**A Poet, Rascal, Clown, Speaks**

Since he started writing and publishing in the early fifties, Nissim Ezekiel has been widely acknowledged as the father of modern Indian poetry in English. Today, he could well be regarded as the granddad of them all – the two generations of poets who have followed him, some of whom he nurtured and groomed, others who found in him a father figure to rebel against.

Although 20 years hence, the prospect of being labelled the grand old man of poetry might seem somewhat debilitating to him, there is no doubt that Ezekiel’s contribution to the development of Indian poetry, and to the cultural scene in general, will be seen as a formative one.

One of my first meetings with him – nearly 30 years ago – was in a garage, which used to serve as the Imprint office, in the compound of a building in south Bombay. I had taken some of my poems to him to see if he could use them in Poetry India – at that time the only classy poetry magazine in the country. (Curiously, there is very little since then to match that short-lived venture.) I remember how encouraging Ezekiel was, how helpful in his criticism, how earnest in the total attention he gave me in those few moments. I was thrilled to bits – I was still an undergraduate then – when he decided to publish three of my poems in his magazine. One of the roles that Ezekiel has played all his life, with the grace and honesty that have always been his mark, is to put the subjectivity of new writers in a proper frame of reference.

Some time later, a mild shock was to come with my discovery of “The Retreat”, Ezekiel’s family home. For many of us it was not just an ordinary address then, it was a place of historical interest. I imagined it to be a cozy cottage full of books, antique furniture, etchings on the wall, tastefully furnished, color-coordinated with sensuous textures – in short, an aesthetic treat. After all, Ezekiel was the art critic of the time. It turned out to be an old, run-down house with very modest living quarters, with no evidence of an ordering hand – the most functional furniture, bare stone floor, a cot with a regulation bedcover, an open mori with bucket, matka and a lota.

So art and life – or rather art theory and personal taste – didn’t mix. In the PEN office, which Ezekiel has been using for many years as editor of the PEN newsletter, one notices the same disinterest in the aesthetics of the interior space that the man occupies. Form and content lie in total disarray, with the lord of the mess sitting at peace within it. But one soon feels at home among the dusty books and files, typescripts of poems, loose sheets of paper, journals of Commonwealth origin, paper-weighted letters, more magazines stacked on a chair, more loose sheets spilling out of a rotting briefcase, assorted odds and ends strewn on the table, back issues of PEN lying like stagnant drain water on the floor, neatly filed, post-ready issues of the current newsletter, piles of other stuff leaning dangerously from the top of a cupboard, a broken table fan wrapped in a gunny bag waiting for its burial – each object left to its own device, living its prescribed fate.

There is a story about Ezekiel’s spectacles, which he had been wearing for 25 years and which he had only recently exchanged for a similar, brand new pair. The old ones tilted precariously on the bridge of his Jewish nose, their glass surface smudged and scratched, their rivets caked with the rust of a quarter-century. This was the pair that Ebrahim Alkazi, an old friend and Ezekiel’s contemporary in the theatre, had found for him, escorting him to the occulist. Since then, chaperoning him to outfit him with personal effects has become the burden of friends. (In one of his poems, an admirer-lover sends him a gift of new underclothes but prefers to have him wear his old, worn-out ones for their own rendezvous.) More than a dozen of his concerned friends, lovers, well-wishers must have badgered Ezekiel on different occasions to have his spectacles replaced. But like an obstinate child, he insisted he wanted a rimless pair which looked exactly like the old one. Finally, a newly acquired friend-patron bodily dragged him to a shop he know and fished out a gleaming new pair that seemed to satisfy Ezekiel’s finicky taste. Henceforth, all gift items will have to exclude spectacles. For the next quarter century, the poet is not going to need another pair!

In 1985, Nissim Ezekiel officially retired from his position of Reader in English at Bombay University, which concluded a 25-year teaching career. He came late but stayed on the longest. What many people do not know is that in addition to teaching and writing and being a magazine-editor and art critic, Ezekiel has tried his hand at a whole lot of shortlived occupations – starting as a copywriter in a Bombay ad agency, moving up as a manager in the same outfit, doing a stint as a journalist in The Illustrated Weekly, serving as a manager for Chemould, a frame-manufacturing concern where he juggled his time and wrote *The Unfinished Man*, his fourth book of poems, then switching to Imprint as editor.

But to begin at the beginning…

**When did you first decide you were going to be a poet?**

At a very early age. I was always interested in poetry. I generally read more than my classmates. Even as a 10-year-old, I preferred reading poetry to prose, which was quite unusual in my class, even among the best students. I was never really interested in subjects like mathematics and geography as many others were – these were considered to be the “scoring” subjects. I was thought to be a bit of an eccentric.

**What were your early attempts at poetry like? Did you have a mentor? Did you model yourself on any great writer or poet?**

I modelled myself on the poets that are normally read in India in school textbooks – Shelley, Byron, Keats and others. I couldn’t possibly have had any other models. The Inspiration did not come as much from the poets as from my teachers. In Antonio D’Souza High School there were a number of poetry enthusiasts and some of them read poetry in the classroom loudly and clearly – very rhythmically, in fact, and I used to feel quite thrilled listening to them.

**Did you start publishing right after you left school?**

Publishing came later. When I was at college, I sent a poem of mine to a political magazine – I think it was a weekly being edited by K. M. Munshi. I used to buy this magazine regularly for political reasons – this was in early 1942. Of course, as often happens in India, there was no acknowledgement from the journal – but the poem was published, and that’s what mattered. I bought a large number of copies myself. Subsequently, I started sending out poems to various magazines all over India.

**Were you bothered about whether your poetry would be read at all, whether people would respond to it?**

These questions did not really arise in my mind – the question of the audience, whether poetry is read, what it means to write in English, whether Indian poetry in English has an audience, these and other similar questions did not trouble me at all. At that stage, it was only important to read poetry, to write poetry, to read about poetry, and if possible, to meet one or two friends and discuss poetry. It was too subjective a thing. It didn’t become “intellectual” till much later. It was in my early 20s that it became formulated as a kind of vocation, a career. By that time I had written a fairly large amount. In fact, that is one thing I can always say about myself, I’ve written a lot. I cannot say anything about the quality of my writing – 200 recent poems, there they are. How good the 200 are, and how many of them really deserve to be published – all these are secondary questions for me. I don’t think of individual poems in that sense. I am inclined to write as much as possible and then work on these drafts much later – sometimes I link them together, revise them, improve them.

**When did your first book come out?**

In 1952, in London, published by The Fortune Press. I didn’t know at that time, that it was a “vanity press”. I simply saw a number of copies containing poems by a young English poet. I saw an advertisement and wrote a letter to the publisher saying that I had a manuscript ready. I got a reply saying that he was willing to publish my poems. He came to my basement room in London. He told me that he would publish my manuscript, if I paid for the printing. The cost would be around $10. I told him that $10 is what I would need to live for five weeks and I couldn’t possibly raise the amount. I told him that he could publish the poems if he liked the, or just forget them. And we parted on that note.

Later, I told my roommate, Krishna Paigankar, what had happened. He said, “Nonsense, you cannot postpone the publication of your book for the sake of $10.” He gave me the $10. I wrote to the publisher again and sent the $10 and my manuscript. The book, however, came out after I had left London.

**What was your objective in going to London? Did you set out on some sort of adventure, or did you go to study?**

I was very confused, I must say. I really didn’t know what I was going for. To some, I said I was going to study art in Paris, to others I said I was going to study philosophy in London. There were a series of contradictory answers I always had ready for use. Eventually, I went to London and started looking out for a job, and within two or three months, I got one at India House. I arrived in October 1948 and left in May 1952.

**What did you do after coming back?**

There was actually a job for me in Bombay. One of the persons in India who knew of my problems and disappointments in London was C. R. Mandy of the *Illustrated Weekly*. He wrote me a letter saying that if I sent him my poems he would publish them and if I ever returned to India I could join the editorial staff of the journal. I did that. My friend, Alkazi, as witty as ever, said, on hearing of it: “You set out to be illustrious and ended up being illustrated.”

I subsequently left the *Weekly* to join Shilpi. I didn’t know it was and advertising concern. They advertised for a person capable of writing good English – and I thought I was at least capable of that. I was appointed, and was asked to write a script for an advertising film. I stayed on for five years. In between, I was sent to New York and elsewhere in America to study advertising. Whether I learnt much about it I am not going to confess.

I left Shilpi in 1958, and for one year I was with Kekoo Gandhi, and his factory at Andheri. I was factory manager there and it was in the factory that I wrote *The Unfinished Man*. In fact, I began to write it because I looked into the factory itself and found that if you organize things properly in a factory you have some spare time to read and write. Then arose the thought of going back to teaching (I had done a couple of stints earlier). My sustained teaching career began in 1961.

**Your Jewishness never seems to intrude in any implicit or explicit manner in your writing, except for some direct references in some poems. Why is this?**

Partly because at the age of 18 or 19 I had moved away not only from Judaism, but from all religion. I had become atheistic and anti-religious and it was a fairly long spell. I always loved mysticism, however. But it was mysticism as poetry rather than as religion.

**You went through an LSD phase? Have you left that behind? Did it make any impression on your work or life?**

It didn’t leave a mark on my writing. In fact, that was one of the disappointments of the LSD experience. But it left a great impression on me as a person for the simple reason that with the first LSD experience, I gave up atheism – it just collapsed. Religion and its mysteries became more acceptable. A number of things happened to me which were very important and still are. I didn’t continue to take LSD because if you take a drug over a period of time you experience both its positive and negative effects. It became clear to me that I couldn’t continue to use LSD regularly. I was very strict and disciplined in my use of it. I took exactly the lowest dosage that was recommended by the experts. The first experience was in 1967 and I continued taking it till 1970.

**Have there been any conflicts between your worklife, your writing life and your personal life? How constructive or destructive have they been to your writing?**

I’ve never felt there was a discord, because when I’m doing the other things I feel I am living, I am working, I am relating to people. I am responding to the situations around me. I never feel that I want to get away from all this “discord” and have a little bungalow in Matheran, where I can stay by myself and enjoy its scenic beauty. On the other hand, to say that there is perfect harmony between my writing life and other life is too much of a claim to make. From time to time, I do cross the line. I live and enjoy my work, and at some stage, feel that I am losing contact with the written word altogether. When that happens, I try to retreat, and restore the balance a little bit. Then something may get written, good, satisfactory things may get written. Again, the logic of events pulls me back to the world and I stop writing and so that pull, back and forth, goes on and has been going on for the last 35 years.

**Have you had any serious crises in your writing career? If so, how have you coped with them?**

No, I have never had a full-scale block. I have always written prodigiously. Whether what I wrote was good or bad or indifferent never mattered at the time of writing. I wrote because I enjoyed it. Sometimes, a bad poem can lead to a good one. Certain ideas occur when you are writing bad poems out of which a good poem could emerge. Since that was my method, I never really had what can be called a total “block”. But in the last year or so, I have not really written much poetry. I discovered a story of mine written in 1951 in London, which had never been published. I didn’t have to revise it very much, only change a word or two. I sent it to a Commonwealth literature journal published in Denmark. It was promptly accepted and published. It has given me a great boost. And I want to write more short stories.

**Do you think you have made a successful literary career in India? Maybe you could have got greater recognition abroad.**

I don’t think so. I’ve met many Indian writers abroad, and 99 per cent of them disappear into the void because they are misinterpreted and underestimated. If you decide you are an exile, you can make something of it. If you try to get into the mainstream, then your chances of making it are very weak. I think I would be an odd man out anywhere else. If I have to be an odd man out then I would prefer being one here. Even now people ask me, now that you have retired, would you like to settle abroad? That’s the last thing I want to do. I don’t want to leave even Bombay, for that matter. All my writing comes out of staying here. I am happy to be unhappy here rather than somewhere else. If I stay anywhere else, I will only be unhappy. Here, at least the unhappiness makes sense, unhappiness lead to critical perceptions. One can take a positive approach to frustration or a negative one. I certainly take the positive approach. It is more creative. If any work of mine does not get the recognition I think it deserves, I’m not unduly upset. Some people push and pull and attempt to promote their work. But I cannot spend all my time trying to get recognition. I’ve got to do some writing as well.

**What have you meant your poetry to achieve?**

If a poem is above all a poem, it cannot have any other form, it cannot exist as a prose summary of it, then it is an achievement as a poem. There is a certain sense of the inevitable in a real poem. It cannot stand for something else. It has to be what it is. If I have written 60 poems in the last five years, I know that 45 of them won’t have this sort of inevitability. That is what I demand of a poem. It should be unconditionally a poem, and only a poem.

**Do you think that poets in India have stretched their resources to the maximum?**

The performance of most Indian poets in English is comparable to the performance of our athletes in the Olympics.

**How would you advise young and up-and-coming poets to go about their work?**

A certain amount of critical reading is always good. Writing poetry without reading all the outstanding advice given by outstanding critics about poetry is like climbing a mountain without a guide and without any equipment. You are likely to come down with a bump. Reading disciplines one’s art. Of course, the case of the genius or the wild man is different. He may get his inspiration from some mad, mysterious source and translate it into magnificent disciplined art subconsciously. But in normal cases, some sort of critical reading is a must, and any attempt to be naïve there is dangerous. This does not imply that a poet must accept everything he reads. A good poet allows himself to be influenced, assimilates the influence, resists the influence. For a good poet, influence does not mean imitation, it can even mean going in the opposite direction. A poet can read and appreciate fantastically free poetry and yet when it comes to himself, he may write in just the opposite way – very controlled, taut, rhymed stanza forms.

**Don’t you think that the Indian cultural ethos is fundamentally discouraging, and sometimes even disruptive, to creativity?**

Well, I have always taken it as a bit of a joke rather than seriously. After saying things like poetry has no future, you go around the world because you have written poetry. The primary question is related to poetry as a vocation, whether it can be a vocation at all or does it only remain at the level of a hobby. I don’t understand these people who are afraid of criticism and run away from it by saying that “I only write for myself; it is my hobby.” I think that is running away from the problem. I’m not upset by any popular notion of what poetry should be like.

**John Berryman once joked that an assistant professor could become an associate professor by working on his senior’s poetry. How do you feel about being the subject of a Ph.D. thesis?**

I am supposed to feel flattered. Actually, there are ways of looking at it, and both of them go together. One way is to take it lightly, joke about it before others can do the same. And I don’t ever give up that way of looking at it. On the other hand, one has to be fair to the person doing the work and one has to be consistent. I have given a lot of thought to these things, and then followed the logic of a central decision. For example, if I receive a letter from someone saying I want to register for my Ph.D. and the letter does not contain a single sentence of correct English, I’ll be very firm and say that there are some qualifications that are indispensable and you don’t have them. So, sorry, I can’t help you. He may be upset about it, but I have to be a little firm.

On the other hand, if there is this man who does his work and then comes to you for some more material, you cannot refuse to help him. But, ultimately, it ends up with you doing research on yourself. This can get a bit out of hand and, at some stage, you must set the limits. If the student, for instance, is trying to trace an article on me that appeared in *The Statesman* in 1947, and comes to me for it, I will advise him right away to go to *The Statesman* office and find out.

**How do you feel about your retirement? For most people it is an arbitrary thing that is forced upon them. I am sure you have a very active life ahead of you.**

Mine is definitely not a retirement in any conventional sense. I have seen people retire and then ask others what they should do. This question never arose in my mind. I’ve always had plenty to do. In fact, my wife complains that now I work as much as I ever did when I was teaching. When you have more time to write than when you were teaching fulltime, you tend to spend more time working on each draft. So I have plenty to do. I am more bothered about finding what not to do, because sometimes things do get out of hand.

**You have an extraordinary ability to write under any circumstances. I’m told a minor domestic storm may be raging at the dining table, and you are scribbling away.**

Actually, that was a decision I took in opposition to the attitude of some of my friends that they, to, would be writers “on condition that” – and I know that if I made conditions like that I would not be a writer at all. At least one person has been saying for 25 years that if he gets a quiet room to write in, he would write. I haven’t got my quiet room and I hope I have become a writer. He hasn’t got his quiet room and he hasn’t become a writer. I am afraid of making excuses. I’d rather struggle and admit, perhaps, that under ideal conditions, the writing would have been better. But the quiet room is not indispensable. To crave for it is self-defeating and I can’t stand self-defeating attitudes, from others and from myself. I feel I must take the responsibility and say that I did my best in my circumstances.

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