

POET, LOVER, BIRD-WATCHER

① Ezekiel had a high conception of the vocation of a poet, and in a number of poems he has expressed his views on his own art. This he has done in "Poetry" in *A Time to Change*, "Creation" in *Sixty Poems* and, "Poet, Lover and Bird-watcher" in *The Exact Name*.

Poet, Lover and Bird-watcher is one of the better known poems of Ezekiel and has received considerable critical attention. It epitomizes the poet's search for a poetics, "which would help him redeem himself in his eyes and in the eyes of God." Parallelism is drawn between the poet, the lover and the bird-watcher. All the three have to wait patiently in their respective pursuits, indeed their 'waiting' is a sort of strategy, a plan of action which bears fruit if persisted in, and followed with patience. It is patient waiting which crowns the efforts (strategy of waiting) of all the three with success.

Ezekiel attempts to define the poet in terms of the lover and the bird-watcher, (*To force the pace and never to be still is not the way of the lover and the bird-watcher. The best poets wait for words*). There is close resemblance among them in their search for love, bird and word. All the three become one in spirit, and Ezekiel expresses this in imagery noted for its precision and decorum:

*The hunt is not an exercise of will
But patient love relaxing on a hill
To note the movement of a timid wing.....*

There is no action, no exercise of will, in all the three cases, but 'Patient waiting' is itself a strategy, a kind of planned action to reach the goal. The patience of the bird-watcher is rewarded when the timid bird is suddenly caught in the net; the patience of the lover is rewarded, when the woman loved, risks surrendering. Similarly, if the poet waits till the moment of inspiration, he achieves some noble utterance. "Bird-beloved-poem syndrome runs throughout the lyric."

The second stanza stresses the fact that slow movement is good in all the three cases. If one wants to watch the rarer birds, one has to go to remote places just as one has to discover love in a remote place like the heart's dark floor. It is there, that women look something more than their body, and that they appear like myths of light. And the poet, in zigzag movements, yet with a sense of musical delight, manages to combine sense and sound in such a way

that 'the deaf can hear, the blind recover sight'. Highest poetry is remedial in its action, it cures human apathy and deadness of spirit, activates human sense, and makes man see and hear much more than he would have otherwise done. The comparison of the 'deserted lanes', etc., to the "heart's dark floor" connects the search of the bird-watcher with that of the lover and the poet. Says Paul Verghese, "What is striking about the use of images in this poem is that the transition from one image to the other is so unobtrusive that the poet, lover and bird-watcher lose their separate identities for once, and merge into one another to carry the poem forward to its end". However, the use of such vague abstractions as 'myths of light', has exposed Ezekiel to the charge of "flabby thinking" and the use of "woolly terminology" of the Indian philosophical tradition.

L.N. Kher has given a lucid and penetrating analysis of this fine poem, and one may be excused for quoting him at some length. He writes, "The poem reveals the nature of the poetic perception through the network of a highly fecund metaphor in which the images merge into each other like lovers in the act of love. The poet or the bird-watcher begins by defining the mood in which all those who study birds or women must place themselves—birds or women symbolize freedom, imagination, love and creativity. A posture of stillness is recommended, because it is in stillness that one listens to the stirrings of the soul, a necessary pre-requisite to the study of freedom and creativity. That is why the best poets always wait for words from the centre of stillness before they articulate their experience. This exercise in waiting is analogues to the patient lover's or the bird-watcher's act of 'relaxing on a hill/ To note the movement of a timid one.' At the end of this wait, the poetic word appears in the concrete and sensuous form of a woman, who knows that she is loved, and who surrenders to her lover at once. In this process, poetry and love, word and woman become inter-twined. But this "slow movement" of love and poetry, which shows no irritable haste to arrive at meaning, does not come by easily. In order to possess the vision of the rarer birds of his psyche, the poet has to go through the "deserted lanes" of his solitary, private life; he has to walk along the primal rivers of his consciousness in silence, or travel to a far off shore which is like the heart's dark floor. The image of "thorny" ground refers to the arduous nature of the poet's mission. It is only after he has gone through this travail that he is able to see the birds or words of poetry in the form of women who "slowly turn around" not only as "flesh and bone" but also as "myths of light with darkness at the core!" The poet, then, gloats on the slow curving movements of the women, both for the sake of their sensuousness and the insights they bring. He creates his poetry out of these "myths of light" whose essential darkness or mystery remains at the centre of creation itself. But the poet finds the greatest sense or meaning in his own creativity which eventually liberates him from the "crooked restless flight" of those moments, when he strenuously struggles to find the poetic idiom. The poetry which releases the poet from suffering is the medium through which the deaf can hear and the blind see.

No longer waits but risks surrendering—If a man waits long enough, the woman would feel convinced that he loves her and then she would no longer wait but would herself surrender to him even though she may think that she is taking a certain risk.

Explanation. *In this the poet finds.....his spirit moved* (Lines 9–10)—In these two examples (namely that of the birdwatcher and of the lover) the poet would find the right parallels and would be able to draw a moral for his own guidance, or a poet would find a confirmation of the view that a patient wait brings its reward in course of time. The poet never speaks before his mind urges him to speak. In other words, a poet never begins writing a poem till he experiences an urge from within to write a poem.

Stanza 2 (Lines 11–20)

Deserted lanes—paths where no human being is to be seen; untrodden pathways. Here the word “lane” does not mean a city street but a country pathway. It is only in deserted places that one can see rare birds.

By a shore—near a seashore.

Explanation. *Remote and thorny like the heart's dark floor* (Line 15)—A remote and thorny seashore is here compared to a human heart's dark floor. But this comparison is not perfectly clear to us. There is a touch of obscurity here, and the simile here is of an abstract kind. What is meant by the heart's dark floor? Probably this phrase means the inner, unexplored depths of the human heart. We do not always know what is going on in the depths of our hearts and minds. There is our sub-conscious mind; and there the unconscious mind too. Just as the mind has its hidden regions, so there may be a seashore which is remote from our places of work or from our dwelling-places; and there may be thorny bushes near such a seashore. The idea is that a birdwatcher has to undertake the labour of travelling to a distant and thorny seashore in order to find and watch a bird of a rare variety.

Explanation. *And there the women slowly.....myths of light* (Lines 17–18)—And it is near a remote and thorny seashore that a woman would turn around and look at her lover who has travelled all the way in order to find her. In the case of women, we are not, of course, to interpret a remote and a thorny shore literally. In the case of a woman, this phrase only implies the labour which a lover has to undergo before he gets any response from her; and the labour consists in waiting patiently for the moment when the woman would automatically show her inclination towards him. When the woman does respond to her lover's love, she is no longer a woman made of flesh and bones but has become a myth of light. At the moment when the woman decides to accept the man's love, she is transformed into a radiant spirit. The phrase “myth of light” means a radiance which does not really exist but which is something mythical or imaginary or a product of fancy. To the lover, the woman no longer seems to be a physical presence; to him she now appears to be all light and radiance. Thus in this line (18), the poet has glorified love and glorified the woman who eventually responds to a man's love. But it is

The admirable lyrics are based on, "iambic pentameter lines, in two closely rhymed ten-line stanzas", giving it a rigid structure. "This is a justly celebrated poem, containing a beautiful worked set of images moving, as the title suggests, on three inter-penetrating levels. The rich quiet density of the texture is most impressive and is helped by a new, but still minor, breaking of the formal pattern. For instance, in the twenty lines we find ten run-ons—a far higher proportion than in most of the poet's traditional poems—which allows the syntax much more scope in defining pace and emphasis, and in following emotional and intellectual rhythms in a natural way. The sentences are much longer than usual, exactly embodying the urgent but meditative movement of the experience. At the beginning of the second stanza the pentameter breaks under the poet's visionary and metaphoric intensity. Line 1 of stanza II has five and a half feet and line 3 has six feet; the run-ons and the juxtaposition of short and long sentences provide a rhythmic tension and a sense of feeling and perception moving inevitably forward through complexity, towards resolution, helped, not hampered, by the metrical pattern. The spondaic substitution of "the heart's dark floor" draws attention to this striking central image as well as enlarges the poem's sound properties in a powerful way.

—(Cristopher Wiseman)

NOTES AND EXPLANATIONS

Stanza I (Lines 1-10)

To force the pace—to force oneself to go at a fast pace; to compel oneself to make haste (in a particular sphere of activity). *And never to be still*—and never to remain inactive or motionless; and never to feel relaxed; and to be always on the move.

Is not the way—is not the method. *Of those who study birds*—of birdwatchers.

Of women—or of those who study women; of those who pursue their beloveds.

Explanation. *The best poets wait for words* (Line 3)—The best poets do not force themselves to write poetry at any and every time. The best poets wait for words to come to the tips of their pens. The poems of the best authors are written spontaneously. The writing of a poem should never be a laborious task because a good poem is never written as a matter of toil. It is only when the poet is inspired that he writes a good poem.

The hunt—the search for birds, or the search for rare birds, or the desire to win a woman's heart. *Is not an exercise of will*—is not a matter of determination.

A timid wing—a bird fluttering its wings in a timid or hesitating manner.

The one—the woman. *Until the one who knows that she is loved*—A man should wait for his beloved to reciprocate his love of her own accord, and should not force himself upon her in order to hasten the process.