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The Stranger Within: Coming to Terms Through Poetry

A brown dust rises from the dirt road beside my house and stings my eyes, a familiar film-tune from a record shop drifts into my ears, the sound of a bicycle bell softens and vanishes, two mongrels howl in the distance; amidst all this something makes me sit up in my room and draws me to this unseen presence, to a feeling that appears to outgrow form or time — and I realize with a mixture of pain and meaninglessness that I must *move* on the blank sheet of paper I have pulled in front of me. And move with my feeling... for the life I lead. Move with words, into a poem.

Inside this distance it makes me ask myself that oft-repeated question: “Why?” What is it that pushes one to sit down with himself to write poetry? What makes him shun his friends, his social life, his pleasure — to struggle with his feeling and his words in the emptiness of his room?

Poetry is the stranger within oneself, the stranger the poet eventually has to face, this stranger one has to ask: “Who am I? Where have I come from?” It is a personal thing, the writing of poetry with its urgency of finding him (the stranger again) and to know more about him, because the business of writing poetry has to do with one’s beginnings, perhaps with one’s previous lives of experience. One doesn’t know how far back in time this might be. But one goes on waiting for him to explain these things...

Very often, after a reading of poetry, we have this person come up to the poet, incomprehension written on his face. And the poem he has heard, a hazy mass of feeling and idea in his head.

And he asks, this man who wants to understand:

“What does *it* mean?”

The poet answers by asking:

“Should I read that out again?”

The man says:

"Yes."

The reading of the poem over, he asks again:

"But what does it mean?"

Perhaps the poet answers:

"Nothing."

He asks again:

"But it's not clear. Whatever you are driving at."

The poet answers:

"It is an expression of an instant of experience. Mine. But it is you who should make it yours — share the experience, I mean."

And he asks again:

"How can I share this experience of yours?"

The poet replies naively:

"Read the poem again, with care, with love. Then maybe you'll be able to renew the experience."

He questions again:

"But what good is it?" "What does it do?"

The poet looks at him and says sadly:

"Everything, if you will. And nothing."

And the next question comes, more a statement than anything else:

"It's an anomaly then?"

The poet answers:

"Yes, anomaly is the painful reality, perhaps the only real thing in all existence."

II

A poet is a poet by reason of his invention, by his ability to express his feeling for life. His art emerges out of the desire to share, to communicate. There is absolutely no sense in a person creating poetry or other art if he is not able to share his thoughts with others. And he must interact in order to grow. This interaction should take place, in addition to communication on general (and social) levels, on the more intimate "you-me" level, on the level we have just gone through in the conversation at the beginning of this piece. For such an interaction helps us to grow, because in that way we learn to know ourselves, and consequently begin to know about others, which is most necessary.

True therefore, that all art will remain incomplete (and purposeless) if it does not communicate. It might not say or mean the same thing to all people, but understanding becomes possible through the passage of the idea, when it is labelled intellectual; or our understanding becomes emotional in nature when an attitude is felt and accepted; or becomes physical by empathy, which points to the quickening of the pulse

when, say, one observes a performing trapeze artist or similar hazardous shows.

Artistic communication is possible in either of these ways, or in combination of these. But appreciation of any work need not necessarily be intellectual or rational. Poetry, in particular, seems to stretch out gently in the marrow and start a movement of winds in the blood; helping ultimately to create a resonant vibration in the reader (or listener).

How well can a poet get this done? How will he be able to communicate his experiences to others? I should like to think that unless one has learnt to know oneself, he or she wouldn't be able to share his feelings and experiences at all. Only when one has begun to understand that he himself is a part of his own experiences, only when he comes to know what pushes him forward or backward in the complex process of life, only when he realizes what makes him move, as he reacts to various situations which bring him joy or pain or rage — can he be able to communicate fully with another. Mere experiencing things keenly will not be enough, or an intense feeling for objects and relationships; a skillful creation which would transform his experience and capture it with appropriate words is also of the utmost importance.

But it takes time for a person to reach into his own self, the self that he supposes is known to him, he thinks he is familiar with. And even that self he knows may be made up of many selves — different selves that are bound to be there as a result of varied situations one will have encountered through years of living. With my typically Indian outlook and upbringing, I would immediately visualise a river — the river of life — surviving the fury and the calm of the water's flow, amidst waterfalls and whirlpools; encounters which go on to build different responses, make our different selves. Our childhoods, for example (the river's source): those we begin with, and which create strange and powerful moves to shape their personalities...

As a child I grew up in my small world: parents, a younger brother, the backyard with the surrounding deodar trees, and the wall which shielded us from unknown dangers, setting up its boundaries. And with the passage of years, I soon found out that I was no longer *the* centre of my world, but just one of many similar centres, of similar worlds — of my friends and neighbours. But it took me many painful years to realize that, many relationships, both real and imagined. Gradually I learnt that every one of us is different from the others, and that no two people ever see life in exactly the same way. And that no individual can remain in isolation, but must learn to relate to those around him, must learn to communicate. This is especially true for a writer, or a poet — because a poet has to transmit his experience to

others if his poetry is to be. And this is what the writing of poetry does to the poet: it makes him reach into himself to find out what he is, through the process of re-experiencing his own felt experience.

We began this article with the routine question: "Why poetry?" that is often flung at a poet. A question that has been put over and over again to poets through the years. And today, in the nineteen-eighties, the question sounds spiritless to the ears. Truly, I'd feel hurt as though it were a personal affront to me although I realize it is an innocuous enough question. We do not have to go through arguments or into the functions of poetry, or for that matter, any of the allied arts to strengthen the poet's stand. But we might simply suggest another question which is behind this question, viz., "What use is a society which tries to question the existence of its own arts — poetry included?"

III

One of my strangely intense memories of childhood was that of the house (in which I lived) as it settled down each day into the darkness of night. It was a dismal, gloomy setting, one which haunted me with a certain persistence — until years later, a day came when I decided to put the whole thing on paper in an exercise of exorcism. It would be right to say that the situation chose me to write about it; therefore one could generalise that situations force the writer to express his feelings and his music. But I was speaking of the darkened house of my childhood, the dark deodars with the fruit-bats screeching in the branches, and the shadows that appeared to blend with the wind which blew in until one discovered suddenly that the darkness was there, inside him. My father was away most of the time, touring the primary schools of the subdivision on his sturdy BSA bicycle; and in the house my mother, physically ill, would be moving about in the listless darkness, my younger brother at her heels. We didn't have electricity in the house (it was a luxury for us), and the veranda with its adjoining little courtyard seemed to float in a ghostly atmosphere, filling me with a sense of insecurity I found hard to overcome.

And the picture of my mother, holding on to the oil lamp in the shadows, the sooty flame swaying in the breeze, seemed to establish itself firmly in my mind...

Strangely, these evenings in memory that lived closer to the heart than ever. An inexplicable loneliness linked itself with the sad-eyed oil lamp of my mother. They came to mean the same thing to me. I understood what a symbol was, without trying to go deeper into the meanings of things, without my trying to become wiser. And as the years went by and I grew older, perhaps this image buried itself in the

heavy undergrowth of my mind. It was only later, much later, when I started to write that I found myself alone in the past, this past stretching before me, and it was as if I had stepped on a small twig that snapped to make me articulate:

In the darkened room
a woman
cannot find her reflection in the mirror
waiting as usual
at the edge of sleep

In her hands she holds
the oil lamp
whose drunken yellow flames
know where her lonely body hides

Thus, the poem, which I titled "A Missing Person." And thus an unfolding of the process that takes place when a poem is made (for poems are "made" — aren't they?). For me, therefore, unversed in the ways of poetry with my basic science training, the writing of poetry has been a rather painful course of digging out, of finding my own self, and facing ultimately that part of myself I want to know and accept and love.

Archibald Macleish, the venerable American poet who died recently at the age of 90, said that which breathes life in poetry is the image. And an image is made with words. However, the meaning of words does not lie in the words. It is the person who sees the meaning in them, for words are *not* words when they appear on a printed page. Only someone like us is able to feel the push and the scream of words from the neat black letters before him. Words that empty our selves, words that make us laugh or cry or smile, words that manipulate our will, charge it or flatten it like a deflated tyre. And where else but in poetry does one find words charged with meaning?

So the solace that we seek in words, in the language that makes up the poem, as we go on and on in the movements of poetry, seeing how the words stir us, evoking varied responses. And our instants of living are affected by the play of these words. Writing a poem becomes a satisfying act — because it helps to bring a happiness, a light to the eyes, a spring to the feet. I should like to think of it that way. For one realizes ruefully that poetry matters very little to people. (Very few look at the poetry page(s) in a magazine.) Nevertheless, something urges one to sit down and write in the room's silence, like so many others. Although I know that my poems are clumsy attempts to speak to someone. Poems which arise out of the need to say what one knows about life, out of the need to share one's experience. Why is that a

satisfaction? For there is a secret pleasure in the process even when I know that there are only about twelve people who will read what I write; out of whom maybe six will damn my poems as flat imitations of the "great" poets they studied in college.

But memory is proof of a timelessness, and poetry which is shaped from memory makes me live on with my dreams — this hidden music in the bone. A sort of escape? ... Yes. Escape from thoughts of hunger and sexuality and disease and death which plague our days, to bleed away in words.