Influence of the English Modernists on Nissim Ezekiel’s Poetry

Sanjit Mishra & Nagendra Kumar

IIT Roorkee

Every writer is a typical product of his age and the literary movements prevailing at the time substantially affect his works. The well-known Indian poet in English Nissim Ezekiel has been obviously influenced by his contemporary poets like T. S. Eliot, W.B.Yeats, Ezra Pound and Philip Larkin. These influences shaped his creative odyssey that stretches well over five decades. In fact, the huge bulk of his writings, creative as well as critical, evidences a receptive personality prone to assimilate various impacts. To Suresh Kohli’s query as to who were his influences, Ezekiel replied:

Some of my early poetry was influenced by Rilke. I did not succeed in assimilating this and eventually discarded it. I have imitated Eliot, Pound, Yeats and others, but never very well. My own voice has often been muffled or confused by random and temporary influences. That is the main weakness of my verse....A clear influence is no proof of a poem’s merit. Quite the contrary, I was not influenced by Yeats after The Unfinished Man, nor by Eliot and Pound after Sixty Poems. I don’t feel I make the grade to talk of influences at all. All this talk of influences may be of some value only when I write good poetry during the next ten years or so, which I certainly hope to do. (Kohli 1972)

Ezekiel’s first two volumes A Time To Change and Sixty Poems bear a strong imprint on of Rilke’s mind. His poems like “Speech and Silence” and “Prayer I” appear to be written under Rilke’s influence. The following lines bear testimony to this view:

If I could pray, the gist of my
Demanding would be simply this:
Quietude. The ordered mind.
Erasure of the inner lie.
And only love in every kiss.

(“Prayer I”, COLLECTED POEMS, p.54)

Chetan Karnani has very aptly noted this fact, “His early prayer was for quietitude. He wanted to seek the life of solitude and meditation. This ideal of Rilke is strongly expressed in these poems.”(Karnani 1974) Ezekiel, however, denies having imbibed anything from Rilke straightway. He never intended to be a mere imitator:

If someone were to say, “Ah, but in these poems in an early book there are echoes of Rilke and Eliot,” I would agree. This does not mean that I produced a whole poem which is nothing but Rilke. If there were some poems like that, I don’t think, I published them (Selected Poems, p. 171).
W.B. Yeats’ most pronounced influence on Ezekiel’s early poetry which has derived immensely from the Irish poet’s imagery and symbols. It was under Yeats’ influence that Ezekiel identified parameters to discover his self at various stages of its development. In his well known statement the Irish poet has said of his poetry: It is myself that I remake” and Ezekiel, in his “Foreword” to Sixty Poems, wrote:

There is in each (poem) a line or phrase, an idea or image, which helps me to maintain some sort of continuity in my life.” (Quoted in Karnani 1974)

The Yeatsian impact is traceable in Sixty Poems where several images used by him remind the reader of Yeats’ imagery. In “The Stone”, the image seems to have been borrowed from Yeats’ “Easter 1916” –“The stone is in the midst of all.” In Yeats’ poem stone is the symbol of fixity that defies change. The image of the stone represents obsession of the Irish revolutionaries with the liberation of their country which in the process had rendered them heartless and inflexible. A parallel use of this image occurs in Ezekiel’s poem:

I have learnt to love the texture of a stone,
Rough or smooth but all unyielding stone,
Which plays no facile game of outward show,
And holds itself together as a bone;

(COLLECTED POEMS, p.40)

The title of his fourth volume, The Unfinished Man is also taken from Yeats’ poem “A Dialogue with Self and Soul”:

The ignominy of boyhood; the distress
Of boyhood changing into man;
The unfinished man and his pain
Brought face to face with his own clumsiness...

(COLLECTED POEMS, p. 115)

Ezekiel believed in Yeats’ dictum that poets, like women, “must labour to be beautiful,” and the poem “Poet, Lover, Birdwatcher” (COLLECTED POEMS, p. 135) is a suitable case in point where the poet says “The best poets wait for words” like an ornithologist sitting in silence by the flowing river or like a lover waiting for his beloved till she “no longer waits but risks surrendering.” Ezekiel, like Yeats, has managed to create his own Lake Isle of Innisfree: “He dreams of morning walks alone/ And floating on a wave of sand” (“Urban”, Collected Poems, 117). The only difference between them lies in Ezekiel’s commitment to put up with “kindred clamour close at hand” instead of Yeats’ “I shall arise, and go now, go to Innisfree.”
T. S. Eliot’s impact on the twentieth century poets has been so pervasive that no poet of substance could afford to remain uninfluenced by him. In his obituary on Eliot, Ezekiel refers to this phenomenon:

Eliot’s poetry from 1917 to 1943 is like the Himalayan mountains, with the Everest of *The Waste Land* several but inaccessible peaks, a score or so of attractive but treacherous ranges (*A Song For Simeon*, *Marina* et al.) and a miscellany of small, steep hills obscured in the mist. *The Quartets* form a spacious, high plateau among the clouds. The air is rarefied but gracing, the winds are strong and chilly. The temptation to remain in this mountain-scape and to accept it as the only sovereign territory of poetry was irresistible to several generation of readers. (Ezekiel, 1989)

Repudiating adverse comments on *The Waste Land* about its haphazard structural pattern, Ezekiel observes in the same essay:

I think it is possible to make out a strong case for appreciating the poem despite its disorganisation, concentrating on its richness....I consider it a great poem, not he oddity it is now widely considered to be. It is great because of the “unity of a personality” expressed in it, which finally overcomes its disorganisation, once the requisite erudition is acquired by the reader to grasp that unity.

It should, however, not create the impression that Ezekiel is a blind imitator of Eliot because he also disagrees with him at times as in the following extract from the ‘Obituary’:

Eliot approaches the problem of human degeneration in *The Waste Land* in a typically Christian way—“I had not thought death had undone so many.” Though not a religious poet, Ezekiel shares Eliot’s diagnosis of human loneliness caused by a variety of factors. In poems like “Urban”, “Island” and “A Morning Walk”, Ezekiel vehemently denigrates selfish interests and material concerns. The denizens of Ezekiel’s “unreal city” of Bombay are no better than their counterparts in Baudelaire’s *Paris* or Eliot’s London in that they are simple human ghosts with nothing positive in life. Ezekiel’s hybrid colonial city epitomizes all the tensions and corruptions which had engulfed all the major European capitals after the First World War. In the face of a complete collapse of Western Culture—“London Bridge is falling down falling down falling down”—Tiresias is at his wit’s end—“Shall I set at least my lands in order?”—Ezekiel’s protagonist “as a good native should” takes “calm and clamour in its stride” (“Island”, *COLLECTED POEMS*, p. 182)

Ezekiel has been equally indebted to Ezra Pound, whose association with Yeats and Eliot is part of Modernism’s history. He candidly admits that the American Imagist influenced him thematically as well as technically:
The early influence on me of Pound and Eliot concerned poetry as an art, as well as on criticism of poetry, of society past and present, of modes of thinking and feeling etc. But I never accepted the doctrines which Pound and Eliot, separately defined for themselves and their readers. I sorted them out for myself, modified them to suit my temperament, and so on. It would be misleading and unfair to say that Pound and Eliot influenced me only on the “technique side”. Their influence was far reaching, even comprehensive, but I was never dominated by it. I used it and went back to it from time to time, noting how my growth changed my attitudes to their outstanding creative as well as critical writing. (Ezekiel 1968)

Ezekiel’s poetry has an overwhelming impact of Movement poets like Philip Larkin and Donald Davie in its deft precision of phrase, common subject matter, self irony and allergy to hypocrisy. Larkin and his colleagues had ensured that poetry ceased to be an instrument of propaganda, an official hymn, as in the case of the poets of the Thirties, it must be saved from degenerating into romantic yearning of Dylan Thomas’ variety. Ezekiel on his part had to keep at arm’s length both, the romantic vagaries and also the misplaced patriotic strain of pre-Independence poetry. He has admitted his debt to Philip Larkin and this is most pronounced in his deliberate eschewal of intricate symbolism or far fetched mythology, denigrated by the British poet as “common myth-kitty”. David McCuchion has perceptively commented that Ezekiel:

belongs with the Thom Gunn, R S Thomas, Elizabeth Jennings, Anthony Thwaite, and others like them. He has their cautions, discriminating style, precise and analytical, with its conscious rejection of the heroic and the passionate as also of the sentimental and cosy. (McCuchion 1968)

The contention of Christopher Wiseman that the impact of the Movement poets was rather unhealthy for Ezekiel’s poetic virtuosity, is not entirely off the mark. The Movement style did restrict Ezekiel’s poetic canvas and his own real voice often got suppressed. To quote Wiseman,

It is, I think, significant that Ezekiel never experimented with the traditional forms to the extent that most British and American poets did, seeming to be content with strict accentual-syllabic patterns and relatively straightforward stanza forms; and, for all his obvious innate talent, many of his earlier poems suffer from an almost mechanical rigidity, a monotony of sound which deadens and weighs down the bright buoyancy of his content. (Wiseman 1976)

Enumerating his formative influences, Ezekiel wrote to Anisur Rahman (1981) that his poems written after 1965 have shaken all the influences howsoever dominant and irresistible they might have been in his early poetry:

In the early stages, there were Eliot, Yeats and Pound, Rilke, modern American poetry from Whitman to William Carlos Williams, the poetry of the 30’s in England, including specially Auden, Spender, MacNeice and Day Lewis. The later poetry is not under particular influence, because I had begun to resist them. All the poems in The Unfinished Man are obviously in the spirit of the Movement poets in England but from The Exact Name onwards, I am on my own again.
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