



Teaching How to Write a Poem: Notes Towards a Practice Pedagogy from a Public University

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Abstract

In a country where Creative Writing as a university discipline is relatively new and scattered, how does one evolve a robust classroom pedagogy suited to the birthpangs of the discipline? How do you understand and respond to the transition that most students make from largely humanities classrooms to specifically creative writing ones, turning the unstructured ‘osmotic’ models of learning creative expression that they are used to, to a more intentional, a more ‘expository’ pedagogy which is not necessarily dependent on, as it usual is in a traditional English department, on the goodwill of a few kind teachers (who colour our first creative drafts red in rare acts of fosterage, always more serendipitous than institutionalised) or on the cultural capital of the institution and the students it admits.

I suggest that this can be attempted through a combination of at least three different methods, geared towards creating (hopefully) the figure of the ‘critical-practitioner’. I have tried to employ these methods over the last decade of teaching the writing of poetry, in both public and private university classrooms in the Delhi-NCR region. One of them is the careful adaptation of the literature-review method — a staple of critical writing pedagogy — to the creative writing classroom, where we evolve, what I call the ‘bibliography of affect’, wherein we allow ‘research’ to inflect the (often furiously tendered) evidence of experience and feelings commonplace among the new practitioners of the lyric. This allows us to let go of the

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defensiveness of the first sentence almost all creative writing teachers hear in their classroom: *but this is how I felt it*. This method also begs us to consider the ‘critical’ and the ‘creative’, not as watertight compartments, but instead as ‘modes’ or ‘dispositions’ which can be inhabited simultaneously both in the classroom culture we evolve and in the conceptualization of our syllabi.

Keywords: affect, creative expression, pedagogy

Prologue

In his poem ‘Fosterage’, the Irish poet Seamus Heaney (d. 2013) pays tribute to his literary mentor Michael McLaverty (d. 1992), short-story writer and novelist, and also the headmaster of St. Thomas’s Secondary School in Belfast where Heaney joined as staff in the early sixties (*North* 127). McLaverty “fostered me”, Heaney writes, and “sent me out, with words / [i]mposing on my tongue like obols” (127). Obols, Greek coins placed in the mouths of the dead as a payment to Charon to ferry them into the underworld.

McLaverty ferried Heaney into the world of writing. He gave him sound writerly advice in neat aphorisms (“...to hell with overstating”, “Go your own way”), prepared for him a customised literary bibliography (“Remember Katherine Mansfield...”), and checked the excesses of a younger writer “newly cubbed in language” (“Don’t have the veins bulging in your biro”) (127). We all wish for a teacher like this, patient, generous and honest in their assessment of our work.

Enrolled in my B.A. in English literature in Delhi University between 2003 and 2006, I had lucked out. (Dr.) Lalita Subbu (d. 2011), who had been teaching in Hindu College for decades, took me under her wings. Over cups of coffee at the nearby DSchool Cafe, she listened to my poems and short-stories, and even an abortive undergraduate attempt at a magic-realist novella, over several hours that were informed by advice, kindness and critique. She coloured the drafts red, suggesting alternative words, punctuations and sentence structures. She shaded whole passages to be dropped. In short, my

early creative education happened outside the classroom, informally, through the fortuitousness of a good and kind teacher.

This fortuitousness was not incidental. Instead, it constituted the work of the literature classroom by marking its constitutive *outside*. There was no formal creative writing education in the country at the time. Inside the literature classroom, we were being trained as good ‘literary studies’ people, to become critics and teachers, to closely read and unpack literary texts, not explicitly to *write* them. Feedback on one’s assignments, the useful kind, one that was qualitatively rich and not just a score — not just high praise or damning dismissal — depended on the benevolence of a teacher.

However, in the classroom, any education of writing was largely *osmotic* as opposed to *expository*. You soaked it in while reading the carefully selected syllabi, or following up on the suggestions a teacher happened to drop. It depended, I realised in retrospect, foremost on the ease you had with the language you were reading and listening to, and conditioned by this ease, it was often seen to travel in the circuits between the so-called ‘good’ students and the so-called ‘good’ teachers. The social or cultural capital they might come with prior to their classroom contact was obfuscated in this charismatic encounter.

The practice of creative writing, if any, of the students, grew in more mysterious ways, on its own as it were, autonomously in the para-classrooms. In the corridor conversations. In quick staff-room discussions. On the coffee-tables with those kind teachers who gave you time. And in literary societies with a few fellow enthusiasts and mentors, whose feedback was unstructured and playful, with all its attendant highs and risks.

Creative work was the wilder sibling of the more sober analytical work happening inside the classroom. And like siblings, they often did not speak to each other. The classroom did not say anything directly to the creative work but prepared the foundation for it through often well-designed and fairly diverse literature courses which expanded the horizons of our familiarity, made us enter critical

debates on representation, questioned our assumptions and put our worldviews in a flux, all necessary ingredients for a writer.

The time recalled here was the annual mode of teaching in Delhi University. It was not marked by the rush of the semester or the panic of the trimester. The exams were only at the end of the year. Time could be expended more playfully over the months. So the 'creative' component was a bonus, its surprising but possible precipitate, its existing potentiality, rather than something that was inbuilt in the programme. We were given new ways of thinking that spilled over the genre of analytical essay which we were required to write and be assessed on, spilling over into a creative practice which was not mandated by any course. The specific writing pedagogy, if any, was *osmotic*, instinctive, unstructured, and depended on the goodwill of a few. Those who found their McLaverty's were rare.

Turning the *Osmotic* into an *Expository* Pedagogy Or, Institutionalizing Luck in the Creative Writing Classroom

What Lalita Subbu got me started off on has held me through all these years. The poems I got to write became both confidants that held one's hand in difficult personal moments and also became ways of addressing very public conversations. What they did not do was ensure the grub on the table. After my graduation, and a PhD, I returned to Delhi where I taught in different literature departments, in public and private universities, before the poetry writing was properly integrated into 'work'.

I joined the School of Culture and Creative Expressions (hereafter SCCE) at Ambedkar University Delhi (hereafter AUD), a relatively young university. The School, it was said, combined 'Practice' and 'Studies' pedagogy. The school was new, and I was new to it. With poetry writing increasingly coming to dominate what I wrote and thought about, I was keen on letting the creative work not be entirely oblivious and run parallel to what I could call a *career*. The School promised this convergence between *studying* and *practising* literary writing.

At the SCCE, with its emphasis on ‘culture’ and ‘creative expressions’, I encountered a new ecosystem for my teaching and thinking, one that I was not used to, familiar so far only with the traditional literature classroom and the English department ecosystem. Instead, here I was placed instead within the creative arts — visual, cinematic, writerly and performative. The School had four Masters programmes: two practice ones, one in Literary Art - Creative Writing (which I joined) and another in Visual Arts, and two Studies programmes, one in Performance Studies, another in Film Studies.

This was a new cluster of disciplines, with new conceits and assumptions about the students and the classroom. It opened up a set of distinct pedagogical practices, conversations, challenges and world-views that I had not been attuned to so far. As a teacher, these new contiguities proved to be watershed. A literature classroom extended into this sphere but its manners and preoccupations were rendered quite defamiliarized.

The SCCE was set up by pedagogues and practitioners who were dissatisfied by the nature of the practice pedagogy in the country, the kind that had largely existed for Visual Arts and Performative Arts till that point. As I pored over the bulky minutes of the early meetings of the university Academic Council, I learned that the School had been “visualised to impart a new vision of art pedagogy and practice” (*Minutes*, AUD Academic Council n.p.). The founders’ assessment was that most such practice programmes in the country had a heavy, lopsided emphasis on individual practice alone, and that they are primarily ‘generative’ or merely ‘technical’ or skill-based in nature, rather than ‘critical’ or ‘reflective’. “The focus,” the founders argued,

of almost all the existing visual art, literature [they meant writing], performing art, and film educational institutions is in the direction of imparting various kinds of technical knowledge and skills and/or in the nature of routine, if not uncritical learning of theory and history. The area of creative concept developing, newer presentation modes and experimentation in newer mediums, and an

intention for effective viewer/reader participation are most often or at least relatively sidelined in the current available institutions. (*Minutes* n.p.)

The SCCE wished to fill this gap. It was quasi-heroic in its ambition. The founding document had the habitual optimism of all founding documents and perhaps some of the necessary unkindness for what had gone before, but it had its finger on the pulse of creative pedagogy in the country as it existed by the first decade of this century. In filling the gaps that it meant to, strangely enough, the pedagogy of the literature classroom would not be forsaken entirely but instead be re-adapted.

The SCCE did not wish for the students to only *generate* work, or simply equip them with the technical ‘skills’ to do so, but instead, integrated to this, it also wanted them to experience, along the arc of their four semesters, carefully designed and institutionally mandated occasions where they, and their peers, would stop in their tracks and collectively reflect on their work. They did not want to leave it to *luck*, to the charm of *fortuitousness*. They wanted a technical arc for the students’ creative practice to develop in a crucible where their instinctive ways of thinking and doing, and their assumptions about the world, were constantly put into a flux.

The ideal laid in front of us was that of a *critical-practitioner*. Someone who is creating work while growing intellectually. Someone who is producing work and thinking carefully about the mediums and conditions of its production. Someone who relies on the labour of research as much as on the oracular moments of inspiration. But the proof of the pudding is in the eating. For the teacher of poetry, this was going to throw very particular challenges. Over the last decade or so, I have tried to meet that challenge through at least three different methods, which have involved bridging the two kinds of classrooms I am familiar with and putting them into a conversation with each other, the literature classroom and the creative writing one. These methods are: One, the literature-review method, or, letting research and reading inflect experience and feeling through the concept of, what I call, ‘bibliography of affect’. Two, the exposition of technique method, where the technical

elements of a poem are not allowed to remain in its mysterious green room but are subject to explicit scrutiny, and three, the literary-critic method, where each student-author's text is collectively and discursively unpacked through prescribed protocols of careful feedback in the workshop setting. In this paper, I will focus on the first of these: the literature-review method (Kearns 800).

The Literature-Review Method, Or, The Bibliography of Affect

The literature review as a method is a cornerstone of critical writing in the humanities and the social sciences. What does its staple form entail? It assumes that there is an existing body of knowledge in a particular area which you have to necessarily engage with, necessarily research and navigate, to produce your own convincing and original intervention in that field or subject. This is an important and long-established model. When I tried to adapt it to the poetry writing classroom, I realised that there were many a slip between the cup and lip, that it was going to be trickier than I had foreseen. There were very peculiar impediments in its path, mostly to do with how we instinctively understand poetry. What underpinned this pedagogic adaptation was, what we can call, *the bibliography of affect*.

Poetry writing is both peculiarly and often held hostage to a received idea which remains commonsensical and unexamined in most of its contexts: that poetry comes from some mysterious place, hard to describe, a vague sort of space of interiority is evoked here but never really described. In fact, to describe it is to corrode it, is to betray the contract of lyric poetry, as it were. Such an *idée reçue* suffuses the room in the initial sessions of the poetry workshop, especially when the discipline of creative writing itself is hopelessly new, and students don't quite yet know what to expect from it. I noticed that students would not load this burden of strange, transcendental origins onto the novel, or the non-fiction essay, for instance. Those genres were imagined, by them, to require not just the blinding light of the oracles, received in sudden moments of inspiration like the poets are thought to do, but also the very mortal and necessary task of research and the discipline of craft. Of the humdrum labour of writing and revising, through many drafts. Lyric poetry, the kind of poetry that most of us read and write in the

contemporary, one which channels our personal voice and draws on our experience and feelings — as against epic poetry — drew this popular oracular assumption very close to its skin in the poetry writing classroom.

But this is how I felt it is the sentence every poetry writing teacher has heard when the student is defending a particular line or stanza, against an invitation to explore its phrasing or its underlying assumptions further by peers or instructors. *But this is how I felt it*. Or its companion sentence. *But this is how I experienced it*. It is offered as a mic-drop moment. It is a dead-end. It will brook no disconfirmation. It is a wall, which a literature classroom has not served to take down because it left creative practice outside its intentional pedagogic remit. It is a stoppage of all conversation because the evidence of feeling has been proffered. And lyric poetry is imagined to be the container par excellence of supposedly unmediated feelings, its soft accommodating repository, its final, kind embrace in words. You might as well ask someone not to run away from a bear they encounter in a forest, when the goosebumps on their arms, the racing of their hearts and the drying of their mouths is telling them to do so right away. It is the affective urgency of this sort that lies behind the defence of *But this is how I felt it*. How can you shove me into the jaws of the bear is another variation of how can you ask me to revisit and edit a line I have felt so deeply. And the primary building-block of a poem is thought to be, that which puts us in the way of those said feelings, something we call our *experience*.

In her recent book *Uneasy Translations*, the scholar and translator Rita Kothari, also a teacher, offers a different way to think about experience in the classroom. Where the classroom is not simply a space where apriori and set-in-stone experiences are brought to be only shared and offered as evidence behind some individual choice or position, or firmly-held identity, but instead, far more malleably, and perhaps more vulnerably, it is also something else. “The transactionality of giving and receiving knowledge in a classroom,” Kothari contends, “*is also an experience-produced and [an] experience-producing phenomenon*” (Kothari xiv; emphasis added). This requires some unpacking. She contends that the classroom is itself an experience, which is supposed to rub against our preexisting

experiences and bring them into a new relief. The classroom itself is felt, it impinges on you, enters your affective world, whether through the boredom of a long, interminable lecture, or the drop-dead intelligent remark of a classmate, or the off-handedness of a stuck-up peer, or the overwhelmingness of an idea under discussion which suddenly shakes your world.

Later in that same sentence, in another vital formulation, Kothari says that *the classroom is an experience-producing phenomenon*. What does she mean? Perhaps, it is that which shakes one's world. It implies that the classroom gives us new ways of thinking about, of apprehending, or of framing our existing, and future, experiences. In one sense, what Kothari is trying to say, is that we don't remain only the fixed or reified subjects of our prior experiences having now gone through the joys and vexations of a classroom, its possibilities and its frictions. For instance, for a dominant caste student, what might have been experienced as the feelings of easy triumphalism and joy at one's meritorious success earlier might now be experienced as some sobering form of guilt and a churning, as they realise the vast material yields his or her or their caste location had made possible so far in their life, which they hadn't bothered to consider before the classroom discussions made it apparent. Or, another instance, for a queer student, what might have been experienced as feelings of hesitation, anxiety and a difficult muddiness earlier might now be experienced as joyous perspicacity and empathy as they find themselves reflected in the text being collectively read in the classroom. There can be many other demonstrations of the classroom as an experience-producing phenomenon.

Another writer can help us decode this process. In her book *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, the British scholar Sara Ahmed turns away from "the 'Dumb View' of emotions" and turns us towards seeing emotions not as the simple outside of "intentionality" but existing resonantly beside it. "Emotions are intentional in the sense that they are 'about' something", Ahmed writes, "they involve a direction or orientation towards an object...[The crucial formulation here is that the] '*aboutness*' of emotions means they involve a stance on the world, or a way of apprehending the world" (7). Ahmed can be read as suggesting that emotions involve a stance on the world.

For instance, in her examples, British white-supremacist politicians might be propelled to the emotion of hatred or disgust towards the immigrant figure, but that hatred and disgust is not due to anything immanent in the figure of the immigrant, it is instead, because of the 'contact' between the white supremacist with the immigrant is mediated by the former's racialized worldview, also dispersed in British public cultures, in which people are placed in an insalubrious hierarchy based on the colour of their skin or the place of their or their ancestors' birth (8).

As a further example, she is suggesting that the same politician's speech may trigger very different emotional reactions, of joy or triumph or hatred or disgust, all with their affective coordinates on the body, because the listeners inhabit the world with different stances. So, a change in our stance, in the way we understand the world, in our conscious knowledge of its hierarchies and challenges, will alter whether our skin will get joyous goosebumps or whether eyes will spontaneously roll in their sockets or our teeth will helplessly crunch against each other when we hear the same politician-speaker. The more we consciously know of the blindspots and ideals of the world, the more we explicitly delineate the ways in which we invest in the world and harbour its future visions, the ways we are oriented towards it, all of these knowings will also determine whether our eyes widen in fear or our blood vessels dilate and flush our skins with red as we encounter this or that face of this very world.

Prediscursive as it is, affect is not the final unassimilable of knowing. It exists beside it, is coassembled by it, in odd interpenetrating proximity. In her essay 'Shame in the Cybernetic Fold: Reading Silvan Tomkins', which is a cornerstone text for affect theory, the American scholar Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick read the psychologist Silvan Tomkins to precisely ensure a place for the affective, that is not so easily assailable by the barbs of the anti-essentialists, but also to mark the ways that *the affective and the cognitive are coassembled, are transformed by each other*. "The distinction we have drawn between the cognitive half and the motivational half," Sedgwick quotes Tomkins, "must be considered to be a fragile distinction between transformation and amplification...[c]ognitions coassembled with affects become hot

and urgent [let's say, I know you are wrong because I hate you]...[a]ffects coassembled with cognitions become better informed and smarter [I hate you because I know you are wrong]...[a]mplification without transformation would be blind; transformation without amplification would be weak" (518-19).

What does this discussion imply for a poetry writing classroom? It implies at least four insights. One, a much needed disarming of the oracular theory of lyric poetry, the capacity to do some plainspeaking regarding the genre without limiting oneself to easy transcendentalisms such as 'the line suddenly came to me as if in a dream' or in an opium-induced trance. Two, establishing poetry necessarily as an object of language, where the poem is now not seen as an unmediated medium of apriori feelings, but as something which co-constitutes those feelings in the writers' distinct "encounters with language" (Kothari 8), and three, as a corollary of the second, that the poem is an object of the labour of craft, whereby the techniques allow us to co-create affective worlds received in the poem from the writer and created by the poem for the reader, allowing us scrutinise how the affects that inhere in line-breaks, or sound patterns, or image-makings are also the function of particular craft elements around space, sound and sense in a poem.

Finally, the fourth insight can be framed thus: that the student-poets become more receptive to the idea of *the bibliography of affect*, because after all, even if the feelings they have felt have allegedly never been felt before, and are unique to them, craft and language which helps them bring those feelings to the page, have indeed been the subject of intense and immense manipulation by other writers, before and alongside them. That love, and grief, and joy, and disgust, and shame, have been attended to by other writers, whose resources — technical, linguistic, affective — we can all draw on in the classroom while giving shape to our own.

The effect of these four outcomes together helps me establish in class that the 'critical' and the 'creative' are not some separable, watertight compartments, instead they can be seen as symbiotic *modes* which we inhabit together. *Modes*, or *dispositions*, which can be inhabited contiguously, as the writer see-saws between them,

sitting not on any one seat but on top of the fulcrum, sometimes weighing this side, and sometimes that.

Seamus Heaney, for instance, in his essay “Feeling into Words,” wrote about how you find your own “poetic voice” in a necessary apprenticeship to other writers, through engaging with their voices and not in some isolated bubble (1-4). That in practice, you hear your own voice “coming from somebody else” (3). “How, then, do you find it?” he asks, speaking of one’s own poetic voice:

“In practice, you hear it coming from somebody else, you hear something in another writer’s sounds that flows in through your ear and enters the echo-chamber of your head and delights your whole nervous system in such a way that your reaction will be, ‘Ah, I wish I had said that, in that particular way.’ This other writer, in fact, has spoken something essential to you, something you recognize instinctively as a true sounding of aspects of yourself and your experience. And your first steps as a writer will be to imitate, consciously or unconsciously, those sounds that flowed in, that influence.” (3)

One of the writers who influenced him was the Victorian poet Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-1889). For Heaney, the result of reading him was a desire to write. Different writers take up this place for the many student-poets in the classroom.

For example, before asking the students to write a love poem, I attempt to displace the idea that writing about love requires only the material of one’s own feelings padded with some technical skills. What is coded into that week, is not simply the generative and workshopping task, instead, it is also the reading of a diverse set of poets who have written on this otherwise putatively inscrutable feeling, the one subject most prone to cliché. This method assumes a bibliographic foundation to affective exercises, which the oracular mode of poetry would have posited as mutually contradictory. Reading the Palestinian-American Naomi Shihab Nye’s ‘Valentine

for Ernest Mann', 'Identity Card' by S. Joseph in translation from Malayalam, 'Indian Summer' by the New Yorker Dorothy Parker, 'Want' by the queer son of immigrants Eduardo C. Corral, the Kashmiri Agha Shahid Ali's 'Lenox Hill', '[you fit into me]' by Margaret Atwood, 'Her' by the Scottish-Nigerian Jackie Kay, 'Mujhse pehli si muhabbat' by Faiz Ahmed Faiz, 'Munich, Winter 1973' by James Baldwin, 'For Willyce' by Pat Parker, 'A Time for Birdsong' by the Tamil poet Sukirtharani, 'Battle-Line' by Imtiaz Dharker and 'A Thank-You Note' by the Polish Wislawa Szymborska, reading and discussing these poems, in a mandated sequence before writing your own love poem tells us that the world of feeling does not exist in blissful isolation from the other very finite shapes that writers and thinkers have given it before and alongside us, and that we need to consider them, stay with them, research those writings and its contexts, read these texts closely *as writers*, draw on their technical manoeuvres and imagistic strategies, the way they intentionally deploy language to different ends, in the crucible of which, we begin to, are pushed to, give shape to our own precise feelings. Heaney would say, find our own "poetic voice".

Such is the field that the idea of bibliography of affect opens up. Creative Writing pedagogy of this kind does not want to leave things to luck, to *osmosis* alone. McLaverty had asked Heaney to read Joyce, Chekhov, Mansfield, Tolstoy, Lavin, Friel and Kavanagh, to read them *as a writer*, not just to be stunned by them but also to scrutinise the building blocks of their form and content in order to find his own literary voice (see Hillan: 2017). In their curricular vision, the poetry teacher attempts to plan and institutionalise such routes, both shared by and individuated for students.

Experience is not the outer boundary of what you need to know to write your poem, and the mere statement of feeling is not the guarantor of its persuasiveness. An encounter with other writers, important historical debates they are immersed in, critical perspectives of and in their works, technical skills of sound, space and sense that their works display, is imagined and deployed as a necessary rite of passage in creative self-discovery of the student-writer. The idea breathed into the air of the classroom is that research is not the outside of the creative process, reading is not an interruption

but instead a facilitator to your own writing, and critical thought and wide reading sharpens instead of impedes your capacity to express what we call ‘inner feelings’.

In doing so, we have our instincts deepened, our feelings internally differentiated and variegated, our emotions made more precise by being scaled to its object more closely, the cavities of our experiences further excavated, and our imagistic repertoires made more expansive and layered. By entering the sensorium of these poems, it activates in us a passion for difference, our capacity to parse those affective differences from within the large assail of our own experience, to “relentlessly”, in Baldwin’s memorable phrase, “[force] from this experience”, its “last drop” (qtd. in Kothari 3).

I will end with an example from one of my own poems, not because I think it is exceptional in any respect, but because in the way that it came to be, and the final shape that it took, it remains open to some plaintalking and not to the careless mumbo-jumbo of oracular talk:

Twelve variations on a Sobti line

इतना बारीक न सूतिये कि हमारी जान पर बन आए
آنے بن پر جان ہماری کہ سوتیے نہ باریک اتنا
Itna bareek na sutiye ki hamari jaan par ban aaye
Krishna Sobti

Do not thresh me so thin that I die.
Do not cut me so sharp that I break.
Do not braid me so fine that I sigh.
Do not shear me so close that I ache.
Do not press me so hard that I paper.
Do not knit me so tight that I tear.
Do not sear me so far that I vapour.
Do not draw me so red that I scare.
Do not crush me so muslin that I fly.
Do not burn me so ash that I winter.
Do not spin me so cunning that I cry.
Do not shard me so hot that I splinter.

Behind this poem, first of all, is the reading of Krishna Sobti's monumental Hindi-Urdu novel *Dil-O-Danish* (1993). Behind this poem is the experience of getting stuck on her line of remarkable vulnerability and claim, *Itna bareek na sutiye ki hamari jaan par ban aaye*, unable to wade out of the simultaneity of the feelings of vulnerability and claim in that line. Hovering over this poem is the technical sign of the syllable, that joyous little thing from the prosody classrooms, a unit of pronunciation having one vowel sound. No line exceeds ten syllables. No line has less than nine.

Before this poem is the experience of hearing Sobti's novel read out as a durational performance by Syeeda Hameed in the Anglo Arabic School in Ajmeri Gate (Delhi), in the neighbourhood where the novel was also set. It was directed by Anuradha Kapur, an SCCE colleague. Before this poem, was the jumping out of that one line in Syeda Hameed's voice, arched under the white Anglo-Arabic's gazebo, which made the hair on my hands stand up, which pushed me to pick up the novel, to read it closely. At the back of this poem is the feeling of longing for the early days of one particular intimacy, in which the reason why a particular man sauntered into my life was because he knew I loved this line in Krishna Sobti. How could he not attempt to meet someone who loved exactly what he had also loved in that line. Behind this poem is the gratitude to Krishna Sobti for bringing him near me.

Behind this poem is the humbling struggle to translate that one line from Sobti. Behind that struggle is the struggle of other translators. I think of A.K. Ramanujan acknowledging the polysemy of 'Samskara', the title of U.R. Ananthamurthy's Kannada novel. Behind this poem is the resonant co-existence of languages of Shahjahanabad. Stitched to this poem is the metrical foot of the anapest, the sequence of three syllable sounds in which the first two are unstressed and the last is stressed. Almost all lines of the poem are anapestic trimeter. "Do not *thresh* me so *thin* that I *die*. / Do not *cut* me so *sharp* that I *break*." (stress in italics). Behind this poem is the rhetorical device of anaphora which repeats a word at the beginning of neighbouring clauses, here the "Do not" that begins

every line, the repetition thus lending it emphasis, giving its plea a measure of a demand.

Behind this poem are the scores of “inspirations”, those which one breathed in — the root meaning of inspire is to breathe in — in the tradition of Bhakti poets, sedimenting slowly over the years, Bhakti poets from Akka Mahadevi to Lal Ded, from Janabai to Tukaram (the latter two in Kolatkar’s translations), who spoke with the godhead with the temerity of horizontality, did some straight-talking with the divine. Laced in this poem is the attempt at their kind of forthrightness. Behind this poem is the old delight of rhyme, the strong reassuring aural return that it offers like a gift, unlike people who do not return once they go.

If behind one poem, we can demonstrate, is all this, experience, technique, rhetoric, inspiration, prosody, reading, research, translating, rhyme, feeling and sound, then don’t we need to run through the gauntlet consisting of each of these variables in the classroom. At the end of which will be our poems.

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