

LE TEXTE ÉTRANGER

THE DANGERS OF POETRY

IN ANITA DESAI' S *IN CUSTODY*

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“Then you should say what you mean,” the March Hare went on.

“I do,” Alice hastily replied; “at least—at least I mean what I say—that’s the same thing, you know.”

“Not the same thing a bit!” said the Hatter. “Why, you might just as well say that ‘I see what I eat’ is the same thing as ‘I eat what I see.’” (Carroll 55)

After his second disastrous meeting with Nur, Deven becomes momentarily reconciled with his mediocre family life in Mirpore. Setting off on a walk with son, the chastised scholar thoughtfully reflects that “he was lucky to have exchanged the dangers of Nur’s poetry for the undemanding chatter of a child.” (IC 72) The proposition is an intriguing one. Do the dangers Deven dread – you will note the plural – refer us to Nur’s poetry, or can the statement be extended to poetry in general. In this particular instance, Deven’s inner thoughts have an inviting self-reflexive slant about them: What makes poetry a dangerous enterprise? What does poetry call into question or even jeopardize? How do you fight with metaphor and alliteration, asks Nur on page 51. If poetry is an insurrection, what kind of activist does this make of the poet? Should we opt for this line of investigation, we will soon come to envisage the question of the politics of language in Desai’s novel (Dvorak 26-38), and beyond the novel’s immediate context, the Romantic tradition of the committed poet as embodied by Shelley and his claim in the *Defence of Poetry* (written 1821, published 1840) that “Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world.” Shelley’s followers to the present day fight along the same lines as

evinced by Arundhati Roy's poetic activism in *The Algebra of Infinite Justice*.¹

Opinions, however, notoriously diverge when it comes to discussing the instrumental function of poetry, what poetry is and what poetry does. Roman Jakobson analyzed the poetic function of language stressing that its specificity was to put the stress on the message for its own sake.² Following T.S Eliot and Paul Valéry, Jean-Jacques Lecercle has argued that communication is not the poet's first concern "for speech distorts knowledge, and language disturbs communication." (Lecercle 9) So perhaps my initial questions should be condensed and reformulated: To what risks does poetry expose the amateur—poet or reader?

In its Orphic dimension, poetry has been envisaged as a brutal confrontation with the underworld, the entropy of decreation. In this sense, poetry is never a given, or a reproduction but it involves a journeying to the limit to wrench form—Eurydice's mythical body—out of annihilation. The journey is not without risk: poets and prophets alike will venture into the wild, and sometimes they will not come back. Alice falls down the rabbit hole, and surely you will remember the kind of nonsense she will have to contend with down in Wonderland. Of the journey, Maurice Blanchot writes that it creates unlimited jeopardy—"une insécurité illimitée"—for not only must the artist embrace chaos, but s/he will then need the determination to return to the surface with a song, with an evocation:

L'œuvre est le cercle pur où, tandis qu'il écrit, l'auteur s'expose dangereusement à la pression qui exige qu'il écrive, mais aussi s'en protège. De là – pour une part du moins – la joie prodigieuse, immense qui est celle d'une délivrance, comme le dit Goethe, d'un tête-à-tête avec la toute-puissance solitaire de la fascination, en face de laquelle on est demeuré debout, sans la trahir et sans la fuir, mais sans renoncer non plus à sa propre maîtrise. Délivrance qui, il est vrai, aura consisté à s'enfermer hors de soi. (Blanchot 57)

¹ "It is the writers, the poets, the artists, the singers, the film-makers who can make the connections, who can find ways of bringing it into the realm of common understanding. Who can translate cash-flow charts and scintillating boardroom speeches into real stories about real people with real lives. Stories about what it's like to lose your home, your land, your job, your dignity, your past, and your future to an invisible force." (Roy 190-191)

² For Jakobson, the poetic function of language corresponds to "the set (*Einstellung*) towards the message itself, focus on the message for its own sake [which] by promoting the palpability of signs, deepens the fundamental dichotomy of signs and objects." (Jakobson 356)

My contention is that Deven, as he comes close to observe the poet and his art, discovers something about the dangers of creation which, upon closer scrutiny, may clarify the subtle balance the narrative strives to achieve between prose and poetry.

Vulnerable Deven

To what kind of vulnerability does the central character confess when he admits that “he was lucky to have exchanged the dangers of Nur’s poetry for the undemanding chatter of a child.” The substitution refers to Deven’s initial belief in the opposition between poetry as an ordered composition removed from the loud confusion of ordinary life. It is no wonder that noise should indeed recur in the novel as a primary agent of disturbance either as blaring cinema music, brothel brawl, or white noise on the painfully recorded tapes. In chapter 3, Deven came to the realization “he loved poetry not because it made things immediate but because it removed them to a position where they became bearable. That was what Nur’s verse did—placed frightening and inexplicable experiences like time and death at a point where they could be seen and studied, in safety.” (IC 51) The opposition is translated in spatial terms. Nur is associated with verticality as evidenced by the several scenes taking place on his rooftop terrace. And even later, when his image has somewhat tarnished, he still resides in the brothel’s upper stories. On the contrary, Deven’s field of action is rather restricted, confined as it is within narrow horizontal limits. His tiny house’s courtyard lies boxed in by neighbouring walls, much like the prison-like campus surrounded by “fences of rusted barbed wire” (IC 112, idem 17, 73). Images of containment similarly recur in the narrator’s perception of Urdu as a language, a culture and a discipline under siege, surrounded as it is by the Hindi-speaking majority of post-Partition India. For instance, when describing the almost extinct Urdu department in Lala Ram Lal College, the narrator muses:³

[I]f a few Muslim families had not stubbornly remained behind and had had young ones to send to the college to study Urdu, the department would have remained as empty as the cell from which the condemned prisoner is extracted to be hanged. (I C 101)

³ “Lala Ram Lal” is a wide-spread name in Northern India. It connotes both local colour and the ordinariness of a non-descript, generic North-Indian college.

When Deven escapes the confinement of conjugal and academic life in Mirpore, his enthusiastic reaching-out to the higher spheres of poetry causes him to stumble over the humble realities he has been determined to ignore. Critics have repeatedly pointed out that the plot hinges on constant permutations between high and low leading to mishaps and unpalatable realizations. Deven learns more than he ever wished to know about his idol through Nur's graphic description of "his throne of thorns" (IC 43), and the consequences of the poet's immoderate liking for rum, which will leave "poetry forever mixed with vomit in [Deven's] mind." (IC 63)

The antihero's discomfiture as the ignoble unfailingly prevails over the noble begs for consideration. Two remarks and one question come to mind when trying to ascertain the sort of dangers Deven is made to confront. First remark: the transmogrification of high art into burlesque to deride the pomposity of intellectuals is a well-known feature of the campus novel. Both Marta Dvorak and Christian Gutleben have drawn attention to similar humiliations in, for instance, David Lodge's novels.⁴ In this respect, the crushing of the character's expectations is part and parcel of the genre: the character is taking chances, but the author is playing within rather safe generic boundaries. The same holds true regarding the debunking of canonical literary forms in run-of-the-mill postcolonial fiction. The parodic effect of relocating Keats's "La Belle Dame sans Merci" in a postcolonial context is not that different from, let us say, Jane Urquhart's reworking of Romantic imagery in several of her Canadian novels to experiment with the translation of an imported aesthetics into local terms (Lanone and Omhové 20-21). Likewise Arundhati Roy in *The God of Small Things* tampers with the colonial cultural legacy, replacing Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* into the Kerala jungle. Desai shares with many of her predecessors and fellow writers an obvious interest in the circulation, adaptation and hybridization of cultures. Indian responses to Desai's novel, however, have been less sensitive to its postcolonial dimension, than to the concerns it evinces for the radical mutations affecting the Indian subcontinent at the end of the twentieth century:

The interfacing of the changing socio-economic Indian scene with the character of Deven, a man marginalized by the complex forces of a

⁴ Along with the two articles by Marta Dvorak and Christian Gutleben I am referring to, *Commonwealth* 31.2 contains other articles devoted to Desai's *In Custody* you may find useful to consult.

sudden shift in values lends to the novel its absolutely contemporary character. The synchronisation of the life of the individual with the picture of a modern nation developing after the Western industrial model (unsuited to the native temper) makes the novel a typical product of the 1980s. (Panigrahi and Kirpal 277)

In this respect, Deven's collision with the real, local world, as opposed to his idealization of high art, is a *topos* that takes us beyond postcolonial dislocations, all the way back to the first modern crisis of representation in Cervantes's novel *Don Quixote* (1615).

Would it then imply that the dangers of poetry for Deven are analogous to the dangers of romance for Don Quixote insofar as the characters' excessive attachment to an ideal removes them both from the pragmatic world, exposing them to crude disillusion and the reader's amused commiseration? To answer this, it is necessary to depart from generic considerations and return to the text. Indeed, Nur's gift to Deven has little to do with the perfect Grecian Urn of Keatsian fame: "In taking Nur's art into his hands, did he have to gather up the stained, soiled, discoloured and odorous rags of his life as well? He knew he could not." (IC 173) I suspect that the euphonious alliterations expressing Deven's queasiness tell us something more than the difficulty of reconciling the poetic with the prosaic, the ideal with the mundane. I am rather under the impression that Deven's instinctive recoil says something about the intrinsic dangers of poetry, and that it has something to do with the very essence of the poetic.

A Portrait of the Poet as a (Poor) Beast – "that poor beast on the floor" (IC 58)

After the plight of the victim, let us then consider the relationship between the poet and his art. In the vivid scene showing Nur's pigeons preying on him, the dangers of poetry appear in quite a different guise:

He stood there in the centre of their frenzy – slate, chocolate, snow – and the birds not only seethed around him but perched and teetered on his bald head and hands, furiously scrabbling with their hooked claws, raw and pink, and their *gluttonous beaks* as if they would *tear* the flesh from his bones and *devour* it as if he had nothing else to give them. Their *greed* was monstrous, they coated him with their *gluttony*.

[...] ‘Who would have thought,’ he muttered, dry-lipped, ‘that one day the bird, symbol of flight and song, would cease to be a poet’s inspiration and become a threat?’ (IC 44, my emphasis)

Nur’s comment makes it impossible to ignore the allegorical dimension of the scene. The birds are associated throughout the book with the idealized splendor of Delhi’s Moghul past, pigeon-fancying was indeed a Royal pastime and to the present day pigeons remain a powerful sign expressing the Muslim identity of the district around Chandni Chowk in Old Delhi. It is then no coincidence that Siddiqui’s impeccable Urdu should be compared with “a kind of pigeon’s coo” (IC 146). Further in the novel, Nur reminisces about the pigeon-flying of yesteryear: “the sky of Delhi was like a shining tapestry – not the thick quilt of smoke and fumes it is now. The air was as brilliant as a piece of silk, the sun sparkled upon it like a huge gold pendant fashioned by a jeweler [’dju:ələ], and when the fantails flew towards it, they turned into gems and dazzled the eyes.” (IC 68)

Similes interlacing text and textile further link the birds’ flight with the refinement of Persian calligraphy in which *nasta’liq* script admirably sets off the elegance and flourish of the Urdu language. Many will also detect in the analogy between birds flying and writing an allusion to Stephen Dedalus’s epiphany on the steps of the library in Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist*.⁵ The cluster of images is to be found again in the volume of Nur’s poems *Deven dreams of having published*: “He would have it bound in a soft, sky-blue cover like a sheet of the sky in which Nur’s pigeons flew, and its title inscribed in the poet’s hand, distinctively.” (IC 177) On Nur’s rooftop, however, figurative references to writing are obliterated by the literal description of a ravenous orality the poet is unable to control. The “pigeons’ frenzied feasting” (IC 44) presents an alarming vision of the struggle between the artist and his creative medium. The close-up on the birds’ beaks and claws shows the poet overwhelmed by a thing of beauty which has turned ravenous and destructive.⁶ The striking vision of a

⁵ « The air of the late March evening made clear their flight, their dark, darting quivering bodies flying clearly against the sky as against a limphung cloth of smoky tenuous blue. » (Joyce 343)

⁶ The ambivalent relation between the poet and his muse, at once seductive and destructive, is also present in Keats’s ballad “La Belle Dame sans Merci.”

creation feasting upon its creator calls to mind the excruciating reversal Michel Tournier describes in *Le Vent paralet*:

Au bout de peu de temps, mon livre est doué d'un nombre plus grand de pièces, organes, éléments de transmission, réservoirs, soupapes et bielles que je n'en puis concevoir en même temps. Il échappe à ma maîtrise, et se prend à vivre d'une vie propre. J'en deviens alors le jardinier, le serviteur, pire encore, le sous-produit, ce que l'œuvre fait sous elle en se faisant. Je vis dans la servitude d'un monstre naissant, croissant, multipliant, aux exigences péremptoires [...] à l'appétit dévorant, l'œuvre, l'œuvre pie, la pieuvre ... Et quand elle me lâche, quand gorgée de ma substance elle commence à rouler de par le monde, je gis exsangue, vidé, éccœuré, épuisé, hanté par des idées de mort. (Tournier 184)

Both hypotyposes, the poet harassed by pigeons and the novelist consumed by his work's bulging growth, call upon similar images to describe not only the wrestling with their material but also the moment when creation runs the risk of going awry, regressing into the semiotic intensity of pre-verbal fusion with the maternal body. Referring to Julia Kristeva's conception of the semiotic, which she defines as the resurgence in adult discourse of a dimension of language preceding the child's access to the symbolic order, may help us clarify some of the circumstances of the novel's first climactic scene.⁷ You will remember how Deven having interrupted the poet's afternoon nap, he comes to sit by the latter's reclining figure and begins reciting the lines he has committed to memory:

Deven, swaying upon the stool, recited on and on in a voice that grew increasingly sing-song. As he continued, he began to be overcome by the curious sensation that he was his own mother, rocking back and forth on her heels as she half-sang, half-recited a story in the night, and that the white bolster-like figure on the bed beside him was a child, his child, whom he was lulling to sleep. He understood completely, in these minutes, how it must feel to be a mother, a woman. He had not known before such intimacy, such intense closeness as existed in that dark and shaded room where *his voice merged with*

⁷ "Le sémiotique est une distinctivité, une articulation non expressive : ni substance amorphe ni numérotation signifiante. Si l'on peut l'imaginer dans le cri, les vocalises ou les gestes de l'enfant, le sémiotique fonctionne en fait dans le discours adulte comme rythme, prosodie, jeu de mots, non-sens du sens, rire. On peut chiffrer le sémiotique : le sonographe nous met en fréquence le moindre cri. Mais on ne peut pas en mesurer le sens – le sémiotique n'a pas d'unités discrètes significables, localisables. Une topologie peut en donner l'image, mais non pas la contradiction hétérogène avec le symbolique." (Kristeva 14)

those of the pigeons to soothe the listening, lulled figure before him. (IC 41, my emphasis)

The irresistible effect of voice, tone, and rhythm suggests that what is at stake in this scene has less to do with the signified than with the play of signifiers, less with the message than with the massage, to borrow Marshall McLuhan's famous pun. Surging from Deven's infancy, the modulations of his mother's voice pointedly recalls what Kristeva writes of semiotic intensities and their heterogeneity to meaning. Composed of non-signifying units, repetitive sound-patterns, and rhythms, semiotic manifestations gradually disappear from the child's discourse as it begins to perceive itself as distinct from its mother's body and starts to speak with and to others. Semiotic resurgences, however, characteristically occur after infancy in the discourse of the poet, and the lunatic—the “inspired babblers” (Lecerle 9) who have never ceased to intrigue literary scholars. Antonin Artaud and Lewis Carroll, for instance, have gone a long way beyond the looking-glass to explore the murky zone where an immoderate taste for the taste of words causes primary fantasies to surge, and meaning-making becomes threatened by the intransitive pleasures of orality. Admittedly, Anita Desai is not as experimental a writer, as, for instance, Beckett or Nabokov in her exploration of the recesses of language. And Deven is no Humbert Humbert. Desai's novel, however, bears the evidence of a genuine reflection upon the origins of the poetic and its profound connection to the maternal tongue and body.

Deven's wariness about Nur's excesses, his profound yearning for an art form purged from the messiness of life suggest that, for him, the dangers of poetry lie in the engulfing, morass-like semiotic dimension of language. His uneasiness with the bawdy, the body, particularly the feminine body, would suggest just as much. One may, for instance, cite Deven's response to Imtiaz's presence during the recitation of her poems, specifically the red gash of her smile which is described in terms redolent of *vagina dentata* fantasies. Deven's vision of the orifice of the female mouth (sex?) as a maw and a wound has its impact reinforced through the many other references to the male fear of female predators, and the destructiveness of female power interspersing the narrative (Pesso-Miquel 81-90). Finally, the image can also be related to the resurgence in the novel of analogous motifs found in the novel's romantic hypotext, an aspect analyzed by Lise Guilhamon in her presentation. Yet we should not forget that Deven is a fool, and the (rather ponderous) intrusion of an omniscient voice in the final chapter, reminding the narratee of the character's limitations should also

warn us against any damaging confusion between the character's failures and the novel's:

He did not have the will or the wherewithal to deal with this new presence, one had been happy to ignore earlier and relegate to the grotesque world of hysterics, termagants, viragos, the demented and the outcast. It was not for the timid and the circumspect to enter that world on a mission of mercy or rescue. If he were to venture into it, what he learnt would destroy him as a moment of lucidity can destroy the merciful delusions of a madman. (IC 217)

In Deven's relief at "having exchanged the dangers of Nur's poetry for the undemanding chatter of a child" lies one of the most potent ironies of the book, insofar as it denies the intrinsic link between the operations of the poetic and the materiality, the palpability of signifiers for which children develop a taste, and an ear, at the earliest age. Desai once again resorts to structural irony to underline Deven's delusion when, in the very same scene, the father and son are startled by "a flock [of parrots] that exploded out of an acacia tree and streaked over the fields, acid green against the pale yellow of the western sky." (IC 73) Conveyed through a striking trochaic inversion buttressed by strong alliterative and consonantic clusters, the colourful racket evokes a song from the *Panchatantra* to which Manu immediately responds (Lorre 133-134), "launch[ing] lustily into a nursery rhyme familiar *even* to Deven who laughed with delight at being reminded of its simple nonsense." (IC 73, my emphasis)

In *In Custody*, the lust for poetry and the regressive pleasures it procures, are recorded *in absentia* through description. They are held at a safe distance mainly through paraphrasis, periphrasis and hypotyposis, confined within the elastic bounds of the novel's euphonious prose. Yet, poetic symptoms recurrently contaminate, stain and clog the smooth flow of Desai's English, particularly whenever it attempts to express the exquisite texture, "the sweet tones and murmured sibilances" (IC 167), of the absent mothertongues—Urdu,⁸ but also, perhaps, at a deeper level, German—which Desai had to relinquish in order to begin writing in English.

⁸ I have included in the annex to this presentation a poem by Agha Sahid Ali. Its couplets are an homage to Urdu poetry, highlighting its social and religious significance in contemporary India. The poet's remarkable use of the resources of English prosody (rhythm, sound effects, line breaks, etc.) stands in interesting contrast with Desai's own evocation of a lost world and language.

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ANNEX

AGHA SAHID ALI, "A BUTCHER"

In this lane
Near Jama Masjid,

Where he wraps kilos of meat
In sheets of paper,

The ink of the news
Stains his knuckles,

The script is wet
In his palms: Urdu,

Bloody at his fingertips,
Is still fine on his lips,

The language polished smooth
By knives

On knives. He hacks
The festival goats, throws

Their skins to dogs.
I smile and quote

A Ghalib line; he completes
The couplet, smiles,

Quotes a Mir line. I complete
The couplet.

He wraps my kilo of ribs.
I give him the money. The change

Clutters our moment of courtesy,
Our phrases snapping in mid-syllable,

Ghalib's ghazals left unrhymed.

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