The Idiom of Autochthon: A Note on the Poetry of Keki N. Daruwalla

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WITHOUT ASSERTING THAT Daruwalla's successive volumes of poetry are predictable it is not unwarranted to think that they reflect an evolving design answering to a kind of psycho-aesthetic necessity. Indeed, his success lies in the reconciliation of the demands of the individual poem, aesthetic and thematic, with those of an encompassing phylogenetic pattern. The pattern derives from the profound concern of the poet — in fact, any poet — with the apprehension of man in relation to nature and his identity as "a present culmination" of a process of development, historical and otherwise. This pattern Daruwalla seeks to realize in his poetry without relying on any perspective afforded by the transcendentalism of any theology, which, in his view, is of little help to the ordering or explaining of the life of experience. Moreover, Daruwalla's sense of reality demands an exploration of the Autochthon, the singular power of the place that accounts for the distinctiveness of the kind of life it sprouts. Indeed, India, the land of his birth, becomes a landscape capable of engaging and invigorating his imagination intent on realizing a significant being for it. Alone among the contemporary Indo-English poets, Daruwalla plays a "documentary" role in striving to project the stark reality of Indian landscape a home that is at once generative and regenerative of the Indian sensibility:

Behind the heat-haze rising from the fires, Objects shimmer, dance, levitate. You face reality on a different plane where death vibrates behind a veil of fire. There is no lament. No one journeys here to end up beating his breasts. This much the mourners learn from the river as they form a ring of shadows within whose ambit flesh and substance burn.

What plane of destiny have I arrived at Where corpse fires and cooking fires burn side by side?¹

Daruwalla does more than merely document what defines the Indian milieu or its symbolism, since he also discloses the play of the dialectic of decadence and regression that has come to define the Indian people today:

They who trampled on the words today were taken in by the same words tonight by cadaverous cliches pressing at their throats - never knowing what was strangling them accepting burdens "for their own good," accepting their sin-load and the atonement in silver which the priests prescribed accepting decrees and destiny hail-harvests and drought and a couplet from Surdas with the same apathy, somewhere the echo of a half-lilt souring in their bellies as they starve dreamlessly wrapped up in their intestines.2

Daruwalla's view of Indians, though expressed here in acerbic accents, draws attention to the loss of their individual dynamic will and even to the sense of *Bildungroprozess* vital to their regeneration and progress. Implicit in lines like the following:

We have inaugurated crematoriums with an unclaimed corpse a V.I.P. has opened the sluice-gates of a drain and given it an epithet "the drain of hope"

If we had plague Camus style and doctors searched for the virus there would be black-market in rats.³

is his exasperation at human debasement and degradation, remi-

niscent of V. S. Naipaul's indictment of India in his works—India: A Wounded Civilization and An Area of Darkness—as well as an awareness of the need to awaken the Indian to the disgrace of his condition. However, Daruwalla does not project the reality of the situation in terms of sociological or any other kind of realism but in the re-enactment and reinvention of "the terms of the mind."

... The swift bacterial spread across body junctions does not always follow a fishy deal or an adulterous bed.

And hands don't flame when they accept the bribe.4

Daruwalla's is essentially a poetry of experience by which is meant that his poetry is a continual process whereby the very possibilities of human life are clarified and affirmed. Experience — to him as to T. S. Eliot — can be defined only in terms suggestive of its being more real than anything else and poetry is a "verbal manifesting of experience" that itself finds its place in experience. Daruwalla does not seem to be so much interested in realizing "self-reflexive structures" as in attaining a sense of "identity of being" realizable through lived experience:

"Experience must be firsthand what would you like" you asked "the sun from the sky

walking into your eye or float with the tadpoles watching the sun reflected in a layer of fetid water?"⁵

The poet is painfully conscious of "the inertia of our old rhetorics and habits" (to use a phrase of Robert Lowell's) which impede an intensive, concrete realization of experience:

Already you know behind the gummy-eyed images like "dark night of the soul" there is no fiendish grin no rape-smile of a bleeding womb only perhaps

> a blank face that thinks there is something special in its smile⁶

Daruwalla has spoken of his wanting to "write a series of intensely personal poems — all interconnected and nailed around the scaffolding of a personal myth." In writing a poetry "immersed in site" — a poetry distilled from the idiom of the Autochthon — he has created what may be called the Indian Poem which projects an India that has grown pathetic and tragic:

The landscape is so grey they are milking the sun for light.

Walking into the gynaec ward I find it is the mortuary.

In the corpse-mart people bid for the dreams of their childhood, for their lost, enchanted selves.

In the street of the Lord the sepia teeth of *pandas* In the street of virginity the raucous laughter of whores.⁷

In tune with what is projected in the lines quoted above is his sharp imaging of the havoc wrought by "the forces of entropic destruction" in the Indian self and history as in the following:

Somewhere in the dust and drift of history you lost your good-luck amulet and your face
Today you are an empty slogan that walks an empty street
— walls tarred with slogans

Then why should I tread the Kafka beat or the Waste Land when Mother you are near at hand one vast, sprawling defeat?8

His poetry does, indeed, perspectivize India as a disturbing tableau of decadence and defeat, which may be attributed to his moral activism that does not admit of any toleration or hope. His wit, largely irreverent, ranges over the entire landscape of Indian sensibility for targets and startles the reader at times into a fresh perception of his social milieu, which is needed to recognize its distinctiveness:

Her spinsterhood alone is alien
The rest of her, overt and salient
is indian to the bone.
The thing rotarian about her hips
The rotary grind as she does the twist
the rest is rooted stone.

I could believe anything
— in the cosmic flux across the street
in the power of amulets displayed on sidewalks
in a horoscope spread out like a graph of death
I would believe in karma itself and afterlife
if only her misery were not a caricature
if only I didn't associate
nirvan with that toothless grin

and those sockets smiling at the absence of eyes.9

Adopting a form that is open, Daruwalla enlarges and narrows "his units of attention," and elongates and shortens his line-lengths so as to enact the I's response to reality in its engagement with experience. The resultant poetry often becomes laconic in its phrasing and assumes an ironic character suited to his vision and purpose which is to invoke a way of life, an inscape of Indian experience which, though disturbingly frank, makes for the idiom of Autochthon.

NOTES

- ¹ Keki N. Daruwalla, "Boat-Ride Along the Ganga," Crossing of Rivers (London: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 11.
- ² Keki N. Daruwalla, 'The People,' Apparition in April (Calcutta: Writers Workshop, 1971), p. 21.
- ³ Keki N. Daruwalla, "Collage," Under Orion (Calcutta: Writers Workshop, 1970), p. 53.
- 4 "Graft," Under Orion, op. cit., p. 85.
- 5 "Dialogues With A Third Voice," Under Orion, op. cit., pp. 45-46.
- 6 Ibid., p. 41.
- 7 "Vignette III," Crossing of Rivers, op. cit., p. 19.
- 8 "Collage II," Under Orion, op. cit., p. 55.
- 9 "Charity 3 Faces," Apparition in April, op. cit., pp. 47, 49.