

## **'QUARRELING WITH DARK': ON READING THE POEMS OF SATISH VERMA**

Afterword by Christopher Rollason, Ph.D,

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W.B. Yeats once declared: 'We make out of the quarrel with others, rhetoric; but out of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry', and here, in the bleak poem-sequence by Satish Verma on which the reader has just turned the page, we find a modern Indian master of versecraft taking the Irish poet at his word, dramatising the struggle between Eros and Thanatos in the human heart, the quarrel with a darkness that is of the soul, and writing it large in reverberating lines and dark imagery. As the poet declares halfway through: 'Going separately on different routes .../ two things were quarreling with dark / quietly'.

The ambiance is less Indian than universal: certainly, we are for the most part not in the specifically Indian poetic environment of a Tagore or a Jayanta Mahapatra, and the occasional references to, say, saffron, or peacocks, or the Buddha have the role less of 'Indianising' the text than of simply grounding the poet's solitude somewhere, in some identifiable corner of an afflicted planet. What the reader traces across these pages is a journey without maps, through a landscape which is not of this world - a burnt, stunted, desiccated inner landscape which the poet finds within him and which it is his task to make sense of, transform, and - if it is possible - redeem. The journey which Satish Verma has invited us to share is one through image, language and intertextual dialogue, in a universe of doubt and darkness fitfully illumined by redemptive flashes. The poems' speaking voice is a solitary 'I', unnamed and unidentified, who occasionally addresses a 'you', also unidentified but no doubt assimilable to the reader, to Charles Baudelaire's and T.S. Eliot's 'hypocrite lecteur, mon semblable, mon frère!' ('hypocrite reader, my likeness, my brother!').

From the very first poem one thinks of another, celebrated, poetic mindscape, that created by Eliot in *The Waste Land*: 'I yearned for a solitude of desert / sand and rocks', cries out our poet, echoing Eliot's: "Here is no water but only rock / Rock and no water and the sandy road", and, indeed, later on we find a direct evocation of the master's famous title: 'Whom shall we believe, rebirth / Or life after death? / Both are study of wasteland'. Aridity is everywhere ('in the barren field of lies'). Bones, too, rattle across Satish Verma's pages as they do in Eliot's: 'A story reappears again and again / Like a dried skeleton in sands' (*The Waste Land* says: 'I think we are in rats' alley / Where the dead men lost their bones'). It is as if the cultural crisis of humanity that Eliot spelt out loud in his poem of 1921 is still at work, taking its toll in the inner anguish of an Indian poet more than eight decades later.

If the poet's search begins, in the first poem, in a latter-day manifestation of Eliot's wasteland, in the second poem it all but risks disappearing into silence: 'It was the hiatus / that underlying silence / of which I was hearing the voices'. In the inner conflict between life and death drives, language has constantly to strive against the threat of its own annihilation. If it survives and the poetic act remains possible, this is in part thanks to the sustenance provided by the intertextual link, by the presence of the poet's predecessors, those who have trod this dusty road before him. We are not dealing here with the rivalry among poets famously defined by a pugnacious Harold Bloom as *influence anxiety*; rather, what is present is *a survival anxiety that influence actually helps to dissipate*, in what can only be called a counter-Bloomian movement.

Thus, if Eliot is present throughout as a constant harbinger, there also looms large across these poems the shadow of the ultimate predecessor, Shakespeare - who here haunts author and reader in the guise of one who has been there, down in the abyss, and has lived through his works to tell the tale. Satish Verma's most telling point of Shakespearean reference is *King Lear* and its experience of absolute nullity. Lines like 'Rising from nothingness / to unending nothingness', or again, 'I elect to be nothing', echo *Lear's* celebrated 'Nothing will come of nothing'. The spectre of blindness rises up as if from Gloucester's extinguished orbs: 'The eyes are going to collapse in endless night'; 'You become giddy, stagger for a while / and then become blind'. Darkest of all, in a nightmare recalling *Lear* and the dead Cordelia, we hear the desperate words: 'Planting the tender flowers on lips / I find nothing'.

Meantime the imagery takes us through aridity (as in the Eliot allusions); through fire and its aftermath ('The words have a peculiar burnt-out smell / of the road'); through flood ('Water level was rising / and the time of rented happiness / Was over'; 'by the swollen river / an island is swallowed up'); through unbearable heat ('Heat is rising / I am starting the countdown'; 'Under the trees there is no shade'); through wintry iciness ('I ask my bleak, frosted branches / where the birds have gone?'); and through the blackness of darkness ('the vast emptiness of a long night'). Nature is far indeed from being beneficent, far from William Wordsworth's all-giving force that nurtures through all seasons, in sun and in shower: far from it, 'summer will bring the violence', and in autumn we are 'walking on dead leaves covering the grass'. Robert Frost, another precursor, speculated whether the world will end in fire or in ice, and here in Satish Verma's pages it feels as if all the elements and all natural phenomena are conspiring to hasten an end - that is, yet, finally, miraculously deferred.

In the end, it is the poetic process itself, its text and intertext, that has won out and has ensured at least a provisional triumph of life. Satish Verma's pages abound with well-formed, memorable, rhythmically dynamic lines ('Behind the mask lies the embrace of death', 'I will wash my feet with your tears now', 'You said it was a crime to hold the grief'); lucid, almost haiku-like couplets ('I was watching a flight of swans / in a neat row over the horizon'); and sonorous alliterations and assonances ('Death of desire may still take place / Fragrance still devastates the moon'; 'Rivers are flooded with blood and tears').

The penultimate poem finds the poetic 'I' still alive and resilient, however tattered and torn. In a movement finally, perhaps, reminiscent of the Tagore of *Gitanjali* and an Indian tradition hitherto kept on the margins, a Guest arrives: 'A shadow falls on the door / without struggle or rumor / I know he has come, my guest / The survivor of genocide / He has come a long way'. The Guest's message is cryptic: 'He tells me, do something for the grass. / Ask your god to come back from domes', but he may be urging the poet to act to respiritualise the universe, perhaps by generating a vision of organic life such as that of Walt Whitman's *leaves of grass*. Be that as it may, what is certain is that Dr Verma's poem-sequence triumphs over the quarrel with darkness and with one's self, to be received by the reader as the end looms, as, in the ever-resonant words of D.H. Lawrence, *the song of a man who has come through*.

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NB: this on-line version incorporates some minor corrections as compared to the print version.