

Poets & Writers

On the Tension Between Formalism and Lyricism Ravi Shankar's *Instrumentality*

There is something of W.S. Merwin in this quietude of eighty-eight pages, from the hush of the very first poem "a consideredness to each word, each line, stanza, that invites two kinds of reading at once: first, the desire to savor each word and recognition; second, the desire to let this immense respectfulness wash over you.

I find myself at times swimming through the poems towards distant lights, but I am a reluctant swimmer, because I want to stop and float, and yet I fear I might tire or the current might capture me.

The work of certain poets is authoritarian in the way it dictates how the poems should be read. There is nothing wrong with this. One might expect this in a formalist like Ravi Shankar, but that's hardly the case. For example, although Shankar capitalizes the left hand of each line in a manner once common and now rare, there is nothing visually or mindfully impeding about this formalism. His intellect is so considerate and yet penetrating that the reader is free to roam the poem at will. This is the very reason great poetry, whatever the artifacts of its period, never tires and we never tire of it.

A certain poem may be considered a formal maze of form and thought or it may be considered a forest run or an urban stroll. This is an extraordinary feat in poetics "the poet not becoming limited or limiting readers by his own prosody. Another word for it, of course, is mastery. But there are masterful poets whose work nonetheless does constrain the reader to have his shoulders pointed this way and that way by the poet. I think of Gerard Manley Hopkins, but not Hart Crane, whom Shankar obviously admires.

This tension between formalism and lyricism gives Shankar's poems a kind of mathematical elegance. Many lyric poets shrug off the constraints of formalism, finding them at once musty and leaden, but Shankar is a precisionist and sees in form and symmetry a freedom where others might see encirclement.

His precisionism invites me to think of the painter Georges Seurat, who surely had to think in something like mathematical logic where his brush might next touch canvas. But it also reminds me of the medieval Andalusian poets who were often mathematician-poets.

He is unafraid to power his intellect and emotions back and forth from abstraction to intuition to recognition in the very way that many poets are today fearful of mingling abstraction with emotion and specificity. (A brave voyager, in this respect, is the contemporary poet Patricia Carlin). In the same way, he is willing to introduce philosophic speculation into plain speech.

It takes not so much self-confidence to do this as a mind accustomed to speculation and aware that there is a poetic form for philosophy and higher mathematics as well as nostalgia and plaint. In other words, a broadly engaged mind.

Instrumentality reminds me of the composer Sergei Prokofiev's synergistic comfort with melody and modernist innovation. Just when you think you've settled into a formal familiarity with the poet he brings you up short with a recognition that reminds you that while you may completely trust him, his rigor and impeccability, you better not get too

comfortable with him, because his poems aren't a visit to the family homestead and he will not send you any Hallmark cards.

Shankar's lyric and formal wont shows up clearly in the arresting "How the Search Ended" on page 49. Following "Landscape in Chelsea," a meditation in extended quatrains, the poem begins:

Before the bus flattened me,
I was searching for a scent
Never to be remembered
Until it was smelled again.

My fault, not the driver's:
I had stopped to stare at a girl
Undressing in her window.
I was too far to smell her.

This is a perfect feast. We can muse about the fate of voyeurs. We can contemplate the olfactory role in memory and literature, perhaps conjuring the more than two hundred identifiable olfactory sensations in Joyce's *Ulysses*, or we can admire, as I deeply do, the power of formal verse to convey a modernist sensibility, a contemporary landscape and response to a society from which silence and spaciousness have been divorced.

But modernity doesn't reside in form alone. A poet might speak of the girl's fragrance or her scent, but Shankar's speaker complains that he's too far away to smell her, and that's that. A girl might have a scent, but that doesn't relieve her of the flat-out modernist burden of smelling, too.

Shankar is that breed of formalist who refuses to disdain experimental verse. He has considered it and uses what he chooses of it, but it's chemically absorbed into his love of symmetry and his classical sensibility. As I thought about this, sometimes just scanning his work instead of rereading it aloud, studying his prosody, I thought of Edwin Muir, the Orcadian poet whose plain speech and contemporary muse nonetheless fell naturally into formal verses and lived there comfortably with recognitions that lesser poets require free verse to convey. (Muir should be better known in North America.)

There is a formalism in prosody that is about formality, about a considered way of conveying meanings and musicality, but there is a formalism that is about the poet's way of apprehending experience, of admitting information and its interpretation into his mind and then processing it. Perhaps another way of saying this is that some poets are passionately concerned with how things are said and some poets are just as passionately concerned with how they're apprehended and conveyed. Some poets want to paint or sketch an idea on the page, some want to convey the progression of their own minds, the way things have been ordered in their heads. These latter poets are not as esteemed in today's cultural environment because they often speak to the elephant in the room, that one thing about which there is consensual silence.

If you impose a metrical scheme on a poem from the outset, it's different from inviting your recognitions to choose their own meters and schema. Sometimes, the given of a poem, its *donné*, its initial impulse, is so demanding that a poet will cock an ear and listen to it for a while before deciding what shape the poem will take. It's not unlike a bird call. It's one thing for the bird to call; it's another thing when there's an answer. Many poets don't wait for the answer.

But the poetic process is not as improvisational as that. Good poets become so familiar with verse forms that they become matrixes, actually shaping the way poets perceive the world. Hence, the given, the *donné*, isn't the sole determinant in the way a poem proceeds. Certain recognitions are conveyed by certain forms. The form turns up and modulates the magnification.

I don't think Shankar belongs to a school or a class of poets. I think few English language poets have escaped his attention and his recognitions are more important to him than experimenting with ways of putting them. I think this was so of Muir. He understood himself to be a modernist because he knew how his intellect was responding to the contemporary world. He was breaking old molds in his mind. But he wanted to be able to rely on a fairly symmetrical and recognizable prosody to sing his song. It's not that the song wasn't new and surprising, but that he didn't feel he needed a new tool every time he sang it.

In an e-mail exchange with me, Shankar alluded to this. Citing his poem, *Fabricating Astrology* " (p14), he wrote that no critic had commented on his use of chiasmus off-rhyme "the last word of the first line rhyming with the first word of the third line, the first word of the second line rhyming with the last word of the last line in each quatrain.

It's subtle but meant to have the same imposed order as the constellations, " he wrote. The device has many variations and is rarely used with Shankar's rigor nowadays. Judging by my own failure to identify this device in the poem, I would say the mark of its success is its unobtrusiveness. And yet the device was used by King David in *Samuel* and later by Alexander Pope and many another. Here are two of Shankar's quatrains:

The longer I gape, the more the many
Nebulae appear latticed, like a screen
In windows or a page of graph paper,
Ordered as the placement of fibulas

In feet. The chart seems plotted
Along three axes: love, labor, time.
Besotted hours converge into minus,
Kind and curative movements belong "

Notice the extraordinary symmetry of these quatrains, reminiscent of a Hans Hofmann or I. Rice Pereira abstract canvas.

Then consider the sort of mind that insists on such a stratagem. Is it a chess player's mind? A musician's, perhaps? Perhaps indeed, but it is primarily a poet's mind, one that delights in a kind of syllogistic logic. To employ chiasmus in a modern poem you have to have a passion for mining the ravishing beauty and logic of the English language when it is pushed over the edge and reassembled as if newfound. The English language, which is not an easy one to learn, has much of the infinite potentiality of Arabic numerals compared, say, to Roman numerals "stick figures compared to ballet dancers.

But there is much more to admire in these two quatrains. Consider the plainspoken-ness of In windows or a page of graph paper. "

Nothing presumptuous or clever there. And in context with the asperity of a line like, Along three axes: love, labor, time, " we might think ourselves in the hands of a rather grimly determined modernist, but then comes the antique word besotted, and we see (because this is early in Instrumentality) that the poet has simply studied the language well and will not renounce any of its splendors in the name of dogma, which means he risks some critics' disapproval. (Remember all those 20th Century modernists who had created their own vogue and didn't think Hart Crane belonged in their canon because he wasn't an imagist this or a minimalist that "that's the way vogue is, like a club, excluding by definition.)

Experienced museum-goers often target a particular gallery or room, because they know that drifting around a museum dazes you and you wind up in a kind of walking coma. *Instrumentality* should be targeted, one or two poems at a time. That is the way to apprehend its many perfections. So if it's sitting on a table in a stack of other books, set it aside as if you were presiding over a diamond-cutter's bench and examining the merits of each gem. Otherwise you might swim over it or under it as if it were something to get past. It's not, it's something to almost drown in. "

-Djelloul Marbrook