

• PART II •

Poem and Poetry

THE STORY OF A POEM

You have imposed the rules of your logic upon us; lying in poetry supersedes truthfulness.

—al-Buhturi

Why don't you study *The Book of Poetry*? Poetry can serve to inspire (*xing*), to reflect (*guan*), to communicate (*qun*) and to admonish (*yuan*).

—Confucius to his disciples

There is a scene from a film whose director I cannot remember, a boy is chasing his girl friend in a cab, racing alongside the train where the girl sits. Her hair blowing in the wind, and then the cab has a puncture. The boy gets out, closes the cab door and starts running. And he outruns the train, running straight into the horizon, while the train chugs along behind. The speed of his need was faster than any speed the train could ever hope to achieve! That's where it (the scene) becomes poetry.

—Joy Goswami

The Story Begins

The story begins on a note of anxiety, not particularly on a crest, for one cannot deny the career of the poem as having hit an undulation in our times, when speed is the cult of living and uptight alertness is preferred over sensitivity. Christopher Clausen points out that poetry “is widely distrusted for two contradictory reasons: it is at once too simple in its language to be very important, and too difficult in its figurative qualities to be understood.”¹ Riding the cyber revolution, we now have increased accessibility to major poetic writings, accessed through poetry archives that have, consequently, improved the visibility of poetry in the public space. Dana Gioia observes that “although conventional wisdom portrays the rise

of electronic media and the relative decline of print as a disaster for all kinds of literature, this situation is largely beneficial for poetry. It has not created a polarized choice between spoken and printed information. Both media coexist in their many often-overlapping forms. What the new technology has done is slightly readjust the contemporary sensibility in favor of sound and orality.”² I concur with Gioia about the possibility that electronic media has generated far greater nonspecialist encounters with poetry, both in and out of the academy. Gioia finds “an opportunity of recentring the art on an aesthetic that combines the pleasures of oral media and richness of print culture, that draws from tradition without being limited by the past, that embraces form and narrative without rejecting the experimental heritage of Modernism, and that recognizes the necessary interdependence of high and popular culture.”³ Despite a life in the new aesthetic, a fresh tradition of reading and experiencing poetry, I am not very ecstatic about the future of serious meditative poetry in the Indian subcontinent. A good poem is a serious art, complex and compelling. Patience and taste for a good poem are at a premium, but the consternation over its complete extinction does not look a reality yet.

Clausen notes that technical innovation and consequent spaces of recreation and experimentation have hit our concept of literary generation hard where “each poetic cell” is “jealously isolated from every other cell,” giving “birth to new cells through mitosis.”⁴ I don’t agree with the thought that there is a dramatic decline of interest in poetry but surely pitch myself with the lugubrious note that underpins the collective disinterest for serious poetry and the hollowing out of a sensibility and fine patience that poetry has always demanded from its readers and has needed for its own survival. The possible ambit of the audience for poetry has extended, but the committed poetry-reading community has shrunk. Poetic sentiment has been struggling to find its real home. Its generic importance has conspicuously downsized.

Poetry in the Indian subcontinent is largely confined to departments of literature and other regional language publications. It has somewhere lost its touch with our soul, with our readerly curiosity and habitation. It shows a kind of disconnect with the life that people ordinarily live, because what is poetry today is mostly elitist, self-indulging, subculturish, and cryptic to the general reading public. Poetry readership is sharply divided among the curious and cerebral institutional minority as against a sneering and restless majority. People have no time to join readings, appreciate the rare occasions when such functions are organized. A poem demands a separate

kind of thought, a different rhythm of thinking, a distinct strain of sensibility and perseverance with language. Is a poem beautiful only because it is commonly understood and generally intelligible?

Poetry does not receive its due share of institutionalized love during the years when it ought to: students in high school in India read a poem as effectively as reading Alexander's invasions in India or Newton's laws of falling bodies. A poem is preponderantly treated as a mechanism to be understood, committed to memory, and competently ventilated through examination modules. Undergraduate courses in Indian colleges make poetry a segregated domain within literature departments. A poem, most students think, is either too easy (for instance, William Blake's "The Lamb") or so disturbingly challenging (like T. S. Eliot's "The Waste Land") that reading becomes routine and no longer fun. Most of us lost the fun with poems quite early in our lives.

The problem that I find in most good poetry written today is the imbalance between world consciousness—be it cultural, political, or social—and a peculiar penchant to be idiosyncratic and convoluted. This has generated a disconnect with the common understanding of poetry, washing it away from the common currency of reading into a world where most readers balk at the threshold. The Indian part of the poem's story is mostly about struggling to join the two ends, the diversity of the content in the largest democracy of the world and the overly private and entangled form in which a poem is created. Subject and expression often do not harmonize, resulting in most poems being written without readers. A poem is not for the poet alone but is surely an art that enriches in sharing, vitalizes in communication, sustains in readerly revisits. Not that all poetry written in the subcontinent is soft in the center and is mere expression of a poetic affect. Good poetry has become rare and bad poetry in its profusion and permeability has made poetic experience avoidable; it has prevented the formation of a sensible readership. A poem cannot be read with literacy alone. A poem needs education, a cultivation of a different kind of mind and taste. Regretfully, the nation that can take pride in Kalidasa, Rabindranath Tagore, Jibananda Das, Agha Sahid Ali, A. K. Ramanujan, Jayanta Mahapatra, and many others—the list can be long and illustrious—has more readers than ever before but has lost the taste of *living* with a poem.

So poetry is produced at the expense of a poem. Writing a poem is not like writing a dissertation accented on a specific discourse. A poem has its laws and also a life in lawlessness. Are publishers looking for poems written in a particular way? Is publishing poetry close to being a predestined

project? I wonder how much of public and private funding, writers in residence programs, creative writing fellowships, exist for the poets in India today. Apart from a couple of private universities and Jadavpur University, there is no creative writing faculty: no professional appointments in literature departments will consider the candidate's profile in creative writing because, unfortunately, an essay published in a middle segment academic journal will always be privileged over writings published in magazines like *Granta*. Unlike the American poetry scene, the issue of reading poetry in India is spread and operated across regional languages—a country which has a huge population of *bhasakabita* (language poets, i.e., poets who do not have polylingual presence). Regional languages can sometimes preclude poems from leaping over fences of culture and communities. I am not talking in the sense of globalizing a poem. But the anxiety of nativism, at times, may prove inhibitive by way of a certain ideological embargo. Consequently, the reading of poetry becomes a part of a subculture, a minority act, restricted and sectarian. English-language poets have their visibility but a restricted readership because poets read poets and so do scholars, forming a select and specialized community. A poem has more means to reach the public now but attention to poetry has not altered significantly.

Dana Gioia notes that “for most newspapers and magazines, poetry has become a literary commodity intended less to be read than to be noted with approval. Most editors run poems and poetry reviews the way a prosperous Montana rancher might keep a few buffalo around—not to eat the endangered creatures but to display them for tradition's sake.”²⁵ Poems are for poets, friends of the poets, for a minority claiming sensitivity to poetry: a great poem rarely speaks to the common man. Perhaps educated readership is also shying away from poetry, because, strangely, patience with poems is a casualty before the cult of speed in our age. Why do not people try to rethink what a poem has to say? If a computer has its own language, if a book manuscript has its own negotiations with a style sheet for a camera-ready copy, by what logic should a poem dumb its expressive powers down to a level where getting the readers' attention becomes more its responsibility than the commitment of its readers? But I refuse to admit that all poetry has become irrelevant; perhaps, the decline is more in the neglect that the mainstream metes out to poetry. The story of the novel is more attractive today than the story of the poem.

Edwin Muir, in *The Estate of Poetry*, looks into the role of the poets to make their poems less obscure, espouse great themes and have them

treated clearly. But clearness in a poem is a different kind of clearing; a poem is not a documentation of experience, not necessarily a discursive treatment of a subject. Its alethic and disclosive power can be reasons for its excellence and subsequent alienation. Muir warns that “there remains the temptation for poets to turn inward into poetry, to lock themselves into a hygienic prison where they speak only to one another, and to the critic.”⁶ But does not a poem also generate its own relish through inwardness? Wendell Berry’s observations are too apposite to ignore:

We would be ungrateful and stupid to turn our backs on the work of inward-turned poets. That work contains much of value that we need to cherish and learn from. It is only necessary to understand that that work has flourished upon, and has fostered, a grievous division between life and work, as have virtually all the other specialized disciplines of our time, and that that division has made it possible for work to turn upon and exploit and destroy life. There is in reality no such choice as Yeats’s “Perfection of the life, or of the work.” The decision to sacrifice either one for the sake of the other becomes ultimately the fatal disease of both. The division implied by this proposed choice is destructive because it is based upon a misconception of the relation between work and life. The perfections of work rise out of, and commune with and in turn inform, the perfections of life—as Yeats himself knew and as other poems of his testify. The use of life to perfect work is an evil of the specialized intellect. It makes of the most humane of disciplines an exploitive industry.⁷

Poetry, then, is “an empty basket: you put your life into it and make something out of that.”⁸ The poet’s feeling the world makes the poem worldly, that is, closer in themes to the taste and preferences of its readers. When poetry was a tribal business and an integral part of religious ceremonies (poetry festivals were funded, fostered, and feted) the poem had more people to acknowledge its stories and its existence was far more intensely materialized. Living with a poem was a soothing option, a recreational alternative to existential encounters. However, caught in the “pranks and easements of technology,” the poem no longer disturbs: indeed, its disturbance is scarcely given its worthy dues. But in our times, we need a poem because technology has, unfortunately, touched our body but never much our emotions, the inner recesses of our thinking, the epiphany of our daily wear and tear. Mary Oliver has her fingers exactly on the nerves I am alluding to: “We need those orderings of thought, those flare-ups of

imagination, those sounds of the body and its feelings, proclaiming our sameness, calling the tribal soul together. The man out there, cutting the grass, is more astute than we give him credit for. He knows that the poem must transcend its particular origin and become a poem about his life. He goes on, cutting the straight rows, apparently not listening. But when the poem is his, he will fall headlong into it and be refreshed and begin listening for more.”⁹ The transcendence, the plunge, the dream, the transmutation, and the listening aestheticize a poem’s calling. It is a story or stories that might make the common audience shrivel but that should not in any way discourage us from the retelling. The tale told in the following pages is not a repeat of what got told in the past: the story unfolds, grows, and stops but only to carve another beginning.

Act I

A poem is never lost. Finding a poem permanently is difficult, too. Shrinking readership and dwindling publishing interests influence but cannot configure the essential story of the poem. A poem is no hermetic possession of a culture and nation alone. *Rasa*-experience can let the story of the poem overflow traditions, thoughts, and theories to make sense of its exemplarity.¹⁰ What follows is my experience and understanding of a story told dialogically, across cultures and traditions whose dimensions are varied and vibrant, delicate and disturbing. How can the story of a poem be made to unfold so that reading poetry is not determinatively judged with the economy and commerce of production, with the collaborative indispensability of a career with the printing press, and the visibility granted by an acknowledging multitude?

Lu Ji writes:

At the beginning of the process of writing,
The poet closes himself to sight and sound,
Deeply he contemplates, widely he enquires in spirit;
His spirit roams in the eight directions,
His mind traverses a distance of thousands of ancient yards.
When the opportune moment to write arrives,
The poet’s feelings gradually dawn to increasing clarity,
And objects become clear and present themselves to him
in a stable order.¹¹

Here begins the story, a very complicated, delectable, and fine-spun story of inspiration, skill, and mystery, touching unusual elegance and depth.

When Jibanananda Das (1899–1954), one of the most prominent modern Bengali poets in the post-Tagorean era, writes, “All are not poets: only a few are,” in his *Kobitar katha* (The story of a poem) the exemplarity of a poem’s coming into being is boldly vindicated.¹² I would add to that by saying that all of us cannot be readers of poetry; some are and it is because of such readers that poetry has survived. A great poem is not for all. (Sylvia Plath writes: “Surely the great use of poetry is its pleasure—not its influence as religious and political propaganda. . . . I am not worried that poems reach relatively few people. As it is, they go surprisingly far—among strangers, around the world, even.)¹³ A great poet speaks to all but is not understood by everyone. Das points out that a poem is more than an inspiration, certainly more than a divine inspiration. A poem is not just about writing poetry. People who think that a poem can be best written after one has educated herself in the native traditions and in the past and present of his or her poetic culture are destined to be on a wrong path. A poem is a moment, a flicker of the candle light against a world in fragments and disarray, a pause where the experience of it gradually moistens the heart and wells up in the head. Any desertion of this experience forbids the birth of a poem; it does not forbid the writing of poetry, though. It initiates the debates and arguments that poetry can bring through its deeply encompassive association with the world. A poem cannot always be discouraged from engaging with the circumambient world of politics, ideologies, thoughts on culture, religion, and society. Many great poems have constituted themselves through such investments. However, Das believes in a method where the poet cannot begin with a conscious submission to congeries of thoughts and discourses, a decisive devotion to established patterns of thinking; even if the poet does begin with conscious submission, it is the radiance of imagination that redeems such prefabricated, thoughtful drive. Allegiance to such strains of thought must hide the dominant beauty of a poem like blood corpuscles, veins, and arteries. A poem can unveil the problems and issues of life, but the unveiling is not conducted as if by a social scientist but in beauty, through satisfactions of the desires of imagination. Eliseo Vivas notes that “what the poem says or means is the world it reveals or discloses in and through itself, a new world, whose features, prior to the act of poetic revelation, were concealed from us and whose radiance and even identity will again be concealed from us the moment our intransitive attention lapses and we return to the world of affairs and of things in which we normally live.”¹⁴ This is the *kavya rasa* (the *rasa* generally associated with poetry) that is to be distinguished from

the emotive experiences generated out of mere studious encounters with culture, science, and history.

Visvanatha, in *Sahityadarpana* (one of the most important treatises in Sanskrit poetic theory, written in the late fourteenth century) considers poetry the soul, a kind of ordered, harmonious organism that can be understood through the congruence and consonance of parts to the whole and also through the whole itself. Poetic composition is both a process and a project for closer (functional) examination that eventualizes in the production of *rasa*. Bharata, in *Nāṭya Śāstra*, written during the period between 200 BCE and 200 CE, in classical India, points out that without *rasa* there is no *artha* (meaning). A poem without *rasa* is unthinkable. Visvanatha considers the existence of *rasa* equivalent to the experience of *rasa*; a poem builds its own taste much the way it is appreciated by a “man of taste” with his learning, experience, and understanding of *jibon* (life) and *sahitya*. *Rasa* ensures that the poem has a life in its readers. Understanding *rasa* is synonymous with the understanding of a poem. Visvanatha identifies certain features for *rasa*: heightening of *sattva* (truth, goodness), its self-revelatory power, its ability to produce joy, thought, and wonder. *Rasa*, thus, inculcates a kind of intelligibility, the poetic intelligibility. Honeywell argues that “in terms of the distinction between potentiality and actuality, the parts of a poetic composition fall into a hierarchy. The sentences, in both their representational capacity and their stylistic forms, are necessary conditions for the representation of conditions, consequents, and transitory feelings; these three parts are necessary conditions for the representation of a dominant emotion; and the dominant emotion, in turn, is the necessary condition for the experience of *rasa*. It is as the ultimate member of this hierarchy that *rasa* is said to exist as the actualization of the full potentiality of the poetic composition.”¹⁵ *Rasa* is indivisible and contributes to the unification of the poetic experience. But it is a unity that is difficult to analyze because *rasa* is considered indivisible. Parts of a poem, Visvanatha argues, are analyzable where each part contributes to the experience of the whole. But the whole is a *rasa* experience that exceeds analyzability and yet makes for the organization of the poem, its principle of order and orientation. *Artha* (meaning), as Bharata has argued, is deeply housed in *rasa*, which then functions as a poetic necessity. A great poem, as Ramaranjan Mukherjee points out, will have five elements: *rasa*, *dhvani* (suggestion, resonance), *aucitya* (propriety), *vakrata* (poetic deviance), and aesthetic unity.¹⁶ Mukherjee works this out through a reading of Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” demonstrating

how the *adbhuta* (marvelous) leads to *vibhava* (development of a particular state of mind), then to *anubhava* (direct perception or cognition), and finally to the experience of the quietistic (*santarasa*). Working through profound suggestiveness, the poem, in the end, provides an aesthetic relish in *santarasa* (the calm, the poise), an equanimity provided through the coming together of beauty and truth. The whole poem, Mukherjee points out, “has emerged as a single aesthetic entity and when the appreciative reader gets absorbed in the Ode he neither remains conscious of the division of the poem into parts nor of the exact distinction between the explicit and the implicit.”¹⁷ So poetic meaning is a compound experience that cannot always remain open to the common minds. The immediate meaning is not enough to make the ultimate sense of a poem. This *rasadi* (the *rasa* mode) is integrally connected with *kavi-vyapara* (creative workings of the poet’s mind).

To what *kavyarasa* are Lu Ji (261–303), Tao Qian (365–427), and Liu Xie (465–522), the major poets and thinkers on poetics in Chinese literature, referring to when they try to figure the way meaning, words, expression, and emotion are bound together in a poem? Lu Ji describes poetic inspiration but fails to understand “the causes of its ebb and flow.”¹⁸ Tao Qian, echoing Zhuang Zi’s paradox, believes that “great eloquence does not speak.” Liu Xie struggles to clarify the harmony between *yi* (idea) and *si* (intuitive thought). In these Chinese writers, *kavyarasa* is generated out of the paradoxical nature of poetry. Playing on the polysemy of the word *jin*, which can mean “fully express,” or “depleted,” or “finish,” Jiang Kui (1155–1221, *Baishi Daoren shishuo*, the white-stone Daoist’s discourse on poetry) indicates that “if one can fully put into effect (*jin*) his discourse on poetry, one will be able to write poetry, but if one thinks that this discourse has exhausted (*jin*) all the secrets of poetry, one will not be a true poet.”¹⁹ This reminds me of how Confucius, in his reference to *Shi jing* (The book of poetry), looks into the four aspects of poetry: *xing* (to inspire), *guan* (to reflect), *qun* (to communicate), and *yuan* (to admonish). Wang Fuzhi’s commentary is appreciatively cogent: “What is inspiring (*xing*) can be reflected (*guan*), thus making *xing* more profound; what is reflected (*guan*) can be inspiring (*xing*), thus making *guan* more manifest; what is communicated (*qun*) leads to admonition (*yuan*), thus making *yuan* more unforgettable; what is admonished (*yuan*) leads to communication (*qun*), thus making *qun* more sincere and authentic. . . . There arises a natural flow of emotions and feelings. The poet expresses his thought or message with consistency whereas the reader undergoes an individual experience of diversity

due to his own emotions or mood.”²⁰ Perhaps a poem invites us to read after it has been understood. Yang Wanli (1127–1206) writes:

“Now, what is poetry about? [You may say] “Esteem its words; that is all.” But I say, “One who is good at poetry gets rid of the meaning.” “If so, then, having got rid of the words and the meaning, where would poetry exist?” I say, “Having got rid of the words and the meaning, then poetry has somewhere to exist.” “If so, then, where does poetry really exist?” I say, “Have you ever tasted candy and tea? Who is not fond of candy? At first it is sweet, but in the end it turns sour. As for tea, people complain of its bitterness, but before its bitterness is over, one is overcome by its sweetness. Poetry is also like this; that is all.”²¹

A poem ends and ends in a nonending, too, an exhaustion of words and an inexhaustibility of meaning. Yan Yu (1195–1245) believes in the construction of a poem, but the act of piecing it together into a singular whole might not always be possible. A poem can be “like sound in the air, color in appearance, the moon in water, or an image in the mirror; the words have an end, but the meaning is inexhaustible.”²² So a poem is “impure,” as Charles Simic astutely notes: a poem “is an attempt at self-recovery, self-recognition, self-remembering, the marvel of being again. That this happens at times, happens in poems in many different and contradictory ways, is as great a mystery as the mystery of being itself and cause for serious thought.” I agree with Simic that a poem can, sometimes, be smarter than the poet.²³

Act II

A poem immured to its cultural conditions of emergence is an act of unacceptable reductionism. It is more than the culture that it springs from; rather, it is a culture by itself. Brett Bourbon argues that poems are “odd, funny kinds of things—and that is both their danger and their promise and a further reason for the dependence of our interpretations on our judgments about the kind of thing a poem is.”²⁴ A poem is not like a chair. Bourbon notes, “When we want to cast poems or art as like chairs or such-like objects, we ascribe functions to art, including the function of having no function. Such functions are stipulations. There is no nontendentious way to establish a link between the posited function and the thing the poem is.”²⁵ So a poem is a source for worry, the unflappable worry of trying to make use of it in much the same way a chair is used and pinned down to a particular function. A chair has a logic, a science of constructiveness, a pattern of comprehension and completeness; a poem performs

its best when it surpasses the logic of everyday use and effectiveness. Language is what becomes the vehicle of poetic thought and it is language again that aggravates the worry over a poem's failure to produce a chairlike completeness and efficacy. Bourbon's observation that "poems are radically dependent on ideas of poetry and that they do not constitute a particular kind of thing" is quite interesting.²⁶ He argues that we eat the cake but we do not eat the concept; but, analogously, when we eat poems we also eat the concept of a poem. He argues: "It is not just that a particular poem is dependent on the concept of a poem in a particularly intimate way but that poems are funny kinds of things that are always concepts of poems and never just poems. Hence there is always an idea of poetry as such being expressed in a particular poem—and if we deny that, we turn the idea of poetry into something else—like the idea of culture or desire or of mind or of language."²⁷ Perhaps my exegesis on Wordsworth's "Daffodils" in chapter 5 of this book is a challenging rejoinder to a poem's overcoming of the superintending power of the idea of poetry, Romantic poetry in particular. A poem makes its own place, makes itself out of place, is found, is lost, is discovered, is nothing, is ignored. It scarcely has the logic of a novel and a play.

Kavyarasa can have its own logic; it is, on one hand, drawn from the full-bodied, structured, and familiar world and yet is not only facts. Charles Pierce considers any thought that ascribes what is not fact as poetry as "nonsense." A poem is not just a fact alone.²⁸ *Kavyarasa* emerges out of the poem's ability to "repair to the material of experience," as Santayana argues, "seizing hold of the reality of sensation and fancy beneath the surface of conventional ideas, and then out of that living but indefinite material to build new structures, richer, finer, fitter to the primary tendencies of our nature, truer to the ultimate possibilities of the soul."²⁹ So the poem is a poem in its analyzability (I would argue, as the facts or the logic of a poem), within the summation of understanding that individual parts provide and yet how it is a "poem beyond a poem" in its surplus. William Poteat writes:

What we have to say, then, is that the poem in one sense is "about" the poem in another sense; that as having analyzable parts it is about an unanalyzable totality; and that no behavioural test—linguistic or otherwise—can be used to determine that the poem as being about itself has been grasped. Or we may put it thus: the poem in itself as a totality is an aesthetic object, and, if anyone asks to be told what this is, nothing can be said except that it is that to which the poem in its analyzable parts

refers; it is the plus which is more than the analyzable parts and about which nothing else can be said, other than that there is something which the poem is “about” concerning which nothing can be said.³⁰

The “plus” is what, most often, makes a poem. The plus is a poem, too. Poetry often builds its own knowledge, a consciousness of itself, without being aware of an activity outside itself. It is a world to itself, commits a deep faith in “worlding” and has its own mysteries—its own unique ways to awaken to itself, the poetic state; but, it also is not merely mysterious and enigmatic. Inwardness is not just poetic knowledge. Maritain writes beautifully:

It is surely true that one can be a poet without producing—without having yet produced—any work of art; but if one is a poet, he is virtually turned toward operation: it is essential to poetry to be in the line of operation just as the tree is in the line of the fruit. But in becoming self-conscious, or aware of itself, poetry releases itself in some measure from the work to be done. For knowing itself means turning back upon itself, upon its inner sources. Thus poetry enters into conflict with art, though by nature poetry is bound to follow the way of art. Whereas art requires an intellectual shaping according to a creative idea, poetry, under such circumstances, asks to remain passive, to listen, to descend to the roots of being, to the unknown which no idea can circumscribe.³¹

This is the “in-drawing magic” of the poem that Abbe Bremond qualifies as the call “to a quietude, where we have nothing more to do than be carried, but actively, by one greater and better than we are. Prose, a lively and leaping phosphorescence which pulls us away from ourselves. Poetry, a reminder of the inward.”³² There is something strongly “inward” about a poem. A poem does not forget its own independence to come into being: eating the poem (experiencing and feeling the poem) but not the concept of poetry. If a poem has its conflict with art and again manifests its subservience to art, one must know how a poem practices the art of going beyond art—the poem going beyond a poem.

A brief note on Muhammad Mandur’s *shi’rmahmtis* (whispered poetry) can be interesting here. Mandur, a foremost thinker in Arabic literary criticism, saw *ulfa* (intimacy) as the serious demerit of contemporary Egyptian literature. Literature, primarily poetry, has to be “sincere.” Whispered poetry is difficult to describe: a difficulty which is its charm, begetting a melody that is not ordinary rhythm and also delicate sentiments which sug-

gestive language evokes. It is a compound experience and not something that legitimizes the overloading of ideological content. Semah explains that Mandur did not consider poetry “a collection of plain statements but a mixture of suggestive images; in it music is equally, if not more, effective in capturing the reader’s mind.” Contributing to the tradition of New poetry, Mandur speaks of the importance of delicate emotions and vivid perceptions in poetry and how that needs to be reflected with subtlety through poetic expression. New poetry, “by virtue of its genuineness achieves the quality of whispered secrets,” a quality that is “distinct from rhetoric and jingling verse.”³³ Semah points out further that “poetry was no longer a kind of oratorical composition to be declaimed at public ceremonies, for which the old form might still be suitable. It was now intended to be read and ‘whispered’; in many cases it became a kind of confidential dialogue between human beings. The new musical scheme was the most appropriate for this dialogue which, far from resorting to rhetoric, contented itself with ‘whispering truth’ (*sidqhdms*).”³⁴ But poetic experience is not wholly conceptualizable: it is not about grasping the foundations of experience. A poem is a flow and not pronouncedly a code whose essences and experiences are never realized noisily through the “tin-opener” theory of interpretation that peers into the poem with investigative triumph.³⁵ Maritain argues that “poetry dislikes noise” and insightfully warns that “if you try to make use of poetic knowledge for knowing, it vanishes in your hands.”³⁶

A poem is both a plan and a chance, Frost’s momentary stay against confusion, achieved through clarification and “lucky events.”³⁷ It is directed and is directional. Indeed, I share Stevens’s not-too-confident assertion that “perhaps there is no such thing as free will in poetry.”³⁸ Chance and choice hang together—fairness of will and the strangeness of impulse. The figure that a poem makes is both about a poet’s being a “poetic mechanism” and the poem’s having an autonomic growth, in the sense that “it is what [the poet] wanted it to be without knowing before it was written what [he] wanted it to be, even though [he] knew before it was written what [he] wanted to do.”³⁹ Writing a poem, Stevens notes, is like reading the page of a large book where the poem, with its resonant and rhythmic steps, builds like an “an unwritten rhetoric that is always changing and to which the poet must always be turning.”⁴⁰ While writing a poem, the poet knows “the pleasure of powers that create a truth that cannot be arrived at by the reason alone.”⁴¹ The conscious and the unconscious, known and the unknown, meet in a chiaroscuro. So a poem is an “integration” of two

states of experience, which, however, is mostly fortuitous: “It is not always easy to say whether one is thinking or feeling or doing both at the same time.” A poem has its own “taking place,” a power that the mind lends the poem and the power that it draws out of us without our being conscious about it. Stevens delicately argues that “it is curious how a subject once chosen grows like a beanstalk until it seems as if there had never been anything else in the world.”⁴² But experience, as I have tried to argue, has to connect with language; rather, “style” and the subject are peculiarly ligatured. Language needs to be ambitious to accommodate and carry over experiences, resulting in more *dhvani* (resonances, obliquity). Ingenuity of language makes a better story out of the poem. Every word has a beginning in the story of a poem and every word does not end with a beginning. Beginning continues every time a poem settles in to grow. The vocabulary of the poem is seldom preformed.

Miller’s adroit demonstration of the motive of metaphor through an engaging discussion of Stevens’s “The Motive for Metaphor” happily motivates me here to see what metaphor and its transcontinental cousins *rupaka* (metaphor) and *bi* (to compare) in Sanskrit and Chinese poetics do in the story of a poem. Miller rolls his rhetorical reading into top gear to produce several interesting spaces in meaning and poetic experience and leaves me to wonder whether metaphor could be considered one of the ways of looking at the philosophy and aesthetics of across (exhilarations of exchanges), which is my predominant motif in the book. Metaphor in poetry carries the vector of transference (in the Aristotelian sense of the term) and indirectness that does not meet with much enthusiasm from thinkers like Thomas Hobbes and John Locke. Metaphor, indeed, is much more than a rhetorical device (book 3 of Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* and chapters 21–25 in his *Poetics* tell us this). Metaphorization is an art—an intuitive poetic ingenuity—that generates an efficacious contiguity of apparently disconnected things or thoughts (“unapprehended relations of things,” as Shelley points out in *A Defence of Poetry*), resulting in pleasure, wonder, and charm.⁴³ Miller, I would like to believe, must be in agreement with me over the “inherent tension” that metaphor holds and in being considered, often, as poetry itself. Metaphor changes, through shock and unusual rapprochement, the way we look at a poem, its world, and the world we inhabit. The poem, then, is like constructing an “interminable building” reared by the “observation of affinities / In objects where no brotherhood exists / To passive minds.”⁴⁴ Persian literary criticism sees *isti‘āra* (metaphor) as eloquently pregnant; metaphor states with signification and potency and

often exists as a puzzle waiting to be unveiled before the discerning eye. Seyed-Gohrab points out that “Persian rhetorical manuals concentrate on various categories of metaphors. Metaphors usually underlie other rhetorical figures, and the other figures are commonly used to enhance a metaphor. One of the most common terms for metaphor is *isti‘āra*, meaning literally ‘to borrow.’ The term is often regarded in rhetorical manuals as a subcategory of *majāz* and stands in contrast to literal (*ḥaqīqī*) meaning. Metaphor is also discussed in philosophical and religious manuals, with somewhat different definitions in the various disciplines. Authors define the term in relation to other adjacent terms such as simile (*tashbih*), exemplification (*tamthīl*) or rhetorical ornament (*badī‘*).”⁴⁵ Ideas of affinities and resemblance (borrowing as a critical act) get us closer to *yi* in Chinese, which means “to attach or cling to.” The Confucian scholar Kong Yingda (574–648) points out: “To cling means to cling to analogies. If one wants to learn poetry, one must first cling to and rely on extensive analogies. If one does not study extensive analogies, one cannot master poetry, for poetry is analogies.”⁴⁶ Michelle Yeh shows us how the word *bi* also functions to demonstrate the complexities of comparison and analogy: “*Bi* as the trope of analogy or metaphor in the poetic tradition is derived from a number of sources, all of which suggest affinity and complementarity. Compared with Western metaphor, there is an essential difference in their etymological import. Whereas metaphor literally means ‘to carry (*pherein*) over (meta),’ thus underlining the movement of transference from the vehicle to the tenor, from the signifier to the signified, *bi* emphasizes affinity or intimacy (*yi*) and even sameness (matching).”⁴⁷

Understanding *bi* and the dynamics of metaphor gets us trans(in)functionally across to *rupaka* in Sanskrit poetics. Miller’s strong and subtle understanding of motive in and for metaphor in Stevens draws me closer to Frost’s critical obsession with metaphor, or *rupaka*. Frost considers metaphor not as a simple and static pairing-off correspondence but as a way to establish *abheda-pradhana* (non difference dominant). Kapil Kapoor points out that metaphor established *abheda* “non difference” between two different entities and “teachers of poetics prefer to use the concept of *abheda*, identity, to describe the effect of the metaphor.” And so when the *bheda*, difference, is removed from a simile, we are in the world of metaphor that is creative and vital and endowed with critical amplitude.⁴⁸ Frost’s principle of correspondence in metaphor finds a parallel in the way Visvanatha in *Sahityadarpana* perceives the critical unfolding of *rupaka*, as a way of discriminating meaning from the language that

contains it.⁴⁹ Let us try to understand this point by an instance from “Birches” again.

He always kept his poise
To the top branches, climbing carefully
With the same pains you use to fill a cup
Up to the brim, and even above the brim. (35–38)

The obviousness of the comparison underlines the pain, restraint, care, and poise that combine to lend the proper spirit to art. The metaphor of the cup’s filling up to the brim without being threatened by a spillover forms the very essence of Frost’s poetic art. This apparently simple but superbly delicate metaphor addresses the notions of Frost’s dual answerabilities to society and individual energy, pointing to the urgency of maintaining poise. His conscious art lies in understanding the brim and how measuring up to it can be disguised as spontaneity. This metaphor, also, has the quality of letting us know that there is an aesthetic buildup, a careful attitude to art (*careful* being one of Frost’s favorite words) and also a step that is careless. Frost’s art strives to perfection through a careful design that is not made meretriciously obvious but is adroitly guised in its expressive depth and amplitude, word-idea integration, and the synchronicity of meter and feeling. Frost’s metaphorization is akin to Rudrata’s (a ninth-century Kashmiri poet and literary theorist) idea of *pushtartha*, the maturity in meaning and ideation. It is not mere *anumana* (inference) through intellection but an investment in possibilities that probe the inherent relations among images, words, and ideas; this results in new formations, figures. Frost’s insistence on the proper poetical education by metaphor approximates an aesthetic creativity that hinges on *upamaprapanča*—the construct (with a strong creative bias) of similitude, an important organizing principle in Sanskrit poetics. Yet, such aesthetic creativity hinging on *upamaprapanča* is neither a self-determinate progress nor a jumping grasshopper “whose day’s work gets him nowhere.”⁵⁰ One can easily note that the metaphor has neither a predisposed march in its meaningful expansion nor a directionless consequence; rather, in its inherent richness of networking relations (what we can term *sambandha*, deep correspondence) we discover an organizing principle whose function depends on thought formations and poetic knowledge. Effective figural expression is bound to have a wider reach as it contributes through discipline and direction to the concretization of feeling.⁵¹

So metaphor is *meta-phora*, literally meaning “between motion,” initiating a kind of change (*phora*), a translocation of meaning, a momentum for the across. The emphasis, through readerly intervention and linguistic potency and prowess, on the poem’s ability to see one thing, something, another thing, and another thing as coming together in radiant exhilarations can bear extraordinary consequences where words can lose their “painful definiteness,” words can have their career “without meaning,” and words get “murmured over and over, in continuing suspiration” (in the words of Miller). I am tempted to join voices with Miller by arguing that metaphor provokes roads not taken, which shrink from “the weight of primary noon, / The A B C of being,” for there is something that stands beneath and holds the poem up. Miller perceptively observes that “if the poet can bring metaphors to bear can he hope to escape.” This makes the category of the “X,” mentioned in the poem’s final line, mysterious—an amazing cohabitation of affect through the use of words such as *vital* and *fatal*. A poem has its own allegiance to truths that it cannot shrink from. But a poem is also built through shrinking from the “weight of primary noon.”⁵² The trans character of metaphor is interesting to understand poetry: metaphor, *rupaka*, *yi* and *isti’āra* exist as resemblance. Stevens writes in “Three Academic Pieces”: “As the mere satisfying of a desire, it is pleasurable. But poetry if it did nothing but satisfy a desire would not rise above the level of many lesser things. Its singularity is that in the act of satisfying the desire for resemblance it touches the sense of reality, it enhances the sense of reality, heightens it, intensifies it. If resemblance is described as a partial similarity between two dissimilar things, it complements and reinforces that which the two dissimilar things have in common.”⁵³ This holds an intimate, figurative, rhetoric, productive, and transportative dimension. A poem would know how to find the “organism” among things.

A poem’s truth is a distinct form of knowing, a belief in situatedness, a tradition, as Gadamer would argue. Embeddedness in tradition is not response to neutrality, but a response to values, “fore-meanings,” or prejudices.⁵⁴ Gadamer’s restitution of prejudice is not relativism but invitations to horizon meanings across cultures and historical situations. A poem, for me, cannot overcome its prejudices, that is, the prejudgments, the logical-linguistic space for understanding both itself and its limitations. It answers questions and questions itself within an aesthetic that recognizes both the virtues of the poem and what the poem does to us. A good poem always outbounds its premises, its formalist aesthetic thresholds, the poem going

beyond the poem. So a poem does not have an “alienated consciousness” and is competently enabling in its connection with both itself and its outside. It is disclosive and also makes us see again what we always saw and have been seeing—a delicate mix of aesthetics and ethics, of art and life, the reordering game between the past and present. A poem’s morality is in the “other,” in building a community, staying in communities and in generating a taste. It, to appropriate Gadamer again, is like celebrating a festival where intention brings all under the common sky, although perspectives and positions can be different. A poem is the common ground, the site of celebration, the rendezvous of the ordinary and extraordinary. It has an order that is strangely elusive. This results in its becoming dispensable, a nonserious art consigned to be read when one has temporal abundance and vacuous leisure.

Act III

William Matchett rightly observes that “a poem may include arguments, however, or may even end with an overtly didactic summary, as long as such arguments or summaries are not destructive of the form of the experience. Nevertheless, to abstract the idea from the experience—which is the poem and to call that abstraction the ‘meaning,’ is to deny the poem’s very significance. Not the abstract idea but a complex and vital experience—the poem—is the meaning. The poem is its own meaning; there is no paraphrase for it.”⁵⁵ What precision can language produce in communicating poetic experience? A poem cannot have the purity of mathematics, where language communicates facts with precision and definitude. The imprecision in language, the resonance, the bee in the bottle, owes to a poem’s investments in communicating “human experience” that cannot always be defined with scientific rigor. Matchett observes pertinently that a “human being is the continuing fact of his own consciousness. This is his point of contact with the world, a world which can come to him, from moment to moment and at any given moment, only through his awareness of it. Even his own thoughts, memories, and dreams can impinge only as experiences if he is to ‘have’ them. His life consists in his continuing perception, in the unremitting flow of complex experiences—inter-related sensations, thoughts, and feelings—with his sense of self at the center of this flow. Science can explain many aspects of perception, and of things perceived, but it cannot deal with the primary human fact of experience itself.”⁵⁶ A poem and its relationship with language, then, is invested in nicety, suggestion, and discrimination.

A poet can work with words as objects but the poem is not something that forms out of a particular arrangement of material objects. A poem surpasses the “material” to become not merely ineffable but an event that cannot be logically burnt out. Words change and just don’t stay words as material objects—undispersed and immovable. Working into a poem they frame their own narratives, stories in sounds and images. Poems are set in motion, unremitting and persistent. Words will be repeated. Structures (meter and rhyme, for instance) will be repeated, too. But repetition is a way of undoing the word, the image, the thought, the affect, and the materiality of expression. This undoing is the real doing of a poem.

The whole question of the poetic is inscribed in “play.” The Wittgensteinian silence over poetic language, the creative refigurations of the language-games, does not discount a kind of acknowledgement of the rough ground of the ordinary and living language (as revealed through a closer reading of *Philosophical Investigations*). Unlike Wittgenstein, who struggled to move out of the rule-boundedness of language, Gadamer is more sensitive to the empowerments that the language of poetry may have—the everyday language and how that *forms* into the language of poetry. Everyday language, as Gadamer notes, “points to something behind itself and disappears behind it.”⁵⁷ But how does the “small change” of everyday language change into the “gold coins” of the language of poetry?⁵⁸ Words have intention and are expected to be intentional but intention is never always truth serving (in the sense in which the truth of words is trustworthy) or meaning efficient. It can also be participation in the creation of a different level of answerabilities (language standing before us), unintended acts of speaking, and problematical investigations of “intentions.” Gadamer sees “eminent sense of the word,” the sense that retrieves the word from being lost into the materiality of use.⁵⁹ Words disappear but gold-like reveal a corporeality that is eminent, a coming to life that becomes an event in poem-encountering. This makes us consider the “fusion of horizons” at a new level of understanding. The language of poetry builds in dialogue; it is performative and cannot merely be a propositional submission to truth-functionality. It draws on a kind of livingness, forms of life and riddles that words create in trying to express life and conditions. There is no denying Gadamer that a text also has to return to speech, the contexts of speaking, the address and establishment of the written word. But how do we deny play? A poem plays with rules and the arbitrariness of rules, a strange, regulative beauty that is socially derived, drawn up on internal kinesic, and built through a logic that is not always restrictive. It is a truth,

a story, that tells many tales playfully, through games, often superseding the consciousness of the individual. So a poem is not how the individual plays with it but a play itself, a playfulness that involves reason and the reason to outplay reason.⁶⁰

This playfulness is the *dhvani* (suggestion) on which a poem builds itself. Suggestiveness brings out the full strength of language. A poem is the “connect” with experiences that we sundered ourselves from, the experiences that our daily grind deadened us to. So a poem is like a stained glass, arresting “attention in its own intricacies, [confusing] it in its own glories, and is even at times allowed to darken and puzzle in the hope of casting over us a supernatural spell.”⁶¹ This reminds me of how Octavio Paz reconsiders this connection with words and the experiences of the world around us. Words need our passions, senses, eagerness, and curiosities to be born and stay alive. They examine the world, the poet, and the poem itself. Words connect with the circumambient world, with our sensations, our thoughts, and desires, and in the process seize the poem, too. Comparing Paz with André Breton, Ricardo Gullón observes that “the language of passion and the passion of language are on good terms with one another, that they are the recto and verso page of the same attitude. Moreover, language is where song happens. There is no song without words, even though a song can be diminished to a susurrations or concealed in a number.”⁶² This faith in words circumscribes the Spanish poet Jorge Guillén’s vision of poetry, where the language of poetry does not discount any word in advance because any expression, as Guillén points out in *Lenguaje y poesía*, “can give shape to the phrase.”⁶³ It has a democratic approach to words but implicates a closer examination of words than what we usually do in prose. The relationship between language and experience is vexed and opinions are divided over the acceptance of the insufficiency of language and unrepresentability of experiences. I would like to see both, the insufficiency of language and the reparative and restorative ability of the poet’s craft, as constituent paradigms in the making of a poem. What Gérard Genette calls “secondary Cratylism” brings home the dialectic of the arbitrariness of linguistic signs and the poet’s commitment to redeem them through care, concern, and convergence.⁶⁴ The language of poetry is inscribed in this tension and, through *dhvani* and *vakrokti* (oblique expression), continually prepares to remunerate, rather, refurbish language’s in-built deficits and constraints.

Dhvani is an important segment in the story of the poem, in the unfolding story of resonant poeming. *Dhvani* is the unsaid meaning, the sugges-

tiveness of the poem, its unique strength and charm. Anandavardhana in his *Dhanyaloka* would consider the indirectness of meaning as the poet's greatest art. I would interpret this as the kind of indirect listening that a poem generates. Anandavardhana was the "first Indian critic to state that a *rasa* cannot be directly expressed" and *rasa* and suggestive poetry are integrally connected.⁶⁵ He believed that only those "figures of speech which are in conformity to *rasa* are capable of imparting suggestivity to the sense."⁶⁶ *Rasa* and suggestion can work together to produce three kinds of poetry: *Dhvanikavya* (the highest form of poetry, where *dhvani* and *rasa* are intertwined to produce the best of poetic effect), *Gunibhutavyangyakavya* ("it is that kind of poetry in which *rasa* is suggested, but it is made subservient to the striking features of the primary sense. Here the suggested sense contributes to the primary sense by enhancing its beauty."), and *Citrakavya* (the lowest class of poetry, where the emphasis is on the "varieties of expression" and where *rasa* is thinly felt).⁶⁷ A poem is an emotion of a thought (in the words of Frost) and both a *rasa* of a *dhvani* and *dhvani* of a *rasa*.

Dhvani can be seen to have a corresponding approval in Chinese poetics, where *Anshi* (suggestion) comes with surplus and meaning that invariably surpasses words. There is, indeed, a text beyond the text, brought about through *yan wai zhi yi* (meanings beyond the expressed words), *xian wai zhi yin* (the sound of the string), *xiangwai zhi xiang* (images beyond the image), *weiwai zhi zhi* (flavors beyond the flavor), and *hanxu* (subtle reserve).⁶⁸ Wang Fuzhi expresses the importance of suggestiveness over descriptiveness: "Where the spirit of the ink shoots out, it reaches the extremities of the four directions without being exhausted. Where there are no words, the meaning is everywhere."⁶⁹ A good poem finds what Liu Xie calls the *yin* (the concealed, the rich implications beyond the text). The *yin* in the story of the poem lends *vaicitrya*. It is a diversity that draws its life from what Kuntaka advocates as *vakrokti*. *Vakratva*, or *Vakra-bhava*, creates a striking expression (*ukti-vaicitrya*) that makes the poetic experience extraordinary and exciting. It is here that the poet exhibits his skill (*kavi-kausala*) and acts of imagination (*kavi-vyapara*). Kuntaka argues that a special kind of *vakya-vakrata* (obliquity of expression) must combine the *svabhava* (character) of an object, whether *sahaja* (natural) or *aharya* (worked up), and this "forms the legitimate theme for heightened expression," allowing it as "one of the elements of the simpler *Sukumara-marga* (delicate style)."⁷⁰ *Vakrokti*, as poetic deviance, is not completely what Dandin calls *atisayokti* (hyperbole) because that narrows the scope of the concept. It transgresses the ordinary and induces strikingness that lends charm to a poem.

Sethna observes, “Poetry shot through and through with mystery by a movement of intense rhythmical feeling which weaves a word-pattern whose drift eludes the thinker in us: this is Housman’s conception of ‘pure poetry.’ But he does not say that poets should aim at nothing except such a word-pattern. What he emphasizes is that any poetic word-pattern is poetry by an element that, however, mixed with thought, is really independent of it and can be best considered a stir of emotion. To touch us and move us is the function of poetry.”⁷¹ A good poem moves us, makes claims on patience, keeps us embraced in a thought, allowing a certain experience to build in words and ideas to have a tenure of their own. Reading poetry is not rushing the subway of thought to catch the train of meaning. It is education in toleration for thoughts that baffle, is sustainment in complicated bends of thinking and metaphorical trajectories—“drunken song” (in the words of Frost) with a happy-sad blend. Dylan Thomas notes that “a good poem is a contribution to reality. The world is never the same once a poem has been added to it. A good poem helps to change the shape and significance of the universe, helps to extend everyone’s knowledge of himself and the world around him.”⁷² Caught amid different takeoff points in life, experiencing a poem is both an ordinary and extraordinary act, as the Indian poet-philosopher-mystic Sri Aurobindo affirms. For him, the planes of consciousness and poetic inspiration are connected: his overhead note in poetry mentions the Higher Mind, the Illumined Mind, the Intuitive Mind, and the Overmind, which considers sight as the essential poetic gift, the inner seeing and sense, a vein of comfort touching points of life-truths, values, fun, and play.⁷³ The story of the poem adds to the stories of our lives, our worlds, our own understanding of who and what we are. However,

If, in writing poetry, you insist it must be *this* poem
Then certainly you are not one who understands poetry.⁷⁴

A poem poems. The story begins.