

Defending Ancient Springs of Faith

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Abstract. Twenty first century is remarkable for a persistent search for positives, a quest for meaning that could impart some pattern to the chaotic flux of life. Man must exceed himself and grasp this real world with the combined powers of sense, soul and mind. Life is always more than life. It contains a transcendental function. In no other period in the history of English and American literature have the writers embarked on a quest for values with such dogged determination as in the present age. The process that balances and integrates various orders and dimensions into a harmonious and convergent whole may be called spiritual health. It implies harmony with all. Just as the colours of rainbow remain just what they were, just as distinct and just as beautiful, so spiritual health has been with us all the time, in some shape or the other. Faith is not a phenomenon beside others but the central phenomenon in man's personal life, manifest and hidden at the same time. There is value in every form of creative activity in which the self can engage. Man, however, must strive for and realize certain intrinsic and ultimate values that can not be suppressed without suppressing humanness. Men are always corrupting the old symbols, drifting away from the old truths. But while some are losing their faith, others are achieving new spiritual insights. And that is how most of us play our role in the reshaping of our society's value.

Keywords : transcendental function; microcosmic reflection; spiritual health; threatening nightmares; qualitative mystery; cosmic sense.

Twenty first century is remarkable for a persistent search for positives, a quest for meaning that could impart some pattern to the chaotic flux of life. We have been speaking two words invariably i.e. Art and Literature. Art like love, sends its roots deep into what we are. Literature, which is strung out of words, remained oral utterance for centuries. But words have seldom made people wiser in an immediate, mechanical manner. Yet, their influence, on active, virile minds has in turn changed the course of history. Today, information is given by newspapers, knowledge imparted through books, and wisdom sought to be communicated through poetry and prose recited or read in silence.

Life and literature are an eternal tight - rope walk. Art is alchemy, a higher stage of chemistry. It carries on and sublimates the process of life, which is itself a great mysterious chemistry. Every life is a point of view upon the universe. It contains a transcendental function. In fact, art's function becomes for T.S. Eliot the microcosmic reflection of divine order and the evolution of his personal philosophy can be traced in his movement from despair at the disorder of the natural world to his acceptance of a supernatural order which gives meaning and

unity to the world's apparent chaos. He avers in *The Waste Land*, "These fragments I have shored against my ruins". (*The Waste Land* 1998 : 430)

The process that balances and integrates various orders and dimensions into a harmonious and convergent whole may be called spiritual health. A sense of whole, at once belonging and beyonding, is the distillation of spiritual health. Man must exceed himself and grasp this real world with the combined powers of sense, soul and mind. It is, in a sense, heightening and intensifying of the personality, a deepening of the ethos, a strengthening and broadening of the sense of humanity. Life is always more than life. It contains a transcendental function. Life and reason must not be set in opposition. They must interpenetrate each other. A double commandment obtains : Life shall be spiritual, but spirit shall be vital. Spiritual health implies harmony with all. Just as the colours of rainbow remain just what they were, just as distinct and just as beautiful, so spiritual health has been with us all the time, in some shape or the other. The concept of classical beauty implies a harmonious fusion of parts; a sense of proportion and subordination of separate elements to the shapeliness of the whole. There are elements joining together in a concord of equilibrium, such a concord is spiritual health. If consciousness is the emergent trait in literature and the dominant aspiration of the writer, and if the subtleties of combined words arise through the creation of states of visible and invisible awareness in all their variegated colours, hues and non- colours, then words in poetry or prose are necessary for evolution of human personality, for the growth of being and for the confirmation of the familiar and unfamiliar feelings of mankind. One finds expression in serene beatitude in which William Wordsworth steeped himself in moments of sheer spiritual exaltation when he says in "Tintern Abbey" :

... 'tis her privilege,
Through all the years of this our life, to lead
From joy to joy : for she can so inform
The mind that is within us, so impress
With quietness and beauty, and so feed
With lofty thoughts, that neither evil tongues,
Rash judgements, nor the sneers of selfish men,
Nor greetings where no kindness is, nor all
The dreary intercourse of daily life,
Shall e'er prevail against us, or disturb
Our cheerful faith, that all which we behold
Is full of blessings...

(*Fifteen Poets* 2011 : 126-137)

"Faith," said John Cotton, "is like a poise, it keeps the heart in an equal frame, whether matters fall out well or ill. ("Christian Calling," *The Puritans* : 247). Needless to say, faith is not a phenomenon beside others but the central

phenomenon in man's personal life, manifest and hidden at the same time. It is religious and transcends religion. It is universal and concrete, it is infinitely variable and always the same. But faith is an essential possibility and is therefore possible and necessary also in our period. It is the triumph of the dynamics of faith that any denial of faith is itself an expression of faith. To live is to be in faith. T.S. Eliot says in "East Coker", There is yet faith / But the faith and the love and the hope are all in the waiting." Here is a modern dilemma:

To whom can I speak today?
The gentleman has perished
The violent man has access
to everybody.
The iniquity that smites the land
It has no end.
There are no righteous men
The earth is surrounded to Criminals.
(On Poetry and Poets 1957 : 89)

In these melancholic lines the writer's nostalgia for an older, gentler, more righteous time strikes us as very modern. But the poem was written by a man contemplating suicide some 4,000 years ago, in Egypt's Middle Kingdom. According to W.B. Yeats, too,

The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.
(*Selected Poetry* 1989 : 100)

Each generation must fight the old crucial battles, on its own battlegrounds, and so discover its own truth. Thus in *Murder in the Cathedral* Becket acts out his passion alone, but the effect of his martyrdom is felt in the lives of the women of Canterbury. Similarly Harry, in *The Family Reunion*, must go his own way in the end, but his return home makes a difference in the lives of members of his family. In both the cases, divine love takes precedence over human love when a choice must be made. Both Celia in *The Cocktail Party* and Colby in *The Confidential Clerk* must make the difficult choice of giving up human for divine love. Only in *The Elder Statesman* (*The Plays of T. S. Eliot* 1960 : 215) does human love become the earthly reflection of divine love and thus a positive value. The poet - dramatist, Eliot suggests, can, like Virgil, lead us to the brink of that other world by making us aware of its existence. Then onwards the path of salvation must be travelled by each soul alone. In each of his plays Eliot has portrayed the plight of the individual who perceives the order of God but, forced to exist in the natural world, must somehow come to terms with both realms.

In no other period in the history of English and American literature have

the writers embarked on a quest for values with such dogged determination as in the present age. The modern writer looks upon his artifact as an exploration into reality, a raid on the inarticulate, an instrument for remarking himself. In the words of W.H. Auden, the philosophy of values in literature tries to turn treachery and scorn into silver syllables and make a seamless coat out of torn fragments. Whether a writer decides to sail to Byzantium or return to the traditional faith of his ancestors - the philosophy of values is concerned with the attempts to transcend the wasteland condition and to overcome the threatening nightmares of a confused reality. In short, the modern writer has come to believe that man must evolve an integrated scheme of values that may give consistency to his choices and help him resolve the tensions within the human personality. Each human personality matures and develops into the cosmic personality, creating and revealing. And creativity and value are identical as values are particular entities or processes which are intrinsically good. There is value in every form of creative activity in which the self can engage. Man, however, must strive for and realize certain intrinsic and ultimate values that cannot be suppressed without suppressing, humanness. "It is impossible for man," observes Jaspers, "to lose transcendence, without ceasing to be man" (Jaspers 2005 : 219)

Adam, according to the Genesis myth, fell into 'a deep sleep.' Plotinus conceived mankind passing 'as it were from bed to bed, from sleep to sleep.' Plato tells in a fable that souls as they approach birth drink the forgetful waters of Lethe - matter. Those who drink deeply forget all they knew in eternity, while others drinking less deeply have some measure of remembrance. Wordsworth anticipates Plotinus when he says:

The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star
Hath elsewhere had its setting
And Cometh from afar:
Not in entire forgetfulness.

Or as Yeats echoed,

those born
Must sleep, shriek, struggle to escape
As recollection or the drug decide.

(Encounter July, 1966)

It is as good as returning to tradition when C.G. Jung holds that beyond and behind our personal memories there lie a *terra incognita* which we have perhaps known, as Plato taught, in some former state or which we have never known, but which, when we bring it to consciousness, has the familiarity (its being a part of ourselves) of something recollected. It is an abiding characteristic of man to believe the old virtues are disappearing, the old values disintegrating, the old, good, stern ways no longer honoured. Many people today seem to think that our morality, our devotion to virtue and justice resemble a reservoir that was filled long ago, (vaguely

about the time of our grandfathers) and has been seeping away ever since. But our grandfathers thought that the reservoir had been filled by their grandfathers and had seeped away ever since. And their grandfather thought the same. The answer is that the moral order undergoes regeneration as well as decay - a continuous "recurrence of birth," offsetting death. The real world, observes David Gascoyne in "A Vagrant" (1943- 50), is "one continued vision of imagination," yielding up its secrets to that lonely vagrant, the poet:

Evening again.
The lurid flaming light
That red sky's smouldering alkali spread on reflecting stone
Facades of ageing buildings seeming now to slant and strain
Backwards against the leaden East...
Back on their rigid branches, shudder brusquely back and show
How underneath their sparkling green profusion there are hung
Shadows, dull undertone of mourning. Die down, die
Away, brisk wind let the lit leaves lie still.
Let them with tranquil glitter once more hide
Their secret. Heavy beneath all that is seen
Hangs the forgotten ... (Skelton 2002 : 45)

The imaginative vision receives the qualitative mystery communicated by the ever - present signs written in the sky - light of the sun, at once the light of the world and the ominous threat of the destroying fires. The "smouldering alkali" and the "fume" suggest the furnaces of an industrial landscape whose threat of destruction merges with that written in the heavens. In an almost identical image, Virgil has described the dreams that hang under each leaf of the elm of Hades.

Men are always corrupting the old symbols, drifting away from the old truths. But while some are losing their faith, others are achieving new spiritual insights. And that is how most of us play our role in the reshaping of our society's value. The Swiss philosopher Amiel said, "Every life is a profession of faith. Every man's conduct is an unspoken sermon that is for ever preaching to others." Plato called the world a happy and immortal animal, one immortal joy sweeping through its myriads of component lives and all. St. John Perse's poems are praises, eclogues, of this 'moving image of eternity'. His image suggests the infinitely various and inexhaustible fecundity, one life in all. Modern mankind inhabits, as did no former generation, the earth as a whole - "All the land of trees, out there, its background of black vines, like a Bible of shadow and freshness in the unrolling of this world's most beautiful texts. 'The land in its long lines, on its longest strophes, running from sea to sea, to loftiest scriptures;' 'And this great winter prose that is to the Old World's flocks, the wolf -lore of the New World;' Those flights of insects going off in clouds to lose themselves at sea, like fragments of sacred texts, like the tatters of errant prophecies and the recitations of genealogists and psalmists.'

(Vents, II, 1-4). St. John Perse is, above all, concerned with palingenesis, the restoration of all things to their primal perfection, the state of Paradise, by the freedom and simultaneously of all existence, within the single Now of 'nature'. W.B. Yeats re-grafted himself within the tradition of the Ireland and Edwin Muir brought from his 'distant isle' (Orkney) only memories. Vernon Watkins chants the theme in 'Taliesin and the Mockers' (*Affinities*, 1962). The Taliesin legend, possessed of the spirit of divine wisdom, is identified with the prophetic tradition both Christian and pre-Christian. This was the wisdom when the mountains were laid. The same wisdom was present at the crucifixion and inspires all prophetic utterance. This is how Milton's Jesus also defends the Jewish tradition of prophetic inspiration against Satan's last temptation, human learning. Taliesin's symbols are cosmic and timeless in themselves; its stars, birds and rivers, and also the Hebrew and Christian themes of the 'Lay' remain contemporary. Vernon Watkins's poetry is a return to a poetry like that of the English metaphysicals especially Herbert and Vaughan whose roots were Welsh. The image of the bell in *The Death Bell* (1954) is more akin to Herbert or Vaughan than to Donne from whom the theme of the death bell- 'It tolls for thee'- is taken. Vernon Watkins's Christianity may be viewed as a seed or acorn into which the essence of the Pagan cosmic sense which filled his earlier poetry with blossom and bough, with sea foam and rock and wings has been distilled. The tree of life has been diminished to a grain which in its simplicity holds the potential complexity of the tree both as memory and as promise. Vernon Watkins makes his choice and shows his penchant for the world of the 'ancient springs':

O dark, interior flame,
O spring Elijah struck:
Obscurity is fame:
Glory and Praise are luck
Nothing can live so wild
As those ambitious wings
Majestic, for love's child
Defending ancient springs
(Watkins 1967)

Thus there were some values at least which were agreed upon between the profane positivist world and the world of the "ancient springs". Seemingly there no longer exist any common terms or common values. Beyond a certain point of divergence communication becomes impossible. Relative ignorance may still recognize and aspire towards knowledge. Absolute ignorance is perfectly complacent. Tradition which recognizes a difference between knowledge and ignorance cannot come to terms with a world in which there are no longer any standards by which truth and falsehood may be measured.

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