CHAPTER III

THE RELIGIOUS-PHILOSOPHICAL STRAIN
human body. Ezekiel as a poet has in recent years shown a great command over his art, a deeper maturity in thought, a more delicate sense of craft, a higher sensitive awareness of words and their poetical content, a more skilful tightness in organisation and a deeper inward awareness of the organic form of a poem than in the past. These qualities of the later phase of Nissim Ezekiel's poetry are relevant to the religious and philosophical poems.

In a letter to Prof. Delmer Bogner at New Paltz, New York, Ezekiel wrote on 14 June, 1966:

I was brought up in a mildly orthodox Jewish home which gradually became liberal Jewish. I attended the liberal Jewish Synagogue in Bombay until I abandoned religion altogether soon after leaving school.

Nissim Ezekiel is a Maharashtrian Jew, but his early education in an English-medium school led to a total neglect of his mother-tongue, Marathi. Although he began writing verse in his early teens, the period of consolidation was between 1950 and 1952, the years he spent in "voluntary unemployment" in London and in studying philosophy at the University of London. He admits the influence of Rilka and T.S.Eliot on him, but
asserts that he has not formulated any philosophy or aesthetic theory.

This is clearly a very close connection between Ezekiel's life and his poetical work. He is primarily a poet seeking, sometimes in vain, other times successfully, a balance between an almost existential involvement with life and an intellectual quest for commitment. His poetry emerges from a tension between opposites, an emotional plunge into life and a desire detachment from it; a craving for prayer and a temptation for irony; a passion for this world and a hankering after the world beyond. His poetry is deeply embedded in his life (existence), and at the same time it merges into meditation (essence), "Prayer and poetry, poetry and prayer" (A Time to Change).

The word "prayer" is used quite often by Ezekiel in a diverse set of poems. In fact, he has recently written a novel set of poems which are entitled Poster Prayers. These are described as unconventional and comic "appeals to the universal egoist's silent God." In the poems written in the early phase the world "prayer" is frequently used to denote a feeling of genuine spiritual commitment, though this is very often modified by a kind of subtle scepticism and incisive irony.
Ezekiel's post-1967 poems are marked by a strain of what may be described as esthetically-inclined philosophical humanism. On the one hand he is conscious of his own mask, but at the same time he aims at "stripping off a hundred veils" of creation and the creator. His theological position has to be stated in purely humanistic terms. In this philosophical system aimed at restructuring man's relationship with God, society, and nature Ezekiel expresses his own inner response: "Lord, I am tired/of being wrong." This feeling of metaphysical exhaustion alternates with a realization that God's truth is too important and great for man and, therefore, it cannot be brought within the narrow framework of utilitarian objective:

Your truth
is too momentous for man
and not always useful.

Ezekiel becomes conscious of his own mask in the process of realizing his own self as a condition precedent to understanding the nature of divinity:

Even as myself my very own
incontrovertible, unexceptional
self, I feel I am disguised.

While this process of trying to come to terms with the self continues, physically the disgust with the world of appearances dominates him and he feels "tired to irony
and paradox" and of "poetry direct and oblique" and "of categories and labels." However, the poem itself is basically built around sensual, psychological, moral, and theological paradoxes emerging from man's relationship with God. God's indifference to man is hinted at, and at the same time the poet inwardly feels that God is trying to save him from a "terrible situation," a paradox at the heart of the poem. "Theological" is rather a prosaic poem, and although the poet asserts his own impatience with "statement plain or symbolic," it verges on a plain statement using such unpoetic words as "incontrovertible." Its sceptical under-current and cynical irony also subtly subscribe to this basic dilemma.

Ezekiel's thinly philosophical poems, to a degree like Auden's, explore existence not by making mere statements or clear or oblique assertions, but by involving the reader's sensibility into an esthetic process of exploration. This is achieved through various poetical devices such as a skilful use of sound, rhyme, perspective and imagery. Ezekiel's main subject is man in his cosmos and, therefore, many of his poems take the shape of portraits of men, and other poems take the form of the poet's encounters, real or imaginary, with them. These encounters seem to be
inhibited by a dismal ambiguity and "know-not-where" enigma. "Ezekiel," writes Adil Jussawala, "is much concerned with the interior life and its rewards." However, the awareness of this interior life is externalised and the clarity, lucidity, precision, and technical perfection of Ezekiel's poetry are the direct outcome of this process.

The poem "Process" is an excellent evidence of Nissim Ezekiel's newly-acquired religious stance and his way to a positive faith:

Just when you give up
the whole process
begins again
and you are as pure
as if you had confessed
and received absolution.

The poet has achieved a new faith "in a process that can perform such miracles." In April 1967 Nissim Ezekiel had his first LSD trip, which he would like to describe as the voyage of discovery — this happened during his second visit to the United States. He explained an aspect of this experience in a letter to Vasant A. Sahane — "I came out of that with my 'philosophy' turned inside out. In eight hours, and became a Believer:

in God, religion, the metaphysical nature of the Universe and life, ESP, etc." The entirely new change in Ezekiel's mode of thought and values is a basic shift from his earlier rationalist-atheist phase reflected in his early poetry. In his poem "Chronic," he expresses his awareness of the mysteries of life and universe and the impediments in realizing their meaning. He feels that "the obstacles are all illuminated" and yet

the world is full of secret languages
waiting to be learnt instinctively

In his quest for knowledge Ezekiel is up against many "hackneyed truths" which loom, ahead of him and make him conscious of his involvement in various masks. His poetry may not always succeed in expressing his spiritual dilemmas and, therefore, he becomes aware of his inadequacies in this realm: "Yet all I end up with is membling poetry, and a thousand helpless books."

His search continues for a sacrament but he mocks the grace of living using his analytical skill. However, the ultimate experience comes as a rather painful revelation:

I tread on water, sink
as I expected to, know
only the sea-bed's muddy truth
among coral and crab-fish
affectionate and ineffective
in every age and circumstance.
In his poem "Choices," Ezekiel reveals the stages in his spiritual quest and moral belief. "I cannot choose but live/Unless I choose to die" is a statement in tune with his philosophical liberalism. The philosophical dilemma of man in relation to time and place is resolved by the poet's determination "Not to live imprisoned in the time or the place/In the mind or the self." The second stage in the realization is self-surrender, and the third and "lightest" step "Is right into the air," a sure way of observing and comprehending the eternal verities of the cosmos.

Nissim Ezekiel in his religious and philosophical quest creates a "rrom" of his own, a spiritual parallel to his own physical room of study where he writes poetry. In his study room he has moments of vision as well as dismal tidings of being cribbed, cabined and confined:

I mock myself here
as if my very existence
is presumption

And then he becomes conscious of his task of restructuring and renaming the objects: "I have no name anew/the things I see." The shadows in the room shift continually and fall into different patterns making the poet conscious of coming events:
Yet some events are to happen here not of moods only but of visions.

In another poem, "Happening," the setting once more is the poet's room which holds his writing desk as well as many of his upsurges, abysses, paradoxes, and transcendent moments. He begins by testing the proposition that

A man withdrawn into himself
man be a man moving forward.

He wishes to resolve his philosophical dilemma, although the light in the room is rather dim, suggesting the spiritual state of his groping in darkness. Ezekiel bewails the sad fact that man has "lost the language of dreams." In making love man has to rely on "a fire from heaven." "Happening" is a moment of intense revelation of the self and it is expressed in a language and a mode characteristic of the poets' pinning their faith in liberal, emotive, philosophical humanism:

The food I eat
cannot nourish me
unless I love the human face.

This "happening" brings the poet's sensibility in intense "kinship with the world" and he realizes the truth of the unity of nature and man and the links that bind man with his fellowmen: "I am near every body/ being near myself alone." If the poet withdraws into
himself, he becomes a victim of the fever of his own making, "the meaning without a cure for it" and this state explains the sequence of the "Happening."

The images of light, darkness, transparence, rocks, hill, broken bridges, burnt boats, human body, masks, face, room, shadows, earth, and inferno, characterize the post-1967 poems of Nissim Ezekiel which are composed on this religious-philosophical issues and experiences. The element of the imagery in these poems is rather restricted since they aim at conveying directly the poet's predicaments to the reader.

For instance, the poem "Transparently" uses the images of light and darkness, words which the poet "consciously loved." The poet feels, however, that more than half of his hours are heavy and dark and that even rocks are reasonable or clouds are clear compared to his mind and then he unfolds his basic predicament:

Who wants experience at the cost of achievement? All I want now is the recognition of dilemma and the quickest means of resolving it within my limits.
Ezekiel has stated his position clearly and unambiguously and what strikes the reader in his (Ezekiel's) recent poems more particularly is his transparent sincerity, his steadfast adherence to the truth of his experience and idea. He is among the few Indian poets writing in English who is honest to the core in stating his attitudes or beliefs. What is still more significant is his clear comprehension of his area of achievement, or the lack of it, his awareness of his limits. This realization is Ezekiel's strength, rather than a weakness.

Ezekiel as poet is too conscious of his vocation, and also of its heavenly quality as well as its earthiness. "In the Theatre," the world itself becomes a stage, and the actor's talent tries to interpret "the sense of transparent existence" and its movement which is compared to the flight of a migrating bird. The poet desires to "end the acting" and to know, to be new, to discover his relevance to cosmos. He knows that

It's not the artifice
It's the art that finally
entrances reason
and makes us human.

Ezekiel's constant stress on humanism as his basic belief is given poetical expression through such
images as human face, and the state of being intensely human is also conveyed through an encounter with reason. He has a feeling of staying still "behind the sad mask of reason" and praying to God to give him strength to encounter all obstacles in the way of knowing the life of the spirit. This humanistic stance is brought into close association with the element of his art. The poet desires to "act" and compose his work in "the script of the universal theatre." And the experience finally culminates in a metamorphosis of the artist's experience and this is essentially original:

Originality is metaphysical transcending consciousness yet falling like rain by a natural process.

In Ezekiel's created world, art, philosophy and religion are intermingled. However, many of Ezekiel's poems do not give this feeling of "falling like rain" so naturally and their artistic flow is impeded by many obtrusive ideas and intellectualism.

A reading of his poems shows that Ezekiel is not quite content with playing the role of a poet, pure and simple, but he is rather fascinated by a wider world. First, there is the world of poetry and art and, second, there is the larger world of reality and facts. While
Keats's sensibility moves primarily into the world of art and beauty, Shelly's operates between one world and another. This explains why Shelley called the poet as an unacknowledged legislator of mankind. In Ezekiel the stress key is almost always on the world of reality. As a result his poetry suffers as art, though there are various meeting points where his poetry seems happily wedded to his philosophy and his ideas.

In this context, "The Hill" is a fine poem which focusses attention on the normative quality of his art and ideas. The "normative hill" is "transparently accessible" and man should not miss it at all. The hill may demand a man "with forces flowering"

as from the crevices
of rocks and rough surfaces
wild flowers
force themselves toward the sun
and burn
for a moment.

The image of wild flowers blossoming and burning in a moment is very significant, suggesting man's quest for eternity and the divine. Ezekiel is quite conscious of the wider issues involved in the process:
I am not talking about poetry. I am taking about perishing outrageously and calling it activity.

This activity will finally make man aware of the eternal verities, that in "decent death you flow into another kind of time, which is the hill," a knowledge of the eternal life which is at the heart of the poem and which is symbolized by the hill.

Ezekiel's efforts of climbing "A Small Summit" is also metaphysical in its ontological and cosmological contexts. It is ontological because it explores the nature of being, reality and self: "Do I belong, I wonder, to the common plan? A bitter thought." He may wish to be my own guest in my own one-man lunatic asylum questioning the Furies, my patron saints about their old and new obscurities.

The metaphysical element may also be related to its cosmological context since it deals with the structure of the world. The poet closes his eyes and allows the dream to sustain his spirit:
This is no inferno after all
which it may well have been
but just another landscape
justified by being there.

Ezekiel treats the landscape and its forms in various ways. In "Lawn," man's awareness of the earth is gently unfolded and also the mode of the growth of vegetation. The earth looks like a mysterious prophet "who will not give a sign" and then the transforming process is at work culminating in "a thin transparent green."

a silence in the depths
a stir of growth
an upward thrust
a transformation -
botanic turmoil
in the heart of the earth.

This botanic turmoil is only a physical aspect of the metamorphosis of the soil and the poet learns the secrets of the mother-earth. This event is symbolic of religious revelation which is at the heart of this poem. Though Nissim Ezekiel is a Jew belonging to the Bene-Israel community, he is very much under the impact of Hindu thought.

Ezekiel's "Testament" expresses his basic belief in the "moment of winging":
More should be remembered
than is forgotten;
and that's
only the beginning, the silent hour
later, the moment of winging ......

Then Ezekiel speaks of the "resurrection," its "fact and fiction" and the primary need to know the "life designed for a steadfast radiation." The poet slowly becomes aware of the significance of this transforming event to which he "owes a colour." This quest for the divine need not be confined to the realm of poets alone but must have an ever-expanding horizon:

Yet this is the calling
not of poets only
but of men and nations,
the spaceship earth itself
in revolutions recollected
for Time's unimagined
apostolic continents.

The image of the earth as spaceship is beautiful and apt in the context of our present day knowledge of the universe; it also articulates Ezekiel's belief in the divine, in God.

Ezekiel's religious — philosophical poetry arises out of a tension within his own personality. He says, "I am not a religious or even a moral person in any conventional sense. Yet, I've always felt myself to be religious and moral in some sense. The gap between these two statements is the existential sphere of my poetry."