

JAMES K. BAXTER'S INDIAN POEMSⁱ

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I myself am quite convinced that India was a sort of crossroads, and Jim, being the kind of person he was, had no choice but to turn in the direction of a new and then unknown destination—Jerusalem. I'm not now just referring to a particular spot on the map. The immediate and obvious effect on him as a writer produced *Howrah Bridge*, but this of course was only the tip of the ice-berg. And this is what India did to Jim the man. I mean ordinary man. It didn't shake him *to* his foundations ... but *from* his foundations. And it took nearly 10 years to find himself again in a new relation to God and man.

—Jacquie Baxterⁱⁱ

Introduction

Between September 1958 and April 1959 James K. Baxter took up a UNESCO Fellowship to study educational publishing in India. His biographer writes of the poet's encounters with extremes of poverty, of his recurring sense of shock and alienation at being the single European face in a sea of people, and of his unmediated experiences of death and disease.ⁱⁱⁱ Baxter's comments on his Indian poems in *Howrah Bridge* (1961) indicate the significance of the transformation India worked on him:

the first part was written some time ago by a man who thought he was a New Zealander; the second part lately, in the past two or three years, by a man who had become, almost unawares, a member of a bigger, rougher family. The poems written in India mark this change.^{iv}

Are Baxter's Indian poems simple markers of a change, or do they reveal something about the nature of that change and the influences and experiences that caused his allegiance to shift to 'a bigger rougher family'? Reading the poems closely, with Baxter's own symbolism as the predominant frame of reference, it becomes clear that

this important sub-corpus documents a process of change that, as his wife argued, ultimately turned him in the direction of Jerusalem.

The Indian Poems

For most of his life Baxter preserved his poems by entering the final drafts sequentially in a series of notebooks now held in the University of Otago's Hocken Library. His time in India is covered by notebooks XIX and XX (Hocken MS704/19 and MS704/20), which show that, including the poems marking his arrival in India ('Air Flight to Delhi', MS704/19:68) and his New Zealand homecoming ('Return to Exile', MS704/20:24), Baxter wrote fifty-two poems that could be broadly described as 'Indian poems'. But many of these poems bear no relation to India; being further explorations of themes and ideas he had been working with before he left New Zealand. Other poems, while relating broadly to Baxter's time in Asia, are unlike the six poems in *Howrah Bridge* he was clearly referring to when he wrote 'the poems written in India mark this change.' These six poems, which were published in chronological order, all begin with a concrete image from Baxter's Indian experience—'Rivers like lizards', 'the stair of Qutub Minar', 'villages of fish and oxen', 'This Indian morning brown as Icarus', 'The moon's vast geometric nimbus', 'Accordion and sweet brisk drum'—which is then elaborated in ways that reflect on life and writing, often by working into the poetry characteristic symbols and favourite myths. Based on these criteria, a further eight poems out of the fifty-two also qualify as Indian poems, bringing the total to fourteen, of which seven have been published. The following list includes the Hocken reference and, where relevant, the page reference in *Howrah Bridge (HB)* and Baxter's *Collected Poems (CP)*. Not included are earlier or partial drafts of later poems and some, like 'Goan Folk Song', that are translations or experiments with traditional forms.

'Air Flight to Delhi', MS704/19:68, *HB*29, *CP*193

'Shalimar', MS704/19:70

'Howrah Bridge', MS704/19:71, *HB*30, *CP*194

'The Yoke', MS704/19:72

'The Carvers', MS704/19:75, *HB*31, *CP*195-6

'Madras', MS704/19:82, *CP*197^v

'Calcutta', MS704/19:83

'This Indian Morning', MS704/19:94, *HB*33, *CP*198

‘Possibilities of Madness’, MS704/19:96
‘Letter from India’, MS704/19:101
‘Night in Delhi’, MS704/19:104, *HB34*, *CP198-9*
‘Elephanta’, MS704/20:6, *HB35*, *CP201*
‘Goodbye to India’, MS704/20:19
‘Return to Exile’, MS704/20:24

The Journey

In ‘Symbolism in New Zealand Poetry’ Baxter observes the voyage or journey recurring ‘in all literature as a symbol of man’s life-span; but, more specifically, as a departure in search of new knowledge.’^{vi} He illustrates this by quoting Allen Curnow: ‘Simply by sailing in a new direction / You could enlarge the world’.^{vii} Where Curnow’s voyagers were expanding their geographical knowledge, Baxter’s Indian journey expanded his understanding of humanity, causing him to shift allegiance from New Zealand to a ‘bigger, rougher family.’

If the Indian poems are read with Baxter’s symbolism of the journey in mind, two things stand out: the first is the focus not on the whole, but on a portion of a life-span, its mid-point to be precise; the second is the way Baxter transcends the classic symbolic account of the search for new knowledge by focusing more on what is discovered than how it was discovered, and by committing to the record his intentions for putting this new knowledge to practical use. The poems highlight one more thing: the knowledge Baxter discovers in India is not really new, it is knowledge already known from earlier journeys. But whereas in New Zealand this knowledge had begun to vegetate, in India it is sufficiently rejuvenated to send Baxter in a new direction.

Back to Adolescence

India was Baxter’s second experience of severing his ties with New Zealand. As a boy in the late 1930s he went with his family to England and Europe, returning at puberty ‘out of touch with my childhood companions and uncertain whether I was an Englishman or a New Zealander’.^{viii} The experience was painful but he conceded its value: ‘I fell into the habit of poem-writing with a vengeance’.^{ix} Exacerbating his isolation were the immediate years of war when, as the son of pacifists, he was persecuted and spent much of his teenage years in solitude.

Although India caused Baxter to recall the pain of adolescent alienation, he enjoyed the anonymity there that he had lost in New Zealand. Thus the Indian poems return to the defining themes and modes of his teenage verse from a mature, nuanced perspective: the mythologised figures of the adolescent self are developed with greater complexity; the long poem 'Letter from India' is connected to, but significantly different from, early epistolary poems addressed to Noel Ginn; adolescence is frequently alluded to, but not always negatively; and Baxter's perspective on New Zealand life develops distance and objectivity reminiscent of poems written from the marginalised position he came to value in the 1940s. There is also an altered perspective on the experience of adolescence. The adult Baxter no longer views it as 'a very arid time'^x but wishes he'd known 'that in spite of all the guilt and uncertainty, [he] had something right then that [he] would never have again'.^{xi}

The Wounded Body

At times in India Baxter must have thought ironically of his stirring words at the 1951 New Zealand Writer's Conference:

The typical dilemma of the modern poet is one of divided aims. A man who is working ... in a society he knows to be unjust, cannot dare to think clearly on moral issues; for the society is part of his physical and even psychological security. If he breaks with the society and departs into the Wilderness in customary Romantic style, then he loses brotherhood with all but similar outcasts. What Justice demands is something more difficult—that he should remain as a cell of good living in a corrupt society, and in this situation by writing and example attempt to change it.^{xii}

Certainly the poem 'Letter from India' turns a cynical eye on the brashness of youth, perhaps recalling only the bleak assessment that the poet 'who turns his eyes from the fact of human suffering is involved in self-betrayal'.^{xiii} In an explicit reference to Allen Curnow, 'Letter from India' rejects the respectable path:

A poet has to learn to stand upright
And comprehend a world of bleeding stone.

So it is that in 'Howrah Bridge' we find Baxter lying awake, his mind captured by images of the poor, his own body, the metaphorical body of his art, wounded by their suffering:

In the unsleeping night my thoughts
Are millet falling from an iron pan,
...
The rupee god has trampled here;
The poor implore a Marxist cage.
Dragon seed, the huddled bundles lying
In doorways have perhaps one chilli,
A handful of ground maize.
King Famine rules. Tout and owl-eyed whore
Whose talons pluck and stain the sleeve,
Angels of judgement, husk the soul
Till pity, pity only stays.

*Out of my wounds they have made stars:
Each is an eye that looks on you.*

Such wounds are at once sources of illumination, symbols of second sight and oracular vision, and new ways of seeing. Like the decaying body, the wounded body of the later poems also has its source in the experience of India.

The Problem of Religion

One of the first problems Baxter faced in India was the problem of religion. In the Indian poems a recurrent theme is a divide he perceives between his Christianity and Hinduism:

like the banyan tree a Hindu's thought

Accepting all things human, even Hell,
Drops aerial roots in the abyss, alone—
If lepers rot, why, God has made them smell

For amiable reasons of His own.

....
The smile that spreads on Shiva's golden mask
Is ignorant of pity. It approves
The dancing whore, a human coat or flask,

Dung in the streets, dead oxen, empty graves.
Ganesh, his child, the heavy rupee god,
Rules cowlike matrons in their tribal loves

And tramples on the poorest ironshod.
[‘Letter from India’]

While it is not immediately apparent, the concern Baxter expresses here is related to adolescent preoccupations. His disappointment is not specifically with the tenets of Hinduism, for none of his writings from the period engage with Hindu theology. It is similar to a disappointment expressed over a decade earlier in 'Letter to Noel Ginn II':

It was my dearly held delusion once
That labouring men were better than their betters
And needed only to throw off their fetters
For Eden to return to Adam's sons.
Since then I've worked with them; and they're go getters^{xiv}

Baxter's 'go getters' have their complement in India: 'I grant you that the Hindu's counterpart / Exists wherever farmer crumbles clod, // At Southland wool sales, Auckland's cabbage mart'.^{xv} What he cannot accept, in India or New Zealand, is a status quo that benefits a majority by perpetuating injustice and suffering for a minority. Much later, in 'Autumn Testament 36', he will recall the dying leper he saw 'lying beside the fruitstalls in Calcutta' and recognise a universal problem: 'There or in Karori, the sickness is, not to be wanted'.^{xvi}

Stone Perpetual Night

For Baxter, identification is always with the individual and the individual is never worth less than the group. This position is already fixed by the age of sixteen when he writes the poem 'A Man' (1942), where a dead soldier represents all humanity: 'For I die in this man. O comrade, even I / Shared in your peace and vision under a homely sky: / In you I suffer, in you I die'.^{xvii} In this poem Baxter uses the metaphor of 'a stone perpetual night' to describe the nature of this suffering. Stone is also the substance of the metaphor in 'Letter from India', although its association is with more immediate, lived experience than night's dreaming and concealment: 'I need my Davy's lamp, my mug of tin, / To walk these tunnels of the living stone // (Hope is the lamp, the mug a sense of sin)'. Baxter's resistance to the dehumanising aspects of the Indian status quo in the late 1950s parallels his adolescent resistance to the dehumanising aspects of New Zealand's status quo during the Second World War. The paradox he often acknowledged was his innate need to oppose the mainstream. The experience of being marginalised because of his principles fed positively into his

poetry, helping, he said, to produce a 'kind of tension of belief' that gives a poem a 'certain edge'.^{xviii}

'Air Flight to Delhi'

A kind of tension of belief is evident in the first of the Indian poems, 'Air Flight to Delhi'. The poem follows Baxter as he travels to India ahead of his family by way of Thailand where 'Rivers like lizards' spread 'Brown silt into the sea'. From the start there is the expectation his journey will muddy familiar waters. The realities of Delhi—'Vultures in grey dinner suits. / Nepotism and the leper's stump'— are 'wounds that I must understand'. He internalises the suffering he sees around him, likening it to the 'stone of Sisyphus rolled on the heart'. In Baxter's adolescent verse Sisyphus is a beneficiary of Christ's sacrifice on the cross, and is liberated from his 'groaning labours' through 'celestial pity'.^{xix} In 'Air Flight to Delhi' the cross is 'clouded...with market dust' and St Paul's exhortation to 'bear ye one another's burdens'^{xx} becomes a personal injunction. Baxter cannot blame fate or reincarnation for the 'homeless in the Mogul tombs...On the great star wheel pulled apart' for such 'disastrous innocence' produces 'one who murders in his sleep'.

Sleep takes on a special significance in the Indian poems because the boundary between sleeping and waking is frequently blurred. In 'Air Flight to Delhi', as Baxter lies insomniac under a great fan, the usual stuff of his dreams enters the waking moment. He experiences the temptation of the 'undesired accomplice / Some sky or water demon / Twisting the locks of the mind'. This undesired accomplice is akin to the demons of the adolescent poems, powerful figures representing the forces of puberty that so overtake the child they destroy what had once seemed an immutable natural order. In the poem 'Rain-Ploughs' (1942) for example, the Earth, symbolising the newly created adolescent, is a sodden cadaver, its identity 'unproven' due to the unfamiliar terrain of adolescent experience. The power of adolescent demons is evident when the sun is 'gashed from heaven' by an 'insane poltergeist' and demons are given 'room to wreak their hells' until the 'World crumbles, warped and wan'.^{xxi} Again and again Baxter's Indian poems bind themselves to his adolescent poetry by re-visiting and re-working such early symbolism. In 'A Letter from India' he makes this explicit:

I write of devils now, who plucked the feather

And harp of ocean angels in my youth
Through the rough changes of Otago weather.

Devils and angels are the daylight truth
Of any man whose faith has found a Sun;

Read in chronological sequence, Baxter's Indian poems offer a narrative explanation of how he was shaken from his foundations and turned 'in the direction of a new and then unknown destination—Jerusalem'. The tone of expectation and anticipation in 'Air Flight to Delhi', the identification of 'wounds that I must understand', is a key indicator of his receptiveness to the possibility, necessity even, of change.

'Shalimar'

The second Indian poem, 'Shalimar', returns to the crucial moment when the child is 'hurled into the adolescent abyss'. Shalimar, Shah Jahan's idyllic Kashmiri garden, is in this poem the Eastern equivalent of the Edenic garden of Baxter's childhood, although in its post-lapsarian state: 'Outside the grass hut rustles on the ground / An empty snakeskin'. The difference from adolescence is that the mature Baxter has the 'tools to deal with the central anguish' of the time and can even understand the necessity of the Fall if the 'mind's great door' is to swing open and admit the 'brief illumination' that appears in 'Characters of fire' on the 'soul's narrow walls'. Naturally, purification is a necessary precondition of such divine illumination:

The musical water washes
From mouth and hands and heart
Memory of the *peine forte et dure*
Experienced in life.

The Holy Spirit, here symbolised by the water of the Edenic garden, cleanses the mouth (symbol of poetry), hands (symbol of salvation through works), and heart (symbol of the soul) of the internalised stains of suffering that Baxter likens, in 'Air Flight to Delhi', to the boulder of Sisyphus, and here compares to the '*peine forte et dure*' punishment of being pressed to death under planks and boulders. The moment of illumination, when it finally comes, is brief, specific, and initially obscure. As 'the sun' (symbolising Christ) strides in a 'broken house' (symbolising the self), the following appears on the walls of the soul:

I AM THE CUP THAT HOLDS YOUR PAIN,
JANUA COELI, STAR OF TRUTH.
I AM THE ARK, THE STRONGHOLD OF THE KING,
I AM THE VOID WHERE LIGHT IS BORN.

The illumination becomes less obscure if we read it in the context of Christ's claim in John 8:58 that 'before Abraham was, I am'. Jesus, 'the great I Am', then becomes the cup, the Christian's Holy Grail, with his own blood, the wine of the Eucharist commingling with the pain of the believer. Christ is also the Janua Coeli, or Gateway to Heaven, and, in a significant reference to one of Baxter's most pervasive poetic symbols, the productive void.

'Howrah Bridge' and 'The Yoke'

The next in the sequence of Indian poems is 'Howrah Bridge', discussed above, in which India begins speaking directly to Baxter and very gradually working towards a conflation of his purpose with the purpose of Christ, a conflation which will become complete in later poems.

'The Yoke', the fourth Indian poem, is explicit in connecting Baxter's Indian experiences to adolescence. It is addressed to Baxter's adolescent personification of poetry: 'you were needle, I the thread'. The adolescent poet's muse is both mother and lover. He has her 'ikon nailed above the bed / In the attic of an unused life'. To the adolescent, his poems seem like a simple magic, product of a fabulous private world, like 'Petronella's / Boarded by her lover on a vat / With private comfort, neither caring / How many devils slept inside'. But the adult poet, with the 'knowledge left for the middle years', has discovered things that cannot be 'evaded by a kiss' of poetic inspiration. He is aware that the vat the young poet so blithely rests upon, careless of its contents, is the soul, inhabited by teeming desires, like 'hungry rats; / Or those great fish that nudge / For rice grains on a sluggish pond'. Repeatedly the Indian poems crave release from the destructive desires of 'drink and sex', those 'dangerous jewelled gardens' and 'old diseases'.^{xxii} Now the poet acknowledges a similar compulsion for poetry. The youthful narcissistic poet 'sighing in his cage of mirrors' and the 'sadhu, ignorant, smeared with ashes'—symbolising Baxter's public oracular self ostentatiously grieving for society—are both slaves to their art. The more useful knowledge reserved for the middle years is that if poetry can be used to liberate

the poet from his destructive selves, then poetry itself can be freed to be something new and original. The means to achieving this is the yoke of the title.

In the poem 'To My Father' (1948) Baxter recalls the 'light and sympathetic yoke' of his father, 'a poet whom time betrayed / To action', whose foundation stone is a 'rock of passionate integrity'.^{xxiii} For the Baxter of the middle years his father's perfect yoke is not a burden, but a welcoming guide that steers him in the right direction and helps him resist the peripheral distractions of old desires. The key point made in the final couplet of 'The Yoke' is that 'the perfect yoke / Unlearned' while he played his public role can be 'learned again in writing'. Poems cannot be passive recorders of knowledge already acquired; the poems that matter are those in which the process of creation offers its own specific illumination.

'The Carvers'

Poetry and illumination are at the heart of the fifth Indian poem, 'The Carvers'. This poem commences with a journey through 'villages of fish and oxen', symbolising the Christian and Hindu faiths. But Baxter continues on past these communities of organised belief until his journey has become a solitary pilgrimage, by a 'steep path and dangerous,' to 'the silence of the daimon'. Baxter only refers to the 'daimon' to describe poetic inspiration, for example in childhood when he 'endured that intense effort of *listening*' to the 'unheard sound of which poems are translations'.^{xxiv} This time he conflates the daimon of poetic inspiration with the 'Dark Spirit ... For whom our sleepless hungers burn'. In possibly the most difficult symbolism of the Indian poems Baxter's 'Dark Spirit' is revealed as his personal version of the Holy Spirit—'Breeze, Tongue and Cloud'—of the Christian Trinity, defined in this way to foreground the pain that is the product of an active and obedient faith. When Baxter writes in the *Jerusalem Daybook* (1971) of God 'the terrible One who grips our living entrails, who drives both good and evil from our souls, as if both were his enemies, and fills us with anguish and darkness',^{xxv} the direct connection is to the 'Dark Spirit of our disenthronement' of the Indian poems. In the same vein Baxter at Jerusalem finds the hands of Mary 'Hard, heavy, slow [and] dark' as they teach him 'to die' and guide him towards 'the darkness I call God, / The darkness I call Te Whaea'.^{xxvi} It is a description that accords with the call in 'The Carvers' for the Dark Spirit to 'Explode the debris of our lives.' In anticipation of some cataclysm the poet assumes an attitude

of waiting and readiness, nursing ‘in exile the unkindled fire’ of poetry that he expects to burn in a new direction.

‘Madras’

There is no cataclysm however. The ‘Dark Spirit sought and found’ appears ‘without procession’ in the next Indian poem, ‘Madras’. Appropriately Baxter is near the site of the hidden grave of the Christian martyr the Apostle Thomas (another who struggled with doubt) when he is visited by the one ‘For Whom my barefoot heart hiding / In the mountains of transgression / Thirsts and waits’. His encounter with the Dark Spirit bears the hallmarks of the encounter with the resurrected Christ by the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, but the description is also heavily layered with symbolism associated with the production of poetry:

On the sea road from Madras You found me,
Led me to the doubting cave,
The *Sitio* of true belief,
Wounds not my own imprinted there,
Rain like arrows piercing the grass roofs
By the Apostle’s mount and open grave.

The reiteration of Christ’s agonised cry from the cross—‘Sitio’ (‘I thirst’)—is the catalyst for illumination both divine and poetic. When ‘sea’ and ‘cave’ appear in close proximity in Baxter’s poetry it is always on some level a reference to his first experience of creating poetry as a child while crouching in a shallow cave set into a cliff above the pounding sea. In ‘Madras’ the doubting cave is synonymous with the Delphic cave; the daimon of poetry is also the Dark Spirit of God; and the wounds are both Christ’s and Baxter’s. The arrows are a specific link back to ‘The Yoke’, and before that to early poems like ‘Rain-ploughs’, ‘The Unicorn’, and ‘To My Father’, where anything to do with archery symbolises his father Archie Baxter (born under Sagittarius), whose perfect yoke Baxter has learned to cherish.^{xxvii} The fact that the arrows pierce the grass roof of the flimsy shelter in ‘Shalimar’ is not the threat it seems. In ‘Rain-ploughs’ the poet who faces his demons finds that ‘hope stays for him who [dares]’ because the ‘angel-Archer’ looses ‘Fire-feathered arrow-thought to set new sun on flare / Brave djinn and monster, [and] green again the land.’

‘Calcutta’ and ‘This Indian Morning’

By the time Baxter writes the seventh Indian poem, 'Calcutta', he is observing the suffering around him through eyes re-educated by the examples of Christ and his father. He sees 'Poverty crucified on destitution....The sweeper boy divided from his soul' and experiences for a second time the illumination of 'Shalimar'. The difference this time is that Baxter, too, is the 'I am' who takes on the pain of those expecting 'the mercy of the Deposition'—the welcome death that ended Christ's suffering on the cross. Similarly, in 'This Indian Morning', he sees the suffering around him as Christ did, finding in the lepers with 'bandaged palms' and 'eyes like desert cisterns' no distinction between their souls and his own.

'Possibilities of Madness'

The next Indian poem, 'Possibilities of Madness', is the first to broach the question that will define both Baxter's time in India and the Indian poems. What are the implications of his illumination for poetry? His verdict is bleak: 'Preoccupation with the Void has riddled / The green heart of a generation' of poets. His brother poets are somnambulists 'Locked on the black and ivory squares', his sister poets 'dream of empty haven / Under a nest of leaves'. Collectively they follow materialism's false trail and 'grow fat for the witch's oven.' It seems it is no longer acceptable to be 'a cell of good living in a corrupt society', not if the result is poetry of compromise, strangling on its inability to make a decisive commitment—hanging, as the poem puts it, 'Like Absalom...between the Yes and No of love'.

This, then, is also a poem of decision, a choice between two possible directions. What 'Possibilities of Madness' rejects is the safe, passionless course, where 'Simply to grow old, meaning 'grow loveless', / Would be enough'. In a bleak epiphany, the final stanza decrees that poets who lack passion 'Butcher the dying light.' This phrase, with its intimation of life unnaturally and ineptly shortened, suggests a travesty of Dylan Thomas's injunction to 'Rage, rage against the dying of the light.'^{xxviii} Thomas's poets are 'Wild men who caught and sang the sun in flight'. Despite the risk of the doom of Icarus, Baxter's poem suggests that the possibilities of such madness are preferable to poetry of compromise.

'Letter from India'

The concern with poems that compromise leads naturally into Baxter's next poem, the long, unpublished 'Letter from India'. I consider this the key Indian poem when it comes to comprehending Baxter's future direction. The tone of 'Letter from India' is deceptively conversational—deceptively because the poem is a careful terza rima of forty-one tercets and a single-line envoi written in exact iambic pentameter. Like the sestinas Baxter would produce in the last months of his life, the poem's easy flow of language obscures the attention to technique, and the conversational persona conceals Baxter's serious intent, which is to revise his earlier 'notion of the function of the poet in modern society, and particularly in [New Zealand]'.^{xxix} Both at the beginning and the end of 'Letter from India' Baxter critiques his fellow poets. The poem begins:

Dear Earle — A letter from Nizamuddin,
My Indian residence, where like a nabob
I taste the Delhi sun – (a lion-skin,

This blessed terza rima does the job
For any man or mouse who roars inside.
Faulkner's hero used a ripe corncob

On Temple Drake, the raingod's virgin bride
And afterwards knelt whinnying by the bed;
So half a hundred headless poets ride

This tram to dereliction.

The epistolary address and reference to the lion-skin link this poem directly to the earlier rumination on life and poetry, 'Letter to Noel Ginn' (1944): 'They can admire the empty lion-skin / The heart skewered by print, who will admire: / But from you, Noel, I wish more'.^{xxx} In 'Letter from India' poems are still empty lion-skins, but Baxter's verdict on poets seems much harsher in likening them to the impotent rapist Popeye, from William Faulkner's novel *Sanctuary*, who violates the judge's daughter Temple Drake with a corncob.^{xxxi}

'Letter from India's' main intent is to weigh the knowledge Baxter has acquired in the course of his Indian journey. Poets who write for public acclaim are indistinct from those who worship 'the rupee god': 'From avarice to act the step is clear'. No matter how such poems glitter, they are like the flowers adorning the exterior of Mogul tombs while within the impoverished struggle to survive. Poetry is more than simple adolescent magic. Poems don't spring 'like Eve from Adam's rib', truth in poetry is a product of suffering, and a struggle with both devils and angels—

'the daylight truth / Of any man whose faith has found a Sun'. Baxter credits his Catholic devotion to Mary with leading him into the 'valley of clear sight' in order to better 'comprehend a world of bleeding stone'. His distaste for India's English legacy—'Where they ruled the rot began'—and for Calvinism's '*frigor Anglicanus*' is tempered with shame at his own complicity: 'Honour and England. ... brought me to this desert place / Defending what I loathed, the old school tie, / Against a just man of a foreign race'. This painful admission, that some toxic residue of Calvinism yet exists within him, brings him full circle to poets and poetry. His final judgement, although less coarse than the reference to Faulkner's novel, is far more severe. Poets who compromise die by degrees, or risk losing contact with the daimon of poetic inspiration and becoming instead the mouthpieces and apologists for what he would later describe as the 'Medusa's head [of] present-day urban civilisation [with its] depersonalisation, centralisation [and] desacralisation':^{xxxii}

We died; live on because our hearts are small.
Some cut a little vein; some write a play;
And some will choose the toughest sop of all,

To fall and rise a hundred times a day.
'Our elders in the magic' (Durrell's words)
Would often write as if their hearts were gay

And so deceived us, whistling like cage birds
Though the cold devil had them on the hip;
We followed, left the fire, the bowl of winds,

And marched hungry in the desert's grip.

The Final Indian Poems

The final four Indian poems represent a move towards the decision that is at the heart of this essay. Baxter has diagnosed the complaint; now he has to find a cure, which may be worse. 'Night in Delhi' delays the decision on poetry for a moment and focuses on another necessary healing. This love poem to his wife seeks to repair the breaches of the past, so that they can rise together above their 'familiar proud catastrophes' like 'two eagles in an equal gyre'. He suggests their aim should be to keep above the things that have drawn them to earth in the past, no matter if such love 'seems to the world indifference'.

At first 'Elephanta' seems removed from the concerns of the other Indian poems. Its eleven couplets, which owe something to Lawrence Durrell, are a crisp, evocative observation of a moment in the life of the Indian town. Yet there is an ominous subtext in the concluding description of the smooth passage of a 'narrow coffin-boat' observed on the far side of 'an angry tide-rip'. Baxter's Indian journey is drawing to an end and he will soon cross the sea back to New Zealand. His usual symbolic association of the sea with 'death and ... regeneration'^{xxxiii} aligns nicely with the strong impulse towards change and renewal that develops through the Indian poems. However the 'angry rip-tide' he must cross also suggests an uneasy voyage over 'the Dionysiac flux of experience'.^{xxxiv} This unease is accentuated through the inevitable association of the coffin-boat with the boat Charon pilots across the Lethe to Hades.

The penultimate India poem, 'Goodbye to India', makes it clear Baxter cannot avoid what lies ahead. He has a responsibility to put to use the new knowledge obtained on his journey. It is a different Baxter returning to New Zealand. When he departs India, he will leave part of himself behind—the public self that glittered in company and wore the empty lion-skin with such aplomb:

I cannot fetch from the pool
The image that glitters there
Between hoof-trodden mud
And the hawk-thronged air.

In the final Indian poem, 'Return to Exile', Baxter casts himself as one of his favourite mythological figures, Odysseus, coming home:

Returning on shipboard from an older land,
Amoeba in his bowels, one travelling man
Sees with gratitude the home coast rise,
Lares et penates...

His initial gratitude is weakened when he recalls his thrall to the household gods (*Lares et penates*) of domesticity, money, and status that he associates with the anti-aesthetic angel of Puritanism. His bleak recognition is that he is swapping one exile for another. New Zealand's glittering coast does not promise gold, it recalls instead the flowers on the Mogul tombs and the image of his public self trampled in the Delhi puddle:

No trumpet on the mountain. From
Exile into exile he goes home.
Secretly the glittering coast instructs him:
'Your lot is now intelligible pain.
Ignore the whorish voice that whispers
Of meekness, meekness among thieves.
I am your angel. Rage against me.
Older, so very little wiser,
Set down your meaning with a shaking hand.'

Baxter returns to New Zealand with more than amoeba in his bowels. He returns re-infected with the diseases of adolescence—the sense of difference and a gap between himself and others—contracted after being shaken from his foundations. The infection requires him to rage against the things in New Zealand that, post-India, would be more than 'disastrous innocence' to ignore.

Conclusion

Three years after his return from India Baxter left his bureaucratic job in School Publications to become a Postman. A decade later he began the journey to Jerusalem. These decisions, along with other attempts to step out of the mainstream, can be traced directly to India. For the Jerusalem Baxter, striving to be a cell of good living in a corrupt society is no longer enough. His Indian knowledge tells him that to continue in this vein makes him little better than the impotent Popeye violating Temple Drake, or any of the half a hundred other poets marching hungry in the desert's grip.

The sense of double exile articulated in Baxter's final Indian poem anticipates what many have experienced in the globalised world of the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first centuries. India turned Baxter back into a global citizen, a member of a bigger, rougher family. Yet from this new perspective he could see with even greater clarity that in New Zealand the poor were in many respects worse off:

In Delhi, when I was there, the poor lived in chambers of the Mogul tombs, raising families, cooking food, behind curtains of sacking ... In this country they would all be in jail, or have the Health authorities and the Child Welfare Division on their backs ... Who is more free, the poor Indian or the potentially wealthy New Zealander?^{xxxv}

There is then no contradiction in the fact that he never again left New Zealand, or that he retreated to a rural community to try and live a life based on Maori tribal and spiritual values. The poetry of both periods provides ample evidence to suggest he was acting locally but thinking globally.

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ⁱ This is a substantially revised excerpt from a paper prepared for publication in the conference proceedings of the 11th Biennial Symposium on the Literatures and Cultures of the Asia-Pacific Region, held at the National University of Singapore in December 2005. The conference proceedings (working title 'Literatures in Englishes of the Asia-Pacific Region: Perceiving from the Inside') are scheduled for publication in June 2007.

ⁱⁱ Jacquie Baxter, excerpt from private correspondence, quoted in Peter Alcock's unpublished conference paper 'From Delhi to "Jerusalem": Indian Transformation of a Remote New Zealand Poet', manuscript in possession of the author.

ⁱⁱⁱ Frank McKay, *The Life of James K. Baxter* (Auckland: Oxford UP, 1990), see chapter 9 'Baxter in Asia', pp. 166-180.

^{iv} James K. Baxter, *Howrah Bridge and other poems* (London: Oxford UP, 1961), dust jacket.

^v 'Madras' was not published in *Howrah Bridge*. John Weir selected it for his posthumous edition of Baxter's poetry *The Labyrinth: Some Uncollected Poems (1944-72)* (London, Wellington: Oxford UP, 1974), 13.

^{vi} James K. Baxter, 'Symbolism in New Zealand Poetry', *The Fire and the Anvil: Notes on Modern Poetry* (Wellington: New Zealand University Press, 1955), 76.

^{vii} Allen Curnow, 'Landfall in Unknown Seas' (1943) quoted by Baxter in *The Fire and the Anvil*, 76.

^{viii} James K. Baxter, 'Notes on the Education of A New Zealand Poet', *The Man on the Horse* (Dunedin: University of Otago Press, 1967), 124.

^{ix} Baxter, *The Man on the Horse*, 124.

^x James K. Baxter, 'Further Notes on New Zealand Poetry', Hocken Library, University of Otago, MS975/119.

^{xi} James K. Baxter, 'To Wake the Nations Underground', *Canta* XIX.8 (7 July 1948), 4.

^{xii} James K. Baxter, *Recent Trends in New Zealand Poetry* (Christchurch: Caxton, 1951), 17-18.

^{xiii} Baxter, *Recent Trends in New Zealand Poetry*, 16.

^{xiv} Baxter, *New Selected Poems*, 15.

^{xv} 'Letter from India.'

^{xvi} Baxter, *New Selected Poems*, 147.

^{xvii} Paul Millar, *Spark to a Waiting Fuse: James K. Baxter's Correspondence with Noel Ginn, 1942-1946* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2001), 294.

^{xviii} James K. Baxter, interviewed on Radio New Zealand, c. 1963.

^{xix} Millar, *Spark to a Waiting Fuse*, 283.

^{xx} See Millar, *Spark to a Waiting Fuse*, 289 for a link between these words from Galatians 6:2 and Sisyphus.

^{xxi} Baxter, *New Selected Poems*, 6-7.

^{xxii} 'Possibilities of Madness.'

^{xxiii} Baxter, *New Selected Poems*, 28.

^{xxiv} Baxter, *The Man on the Horse*, 124.

^{xxv} Baxter, *Jerusalem Daybook*, 15.

^{xxvi} Baxter, 'The Ikons', *New Selected Poems*, 133. Te Whaea is the Maori name for Mary, the mother of Jesus.

^{xxvii} Baxter took pains to identify his father as the archer in his poems: in 'The Unicorn' the 'musing archer bends his bow' and slays the fabulous creature in order

to assist the transition to adolescence; and in 'To My Father' Baxter compares his father 'to the bended bow / Myself the arrow launched upon the hollow / Resounding air'.

^{xxviii} Dylan Thomas, 'Do not go gentle into that good night,' from *The New Oxford Book of English Verse, 1250-1950*, ed. Helen Gardner (Oxford: Clarendon, 1972), 942.

^{xxix} Baxter, *Recent Trends in New Zealand Poetry*, 20.

^{xxx} Baxter, *New Selected Poems*, 7.

^{xxxi} William Faulkner, *Sanctuary* (Cape and Smith, 1931).

^{xxxii} James K. Baxter, introduction, Ans Westra, *Notes on the Country I Live In* (Wellington: Alister Taylor, 1972), 8.

^{xxxiii} Baxter, *The Fire and the Anvil*, 69.

^{xxxiv} Baxter, *The Fire and the Anvil*, 77.

^{xxxv} Baxter, *Jerusalem Daybook*, 45.