All poetry is personal. The poets deal with impulses and feelings of a personal kind which overflow out of an excess. Whether one expresses or escapes from one’s personality, the personal dimension is predominant in all poetry. But in an endeavour to universalise the experience, the poet generalises the ‘I’ which involves even an amount of objective evaluation of the experience, as though it was of another person. The poet creates a ‘Persona’, a voice to achieve this distancing or generalisation. It is never quite easy to distinguish between the poet and the persona, particularly when one is dealing with such an involved poet like Nissim Ezekiel.

The poems could be descriptive, discursive, meditative and could deal with explorations into the self, meditations on past experiences or past relationships and could be analyses of the relationship between man and self, man and woman and man and God.

The streak of the personal element is sharply etched in Ezekiel’s poetry being an indispensable component of
his poetic creation. All his volumes of poetry are interspersed with elaborate expositions of his ideas, attitudes, aspirations and apprehensions. A sizeable chunk of the personal element thus prevalent is prompted presumably by his own vast and varied experiences of life. This conglomeration is translated into poetic terms. He assiduously builds up his set of dogmas and philosophies which are gradually elucidated to the reader.

It is interesting to note that statements, confessions and declarations on the personal front come to Ezekiel almost effortlessly, for he displays no reticence in unfurling personal traits and experiences, even his inmost thoughts and apprehensions are laid bare. No impediment obstructs the prolific outpourings of his heart and mind and this is the reason why his poetry makes interesting reading. Yet he does not lose his resilience either in his art or in its expression. Reiterating his faith in the personal, Ezekiel states,

The immediate environment is one of my concerns, It doesn't inhibit me. So far as inspiration is concerned, the environment plays a part but is not the whole or only source of it. One lives after all in some areas of one's inner life that are autonomous, that is not at all dependent on the environment.
It is not surprising therefore that his poetry has been described as "a metaphoric journey into the heart of existence."

Nowhere does the poet falter or grope for words in an attempt at right expression. Even an apparently trivial childhood attitude is deftly projected. The poem 'the child' is one of the rare instances in which he has employed the element of fancy in a winsome manner.

Once I was a child
And knew the certain joy of mud and toys,
The destiny of fairy princes, magic birds
And happy giants in the golden books
whose colours sang the wonder
I was born into.

The gay world of vibrant colour and fancy appeal to the child. Such fancifully adorned lines appear but seldom in his poetry and this is an exception to his general mode of expression. Another clear fact of his childhood disposition which surfaces is that he was extremely sensitive and violence was far from his scheme of things. Being altruistic and unconsciously magnanimous, he was instinctively delicate and refined in his sensibilities.

I who as a child wept
to see a rat destroyed,
Many a poem of his abounds in personal references and reveals a man who is uninhibited in thought and expression. Besides, he exhibits a frankness which facilitates a lucid and unpretentious exposition of the intricacies of his own life — its gradual progression from folly to near wisdom, his endless encounters with men and matters which ultimately result in his proclamations (lofty or otherwise) of life in general.

His own vast experience, enveloped by a gamut of interests and discoveries stand him in good stead and this accounts for the obvious authenticity of his declarations. Such statements are interesting and impressive too because they bear an unmistakable stamp of his personal experiences. It is relevant, at this stage, to note that quite a number of his poems use pronouns like I, me and myself extravagantly. This bears testimony to the fact that he exposes generously the personal front of his life.

Perhaps this is inevitable in the course of poetry.

Adil Jussawala, writes:

Ezekiel is much concerned with the interior life and its rewards.

Vasant Shohane rightly says,

However the awareness of this interior life is externalised and the clarity, lucidity, precision
and technical perfection of Saokiol's poetry are the direct outcome of this process. 

It is a well-known fact that Saokiol believes that no poet can afford to deal with his own feelings. But he can hardly resist the temptation of being personal. This is an inextricable part of his poetry, though it must be stated to this credit that he does not draw the line there. Instead he proceeds undauntedly in his real pursuit and the experiential phase of life forms the solid foundation for his poetic structure. Consider the following lines as an outcome of his deep meditation of life.

How many times have I felt free?
How many times spontaneous?
It's fantastic
what a slave
a man can be
who has nobody to oppress him?
except himself.

It is an unfortunate paradox of life that man is his own oppressor and this prevents him from luxuriating in the freedom, spontaneity and exuberance of life. The joy of life is considerably curtailed and the essence of life becomes diffused. As a result of his victimisation, man becomes his own enemy and suffers a self imposed bondage.
So deeply does the poet analyse situations that he
sometimes has cause to doubt his own sanity. Hence the
impassioned outcry.

I listen to my own madness
saying: smash it up and start again.

The influx of influences and unwholesome ideologies
in present-day life is so rapid that the serenity and
tranquility of one's mind are adversely affected.
Equanimity is almost entirely lost. Ezekiel correctly
categorises people as belonging to varying grades of
insanity. His own attempts, to evade insanity and seek
asylum in a sane world, meet with frustration and ensuing
defeat. As per his own maxim, the more deliberately one
attempts to attain it, the more doggedly it eludes him and
eventually one attains only worse insanity. The poem
'Dilemma' embodies this idea in a highly impressive manner
and it is one of his best poems written concisely yet
loaded with significance.

The further I move
away from madness
towards stability
and a measure of sense
the closer I seem
to the verge of madness
Should I be surprised
trader in paradoxes
ally of the dialectical?
I shake with intimations
not of immortality
Change, they say, or
die of sanity.

As Satyanarain Singh states, Ezekiel endeavours to
separate virtue from vice and his progression is into
the centre of the being. He attempts to derive an expan-
sive view of the world. He is able to perceive the real
essentials of life.

I don't want to be
the skin of a fruit
or the flesh
or even the seed
which only grows in another
wholesome fruit
what there is within the seed
that is what I need to be.

Ezekiel is a realist who clearly comprehends the
nature of his role. Though he perceives life as imperfection,
there is no frivolousness in his approach to it. Notwith-
standing the fact of life's imperfection, he experiences
regret as he advances in age. He reluctantly compromises
with the unfortunate fact of his advancing age but states
in no uncertain terms that he would prefer to be in the
bloom of life where the emphasis would be on accomplishments and the realisation of his specific objectives in the chosen field of work. It is a highly paradoxical situation that while on the one hand he is acutely aware of the fact that the quality of life has degenerated, on the other hand he is almost simultaneously aware, that the vitality and enthusiasm of life can yield fruitful results and spur one on to greater achievement.

I am ageing

---
I do not want the ashes of the old fire but the flame itself
Given the choice, who would not prefer to stay among the growing shoots instead of shedding leaves?

All the same, it's true
I'm making hay while the sun shines and remain, as always, a muddy peasant of the good life.¹¹

Echoing a similar feeling of disenchantment and rebellion, he states that he is not inclined to accept uncomplainingly the fact of his mature age. Yet there is a clear note of philosophic resignation which indicates his desperation in the matter.
'A Small Summit' expounds his rebellious point of view very impressively.

Why should I be reconciled to middle-aged spread and zigharole?
If nothing else, I'll keep my nerve refuse the company of priests, professors, commentators, moralists be my own guest in my own one-man lunatic asylum questioning the Furies, my patron-saints about their old and new obscurities."

As the poet states it becomes "necessary at a certain stage to believe that one knows." His poetic volume entitled 'THE THIRD', presents a poem 'What Frightens Me' in which the protagonist explains the nature of his apprehensions. It explicitly indicates that Ezekiel probes deep into the heart and purpose of existence and as a result of his thorough analysis, arrives at certain axioms. Various areas of the poem are abstract and indicate a philosophic frame of mind. A sort of existential fear is also indicated.

Myself examined frightens me.
It is no accident I as what I am
I saw the image being formed,

I have seen the mask
And the secret behind the mask

--- I have realised its final shape
Is probably uncertainty
This it is which frightens me. 

The protagonist is engulfed in a situation from which he has no means of escape and thus entrapped, he views his own predicament which is, of course, representative of the human condition in general. Man is a victim of Time and Fate and is doomed to a life of uncertainty. No amount of rebellion or meditation can quell the problems of life and death. "Torn between present action and a more inclusive patience, the protagonist grows frightened as the year ends with no promise made for the future shape of his emerging identity." The ensuing impact of life's multitude and of adversities is that he is rendered desolate and despondent. 

Within the room's enclosed dark
How safe it is and still it is
The night is heavy on my heart
The dust of day has left its mark

I hear the clamour of human dreams
The heart of the day beats still in the dark
The dust of the day is eating my heart.

It is relevant, at this stage, to note that Szokiel does not speculate elaborately, in his characteristic manner, on the subject of death. Apart from a couple of
superficial references to death, he generally remains tight-lipped on the issue. This is, of course, an area which he could have explored quite intensively if he so wished. In refraining from the subject, he would have us believe that he is undoubtedly more inclined to comprehend the mysteries of life than explore the domain of the unknown, the remote and the quaint. The business of living enchants him. Nevertheless in this poem 'Sotto Voce' taken from SINY POEMS, he implies the fact of death's enigmatic nature which eludes his own powers of comprehension.

I often think of death
But cannot think the thought out to the end
For that would be the end of thought
Death or perfect peace
And life as is imperfection,

Referring to his treatment of the subject of death, he states candidly,

I have no philosophy about Death except to the extent that it is one of Life's Realities. Then one thinks about it in relation to Life, it can add to the intensity of living, to the meaning of the struggle for self-projection and self understanding I deal with Death 'superficially' because I don't claim to have discovered anything about it through my own confrontation with the prospect of disappearing from time, space and eternity,
Although he firmly believes in a life of action, there are times when he is frustrated and almost compromises with the sheer banality of life. This is the direct outcome of one who has channelised much effort in comprehending the matters of life and is eventually disappointed with the quality and texture of life, perceived and experienced. The resultant feeling of desperation is one he is unable to weather effectively.

At last I have been reconciled
To simple nothingness and catch
Myself, hour after hour
Free from any need to live at all.

Fortunately, however, such a non-plussed mood is more an exception in his scheme of things and thereafter he resumes his hopes and aspirations for himself and mankind in general. In his poster-poem 'How My Father Died', he recalle the event lucidly, concisely. The event is dexterously conveyed, affirming besides, his meticulous craftsmanship. The poem is certainly laudable by any standard of critical appraisal.

My father talked too much and too loudly
but just before he died
his voice became soft and cad
as though whispering secrets
he had learned too late.
He called me close to him
and put his truths to me
I only felt the breath of his love
but did not hear a word.

In his skilful style of deft understatement and by exercising a clever and subtle economy of words, the desired effect is achieved. Quite uninhibitedly, he presents situations pertaining to his family without resorting to flamboyant egoism. Thus, in an apparently non-committal vein, he refers to his offspring in 'Postor—Prayers' and here too the effect is impressive.

Protect my children
from my secret wish
to make them over
in my image and illusions
Let them move
to the music that they love
dissonant, perhaps to me.

He is direct and straightforward in his expression of views and attitudes. Devious paths are distasteful to him. There is a clear preference to be candid and forthright.

When I say
I do not care
whether or not,
it proves I do care
and fear I am losing
or have lost already
It's best
to care, and say: I care.
With his perceptive frame of mind, he feels that a few things are worth emulating. Hence the directness of the worm appeals to him and he wonders why man is so devious in his course. So too, the smooth texture of the stone enchants him. It is as if he strives to assimilate into his being all that is superlative and that which enhances the standard of life.

Ezekiel personal poetry has a strong tendency to be reflective in nature. And his conviction is that the different stages in one's life have an inevitable element of the good and the useful in them.

Dreaming of the good and beautiful
I'm held by sanity. pull of reason
ripeness revealed in the right season.23

The real source of his poetic content is always his own domain of experience and this, to a large extent, accounts for the authenticity of his recordations. Rojcev Taranath states in this connection:

His more em recent style, open and passionately introspective, is a definite sign that in Ezekiel...
we see a poet in whom creativity is not a thing apart from the changing pressures and priorities of living.

Ezekiel believes that it is important for one to be tranquil in life and not be pre-occupied with the reward or fruit of work. Like Swamy Vivekananda, he too believes that one should work incessantly but not be pre-occupied about its outcome. The result of work, according to him, automatically flows

How often must I say to myself
What I say to others
trust your nerves —
in conversation or in bed
the rhythm comes.

K.R.Srinivasa Iyengar notes that in Ezekiel's poetry—

There is a gain in quality and integrity and he is able to achieve conversational directness and ease without losing himself in discursiveness. Obscurity and mere angularity are avoided and beauty and bareness of statement often go together. The discipline of rhyme and regular stanza form is not shirked except when special effects are intended.

Ezekiel is a conscious practitioner of craftsmanship in the sphere of his personal poetry. Seldom does he sacrifice content to form in his verse.
To live in this room
without fear of exaggeration
proves beyond my means,
my ready cash of doctrine
and deliberation. The door
is always open
but I cannot leave. 27

Another prominent feature of his poetry is his
articulation of an existential loneliness, and isolation
that he experiences more often than not. Even if his
outburst during such times is not over-emotional or
agonising, yet a wary reader is aware that this feeling
does prevail strongly and surfaces in many a poem. He
often states the view that man is basically alone and
almost friendless, bereft of real companionship and true
understanding. The company he seeks in a vain bid to
overcome this feeling, is far from satisfactory. In this
aspect of thought, he reminds us of T.S.Eliot who states
that all human speech is like the chattering of apes
because ultimately speech is not only of little avail
but has proved to be a gross failure in vital areas,
indeed a hindrance to communication. In his very first
poetic volume 'A TIME TO CHANGE', there are at least a
couple of clear indications about his plight.
I am alone
To which we are exposed alone.
Likewise in 'Island' he states emotionally
Sometimes I cry for help
but mostly keep my own counsel.

His poem 'Speech and Silence' reiterates his scepticism
in deep human relationships and the ineffectiveness of
speech in cementing and sustaining relationships.

Man is alone and cannot tell
The simplest thing to any friend
All speech is to oneself.

The predicament may be summed up in the succinct words
of prof. Satyanarayan Singh -

In the existential arena of the world, man is
essentially a loneliness, being pitted against
unknown adversaries. He has to face new challenges
drawing upon his own inner reserves of strength.
Rather than assiduously search for solutions to
life's problems in scriptural texts or depend upon
the ready reckoners supplied by priests or gurus,
he would be a man withdrawn into himself developing
the energy and resilience to choose his course of action.

Loneliness is a fairly wide spread problem today
and in projecting his own experience of it, Ezekiel is
only trying to depict a universal problem. A true and complete understanding of a person in all his dimensions is never attained. Indeed it is futile to even remotely expect total understanding and affection from any human quarters. Exploring this grim complexity, Ezekiel strives to rationalize it as 'Confession' indicates.

And what is this loneliness?
Perfection. A fantasy of lucid being — — — — —
And at the end, desolation which any fool could have foretold.

The crux of the problem proves that man has clearly failed in this vital area. His entire effort is a fiasco and the ensuing frustration largely accounts for his despondency. Even in the midst of teeming crowds, he is sequestered and marooned. Not that he is by any means sceptical of the possible magnitude and intensity of a relationship, but on the contrary; he is perceptive enough to understand its barriers, limitations for one therein operates within a limited frame work. And for one who is expansive, such artificial restrictions are stifling in the way of self-realisation and growth. With the insight of an analytical mind, he gauges the futility of superficial relationships whose flimsy texture is prone to easy rupture.
There is at least one instance wherein he appears to have arrived at some kind of an answer to the riddle of life. The truth dawns on him.

I am not separate from the life I know
But in the very heart of it.

My clothes are me, My soul does the walking.
And my experience, here, are all my meaning.
I walk away attentive to the meaning.

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NOTES


3. JSAL, P.35.

4. JSAL, P.14.


7. JSAL, P.67.

8. JSAL, P.56


11. JSAL, P.147

12. JSAL, P.94.


14. JSAL, P.32.57.


16. JSAL, P.41.
17. JSAL, P. 33.
19. JSAL, P. 32.
22. Ibid, P. 128.
27. Nissim Ezekiel: *Hymns in Darkness*, P. 42
23. JSAL, P. 19.
30. Ibid, P. 34.
32. JSAL, P. 37.