

Remembering Syd

Dieter Riemenschneider

we share ideas,
knowing consolation must be stoical,
and that our minds are, perhaps miraculously,
too small and too large to contain
waves that are nothing but water
(Syd Harrex, 'Dieter at the Wheel')



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It is almost forty years since March 1978, when scholars of literature from Africa, Asia, Australia, Europe and the United States met on the occasion of the fourth EACLALS conference organized by the English Department of the University of Malta. Accommodated in a large hotel near Mdina, right in the centre of the main island, we profited not only individually from listening to papers presented on the topic 'The Individual and the Community' but also enjoyed the flair and the friendly atmosphere of the community of Commonwealth Literature scholars. Relaxing one evening in the lobby, I noticed a tall man with long blondish hair and a broad-faced smile entering, slightly leaning towards a small Indian lady accompanying him. They were perhaps looking for friends to relax and have a chat with. My former wife, an Indian, immediately recognized her compatriot, a former school mate from Pune, whose escort turned out to be Syd Harrex from Adelaide, Australia. Matching his smile with a distinctly Australian pronunciation of our names, it turned out that this visible Australia-India connection was no coincidence. Syd explained he had completed two books on the Indian-English novel titled *The Fire and the Offering* which had been published by the Writers Workshop in Calcutta. I mentioned I had visited its founder P. Lal, poet, translator and promoter of Indian-English poetry, in 1966 and that we had been in contact ever since. Unfortunately, I added, my PhD thesis on the Indian-English novel published in 1974, had had to be written in German and thus was totally unknown to non-German-speaking scholars like Syd.

We agreed then and there to stay in contact, a promise not altogether easy to keep with the slow postal services of the 1970s. Yet since both of us were keen conference participants we were to meet again, the next time at Frankfurt University where I organized the fifth EACLALS Conference in March 1981. Though there was little time for extended chats with my colleagues, I enjoyed listening to many papers, with Syd presenting a fascinating and erudite contribution to the conference theme, 'The History and Historiography of Commonwealth Literature.' His paper, 'The Historical Sense and the Commonwealth Writer,' ranged from observations on T.S. Eliot's definition of the 'historical sense' to relating seemingly different fictional and non-fictional works from India, the Caribbean and Australia. It was an impressive demonstration, not merely of his knowledge of the Indian-English literary tradition, but of Commonwealth literature generally – if you, Australian readers, forgive me for subsuming Syd's Australian compatriot writers Henry Lawson, Patrick White, Christopher Brennan and Hal Porter into a category they would have contested had they been present. Syd was certainly aware of their sensitivity when he concluded his talk by replacing the politically homogenising term 'Commonwealth' with its differentiating counterpart 'New Literatures in English.' History, he said, 'draws attention to key issues concerning the development of cultural consciousness in countries where emergent literary English is flourishing and contributing significantly to the diverse tradition of literature written in English.'

Reading Syd's *The Fire and the Offering*, I observed that Syd would not be drawn into the contemporary debate of Indian scholars, of whether their own writers had done their duty and composed 'Indian' novels. Instead he based his extended analyses of Mulk Raj Anand's, R.K.

Narayan's and Raja Rao's works on four prerequisites. The non-Indian critic, he said, should pay heed to the Indian cultural and social background of the works in front of him; he should accurately describe the complex blending of Indian and English elements; should further recognize the mixed sensibility of the individual Indian writer and, finally, he should 'assess an author's style as the fundamental test of his originality in handling his subject matter.'

I could only agree with Syd's procedure of combining a contextual approach with a close analysis of the individual writer's thematic and linguistic achievement. It was to reveal the culturally multiple and not the hybrid nature of Indian-English novels and it located them in the neighbourhood of other New Literatures of English, for example from Africa or the Caribbean.

I would like to add a few more observations on Syd's continuous engagement with India, such as doing justice to a writer's contribution to a common literary tradition, or on his comments on its shifts and changes from the 1980s onward. Talking about a typology of the novel, he distinguished the expressionist from the neo-classical and the romanticist from the eclecticist form with reference to Anand, Narayan, Rao and G.V. Desani. However, Syd also conceded that a then younger writer like Salman Rushdie had extended this canvas with *Midnight's Children* which had 'brilliantly opened up new possibilities in the quest for that elusive of ideals, The Great Indian Novel.' On the other hand, Rao's works invited comparison with non-Indian novels, Syd argued, calling Rao 'a kind of Indian James Joyce' because of numerous and interesting parallels between *Kanthapura* and *The Portrait of the Artist*, *The Serpent and the Rope* and *Ulysses*.' Besides, he argued, *The Serpent and the Rope* demonstrated that this highly praised novel was not just 'about abstract [Indian] ideas but ... also about people and the human person's concept of himself.'

Meeting again in Germany and a few years later at his home in Adelaide and for the last time in India, I found out more about Syd's 'concept of himself,' if I may call it that, especially visible when he read his own poems, revealing a side of him I had not been aware of until a conference in Königstein near Frankfurt, that I had organised in 1987. I don't remember details, but have not forgotten how serious he suddenly appeared to me, this otherwise jovial, witty, entertaining, accommodating and at times slightly ironical Aussie. This side of himself he certainly also displayed at the 1995 ACLALS Conference in Colombo. To celebrate my 60th birthday, I had invited him together with other old friends and colleagues to a kind of extended party, I was sure, Syd wouldn't have liked to miss. The head waiter discreetly asked my New Zealand wife, shouldn't he close the bar, as he was running out of an excellent choice of non-too low-priced European wine. She saw everyone, including Syd, enjoying themselves so much and said: oh no, do keep it open!

Our last meeting at the ACLALS conference in Hyderabad in 2004 I still vividly remember. Such a big gathering of scholars accommodated in two 'de-lux' hotels, The Taj Residency and the Banjara Hotel, and altogether a far cry from the smaller and more intimate conferences and simpler venues during the first decades of our Association's activities; proof besides of the development of international conference politics ACLALS appeared unable to stay away from.

With lots of old friends, Syd and I chatted and listened to contributions on Indian-English writing. To my surprise it turned out he was to chair the session in which I participated. Before inviting me to present my paper he asked, could he, by way of introducing me, read the poem he had dedicated to me a few years earlier as his contribution to my Festschrift *Crabtracks*. I really couldn't say no, not the least, since it also meant 'celebrating' our surprising first get-together on Indian soil. Syd's gesture moved me deeply and I regret never having been able to honour him and his work in a similar manner, which I hope to rectify a little by writing this. No more chance to chat, joke together and comment on new novels from India while having a drink together – now, just memories of a cherished friendship.

Dieter Riemenschneider taught New Literatures in English at Goethe University, Frankfurt, between 1969 and 1999. After his retirement, he and his New Zealand-born wife lived north of Auckland before returning to Kronberg im Taunus near Frankfurt -- from where he tries to follow closely the fate of teaching/researching New Literatures in English at his old Alma Mater.