INTRODUCTION

It is certainly not a matter of conjecture that for Nissim Ezekiel, the rather elusive art of poetry held a fascination even at a very young age. In a poetic volume published during 1965-74, he had stated that 'Philosophy, poverty and poetry' were his companions in a basement room at London - this statement was made when he was barely twenty two years old. Like a typical adolescent, he dreamt exuberantly about possible achievements, but then at a later stage, he forthrightly states,

The later dreams were all of words
I did not know that words betray
But let the poems come.

Ezekiel published his first collection of poems A TIME TO CHANGE in London. The young poet was then a student of philosophy but soon realised that poetry was his special field and nothing could induce him to swerve from the chosen path. In the journey of life, poetry is instrumental in realising oneself. For Ezekiel, life and poetry are inextricably linked.
In his Foreword to *SIXTY POEMS*, he writes, "Poetry is elusive, to write a poem is comparatively easy". There is clearly discernible in his early life a specific objective which acted as a motivating factor in helping him to realise his purpose and ambition in life — that of discovering the right idiom in poetry and very doggedly is this mission pursued. Several poems in *A TIME TO CHANGE* show an acute consciousness of the nature of the poetic art and concern for it as a serious vocation.

In his early uncertain and diffident groping for poetic expression, his youthful exuberance and vitality notwithstanding, he discerns that his expression is rather naive and artless, the subtleties are yet to be acquired and his poetry is far from the desired standard of excellence he has set for himself. Yet he is perceptive and realises that they are significant to the extent that they help as experiments in the uphill task of good poetic composition and will gradually assist him in displaying his total potential. As P. Gurrey states,

To begin with, we must acknowledge that the thinking of the ordinary person, even at his best, is never or very rarely, as exact or intense as the poet's at his best, nor is his feeling so sensitive and finely discriminated, he is rarely so fully aware of fine shades of thought and feeling as the poet frequently is."
Ezekiel does not have any doubt about the fact that the art of poetry being an exacting one, its practitioners are expected to be persevering in their effort for the substance of poetry, he is aware, is no romantic fantasy in which the diction may be extravagantly loaded with fanciful embellishments. It is unlike "the English spoken and written in the mid-Nineteenth Century, which was characterised by diffuseness and vagueness. And the two qualities, it is clear, were inter-dependent. The diffuseness was a consequence of the vagueness. Two words were required to do the duty of one because a single word was so enveloped in emotional connotations that its meaning, its intellectual content was never certain." 

Ezekiel's purpose in poetry has been and continues to be the employment of a vital language. While poetry itself is expected to be realistic dealing with concrete experiences expressed in concrete terms. The vague, the nebulous and the indefinite cannot expect to find room in poetry. It is perhaps relevant at this stage to mention that Ezekiel as a pioneer of modern Indian Poetry in English has laid down definite standards for the craft. In A TIME TO CHANGE, he expresses his basic idea of poetry.

If it were so, as I say it is
In poetry, precisely so,
A face, a savage, singular
But well-defined identity
Homage would be done to it
By such a sleep, such a lucid flow
Of time, that I would be
In poetry defined
As in reality, I should be so.
A poem is an episode, completed
In an hour or two, but poetry
Is something more. It is the why
The how, the what, the flow
From which a poem comes,
In which the savage and the singular
The gentle, the familiar
Are all dissolved, the residue
Is what you read as a poem, the rest
Flows and is poetry. This should be so
Precisely so.

Thus does Ezekiel expound his philosophy of poetry
and one immediately discovers the seriousness of his
commitment. When compared to the intricate task of
poetry, a poem is a mere trifle and can be quite easily
contrived; the art of poetry cannot for it encompasses
in its framework a gamut of feelings, subjects and themes
and above all demands an unwavering loyalty and allegiance
in its pursuit.

"In mature life poetry ceases to be mere uncontrolled
affective association and primitive rhythm and becomes
charged and controlled by reflective inquiry and
canons of technique." 8

When one comprehends his idea of poetry, one is
inclined to recall the poem of Archibald Maclish entitled
"Ars Poetica"
A poem should be palpable and mute
As a globed fruit

A poem should be equal to
Not true*
A poem should not mean
But be.9

What we infer then is that a poem is not significant
for what it says but the manner in which it is said. The
formal excellence of a poem is far more significant than
the theme it deals with. It is interesting to observe
that

"the need to write poetry in the case of Nissim
Ezekiel does not arise from the need to explore
a very personal verses—theraphy like the
confessional poets nor is it exclusively a matter
of deep contemplation. There is a poised balance
between inspiration and thought as he writes
about the problems of existence and the scheme of
things in the large cosmos. The poet in Nissim
Ezekiel is too self-conscious of artistic
excellence while the man in him strives to explore
the real meaning of existence through art. 10"

Repeatedly he craves for the attainment of the
precise expression. A fact that is constantly emphasised
in his credo is that anyone who aspires to poetry cannot,
by any means, afford to be shifty or haphazard or work
in a disorganised manner. He explicitly states that
poetry is a demanding area of work and elicits subservience
to the rules of precision, clarity and a rigid discipline.
Frivolity and listlessness can hardly be accommodated in the
field of poetry.
Poetry is a kind of saying. It is however a kind that many people, until they become well acquainted with it, feel is rather peculiar and even useless. They feel this way for two reasons: the way of saying and nature of the said... yet poetry has existed from the time of the emergence of the human race from the shadowy pre-history and has survived in one form or another in every society since that time. When we realise this, we may be inclined to consider the possibility that poetry only seems unnatural and irrelevant, we may even decide on reflection that it does spring from deep human impulses and does fulfil human needs.

Nissim Ezekiel rightly believes that a poet cannot afford to deal with his own feelings. And true to his convictions, he has accommodated a wide variety of themes, moods and topics. Much has he penned and despite his prolific out-put, there is still a yearning to write more, so that his craft may be executed with greater finesse and he might thereby impart to it greater depth and possibly a new dimension.

The pure invention of the perfect poem
Precise communication of a thought
... subsidised by dreams alone
The stubborn workman breaks the stone, loosens
Soil... finds on a lucky day a metaphor
Leaping from the sod.

He has no use for hackneyed phrases and expressions but wields a language that is direct, vital and vibrant. Therefore it is not surprising when he states with great feeling and conviction.
I am tired
Of irony and paradox
Of the bird in the hand
And the two in the bush
Of poetry, direct and oblique
Of statement plain or symbolics
Of doctrine and dogma
Of categories and labels.

He is fastidious and his own verse appears to him inadequate. Often, he is acutely conscious of his limitations when he realises that the right word eludes him, he becomes starkly aware of the liabilities of his art and expression. During such times of self-evaluation, he understands that his art is to be chiselled further and laboured over so as to be made acceptable to himself first. To a wary reader of his poetry, it seems a little paradoxical that for a man like Ezekiel who has, besides his instinctive poetic faculty, worked laboriously at gaining a mastery of technique, the problem should be distressing. Is it perhaps that the subject of his poetry being vast and complex, the jargon he employs for the purpose seems inadequate? Be it as it may, the fact that is reiterated is that he is a conscientious practitioner of verse, working to acquire an expression that is efficient by his own critical standard of judgement. One's entire resources of language are to be unravelled for the right idiom, usage and expression. Many a time he encounters blocks which
impede his progress and he is inclined to ventilate his grievance.

These are fragments of a poem
Lines of poetry like broken limbs

I cannot mould the language as desired.

Echoing a similar note of disillusionment, he says,

My lips lack prophecity
My tongue speaketh no great matter
I am bare beside the abounding sea
Rivers feed my roots, yet I do not prosper

Give me vision and I shall be clean
And let my leaf be green with love
And let me live.

A heartening trait in the poet is that his apparent pessimism is usually shortlived and in his quest of wider horizons, no obstacle is insurmountable, no sacrifice too demanding. As Paul C. Vorphese says

"Writing poetry is a serious vocation with Ezekiel. This is clear from 'Poetry in A TIME TO CHANGE, creation in SIXTY POEMS....' To Ezekiel poetry does not remain separate from life."

It is a well known fact that Ezekiel had been influenced by a number of poets like Eliot, Yeats and Rilke to mention a few. In an interview he states,

"I have imitated Eliot, Pound, Yeats and others but never very well. My own voice has often been muffled and confused by random and temporary influences. That is the weakness of my verse."

He gradually came into his own and has been able to creditably acquit himself with a distinct voice.
Referring to the poetry of William Carlos Williams, he states in no uncertain terms that although he admires his verse, he is not inclined to imitate his style.

I do not want to write
Poetry like yours
But still I love
The way you do it
I feel the flesh of the poem
Firm
And the bone hard
It comes to me
Beloved poem
I love it
And then I let it go.18

He discovers his own authentic voice by steering clear of the styles of great poets, however impressive they may be. Vain imitations signify a degeneration of his own poetic vision, insight and utterance. If one is genuinely committed to poetry, one is automatically aware of the flow of the creative impulse which manifests itself in the form of exquisite verses. Coleridge rightly states,

A good poem must contain in itself why it is so and not otherwise.19

It is now commonly accepted that

In general the essence of poetry as an art is not so much that it is rhythmical (which all elevated language is) or that it is metrical (which all poetry is, except by a considerable extension of the meaning of the word) as that it is patterned language. This is its specific quality as a fine art.20
His poems are related to one another and they assist him in discovering his faculty. Poetry is the means by which he seeks to display the story of his life. In 'Something to Pursue' he says,

Out of doors where the winds of God
Make our minds sweet with love
The answer is; There shall be no more questions
No more expenditure of doubt
But only a limpid style of life
Whose texture is poetry.

For poetry to exist as an organised school of art, it is vitally important for the practitioners of verse to be enlightened, in not merely the rudiments of the art, but also the finer sensibilities of the art. There should be a conscious attempt on the part of poets, to conform to a certain frame work involving the form and scope of poetry. Very wide differences diffuse poetry as a craft and render it inconsequential, even trivial.

As a champion of verse, it is irksome for him to tolerate lukewarm, half-hearted poets, and slack expression by well intentioned poets. He deftly projects the growing scepticism of the public to spurious poets in the same manner as the authenticity of sages and saints is doubted.
It is extremely difficult for the two categories to make explicit their authenticity. Just as a sage struggles to find a plausible answer to his own dubious convictions, so too the poet is a juggler of words. They are acutely conscious of the ineffectiveness of their medium and are confronted by a sense of defeat and frustration. Yet ironically, a poet is out to proclaim his findings-out. The manner of his communication and the language he wields contribute to his inevitable failure—the crux of the issue being that he has not been totally involved in his art and has presumably treated it shabbily and frivolously. Hence the predicament of the poet wavers precariously between acceptance and non-acceptance. Such immature artists are strongly denigrated.

Who says he is a poet? How much does he really know or is he one of those who cheat with words instead of money? Counterfeiters caught by critic cops at dead of night

Your vanity is not as wretched as your style.

In his view, a pseudo poet is as socially offensive as any other category of defaulters for he indulges in a web of deceit, language being his special tool for the
purpose. A fake poet has a talent that is raw, flimsy and insubstantial. Insincere and immature attempts at poetry are easily discernible. Connivance at fake art is not a pardonable offense. How much love can one expect from a whore? Likewise, how much truth can a pseudopoet project? Such aspirants to poetry should, at the very outset, realise that their presumptuousness is in itself a disqualifying factor. It is indeed deplorable to perceive that in the brilliance of their over-enthusiasm and conceit, they are blind to their own unimpressive and objectionable style (if they have one, that is). And what Ezekiel finds unpardonable is their lack of seriousness, devotion and sincerity. He censures and castigates the entire community, half-hearted poets a included.

Damn all you sensitive poets
Seducers of experience
Self-worshippers and publishers
Editors of small magazines
Bread casters of small weather woes
Victims of your own spontaneous fraud
You are in hell
and do not know it
when did you last write
a real poem?

"Many are called but few are chosen" says the Bible.
Stating an almost similar view, Ezekiel says that not
every one who writes can claim to be a poet — real poetry is the exclusive preserve of a select few whose faculties, instinctive as well as acquired, are perfected painstakingly over the years in the interest of attaining a meticulous expression. Like a superb craftsman, a genuine poet is required to mould his thoughts, ideologies, aspirations, sentiments and apprehensions into a medium that is precise, genuine and spontaneous. The output of the wide galaxy of enthusiastic aspirants is not qualitative enough, although there is no dearth of attempts at poetising quantitatively. From the conglomeration, a few are appealing and striking while the bulk may be quite easily dismissed.

The realm of modern poetry says Miller in his 'poets of Reality' is one in which things, minds and words are sought to be rendered as co-present realities. The realm becomes more auditory, tactile ............. The poem is no longer an idea about the thing but as Wallace Stevens says the thing itself. It is a walk barefoot into reality, an effacement of the ego.24

It should be possible to reveal the total man through poetry, the scope of poetry should be able to accommodate man in his multi-dimensional capacities. True art
knows its place in the contemporary social milieu.

In all sincerity to his poetic vocation, Ezekiel has sought to translate his experience into poetic terms. All his poetic volumes from *A Time to Change* to his latest *Latter Day Psalms* speak of his experiences in life, its joys and sorrows. Poetry should have its roots in experiential reality, it being a substantial component.

From theorising to practice
From illusion to reality
From folly to wisdom
And back to theorising
Illusion and folly
Has been my way, O Lord
Forgive me
I have to sing
The song of my Experience.

To limit a poet's role to that of an objective spectator of life and to thereby render his poetry an impersonal portrayal of the same is a gross error in the definition of poetry too. Ezekiel is certainly aware of his place in the scheme of things. Each of his experiences, however trivial they might appear, attain a distinct connotation and significance when translated
into poetry. There is in him obviously a deep understanding and concern for the human situation. He is expansive in his concern for fellow beings and in his approach to man and life. He craves for the attainment of the fullest poetic faculties.

Not only a new poem,
but new poetry
by a new man
If this is not a dream Lord
the time is ripe
Give me the word.

There are also genuine and passionate utterances for flights of fancy

Grant me, O Lord the imagination
to fly with the sparrow
at least once a day.

In search seeking to arrive at the right idiom, he is obsessively concerned with truth and in this quest, he is untiring. He hopes to acquire a balanced view of the world. Yet there are times when he feels that man's relentless pursuit of truth is in all probability bound to end in a fiasco. In a world that is enshrouded in darkness and mystery offering ambiguities and complexities
at every stage, it is apparently improbable to discover
the light of truth. Life is a quagmire, an enigma.
Excessive knowledge and experience of the world only
deter man from the path of truth. In his pursuit of
truth, man should strive to begin afresh without being
coloured by his axioms and inferences. It is not merely
man's concern for himself that has helped him weather
the storms of life.

It is the task
of love
and imagination
To hear what can't be heard
When everybody speaks.

As an ardent pursuer of truth, he sincerely exclaims
thus,

Freshen for me Lord
every hackneyed truth
and make her open
like a virgin
to her lover
nervously, but with the first thrill
of making it at last.

Consider again the following lines which exhibit
his zeal as also the freshness of his expression
Kick me around
a bit more O Lord
I see at last
there's no other way
for me to learn
your simplest truths.

Perception of truth, imagination and insight pave the way for the fruition of the poetic potential. Much lies however in the manner of the poet's own understanding and awareness of things around him. This, together with his craftsmanship, decides the quality and nature of his work. If a poet works in splendid isolation removed from reality, his work fails to strike roots. Poetry should, as far as possible, be rooted in the social milieu from which it springs.

Ezekiel holds poetry in reverence. By tireless endeavour a poet discovers his metaphor and his toils are comparable to that of a farmer. He finds a similarity, between the acts of God and those of a poet. The poet's vision results in poetry in the same way as the utterance of God resulted in the creation of the universe. What is crucial to the poet is inspiration, Utilising his imaginative prowess, he explores many a new domain.
Blind as Homer brooding on the sun-drenched sea,
I brood on the wind, churning
The springs of many unborn songs in me.

Ezekiel strongly believes that the scope of poetry
is expansive. His ideas are brilliantly expressed thus:

However personal poetry may be it has to obey
the laws of truth even the truth of an experienced
contradiction, poetically expressed, which gives
it a universal significance. The devices used
to reflect a state of mind need to be Judiciously
appropriate and the injudicious in poetry is
false, pseudo statements. A lot of poetry is of
that kind. We are not content to dismiss it as
bad poetry. We know that it is not poetry at
all, but pretending to be . . . . . .

It has been stated that the poem 'Poet, Lover,
Birdwatcher', shows that the interest of the poet has
broadened and the artist grows in stature with the
technique of sincerity. Ezekiel waits for the right
moments of utterance. It implies that a poet cannot
afford to be impulsive. 'The best poets wait for words'
to facilitate right expression. Only a genuine poet
who is truly committed to his art, can compose such
lines. And so convincingly!

Paul G. Varghese states that Ezekiel is quite
clear as to the distinctive roles of poetry and
philosophy in human life. He attempts a clear analysis
of their separate roles when 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. 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 use to which they can be put is of the highest importance. Poetry is an art of language.33

When Ezekiel states that a poet is required to be perceptive and vigilant in his choice of the right word, he obviously implies that a poet should have primarily a passion for his art. Dexterity in handling technicalities of verse follows at a later stage. Basically, the passion should be present. There is something elusive about all great poetry and to unravel the deeper implications of a poem, a reader has to be wary. So too a poet. This fact is realised by Ezekiel and most convincingly does he express it:

The ripening and maturing of aesthetic experience is necessary for the other arts too. As Margaret Bulley says,

"A great painting will only yield its secrets slowly" and Epstein remarks.

I find that you have practically to live with
sculpture really to understand it. They change in the sun, the rain and the snow. They are still a mystery.

Therefore the more vigorous the pursuit, the more one becomes conscious of the need for the exact word. Although he is a meticulous craftsman, efficient in wielding many types of verse forms, he is also aware that there is an additional requirement, a certain something that helps poetry grow. A poem may suddenly sprout after a period of observation in which caution and patience have been exercised.

Before I am awake
a back is bent
across a brown
and barren
patch of earth
requiring
not only water
and the seed
but patience at the root
the gentle art
of leaving things alone

For weeks
this earth
is like a prophet
who will not give a sign
==
a silence in the depths
a stir of growth
an upward thrust
a transformation
and there you have the lawn.

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NOTES

1. *Journal of South Asian Literature* : The Nissim Ezekiel Issue, Vol. XI No. 3-4 (Spring, Summer 1970), P. 89 (Subsequent references to this journal is abbreviated as JSAL).

2. JSAL, P. 96.

3. Nissim Ezekiel : Foreword to sixty poems.


7. JSAL : P. 17.


10. Anisur Rahman : Form and Value in the poetry of Nissim Ezekiel (Abhinav Publications), P. 63.


12. JSAL, P. 11.


15. Ibid, P. 42.

17. In An Interview with Missim Ezekiel.
18. JSAL, P.29.
25. JSAL : P.135
26. Ibid, P. 137
27. Ibid, P. 133
28. Ibid, P. 108
29. Ibid, P. 134
30. Ibid, P. 133
32. Guest, No.76 1972, 46.
33. Paul C. Vorgese : Indian Literature, P.73.
34. P. Gurroy: The Appreciation of Poetry, P. 24
35. JSAL, P. 113.

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