The Enchanting Verses Literary Review

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The Enchanting Poet for ISSUE XVIII April 2013

B. R. Dionysius *was founding Director of the Queensland Poetry Festival. His poetry has been widely published in literary journals, anthologies, newspapers and online. He is the author of one artist's book, The Barflies' Chorus (1995, Lyrebird Press), two poetry collections, Fatherlands (2000, Five Islands Press), Bacchanalia (2002, Interactive Press), a verse novel, Universal Andalusia (2006, SOI 3) and two chapbooks, The Negativity Bin (2010, PressPress) and The Curious Noise of History (2011, Picaro Press). He won the 2009 Max Harris Poetry Award and was joint winner of the 2011 Whitmore Press Manuscript Prize. His seventh poetry collection, Bowra was released in April 2013. He lives in Ipswich, Queensland where he watches birds, teaches English and writes sonnets.*

His new collection of poetry is avaialble soon. "Bowra" is a collection of contemporary free verse sonnets and sonnet sequences about birdwatching in western Queensland, the tragic lives of some Ipswich citizens, the historical and enviromental story of the Bremer river, floods, mine disasters, a US kidnapping, shooting crows and dead poets. Available from Whitmore Press - www.whitmorepress.com

Poems by B. R. Dionysius

Capa

The sun shot him in the face all morning.
Sunburn crept across his cheeks like blood
Pooling in an earthy depression or dam water
Warmed up by the midday heat; silt powdered
His lips in a thin gruel of saliva. Leaden bees
Droned past his ears, but still he sat on the waxy
Grass, his cells urging flight, the chemical trail
Confused, his mind lost, turning slow circles.
Which was faster? The human seed-head that
Spun off its steel stalk and blew into his head
Like a Father Christmas, the childhood wish
Ended. Or the camera's animal click, the organic
Eye-blink of black film processing his eternity.
His death in the birth of a Capa's open shutter.

The Finding

He wanted to know through the finding what went wrong.
This is what they told him seated around the oak-panelled
Room. Every thaw, the mountains bleed & pure blood jets
Down from the country's high tableau, rolling skulls along
The beds of rivers like polished stones. Melt water courses
Through its Martian valleys, cutting each year deeper than
The last. They reported that many fingers slide bullets into
Magazines with the ease of counting beads on an abacus,
Or housing chess pieces in their velvet-lined box. They said,

That children see-saw on tank barrels & hoist the rusted pipes
Into the air, celebrating death like hair follicles that continue
To grow for weeks after the body is dead. They informed him
That rockets are slung across shoulders as casually as fishing
Rods in the West. You can't defy rock, is what he found out.

Salute

The curtains snap open; a prop of eyelids dazzled
By midday's brilliant embrace, or a ship's synaptic
Morse code that signals a journey's end. 'There it is!'
He shouts & is hushed by the teenage honour guard,
Breaking the minute's silent salute, cleanly as a weld
In a rocked chair's undercarriage. In the blue sky's brain,
The grey cargo jet is created from inside the classroom,
Its bass thrum vibrates over the boys' skin like the after-
Burn of a punch, as it banks, returning from Afghanistan.
Their English lesson homecoming; Walter Cunningham
Jnr's poor dishonour becalmed on the projector screen.
His black syrup frozen as the dramatic loss of speech.
Then it's over. They draw down blinds as in a poem;
& turn their faces toward, *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

Cloth

The flag, spread-eagled, flanked by two boys
Who held it up like a history project out front
Of the assembly. Eyes raked over the tiny stars
That winked; dying embers of memory's blaze,
As the faint hint of smoke ghosted silky fabric.
This weighty pennant, rolled up respectfully like
A newspaper used to contain a surge of broken
Wine glass after a party. The neat folds, a printed
Triangle hand-delivered to their wounded guests.
Razor sharp angst picked up off the kitchen floor.
Names, etched on the textile, countless as fallen
Stars, visible for only a few brief seconds across
Night's black stripe. Cloth draped over the lectern;
A funeral shroud dressing the dark wood of grief.

What's Your Connection?
For Diana

Her words took him like some great white, which
After its exploratory chomp, dives deep to build up
Steam; a grinning automaton with guidance fins that
Pushed her violent question into his shocked carcass.
His electrical impulses could detect a black eyed anger,
But his blood was at a loss; after all they'd invited him
To read at their 10th birthday celebration. Apex predators
Need no Facebook invitation. What's more, he'd been
In her coffee shop before; on holidays his kids chalked
Up their café experience on her walls, riding around on
The orange plastic postmodern dog like an aquatic park
Trainer. He should have told her he felt connected to her
City, like a Shapcott or a Palmer. 'There's your sugar,' she
Snapped: a new, serrated tooth pushed forward to her jaw.

Editor's Choice

Poems by Vladimir Martinovski

COMING TO TERMS

If you follow the stars
you can't miss the sky
Dante

If I follow the ants
I will be able to find the crumbs
form yesterday's lunch,
yet I will not be able to hear
the cricket's song in the ant hill

If I follow the streams
I will one day reach the sea
or maybe even the ocean,
yet the water flowing
there will not be as clear

If I follow the snowflakes
I will one day merge into
the ever present white,
yet I will have to
come to terms that it will all melt.

If I follow the stars
I will one night
reach the sky's end,
yet maybe there
I will miss the ground.

THE LAKE EXPANDS

This is no ordinary ebb and flow;
While some lakes recede from
geography and flow into history ,one lake expands daily.
It expands a foot in height and width, even more in depth.
The divers have given up on all attempts to reach its bottom,
Fearing they'll get to the center, or even to the other side of earth.
Archeologists have started to boast that they
are sure to find there the first home of the first people.

Yet, further than the deep, expands
the endless silence and the endless blue;
all the things spilled in there, never stop it
from being even more blue, more clear, more transparent every new morning.
The blue of the lake expands together with the blue of the frescoes and the skies. It expands together with the silence.
No matter how loud, noisy or blaring we are in the night,
the lake gets even more quieter and calmer each morning. The waves
have become silent, quieter than the beating of
a sleeping heart. The silence is expanding to the other side of earth.

Vladimir Martinovski *(1974) is an Associate professor, teaching the subject of Comparative Poetics at the Department of General and Comparative Literature, Faculty of Philology "Blazhe Koneski", Sts Cyril and Methodius University, Skopje. He was the president of the Association of Comparative Literature of Macedonia (2009-2012). He is member of the Executive Board of the International Association for Semiotic Studies. Furthermore, he is a member of the International Comparative Literature Association and the European Network for Comparative Literary Studies. He is member of Macedonian Writers Association and Macedonian PEN Centre.*
He has been an editor of the following books: Ut pictura poesis – Poetry in Dialogue with the Fine Arts, Thematic Selection of Macedonian Poetry (together with Nuhi Vinca 2006); Metamorphoses and Metatexts (together with Vesna Tomovska 2008); When the Butterfly Becomes a Poem (together with Lidija Kapushevska – Drakulevska, 2010), Odysseys about the Odyssey (together with Vesna Tomovska, 2010), New Macedonian Haiku Wave (2011), Lyrical Dodecameron (2012) and Literary Dislocations (together with Sonja Stojmenska-Elzeser, 2012).

Vladimir Martinovski is recipient of the following awards: First Prize at the Short Story Competition of "Nova Makedonija" (2009) and the Brother's Miladinovci Award (awarded by the International Festival Struga Poetry Evenings, 2010).

Is Old Tom Frost a Gypsy?
By J.S. MacLean

The narrow ruts that led from under the Juniper
to the sneaking lane drank the day's first shadows
and appeared the vintage of pulp cutter years
although yesterday the earth had been
unblemished.

It was late evening when they hailed me to the fire.
At the time I had six foot stanzas stacking
in my mind but now they have vanished
like nomad wagons over high winter passes.

I have sought that ethnicity ever since
to find the bandannoed mustachioed man,
the coal-eyed color wheel of teasing zills,
and the one-eyed vigilant clucking crone.

I suspect Tom is one; a stickman silhouette
with a squeezey box writhes in branches at dusk
and lurch-spins under the heart of Saturday night
like a drunken scarecrow on the run.

Once, an eco-terrorist's wife and daughter
shopped beside me in Safeway's candy aisle.
The mother had hacked old-ivory hair
and a jutting elbow-hooked accusing nose.

I know the difference between witch and rover
but I thought she might know of the hydden roads.
I didn't ask since the young woman's lucent bloom
struck me dumb and only now I compose from it.

Sundown Rides in an Evening Sky
By J.S. MacLean

They mosey 'round the tipi rings up onto Longview Hummock.
Comanche Champ III low-sets his head as is his wont these days.
The grizzled rider squints towards the south and thoughts of Texas,
the Goodnight Loving Trail, Wyoming, Montana, Whoop-Up,
and Johnny Ware's Bar U drift over him like smoke and dust and rain.

Beyond foothill shades the Rockies edge red clouds and by the hooves
a fieldstone carved: Bill Yomers 1820-1909, camps with one old boot
and a coil of rusted barbwire. Yonder, a pair of steers still graze,
some Mulies bounce along the coulee's draw, a Golden Eagle dips,
and silence holds a final remembrance between sun, prairie, and air.

Yet, beyond the dome a transcontinental thunders stampede echoes
and news from over the ocean flashes and troubles like saddle bones.
His thoughts seem to manifest then, like storm scent will kiss a cheek.
A distant low growl now grows, now shivers, now shatters the moment.
Champ's ears slant back and the cowboy gapes up at a flying machine.

J.S. MacLean *is an independent poet who has been published in a variety of journals in Canada, USA, UK, and Australia. These publications include Ice Flow (University of Alaska), The Apeiron Review, Literary Review of Canada, Writer's Ink, The Chimaera, and Anobium. He has a collection, Molasses Smothered Lemon Slices available on amazon.com. In his spare time he works.*

Confession
By Conrad Geller

I have behaved badly. We can agree on that,
the same in fearful darkness as the light
of seeming ordinary afternoon.

Late or soon
I knew you'd find it out. Curled here inside
blinks the very gnome you dreamed about,
wrinkled and stupid. It was he that touched you
when anyone, even I in my own person
in other circumstances would have grieved.

I am not deceived
by your kind strokes. Do not expect forgivness
though we live long years together, press together.
It is his hideous will, his touch , you know it,
known I have never dared to interfere.

At the Play
By Conrad Geller

We in the audience likewise rehearse.
Here is the cue for weeping, the great scene
For stony wonder. Timing is everything,
If we would tell the players what to mean.

In safety we venture forth, in safe darkness
Watch the hero stumble, see him pause,
Grasp the horror of his finding out,
Perform the drastic ritual of applause.

Conrad Geller *grew up in Boston, worked much of his life in Westchester County, New York, and now lives in Northern Virginia. More than a hundred of his poems have appeared in print and electronic media. He is old now, so his newer poems have turned from love to death.*

WRITE-IN
By John Grey

Martha still considers herself the head of the family
even if she cannot remember any of our names.
She spends her days at the mall,

where everything is tagged, and the men and
women of the past fill out the new suits,
the swanky evening gowns and the shoes - the acres
of shoes.

When she was young, her mind knew people as
themselves
not some great blur of identity. She boasted tennis
partners -
each tag-less but fully formed in her brain.

To play doubles, you had to shout out to your
cohort;
"It's yours, May!" or "Baseline, Cyril!"
In singles, there was no doubt.

She wiped the floor with Margaret or Jean. She
defeated a history,
particular events that joined her to these others.
She says she's the head of the family but she's more
like

something once solid, now melted, flowing through
her offspring.
Once a month, a stranger drives her to an unknown
doctor
There's always a woman with a strange, toy-rattle
cough,

in the waiting room, complaining of the moths in
her cereal.
For the past half year, she's been Martha's oldest
and dearest friend.
More pills are prescribed. The only thing they're
more effective than

is no pills at all. Angie to the rest of us, a woman
wrestler she once
saw on television to Martha, squeezes those tablets
past her teeth.
My niece says, "The house is still standing but
nobody's home."

Rhona thinks of her more as a store - everything
sold and still of use
to the buyer — but the shelves empty now. And no
one will
take down the "sale" sign. But she's the head of the
family.

I see her as state house. Everything's on recess until
the next election.
But she's still handing out those buttons from the
last.
Still, we all can use a little governing. This is my
write-in vote.

THE PRESSURE OF THE PEER
By John Grey

Your words weren't with you yet
so you borrowed the talk of others.
You couldn't name how things looked to you,
So out It came from your malleable throat...
the opinions of others.

You fought because Andy said it better
with his fists.
You stole from stores
because Mike couldn't help
helping himself.
Cigarettes got you to be Ricky for a while.
You looked at girls
through Ronny's lascivious eyes.
Smoke and crudeness on your breath,
no one could accuse you
of not being everybody else.

Your time hadn't arrived
but it was slowly catching up.
Would it get there before Brian
brought his father's gun to school?
Or R, J. fondled a screaming Jenny
hi the library?
Or Mark ran away?
Or Floyd bailed out on life?

You were these kids
on your way to being yourself
The sooner you got there,
the better for your followers.

John Grey *is an Australian born poet, works as financial systems analyst. Recently published in International Poetry Review, Tribeca Poetry Review and the horror anthology, "What Fears Become"with work upcoming in Potomac Review, Hurricane Review and Osiris.*

Eyelids of Pure Ice
By Samantha Seto

Gray moonlight filters
through cracked windows.
It brushes purple wind
against my dry eyelids.

Buried in the thickness of my jacket,
flurries of snowflakes tangle with hair,
frost burns my face, numbs my eyelids,
memory never hesitates to leave me alone.

Degrade myself, restrain screams,
until end of the tunnel doesn't exist.
Clouds haze promise in
decayed leaves and white blanket.

I dip my feet into icy lake,
waltz with snowflurries
as evil silently whispers,
eyelids block violet cloudborne nocturne.

My heart pounds
at long wasted memory.
Haunts me, acrobats weave webs,
tears pour out of my eyelids.
Erase indigo memory.

The Last of Us
By Samantha Seto

So many decades have passed.
We grew apart between love into hate and sad
letters.

Phone calls impossible for my paper flowers,
your face vanishes into crowds, escape inside our
song.

I breathe into your lungs like the soprano in the
opera,
my ghost will inhabit your soul.

The ground weighs beneath my feet in white
hospital linen,
my headache burns past nightfall.

If our collective CPR stopped, lost charge,
our last breath would synchronize into one.

Despite every passing second alive
for all who breathed us in, a pair of doves.

Each set of lungs, colorful balloons, warm kisses,
they throw us into air and I watch you rise like rain.

Samantha Seto *is a writer. She has been published in various anthologies including Ceremony, The Screech Owl, Nostrovia Poetry, Soul Fountain, and Black Magnolias Journal. Samantha studies creative writing. She is a third prize poet of the Whispering Prairie Press.*

Of Travelling and forgetting
By Goirick Brahmachari

1. Postcards from Chopta

In your mornings,
Music is a landscape of green memories
Free. Honest.
In your music,
Silence.
White mountains
White petals,
White lanes,
White sheets that hang from the height of past
under the bluest Buddhist skies.
And in your memory
there is peace.
A time travel.
A year of love.
Rain.
and beyond.

2. Kolkata and Leftovers of you.

Parting isn't really the hardest thing to do.
It's those lost fragrances, images
Once left behind, come back clearly
and cut like a rusty iron blade

The fragrance of Irish coffee that fell over my jacket
The folded tissue papers of gibberish
Noise makers of China town,
Cheap alcohol,
Colourless posters of adult movies, wet and torn in rain
Faded newspapers in that tea stalls that smell of charcoal and kerosene
Lazy College Street walks.
Books, Cabins, fish fry and more
Wet tickets of that sticky mini bus
Ranikuti to 22 Camac street
Working as a sales men,
selling Jazz music at Elgin road
But buying blues from free school street.
The wrapped 'Love at the time of Cholera'
Crazy Jazz Fests of Congo Square
Kaustav and his McLaughlin guitar
Torn pages of my dairy
That I left for you
And your skin,
That smelt like a country song.
I remember how I cribbed,
Many years later
for the train was late by 5 hours
That meant lesser hours spent in Kolkata.
But everything was over by then.
Well, what did we ever have, except a few nameless strolls?
When I look back at what I sometimes call your story;
I can only see myself walking aimlessly
Singing 'Love Minus Zero' to myself.

3. Devprayag

Amidst the misty Garhwal mountains
I stood speechless
With Ma by my side
And you on my mind
Two rivers streamed in
And fused into each other's rhyme
Bhagirathi from left
And, Alaknanda from the right.
We could hear
The song of love
The rivers sang
As they melted into one
We could see
Mother Gangas step
Into this earth.
Mothers, they melted deep
Into the safest depths of my heart
And there they stayed forever
A collage of three different art.

Goirick *works as a consultant for an economics research organisation in New Delhi India. -An ardent follower of Jazz, Blues and Indian classical forms of music. He loves to travel and document places and experiences through his poems. His poems have been published Decanto, Pyrta Journal, Four Quarters magazine, and other Indian Journals.*

Subtle Damage
by John W. Sexton

sky is dust ...
the umbrellas
dream of hands

a fork in the knife ...
no point in peeling
the vortex potato

I gave her a piece
of my mind ... the bloodless bite
of the teleleech

the subtle damage of sleep ...
another crack
in the porcelain moon

a twenty-headed blackbird ...
the garden
has finished the whiskey

a digital sky
leaks into space ...
days without number

Isaac Asimov postage stamp ...
waiting in the corner
at light speed

edge of the world
misplaced again ... we send in goats
to eat the fog

The Finger Bank
by John W. Sexton

Earth's turn as dust -
the dead moon
maintains its grin

in vinegar seas
a sour eternity
for the picklemen

fungous bungalow
another Gretel
subsumed

seen through obsidian glasses...
the plasma girl
mimes a cold shoulder

conjoined fractal codes -
flakes of thought the
snowman's mind

the finger bank ...
a chaos auditor
subtracts another digit

John W. Sexton *lives in the Republic of Ireland and is the author of four previous poetry collections, the most recent being Vortex (Doghouse, 2005) and Petit Mal (Revival Press, 2009). His fifth collection, The Offspring of the Moon, is due from Salmon Poetry in spring 2013. Under the ironic pseudonym of Sex W. Johnston he has recorded an album with legendary Stranglers frontman, Hugh Cornwell, entitled Sons Of Shiva, which has been released on Track Records. He is a past nominee for The Hennessy Literary Award and his poem The Green Owl won the Listowel Poetry Prize 2007. In 2007 he was awarded a Patrick and Katherine Kavanagh Fellowship in Poetry.*

2 Poems by Rufo Quintavalle

Bleached austral dawn
And a hundred
White impassible sailors
Piss and shave,
Shoreleave's brief horror
Washed away forever;
When the skittish
Wind grips you
With its carnival
Order or unbid
Obscurity newly descends,
Odors of silex,
Of liminal cunt;
Or when the
Spider on its
Web of breath
Waits all night
While humans talk
With millennial sorrow,
Wattles akimbo, jowls
Wet and glabrous,
Wiping their brows
With cow-flecked fingers,
Weak for bullion,
Weak for gold,
Weak for that
Which makes believe,
Which makes whatever
Was changeable less;
When the bow
Wastes and breaks
And the hard
Unlovely virgins cede,
Undone the decade,
Undone their refusal,
A blank-eyed skipper
And his crew
Are ballast and
Antipodes to this
Weird, unsettling mess.
What is normal
Weather anyway, given
Where the seasons
Went? Inside the
Withered, dystopic bower
Where the sprawling
Weeds grow bullish,
Water alone is
Wealth, water without
Which our money
Worthless swells, determines
Whatever intrinsically counts;
We cannot own
What is unequal
To our eyes
That are themselves
Twinned damp collateral,
Pearls of fluid
Puzzling out the
Pulsing world's liquidity,
Parts of each
Person's better imagining
Leaching into us
Whenever we touch,
Making each essence
Convergent with many,
Flophouse of contact,
Brothel of heart,
Nodes where the
Vagabond others merge
Heaped in community,
Huddled in dream,
Slotted together like
Wisdom on the
Shelf, like mind's
Synchronic and curious
Synapse, or that
Carcass of poultry
Simmered and blending,
Bouillon of vanishing
Inputs and stocks.

...

34.

Never has so much
Impinged upon so
Nervous a crescendo;
The undone and the unsaid too
The thought thought and forgotten

Rawness
Nudity, primitive
Timbre
The tremor

That from nothingness
Makes it up
Lazily spews its narrative
Because, because it can it does;

Nine

Toadstools on a stump concur
Twelve pimples on a throat

Not at all
Sorry, in fact
And not at all clever
These things are
Simply
Themselves
And sit out their time, laying claim
To nothing beyond

A piece of sky that corresponds
To their own discrete dimension

Rufo Quintavalle *is the author of three books: Make Nothing Happen (Oystercatcher Press, 2009), Dog, cock, ape and viper (corrupt press, 2011) and Liquiddity (Oystercatcher Press, 2011). He lives in Paris, France. http://rufoquintavalle.blogspot.com.au/*

3 Poems by Adam Pettet

Dream Fires

Dead chickens on the lawn,
broken wheelchair rusting in the weeds.

Smoke on the horizon,
bushfires
and an orange sunset.

My T-shirt sweating to my back
as you say your goodbye
with a tired smile.

I remember the washed out tears
of the night.

The aching jaws
the blank stares.

We believe our dreams.

Writing them down,
breakfast discussions.

Yours told you to go.

I hadn't seen you in a dream for weeks.

Now standing in the weeds and smoke
this dream seems less real,
losing all solidity
in a wash of orange light.

In the wake of small craft

I can still hear cicadas
in the churchyard.
from where I sit
on the stone wall.
A black river
embedded in my skin
and lonely the ferryman.

Freedom

He can not stop holding the bird.
Tighter,
tighter his grip, wings twisting in his fists,
feathers bubbling from his fingers.
“I want to see it fly, I want to see it fly.”
Mumbling beneath breath
as a song struggles in its throat.

Adam Pettet *is a poet/writer from Australia. He is widely regarded for his sparse melancholy poetry and other writings. His is also well known as one of Australia’s foremost Beat historians.*

2 poems by Cralan Kelder

Luxembourg Fields

In the morning my old gym shoes collect dew between orchards and soak through to let me know about it.

*

Watching young foxes play between forest and cornfield in the unfettered open on short grass under bright sun
wrestling, pounce tumble, long tails dart in out running length of towering cornstalk rows brownish, white blurs race
don't see me at 20 yards in shadows until

^^

then, as if embarrassed, head low and peg it back into dark woods

The Talk

Old men shuffle across dusty roads to join other men. In cafes and squares, on park benches and ramparts of stone. Picture them sitting and squatting to catch the first rays of sun. Young and old sheltered by trees from heat and rain. Barefoot, sandaled, some well dressed, in laundered shirts and robes, others with trousers torn. Imagine men in caps, in djellabahs and hoods. They gather after worship, and for sunset, conversing through the passage of day. They hawk, spit, drink tea and smoke, play games, place bets and talk. Oh, how they talk, a multifarious dialogue of weather and neighbors, families and crops. They discuss health, money, and politics, turning the world inside and out. Buses roll by, and carts, children from school and donkeys braying as conversation moves from market place and prayer to upcoming celebration. At times late into the night, a chance to prolong company as a bright moon allows. All these people in bustling places, Marrakesh, Malta, Mongolia, Peru.

Cralan *lives in Amsterdam. For more information visit www.cralan.com*

Delhi Auto-Rickshaw
By Abkay K

Green on yellow
triangle on wheels
crisscrossing Delhi
as a kite soaring
against the wind
carrying the city
on my wings.

Yamuna
By Abhay K

Withdrawn and sulky
I flow past Delhi
like dark silver
caressing the city shores
draining darkness
from Delhi's soul.

Abhay K*. a poet-diplomat, recipient of the SAARC Literature Award and nominated for the Pushcart Prize, is the author of eight books including five poetry collections.*

VOLCANO
By Mandal Bijoy Beg

Those two
streams of lava
Have become solid
and silent now -

Ever reminding me
Of those painfully
sweet
Sleepless nights
Of incessant
creativity.

The volcano is
silent now -
Not dead
(It should not be
dead:
For "miles to go
Before I sleep.")

Will ever that time
come
When a head will
run
Ahead of a
stomach!

Who knows
When 'gain
This volcano of
creativity
Will abruptly erupt
And some more
new streams
Will start flowing!

Muse, let thine will,
Not mine be done!

HOLI: CALL OF THE SEA
(writing after
many years)
By Mandal Bijoy Beg

look yonder, the
fishermen
venturing into the
sea
unfriendly
and so
unfathomable
deep
on 'eir mechanised
boats
from the Puri
beach!

it's a voyage in
quest
of something firm
into the realm of
unfathomability

a passion
to face 'nd fight,

a mania
to be at ease

a perilous
pleasure!

so unyielding,
so unconvincing!

Ulysses,
O Captain! My
Captain!
Journey of the
Magi,
The Old Man and
the Sea
and
The Road Not
Taken
peep into my mind.

Nissim Ezekiel's *Latter-Day Psalms*: His Religious and Philosophical Speculations

By Dr. Pallavi Srivastava

The depiction of Indian experience by Indian poets writing in English must not be confused with the futile attempts of the poets to imitate the West. Similarly, it must not be considered a substitution game for Indian poetry in English proved to be extremely receptive and assimilative to English education and English language. It never lost its native colour, taste, opinions, morals and intellect. Thus Indian sensibility in Indian English poetry completes a full round. It started with the mystic, religious, spiritual and philosophic and now it also speaks about the city life, the self and of the practical world and its problems. It can be seen in the poetry of Indian English writers in the form of Indian mythology, history, culture, religion and life. In the beginning this sensibility is emotional as we see in the poetry of earlier idols like Tagore, Aurobindo, Toru or Sarojini Naidu etc. But it becomes intricate as we come to modern poetry of Ezekiel, Ramanujan, Kamala Das and others. It is the credit of Indian writers writing in English that they used English language prolifically and profitably in their best works. Today we have a glittering galaxy of talented writers in India who are on their way to produce works of merit and skill, especially in the domain of poetry. There are the poets like Nissim Ezekiel, A.K. Ramanujan, K.N. Daruwalla, R. Parthasarathy, Kamala Das, Gauri Despande, Jayant Mahapatra, and many others. These poets have given excellent works to Indian literary world and proved fruitful and rewarding because of the depiction of the warm soul of India

In this context, Nissim Ezekiel (1924-2004) whose poetry is an embodiment of Indianness occupies a prominent place in modern Indian English literature. Ezekiel has seven volumes to his credit – *A Time to Change* (1951), *Sixty Poems* (1953), *The Third* (1959), *The Unfinished Man* (1960), *The Exact Name* (1965), *Hymns in Darkness* (1976) and *Latter-Day Psalms* (1982). When Ezekiel commenced his poetic journey, he was surrounded by a host of inhibitive complexes owing to his Jewish background. This instinctive awareness of marginality is the main cause of the notes of anguish and anxiety, recurrent in his poetry. In fact, this records Ezekiel's incessant struggle to transcend his position and force himself onto the centre. The impelling urge of the marginal inclined Ezekiel to formulate personal strategies to device his relevance to his surroundings. The beginning of his poetic career is marked with a developing sense of commitment and belonging to broaden his individual self in his creative pilgrimage and this concern of Ezekiel is the most pervasively pronounced in his poetry. Thus Ezekiel has been authentically an Indian poet without any faults of many other Indian English poets of today. He regarded himself essentially as an Indian poet writing in English. He has always aspired to the genius of the soul of India.

Ezekiel's seventh volume is *Latter-Day Psalms,* which was published in 1982 from the Oxford University Press. Ezekiel was invited to Rotterdam International Poetry Festival for poetry reading from 11-17 June 1978, where he composed this volume. This volume has also been translated into Assamese. Out of 150 Psalms given in the Bible. Ezekiel has selected only nine, corresponding to numbers 1, 3, 8, 23, 60, 78, 95, 102, and 127, and to maintain a sense of modernity, he has given them his own views and a characteristic modern touch as discerned in the tenth. To quote Dr. A.N. Dwivedi, "This latest poetical work of Ezekiel running into sixty-three pages and spanning a period of about twenty-five years in its coverage of a wide spectrum of experience and knowledge has in its texture a beautiful blood of the old and the new, of religion/philosophy and worldliness/sensuality, of traditional value systems and modernistic value systems, and of all those contrarieties which constitutes the present–day human life of complexities and difficulties." [1] The volume reveals in particular, a passion for form and precision, like some of his earlier volumes- *The Unfinished Man, The Exact Name and Hymns in Darkness.* The volume, in a sense, unfurls Ezekiel's struggle for words, language, irony and paradox in order to achieve a universal range of self-expression. "The Postcard Poems" of this volume is quite remarkable for language experiments; so also the poet's attempt to define himself. To quote S.C. Dwivedi, "Latter–Day Psalms is full of idioms of modern Indian society sometimes employing the literal translation of colloquial words and phrases in order to keep touch with the reality." [2] Some critics observe that this volume lacks harmony and thematic unity, but it is quite outstanding in its pursuit of the concept and image of man. Poems like "Songs For Nandu Bhede", exhibits Ezekiel's brilliant use of wit, humour and understatement, and "Undertrial Prisoners" exposes both the judiciary and the Indian Jail system. They are truly arresting in appeal. Thus, the poems of this volume are quite remarkable for their modernity, sophistication, paradox, irony and detachment – an indelible contribution to Indian poetry in English indeed.

The idea of writing these Psalms struck the poet during his stay in a hotel in Rotterdam. The Psalms of David, as referred to on p.43. These Psalms were the part of the song-singing in the public services of the Israelites and also in their private devotions. In essence, they touch poetic heights and are highly readable. The volume is remarkable for Ezekiel's art, sophistication, and choice of exact words. The poet employs irony, metaphor and symbols to achieve his perception of paradox. Ezekiel's themes stem from his own experiences and the experiences of the people around him. He exposes the Indian people's faulty use of language in "Very Indian Poems in Indian English". These poems namely "The Patriot", "The Professor" and "Irani Restaurant Instructions" highlight in a humorous tone the linguistic errors of Indians while speaking English. The volume is a fine specimen of language alteration in a radical way. In this respect, Ezekiel attempted to alter the tone and idiom of language in his poetic corpus. Thus *Latter-Day Psalms* is remarkable for Ezekiel's great feeling for the language. Apparently, there may be lack of harmony and thematic unity in it as some critics have pointed out. In fact, the volume exhibits the social, personal and religions commitments and involvements of the poet in a busy metropolis. As for lack of harmony and thematic unity, the poet pursues the concept and

image of man in his poems to make a unifying whole. Man acts as the centre as well as the uniting factor. Even "Latter-Day Psalms", which is a religious poem, deals with the decline of man and his dilemmas. These poems establish his position as a religious-cum-philosophical poet. "Postcard Poems" depict responses of a skeptical and secular man to the religious texts. In short, the volume is commendable for its use of the Biblical theme in the modern language. The apt combination of religious strain in unorthodox and modern consciousness demonstrates the poet's struggle in most passionate and emotive language to define and redefine him and is a brilliant specimen of Ezekiel's extensive use of the lucid and plain language of poetry. In fact, the volume is credited to have brought the central Sahitya Akademi Award for Ezekiel in 1983.

Latter-Day Psalms, succeeding *Hymns in Darkness* six years after is a characteristic evidence of the Hindu view of life and tradition affecting the poet. The very opening poem of the collection, "Counsel" expresses the classical Hindu view of action– giving, receiving and restraint:

Express your gratitude By giving what you have to give.

You may get nothing in return.

And bear your restlessness with grace. [3]

(*CP,* p.230)

The above mentioned excerpt appropriately reminds us of *datta damyat, dayadhhwan.* The last line is highly characteristic as it contains the undertones of the *Bhagwad Gita,* preaching us to endure loss and gain, success and failure with equanimity. The poet wants to pass on the encapsulated wisdom enshrined in the Hindu Scriptures to the succeeding generation. The protagonist of the poem ardently seeks after success that is rarely achievable –"Success at the moment/is not in your interest" (p.229). As a fatalist, the poet suggests:

Turn to silence, nothingness.

Where you are

Is where you have to be.

(*CP,* p.229)

The poet's further advice to us is that we should sort out personal weaknesses in our existence that enrich and strengthen our personality. In spite of being aware of the difficulty involved in this task, the poet advises us to:

> Know, you are not wise:
> This is difficult
> Grasp you folly
>
> And you grasp your self.
>
> (*CP*, p.229)

The line – "Do without, be absent" (p.229) – to exist within limitations and imperfections emerges just like a caution that contains material condemnation that is treated by people as the very soul of life. The poem contains a list of non-attachment and determinism that is often stressed in the Hindu view.

The title poem "Latter–Day Psalms" represents the culmination of Ezekiel's spiritual speculations though he has not accepted that he is a religions poet in the accepted sense of the term. Writing a letter to V. A. Shahane, he wrote:

> I am not a religious or even a moral person in any conventional sense. Yet, have always felt myself to be religious and moral in some sense. The gap between these two statements is the existential sphere of my poetry. [4]

The poem was composed during Ezekiel's stay at Rotterdam in June 1978 for poetry reading. At his hotel, he had no reading material with him. Ezekiel composed his poems in reply to Psalms. The modifier "Latter-Day" in the title represents the irrelevance of the Biblical Psalms to contemporary man concerned with the immediate and the real. Thinking that the Psalms need to be retouched, the poet evolves a compromise formula to seek good. The first nine Psalms correspond to 1, 3, 8, 23, 60, 78, 95, 102, and 127, representing the 150 Biblical Psalms. As the title itself suggests, these Psalms offer a modern interpretation of the original Psalms. The poet intends these Psalms to be "only Post-Judaic-Christian". Using his favourite mode of expression, *i.e.*, irony, Ezekiel recasts the original sense of the Psalm in such a way as to overturn their meaning.

The very first verse of Psalms, in comparison with Ezekiel's first "Latter-Day Psalm," is liable to quote to underscore the quality of adaptation:

Blessed is the man that walketh
not in the counsel of the con-
ventional and is at home with
sin as with a wife. He shall
listen patiently to the scorn-
ful, and understand the sources of their scorn.

(*CP,* p.252)

This outrageous analogy "at home with/sin as with a wife" (p.252) brings out the fact that he is a believer in the world of experience. The enjoyment of sin implies tolerance, understanding and salvation. In fact, the poet defends involvement in life which is an admixture of both good and evil. Like the Gandhian philosophy of 'hate the sin and not the sinner', Ezekiel sympathies with the depraved and expresses his concern for mankind in general and the suffering people in particular through his Psalms.

The second Psalm alludes to the doctrine of the *Gita*. It is the doctrine of dispassionate action or work without being involved in it. The poet uses this philosophy because man lives in time and "Rare is the man whose fruit is/in his season" (p.253). With 'the Time's chariot drawing near', the poet sees the Good ironically. The congregation of the Good and the Evil signify the humanity. Ezekiel's second Latter-Day Psalm is based on the third Biblical Psalm, having echoes of Hinduism in its Catholic approach. The opening verse is a prayer to God to save both the good and the evil from their potential human weaknesses. Ezekiel creates his characteristic mode of humour in quoting literally the Biblical Psalm 3:

How can I breathe freely if
thou breakest the teeth of
the ungodly?

(*CP,* p.254)

Ezekiel's Psalms have more tolerance, permissiveness and broad-mindedness than those in the Bible; his Psalms encompass the whole of mankind, not only the believers of a particular church.

The impact of Hindu tradition and individual talent can be discerned in the whole of Ezekiel's "Latter-Day Psalms." These Psalms reflect religious strain in an unorthodox way. Ezekiel's eighth

Psalm extensively overhauls Psalm 102, featuring the afflicted devotee who complains before the Lord about his temporal existence. And after some subtle modifications, Ezekiel's verse comes out as:

> I am like a pelican of the wild-
> erness, like an owl of the de
> sert, like a sparrow alone
> upon the housetop-but not in
> misery.
>
> I forgot to eat my bread,
> not because my heart is
> withered like grass.
>
> (*CP,* p.259)

It is because of mortality that the Biblical Psalmist obliterates all his wayward considerations, even the bare necessities like food. However, Ezekiel's regret to 'eat his bread' is born of different reasons. Both Ezekiel and the Biblical Psalmist put forth similar attitudes to worship God who "regards/the prayer of the destitute, who hears the groaning of the/prisoner, and of those who are/appointed to death" (p.259). The Biblical Psalmist vents his humble anguish over his appointment with death.

On the other hand, Ezekiel's Latter-Day Psalm simply reflects the borrowed metonymy, without having any compliant for his predicament:

> I wax old as a garment;
> as a vesture I am changed.
> In this I accept the condition of humanity.
>
> My children shall continue,
> and their children shall continue . . .
>
> (*CP,* p.259)

Ezekiel's surprising knowledge of the Hindu Scriptures makes the above extract remarkable. It eloquently echoes the celebrated advice of Lord Krishna to Arjuna:

Vāsāni jīrnāni yathā vihāya, navāni grihnāti, naroparāni.

Tathā sharirāni vihāya jīrna , nyānyani sanyāti navāni dehī.[5]

The fate of mankind has been one of anguish and suffering ever since Adam's fall. Referring to such a situation, the great Romantic poet John Keats writes in his famous "Ode to a Nightingale":

Thou wast not born for death, immortal bird!
No hungry generations tread thee down; [6]

This temporariness of human existence is perceptible to Ezekiel that is hinted by three dots at the end of the above quoted extract of Ezekiel's Psalm. It appears that Ezekiel tries to put this endless occurrence of human predicament into verbal form. Being basically a humanist, Ezekiel is endowed with an instinctive empathy for man's weaknesses. He expresses his sense of admiration for his Psalms as they are human creations, and hence destined to be flawed and incomplete. Putting forth his comment on the poetic virtues of the Psalms, he also admires their lyrical quality and the richness of images and over's, "they swim in my Jewish consciousness" (p.261). This 'Jewish consciousness' makes him aware of the fact that:

God is a presence here
and his people are real.
I see their sins. I hear
His anger.

(*CP,* p.261)

At the same time, the poet admits an instinctive awareness in the shaping of his sensibility. In the concluding Latter-Day Psalm, Ezekiel reiterates the significance of the Biblical Psalms in the growth of his personality:

Now I am through with
the Psalms; they are
part of my flesh.

(*CP,* p.261)

However, it is notable that Ezekiel does not have any intention to reject or discredit the original Psalms. In fact, they act as an inspiration for him in enhancing his sense of integrity in religious faith. Ezekiel's non-conformist attitude to Psalms is deeply-rooted in the catholicity of human love. Its appeal has a telling effect of its own. Bruce King rightly observes in this connection:

> The 'Latter-day Psalms' reflect Ezekiel's struggle with his own Jewish heritage and end with an ironic 'Jamini Roy' conclusion in which the art of the psalms provides a model for his own work. [7]

Thus, the Psalms are imbued with the poet's deep sense of faith that makes him see the workings of God.

In fact, Ezekiel's commitment to Indian thought and tradition makes his poetry quite reflective and meaningful. His recent poetry evinces his keen interest in the Hindu mysticism, philosophy and theology. However, he is not committed to any particular system of thought or religion. It is because of the exploration of philosophical and existential aspects of life, that Ezekiel has become an eminent Indian English poet. Though Ezekiel is a Jew belonging to the Bene-Israel community, the impact of the Hindu thought on him can be discerned easily.

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The Moping Owl :

the Epitome of Melancholy

by Zinia Mitra

The history of Eighteenth Century poetry for all its confirmation to, what we call, the Augustan tradition, appears to us today as the history of struggle between the old and the new forms of poetry and the gradual triumph and acceptance of the new. On one hand there were poets who adhered to the continuance of the Augustan tradition, to the school that Pope had popularized and brought to perfection, and, on the other hand , there was a discernable tendency to deviate from the rigid principles set by that school and a response to a wider range of experiences, seeking fresh subjects, fresh forms, fresh modes of feelings and expression. When Joseph Warton in his Essay on the Genuis and Writing of Pope (1756) held a position that Pope was a great "wit" but was not a great poet since he allegedly lacked imaginative and emotional qualities that are fundamental to true poetry [1] and when Edward Young in his Conjectures on Original Composition (1759), maintained that poets must stop imitations of classical models and be sensitive to nature and the promptings of individual genius, it was evident that a change of taste was beginning to express itself in quite an open disapproval. Age of Johnson (1744-84) was an age of transition, innovation and varied experimentation. The chief characteristics to which the school of Pope adhered to as the classical school were astuteness and distinct lack of emotion and imagination. The poetry they produced were exclusively town poetry. The poetry they produced avidly rejected romantic spirit. The style and form were extremely artificial and formal. They adhered rigorously to closed couplet.

The reaction that I was referring to entered into poetry and modified its dry intellectuality and its constricted didactic principles. Emotion, passion and imagination was set in. Poetry showed a gradual increase in interest in nature and rustic life. The most significant was the interest in the growth of the sense of the picturesque. With romanticism gradually making in there were attempts to break away from the stereotyped conventions of poetic diction and to look for substitute in the simplicity of phrase and language of nature. The superiority of the closed couplet was questioned and other forms of verse began to be used in its place. Such reactions against the established conventions of an age sometimes hurl in together and sometimes are independent of one another and yet sometimes they

cross one another at some crossroads resulting in great complication for the literary critics to note down the characteristic deviations in clear-cut points.

We may conveniently begin with the change in form. The key characteristic of the reaction in style was the rejection of the Popean couplet for experiments in other kind of verse. Thomson's Seasons was fashioned on Milton. Other examples of poetry not fashioned on the restrictive poetic diction but belonging to the closing years of the age of Pope include William Somerville's The Chase, Edward Young's Night Thoughts, Robert Blair's The Grave, John Dyer's The Ruins of Rome (1740) and Dr. Mark Akenside's The Pleasures of the Imagination (1744). The Age of Johnson was as an age of transition and experiment ultimately led to the Romantic Revival.

The greatest protagonist of classicism at the time was Dr. Johnson and he was enthusiastically supported by Goldsmith. As Macaulay points out :

> He took it for granted that the kind of poetry which flourished in his own time, which he had been accustomed to hear praised from his childhood, and which he had himself written with success, was the best kind of poetry. In his biographical work he has repeatedly laid it down as an undeniable proposition that during the latter part of the seventeenth century, and the earlier part of the eighteenth, English poetry had been in a constant progress of improvement. Waller, Denham, Dryden, and Pope had been, according to him, the great reformers. He judged of all works of the imagination by the standard established among his own contemporaries. Though he allowed Homer to have been a greater man than Virgil, he seems to have thought the Æneid a greater poem than the Iliad. Indeed, he well might have thought so; for he preferred Pope's Iliad to Homer's. He pronounced that, after Hoole's translation of Tasso, Fairfax's would hardly be reprinted. He could see no merit in our fine old English ballads, and always spoke with the most provoking contempt of Percy's fondness for them.[2]

Goldsmith was equally convinced that the classical standards of writing poetry were the best and that they had attained perfection during the Augustan Age and that "Pope was the limit of classical literature."

The poets who showed romantic leanings, during the Age of Johnson, and who are today described as the precursors or harbingers of the Romantic Revival were James Thomson, William Collins, James Macpherson, William Blake, Robert Burns, William Cowper, George Crabbe and Thomas Gray.

James Thomson (1700-1748) in The Seasons, which is a poem of empathetic depiction of nature, follows the Miltonic blank verse. In his dream allegory The Castle of Indolence he used the Spenserian stanza. William Collins' (1721-1759) advocacy, return to nature, to unsophisticated simple life eventually became the fundamental creeds of the Romantic Revival. Though his Oriental Eclogues was written in the closed couplet, it was romantic in its feeling. In his the odes: To Simplicity, To Fear, To the Passions, and in the short lyric How Sleep The Brave, and the exquisite Ode to Evening he valued solitude and quietude. Much like Gray, whom we are to discuss, Collins exhibited deep feelings of melancholy. James Macpherson (1736-1796) who became famous by the publication of the 'Ossianic' poems, which he claimed were translations of Gaelic folk literature, introduced melancholy and romantic suggestions in poetry. William Blake (1757-1827) a mystic and a visionary with an apocalyptic effusion offered a complete break form classical poetry. His Poetical Sketches, Songs of Innocence and Songs of Experience depict the love of the country, of simple life of childhood and home that mark him out as a leader of naturalistic poetry on which Wordsworth was to labour later. In The Book of Thel, Marriage of Heaven and Hell, it is the prophetic voice of Blake which appeals to the reader. Robert Burns (1759-96) displayed a great love for nature. William Cowper (1731-1800) described the homely scenes and pleasures and pains of simple humans. George Crabbe (1754-1832) standing midway between the Augustans and the Romantics remained classical in form but did not shrug off his romantic temper.

If we recall James Thomson, William Collins, James Macpherson, William Blake, Robert Burns, William Cowper, George Crabbe and Thomas Gray, we must also mention Thomas Chatterton (1752-70) who conceived the romance of Thomas Rowley, an imaginary monk of the 15th century and had made a very strong appeal of medievalism. His death, though attracted little notice at that time was commemorated later by Shelley in Adonais, by Wordsworth in Resolution and Independence, by Coleridge in A Monody on the Death of Chatterton, by Dante Gabriel Rossetti in Five English Poets, by Henry Wallis in his painting titled "The Death of Chatterton," John Keats had dedicated one of his sonnets in his name : "To Chatterton". Keats also inscribed Endymion " to the memory of Thomas Chatterton".

What appeals to us in Thomas Gray is that he was a recluse and produced little poetry, but, the little he wrote is exquisite both in quality and finish. This instantly draws our admiration probably because it stands in stern contrast to the our present day poets who produce bulks and bulks of unreadable poetry.

Thomas Gray composed "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" in 1750, when he was only thirty – four. It eventually became one of the best –known poems of later eighteenth century. It elevated Gray to a considerable position of influence for the first generation of Romantics. Wordsworth himself had singled out Gray and quoted his sonnet "On the Death of Richard West" to establish his argument in his Preface to Lyrical Ballads that a good poem does not necessarily need to adhere to the strict principles of a given poetic diction. His ode, "Intimations of Immortality" was much influenced by Gray's "Elegy".

Gray's Elegy begins in a temporal space that separates the full light of day from the coming darkness , admirably suited to convey the sense of human mortality introduced by 'knell' in the very first line :

The curfew tolls the knell of parting day ,
The lowing herd wind slowly o'er the lea ,
The ploughman homeward plods his weary way
And leaves the world to darkness and to me.

William Collins had epitomised this twilight state in his Ode to Evening (1747):

Now air is hushed, save where the weak-ey'd bat
With short shrill shriek flits by on leathern wing,
Or where the beetle winds
His small but sullen horn
As oft he rises 'midst the twilight path
Against the pilgrim, borne in heedless hum:

This symbolic twilight time is rather condensed in Gray as the moment when darkness finally blots the glimmering landscape out of sight :

Now fades the glimmering landscape on the sight,
And all the air a solemn stillness holds,
Save where the beetle wheels his droning flight,
And drowsy tinklings lull the distant folds:

Having thus set the backdrop, Gray turns his attention to the foreground, to the row of narrow graves where the 'rude Forefathers of the hamlet sleep'. Readers may frown at the word 'rude' today but Gray clearly used it in the sense of robust, hearty or, at the most, in the sense of rustic. The images of nature become alive and active in the morning in contrast to the 'drowsy tinklings', and 'droning' of the evening. The swallows twitter, the cock's clarion call, and there's the 'echoing horn". 'Morn' itself is a living creature calling and breathing. The poem proceeds to reflect a while on the pastoral life, ruminates for a while on the pastoral way of life as the ideal way of living before introducing the poem's main theme, death, the inevitable tragedy of life. It is because the country dwellers lived in nature they lived active lives in harmony with nature. The harvest yielded to the sickle, and although the stubborn earth did break their furrows at times the forest bowed to their 'sturdy stroke'. But later in the poem we find an ambiguity creeping in (stanza XII), as the poor are depicted as unable to realize their best potentials despite living ideal pastoral lives :

Chill Penury repressed their noble rage ,
And froze the genial current of the soul.

On one level the poem proceeds with the poet appealing to its readers to value the modest qualities of the good country farmers and their honest labors and not to err by reducing them by inappropriate assessments of relative greatness, for, that involves opportunities they have never had. On another level, by the reference to the country dwellers as a Hampen or a Cromwell, a new kind of perspective is introduced. The country dwellers are seen and valued (with the appeal

of not to be valued) through the periscope of the city life. By the references to Hampden and Cromwell the pure pastoral heritage of their relationship with nature is altered. But again we can say , it is only the poet who is affected with this varied perceptive, for, the poem again lets the traditional values of pastoral life overhaul:

Far from the madding crowd's ignoble strife ,
Their sober wishes never learn'd to stray ;
Along the cool sequester'd vale of life
They kept the noiseless tenour of their way .

And with,

This pleasing anxious being ever resign'd,
Left the warm precincts of the cheerful day".

The implied continuance of the pastoral tradition itself is dependent on the memory of those who live after them. The very fact that the poet can determine the 'uncouth rhymes' and 'shapeless sculpture' in their frail memorials, along with "Their names their years, spelt by th' unletter'd Muse" locates the poet firmly in a world that is set apart form the simple ignorant people. The poet is not one who is mourning the death of his companions, he is an outsider, viewing them from outside. The epitaph that concludes the poem tells a story of a life of a simple country shepherd.

It has often been questioned if Gray's Elegy Written in Country Churchyard belongs at all to the kind of elegy as per definition that involves mourning occasioned by a specific death. The original title of the poem was "Stanzas Wrote in a Country Churchyard". Gray is known to have later changed the title at the suggestion of his friend William Mason who identified the alternatively rhymed iambic pentameter quatrains as the form used in elegies. Gray's poem is a poem of mourning even if we overlook the specificity of remnants of his grief for Richard West (died 1742), the elegy does mourn a particular death, along with the deaths of the obscure villagers. As is widely known, the figure of the poet in the opening scene is derived from Milton's Il Penseroso, a melancholic solitary figure with a prophetic vision. Gray's deliberate indulgence into this figure is part of mid-eighteenth century revisitations to the melancholic.

Death is the silencing of life. It is a silencing of the sounds that are alive and active during the morning. Throughout the elegy there is an absorbing obsession with silence as opposed to sound that eventually leads to the epitaphic script as opposed to the living voice.

In the opening lines there is a detailed attention to the dying sounds that emerge from in the foreground of a silence that shall begin soon. The sounds of 'solemn stillness'. In the context of a churchyard at nightfall, these are like lingering sounds that break out to survive death , the positive indications to which any human will hold on to. Gray is aware that posthumous human language is unvoiced and is dependent on the quiet meditations of an epitaphic script. The poem proceeds to gradually introduce this quietude.

Can Honour's voice provoke the silent dust ,
Or flattery soothe the dull ,cold ear of Death?

The 'silent dust' and 'cold ear' are both resistant to the aggravation of voice or music. Gray educes respect for some 'mute' and 'inglorious' Milton, for death will eventually silence all voices. Having introduced inescapable muteness that all existence has to enfold Gray is suggestive of being in alignment with that mute inglorious Milton himself for all his written words in the elegy.

In his The Ode on the Spring the poet observes insects, bees, gnats, butterflies, as they revel in the sun, and pities the brevity of their life and happiness, whereupon the insects, in their turn, reply to the lonely, obscure and solitary poet. In Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College Gray ostensibly contrasts the carefree years of boyhood with infirmities, frustrations and disasters of mature life and then comes the final stanza of resignation

To each his suff'rings: all are men,
Condemn'd alike to groan;

In the Hymn to Adversity his fear of life, the dread the future, the whole burden of his age that we recognize as melancholy overshadows the anguish of his grief over the death of his friend, West. In the Sonnet, this grief is expressed with intensity and concentration:

My lonely anguish melts no heart but mine

In The Progress of Poesy, Gray sets himself to glorify the poet's calling with exaltation but with an allusiveness that his contemporaries were not familiar to. But it was quite a prelude to Romantic Revival, quite a foreshadowing of Keats and Coleridge:

> In climes beyond the solar road,
> Where shaggy forms o'cr ice-built mountains roam,
> The Muse has broke the twilight-gloom
> To cheat the shiv'ring Native's dull abode.
> And oft, beneath the od'rous shade
> Of Chili's boundless forests laid,
> She deigns to hear the savage Youth repeat
> In loose numbers wildly sweet
> Their feather-cinctur'd Chiefs, and dusky Loves. . . .

One of the finest precursors of romanticism, Thomas Gray, later came to be listed with Graveyard poets along with Oliver Goldsmith, William Cowper and Christopher Smart. Himself the very icon of romantic alienation, his works like the paintings of Casper David Friedrich or William Turner open up nature before us with all its delicate breathings with a lingering note of inevitable melancholy.

Notes and Reference :

1. “Thus have I endeavoured to give a critical account, with freedom, but it is hoped with impartiality, of each of POPE's works; by which review it will appear, that the largest portion of them is of the didactic, moral, and satyric kind; and consequently, not of the most poetic species of poetry; whence it is manifest, that good sense and judgment were his characteristical excellencies, rather than fancy and invention;”...

“An Essay on the Genius and Writings of Pope” in English Poetry 1579-1830: Spenser and the Tradition: Volume II. Rev. Joseph Warton, London: M. Cooper, 1756.

2. Macaulay, Lord Thomas Babington. *Boswell’s Life of Johnson,* Sept. 1831, in Macaulay’s Life of Samuel Johnson , by Thomas Babington Macaulay and William Schuyler , London: Macmillian ,1908

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Identity Issues in the Poetry of Nissim Ezekiel

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It's fantastic

What a slave

A man can be

Who has nobody

To oppress him

Except himself

-Ezekiel(*Collected Poems.* 149)

Nissim Ezekiel is a poet of post-Independence era presenting the authentic identity crisis of modern man. He is venerated as a mentor and father-figure by many younger poets, critics and novelists. For half a century, Ezekiel stanchly served his poetic muse, and nurtured the muses of many others, from his home in Bombay. His collection of poems include : *Time To Change* (1952) ,*Sixty Poems* (1953),*The Third* (1959), *The Unfinished Man* (1960), *The Exact Name* (1965) ,*The Three Plays* (1969), *Hymns In Darkness* (1976), and *Collected Poems* (1966). Ezekiel was awarded the Sahitya Akademi award in 1983. In 1988 he received another honour, Padma Shri, for his contribution to the Indian English writing. He has written poems on various themes such as: clash of opposites, Indianness, love, city life, common human relations, region, philosophical concerns and Identity issues.

In much of recent Indian English poetry, the portraits of man is shown as alienated individual, rootless and helpless, psychological restrained and cautiously retreating to the inner world. "Man is alone" (53) says Ezekiel in *Collected Poems*. A Raghu in his critical book *The Poetry of Nissim Ezekiel* rightly says about Ezekiel,

> Whether or not this generalization is correct, the author of the statement has always been alone. Ezekiel has often struck me as one of the loneliest individual on earth (148)[1]

The loss of 'identity' in the lives of men and women in the present commercial civilization is conveyed in the poetry of many Indian poets writing in English. One has reasons to believe that Ezekiel's quest for identity has become the underlying theme of his poetry and can be perceived in the several poems. His poetry gives the impression of an oversensitive soul caught in the tentacles of a cruel city civilisation, unable to escape from its vagaries and consequently developing a love-hate relationship with its tormentor. Ezekiel has seen the splendour and poverty of the great city, its air-conditioned skyscrapers and claustrophobic slums, its marvellous capacity for survivals and its slow decadence. H. M. Williams asserts:

> Many of his poems derive their effectiveness from the poet's puzzled emotional reaction to the modern Indian dilemma, which he feels to be poignant conflicts of tradition and modernism, the city and the village: a somewhat obvious theme but treated by Ezekiel as an intensely personal exploration.[2]

Ezekiel began with a sense of alienation with the world around him. His poetry has been attempted to establish some kind of recognizable order and relevance for his self in the irrational and featureless world that surrounded him. The poet's gradual emotional disassociation from the immediate environment of the city where he was born began in early childhood. His failure to get into the mainstream of Bombay's life is symbolically expressed:

> He never learnt to fly a kite
>
> His borrowed top refused to spin.
>
> ('Background, Casually')

Alienation is another main aspect of modern poetry. The poet remains detached to his surroundings. The modern poet becomes alienated as he might have lost religious anchors, which was very true in Nissim's case. The modern man is again spoiled by secularism, science and technology. Alienation became a code word in European literature since World War II; Ezekiel had the seeds of alienation ingrained in him. He stood alone in the Hindu-Muslim society, because of his Jewish ancestry. A passage in Ezekiel's well known essay, 'Naipaul's India and Mine' clearly substantiates his identity crises:

> I am not a Hindu and my background makes me a natural outsider. Circumstances and decisions relate me to India. In other countries I am a foreigner. In India I am an Indian. [3]

In his *Poster Poems & Hymns in Darkness* the poet's mood is one of reverence and submission.

> From this human way of life

Who can rescue man

If not his maker?

Do thy duty, Lord.

Confiscate my passport, Lord,

I do not want to go abroad

Let me find my song

Where I belong.

(Poster Poems & *Hymns in Darkness)*

The poet says that the man is now cut off from worldly love and affection and he is living a painful life. He is standing at the air-port searching for his Self:

Confiscate my passport, Lord,

I don't want to go abroad

Let me find my say

Where I belong (*Hymns in Darkness*.213)

'A Morning Walk' is a great poem which translates the sense of the bustle of the "barbaric city" into a gnawing pain that oppresses the poet's memory. The picture of the city deprived of seething with poverty, dirt, noise and bustle emerges with disturbing clarity in this poem:

Barbaric city sick with slums,

Deprived of seasons, blessed with rains,

Its hawkers, beggar, iron-lunged,

Processions led by frantic drums,

A million purgatorial lanes,

And child-like masses, many-tongued,

Whose wages are in words and crumbs

('A Morning Walk')

The several vignettes of disgust and revulsion Ezekiel presents in a haunting urban picture of societal doom and individual depravity.

Here among the beggars,

Hawkers, pavement sleepers,

Hutment dwellers, slums,

Dead souls of men and gods,

Burnt-out mothers, frightened

Virgins, wasted child,

And tortured animal,

All in noisy silence

Suffering the place and time,

I ride my elephant of thought.

('In India')

Nissim Ezekiel vivifies the feeling of the man at the threshold when he is grasped by a queer feeling and suffering from a sense of alienation in this world. The poet's own self-diagnosis can be seen when he describes that he is "corrupted by the thing imagined" (A Time to Change). In the important poem 'The Double Horror' the poet gives his feeling in the following lines:

I am corrupted by the world,

Continually

Reduced to something less than

Human by the crowd ('The Double Horror')

'Background, Casually' expresses the travails of an intelligent Jew boy of meager bone living and growing up in a multi-racial, multi-religious and multi-linguistic urban society where he was so alienated and frightened that

One noisy day I used a knife

('Background, Casually')

'Enterprise' is an allegory of the pilgrimage theme with a suggestion of futility. Journey from the city to the hinterland is a metaphor for contrived change from frustration to fulfillment. The futility of the trip, the struggles on the way, the deprivations the group undergoes and the failure to compromise the intention of the trip with its end are succinctly brought out in the final clinching lines :

.... … … differences arose

on how to cross a desert patch

……

Another phase was reached when we

Were thrice attacked, and lost our way

A section claimed its liberty

(Enterprise)

In 'The Edinburgh Interlude' Ezekiel wrote,

I have become

part of the scene

which I can neither love nor hate.

Nissim Ezekiel beautifully expresses man's helplessness. The agony and anguish of loneliness is described in the following lines:

My daughter tells my wife,

Who tells my mother,

Who tells me *(Collected Poems*.200*)*

'Urban' is a poem of eighteen lines exploring the divergence between the Bombay man's search for the nourished dream of a free, oppressionless existence and his perennial inability to achieve even a partial realization of it. He never sees the skies; he never welcomes the sun or the rain; his morning walks are dreams floating on a wave of sand. The disgusting reality of everyday life, the resulting Jack of coordination between action and perception and the sense of futility of human efforts to discover meaning in hope are the outcome of the tyranny of the city over the citizen.

He knows the broken roads and moves

In circles tracked within his head

('Urban')

The poet digs at the mechanical and artificial life of the modern man, suffering from loveliness and tastelessness. Ezekiel is a philosophical poet and precedes systematically in the treatment his subject. How philosophically, the poet broods over the lot of modern human beings in his *Collected Poems* as:

If saints are like this

What hope is there then for us?' *(Collected Poems)*

In 'The Double Horror', irony is combined with the urban theme and the distortions of a mass culture are mercilessly exposed:

Posters selling health and happiness in bottles,

Large returns for small investments in football pools,

Or self-control, six easy lessons for a pound

Holidays in Rome for writing praise of toothpaste.

(The Double Horror)

'The Railway Clerk' the first of the Indian English poems in '*Collected Poems'*, captures the miserable existence of a representative of contemporary lower middle class society as,

My wife is always asking for more money,

Money , money , where to get money?

My job is such, no one is giving bribe,

While other clerks are in fortunate position,

and no promotion even because I am not graduate,

I wish I was bird ('The Railway Clerk,184)

This inevitable choice to stay, however, unsettles the poet. Instead of providing an anchor for his thoughts and hopes, it launches the poet into an unending search for identity, stability and repose. His desire to belong to the city (Bombay) he chose is often frustrated by the impact of the strange city's truculent mass culture.

I have made my commitments now

This is one: to stay where I am,

As others choose to give themselves

In some remote and backward place.

My backward place is where I am.

(Background, Casually)

Caught in the vortex of a soulless city the poet longs for salvation. His poetry becomes a perpetual quest for identity and commitment in a world of eroding individuality and lack of purpose. The poet expresses his dilemma thus:

.... The door is

always open

but I cannot leave

(The Room)

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