(Presentation for '**The Poetic Present'**, Experimental Theatre, N.C.P.A., Mumbai, 8th August 2003: **Anand Thakore**, Hindustani singer and English-language poet, discusses the poetry of **Adil Jussavala** as an exploration of traditional systems of meaning and the chaos that arises from their sudden collapse.N.B.The written draft of this presentation was subsequently published in New Quest, 2004 by Dilip Chitre)

ON THE MUSIC OF A MISSING PERSON: ADIL JUSSAVALA AND THE CRAFT OF DESPAIR.

At twenty-one, as a student of Eng. Lit. in Pune, I made my first acquaintance with Adil's poetry through Arvind Mehrotra's Anthology of Indian poets writing in English. In addition to the title poem of 'land's End', Arvind's anthology contains selected extracts from the 'Missing Person' sequence. I can understand Arvind's need to accommodate a portion of the poem within obvious limitations of space. 'Missing Person' is certainly an essential part of Adil's ouvre and demands representation, even when it is only possible – because of its sheer length – to represent it only in part. It remains, however - fragmentary as it may seem at a first reading – a poem that needs to be read in full from beginning to end; for it is only by means of such a reading that its underlying unity can be felt, its deeper impact experienced. The fact that the poem as a whole, was not - and continues not to be – easily available to the reading public is symptomatic of the chaos to which the poem itself constantly points; for the chaos that overtakes the central consciousness of the poem, (i.e. the 'mind' of the missing person) is also the chaos that our literary culture – to the extent that we have one, as Indian poets writing in English – continues to find itself almost helplessly immersed in.

When I first read Arvind's selection of Adil's verse I was struck by the sharp contrast between 'Land's end' and the selected extracts from 'Missing Person'. The two poems seemed to emerge from completely disparate realms and I think I would have found it hard –had the name of the author not been mentioned – to view them as the products of a *single* consciousness evolving in time. 'Land's End' came across to me as an exploration of a traditional system of form and meaning; as an attempt, however desperate it may have been, to accommodate inner chaos within the time-honoured mould of metre, rhyme and Christian symbolism. 'Missing Person', on the other hand, seemed to have emerged from the complete failure of traditional systems to function meaningfully; and from the absence of any new order that could take their place, into which the poet could move with a renewed sense of self-assurance. Looking at Adil's ouvre today, the 'Missing Person' sequence still stands out against the rest of his earlier and later work, in terms of the strategies it employs and the poetics it assumes. It is this contrast that I would like to bring out during the course of this presentation. I begin with 'Lands End' which is the title poem of Adil's first book of verse, written while he was in England and on the continent, but published here in India in 1962.

Reading –' Land's End'

I remember, as a student in Poona University, being instantly drawn towards the lyricism of this poem. I found the powerful musicality of the poem re-assuring, as also the poet's comfort with

stanzaic pattern, his exquisite control over the devices of metre and rhyme. I was relieved - surrounded as I was by students who were trying so hard to 'decolonize' themselves to find a poet who wasn't ashamed of his fascination with Christian symbolism. I was struck not by the individuality of the voice I heard but the magnificent rhythmic and tonal command that it displayed. The lines came across to me as feats of breath control and I was impressed by the delicate use of enjambment that often teased the ear at the end of a line. It is true that the voice Adil finds here is similar to that of Robert Lowell's in 'The Quaker's Graveyard at Nantucket' as also is the rich sea-imagery and the use of Biblical reference; but I don't think it would be quite correct to call it an imitation. There is certainly an emulation of certain qualities in lowell's style, but these qualities are then adjusted to suit the poet's individual needs. One important difference, I feel, is that the poet of 'The Quaker's Graveyard' speaks of God in The third person throughout his poem, whereas as the poet of Land's End addresses him directly.
Compare for instance lowell's lines :

'I see the Quakers drown and hear their cry:
'If God himself had not been on our side,
If God himself had not been on our side,
When the Atlantic rose against us, why,
Then it had swallowed us up quick.'

with Adil's more direct apostrophe:

'Lord your netted round of deep lifts
Its sweet fish to our lips; yet fishers haul
Against its tented pull.'

The cry unto God that Lowell hears is uttered by a group of dying Quakers whom he imagines; whereas the cry Adil hears is quite his own.; and yet -regardless of certain subtle differences of approach - the tonal and visual resemblances between the two poems remain clear. The following lines from Lowell's poem - which I am terribly fond of and which sustain a single breath triumphantly over six rhymed and metred lines – might elucidate this further:

'The wind's wings beat upon the stones,
Cousin, and scream for you and the claws rush
At the sea's throat and wring it in the slush
Of this old Quaker graveyard where the bones
Cry out in the long night for the hurt beast
Bobbing by ahab's whaleboats in the East.'

'Land's End' – though it deals explicitly with the wavering of faith - became for me, personally, a sign of faith in a traditional poetic; an assurance that the attempt to contain individualism within the framework of an ancient set of formal assumptions remained valid in the twentieth century. As a Hindustani musician , attempting to strike a balance between the peculiar demands of my own sensibility and those of raag and taal, I found this heartening. The use of Christian symbolism, however –though I could relate to it at once and felt reassured by a poet who didn't need to deny his colonial moorings in order to feel closer to his roots – continued to raise

disturbing questions concerning my own attitude towards my Christian schooling both in Birmingham, and here in Bombay. It reminded me of the strange sense I had, as child studying in Birmingham, of being a mango sapling planted in the arctic by way of experiment, to see if it would continue to grow in altered circumstances. To what extent had I felt at home in a system of education that continued to function on colonial lines? Was I significantly more 'at home', when I studied music, as a child, in the guru-shishya system? Or was I an exile everywhere whose only home was the piece of music or the poem he was currently working upon? Personally, I have found few things more dejecting than the unfortunate habit of my own mind to ask such questions in the abstract, without actively involving itself in an artistic medium. They are questions that immediately stir an urgent need for art; and I fear that if that need had not been repeatedly fulfilled since adolescence, I would have either gone insane or suffered a lasting depression culminating in suicide. The following poem, which evokes the world of the Old Testament, captures the urgency of that need along with the sense of panic that often initiates the act of music-making.

Reading –'David'

I like to believe, personally, that David, when he 'brushed the harp /with thumbs of wood, thudding, dull, unwilling,' wanted deeply to sing ; though he had no way of knowing this until he got started. I wish the syntax of the poem had been less contorted, but I think it incredible that the emotional impact of the poem survives its syntactic contortions.

When I first read Bruce King's pronouncements on 'Land's End ' I reacted strongly against them, thinking it absurd that Indian poets should be evaluated not on the basis of their merit as craftpersons, but on the basis of how successfully they had 'decolonised' themselves. 'The Christian vision of land's End,' King says, is an example of the continuing effects of colonialism'. He then strikes a comparism with the anglican poems of T.S. Eliot. 'The Eliotics', he says, 'express an anglo-catholic religious phase Jussawalla was going through at the time, which was part of his crisis.' Over the years I have made my peace with Bruce. I can see that I had read - through my own over-excitement – an evaluatory tone into statements that are essentially descriptive and objective ones. King is not being dismissive of Adil's early work. He is merely trying to describe it in terms of a broader historical context.

The world of Judeo-Christian myth and symbolism is certainly not the only mould in which Adil seeks meaning and continuity in his first book. We often find him entering the world of the landscape-painter, seeking meaning in the scene immediately before him, and a sense of continuum with an order that precedes civilisation. 'Evening on a mountain', which I would now like to read, is one of the few poems in 'Land's End' which has a tone of serenity. I was reminded remotely of Wordsworth and though I missed the tonal richness and cadence that characterises Adil's verse in a large number of the poems in 'Land's end', I have come to admire, over the years, the quiet interplay between stillness and motion that is central to the poem.

Reading- 'Evening on a mountain'

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'Gauntlet', a stunningly minimalistic and cinematic three-liner captures a more aggressive sort of movement through nature.

Reading –' Gauntlet'

I quite love the swiftness of the moving image and the sharpness with which it hits the eye. I also find the need on the part of the poet to locate himself in the third line interesting. I don't think the sense of movement would come across if the poet didn't mention that he was looking at the surrounding woods from inside a moving train. Urban and pre-urban images (I feel uncomfortable with the adjective 'natural') often share the same canvas in Adil's poems; and there is a subtle blending in his work of landscape and cityscape. The following poem, in which his use of compound words is clearly reminiscent of Hopkins, exemplifies this.

reading – 'A letter in April'

In addition to those poems that deliver a predominantly visual experience, there are also several that make use of a song-like line, of strongly regular rhythms and even chorus-lines. While dealing with contemporary themes, the poet amply exploits the potential of an ancient way of music-making in order to unify content and heighten effect. The following poem uses rhyme and repetition to create an effect at once bitter and comic:

Reading –'The Butterfly'

The movement from 'Land's End' to the 'Missing Person' sequence, published thirteen years later involves a complete shift in the poet's approach to the craft of verse. At a first reading this contrast is immediately apparent from the form of the poem which is unlike anything Adil had ever attempted before. The poem spreads itself across twenty-two pages divided into two sections, each section being further subdivided into parts that only rarely preserve any sequential link between them. Whereas the earlier poems came across as composite self-contained structures, 'Missing person' appeared, at a first reading, as a group of fragments loosely strung together. The underlying forces that unify these fragments only became apparent to me slowly after several readings. The poem seems to become here, for Adil, an open space for 'free' improvisation on a very broad theme, rather than a self-contained construct based on older principles of composition. To the extent that the poem succeeds in what it sets out to do, it actually makes me question, as a classical musician particularly – the meaning of terms like 'composition' and 'improvisation', even the meaning of the word 'theme'. The argument that composition and improvisation are two sides of the same coin is one that – as a practitioner of music and poetry – has always been deeply meaningful to me. But I think it is still possible, at a conceptual level, to differentiate between the two terms on the basis what they emphasise. At a very basic level, The process of composition, thus involves, for me, an emphasis on the bringing together of separate entities in a cohesive fashion, a process of unification that involves a selective assessment and ultimate cutting off of the inessential. The process of improvisation on the other hand, involves an emphasis on the opening out of a given theme, on the exploration of infinite possibilities contained within it. It thus involves a 'freer' movement of the mind through a defined space. The two processes have a symbiotic relationship with one-another and it is quite impossible when one is in the midst of any creative act to know for certain which way one has

begun to veer. Since I believe the act of reading poetry to be, in essence, a creative act, this makes my own position as a reader of 'Missing Person' tricky. 'Missing person' comes across to me primarily as an improvisatory tour-de-force on a very broad theme that becomes at times only remotely visible. There are passages in the poem that seem very tightly composed, both in terms of the way in which they develop Ideas and emotions and the tonal and rhythmic structuring they involve; but whenever the poem delivers to me a strong sense of the compositional, this sense is soon lost in a plethora of erratic improvisations.

I think the choice of such a formal stance, on the part of an artist, has a great deal to do with the way he chooses to handle chaos at a particular time, the extent to which he wishes to allow chaos into the body of his poem and the extent to which he needs to shut it out. But I must admit here, though I used the word 'choice', in the last sentence - and often find myself using it in such contexts on a daily basis – that I am not the least bit certain at a deeper level that an artist *has* a choice in such matters. Be that as it may, 'Missing person' involves me in questions of choice between various strategies of handling chaos in art. It makes me question, for instance, the validity of my own use of traditional forms – both in music and poetry - to keep chaos at bay; and it makes me wonder if the search for a more authentic voice necessitates the letting in of what I continue to labour so hard to shut out.

In 'Missing Person' we no longer hear the first-person voice that characterises so many of the poems in Land's End. We have a 'he' instead of an 'I', a fictional character, fragments of whose life emerge in the course of a fractured narrative. Though this character is adequately individualised, he may also be seen as the prototype of the beourgeois intellectual in post-colonial India. I am sure there are readers who prefer to see this 'he' as a direct substitute for the 'I' encountered in Adil's first-person poems. But I prefer not to do this. I prefer to see the missing person as a being of the poet's creation, whose situation the poem describes; to position the poet, in my own reading, as a third-person narrator. My own desire to do this becomes problematic because there *are* times when the narrative voice and that of the missing person seem suddenly to co-incide as in the end of section I, which I will come to in a little while. The steady flow of the third-person narrative is repeatedly broken by sudden voices that seem at first to emerge from out of the dark. I like to think of these voices as occurrences in the mind of the missing person. They are often the voices of other people as he internalises and remembers them; voices that articulate his perception of other people's perception of him; or the collective voice of society, as it were, commenting upon him, usually pejoratively.

The mind of the missing person is thus a troubled space inhabited by a multiplicity of voices, none of which quite sound – to him - like his own. I see the whole poem as an exploration of a deep identity crisis, in which the Missing person is constantly aware not only of his absence in the eyes of society but in his own perception of himself. The search for identity results in constant rebellion against authority which goes bizarrely hand in hand with a desire to be contained within established systems. These include Chritianity, Zoroashtrianism, Marxism and The English Language itself, none of which seem to provide the 'parted psyche' of the protagonist with what it is looking for. What, one may well ask, is this mind, that seeks shelter everywhere and finds it nowhere, looking for? I like to think that it is essentially, a mind searching for meaning; though it seeks this amidst the rubble of a fallen culture that has neither completely passed away, nor given way to an alternate scheme; a mind rummaging through the

leftovers of colonialism for the slightest semblance of a new order, which time and again, it simply doesn't find.

The fragmentary form of the poem and its use of multiple voices thus reflects the fragmentation of the mind of its protagonist. In terms of the strategies the poem employs to capture this sense of fragmentation, 'Missing Person' is distantly reminiscent of 'The Wasteland'; but there are important differences between the two poems. 'Missing person' –for all its brokenness – continues to deliver to me a more unified experience than 'The Wasteland' does. I think this unity is achieved by the presence throughout the poem, of a *single* character i.e. the Missing Person. Regardless of whether one chooses to identify him with the narrator of the poem, he remains - despite the forces of disintegration that his psyche is constantly a victim of – a particular person whose mind the poem concerns itself with. The forces of post-colonial chaos that overtake this mind and the way this mind relates to the society it inhabits are the central theme of the poem. Though it came across to me initially –twelve years ago now – as a poem lacking a distinct theme , successive readings over the years reveal more fidelity on the part of the poet to a sense of theme. 'The Wasteland,' remains for me, fascinating as it is in its variety of verbal textures, a poem that seems less thematically defined. I think of the critic – was it F.R. Leavis – who interpreted 'The Wasteland' as a series of images occurring in a central consciousness, in the mind of Teireisias, the prophetic seer. The wasteland doesn't quite work for me in that fashion, though I can understand the need on the part of the critic to impose a unity of perception upon a poem that denies such unity so emphatically. Adil's Poem does not threaten the reader's need for unity of perspective, quite as severely as the Wasteland does. It delineates more specifically, the area in which seemingly random improvisation is to take place: though it may take many readings to perceive those boundaries with any clarity. Another – and perhaps more important – distinction, is that 'The Wasteland' remains, however far one attempts to stretch it interpretationally, a primarily eurocentric construct; whereas Missing Person is clearly set in the context of the post-colonial third world.

Section I of 'Missing Person', entitled 'Scenes from the life', is preceded by an epigraph from Auden's 'Letter to Lord Byron', The question posed by the child in the Epigraph is one that the missing person seems to be asking himself all the time:

Reading –epigraph.

The poem as such begins with the missing person imagining the circumstances of his own birth and establishes a sense of discomfort with the parent-child connection; with the mother's need to view her progeny as a reflection of herself, thus denying the child his individuality.

reading - I1

Part 3, deals - by means of a playfully experimental use of phonetics, that seems at first cryptic - with the disintegration of language itself, with the failure of the English language to function as a coherent system of meaning. The missing person finds himself unable to distinguish the devanagiri vowel 'a' from its closest English equivalent. I must confess, it is a teasingly difficult passage to read aloud, but here goes:

Reading –I 3

In part 5 the missing person imagines his own execution at the hands of society. Ironically, the missing person's sense of his own absence takes over, and society finds itself attempting hopelessly to annihilate an entity that has never has never really existed.

Reading –I 5

In part 9 we see him running hopelessly from one ideology to another, oscillating between religion and drugs, between a hopeless marxism and the rubble of a defunct Christianity, finding a sense of belonging nowhere, remaining in the dark while his colleagues emerge successfully into public life.

Reading –I 9

In part ten he comes across as an adolescent rebel. The whole passage is spoken in the collective voice of the 'broken tribe' which expresses its horror at his rejection of traditional values.

Reading I 10

Part 11   captures a simultaneous disappointment with Marxism and Christianity.

Reading I 11

I really like the pun on the word 'masses' which acquires a context at once Christian and Marxist. I continue to hear the resonances of the line –'it's now commando comrades butcher', having myself grown up in the company of Marxist friends who seemed to spend their afternoons dreaming of future utopias without asking themselves seriously what meaning they could create in the present.

Section I ends with a passage that violates the sense of narratorial distance hitherto sustained. We have a first person voice at the end of the passage which makes my own need to see the Missing person as a character separate from the narrator problematic. I think the problem can only be resolved by assuming that the entire poem is spoken by a fictional identity; much in the way that the 'I' of Adil's earlier first-personal poems may also be considered a fictional concoction. This leads me personally to the Buddhist notion that the self is a fiction, however hard we try to assert the reality of its existence. Missing person makes me increasingly aware that I am living in 'maya', whether or not I like to believe this.

Reading –I 14

Section II, entitled, 'Points of View' is epigraphed by a citation from the prose of Marxist intellectual Frantz Fanon.:

Reading – epigraph.

Part 1 captures the image of the savage disguised as an anglicised gentleman.:

Reading –part 1

In part 3, the missing person, overwhelmed by the absence of roots, begins to look for love. I see this as a search, in the absence of a particular language, for a universal one. The search of course remains unfulfilled, culminating in an arid, restless sexuality, devoid of any emotional depth. I find Adil's off-handish use of rhyme interesting. It represents a continuing need on the part of the poet to make the music of the poem cohere while the missing person's mind continues to fall apart .

Reading – part 3.

Over the years I have had my own personal rapport with this character of Adil's creation. I think I have feared few things more than becoming like him; though I have often felt dangerously on the verge of becoming what I deeply fear. I have often felt the need to deny completely that I have ever been caught up in a situation similar to his; though I have only to walk out of my house or look in to myself briefly to know that I am. I have frequently wanted to believe that the inner chaos and neurosis of the Missing Person, emerge from a realm wholly different from the one I personally inhabit. I think this has a great deal to do with my own difficulty in admitting to myself that I am a victim of the cultural chaos that constantly surrounds me, the chaos that has become a part of me, whether I like it or not; and which i have repeatedly tried, so hard, in music, life, and poetry, to keep at bay.

When Arundhathi asked me to make a presentation for 'the poetic present' , I thought at first, considering what I was going through musically, of discussing neo-classicism in the work of Dom Moraes. But something motivated me, while I was thinking of Dom's use of traditional verse-forms, to take a quick look at 'Missing Person' . For the first time in my life, I felt a sense of detached empathy with the character forming before me, a sense that I did not have to become like him, in order to understand him better; that we shared a common sickness, though my way of handling that sickness was, thankfully, different. It is this change in my perception of the missing person –who was earlier too close to me for own comfort – that has motivated me to write about Adil's work. I think I have come to believe, of late –more intensely than ever before –that it is only through a heightened awareness of my own sickness that any form of healing is possible for me; and that the sickness I have thought of as exclusively my own is not really separable from the sickness I perceive in the world around me. I know that the missing person and I are both victims of the same disease; but I also feel that his way of handling this disease is suicidal; and that if I were to take the same course, I would be asking for madness or death.

The Missing Person sequence, is followed, in Adil's second book, by a return to a more lyrical and composite view of the poem, a return to the search for structural cohesiveness and wholeness of conception based on older formal values. There is a growing emphasis on unity of tone and

theme, a search for a more even rhythm and a steadier development of thought and feeling. The voice that emerges from this search seems far more mature and individualised than the one we hear in Land's End, where a similar stance was often attempted. It is a voice that continues to talk of political and cultural chaos, but which seeks to accommodate this chaos within a more wholesome structure, and begins to look towards the past for signs of meaning that might redeem the present. In 'Sea breeze, Bombay', a poem I cherish for its depth of tone, this voice achieves a note of serenity in the midst of the chaos it describes, seeking to be restored to ancient spiritual values.

Reading –'Sea Breeze, Bombay'

If 'Sea breeze, Bombay' uses a collective 'us', 'Freedom song' evokes a more autobiographical view of History, allowing the personal to indirectly suggest the History of a nation. In terms of its form the poem is very much what the title announces it to be- a 'song'. It preserves a steadily bouncing rhythm throughout and involves considerable control in its handling of cadence. There is a delicate balance struck between the formal decorum of the poem and its aggressive use of obscene slang.

Reading –'Freedom Song'

It is interesting to compare the poet who looks back upon his years in Bombay with the one who looked into his own future years ago, addressing the city as if it were –for all its contradictions – an entity essentially worthy of reverence. I read concluding lines of 'A letter for Bombay' , a poem in Adil's first book:

Reading –'A letter for Bombay'

I would like to end this presentation with the last poem in Adil's second book
It is one of the few poems in the book that makes no direct political statement –except perhaps in a single line; a poem in which we find the poet briefly at home in the immediate, focusing his eyes upon the motions of a swing. The search for a steady monosyllabic rhythm is central to the poem, as is also the sense of oscillation. I think it achieves, a brief moment of equilibrium, a state in which the sense of exile and that of belonging cease to be in binary opposition with one another. It is a way of seeing things that I have come, personally, to treasure over the years; though it is by no means an easy perspective to sustain. It brings me back to the notion that the only home a poet can find upon this planet is the poem he is currently working upon; a notion I find at once disturbing and deeply rewarding.

Reading – 'To the tune of a Swing in a municipal Park.'

I had planned to end comfortably with the locking of the gate but Adil's poetry makes me question my own use of certain terms while describing it. One of these is the adjective 'traditional' which I have used rather broadly, throughout this presentation, in a colloqual sense, the sense in which Dhrupad or the masses in B –minor, for instance, may be said to be more 'traditional' than deep-purple; or the use of stanzaic forms more traditional than that of a broken narrative with multiple voices. I have used it simply to imply ways of approaching life and art

that have been with us for relatively longer periods of time. The fact remains that I also see poems like the wasteland as part of my traditional inheritance. I am personally uncomfortable – despite my own use of the word throughout this presentation – with the way in which the term traditional is often used to imply 'pre-modernist' and I would like to ask the audience, how comfortable it is, at the onset of the twenty-first century, with my particular use of that word. Thank you.