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# The Poetry of Nissim Ezekiel

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C. PAUL VERGHESE

NISSIM EZEKIEL, UNLIKE Dom Moraes, another Indian poet in English, is much simpler in his technique and use of poetic devices. He has no use for the mythological machinery borrowed from fairy tales, medieval romances and contemporary anthropology which Moraes skilfully employs to serve his purpose. Ezekiel's verse is sharp and shapely, taut and austere, though occasionally a little bare. Added to this is the epigrammatic terseness about some of the lines, that gives the impression of his being aphoristic. This is most evident in his poems dealing with the non-tangible and the abstract in which an attempt is made to define concepts. 'Prayer' from which the first and last stanzas are quoted below is an example:

Prayer is transcendental speech.  
To transcend is to go beyond,  
Beyond is anywhere—All  
Or nothingness. I have known  
Prayer as nothingness, and prayer  
As all but nothingness,  
But prayer as All I have not known....

'Guard my tongue from evil'  
Is a prayer within the reach  
Of evil tongues. Indifference  
Alone is unredeemable.  
The rest is faith, belief and truth  
Pursued, at any rate in prayer  
This is all I know of prayer.

But like Moraes he too is well-versed in the handling of

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mterical as well as free verse; in fact iambic tetrameter is his favourite form :

The city like a passion burns.  
He dreams of morning walks, alone,  
And floating on a wave of sand.  
And still his mind its traffic turns  
Away from beach and tree and stone  
To kindred clamour close at hand.

The above lines reveal a certain sureness, skill and flexibility. That the dream is a mirage is suggested by the line, 'And floating on a wave of sand'; and soon we notice that the dream gives place to reality: 'Away from beach and tree and stone/To kindred clamour close at hand.'

Even within the narrow limits of iambic tetrameter, the poet successfully effects changes of tone to suit the subject-matter.

Barbaric city sick with slums,  
Deprived of seasons, blessed with rains  
Its hawkers, beggars, iron-lunged  
Processions led by frantic drums,  
A million purgatorial lanes,  
And child-like masses, many-tongued,  
Whose wages are in words and crumbs.

This is also true about his use of iambic trimeter or an alternation of iambic pentameter and trimeter. The tone of prayer, for example, in 'Morning Prayer'—a poem in iambic trimeter—is unmistakable.

God grant me privacy.  
Secretive as the mole,  
Inaccessibility  
But only of the soul . . . .  
  
Whatever the enigma,  
The passion of the blood  
Grant me the metaphor  
To make it human good.

'Wisdom', concerned in a personal and pessimistic way with the gap left when '... the old are stale in the morning light/And

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the young have shining eyes', shows that Ezekiel, even when lucid and simple, is capable of loading his words with meaning. The repetition of lines at the end of each stanza with the simple change of a few words serves to heighten the sense of gap between the old and the young. The rhyme scheme and the careful choice of words enhance the total impression of concentration of thought. The poem which is quoted in full below also shows how well Ezekiel makes the subject-matter inseparable from the poetic form :

To take the burden and exert oneself  
As though it were not there,  
Neither more nor less than one can bear,  
To do this would be wise—  
But the old are weak and on the shelf  
And the young have shining eyes.

To keep our bonds in tension, plumb the night,  
Renounce the soothing lie,  
From all the routines and the customs fly,  
To do this would be wise—  
But the old are stale in the morning light  
And the young have shining eyes.

To shape one's inner image silently  
Though human and infirm,  
Preserving love against the secret worm,  
To do this would be wise—  
But the old are still as a fallen tree  
And the young have shining eyes.

Ezekiel's free verse is not a mere escape from the restraints imposed by a fixed form but it is the employment of a rhythm that suits the emotional mood of the poem. He seeks a stricter discipline and arrives at what according to Marjorie Boulton is the third kind of free verse—'verse with a more colloquial style, suitable for the expression of difficult thought or sometimes of cynicism or the man-of-the-world attitude'. 'In India' is a fine example. In this poem widely different emotions are contrasted by means of flight after flight of carefully woven images and sequence of moods which at first look haphazard but later

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come to be recognized as a skilful patterning of sharp sketches of the painfully contradictory Indian scene as witnessed in Bombay. The poem begins with a description of the city of Bombay:

Always, in the sun's eye,  
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,  
A Cézanne slung around my neck.

The poet is in the middle of this mosaic of Indian scene, reflecting on it as the last two lines of the above passage suggest. There is clear irony in the sketches that follow. The picture of 'the Roman Catholic Goan boys', 'the whitewashed Anglo-Indian boys' and the 'musclebound Islamic boys' who at one time, though earnest in their prayers, at other times 'copies, bullied, stole in pairs' and 'bragged about their love affairs' and 'confessed their solitary joys', is, for instance, as ironical as the picture of 'the Anglo-Indian gentlemen/(drinking) whiskey in some Jewish den/With Muslims slowly creeping in/Before or after prayers', that comes immediately after it. The gossipy liveliness of these pictures as well as the lines given below, which describe the celebrations of New Year's Eve, very well suits the content:

The wives of India sit apart.  
They do not drink,  
they do not talk,  
of course, they do not kiss.

The last picture is not only ironical but also sarcastic, and takes the poem to its climax; it is the account of an English boss atte-

tempting to seduce his Indian secretary.

... This is the promise:  
The long evenings  
In the large apartment  
With cold beer and Western music  
Lucid talk of art and literature,  
And of all 'the changes that India need'.  
At the second meeting  
In the large apartment  
After cold beer and the music on,  
She sat in disarray. . .

But with true British courtesy  
He lent her a safety pin  
Before she took the elevator down.

More than the gossipy liveliness, it is perhaps the effective use of understatement, surprise and irony, that makes the poem effective.

Another instance of Ezekiel's use of free verse is to be seen in 'Night of the Scorpion'. This is a simple narrative poem in which the force of superstition and age-old beliefs is pitted against the scientific temperament. The success of the poet lies in the careful variation of rhythm which helps him to achieve different effects. The rhythms of the speaking voice shift with the sense, in a manner usual in free verse. The change of rhythm in the following lines is intended to achieve an incantatory effect which it does :

May he sit still, they said.  
May the sins of your previous birth  
be burned away tonight, they said.  
May your suffering decrease  
the misfortunes of your next birth, they said.  
May the sum of evil  
balanced in this unreal world  
against the sum of good  
become diminished by your pain. . .\*

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\*S. Nagarajan notes that the poem renders 'the feel of Indian ritualistic invocations' (*Poetry India*, April-June, 1966).

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The syntax and grammar of the lines in the poem are straightforward and the voice we hear is obviously the poet's own. The imagery is vivid and sensitive with more than usual clarity as in 'Parting with his poison—flash of diabolic tail in the dark room—he risked the rain again', 'The peasants came like swarms of flies/and buzzed the Name of God a hundred times/ to paralyse the Evil One,' and 'with candles and with lanterns/ throwing giant scorpion shadows on the sun-baked walls...they searched for him...' Throughout the poem, Ezekiel deliberately withholds his own emotional colouring so that reading the poem we may be aware of a traditional world of superstitions as against another of scepticism and rationalism. The two attitudes are placed in juxtaposition in the passage below :

My father, sceptic, rationalist,  
.....  
He even poured a little paraffin  
upon the bitten toe and put a match to it.  
I watched the flame feeding on my mother.  
I watched the holy man perform his rites  
to tame the poison with an incantation.

The poet's emotional detachment lets the situation speak directly to us. The entire poem is built on irony which reaches its climax in the last lines :

My mother only said  
Thank God the scorpion picked on me  
and spared my children.

Writing poetry is a serious vocation with Ezekiel. This is clear from 'Poetry' in *A Time to Change*, 'Creation' in *Sixty Poems*, and 'Poet, Lover and Birdwatcher' in *The Exact Name*. To Ezekiel poetry does not remain separate from life. 'It is the why,/The how, the what, the flow/From which a poem comes' ('Poetry'). 'The sunshine of a kiss', he tells us in 'Creation', 'can glow/Within a dozen poems, and a body yielding,/ On the summer grass, with expert fingers/Can release/A spring of words as fresh as women's eyes'. In 'Poet, Lover and Birdwatcher', Ezekiel attempts to define the poet in terms of the

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lover and the birdwatcher. 'To force the pace and never to be still' is not the way of the lover and the birdwatcher. 'The best poets wait for words.' There is close resemblance among them in their search for love, bird and word. All the three become one in spirit, and Ezekiel expresses this in imagery noted for its precision and decorum:

The hunt is not an exercise of will  
But patient love relaxing on a hill  
To note the movement of a timid wing ...

In the next stanza the assertion about this resemblance becomes all the more telling and intense. To achieve the effect Ezekiel refers to the birdwatcher as going 'along deserted lanes and where the rivers flow/In silence near the source, or by a shore/Remote and thorny like the heart's dark floor'. The comparison to 'the heart's dark floor' connects the search of the birdwatcher to that of the poet and the lover. The climax is reached in the lines:

And there the women slowly turn around,  
Not only flesh and bone but myths of light  
With darkness at the core, and sense is found  
By poets lost in crooked, restless flight,  
The deaf can hear, the blind recover sight.

What is striking about the use of images in this poem is that the transition from one image to the other is so unobtrusive that the poet, lover and birdwatcher lose their separate identities for the nonce and merge into one another to carry the poem forward to its end.

Ezekiel's primary concern is with man and his mind—'The haze of self-deception in our eyes'; 'Desire/Labyrinthine'; 'Desire with object near and far'. In 'First Theme and Variations', Ezekiel says: 'I know a man whose definition in a word is chaos, but listened to his cry because he strove to be a finished man. I found him haunted by a passion for the truth about himself; he had been long in abandoning the urge to be loved and understood.' It is his own striving to become a finished



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man that makes Ezekiel 'love the texture of the stone' which 'does not feel the paralysing flow'. Man and his mind are the themes of many of Ezekiel's poems. 'On Meeting a Pedant' in *A Time to Change* is an early instance :

Words, looks, gestures, everything betrays  
The unquiet mind, the emptiness within.  
Sunlight swarms around him and the summer  
Evenings melt in rich fatness on his tongue  
But he is rigid, barricaded from  
The force of flower or bird by what he reads.

'Portrait' in *The Third* is about the predicament of the modern man :

No longer young but foolish still  
He wakes to hear his words unspoken,  
A sadness in his toughened will,  
And all except his faith unbroken.

The tone of the poem is cynical right from the beginning. His 'daily strategy' is described in the next two stanzas. It is a strategy deliberately adopted to achieve success in the business of getting on in life. But,

Beneath his daily strategy,  
Reflected in his suffering face  
I see his dim identity,  
A small, deserted, holy place.

'Urban' and 'A Morning Walk' in *The Unfinished Man* have for their subjects the city man. In both these poems the poet's analysis is gently sarcastic. In 'A Morning Walk', standing at the cross-roads, the city man who had a dream 'of being lost/ Upon a hill too high for him/(A modest hill whose sides grow steep)' watched the cold and dim city. He could not shun his native place. He wondered: 'Is he among the men of straw/ Who think they go which way they please?' In the last two stanzas the poet contrasts the condition of the city man with his dream. Even the image of the hill with its steep sides, typifying

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an ambition difficult to realise, occurs once again and brings the poem to its logical conclusion.

The garden on the hill is cool,  
Its hedges cut to look like birds  
Or mythic beasts are still asleep.  
His past is like a muddy pool  
From which he cannot hope for words.  
The city wakes where fame is cheap,  
And he belongs, an active fool.

The irony of the early stanzas is gentle and unobtrusive, but in the last lines it becomes quite obvious and borders on cynicism.

A commitment to life in the city of Bombay is discernible in a large number of Ezekiel's poems. It is this rather than any limited experience of life in general that makes him choose for his case studies from the city of Bombay. The poems analysed earlier bear testimony to this commitment and this choice of subjects. Ezekiel's talent for summing up a whole life or presenting a revealing incident in a few stanzas or sometimes a few lines and his ability to pierce through appearances and expose the unsavoury actuality with gentle irony and occasional sardonic humour stand him in good stead. 'The Double Horror' in *A Time to Change*, 'A Short Story' and 'Episode' in *Sixty Poems*, 'In the Queue' and 'At the Hotel' in *The Third*, 'Urban' and 'Event' in *The Unfinished Man* and 'Beachscene' in *The Exact Name* are further examples. Of all these poems 'Urban' is perhaps the best. The inner struggle of the city dweller caught between the pull of the city on the one side and the desire to escape the humdrum life of the city on the other is well brought out in the poem.

The hills are always far away.  
He knows the broken roads, and moves  
In circles tracked within his head.  
Before he wakes and has his say,  
The river which he claims he loves  
Is dry, and all the winds lie dead.

But his desire remains a dream for ever, his mind cannot resist

the inevitable pull and he truns 'To kindred clamour close at hand'.

Ezekiel's striving to become a finished man compels him to the self-analysis and introspection we come across in some of his poems. Truth whether about himself or about others is his objective. He believes :

To see things as they are is a habit,  
An acquisition in the blood  
That will not let the eye grow old.

In 'What Frightens Me,' he says :

Myself examined frightens me . . .  
I have long watched myself  
Remotely doing what I had to do,  
At times ashamed but always,  
Rationalising all I do.  
I have heard the endless silent dialogue  
Between the self-protective self  
And the self naked.  
I have seen the mask  
And the secret behind the mask . . .

In 'Philosophy' he speaks of a place to which he often goes 'by a flow/Away from all existence, to a cold/Lucidity' in which 'The landscape in its geologic prime/Dissolves to show its quint-essential slime'. He looks at the past with a neutral eye and thinks 'Of each historic passion as a blink/That happened to the sad eye of Time'. The 'clarity of sight' is however not absolute.

But residues of meaning still remain,  
As darkest myths meander through the pain  
Towards a final formula of light . . .  
What cannot be explained, do not explain.

A striking characteristic of the poem is the concentrated intensity of imagery. The poem, however, suffers in the fourth stanza where Ezekiel attempts generalization and consequently tends to prosiness.

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That Ezekiel sometimes lapses into pure and simple prose in versifying ideas or in dealing with ordinary themes is a defect of his poetry. 'A Short Story', for instance, ends with the lines :

He learnt the lesson, kept his own counsel.  
No longer wanted to be loved or understood  
But rightly broke with the Spanish girl.

So too in 'Conclusion' he defines life thus :

The true business of living is seeing, touching, kissing  
The epic of walking in the street and loving on the bed.

It is true that Ezekiel confesses his impressions easily and naturally in verse and this makes his poetry always moving and warming to read. But sometimes the intense concentration of thought impedes the flow and musical quality of his verse, as in 'Sonnet'.

Things unsubdued subdue the weakened will  
The bride is but a common girl; deceive  
The eye, perish the rational mind. Reflect:  
Ambition fails and kings have lost their thrones.  
At first the beloved merely finds fault,  
Later comes the slow unresponsive kiss.  
Between the first encounter and the friend,  
And the friend no more, the truth is known . . .

All the same, in poems like the above, Ezekiel's craftsmanship shows that rhythm, properly controlled, helps the poet not only in precise expression but also to examine each subject with a kind of objectivity and detachment.

A few of the poems in each one of Ezekiel's published works would not have been there if a careful selection had been made. As he himself says, he does not have 'the courage to destroy them' as they help him 'to maintain some sort of continuity in my life'. A poet should not think that everything he has written is good enough to find a place in a collection of his poems. Selection guided by self-criticism is necessary so that the quality of the final output does not suffer. Even in his latest collection of poem (i.e., *The Exact Name*) Ezekiel does not seem to

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have felt the need for a proper selection. The last poem in the collection is an example. In that poem there is no growth except for the change of subject preceding the verb :

Pretence, to pretend, I pretend,  
You pretend, we pretend,  
They pretend.

I pretended, you pretended,  
We pretended, they pretended . . .

Notwithstanding his lapses, Ezekiel is a true poet. He always takes pains to reconcile his experience of the senses with a genuine poetic awareness. This is as it should be in poetry that carries with it undertones and overtones of philosophy. He believes that though there is a clear distinction between poetry and philosophy, 'if the sound were really right, it would be sense as poetry, (and) it may even be sensible as philosophy whether or not meant to be.' A harmonious synthesis of sound and sense is often achieved by him in his poems. His 'Declaration' quoted in full below perhaps illustrates this point :

Whatever is beyond my reach  
I shall not reach for, certain vases,  
And women are too expensive, or else  
Fragile, exacting, best enjoyed  
From a distance, with delicate affection.  
Passion possesses, and beyond possession  
All is in question, mood and mystery spent,  
But reconciled to long perspectives  
The sensual form may serve to calm  
The senses and keep the darkness pure.

Darkness, disturbed and turbulent,  
Is also dear: possession is necessary  
Certain vases and women, however, expensive.  
Fill the animal heart with wonder and warmth  
And deprivation is desolation,  
I have stood in the empty room,  
And gazed at crowds in the street  
Longing to be absorbed —  
No moral law can fill the void,  
Deaf and blind to all is appetite.

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If Ezekiel's poems of the senses generally reveal his commitment to life in a particular place and a keen awareness of the problems, vexations and conflicts of those there, his meditative poems show that his is a constant and continuous struggle to become more and more fully integrated. Introspection, to a certain extent, helps one attain an integrated personality. But introspection unrelated to an awareness of the incompleteness of life around him will not take a poet far. In Ezekiel we see this awareness assisting his mental growth through introspection :

For nothing can be hidden long  
From heart or intellect,  
To each the other's phantasy  
Is plain in retrospect,  
But welded they could see and be  
A single architect.

Ezekiel's interest in philosophy does not lead him to a mere versification of ideas, reflections and anecdotes in illustration of his philosophy. He is quite clear in his mind as to the distinctive roles of poetry and philosophy in human life. He attempts a clear analysis of their separate roles in a paper on poetry and philosophy. He says :

The nourishment poetry provides to the soul is through the senses and the capacities of thinking and feeling are exercised by using words as signs and symbols, in addition to using them as meanings. That is why in poetry the sound and weight of words, and their special status in the language at a particular time as well as the new uses to which they can be put, is of the highest importance. Poetry is an art of language, philosophy is an art of thought.

Ezekiel's poetry is 'criticism of life' in the best sense of the phrase. That is why he often deals with the comic spectacle of man sulking or dreaming in a world, puzzled, and reveals a sceptical attitude to human pretensions and pretences. He can be serious and light, sardonic and intense at the same time. But his work has been at its best when it has struggled to answer questions and reconcile differences.