

CHAPTER V

The Concept of the Poet in the Psalms

Identifying the authorship of the Psalms can be a monumental, though moot, exercise for, contrary to the later traditions, David, Moses and Solomon can hardly be considered as possible authors of the Psalms preserved in the Psalter. This has been demonstrated increasingly clearly as exegesis developed. We can prudently and safely unite our voice with Klaus Seybold when he points out that at the most it would be impossible to speak of traces or fragments.

There is not a single Psalm, which can with any probability be said to stem from David. Of many linguistic, cultural and theological difficulties stand in the way. Even if the so-called Lament of the Bow (2 Sam.1,17ff) could be proven to be by David, the gulf between this poem and the Psalms shows that a common origin is out of the question. Only with the personalisation of the originally anonymous Holy Scriptures and the distribution of the text complexes under the names of great authors, Moses, David, Solomon, and the prophets, Ezra etc., did the Psalms come to be given an 'author', a simplification which may have had dogmatic advantages, but which in the long run has been at the cost of historical plausibility, and has led to ideological entrenchment. (Seybold1990: 37-8)

However, without grinding any ideological axe, we can yet triumphantly declare the moving poetic spirit, subtle and sensitive, in the whole corpus of the Psalms. There is no denying a 'sharp and clear mind' and a 'prophetic spirit', an obvious poetic inspiration and poetic utterance that verge on a discovery of divine-human relationship.

(In the Qumran document of the Psalms [11QPs], we have the reference to David as being wise, intelligent and irreproachable before God and before mankind in all his ways. He is bestowed with a sharp and clear mind and is said to have composed his hymns in a prophetic spirit conferred on him by the Most High.) It has the spiritual vision that combines life-sense, vigorous emotion, profundity of thought, and a strong aesthetic sense. It remains as a transmutation of what the Poet sees outwardly in relation to man's approach to God, exciting an inner vision. Here we notice a mind that allows it to interact with the actual truths of our outward life and then encourages the crudity to sink and get drained in the onrushing crystal waters of Imagination, transforming it into an artifice that is sincere and severe in the strong outlining illumination. Eschewing all efforts toward personalisation, we can trace a poet-soul that is intuitive and interpretive, echoing the creative principles of the Vedic poet, *Kavi*. The argument can begin with a few lines from Psalm 40.

I waited patiently for the Lord;
he inclined to me and heard my cry.
He drew me up from the desolate pit
out of the miry bog,
and set my feet upon a rock,
making my steps secure.
He put a *new song* in my mouth,
a song of praise to our God. (emphasis mine)

The "new song" holds the key to our argument. In fact the divine inspiration spreads its luminous wings on the fertile tracts of the poet's mind and helps in the germination of a new art. The concept of the poet as a divine singer is an established phenomenon not only among the Vedic poets like Dirghatamas or Brihaspati but also among the major early Greek poets like Homer, Hesoid and Pindar. The Poet has installed himself at a place where his experiences are recorded with clarity and insight and the experiential self communicates the wisdom that is garnered from the 'paradise regained' in the wake of the divine afflatus. Milton's prayer to illumine what in him is

dark is the message. This illumination reveals one aspect of the binding force of the poetic spirit. This is evident in many of the Psalms; a spirit that artfully telescopes various themes and through careful reworking engineers a balance that exhibits a strong thematic unity. There are 'growth rings' that hem the solid inner text. We can mark clear stages of development wrought by introspection, a wide surfing of thematic possibilities, and an ingenious poetic license. For instance, Psalm 19 has a three-part division. It begins:

The heavens are telling the glory of God;
and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.

The second part is a series of theses on the nature of the Word of God i.e. the law of the Lord, the testimony of the Lord, the precepts of the Lord and the commandment of the Lord which is perfect, sure, right, and pure. The fear of the Lord is clean and the ordinances of the Lord are true. However, the third part rises to a prayer with the poignancy of a sincere emotion.

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart
be acceptable in thy spirit,
O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.

Despite the obvious thematic diversity, the unification or combination does not strike us as patchwork. In the alembic of the poet's sensibility and subtilised intellect, it coalesces into a coherent cogent composition that combines a hymn of creation, the nature of the creator and the prayer of His creature. The apparent disharmony in themes melts under the linguistic innovation or what one may refer to as the 'inspired' speech. The poetic effort (leave aside the wanton tirades or imprecation directed at the enemy camp) has the prophetic inspiration and the 'impulse' of the spirit.

The organicity of the poet's mind works on a 'structural intention'. He has a beginning, choosing his words carefully with the pitch and intonation. For instance, Vindicate me, O God, and defend my cause (Psalm 43), or God is our refuge and

strength (Psalm 46), or *Be Pleased, O God, to deliver me!* (Psalm 95), or *Hear my prayer, O Lord* (Psalm 102). Striking the note at the outset, the Psalmist makes sure that the close of the text is equally cadenced, resonant, leaving a well-nigh indelible imprint. Psalm 104 should be a brilliant example.

May the glory of the Lord endure forever
May the Lord rejoice in his works,
Who looks on the earth and it trembles,
Who touches the mountains and they smoke!
I will sing to the Lord as long as I live;
I will sing praise to my God while I have being.
 May my meditations be pleasing to him,
 for I rejoice in the LORD.
Let sinners be consumed from the earth,
 and let the wicked be no more!

Post-scripts are obvious for alphabetical Psalms. However, here, the creative spirit of the Poet has manifested a keen sense of form and rhythm by adding the last two verses for a structural wholeness.

Bless the LORD, O my soul!
Praise the LORD.

In fact the subtlety of the rhythm goads the Poet to furnish the last two verses as a demonstration of a conscious construction that is loyal to the demands of the wholesome harmonised final impact. It has a lively recognition for 'design' where form and substance jell together to evolve a soulful rhythm. The Psalm has a thought rhythm and a well organised development hinging on the concept of God and His creation in relation to the ultimate dependence of His creatures on Him. The world of creation may proliferate in all ways but at the end everything suspires from His Immortal Flame. A meticulous reading of Psalm 104 manifests a conceptual development from one stich to the next. Here we notice the extraordinary principle of organisation and growth in the

Poet's mind. The development is effected by making the different stichs deal not with the same but with different events. Thus one is led through several phases: light to heavens, then to firmament, from it to the clouds which leads one to the wind, then to storm and from storm to lightning and then to the face of the earth. The spirit of the Poet works with supreme adhesive qualities and in the crucible of his creative imagination the ideas are well aligned and endowed with the much-needed vibrancy. The medium becomes the message.

Again the symmetry of the Poet's mind is well demonstrated if we look at the prayer songs of the individual. The invocation is immediately accompanied by a cry for help; the petitioner announces what Yahweh means to him and by an illustrative and comparative way – this highlights the poet and his medium – underscores God's power to save. The next block of the 'pattern' deals with the self description of the afflicted petitioner who is 'distressed and poor'. The distress and distance from God continue to evoke the plaintive cry – 'why? 'How long?' – and the prayer nearly reaches the borderline of importunation but never without the latent hope that the clouds of present misfortune will disperse with time. But the imperative or the jussive mood often faces impediments in the shape of hostility of fellow mortals. True to his blemished nature, the supplicant breaks forth into maledictions and seeks an effective intervention of the Lord. The relationship is crowned by a vow of thanksgiving (*todah*) and a craving for His mighty fortress where truth, righteousness, and steadfastness have their holy seat. Indeed this religious document is a product of the living centre. It has the creative rhythm and word images with the profound message from the depths of the Poet's soul. It becomes the testament of the living radiant soul with *kavayah satya-srutah*. It manifests a sheer force of presentation where the God-Man relationship opens up an important text of life, as the composer, guided by the power to soar into the empyrean of the Infinite, hears the music of the hidden movements. It exhibits the forceful vision of familiar things and an inquiring spirit that examines the dilating life force, the passion and ardour of existence and glories in the hues of imagination and takes pride in the power of transmutation. It becomes 'vital' poetry and philosophy, well manicured by a keen aesthetic sense and subtilised intellect. The powerful mind renders a 'discipline' and facilitates the construction of the contours of well-grounded

ideas in truth and eternity. It removes the veil that separates man from the usually perplexing theological problems and unearths the higher strata of revelation. The comprehensive soul and lively sensibility of the Poet thrash out a theological document, raising the banner of universal proclamation and communication. In the Psalms (102, 40, 41, 22, 30, 69, 49, 73, 104, 139), the Poet stirs the depths of human consciousness, the bizarre complex of mortal craving, the intricate plexus of fear, doubt and piety, the confounding matrix of virtue and vice. Indeed through 'a gradation of themes' (faith, confession, lamentation, heart wrenching, praise, refuge, righteousness) and linguistic dexterity, the Psalms have become special object of theological interest and reflection. The Psalmist has dealt with the mystery and wonder of a relationship with imagination, aesthetic sensitivity, historical consciousness and linguistic acumen. Martin Luther found the Psalter a little Bible comprehending most beautifully and briefly everything that is in the entire Bible. It is biblical theology in miniature.

The writer, it may be noted, calls his poem a *maskil*, strictly 'proverb' or aphorism but also 'proverbial poem' or 'solution to a riddle', thereby bringing the Wisdom genre back into play. Psalm 49 reads:

My mouth shall speak wisdom;
the meditation of my heart shall be understanding.
I will incline my ear to a proverb;
I will solve my riddle to the music of the lyre.

The Psalmist has more often worked in the sapiential tradition; also the theological and ethical concepts of wisdom circles have impacted upon them. Language assumed the didactic and the meditative undertones and teaching the revealed will of God became the very backbone of communal and individual existence. (Wisdom was poured out in the way of righteousness, steadfastness, and was the property that remained as the abiding *peace* in his mighty fortress.) The obvious objective was the edification and orientation of the members of the synagogal community and the general tone was that of pastoral counselling (Ps. 1, 34, 37, 39, 49, 119, etc.). However, the didactic presentation of materials is poetically conceived with the clear principle of organisation

of the Poet's mind. The 'historical psalm' and the 'Torah psalm' assimilate "wisdom's" ideas (Ps. 1, 119, 37, 73, etc.) but not in the desiccated aphoristic method. The stimuli of wisdom run through problem poetry and prayer literature. And although the proverbial wisdom embraces three motifs – the transitoriness of life in time, protection of the city and the toil of labour, the common life of brothers – yet the wisdom slant has the touch of the poet's brilliant mind and his sense of the artistic form.

Indeed dry precepts and disembodied disquisition can never convey a complete or perfectly natural impression. Truth requires the art of the poet to express it; it needs the careful adroit hands of the creator to stamp its mark. Poetry has its anointed means to make truth reveal itself, for a wanton indiscretion in presentation attenuates its identity with the creative power. The interpreting eye perceives the authentic and the compelling and looks beyond the mere scientific, philosophic, or aesthetic truth into something which has an 'individual distinct significance' brought home by the transforming power of poetic vision. Most of the poems exhibit a visioned thinking attended by a realisation that maps out the clear contours of a 'righteous' existence. The Poet's mind has seen the divine fire of truth and the inmost spirit has grasped it in entirety. The rhythmic language has seized the finite in man and conflated it with the song and light of the Infinite. The acuity of the prayer-psalms has made man to figure out his mortal configuration with the irrefutable accents of the divine. The Psalmist has seized the emotional realities of man with 'wise understanding'; he presents a situation where man tries to envisage the self, outlining the journey from an intellectual apprehension to a spiritual comprehension. The poet has brought man before Truth, Unity, highly visioned Will, Harmony, and Good. The citadel is built not by the arid light of intellectual reason – the dead mechanical chain of apparent things – and systematising intelligence but is the product of a synthesis of rhythm and truth. There is a spiritual experience which carries us straight to sight. Psalter does not contain a summa of theological thought or any kind of confounding theological system but a treasury of experiences accumulated by generations of people who lived in the region where the cradle of our civilisation stood. They nourished their particular hopes and anxieties, they clung to their values and deities, and they are heirs of their faith. But

such experiences found the eloquence of the poetic spirit to their overwhelming advantage. The force of inspired seeing propelled their emotions and with imagination, fancy, a turn of phrase, an introduction of a symbol or weaving of an image, the correspondence with the life-spirit is established. Our inner being is made to respond to the extraneous self or the world; we arrive face to face with our 'inner life'. The Psalter ceases to exist as a mere disciplined document of religious knowledge. Under the incandescence of the Poet's inward and piercing sight, the higher flights of thought and art, the voices of poetry, philosophy and religion dissolve into a luminous entity secured in its inviolability.

The second stage of the discussion can trigger off with the careful perusal of the opening of Psalm 45.

My heart overflows with a goodly theme;
I address my verses to the king;
my tongue is like the pen of a ready scribe.

Here the 'address my verses' has the note of craftsmanship or the art of construction (for example baking in *Genesis* 40,17 or metal work in 2 *Chronicles* 3,10). Indeed the Psalms are the handmaid of the writer and the singer; it exists as the art of the 'ready scribe', growing out of the wisdom tradition. We can easily agree with Hans Joachim Kraus when he asserts that art, in the Old Testament, does not consist of a "dialectical contradiction", as Kierkegaard puts it in the light of the "truth of the eternal" in that poetry. On the contrary, the artistic capacity expressed in the Psalms is indicated in the intensity and concentration of style, the appropriateness of the measures employed, the clarity and beauty, the heights and depths of that which is spoken and sung in the presence of Yahweh. (Kraus 1992: 15) As a matter of fact, the three basic types of text in the Psalter - prayer, poem and song - require a suitable linguistic medium which under the severity of insight and the flame of imagination can grow into a definite shape and form using all the repertoire of structured speech. No doubt man has approached his god by verbal as well as non-verbal communication in the form of gestures, oblations and symbolic acts. Yet language was probably the decisive element in most

ceremonies and words carefully guarded and measured came to be used having specific intonations and particular rhythm. One can agree with Bowra that most so-called primitive people sing their prayer. In fact, in singing, lies the art of welding proficiently words and music, idea and the rhythm, instruction and the intonation. There is the fine recasting of the conventional. With an ear that is extraordinarily sharp to music, the Poet makes sure that the Psalms exhibit a sound pattern – the vocalic and the consonantal structure of words and sentences. The sound structure makes remarkable use of repetition, assonance and alliteration, seeking to print his message in sound pictures. The metrical system is substantiated by the accentuation system, the alternating system and the stichometric system. Also remarkable is the *parallelismus membrorum* where rhyme-relationship effects a stereophony of thought content. The Psalms demonstrate a ‘keen mind’ working on the various stylistic devices, catering to the demands of the poetic situations. The basic textual structure has the ‘refrain’ providing the unity to the stropes; also a symmetrical or concentric or chiasmic schema can be discerned. Interestingly, the formal structure and the semantic structure have a synchronisation and the bulk of the poems (Ps. 9, 25, 119, 102, 104, etc.) exhibit an organic wholeness and tectonic symmetry. The Poet has infused a balance in rhythm, length, and meaning. His edifice has synonymous, antithetical, climactic and synthetic parallelism and Kugel stresses the dominance of the later. Kugel defines it as ‘A is so, what’s more, B is so’ which indicates that ‘B typically supports A, carries it further, backs it up, completes it, goes beyond it’.(1981:52) Alter sees a forward movement, both intralinearly and interlinearly in the larger structure of some poems.(1985:9-15) There is a movement of ‘consequentiality’ or ‘intensification’ and this intensification works on the poet’s use of the images and the involvement of the poetic spirit that infuses a dynamicity in the movement of the verse. This has worked well with the interpreter for the enrichment of the language serves well towards the communication of concepts and the meaning of the text. It is part of the Poet’s shaping effect and ‘intentionality’. Patrick D Miller works on this aspect with laudable care.

Psalm 2:2 shows the way in which successive cola second earlier ones by elaborating and expanding:

- A The kings of the earth set themselves
- B and the rulers take counsel together
- C against the Lord and his anointed.

While the second colon (B) is clearly parallel to the first (A), it does not merely repeat the thought of A but intensifies and elaborates it. The rulers not only take their stand, they counsel or conspire together. The verb in B explains in a quite specific way that goes beyond A. The third colon (C) is sometimes omitted by commentators as a gloss. There is no compelling reason for that, however. Again the colon moves on to intensify and elaborate in a startling way by identifying the object of the action of kings and rulers. That action is emphasized and explained by the double object in colon C. The tricolon as a whole serves to build in intensity as each successive colon adds a dimension to the basic thought in the first colon. The interpreter is led by the poetic process to hear the development of thought and the force of each new dimension as he or she hears the members of the poetic line. (Miller 1986: 34-5)

It is not the labouring on an idea to a point of nausea but an intensification that harps on the aesthetic and the interpretive faculties of the Poet's art. This should not mislead us to believe that the Poet was merely a thinker in lines and stanzas – a rhapsodist with rhetorical virtuosity. Instead we are made to see through the thought-power. Notwithstanding the objective, subjective and the aesthetic imagination, a creative imagination is irrepressibly at work, that stirs the *self-interpretive self*.

In fact liturgical language is always poetic or semi-poetic. It has to soar above the colloquial usage for it is essentially a communication with divine things. So we need not be surprised by the poetic-liturgical vocabulary extant in the Psalter. The Poet includes the devices of parallel pairs or ostensibly formulaic pairings, merismus, anaphora, anadiplosis, repetition (inclusion is the predominant form), balancing in the

process, the concrete and the abstract, metaphor and the delicate mosaic of images, which, illustrate a point and pack a muscle to the poet's supreme art of interpretation, be it didactic or aesthetic appropriation. Here, it is important for us to observe the use of metaphors.

As a hart longs
for flowing streams,
So long my soul
for thee, O God (*Psalm 42*)

Or,

In them he has set a tent for the sun,
Which comes forth like a bridegroom
leaving his chamber
and like a strong man runs its course with joy. (*Psalm 19*)

Here the metaphoric language in its lucid elegance touches a dimension that has the importation of exhortation, meditation, and concentration. This leads to a meaningful focus on the divine-human relationship that encompasses anxiety, jubilation and the marvellous works of God in nature and history. The images demonstrate a 'crossover effect' as evidenced in the Psalm 19 or Psalm 42. The Poet has made sure that the multiple metaphors bore common allegiance to a subject. The metaphors emanate from different images and are threaded under an overarching idea. One can observe an overarching idea(s) or feeling(s) to which the disparate images in the poem contribute; the poem's unity arises from its metaphorical diversity. The Poet makes sure that the images are carefully constructed to convey an overarching idea and an overarching feeling and that individual images do not form literary worlds unto themselves. Imagery adds the three-dimensionality to the poetic text and the language although has a restrictiveness yet is never devoid of a delicate elevation. The Poet's purpose is to integrate and keep the circulation in the poetic circuit unhindered. His flame of creation binds the internal and the external experience to a nicety that betrays an attitude of profound authority.

Some Psalms primarily have a 'theme word' which can be the key to its exegesis. The metaphoric language is in tune with the religious language for it remains the powerful medium to express the inexpressible. Also in verse the Scripture sets the three-dimensional scene in which the Word is alive. There exists a remarkable rule of word-order that applies for lists and chains of words whereby they run from shortest to longest. Perpending Psalm 90 closely we come across the art of the Poet and the prayer writer generating their own style. Leaving aside ornateness or bombast, the unconstricted linguistic pattern holds its ground with an intentness of spirit. It has a picturesque language punctuated by images that are exquisite in themselves.

Thou dost sweep men away; they are like a dream
like grasses which are renewed in the morning:
in the morning it flourishes and is renewed;
in the evening it fades and withers.

Here the poetic spirit works feverishly, as it were, on the syntactical structure to evolve a chaste model of expression that harbours the emotion and wisdom to inundate the reader in the clear transparency of an everlasting light. Often pedagogical intent comes together with poetic art, with the former in strong proverbial form. The poetic speech has the felicity and the finesse to make the exhortative undertone less husky.

However, the mere meretricious use of poetic devices can easily relegate it to the borderland of half poetry. It is true that the entire corpus of the Old Testament poetry does not reveal the essence of poetry and fails to distil the coruscating power of the poetic spirit. However, the best reveal the imaginative vision, the spiritual sense, the soul-feeling and the soul-sight. The Psalms largely avoid philosophical abstractions or the labyrinth of metaphysics to communicate in a poetic speech that mediates between the immaterial and the concrete and the spirit and the 'life'. Herein lies the triumph of the Poet's mind. Poetry catches the joy or agony of the Poet's soul – the benign formula to liberate man into pure delight and endow life with immutable beauty. Poetic speech catches sonorously the mundane and the divine selves of man, juxtaposing the finite and the infinite, the transient and the Eternal, encouraging an expansive vision

that removes the dross from the surface of our existence and obviates the 'profane' by winging to the hitherto unscaled heights. The spirit combines the best of the philosopher, the prophet, and the singer without allowing one to dominate the other. The 'fused' vision is poured into thought images evading cryptogram and enigma and drops all the ostentatious rigours of structured expression which would have falsified the vision itself. The Psalms have shown the five eternal powers about which Sri Aurobindo talks so eloquently in *The Future Poetry* (Truth, Beauty, Delight, Life and Spirit). Partaking of the vast creative will of life, the Poet leads us to the awakening of the self and paves the way for an approximation to a 'greater knowledge'. (Aurobindo 1994: 197)

Biblical poetry does not have the inane rhythm we associate with lyrical poetry of the common run; rather it has the rhythmic soul-movement of a keen poetic consciousness. Mere metrical excellence does not make a poem as knowing all the laws by heart does not make one a good lawyer. It has to be the creative spirit that runs through the verses to satiate the claims of melody and harmony. The truth or the wisdom has the support of a full-throated inspiration and the art of melodic recurrence to reveal a beauty that wakes the soul. Perhaps herein lies the significance of the Psalms, inviting a debate on human experience, the possibilities of a spiritual revelation and the ground of soulful interpretation that eclipse our befogged sensibilities and prepare the road to a transparent consummation. Old Testament poetry evolves the creative sound that makes one conscious of the 'power' behind its genesis. There is the radiant impulse that makes us hear the 'greater movement' that casts up something from the expanse of eternal depths, making it just not beautiful poetry but powerful poetry. With the Psalms, we may say, a terrible beauty is born.