself,
Conceived with love, it shall be fed.

“Burn Bright” by Hank West

I long **SO** much to break out of my skin,
to burn bright as a meteor streaking
like the sun of heaven across the sky
for a moment, only for a moment.

Life *is* but a brief moment,
not to whimper like a broken spirit
but to burn brightly in my time
and then be gone.

THEME OF OTHER SPIRITUAL TRADITIONS, CULTURES

“Ah” by Paul Innes (Ancient Buddhist meditation)

Ah yes it dawned upon me,
Ah right to learn so much,
So **Ah** and set the soul free,
Because **Ah** you know is such,
An emotion of joy or pain,
A thought of realisation,
A word that is the main,
Beginning of all sensation,
In laughter or fear,
Or after a beer,
Ah is the God of comfort,
In joy or sorrow,
Ah we'll do it tomorrow,
Ah you can like it or lump it,
Ah.

“Retreat I beg you” by Hazel Menehira

Don't quote your bible at me
remind me of a resurrection.
Retreat, I beg you, leave
my spirituality intact
religion holds no place for
me nor death a sting
requiring explanation.
Retreat, don't cram my head
with words and scriptures
don't quote your texts
your man-made consolations.

Sunrise, sunset are enough for now,
rain clouds, soft mists, silent
walkways, ebbing tides are fine
companions for a saddened heart.
Retreat to let me breath in tune
with nature's gentle melodies,
that waves and breezes blow.
Tangaroa, Tane-mahuta, Tawhiri-matea,
Nature's gods welcome pagan poets
my tropical karakias rest with them.
Text bearers depart, understand
I bless your good intention but
retreat into your man made clubs,
I do not fit within the rigid walls
of stately narrow spires.

Ta ne-mahuta: Maori God of Nature, personified God of Sun.

Tangaroa : Maori God of Sea.

Tawhiri-matea: Mori God of the Wind.

“The Merchant's Excuse” by Magda Palmer Cordingley

“Oh no” whispered the girl
looking at the lone framed butterfly.
“It's against my beliefs to have something
that died unnaturally”.

“Not so” smiled the seller
“This butterfly lived a full life;
Alive, her wings pinned to paper
she died. Naturally”.

“Then so” whispered the girl,
“you are forced to a desert
and left, your arms pinned to stakes;
You'd die naturally”?

“Quite so” smiled the seller;
“Yet still do you not understand
that you too are pinned to fate
and you will die – naturally”.

“Letting Go” by Hazel Menehira

Life and Death hold mysteries
within themselves, no weight of
words can reach, define, explain,
no pens of sages, gurus, seers,
philosophers, theologists,
nor tomes of scientists, can reveal.
They only point a way,
suggest accessibility from
limited accumulated knowledge.

Relinquish words, theories, opinions
speculations, traditional beliefs,
discard all second, third-held words
sacrifice all one thinks one knows.
Go empty handed, vulnerable,
defenceless then there’s just
a chance soul wisdom will
discover a slight sign-post
glimmer of its own, to bask
in the reflected glow of
mysteries we might never know.

Life and Death hold mysteries within
themselves, secrets inextricably
reciprocally linked.
Only participants are invited to explore.

THEME OF LINKING TO THE LAND

“While weeding the garden” by Diane Andrews

while weeding the garden
I discovered
the petal
which nurtures the seed
the womb of the flower
drops
and becomes the food
on which the seed
feeds
the seed grows

petals form
drop...

“Thin Places” by Diana Messervy

(Thin place...a means whereby the sacred becomes present to us. Marcus Borg)

Celts believed thin places
sites of sacred energy where
spirit shimmered through dry bones
and gilded grey of stones.

Australian ancients understood
the thinness of Carnarvon Gorge
and full moon over Hinchinbrook,
rising mist from billabong
as earth breathed out the night,
and Brahminy Kite, thermal soaring
speck in morning eye of sky.

Impassive Brahman mothers chew,
while offspring romp, face off,
butt heads for schoolyard honours;
brolgas land like hang gliders
at Bromfield Swamp; cacophony
of cockatoos fly home;
Faure's Sanctus plays
to gold remains of day.

You stand outside in gathering damp,
hold baby bundled against cold,
breathe the fragrance of his head.
Like candle in rice-paper lamp
the moment's grace a thin place.

“When You Are Most Alone” by Hazel Menehira

When you are most alone,
by pounding surf on
damp firm sand,
where lush palm
fronds curtain
a burning sun,
when you are most alone,
on weathered river
rock, or rain soaked bark
to feel the pulse of

Mother Earth, then-
when you are most alone,
between the thoughts
that bless, there comes
a spiritual gentleness.
Vibrant life, gull, leaf, tree
move in exquisite harmony,
a cosmic dance
enfolding you, bringing
delight, awareness new-
when you are most alone.

“Alone” by Hank West

I prayed at night
outside it is dark
inside a low lamp shines
outside a bird sings
I prayed and answers came
answers meant for me
outside first light appears
through dark shadow trees
dawn is breaking

“Blessing Enough” by Hazel Menehira

Waking with a poem in the heart
words on the lips to write it
is enough

enough
to set the hours in motion
enough
to ignore an unreal world
more than enough
to forgive humanity’s record of stain-
higher powers can sort that out

one poem in the heart each morn
with words on the lips to write it
is blessing enough.

Recommended Background Reading for Spiritual Poetry in the Tropics

British

Development of English Poetry and in particular John Donne, 1573-1631 Gerard Manley Hopkins, 1844-1889 The Romantic Revival poets.

Australian

Australian Religious Poetry selected by Les A. Murray 1986 ISBN 0859243737 (Queensland poets included)

Two Centuries of Australian Poetry 2007 ISBN 9781921276071

New Zealand

Spirit in a Strange Land 2002 ISBN 1-869620970

Early Poets: Blanche Baughan 1870-1958; Ursula Bethell's *Sabbath*

Transitional and Post Transitional: Denis Glover's *Sunday Morning*, A.R.D Fairburn, Robin Hyde, R.A. K. Mason, Eileen Duggan, Keith Sinclair, Alistair Campbell, CK Stead, Fleur Adcock

Recent and contemporary: Hone Tuwhare, Lauris Edmonds, Kevin Ireland, Elizabeth Smither, Vincent O'Sullivan, Cilla McQueen, Sam Hunt,.

Queensland

Early Poets: James Brunton Stephens, Mary Lucy Fisher (1872-1929), *The Lord in the Wind*, Mary Hannay Foote, George Essex Evans,

20th Century: Peter Austen, Post Modernism: James Devaney, Paul Grano, Paula Fitzgerald, James Picot, Brian Vrepont, Judith Wright.

A Handful of Contemporary Tropical Grass Roots poets writing in Cairns introduced today:

Margaret MacIsaac, Diana Messervy, Paul Innes, Letizia C. De Rosa, Diane Andrews, Magda Palmer Cordingly, Christine Eyres. Hank West, Hayley Hohn Hazel Menehira,

Favourite post transitional and contemporary N. Z. Poets

Song for Holy Saturday J.K. Baxter 1958 ;

Oterei Rivermouth Sam Hunt.

Christ did not fly Quantas to Sydney Keith St. Carmail;

A Cortege of Daughters Elisabeth Smither.