

Poetics Of Self

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Adrienne Rich wrote: “I’m both a poet and one of the ‘everybodies’ of my country. I live with manipulated fear, ignorance, cultural confusion and social antagonism huddling together on the faultline of an empire.” There is no escaping one’s limitations. However free we might imagine ourselves to be we are all part of the universe. Poets and to that extent poetry is complicit in the violent realities of power, of practices like collective punishment, torture, rape and genocide. At the same time, poetry has changed lives, helped victims through untold tragedies and literally kept body and soul together. As none of us is free of biases, what we ascribe to poetry speaks more of us than of Poetry.

I agree with Rich never to idealise poetry. “There is no universal Poetry, anyway, only poetries and poetics, and the streaming, intertwining histories to which they belong,” she wrote. “There is room, indeed necessity, for both Neruda and César Valléjo, for Pier Paolo Pasolini and Alfonsina Storni, for both Ezra Pound and Nelly Sachs. Poetries are no more pure and simple than human histories are pure and simple. And there are colonised poetics and resilient poetics, transmissions across frontiers not easily traced.” It may also be worth remembering how various are the kinds of poetry being written today, and how wide its appeal to different generations equally qualified to appreciate it. Interpretations are bound to vary. There must be room for all; poetry is not the handmaiden of a select few. Our limitations, prejudices influence all we think, do. As Emerson said, “People only see what they are prepared to see.”

Poetry offers multiple paths to self discovery, a chance to make that quantum leap into the Unknown. We are all engaged in extending the limits of our personal reality. To that extent poetry makes things happen simply by changing our angle of vision, the way we see things and respond to our reality. “A poem is the very image of life expressed in its eternal truth,” Shelley wrote. In “The Defence of Poetry”, Shelley

claimed that “poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world.” For him there was no contradiction between poetry, political philosophy, and active confrontation with illegitimate authority. Each one of us determines the limits of our engagement. Similarly Rilke reminds us ‘poetry is about everything.’

Historically, poetry played a key role in this context. In Homer the poet is the ‘divine singer,’ the Romans called him *vates*, ‘soothsayer.’ For Yeats ‘the true poet’ is a visionary. The Romantic poets subscribed to such a view and were influenced by German Romanticism. American Transcendentalism also embraced such a view of poetry. In the Sanskrit tradition, the poet was not only a seer (*rsi*), the poet was also regarded as one who ‘sees’; the poet was both actor and spectator. Poetry has been a form of knowledge in India, defined as the decisive perception of the soul. Poetry was recognised as a form of knowledge (*vidyā*), in addition to its significance as an art (*kalā*), *alamkāra*, ornamentation, *shringara*, *riti*, style or *vakrokti*, indirect or “crooked” speech. One is reminded of Emily Dickinson’s words: “Tell all the Truth but tell it slant –/ Success in Circuit lies/ Too bright for our infirm Delight/ The Truth’s superb surprise”. Poetry makes us see things differently while not bludgeoning us into submission.

Poetry is distinguished by its uncommon way of revealing the truth – be it the truth of things in the world, of feelings, or some communal or ideological distortion. In early Sanskrit poetry, such as Valmiki’s or Kalidasa’s, one finds a representation of nature and society that is powerful because it evokes experiences in the reader encompassing all aspects of life. Poetry thus raises consciousness, engaged as it is in constantly disclosing the ever new mystery of the experience-perceptions (*anubhuti*) of the soul or the mind freed of its blinkers. Generations of poets have striven to express the truth which cannot be captured, always remaining beyond words.

If poetry is seen as only an art (*alamkāra*), it is deprived of its particular form of ‘knowing’ represented by emotional perception. The perceived dominance of art in poetry in western literature and the debate surrounding it can be no bad thing if it raises questions about poetry’s social and historical functions as well as the ethical and political foundations of poetic languages. At the same time, take away the joy of

reading poetry and it loses its power to transform. The idea that poetry or *kāvya* makes possible a distinct relation to knowledge – a pleasurable relation – appears in several Sanskrit texts. The capacity of poetry to create connections whereby the ‘self’ and ‘the other’ become interchangeable is widely recognised in various poetic traditions.

In Valmiki’s *Rāmāyana*, there is an episode of such identification when the sage/poet sees a pair of singing birds; the male of the pair of sweet-voiced Krauncha birds is struck down by a hunter. At that point in the text, two cries are uttered, first the cry of the bird’s mate and then the cry of the poet, *aloka* or verse. The word *karunā* or compassion is used in the passage implying the act of entering into the feelings of another. This is perhaps the earliest definition of what poetry is – the ability of a poet to be totally immersed in another. Poetry represents a selflessness, a negation of self, that frees the poet to become another. Keats referred to it as Negative Capability.

There are, of course, as many reasons for writing poetry as there are poets. The act of creation itself is an active, positive impulse, not a static, passive, negative one. It is an act of self-exploration that has been shared by poets through the ages. And poets do so because the process of self discovery is an exhilarating process. To be able to delve into another self is godlike. Poetry and other creative endeavors provide a secure place where we liberate our many selves. For the reader/spectator too it provides a similar release, for example the sense of catharsis after seeing a tragedy. Poetry is not only self-definition it enables us to connect with others.

Through poetry one aspires to live more fully; and in doing so share a sense of belonging to the universe. Poetry is the means by which one explores fundamental questions like: *Who am I?* It was Keats who expressed this well when he wrote in a letter to his brother in 1817 that the quality that “went to form a Man of Achievement, especially in Literature, and which Shakespeare possessed so enormously – I mean Negative Capability, that is, *when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.*” He went on to add that “with a great poet the sense of Beauty overcomes every other consideration, *or rather obliterates all consideration.*” Negative capability can be defined as a state of intentional open-mindedness.

The American philosopher, John Dewey, said of Keats' letter that it "contains more of the psychology of productive thought than many treatises." Negative Capability has been compared to Heidegger's *Gelassenheit*, the spirit of letting things be in a state of uncertainty, mystery; the self-affirming emptiness necessary to insight.

In a letter Keats wrote to his friend Bailey, he referred to 'humility and capability of submission.' Keats also wrote "nothing startles me beyond the moment. The setting sun will always set me to rights. Or a sparrow come before my window I take part in its existence and pick about the gravel." This ability to get into the character of others is what Keats thought Shakespeare possessed so abundantly. In another letter, Keats said the "poetical character... has no self – it is everything and nothing – it has no character and enjoys light and shade; it lives in gusto, be it foul or fair, high or low, rich or poor, mean or elevated – it has as much delight in conceiving an Iago as an Imogen. What shocks the virtuous philosopher delights the camelion Poet... A Poet is the most unpoetical of anything in existence, because he has no identity, he is continually filling some other body." The loss of self is a prerequisite to the perpetual struggle for self-discovery and self-invention; the Keatsean self is forever wavering between 'everything and nothing.' Keats' understanding of a poetic identity thus anticipates Nietzschean concepts of continual self-revision.

T.S. Eliot refers to something similar when he writes "poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality." As a great truth is a truth whose opposite is also a great truth (Niels Bohr), I would like to refer to William Wordsworth's definition of poetry as "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings; it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility." Both reflections on poetry are valid, they represent different ways of defining It. "... – not very satisfactory:/ A periphrastic study in a worn-out poetical fashion,/ Leaving one still with the intolerable struggle/ With words and meaning." (Eliot, "East Coker", *Four Quartets*). There is always that in poetry which will not be grasped, which cannot be described, which survives our ardent questioning, our critical theories, our late-night arguments, our doubts and more.

Living in London, in one of the most cosmopolitan, diverse, multicultural cities of the world, acquiring a kind of negative capability is essential to one's survival. Being oneself becomes an interesting project as individuals grapple with a competing range of views, perceptions and possibilities. Sometimes, being oneself does not 'come as naturally as leaves to a tree' yet, unlike Keats, I cannot say it is better if it comes not at all. A first generation immigrant, facing all sorts of discriminatory practices, one learns to focus on issues that matter – be it poetry, family, friends or the planet.

One of the compensations of being an outsider is objectivity, a displacement that encourages self-examination. The angle of vision from the centre is different than from the circumference helping one to see things uniquely, one's invisibility is a magic cloak. Yet for ideas to live and grow one needs others to see it, share it. Ralph Ellison's hero said in *The Invisible Man*: "I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me." Imagine a world without our greatest thinkers, scientists, artists, industrialists and philanthropists simply because we refused them a place at the table. "Give me a place to stand on, and I will move the Earth," Archimedes is reported to have said. How many original thinkers have we sacrificed because we did not have the ability to understand them? It is especially a human failing – our inability to see/ understand even when our survival depends upon it.

As I have been trying to say – we are all limited in our perceptions, some more than others; it's a human condition. As long as we remain open to possibilities, not get too comfortable in our conception of our self there is hope. My relationship with my adopted homeland is as complex as my relationship with India. I have created my own cultural, literary, spiritual home which I carry with me. Roots matter to the extent that you need them in the process of self-definition, and these roots need to be strong. I do not feel rootless because I do not live in India. Being a bit of an outsider everywhere is no bad thing. It gives one perspective on life. The nature of exile, the role of language and poetry in defining a new personal identity are common among creative writers and thinkers, perhaps more so among self-exiled ones.

Poetry is an intense exploration of the human condition through language by which we seek to uncover new ways of seeing and interpreting

the world around us. What shapes my approach to the world is a search for an inner equilibrium which is hard to come by. The struggle with words is also a struggle with ideas, life's uncertainties – that spiritual quest is ultimately a quest for what cannot be known. In a world fraught with open-ended propositions, one is bound to lose the kind of certainties one had as a child.

It is impossible to know how I would have evolved as a poet, for example, if I had lived in India; or if life had offered me completely different choices. “What might have been and what has been/ Point to one end, which is always present.” (Eliot, “Burnt Norton,” *Four Quartets*) Taking into account the fact we cannot escape our life, past, history etc, the person I am today and the kind of poetry I write must have some connection. It is more difficult to say precisely how much of it is due to me, or a result of my living in this country. The answer has to be we simply do not know, or everything and more – the black box we refer to as luck, fate, kismet. We must all find our answers individually.