

Philosophical Foundations of Spirituality in Poetry

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Abstract

Thadathil centers the short piece on the 'self' and its 'wholeness' as the foundations on which a spirituality can be built and that such foundational experiences and search for the same underlie poetic expressions in any age, especially of the Victorian poetry.

Keywords: Perfection, Wholeness, Morality, Transcendence.

Introduction

The quest for spirituality is a search for the self. The permanent possession of a wholeness of self, in the 'ever present now', as against its fragmentary piecemeal availability occasionally, gets variously described as spirituality. The process of arriving at the wholeness of the person, despite odds and struggles on the way, is described often as the spiritual journey of a person. The *Saint* of Christianity, the *Jivan Mukta* of Hinduism, the *Moumin* of Islam or the *samthwin* of Buddhism are individuals who have arrived at a point of lucidity about themselves, their world and others around them. They are said to be enlightened, spiritual.

The poetic descriptions are in search of a similar wholeness, though the actual narrations in the poem often only give the impression of a gradual approach to the same. Yet, one can also often get a glimpse of the attempt to absolutise, even in its denial, the transcendental of the experience narrated. The search for wholeness offers infinite possibilities, as many as there are poets and seekers, and given the diversity of life experiences that deserve narration. Poetry, stands out, for it contains an over and above or a within to the narration or description that codifies it.

Poetry: A Search for Wholeness

Whether Poetry as a literary genre, is capable of communicating to the reader, the concerns of the poets search for the wholeness either directly or indirectly is one of the issues that ought to be taken into account in a discourse of 'spirituality in Poetry'. Whether we say yes or no to the question posed we have the Victorian poets and their poetry to state the case or disprove the same.

In order to do so, before entering into the Victorian age, the philosophical foundations of spirituality could offer a clue or two as to clarify the very possibility of approaching the 'wholesome' through the poetic. In other words, can the poetic descriptions truly encompass the self whose wholeness is what spirituality refers to? Do words, spoken or written, communicate to the self and about the self? Are speech acts, oral or written, poetic or prose, descriptive of the wholeness sought for in spirituality?

By and far, based on a realist epistemology, the answer to the above question is an emphatic yes. The very popularity of poetry in all cultures and languages, and the poetic associations with the mystical and the religious vouchsafe this possibility. Poetry weaves a world or creates a sensibility by use of words, in describing an event, a person, or mood. It transposes the reader of the text, listener of the poem, to an imaginative world construed by the poet. The possibility of the spiritual is to be seen in the wholeness or discordance generated in that shared world of words written by the poet and being interpreted by the reader.

Therefore, the issue at stake is not whether a poet here or there has been explicitly religious in the usage of imageries, or selection of metaphors, or usage of symbols. Rather, the sensibility raised by the poetic work leads the reader to appreciate beauty, feel ennobled as to recover lost ground, and ground oneself anew in a recreated possibility of meaningfulness and coherence about one's life. How and when does the self feel grounded and what role does or can poetry play in giving roots to a self in search of wholeness.

It depends on the way we conceive 'self'. It can be conceived as a pre-given, on the one hand, or as constructed in the process of living. As for the first, it amounts to saying that 'even if I do not speak, even if I do not think, there is a 'self' prefiguring my thoughts and speech'. It amounts to saying that in conceiving being there is already a 'mythos' prior to the 'logos' in and through which it is spoken of or conceived. In the latter case, the constructedness of the self means there is no self undifferentiated from the act of *be-ing*. The act of living gives rise to the notion of self in and through the process or the series of acts/thoughts/ feelings/sentiments/ emotions being lived out, or at least being observed. In this latter case, the self is the ever evolving witness.

The religious literature gives evidence for the pre-givenness of self, whether in the form of a soul infused into the body as the starting of the human existence or in the form of a reincarnated *jiva* in a newly acquired *sarira* (body). The western psycho-philosophical literature intending to define and trace the roots of subjectivity laid stress on the speech-language act as the defining moment. It is best illustrated and elaborated by the Freud-Lacan psychoanalytic descriptions of the trajectory of self. It is best exemplified in the shift in emphasis from Conscious (part of the Self for whose sake Freud delved into the Unconscious) to the Unconscious (as the primary focal agent for Lacan that constantly controls the conscious and thus deserves the true title

and hold over the Self).¹ One could also see a parallel of this latter instance in the eastern, de-constructive Buddhist approach to a non-self as the ground of personality. Even further, one could argue for a non dual approach to the positioning as well as the description of the emergence of self.

Spirituality as Striving for Perfection

Spirituality is the search for perfection. The poet is approximating this desire in the description of an experience or event or person or mood. The desire to be perfect gets reflected in the perfection found in the external world. The description of the perfection in the external world is a means to reach internal perfection. This process can be theorized using different thought frames: In the Panikkarian cosmotheandric scheme, perfection itself is a harmonious awareness of connectedness between self, others in the world and the divine. In his own words,

“[t]he cosmotheandric vision does not gravitate around a single point, neither God nor Man nor World, and in this sense it *has not center*. The three coexist, they interrelate and may be hierarchically constituted or coordinated – the way ontological priorities must be – but they cannot be isolated, for this would annihilate them.”²

Panikkar envisages an emerging religious consciousness as a meeting point of the symbol, the symbolizer and the symbolized; the divine being discovered by the human in and through the world.³ Late 19th century precedent of the cosmotheandricism - God, World, Man - unity as mutual interpenetration can be had in the discourse that took place between the catholic writers and the visionaries who took to mysticism and eastern religions as for example in the intellectual exchanges between GK Chesterton, a Catholic at heart and Annie Besant, the moving spirit behind theosophy: “The World-soul of the Theosophists asks man to love it only in order that man may throw himself into it. But the divine centre of Christianity actually threw man out of it in order that he might love it...”⁴

Another scheme could be the attempt to read the poetry of Victorian era, or for that matter of any age or culture, through the eyes of psychoanalytic criticism developed by Freud and Lacan. The emergence of the self is in language and language is a substitute for the loss of the significant other (Mother) due to the intervention of the authority figure father (replicated in the Laws) and a constant desire to reconstitute the ideal relation of pre-language, of unity, oneness with the mother. In other words,

1 Cfr. Peter Barry, *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*, Manchester University Press, 1999, pp. 96-118.

2 Cfr. Raimundo Panikkar, *The Cosmotheandric Experience: Emerging Religious Consciousness*, Delhi, Motilal Banarsidas, 1998.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 77.

4 GK Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, London, John Lane, 1927 (1908), p. 243, quoted in Mark Knight and Emma Mason, *Nineteenth Century Religion and Literature, An Introduction*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2006, p. 212.

a psycho-analytic approach to the transcendent that the poet is yearning for or struggling to communicate is an expression of the desire to return to the primordial oneness symbolized in the experience of maternal, motherly oneness.⁵ The naturalism and nature symbolism of a vast array of poets justifies and substantiates this reading to some extent. In contrast, there is also the phenomenon of the 'unachievability of the desired object' which in turn creates a discomfort in the infant and it also leads to the fragmented multiple entry points or definitional options for the subject. This discomfort of not knowing 'Who one is' also leads to the projection of the unwanted aspects on to the 'other,' especially the subjugated, the alienated, the subalternised 'other' (Caliban in *Tempest*, Friday in *Robinson Crusoe*, the Dalit in Caste society, Women within Patriarchy). However, the truth that 'the wholeness of the self' or its fragmentary versions are available to all is what philosophy and all of poetry at its best is attempting to proclaim and disseminate.

Victorian Era in search of Wholeness

Mathew Arnold a representative voice among the Victorians spoke of religion as 'that voice of the deepest human experience,' at once directing the individual inwards into a process of self-examination and moral assessment, but also outwards to that 'one great whole' that is humanity.⁶ What began in him as a happy blend of the Hebraic and Hellenistic influences culminated in a definition of religion as the integration of 'human understanding of what is right in a given situation and the translation of that conclusion into action' as to attain the sense of wholeness:

Religion, if we follow the intention of human thought and human language in the use of the word, is ethics heightened, enkindled, lit up by feeling; the passage from morality to religion is made, when to morality is applied emotion. And the true meaning of religion is thus not simply morality, but morality touched by emotion. And this new elevation and inspiration of morality is well marked by the word 'righteousness'. Conduct is the word of common life, morality is the word of philosophical disquisition, righteousness is the word of religion.⁷

The following literary references drawn from the critical studies on prominent poets of the Victorian era could further act as illustrations of the philosophical foundations of poetry.

Firstly, Bradstock, Gill and Morgan, in their work *Masculinity and spirituality in Victorian Culture* claim that spirituality was not independent of masculinity. The way it was regarded was gendered in the way masculinity was constructed in those times.

5 Cfr. Grace Jantzen, *Becoming Divine: Feminist Philosophy of Religion*, Manchester University, 1998, p. 42.

6 Mark Knight and Emma Mason, *Nineteenth Century Religion and Literature, An Introduction*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2006, p. 1.

7 M. Arnold, *Literature and Dogma; an essay towards a better apprehension of the Bible*, London, Smith, Elder and Co., 1873, pp. 20-1, quoted in *Ibid.* p. 2.

This mode of looking at poetry or literature itself, as of a literary critic is a late arrival. It begins in 1920s and 30s. In this regard, Kathy Alexis Psomiades says Victorian poetry should be given the credit for inventing 'categories of poetry and society, literature and other writing, representation and reality, masculine and feminine' and having brought these 'categories in opposition to each other'. Her claims are based on the study of Tennyson's *Lady of Shalott* and show how it brings to focus the problems of modernity. This attempt to see what the poet intends to perform through the poetry is attributed as 'Dramatic monologue'.⁸ The poet working out the struggles and tensions of his or her times, each in a unique creative style, gives the poetry of the period its colour.

Secondly, Michael Irwin in his *Reading Hardy's Landscapes* shows how in Hardy, 'the external environment regularly focuses itself, in a variety of ways and at a variety of speeds on the attention on those within... The characters are inescapably attuned to what is going on outside.' Irwin looks at Hardy's insects, introduced for 'subtler, more abstract reasons' than providing 'meteorological small print for those practical observers equipped to read it'. More importantly, Hardy, like Darwin, recognized that 'Man and insects are fellow-species, driven by similar impulses, struggling to survive with the capacities at their command, some of which they have in common. Noise, often associated with movement (especially the view that 'motions of all kinds derive from a common source') also figures meaningfully in Hardy, whether musical noise or the sounds of nature, all functioning as a 'significant narrative element'. Hardy's imaginative vision, utilizes 'convergence and concatenation' in a densely detailed fashion 'as to move well beyond the requirements of realism.'⁹ The dynamics that the poet experiences in the varied developments surrounding his or her times gets reflected as the desire for a teleological convergence.

Thirdly, while in Hardy, the nature and musicality of natural sounds is one possible route to the spiritual, one can find in John Hopkins, his auto eroticity of asceticism becoming a contemporary interest of research and study. Saville argues and tries to place him among queer poets and accords him with queer chivalry seeking to describe God's grandeur than the 'more traditional courtly figure of the inaccessible Lady'. He points out that Hopkins queer brand of chivalry refers to God as 'associated with the rigorous self-restraint on which a Victorian sense of manliness was predicated.' The ascetic practices that appear to mortify the flesh in the interest of spiritual invigoration may 'paradoxically prove sensually and erotically satisfying too'. Further, the queer chivalry seeks 'to present a map of Hopkins's poetic career not as a steady linear progression but as a continuous process of negotiating desire through self-discipline,

8 Cfr. Bradstock, Andrew, Sean Gill, Anne Hogan and Sue Morgan, eds., *Masculinity and Spirituality in Victorian Culture*, Macmillan and St Martin Press, 2000.

9 Cfr. Michael Irwin, *Reading Hardy's Landscapes*, St Martin Press, 2000, quoted in William Baker, Hallie A Crocker, Jude Nixon, Jim Davis and David Finklestein, "The Nineteenth Century: The Victorian Period" (accessed from the web)

self-denial, and even at times self-hatred'.¹⁰ These critical comments reiterate the psycho-linguistic potential of poetic interpretation as hinted earlier. Besides, it points to the fact that the self in search of meaning and discovery of beauty, also progresses to the divine in confronting the truth of oneself. Similarly, Philip A Ballinger in his study of 'The Poem as a Sacrament: The theological aesthetic of Gerard Manley Hopkins', argues that behind the man and the poet was a 'a subtle philosopher and theologian whose poetic uniqueness arose in part because of his desire to speak as aptly as possible of the immanent God, of the Incarnate Christ.' He believes that for Hopkins, 'poetry is the use of language best suited for an approach to the transcendent'.¹¹

Timothy Larsen has made a perceptive study on the reconverts to faith in the Nineteenth-Century England showing that the much spoken about crisis of faith also had its aftermath in the honest search for truth leading to a crisis of doubt that characterized many a prominent secularist of the era. He identifies six reasons for the 'crisis of doubt': first, 'a growing frustration with skepticism as merely negative and destructive'; second, their coming to believe that '[s]ecularism offered no basis for morality or for making ethical choices'; third, and most important from the vantage point of a philosophical foundation that we have been unearthing, that 'human beings knew more than could be proven ... Humanity had other sources of knowledge, identified with terms such as the heart, instincts, intuition, feeling, and entire or inner consciousness'; fourth, that their personal search lead them to make a 'reappraisal of the Bible' in terms of looking for the 'good rather than bad in the Bible'; fifth, they had, consequently, a retake on Jesus of Nazareth, who as it were 'had a tendency to rise from the dead', considering their renewed attraction to his person who had once haunted them; sixth, they were led away from 'materialism by re-engaging with the realm of spirit in a form decoupled from Christianity'; seventh, they 'reassessed their assumption that the cause of radical politics and the working classes naturally led on to opposition to Christianity'; and finally they show powerfully that 'a belief is neither true nor false because a Victorian once believed it.'¹² In all of the above mentioned reasons identified by Larsen the primary condition of daring to critique the inherited as well as acquired thought-frames stand out prominent. This search for the possession of truth and discovering the path to perfection in attaining truth characterize a significant feature of the age.

Philosophy and Poetry

The discussion thus far highlighted two aspects: first that spirituality is premised on wellbeing defined as wholeness; and second that Victorian Poets in general and those referred to in particular, as well as all poets do to some extent or other manifest

10 Cfr. Julia F. Saville, *A Queer Chivalry: Homoerotic Aestheticism of Gerard Manly Hopkins*, UP Virginia, 2000.

11 Cfr. Philip A. Ballinger, *The Poem as Sacrament: The Theological Aesthetic of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, Eardmans, 2000.

12 Timothy Larsen, *Crisis of Doubt: Honest Faith in Nineteenth-Century England*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2006, pp.242-3.

a concern for the inner realms of personal experience and attempt translating such experiences into poetic language in their creative works. This claim of there being a philosophical foundation for spirituality can be further strengthened by making a comment or two on the linkage between philosophy and poetry. In Plato's *Republic* we have the condemnation of poetry and dismissal of poets. Ever since, the history of literary criticism can be seen as seeking justification for its usefulness in the polis, in the society. This attempt at seeking cultural legitimacy for literature (poetry) itself offers certain philosophical foundations. The three primal texts of literary criticism from antiquity – Poetics (Aristotle), *Ars Poetica* (Horace) and *On Sublimity* (Longinus) – together started of the three ways open before the poet: 'to do good or to give pleasure or thirdly, to say things which are both pleasing and serviceable for life'.¹³

This tradition, set in antiquity, of seeking cultural legitimacy for literature (poetry) according to Lamarque and Olsen had three developments in nineteenth century England. The first carries forward the argument we have developed in the earlier part of the paper that 'poetry was not imitation of external reality but expression of the inner subjective self' thereby discounting the instrumentality or indirect justification of poetry as means to 'betterment of character' through its moral instruction and inculcation of doctrines. Second development saw 'the literary critical tradition transform itself into cultural criticism' as a reformative practice directed against the kind of society that industrialization promoted. Third development which had its roots in nineteenth century fully matured in twentieth century with the emergence of theory as an outcome of the 'a-philosophical nature of criticism'. It was in fact not an outright rejection of philosophy but its relegation to the boundaries and coalescing with other disciplines and thus giving rise to theory. The rise of 'theory' can be said to be the birth of the philosophical foundation for literature (poetry). It became 'a genre of writing' that dealt 'more illuminatingly' with the similar kind of 'problems as philosophy'.¹⁴ To sum up, philosophical concern with literature has always traded between the moral and the aesthetic: the desire to instruct and the desire to please and has at best of times and in best of literature succeeded to instruct by pleasing and please while instructing.

Conclusion

Kant in his *Critique of Judgement* makes the distinction that the emergence of the spiritual is over and above the Rational (Intellect) and the Practical (Will) as contained in the Sentiment (the higher affective faculty). The sentiment that unites the intellect and will, rationality and practicality is also that which brings about the integral perception of the whole, enabling spirituality to flourish. Accessing wholesome literature offers a probe into one's own sentiment (the higher affective faculty) that unites the sources

13 *Ars Poetica*, pp. 337-8 quoted in Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen in "The Philosophy of Literature: Pleasure Restored" in Peter Kivy (ed.), *The Blackwell Guide to Aesthetics*, Oxford, Blackwell Publishing, 2004, p. 196.

14 Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen in "The Philosophy of Literature: Pleasure Restored" in Peter Kivy (ed.), *The Blackwell Guide to Aesthetics*, Oxford, Blackwell Publishing, 2004, p. 198.

of inspiration - intellectual as well as volitional - under one overriding horizon of spirituality. This discovery of the spiritual is not an addition to the notion of subject, self, soul but a subtraction, a letting go, a clearing as to see the foundations on which the person stands or gets constructed bit by bit and layer upon layer of be-ing. The literary manifestation as the aesthetic moment is a recognition of the levels of be-ing. Whether in poetry or prose, novel or drama, the literary flavour is the outcome of an encounter with the Divine/Being in the Self. Therefore, the assumption that poetry has a purity and power to access the spiritual, the realm of the Divine/Being becomes foundational. Finally, if 'spirituality', is an 'expression of the soul, an awareness of who we are and how to be our most authentic selves', then the poetry of Victorian era as that of every era and every language and culture can, in some way, serve this function of discovering our authentic roots.

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