

Negative Affirmation in Nissim Ezekiel's Hymns and Psalms

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“With perversity in his heart, devising evil continually,
he sows discords.” — Proverbs: 6, 14

THAT NISSIM EZEKIEL's poetry is urban in its vision, and the images of life it dons, is accepted as a truism — not divested of its essential meaning, though — as is the introverted and involved thought-process it generates and contains within its sophisticated precision of form. Indeed, the immediate reality, sensations of human body and mind, and the gestures in which they continue to express the emotional or speculative issue of the involvement in a diversity of human situations and relationships is clear:

the shock, scandal, outrage of the world
become a fever in my room. . . .
I am this fever and the cause of it,¹

and intimations of a vision of God beyond the “fever” of the mind, caused by the outrage of the world, find utterance from an understanding that

A thousand small intricacies of brain
Hold my blood-streams captive, . . .
. . . until
They know the various ways of men,
The soul in solitude and God revealed.²

These are the two dimensions of the reality of human existence, its mystery, that have found expression, both overtly and covertly, in his serious poetry. Linda Hess has admirably summed up Ezekiel's concern with the here and now, in her comment that “He is a poet of the city, Bombay; a poet of the body; and an endless explorer of the labyrinths of the mind, the devious delving and twisting of the ego, and the ceaseless attempt of man and poet to define himself, and to find through all ‘the myth and maze’ a way of honesty and love.”³

Yet, however prepossessing the present experience, and however deeply embedded his poetry in the phantasmagoria of the commonplace may appear to be, it reflects the agony of the search, and progress of the pilgrim soul for the reality beyond: "I've stripped off a hundred veils / and still there are more / that cover your Creation."⁴ It is true that "The hills are always far away," that all one knows are the "broken roads," the river that has run dry, and that one always returns "To kindred clamour close at hand," from the dreams of floating "on a wave of sand." He is compelled to admit that

Love reciprocated to a quiver,
Flawless doctrines, certainty of God,
These are merely dreams . . . ;⁵

yet the intimations from the world of things unseen, the unknown, the world of inner music and silence more eloquent than the spoken word, constantly make inroads into the world of the inveterate ageing man, "making hay while the sun shines / and remains as always / a muddy peasant of the good life."⁶ At the end of certain forage one may come up against blank perplexity: "When, finally, we reached the place, / we hardly knew why we were there";⁷ yet the poet prays fervently:

God grant me certainty
In kinships with the sky,
Air, earth, fire, sea —
And the fresh inward eye.⁸

The prayer spells out the poet's faith in the boon that man's kinship with the elements of nature in their pristine grandeur brings, and the necessity to have "the fresh inward eye" to correct the obliquity of vision caused by the chaotic tumble of experience of living. For it is this inward eye — the divine sight granted to Prince Arjun by Lord Krishna — alone that will enable man to see the dimension of reality which animates and gives meaning to the three-dimensional reality. It is with such faith that the poet sets out to explore and testify to the meaning of what may seem to be "merely dreams," "for it is faith in a process / that can perform such miracles / without assistance from you. / Imagine what it would do / with a little assistance from you."⁹ These dreams, Professor Kher aptly observes, "have

haunted Ezekiel for almost quarter of a century now," and that to Ezekiel "they represent the imaginative structure of human reality." Furthermore, the pursuit of this imaginative structure of reality, he profoundly suggests, "should be viewed as a metaphoric journey into the heart of existence; into the roots of one's self or being which embodies both mythic and existential dimensions of life."¹⁰ The journey through the "human reality" of "myriad names and forms, relations and themes, ironies and paradoxes, failures and realizations" still raises the nagging question: "Is it enough for us to be what we are?" The human reality, therefore, ceases to be merely the three-dimensional humdrum human scene, and becomes a stimulus to evoke emotion and thought that reach out to the fourth dimension — the harmony of inner music — perceived by the "inward eye," or what Maritain has called "the primordial intuition." The journey must go through the vicissitudes of existence with its engaging and crippling patterns, to attain what Shahane calls "the balance between existential involvement with life and intellectual commitment," which he considers as Ezekiel's "hankering after the world beyond."¹¹

Ezekiel's poetry amply bears out his complete abandon, complete identification with the existential involvement in life. His poetry is a record of breaking one's shins against paradoxes of completeness, ironies of the coexistence of denial and drawing of the desires of flesh, tearing dichotomy of will to go on and the doubts that assail and enfeeble it; and moments of being bogged down by the present experience: "One is no longer young, but still foolish." Intellectual commitment, too, has its limitations. Indeed, it makes for the dispassionate ramification of the experience of living, yet may but lead to "seabed's muddy truth," or at best renaming of things; and "marsh" remains "a place where things are what they seem." The tentacles of the involved ego refuse to loosen their hold, and the vision blurs with the cataract of habit formed by nature and persistence. The prospect from the small summit one has attained, too, seems depressing: "I cannot bear the view / although it seems important"; and one must find the way to deal with it; to "concentrate, / concentrate, and make the mind a fist."¹² One must

continue to explore; make one's choice. And once the "choice" is made, the elusive transcendence becomes a constituent of existence. Only then is real self-reduplication, as termed by Kant, the interaction of thought and action in life, possible. For it is through "choice" man becomes truly "INDIVIDUAL."

Hymns In Darkness (1976) and *Latter-Day Psalms* (1982) are Ezekiel's record of the analysis of the quality of religious thought, the upshot of modern man's experience of living, whose approach is to question the validity of scriptural utterance: "We walk by faith and not by sight."¹³ Biblical truth must stand the testing on the touchstone of life to be accepted as a valid guiding principle of life. It is an approach to faith by unfaith, by indirection. Even its affirmation is arrived at by an awareness of its negation from man's life today, who makes his choice to be "the individual" he wants. The oxymoron "negative affirmation," therefore, sums up both his search and his discovery.

Of the other poems besides the Hymns in this collection of 1976, "The Room" is seminal to the consistent attitude of search from the vantage point of agnosticism, cynicism, and scorn of man, who begins by challenging authority of the received or accepted religion. The "ready cash of doctrine and deliberation" of the received religion is not enough to find answer to the questions raised by existence. Therefore he keeps "the door always open," and knows, like the doctor in *Plague*, that he must stay, he "cannot leave." Undaunted by the "nothing," or only "obstacles" to confront, and aware of lack of resource to "attempt to dance without learning to walk," he seems to have some confidence within him to say that "some events are to happen." Events of significance, events that may give insight into the questions that life throws up. These events seem but shadowy as yet, they may be the shadows of coming events, shadows that will form themselves into visions of definite pattern yielding the meaning of it all. The room of mind, febrile and given to exaggeration in that state, yet seems hopeful of attaining equipoise of understanding, and from understanding self-reduplication.

What stands in the way of such understanding, Ezekiel seems to suggest, is man's ego; the inflated ego, creating a world of its own — the obstacles — demanding genuflection. It is tyrant. The

Hymns, therefore, ironically, are sung to this deity: ego, which like the pagan deities must be propitiated by blood sacrifice; the sacrifice of all Christian values that make for life and light; and sacrificing which man walks in darkness. Turning his mordant irony on, Ezekiel says, darkness is "a kind of perfection, while every light distorts the truth," and thus emphasizes the way of indirection.

The value of humility is learnt by the tyranny of presumption as one grows older with scales of vanity growing thicker on the eyes with time:

He knows how to speak of humility,
without humility.¹⁴

The words and deeds are at extreme variance. The key of knowledge remains an entity apart — a value apart from the action that is motivated only by narrow self-interest, the egotistical standpoint, and not by the knowledge of what is right and what is wrong. Knowledge is but for masquerading:

Self deception is a fact of being. . . .
He has found too many secrets that will not work . . . ,
For every truth in his possession he has a falsehood to go with it.
(Hymn 2)

. . .

All his truths are outside him,
and mock his activity.
The noise of the city is matched
by the noise in the spirit.
(Hymn 1)

He tries to camouflage "the noise in the spirit" by the colossal ego presuming a deeper godly vision of an eye "in the centre of his forehead," and is unable to learn from repeated defeats in the "war of motives." Blinded by his ego he fails to see his own defeat. Inebriated by his ego he cannot recognize "the fixed star of his seeking" even when he sees it, and casts at it a cockeyed glance, which seems to embarrass him:

He looks at the nakedness of truth
in the spirit of a Peeping Tom.
(Hymn 3)

His ego so envelops him in all the roles he plays in life — of which there are various and numerous — this he cannot but be the egotistical self that possesses him so completely: “He is the man / full of his name” (Hymn 3). What is right and what is true remain on the level of theorizing and argumentation:

The difficult way is the subject of his theories.
The easy way is his choice.

(Hymn 4)

In such a state it matters little the direction in which he moves. Yet it is not movement of “the backward mule” of Chinese fable, where movement gives meaning and not the direction. For one is being guided not by knowledge but by being fixed in one’s folly. Life, then, becomes just a rigmarole, a maze without a design, in which man is stuck for a lifetime, inexorably going round and round, wearing the blinkers of ego:

A life is a symbolic pattern.
He’s this life.
He’s the interpretation.

(Hymn 4)

His exasperated ego says, “A single decision / is better than a hundred thoughts,” and therefore, “To hell with all directions, old and new” (Hymn 6); and so he believes.

Self-love has so jaundiced his sight that contemplating on the “sources of life,” outside himself, he finds the world bathed in the “sickly light” of his morbid mind giving it the semblance of a scene of inferno. His gods, to whom he has sacrificed all creative values of life, are kind to him, and his prayers are answered. He lives surrounded by waste land (Hymn 8). The world, therefore, is a place where you don’t “love the bitch you crave and make love to,” for there is “too much love and yet not enough love”; not enough love of the kind that is the creative principle of life, for that has become an offering to the god of “breasts, thighs, buttocks / swinging / now towards / now away from him” (Hymn 7). He admires the “liveliness,” so much “insect activity” of this hell-scene. His acceptance is smug.

The dismal scene in which man finds himself, the web woven from the knowledge he prides in, his towering ego in which he is

caught, may arouse his scorn, but is never too depressing to give up hope for mankind. One is struck with Ezekiel's ability to keep the balance of his mind even in examining the human condition. He seems never to lose sight of the place of man in the general scheme of things. The co-ordinates by which the flux and change of life's images are to be evaluated are man himself and human values. Ezekiel seems to suggest that man's redemption lies in proper self-knowledge, and understanding of the condition in which he is placed, and in finding the means of reconciling with the condition. This is basically a humanistic stance:

A man, . . .
is simply a man.
He's simply a man,
and his speech is human.
The rest is important
to understand that speech.

(Hymn 10)

Nevertheless, without religious faith man finds himself bound by shackles of empty ritual and its divisive tendencies reflected in social institutions. Having outlived their utility the institutions have petrified: "They rot in families, in castes"; they resist change, show no sign of life, but "continue to keep down the young" (Hymn 11).

To the distorted vision of such a man, God seems the arch-enemy, the villain of the piece, in whose name man has tyrannized man. A social do-gooder, "an energetic man," too, is suspect; he may be "a tireless social human being," and also "to others, all attentive. / To his own needs, indifferent"; and yet in all smugness cheerfully walks "in the universal darkness" (Hymn 13). Thus he dwells in the isolation of a plastic bubble of his own creation. Light and darkness have been very suggestively and evocatively used in Hymns 12 and 13, contrasting the general ignorance of man with the presumptuous understanding of the protagonist. The presumptuous light leaves him in "black wordlessness"; faced with the ultimate, the mind of man gifted with five imperfect senses can only reach in speculation. For true wisdom can hardly be expressed in words (Hymn 14).

Since no one has been able to find and formulate all the

answers, nor unravel the mystery of life and death, even the man of ego who lives by the set of values he creates for himself may, from an existential standpoint, be living a justifiable life. Especially so when he, aware of the besetting shortcomings of the five human senses, admits: "I'm forced by the five senses / to fear the five senses," because their captivity is almost inviolable, and not one conclusion arrived at through the senses has remained unchallenged. Not only is he aware of the flawed sensibility on which he has to depend for his speculation as well as his action, but also, as a result of the awareness, he is able to achieve some kind of reconciliation with the condition in which life places him. So that being too late to give a turn to the flux of time and events, he is prepared to accept the doom of a holocaust with equanimity expressed in a smirk. He, too, is content to study and understand, with the help of his five imperfect senses, his immediate reality; the transcendent being beyond the enterprise he can muster :

All you have
is the sense of reality,
unfathomable
as it yields its secrets
slowly
one
by
one.

(Hymn 16)

This pattern does not go awry or break, but keeps its beat in all its varieties and experiments. He may, therefore, be able to discover the underlying and undying law that governs the patterns of reality, if not the teleology of existence. His journey, his pilgrimage from ignorance to understanding must be struck through the brambles of "unfathomable" reality; an understanding that must help in "self-reduplication" in life and not merely specializations of fragments of knowledge.

The *Psalms*, too, sing in this latter-day of the man who does not accept any scriptural precept without doubt or question, without testing it. It has to be an existential validity of faith for him. Ezekiel examines the validity of biblical faith by juxtaposing it with the record of doubt, scepticism, and cynicism of

man who has rejected God and the truth of received religion. All sap of meaning and implication instinct in terms and epithets like God, godly, righteous, sinners, wicked, congregation, etc., have been bled white by his scorn, and which in Ezekiel's poetry give rise to what can be called "theological irony." Once again the approach to faith is by indirection, and by a painful awareness of its negation from life.

Yet it is no surprise that Ezekiel, like all serious writers concerned with man's spiritual life, should go back to the Old Testament to seek anew confirmation of faith that has undergone the stresses of agnosticism, battering of denial and doubt, and the vicissitudes of existence, and find expression in his Latter-Day Psalms.

The psalmist of the Old Testament sings from the core of his faithful heart, wherein dwells the experience of living by the law of God, not merely of his own understanding, but such as has the testimony of the people and prophets of ages before him: "his delight is in the law of the Lord and His law he ponders." He has learnt that "the way of the ungodly shall end in ruin" (1 : 2, 6).

Allegiance of man to doubt and scorn sends him wandering through a world of disguised "sinners," the "ungodly" dying at the roots. Rejecting the conventional wisdom, his object of study is the fountainhead of "scorn," or the path it carves out for itself — the domain of the unknown is left to the hypothetical "Lord." It is a world in which the righteous and sinners are unrecognizably mixed. Acquired veneer of civilization, adept hypocrisy, make discrimination difficult: "In the congregation / of the righteous, the sinners / are well disguised"; and they appear to share the same fate as well: "The ungodly are in the same condition, no more like the chaff" (Psalm 1).¹⁵ Besides, to the dismay of the godly they seem to flourish. The latter-day psalms are, therefore, sung to glory of doubt and scorn of man: the latter-day attitude of man.

Faith in God is a strong enough shield for the believer who knows he shall be protected against every kind of enemy by his God, as He has never failed him before: "But Thou, O Lord, art a shield about me: . . . I do not fear the myriads of people

who have set themselves against me all around" (3: 3, 6). Aware that the history of man is bloodied by religious fanaticism, Ezekiel, by his empathetic human approach to faith exhorts man to rise above narrow confines of his own religion and protection of his God. He seems to suggest that in being the children of God, we all are brothers, whatever our religious commitments may be, and shall find protection in the same God. If human beings are not antagonistically disposed to one another, one would not be afraid of the other: "save us from ourselves." Nor would man then resort to violence; for fear is at the root of violence. And so he can pray, too, for his brethren's protection:

Salvation belongeth unto the
Lord. It is not through
one or other Church.
Thy blessing is upon
all the people of the earth.

(Psalm 2)

In the kingdom of God which is infinitely vast and glorious, the faithful is gladdened and beholden for the place of importance given to man:

What is man that Thou art mindful of him. . . . Yet Thou hast made him little less than heavenly beings. . . . Thou givest him dominion over the works of Thy hands. . . . (8: 4, 5, 6)

He knows that God who is the creator is also the giver of power to man over the world of nature and animals. He is also certain that his enemies must come to destruction, and that this strength which flows from God Himself at times manifests itself in innocent infants.

Beginning with ironic reference to "babes" and "adults" almost glibly, Ezekiel takes into account what man has made of man and beast. It is true that man is important, and that he has power over others — "The enemy and the avenger have / nothing to do with it" (3). But man is also his own enemy and poses an embarrassing question: "What have we done with the do / minion thou hast given us?" He exposes the tyranny of man by following this with another question:

What / are we doing to the sheep and the
oxen and beasts of the field,

the fowl of the air and the fish
of the sea?

(Psalm 3)

Implicit in the questions is Ezekiel's answer in his ironic prayer: "Save us from ourselves" (Psalm 2).

The faithful has implicit faith in the Master as his good shepherd, and he attributes all the gifts of peaceful existence to Him. This, in turn, reaffirms his faith in the ways of righteousness and creative values of existence. He is confident that though he lives constantly in the shadow of death no harm shall scathe him. His enemies will be punished and he shall find support — the rod and the staff — in face of adversities. He can look forward to a life of fulfilment:

Though I walk through the valley of death, I will fear no harm;
for Thou art with me: Thy rod and Thy staff, they comfort me.
. . . Thou preparest a table before me in the face of my adversaries;
. . . surely, goodness and unfailing love shall follow me all
the days of my life. (23: 4, 5, 6)

On the contrary, man today starts with doubt and a question about the very foundation of faith: "Is the Lord my Shepherd?" He considers his own work and attainment alone of any value: "Lead me / away from these into thy / work" (4). Even for his salvation he depends not on the grace of heaven but on his own enterprise:

When my soul is restored,
I walk the path of self-
righteousness. (Psalm 4)

Evil then does not remain a part of the total design of the mystery of life, but looms formidably over his spirit tremulously aware of his imperfections.

Aware of the lapses of disobedience and transgression, man laments God's displeasure manifest both on human and natural level. But the faithful still bask in the support, mercy, and grace of God — the banner — and it is a matter of rejoicing. Humanity, nevertheless, must be divided between those who have kept faith and those who have transgressed. The faithful ones are assured of the strength they shall always draw from the eternal source; and the source of strength that shall lead them to tri-

umph: "Thou hast given a banner to those who revere Thee, . . . so that Thy loved ones may be delivered, . . . With God we shall do valiantly; it is He who will tread down our enemies" (60: 4, 5, 12).

Alienated from God and all human values man remains "outside the strong city":

Cast off, scattered for a
thousand years, where shall
we live in peace with our
neighbours? (Psalm 5)

As against the man of faith who basks in the mercy and grace of God, the alienated man is bereft of harmony within and without; dazed by the shock of having been left to his own resources, his elements have turned upon himself. His prayers are perfunctory, and his victories are not his. The physical prowess is an end in itself.

Recounting the rise and fall of the chosen seed, the ancient psalmist relates the rise and fall of the race to the corresponding resting in, and drawing away from faith in their God. The sons of Ephraim were completely destroyed when they tried the power of their God, and then abandoning faith in Him adopted false Pagan deities for worship, he reminds us. Ephraim did not keep the covenant.

In his denial of faith in God man has alienated from His benignity. The covenant is not recognized "except in the doctrine." Left to his defiled post-lapsarian nature, things worse than the inhumanity of Nazi Germany would be perpetrated by man. Having thrown his faith in God overboard it is not for him to look for consolation in what God did in Egypt. He can only wait to see whether he is put to sword, or faces a firing squad. He is his own judge and prophet. He can blame no one if he has to subsist on his scorn like Camus' Sisyphus.

Reminding his people of stiffening of hearts as at Meribah, the ancient psalmist warns them of the consequences that followed:

For forty years I was disgusted with that generation and said, they are a people whose heart strays, who do not acknowledge My ways.

Therefore, I vowed in My indignation, they shall never enter My rest. (95: 10, 11)

On the contrary, to the faithful one it is indeed a matter for rejoicing that God is there to take care of his welfare; hence he sings his praise and thanks to the Supreme being of power and benignity. He sings a song of praise — an expression of life of fulfilment and harmony — that man today is not capable of:

Come, let us make a joyful noise
unto him with psalms.
And a different noise with
Latter-Day Psalms. (Psalm 7)

The expression of beholdenment undergoes distortion: "The sea is his: we may drown in it"; and loss of faith turns men into Black Sheep, that go thirsting "to no end" over the dry land. What man today seems not to realize is that "a doubt or two," which he makes light of, is something that has no place in a life of faith. Faith has to be total commitment without question: "To tempt God and seek to / prove him is sheer folly" (Psalm 7).

In his distress the man of faith knows where to turn. He knows:

For the Lord has rebuilt Zion; He has
appeared in His glory.
He regarded the prayer of the destitute;
He did not slight their petition. (102: 16, 17)

And now when he is assailed with adversity that shakes him up completely, and feels more like a pelican, an owl, a sparrow, trodden dry grass, and is in tears, he prays for renewal of faith, and invokes the infallible mercy that renewed Zion. But the inveterate faithless revels in his godless state:

I am like a pelican of the wilderness,
like an owl of the desert,
like a sparrow alone
upon the housetop — but not in
misery.

He is quite self-assured and unbending in the face of suffering:

I have eaten ashes to some
purpose, and mingled my drink
with weeping, for worthy causes. (Psalm 8)

He worships the God of his own concept, some power that is capable of relieving his physical agony. But subject to the ravages of time he knows he must grow old and die. And yet, unlike the Buddha, he does not see the law, the right reason of the world that turns the wheel. The ancient psalmist enjoins upon us that God Almighty, the creator of the universe, alone is capable of building enduring structures and of preserving them — children, house, or city. In whatever we do we must recognize the invisible but ever-present hand of God :

It is useless for you to be early
in rising while being late in sitting
up, eating the bread of toil; for He
gives to His loved ones sleep.

Behold children are a legacy from
the Lord; the fruit of the womb is His reward. (127: 2-4)

All man's labour and all his achievements without acknowledging the blessing of God in them are vain and ephemeral.

Once again it is in his denial and rejection of God that man today presumes his labour to be "not altogether vain" and that it is not an agony "to eat the bread of sorrow." For some activity to him seems better than no activity at all: "Yet, it is better to build / than to abstain from building," and

Except the Lord build . . .
— and not even always then —
they labour in vain that build
it.

(Psalm 9)

Concepts of happiness, too, consequently change. Children are considered more of a liability to man who considers himself responsible for begetting them. His enemies are the adverse circumstances in which he has to bring them up. Man seems to be going through the motions of living his life like an automaton, or shall we say, a programmed robot, believing only in the palpable, not necessarily meaningful.

The concluding psalm says: "Now I am through with / the Psalms; they are / part of my flesh." Indeed they would be, for no part of his spirit was involved in the psalms. This psalm sums up the scorn, the ridicule and crass apathy of the modern man towards the adoration, prayer, lamentation of the devout psalm-

ist. As observed earlier, for the man who has rejected God and received religion, any talk on matters of faith, or spiritual well-being, would seem nonsense:

All that fuss about faith. . . .
 the division of men into virtuous and wicked!
 How boring and pathetic, but
 also how elemental, how spiritual
 the language, how fiery and human
 in the folly of its feelings! (Psalm 10)

Untouched by the spirit and the message of the psalms, this man can only admire the "elemental," the "fiery and human" aspect of the devout's total response to his situation. He can only see God and man separated, man in his sin and God in His anger, but never united even by the tenuous nexus of adoration and prayer. He picks up isolated images from the fervent utterances like a rag-picker raking and scavenging the rubbish bins for bright, colourful wrappers and cartons quite oblivious of the contents. But he is quite content to raise his world with such building blocks and values that he in living his life has fashioned.

NOTES

- 1 "Happening," *Journal of South Asian Literature*, Vol. XI, Nos. 3-4 (Spring, Summer 1976), 116. All further references to Ezekiel's poems are to this special Nissim Ezekiel issue of *JSAL*.
- 2 "And God Revealed," *JSAL*, 20.
- 3 Linda Hess, "Indo-English Poetry," *Quest* (Spring 1966), 30.
- 4 "Theological," *JSAL*, 99.
- 5 "A Time To Change," *JSAL*, 12.
- 6 "At Fifty," *JSAL*, 147.
- 7 "Enterprise," *JSAL*, 62.
- 8 "Morning Prayer," *JSAL*, 65.
- 9 "Process," *JSAL*, 117.
- 10 Inder Nath Kher, "Introduction" to *JSAL*, 4.
- 11 Vasant A. Shahane, "The Religious-Philosophical Strain In Nissim Ezekiel's Poetry," *JSAL*, 254.
- 12 "A Small Summit," *JSAL*, 94.
- 13 The Second Epistle Of Paul To The Corinthians, V, 7.
- 14 Nissim Ezekiel, *Hymns In Darkness* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, Third Impression, 1981), p. 53. All other references to Ezekiel's Hymns are to this edition.
- 15 All references to Psalms of Ezekiel are to *Latter-Day Psalms* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1982).