

Chapter V

Intensity

There are many points in time when the poet of Israel is completely mastered by his primitive emotions that he cannot keep silent but must shout out, spontaneously and directly, no matter, how simple, from the pressing burden of joy, gratitude, love or pain. These ancient poems, lyrical cries, come with tremendous intensity and force that we are overwhelmed by the flood of emotions that sometimes even shock, especially when we encounter the "cursings"¹ psalms. Like all creative artists, the psalmists remain close to instinctual drives and their poetic expression is not just prettified and polished speech. The psalmist is the "true interpreter of the human spirit"² and is concerned with the exposure of what happens in the soul of Man. He traverses the whole range of that inner world of human emotions - emotions which become universal in ecstasy and happiness, grief and sorrow, anger and envy, fear and apprehension, praise and thanksgiving.

In the Psalter, the human speaks to the Divine with a voice charged with such great emotional power, that one can quite readily assume that this close "wrestling" encounters, emanate from a long-standing, long-growing relationship between Man and his Maker. The psalmist, therefore, is not hesitant to stand forthright before the Lord and shake Him to arousal: "Answer me when I call, O God / Of my right !" (ps. 4:1. Bible . RSV. 474). There is no shying away from the Omniscient. Claus Westermann says in The Living Psalms, that the reason why these holy poems have "survived" and remained alive "for hundreds of years," is, the fact that, "in them there has been preserved a way of calling on God which is spontaneous and direct and by means of which man can speak to God as he really thinks and feels."³ A similar idea is expressed by Leonard Griffith, who finds it easy to identify himself with the psalmist and say, "This is exactly how I feel. This is what I want to say to God"⁴. The psalmist confronts God as a total human being with all his failings and his thoughts and feelings are inveterate and authentic, springing from the deep wells of the human spirit. What seems to matter more is

not what goes on in the external world but what happens in the mind and the soul. The real happenings in the Israelite's life does not seem to be the mere falling into a trap laid by the enemy or becoming sore and inflicted and then forgetting about them, but the actual experiencing of grief, fear, love, gratitude and happiness. Emotional upheavals of such sort cannot be outdated and hence we become sharers in the psalmist's life. We can feel along with him and explore the whole range of that inner world of human sensibilities.

Besides treating of universal themes: the climaxes in human life (such as unlimited joy and profound grief), the poems communicate, against this backdrop, the poet's mental and spiritual predicaments, so emphatically and so clearly that it is difficult not to be affected by them. Intensity of feeling, of emotion, of experience, lends beauty to the make-up of any work of art and therefore is also important for the psalms.

The following facts allow for the presence, in the Psalter, of this element of Intensity:

1. The spirit of complete abandon, surrender and faith in God. No doubt, this faith wavers at times but not for long. The supplications and invocations are deep-rooted and of gut-level.
2. A simplicity of thought and expression, even in the recurrence of exaggerations.
3. Though the images are sometimes hyperbolic, we must not confuse this with extravagance. The psalmist does not use "woolly" and extravagant language. His speech is direct, spontaneous, accurate and vivid. It comes across to us as real and genuine.
4. Cast in the lyrical mode, the psalms are brief (except for ps. 119, the longest one). Brevity also enhances and can be a sign of an intensity of emotion.

We shall proceed towards the psalms with these factors in view and discover how they facilitate the expression of that tremendous surge of human feelings, which must at crucial times in life, burst through its dam and inundate the embankment to touch the lives of

others all around.

1. The poet of the Old Testament is very much a product of the liturgical tradition.⁵ Israel's relationship with God was considered to be founded on the ~~con~~venant whereby God had promised to take care of his people. Various events of salvation in the course of History (see chapter II), proved again and again that God was an active, living and loving God. The psalmist knew this and so, his heart always yearns for the one God who rescues and protects. "My soul thirsts for God, / for the living God.", (ps. 42:2. Bible . RSV. 496), cries the poet, oppressed and sorrow-laden, and in moments of divine delay, his faith may dwindle but it never dies. Persistent is his supplication, deep is his groaning: "I am weary with my moaning;", (ps. 6:6. Bible . RSV. 475), ". . . my bones are troubled." (ps. 6:2. Bible . RSV. 474) and at the point of total despair he must question his Maker:

"My God, my God, why hast
thou forsaken me ?" (ps. 22:1. Bible . RSV. 483)

Such is life's one moment of intensity where the soul, tormented, beaten and groping, must look upwards and know that the Lord still is. Like the child who looks in confidence to his father, the psalmist too looks at the divine and says, "Hope in God;" (ps. 43:5. Bible . RSV. 497). This is a short but a forceful maxim.

C. M. Bowra, in his Primitive Song, states that primitive man, "When he comes to song, . . . is usually straightfoward, (sic), even when he deals with religious or ritual matters, which are in their very nature recalcitrant."⁶ The psalmist too, like the primitive man, is direct in speech and adopts a very clear cut attitude.

Throughout the crises-psalms, we notice a sense of great weariness. Two factors lie responsible. First of all, the psalmist has sinned and therefore is guilt-ridden, ("Turn not thy servant away in anger," ps. 27:9. Bible . RSV. 486), and secondly, he is physically and spiritually inflicted with wounds and sores and his enemies are hounding him all around, waiting to tear him to pieces, ("My wounds grow foul and fester / because of my foolishness," ps. 38:5. Bible . RSV. 493), ("For my loins are filled with burning, / and there is

no soundness in my / flesh." ps. 38:7. Bible . RSV. 494), and ("Those who seek my life lay their / snares," ps. 38:12. Bible . RSV. 494.).

In such a situation, the person is not only helpless and pleading but is sometimes angry too:

Rouse thyself ! why sleepest thou, O

Lord?

Awake ! Do not cast us off for ever !

Why dost thou hide thy face ?

Why dost thou forget our affliction

and oppression ? (ps. 44:23. Bible . RSV. 496.)

This is a bold and powerful call, reminiscent of Satan's speech to his fallen angels to "Awake" and "arise." (Milton, Paradise Lost 1 lines 330). A series of queries pour forth in an overflowing current of emotion though the speaker seems to be giving vent to his ire, there is an inherent faith that the Holy will deliver them for the sake of His "steadfast love" (ps. 118:2. Bible . RSV. 541).

This is one of many other ardent calls whereby the poet implores the Lord, fervently, to save him (ps. 54:1. Bible . RSV. 502), to hear his prayer (ps 55:1. Bible . RSV. 503), to be merciful (ps. 57:1.

Bible . RSV. 504), or, to deliver him from his misery. (ps. 55:4. Bible . RSV. 503).

Such frantic calls are more than often punctuated by sudden outbursts of personal yearning for vengeance. The poet appeals to God's "judgement" (ps. 67:4. Bible . RSV. 509) in the hope that punishment may be meted out to the unrighteous. Engulfed in rage, the psalmist cries:

On the wicked he will rain coals of
 fire and brimstone;
 a scorching wind shall be the
 portion of their cup. (ps. 11:6. Bible .RSV.477).

At the outset, this may seem an intolerant view and the psalmist may be charged with having a "persecution complex"⁷. But we must remember, however, that the psalmist is a basic person and a poet who thinks and feels intensely. This sensitivity is responsible for his being, sometimes, almost consumed by the fire of hatred. "In some of the Psalms the spirit of hatred which strikes us in the face is like the heat from a furnace mouth."⁸ Though we are horrified at the psalmist's intense reactions to injury, we marvel at his

childlike frankness. There is no disguise in his expression. He says exactly what he feels:

Let their own table before them be-
 come a snare;
 let their sacrificial feasts be a trap.
 Let their eyes be darkened, so that
 they cannot see; (ps. 69:22-23. Bible . RSV. 511)

Psalms 109 and 137 are two of the many poems which are vehicles of the psalmists' extreme anger. Here, the "devilish" nature of a human being is brought out in the bitter curses towards his enemies. This does not mean that the Israelite poets actually did carry out their threats. Because of so much wisdom contained elsewhere in these poems we are more prone to believe that discretion must have got the better of them and they normally stopped at giving vent to their pent-up emotions.

A large part of the Old Testament mentions the oppression of the poor by the rich and though we cannot really identify the enemies, they frequent the Psalter as liars, thieves, mockers, murderers and non-believers. The psalmists refer to them constantly. The poets

of Isreal were not "saints", in the sense that they could rise above it all. They were thoroughly human, capable of every range of normal feelings and it seems apparent that only extreme pressure of cruelty and injustice could have produced by a "natural law,"⁹ such seething hatred.

Without any shame or self-consciousness, the poet expresses profusely his resentment towards the enemy. But a point may be emphasised here. Though he is unrestrained in his cursings, the psalmist is not an Iago, a Machiavellian. He lacks cunning and maliciousness even though his hatred is of great magnitude. In psalm 4:4, he advises: "Be angry, but sin not;" (Bible . RSV. 474) and in psalm 37:8, (both the psalms being accredited to David), a greater tolerance is preached: "Refrain from anger, and forsake / wrath!". (Bible . RSV. 492). These seem moments of peace and acceptance which normally follow a storm. At other times, however, the great deluge of angry feelings towards the enemy is let lose:

May his days be few;
 may another seize his goods !

May his children be fatherless,
and his wife a widow ! (ps. 109. Bible . RSV. 538).

Such is the intense, naked force of the psalmist's wrath. In this context, C. S. Lewis observes: " I did not of course think that this was because the ancient Hebrews had no conventions or restraints. Ancient and oriental cultures are in many ways more conventional, more ceremonious, and more courteous than our own. But their restraints came in different places. Hatred did not need to be disguised for the sake of social decorum or for fear anyone would accuse you of a neurosis. We therefore see it in its 'wild' or natural condition."¹⁰ Lewis goes on to point out that the milieu in which the psalmists lived was one of violence and savagery. This could have, no doubt, aggravated the situation, not allowing for any form of subtlety.

Another reason why the psalmist seems so angry is that, being very close to God, he seriously believed what was right and denounced all that was evil. Hence even when he himself has sinned, he suffers immeasurably. He is deeply wounded, not only because a personal

wrong has been done to him but because these wrongs are hateful to God:

For thou art not a God who delights
 in wickedness;
 evil may not sojourn with thee.
 The boastful may not stand before
 thy eyes;
 thou hatest all evil doers. (ps. 5:4-5. Bible .RSV. 474)

In the case of him being a sinner, his conscience torments him and will not rest: "for I am lonely and afflicted." (ps. 25:16: RSV. 485) and he becomes a miserable "worm" (ps. 22:6. RSV. 483). In moments of isolating pain, the poet seeks the altar of God in worship. Worship becomes more meaningful in the hour of great emotional crisis. The sufferer seems to be aware that worship is, ". . . the reservoir from which we can draw our greatest strength to cope and keep going."¹¹ Hence, the psalmist so ardently invokes God. Intimacy and closeness mark this relationship between God and Man. As one who confides in a trusted King, the psalmist unburdens himself, shorn of all masks, stripped of any awkwardness, before his

Creator.

Intensity of emotion vibrates even through the psalms of praise and thank^Sgiving. These psalms, which seem to be more poetical than the psalms of lament, expose the poet's immense capacity to feel joy and gratitude. Praise and eulogy, almost a surfeit of it at times, come spontaneously to the psalmist. The reasons for this may be many. We look at two. First of all, in the very act of praising, the poet found a certain sense of happiness and satisfaction. Secondly, having known profound suffering, the worth of deliverance is realised double fold. Psalm 150 is a short and spontaneous overflow of such emotion:

Praise him with trumpet sound;
 praise him with lute and harp !
 Praise him with timbrel and dance;
 praise him with strings and pipe !
 Praise him with sounding cymbals;
 praise him with loud clashing cym-
 bals ! (Bible . RSV. 558).

Praise of such kind gushes forth in many of the psalms as brief shouts of boundless joy. The Hebrew poets surely felt less

restraints than we, who live with modern complexities, do. There was a certain openness in all that they felt and did. Feelings were not to be suppressed: whether of joy or sorrow. Honesty and directness led them on and there was no "holding back" when the experience of a moment reached its peak. Thus, David, seized by the force of overpowering ecstasy, could dance before the sacred Ark:¹²

He danced with such abandon that one of his wives (presumably a more modern, though not a better type than he) thought he was making a fool of himself. David didn't care whether he was making a fool of himself or not. He was rejoicing in the Lord.¹³

This kind of impromptu, ecstatic delight in the Lord was shared by all the psalmists. Their hearts would burst in jubilation and they were compelled to "Make a joyful noise to God," (ps. 66:1. Bible . RSV. 508) and to, "lift up a song to him who rides / upon the clouds;" (ps. 68:4. Bible . RSV. 509). Amidst the music of the harp and the lyre, they would declare the wonder and glory of God. (see as

example, ps. 65:5-13). Sister M. Cecilia, in, The Psalms in Modern Life,¹⁴ remarks that God himself inspires such childlike joy in the hearts of those who are untarnished and free. It is this childlike attitude that sets alight the hearts of the poets of Israel and therefore they can sing in fullness of joy and dance, as David did, in gay abandon.

2. The Greeks, it seems were logical and highly analytical people. The Jews were not. Their minds were not crammed with reason and abstractions. They were simple people. For instance, God to them was, simply put, one:

who forgives all your iniquity,
 who heals all your diseases,
 who redeems your life from the Pit,
 who crowns you with ^esteadfast love
 and mercy,
 who satisfies you with good as long as
 you live (ps. 103:3-5. Bible . RSV. 531)

As discussed in the chapter on Incantation, many of these poets were prophets and priests. They may have realised that to reach out

and touch Humanity, they must of necessity be simple. We notice that the less simple a poet is in his expression, the more detached he is from the rhythm of ordinary life. "The lyric deals with passion and emotion in their simplicity . . ."¹⁵ and the poet has to stand close to familiar things. There is no gainsaying the fact that sometimes poetry does demand richer utterance as with Shakespeare for example. P. B. Lyon asserts that even in the zenith of an action, the Bard of Avon could resort to simple expression. His great tragic heroes like, Hamlet and Brutus, for example, all die with words that are simple.¹⁶ Yet, these words were intense and powerful. When Macbeth was told that the queen was dead, his sorrow, fathoms deep, can only be expressed in a single, clear statement:

"She should have died hereafter;". (Macbeth. 5. 5. 17).

The agony and wreck felt by Satan when he first treads the dismal soil of hell is communicated thus:

"Is this the region, this the soil, the clime,"
Said then the lost archangel, this the seat
That we must change for heav'n, this mournful gloom

For that celestial light? (Milton. Paradise Lost 1.
lines 242-245)

When the hour of death strikes for Faustus, the restless fear and anguish of his soul spurts out in expressions simple yet moving with great intensity:

"My God, my God, look not so fierce on me !
Adders and serpents, let me breathe a while!"

(Marlowe, Christopher. The Tragical History of
Doctor Faustus. 5. 3. 120-121.)

Even in a difficult poem like Shelley's Ode to the West Wind, there is a certain simplicity of expression in such emotion-packed lines as:

"Oh, lift me as a wave, a leaf, a cloud!
I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed !"
(4. 11-12)

Such cries of anguish are many times heard in the seemingly ordinary lines as: "Out of the depths I cry to thee, O Lord !" (ps. 130: 1. Bible . RSV. 549), or, "Deep calls to deep at the thunder of thy

cataracts; / all thy waves and thy billows / have gone over me." (ps. 42:7. Bible . RSV. 496). Being simple, does not detract from the effective communication of a moment of Intensity. The poet is still able to impress upon us a plethoric wealth of emotions.

The psalms have been, to some extent, shaped by the social and economic conditions and the needs which they create in men. The needs of the Israelites were simple. Leading lives as semi-nomads and farmers, close to the soil, they were basic people who had no need of any form of complexity. The songs of the psalmists project this truth.

3. In a moment of intense feeling, to wax eloquent seems incongruous. Extravagance and "woolliness" cannot be poetical.

In psalm 104, one of the most poetical of poems, God's creation is described with images that are elemental and familiar. Exclamatory lauds pour forth with vehement unrestraint:

Thou art clothed with honour and

discussion such as:

But God will break you down for
ever;
he will snatch and tear you from
your tent; (ps. 52:5. Bible . RSV. 502)

(see also pss. 7:12, 21:9, 83:14-15.).

In these exaggerations, we are able to discern that the Jewish singer-poets were essentially basic people whose language is tempered by an imagination which is vivid. Furthermore, the aptness and accuracy of these descriptions cannot be undermined. To hold the attention of the congregation, the psalmist needs to be exact yet exuberant, vibrant, not verbose. With his fellowmen who were mostly shepherds learned in the ways of nature, he must speak with their tongue. Therefore, when immense joy, for instance, arrests him, he must speak of the sun and the moon and the stars with such a powerful and forceful feeling, that we too are filled with a sense of wonderment:

Praise him, sun and moon,
praise him, all you shining stars!
Praise him, you highest heavens,
and you waters above the heavens ! (ps. 148: 3-4.
Bible . RSV. 557).

There are many other psalms which serve as examples of unrestrained praise which is simple yet beautiful. In this ability to feel and express so intensely, lies, perhaps, the secret of the psalmists' happiness.

In the wisdom psalms, the poet is "toned down" and not as effusive as he is in the suffering psalms or in the psalms of praise. But through the wisdom psalms, the poet is still able to convey a richness and passion of each moment of life that has been lived. In all, they are proofs of having lived an experience totally and intensely. Wisdom, therefore, seems to be the moving force in many of the psalmists' expression. ^{Keeping in} With a [^] view ~~to~~ Abercrombie's definition of wisdom, we can perhaps understand how this is so: "wisdom is an energy pouring into the world from beyond it, vivifying it and disposing it: 'more moving than any motion'."¹⁷ (see pss. 37, 127:2, 37:11, 1:3, 12:6).

From this point, we move to the next factor which helps to bring in the element of intensity in the psalms: Brevity.

4. The holy poems originated as primitive songs and being lyrical

in nature they are , condensed and brief. (ps. 119 is an exception). The psalmist, like the primitive man who C. M. Bowra talks about in his, Primitive Song , ". . . is capable of seeing and feeling something very sharply and vividly for a short time. The very intensity of the moment brings it home to him in its essential peculiarity and stamps it on his consciousness. He recalls it not in tranquillity but in passion and excitement, and when he turns it into song, he lives through it again, just because it has never left him."¹⁸ The singer-poet of Israel, generally, keeps to one theme: the relationship between Man and the Divine. It is the recurrent drama of the good versus the evil. This drama is the amalgamation of significant moments, all crowded with deep, emotional feelings. In a way, the psalmist is tied down in scope. But this is to the poet's advantage as concentration on a single theme can effectively bring about an immediacy of reaction. Volumes of emotions are compacted and compressed into these lyrics and in articulation, they become, such outbursts which ". . . are of necessity brief."¹⁹ The cause of it all, the slow filling in of passion, the chewing "over and over the cud of some injury,"²⁰ may have taken awhile. All that

has been simmering, must finally boil over in extreme pressure and in great "heat". A human cry of great magnitude is not always a sustained, eloquent and a long cry. It may be singly expressed with a mournful, "Oh!" or an ecstatic, "Bravo!". It can be deeply founded; a gut-level outcry. While discussing the psalms as being composed of units of independent prayer, Claus Westermann, in, The Living Psalms says, ". . . (and to cry 'O God!' can constitute a self-contained prayer). . . "²¹ This, in a sense, touches upon the idea of compactness in brevity.

Psalm 117 is the shortest poem in the Book of Psalms. It does not, however, fail to effectively communicate a strong surge of ecstasy that flows from the knowledge of God's great, unperishable and steadfast love. Being so invigorated by this spirit of praise, the ancient poet exhorts "all peoples" and "all nations" to praise the Lord:

Praise the Lord, all nations!
Extol him, all peoples!
For great is his steadfast love toward
us;
and the faithfulness of the Lord
endures for ever.
Praise the Lord! (ps. 117. Bible . RSV. 541).

It is from an experience of deep gratitude and thanksgiving, that genuine acclamation, such as this , can gush forth and infect those who come near it.

As prayers, the psalms aim at establishing a relationship and hence, the psalmist uses the the shortest possible means. "The occasion is distilled to its essence, and though the result is very short and simple, it has, none the less, reserves of power in its very restraint."²²

A good deal of emotions are, therefore, condensed into these short lyrics, just as the Metaphysicals did in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Whereas the poetry of Donne and his followers was concise and replete with learning, (therefore being difficult at times), the poetry of ancient Israel was brief and replete with intense, personal emotion. The psalms are, hence, enriched melodies that were churned out from the tears and anguish of defeat and oppression and the joys and jubilation of triumph and deliverance.

The sudden starkness of expression brings with it an effect of

overwhelming passion, also because the psalms do not spring primarily from an idea but from an event. The experiences of many different people have been given vivid expression in these poetic creations. Even as effective media of worship the experience factor is significant. Many a tormented cry of the psalmist, for example, stems directly from a real situation of distress. Actual happenings which occurred in the life of a human person, were the source of much inspiration for the psalmists. These events, ". . . took place in harvest fields or on battlefields, in the wilderness or in homes, on sickbeds or in the street" ²³

Experiences based on factual situations, therefore become all the more absorbing and intensifying. The psalms are still living and vibrant today, still ringing with intensity because it is the song of life. This element of poetry, intensity, must still support the psalms or else how should we see life lived thousands of years ago, ". . . in manifold environments between the sea and the mountains, life lived in common with trees, animals, and fields," ²⁴ life lived in its totality? From this distance, it is a pleasure to meet the psalmists of old.

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Conclusion

The exploration must, for the time being, end here. With the discovery of the five poetical elements in the psalms, we can rightfully ascertain two facts: that the psalms are precious and that the psalms will always remain alive for all generations to come. As long as every human soul does not cease to aspire, to seek, to value permanent verities, which in the final analysis, is the total summation of life, these ancient poems will be treasured.

It may be well to consider a point here. The actual beauty of the psalms, we must confess, is not always in the beginning, readily and too immediately discerned by some. It takes time. John Hargreaves, in his ^{re}perface to, A Guide to Psalms, says, "No one ever disliked the psalms more than I did for the first thirty years of my life ! They seemed impossible to understand. Many of them were so un-Christian. People sang them so mournfully. Or so it seemed to me. Then I joined the staff of a theological college and to my dismay was asked to conduct a course on the Psalms. But my

dismay did not last. Before very long I had discovered . . . how precious the Psalms are. To our surprise we found not only that they were great songs and poems of faith in God, but they had been written out of experiences and in situations such as we ourselves knew well."¹

In The Sweet Singer of Israel , C. C. Martindale opines that the psalms may be obscure sometimes but if one could ". . . have one's imagination somewhat in the state of the author's own imagination" ² , then the beauty of the poems will be revealed to us.

In the initial stages, we may have floundered, been somewhat perplexed and perhaps a little confused. But this is not to undermine their value, one has to "grow" with the psalms to discover and realise their intrinsic, hidden worth.

My meeting with the psalmists took place one Christmas, during childhood. A gift from "Santa" to my elder sister, was the authorised version of The Holy Bible . Sometimes, at prayer time, a psalm was read aloud, very little was comprehended, much was forgotten, till occasion prompted the next reading. But, it may

have been then that the seed of curiosity was first planted.

We must realise that the Book of Psalms is worthy of exploration - not only for scholars and for Christians, but also for every other ordinary person, irrespective of caste and creed. There must surely be many more treasures yet undiscovered within the pages of the Psalter; there must be ample opportunities to know the psalmists even better and to learn new and fresh lessons from their songs of faith and forthrightness. In the meantime, the search must go on.

"When old age shall this generation waste,
Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe
Than ours, a friend to man, . . ." (Keats. Ode On a
Grecian Urn 5. 6-8).

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