

A No Mean Poet of the Mean

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Collected Poems 1952-1988 by Nissim Ezekiel.
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“THE true business of living,” Nissim Ezekiel has written, “is seeing, touching, kissing, / The epic of walking in the street and loving on the bed.” These lines are from a poem entitled “Conclusion”, but they will serve aptly as our beginning, as the introduction to a man whose true business over the last four decades has also been the making of verse. A poet of the city, Ezekiel has stridden the streets of Bombay, and revelled in the sensuous and inimitable pleasures of the companionship of women. The contours of the city, the curves of the body, the landscapes of the human mind: Ezekiel has traversed these terrains with equal facility, and for a very long time the English-reading public has stood to benefit from Ezekiel’s numerous excursions into verse. “Searching for the point of it,” we read in “Conclusion”:

The meaning and the mood, one learns
Over and over again the same thing:
That women, trees, tables, waves and birds,
Buildings, stones, steamrollers,
Cats and clocks
Are here to be enjoyed. (p. 96)

To this enigmatic list of what is here to be “enjoyed”, one may just as easily, and perhaps with greater justification, add poetry. To this proposition Ezekiel’s *Collected Poems* stands as abiding testimony.

Ezekiel’s first collection of verse, *A Time to Change*, appeared in 1952, in the infancy of India’s emergence from the womb of British rule, and with it Indian poetry in English, which had long been pregnant with possibilities, finally found a voice that commanded attention. A language placed in a foreign environment takes time to root itself, and at first finds expression with greater ease in prose than in verse, as the appearance of Raja Rao’s *Kanthapura* (1938) and G.V. Desani’s *All About H. Hatterr* (1948) showed. If we accept that a language is never really of the soil until it flowers into poetry, then Ezekiel’s *A Time to Change* (1952) and *Sixty Poems* (1953) must be invested with even greater significance than we might ordinarily be inclined to ascribe to most works of poetry. It is perhaps no accident either that the first blossoms of the birth and growth of modern Indian poetry in English should have come from the pen of a poet who, while very much an Indian, belongs to a community that in India was very small to begin with, and has in recent years become almost negligible, a veritable drop in the vast ocean of the Indian population. Born in Bombay of Jewish (Bene-Israel) parents, Ezekiel wrote in “Background, Casually” (p.179) of how he “went to Roman Catholic school, / A mugging Jew among the wolves.” Ezekiel may have had to contend with his Jewishness, as any other Indian writer may have to contend with his caste, religion, or ethnic background, but he appears not to have had to struggle, unlike many other Indian poets writing in English, over the choice of writing in one language or the other. English is, it may be supposed, Nissim Ezekiel’s language of mother-wit.

We further learn in “Background, Casually” that at twenty-two Ezekiel went abroad, and in the two “London seasons” that passed by, “Philosophy”, “Poverty”, and “Poetry” were the “three companions” that shared his basement room. Knowing,

or imagining, that he had failed "in everything, a bitter thought", Ezekiel left

in an English cargo-ship
Taking French guns and mortar shells
To Indo-China, scrubbed the decks,
And learned to laugh again at home.

"How to feel it home, was the point." Like almost any Indian returning "home" after a fairly long spell in the West, Ezekiel felt exasperated. Those infernal Hindus, all one and the same, talked too loudly, and much worse.

They hawked and spat. They sprawled around.
I prepared for the worst. Married,
Changed jobs, and saw myself a fool.

All a man requires, Ezekiel has written in "A Time to Change" (p.4), is

To own a singing voice and a talking voice
A bit of land, a woman and a child or two.
Accommodated to their needs and changing moods
And patiently to build a life with these.

A wife he had acquired, and equally prepared Ezekiel became to accept his fellow Indians, dissolve into the Indian landscape, and make his home a "real home".

Indeed, it is Ezekiel's commitment to the land of his birth that his verses so visibly sing of, and that in such a manner as to make his poetry profoundly communicative and deeply moving. Of the commitments he has made, Ezekiel says:

This is one: to stay where I am,
As others choose to give themselves
In some remote and backward place.
My backward place is where I am. (p.181)

Elsewhere this commitment surfaces in "The Egotist's Prayers",

July-Aug. 1991

in an invocation addressed rather nonchalantly to He who is the dispenser of all favours and boons:

Confiscate my passport, Lord,
I don't want to go abroad.
Let me find my song
where I belong. (p. 213)

The specificity of "where" he belongs is not left in doubt: "I cannot leave the island, / I was born here and belong" ("Island", p.182). A poet of the city, Ezekiel finds that he cannot walk far away from Bombay: its magnetic pull keeps him at arm's reach. His Bombay, a

Barbaric city sick with slums,
Deprived of seasons, blessed with rains,

is nonetheless the metropolis of thousands of starry-eyed dreamers who arrive at its gates expectant with hope, but "whose wages are in words and crumbs" ("A Morning Walk", p. 119). Ezekiel can yet remember Bombay as one might a luscious mango, and far away in Edinburgh he longs for it as the fruit

on which I've lived
winning and losing
my little life. (p.293)

That island on which the poet expends his "little life" is no little place: it hurries him to "daily business", and he goes about

minding the ways of the island
as a good native should,
taking calm and clamour in my stride. (p. 182)

Ezekiel takes "calm and clamour" in his stride just as the island too flowers both into "slums and skyscrapers"; the development of the island is homologous to the growth of the poet's mind: each appears to reflect the other.

Ezekiel, however, is a poet neither of the skyscraper nor of the slum. He can attain great heights, but rarely does so; similarly, the descent into the world of slums is rarely attempted. He feels deeply for the slum-dwellers, beggars, hawkers, and pavement sleepers—he is in fact a poet of great sensitivity and refined sensibility. But not for Ezekiel the extremes of human existence; neither skyscrapers nor slums will do. Buildings exist to house people, whatever the makers and wielders of the neutron bomb may have us believe, but how can a skyscraper, which obfuscates the central reality that we and everything else that matters are of this earth, or a slum, where dignity is offended at every turn, and men and women liable to forget how far they can soar to untrammelled heights, suffice for human habitation? Home is what one returns to, but such a home must needs be a house. The house of poetry that Ezekiel inhabits occupies a middling ground between a skyscraper and a slum; his poetry is never staggering, never hyperbolic, but equally it never fails to envelop us in its warmth, its humanity, and its homeliness.

Just how is Ezekiel a poet of the mean? In everything he does, Ezekiel strives for a certain equipoise, a certain reasonableness and tranquillity of mind. One must learn to flow with the river's tide, not only struggle against it, for

Both poetry and living illustrate:
Each season brings its own peculiar fruits,
A time to act, a time to contemplate.

Ezekiel wants neither the "yogi's concentration", nor "the perfect charity/Of saints nor the tyrant's endless power", but only a

human balance humanly
Acquired, fruitful in the common hour. (pp. 39-40).

This "human balance" too, like beauty or the "matador's dexterity", must be "acquired", but it must be so acquired as to be effortless, almost as a fruit in its own season. These are lines from "A Poem of Dedication", but this dedication—to a

July-Aug. 1991

woman and to his art—is present in every poem. In "Prayer" we read:

If I could pray, the gist of my
Demanding would be simply this:
Quietude. The ordered mind.
Erasure of the inner lie.
And only love in every kiss. (p. 54)

To ask for "only love in every kiss" may be to ask for unexamined sincerity and perfection, but perfection is far from Ezekiel's mind. He asks only for the "erasure of the inner lie", for the kiss that is not tarnished by the lust that knows no love or by a mechanical everydayness that shows no feeling. Elsewhere Ezekiel writes of

Preserving love against the secret worm,
To do this would be wise—
But the old are still as a fallen tree
And the young have shining eyes. (p. 100)

Here is an admission that the preservation of love against "the secret worm", the "inner lie", the corrosiveness and self-deception within every human being, is not easily gained, and no more easily gained than wisdom, which eludes the old, who have little to teach but of their follies, as much as the young, who lack the knowledge derived from experience. Perhaps to even strive for perfection is not quite human, and that is not only because "life is imperfection", but because that would be akin to thinking the thought "out to the end", which "would be the end of thought" ("Sotto Voce", p. 51). This is also to say that thought cannot always be taken to its logical conclusion; if it is, it can only be at the risk of enforcing silence, of rendering some voice mute. A life between action and contemplation, not merely hovering helplessly between the two, but partaking of both, is one way of bridging the foibles and vicissitudes of human experience; and another such bridge, which we must engineer to construct, is to

Let reason and emotion fare
 As man and wife; let them quarrel,
 Make love or live occasionally
 Apart, and then be reconciled,
 But let them not, indifferently,
 Empty the house of words and music,
 Partners of a marriage in decay. (p. 12)

Yet such engineering must never be altogether deliberate or contrived, for the stillness of reason and emotion reconciled, the stillness of those moments after love-making, must descend upon us.

The stillness for which the poet yearns is not the stillness which comes of a helpless resignation or the acceptance of defeat. It is the stillness which stands in opposition to turbulence, the turbulence generated by an air that struggles to move, threatens to explode, and agitates to be heard. In false movement is stagnation, in a false plenitude is only the emptiness. As Ezekiel writes in "Commitment" (p. 26),

There is a world of old simplicities
 To which my calling calls me, turbulence
 Is stilled in it and slowly understood,

and by such understanding is turbulence transmuted into holiness. Ezekiel has no desire for the exotic or the extravagant; it is the humdrum and the commonplace to which he is attracted, and he has the gift and the humility, all too uncommon, of seeing the holy in the commonplace. "I miss in my movements / the stillness I read about / in mystics and saints", says Ezekiel, and he wonders, knowing that "holiness matters", whether he must

go in search of it
 to an ashram, or settle down alone
 on the top of a mountain,
 with an assured income of some sort
 and a servant to do the cooking[,]

July-Aug. 1991

or whether there is "a different way" (p. 272). Such a way he has imagined,

a different way
 in which things become holy
 as they remain the same.

"A Different Way" is a poem from the eighties, but it may well have been from his first collection, *A Time to Change* (1952), for there he had addressed himself "To a Certain Lady" in rather similar terms:

Life can be kept alive
 By contact with the unknown and the strange,
 A feeling for the mystery
 Of man and woman joined, exhaustion
 At the act, desire for it again;
 By contact with the commonplace,
 A feeling for the touch of wood and water,
 The sight of pictures on the wall,
 Books, carpets, curtains, glass,
 The simple things that make a home. (p. 28)

"A Different Way" does not celebrate "difference", unless it be the difference of knowing that humanity must, if we may carry a metaphor from the market in this age of inexorable capitalism, invest in a common fund. In "Transmutation", Ezekiel boldly asserts:

Do not, in your vanity, the tenuous thread
 Of difference flaunt, but be
 Asserted in the common dance. . . (p. 56)

The common dance is to hold on to life with "obstinate attachment to the world" (p. 27), and to go on with the true business of life,

The epic of walking in the street and loving on the bed [,]

sensing, touching, feeling, seeing, kissing.

It is not domesticity as such that Ezekiel eulogizes, but rather the sensuality in everyday life, a sensuality that we scarcely think exists, and that Ezekiel helps us to recover. Sensuality is an operative word, the underlying mode of expression and being, in much of Ezekiel's poetry and it explains why he is never more passionate than when he is writing about woman. Love may be idolized by Ezekiel, woman seldom is, but nonetheless she is the very incarnation of sensuality. The poems sing lustily but never crudely of breasts, thighs, buttocks, of all the other "landscape images" that a woman's body evokes, and of the smells of her body. We imagine and feel the hair in her armpits, the dampness between her thighs, the free and frank desire in her breasts as they rise to the occasion, we can sense also the ineffable moment of adoration after undress, the arm gently stroking her back, and the limbs intertwined. "I see you here", Ezekiel appears to recall, "stretched out,"

not as complex pulls and tensions,
muscle, bone, skin, resilience
but as person, always
human in your naked
unposed poses, resisting form. (p. 249)

The sexual act is not all: to be "nakedly beautiful", and in the presence of naked beauty, is another kind of fulfilment (p. 248). Nor is the sexual urge the only motive: as Ezekiel thinks of her body in its nakedness, the "details" interesting him as much as the "total form", he recounts that his motives are

sexual,
aesthetic and friendly
in that order, adding up to bed with you.

What matters that the skin is white, "black or grey / would do just as well." The poem continues:

The eyes are large,
so are the breasts—

does size matter?
I don't think so.
Your thighs are full and round,
thin and flat I'd love them too.
There go my aesthetics.
In making love,
certain things
for which I have a taste
you do not quite accept;
you dress again
rather hurriedly,
you do not speak,
you look away,
you are somewhat quickly over.
Never mind. I adjust myself.
So much for my sexual motives.
I stay with you, close to you,
so perhaps the friendly motive
absorbs the other two.

The friendly motive infects all of Ezekiel's work, but this is one infection that we all would gladly catch. The "different way" is to tread, not in the footsteps of the saint or the hedonist, but the largely forgotten path of friendliness. Ezekiel's *Collected Poems* is one of the very few works of contemporary English poetry that fills us with the spirit of friendliness.