

Sahitya Akademi Samvatsar Lectures - Eleven



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Concept of 'Truth' in Art

NIRMAL VERMA

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## Concept of 'Truth' in Art

The sculpture reproduced on the endpaper depicts a scene where three soothsayers are interpreting to King Suddhodana the dream of Queen Maya, mother of Lord Buddha. Below them is seated a scribe recording the interpretation. This is perhaps the earliest available pictorial record of the art of writing in India.

*From* : Nagarjunakonda, 2nd century A.D.

*Courtesy* : National Museum, New Delhi

Samvatsar Lecture XI

**Concept of 'Truth' in Art**

Nirmal Verma



Sahitya Akademi



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### *Publisher's Note*

This is the eleventh lecture in Sahitya Akademi's series of 'Samvatsar' Lectures. These lectures were instituted in 1985 by a resolution of the Executive Board that accepted the recommendations of the Committee set up for the establishment of a series of lectures in literary criticism. A procedure was described by the Board for the selection of the annual Samvatsar lectures. The Samvatsar lecturer is expected to deliver two or three lectures on a theme chosen by him. It was also laid down that these Samvatsar lectures would be published after they are delivered. The crucial clauses in the resolution relating to the Samvatsar lectures read as follows:

These lectures should reflect a deep concern for values. They should open up a new vistas of thinking regarding a literary movement, a current literary trend, some original thinking about a great classic or a new path in literary criticism or literary creation, etc. The presentation should be from a larger perspective while the subject matter could be drawn from the regional or comparative sources within the speaker's experience.

## *Acknowledgement*

I am greatly indebted to Dr. Alok Bhalla for translating some parts of the lecture from Hindi into English, and Ms. Ila Dalmia for permitting me to use some passages from my Shastri Memorial Lectures 'Itihas, Smriti, Akanshsha'.

I  
**The Last Outpost**



## I

*If art teaches men anything, it is to become like art; not like other men.*

*Joseph Brodsky*

Is there anything like the artistic truth? In terms of our response to great works of arts we rarely, if ever, use the concept of truth in the same way as we usually do in a philosophical or ideological discourse. The spirit which illumines a poem or a painting, what Walter B enjamin called the 'aura' surrounding an artistic work, is too ambiguous and amorphous to be capable of being neatly packed in a syllogism or a statement. The sensations of sorrow and grief, of ecstasy and terror which it awakes in us are either too complex or too strange to find an exact equivalence in the language we use for our daily transactions. We feel as bewildered and overwhelmed as a person, who after having come back from a trance, or suddenly awakened from a dream is asked to recapitulate his experience in words which are simply not there. The best he could do is to repeat the words of another poem "I can say there I have been but where, I cannot say". Instead of facing the question squarely, we leave it to the professional critics or professors of literature to answer it for us. They define the 'there' for us, where most probably, they themselves have never ventured to go.



But there may be another sort of doubt lurking in our subconscious—whether it is really worthwhile to extract the truth from a work of art as if it is something separate from the experience we went through while seeing a painting or reading a novel? Does it need any legitimization by canons of judgment which lie outside it? Is not the experience sufficient unto itself? Do we have to ask ourselves, whether it is the right way of experiencing it? E.M. Forster once confessed in an essay that he was slightly baffled, when his friend, the famous art-critic Roger Fry asked him how exactly he responds to a painting. The solemn critic was deeply dismayed when Forster in his typical casual manner began to speak rapturously about a painting by a Renaissance artist, which showed a battlefield, in which one soldier was going to pierce the back of another soldier, "And, the poor fellow did not know, that he is going to be killed the next moment." Forster was quite crestfallen when Roger Fry groaned at his comment, "My dear friend, the painting is not about soldiers killing one another, though it is also about them, but you have missed the essential thing—the relations between light and shade and the forms emerging out of them." I have quoted the anecdote from memory, but I think you must have got the message. Forster was trying to impose a literary meaning on a painting, and in the process deprived himself of the unique pleasure which only the painting could give to him and no other form of art.

So perhaps the experience is not enough, it should be a right kind of experience. But as soon as we use the term

'right' we enter into troubled waters, for the term 'right' has implications much wider than could be confined to our aesthetic judgement. Could our response to a work of art, be it a painting or a poem, be not clouded a little, if in some deeper way it violates the moral canons of what we consider to be right and wrong? The question troubled me when I was reading recently an interesting essay by my friend, the distinguished philosopher, Dr Daya Krishna, in a philosophical journal published in Hindi from Jaipur. It was a free-wheeling essay about 'Thinking'. I was struck by a remark when he observed, and I quote him in my own free-wheeling translation: "There are occasions", Dr Daya Krishna observes, "when even we know that something is wrong, we like it, because we concede that in certain contexts, what is misleading and wrong is *right*; it is right because it causes something desirable in our state of consciousness. In some senses, many artistic works, mythological creations, works of literary imagination and all our spiritual enterprises belong to this category. It seems to me to be a futile exercise to discuss whether they happen to be true or untrue... shall we say then that man finds meaning precisely in those things which need not have anything common with truth?"

This is a bold assertion which does not necessarily deny the existence of truth in art, but deprives it of its relevance in the sphere of artistic creation. If it creates something 'desirable' in our consciousness, then it matters little, if it goes contrary to what we believe to be true. Dayaji does not explain what he means by



'desirable', but even if we leave it as vague as it stands, the question remains whether we can make a neat, surgical separation between our belief what is true and our feeling what is desirable? Of course there are scientific truths that we know to be true, like it is the earth which moves around the sun and yet we enjoy a poem which just states the opposite...but can we say the same thing about some of our moral beliefs, which don't deal with scientific facts but whose truth is deeply grounded in our conscience? Here we tread on a more treacherous ground. It opens old wounds caused by the most painful controversy which raged around Ezra Pound, a poet whose poetry was held in high esteem but whose beliefs outraged the conscience of the literary world. We are rightly required in such cases, however painful the moral dilemmas they pose to us, to separate the literary worth of a poem or a novel from the ideological views held by the author. But what if the views of the author do not remain confined to his belief-system, but spill over as sometimes they do, into his literary creations? How should we react to the anti-semitic allusions which often occur in the plays of Shakespeare or in the poems of T. S. Eliot? Can something which seems to us morally reprehensible co-exist with what remains to be aesthetically desirable? Shall it in anyway affect or reduce the truth of a work of art? Life, said Chaplin's clown in the film *Limelight*, is all about desire, and has nothing do with our beliefs. And if we agree with what the clown says, as I am inclined to do, then what is the worth of truth in a work of art if clashes with our desire?



Whatever position we take in the debates, ultimately we are pushed to the conclusion that if there is anything like 'truth' in a work of art, it should be sought in the work itself, that a poem and novel once they come into being, enjoy a kind of sovereign status, an autonomous entity of their own. All kinds of beliefs may enter into it, noble, ignoble, sacred, blasphemous but what goes into its making it, is very different from what it becomes finally, a poem, or a novel. The truth of a work of art would emerge, if it emerges at all, not from what we believe to be true or desirable, but from the dark depths of its own being; it cannot be extracted like a kernel of a fruit from the language in which it is embedded. No work of art reveals its truth in the same way, as any sociological treatise or a theological tract can do. There the 'truth content', without being much distorted, can be separated from the mode and manner of its representation. The truth of art, on the other hand, is indissolubly embodied in the specific form in which it presents itself. We can get some idea of a poem paraphrased in other words, but it will be a shadowy phantom of a meaning, whose truth has slipped out of our hand. And this applies even more to other arts like painting and music whose truth can be apprehended in ways so mysterious to us, which cannot be translated into the language of human speech.

That such an obvious fact about the autonomy of art has to be repeated and reaffirmed may seem surprising to many of us. It seems to be a distinctive attribute of what

we call the 'modern consciousness'. In earlier times, during the classical period, or even in medieval times, there existed a kind of intimate, convivial connection between an artist and his audience—a word spoken by an actor in a play by Sophocles or Kalidas struck a common chord—as it does even today in cultures where the oral tradition has not completely died out. Members of the same community shared the common reference points marked by their rituals, their beliefs, the memories of their ancestors. True, it was the artist alone, who like a prophet hears the voices, but they caused a resonance in others, evoking a shared memory of loss, grief and redemption. *The artist did not have to reach out to the other, the other was already there within him.* The transformation of the community into a mass-society caused a deep rupture not merely between the artist and the other but it destroyed the transcendental order of things which sanctified the man's journey though this earth and — beyond his death.

Artistic truth became suspect precisely because it ceased to be a symbolic representation of the particular, which was also universal. The imaginative world of the artist was reduced to an incoherent conglomeration of images, with all the connecting links snapped, so that a "pair of boots, a chair in a painter's attic, or a single tree on a slope, where the poet passes... suddenly become the precariously unstable centre of an otherwise unfocussed universe." (Erich Heller). Art turned now into an ambiguous enterprise, its truth in the words of the Polish poet Czeslaw Milosz became "a broken whisper, a dying

laughter." What was accepted by the artists of earlier times as something given, "the revelation of the unfathomable in a moment filled with life", now turned into a dream, a shadow.

Not that there has been a dearth of universal truths in our times. The world, depleted of the divine order of things, became a fertile breeding ground of man-saving, salvationist ideologies, which claimed to fill up the enveloping vacuum. The world once inhabited by gods, now became a wasteland, swarming with messiahs. Since the idea of absolute was identified with history, wherein lay the necessity of art, which at one time was supposed to satisfy the need of the absolute? After his return from the Soviet Union, disillusioned and frustrated, Andre Gide made this startling statement: "For a long time now, the works of art will be out of question. In order to lend an ear to the new indistinct harmonies, one would have to be a deafened by lamentations."

Art found itself in a state of homelessness, spreading out its wings everywhere, belonging to nowhere. No wonder, the most recurring image of the artist in our times has been that of an exile. Within himself, in his own domain of creativity, he is free, accepts no laws and repudiates all power, but outside in the world he does not partake of the moment of life, of history, of human affairs. Like the hero of one of the most moving stories of Thomas Mann, Tono Kroger, the artist in order to create

has to sacrifice his life. Self-sacrifice became the precondition for an artist to create beauty out of the terror of nothingness. As art withdraws into the most invisible and most interior, it reaches an empty point of existence; useless to the world, where only effectiveness counts, it also becomes useless to itself.

A Russian radical thinker of the 19th century thought that a cobbler who makes shoes serves a more useful purpose than all the plays of Shakespeare. And in a sense he was right. If art's truth is measured in terms of its social usefulness, the shoes which protect the shivering feet from cold are far more needful for the people, than watching Hamlet on the stage which leaves the soul shivering in the dark. Once art is deprived of its absolute authority, then it is condemned either to be an article of amusement or an indulgence confined to a privileged few. Withdrawn from the human concerns, on the one hand, and exiled from the divine on the other, it is reduced to itself alone.

I think, the phrase "art reduced to itself", though said in disparagement is important, for it takes us to the centre of the problem, not what art *does* but what it *is* in itself. To know its truth, we should know its essence. What value a truth of a play or a poem could be to others, if its voice is not heard in all its uniqueness in the language in which it is uttered. And not only in the words uttered, but in the silence between the words unuttered and perhaps unutterable. If I take a famous poem 'Saroj Smriti' by the Hindi poet Nirala, which was written as an elegy for his dead daughter, I find that the



truth of the poem is not embodied in the grief of the father, but the way it has been transformed into a configuration of words where it spreads over a luminous space, in which I as a reader become a witness not to individual bereavement, but to the ephemeral nature of life as such. What is more, this ephimeralessness is not a philosophical truth which I can extract from the poem, taking it away with me and leaving the poem behind. For it is entrenched in the poem itself not as a general statement, but a specific wound which is also eternal, a wound that will start bleeding again whenever I will touch it in a poem. *For it is the poem which is the wound.* All acts of criticism and analysis are futile which try to explain the truth of a poem in terms other than the poem itself.

This does not mean, as is often assumed, that the reality of the world of art is closed to world outside. It only means that it creates an alternate reality, which would remain strange and unknown to us, till we come into contact with it. It has a dream-like quality about it, in which the images are borrowed from the world we live in but they are arranged in a different order. The moment we try to reduce the order to a single truth, it either begins to disintegrate into nothingness or like a mythical god, multiplies itself into many truths colliding or coexisting with one another. Since truth of art is not monolithic it becomes a threat to all the totalitarian ideologies of our age which strive to 'totalize' the multiple layers of our experience into a single, tyrannical mould. Art shatters this mould again and again. Its

journey in the pursuit of the 'absolute' can continue only when all other absolutes are subverted.

This applies not only to the big epics like the Mahabharata or Iliad, to which I will return later, but to even a short story. Take for instance, a well-known story 'Shroud' by Premchand. The moment we seem to arrive at the central truth of the story, or what we thought to be its essential truth, we suddenly discover other truths converging upon us pulling us in different directions. Here is a tragic tale of a man, who being too poor had to beg money from the zamindar of the village to be able to go and perform the last rites for his deceased wife. But having got the money, both father and son squander it on a wild, ecstatic orgy. Wherein lies the truth of the story – in the misery and destitution of father and son, or the insight it gives about the hypocrisy of the zamindar, who was callous to their condition when the woman was alive, but considers it his obligation to help them in the performance of the last funeral rites? Or in the sense of utter abandon which is felt when everything is lost, or perhaps it exists in the very act of blasphemy? What after all is the truth of Hamlet, a character made of words but also made mad by them? Could we ever find it in the intentions of its creator? The difficulty becomes even more formidable when we find that there is no single definitive text of Shakespeare's play available. The words change from one folio to another. In our own times the same problem of interpretation has arisen in regard to many modern classics like *Ulysses* and *Remembrance of Things Past*.



But even if there were a single, final text, the ambiguity about its truth would remain, precisely because as soon as it comes to light and becomes part of our awareness, it either closes up on itself, or the narrative opens out in different directions; overturning the one, we held so firmly in our grasp. Its mystery lies not in what it hides but in what it says or to be more precise in what it says, it hides. Not that we do not intuitively apprehend its meaning, but somehow we feel that it lies not so much in the given text as in the 'beyond', it indicates. This 'beyond' is the invisible part of the text, never seen, but always there.

It is this inarticulated feeling of beyond, which connects a work of art with the spirit of the sacred. It is the secret of divine that by its absence it speaks in the language of art. Through words it communicates that which is beyond speech. All works of art, in this sense are an attempt to recover the memory of divine. 'Beyond' in art is not something what is to be attained, but to remember that which has been forgotten.

Hence the crucial role of memory in art which is to recover in art what has been lost in life. To be able to do that, art makes us return inwards, towards the depth of our own self. But it also makes us move in the opposite direction, towards the world outside. Superficially it may seem that these two movements are opposed to each other contradicting one other. The self and the world seem to be divided into distinct parts. But is such a

division natural? Can the nature of man and the so-called natural world be separated from one another? There was a time when art defied this de-cartian division. It refused to be a resident in the subjectivity of the artist, having no connection with the tumult and turmoils of the outside world, so that the passion of the absolute is exhausted in a mere depiction of inner sensations, moods and impressions. Subjective world became the feeding ground on which the external world with its scientific laws and technological triumphs prospered and flourished. Art still claimed to create an alternate reality, but it was a phony reality, because the elements, the raw material which went to make it were borrowed from the external world and to that extent remained its creditor. In either case it is condemned to be divorced from its divine essence, where it serves no other goal than to be itself – a painting, a poem, a novel.

But where art abrogates its right of what it is—and permits itself to be used as a cultural commodity, it leads to strange consequences in the academic world. The literary works of the Afro-Asian countries become significant not in themselves, but in the information they can provide about the ethnic eccentricities or rural realities of the Third World, which could later be processed in the research-laboratories of the First World. The novels of Renu and Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay — or to take a more contemporary example—Anantha Murthy's novel *Samskara* are valued not so much as works of imagination, which they primarily happen to be, but as source-books of sociological and



anthropological data, which they can provide. Not that it cannot be done but that is not what these novels are about. It is like reading the artistic masterpiece of Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks* not for its insights it gives about human existence but to gather information about how the burgher merchants lived in the late 19th century Germany. Salman Rushdie repeatedly said, apparently to no purpose, that his book *Satanic Verses* happens to be a book of imagination and not an edict on Islam or Prophet Mohammed. It should give some food for thought to the little Khameneis of Chicago and Sorbonne, otherwise so benighted in their intentions.

But the malaise is not merely confined to the works of Afro-Asian writers. Most of the English Departments of the U.S. universities, as an article in *Times Literary Supplement* recently pointed out, seem to suffer from some sort of inferiority complex. As they had to compete with socially more useful disciplines like Economics and Social Sciences, literature has to establish its respectability by making its "contribution to knowledge". Thus works of art are seen in terms other than what they are, seeking their legitimacy in something external to them, as if the artistic truth residing in a poem or a novel are not sufficient unto itself... "Readers have been enjoined to treat literary style not to be read for the pleasure of it but as something to be decoded as if the poem must be holding an encapsulated secret, which can only be opened by a professional locksmith. *We are not satisfied by what a poem is unless we know what it is about* so that we could look behind it for big meanings and big truths. We

forget what Henry James once so tellingly observed about the beauty of Shakespeare's plays which lies in the 'phrase—the cluster and order of terms... not to be measured by the reality or truth prior to it,' " (Emphasis added)

It is this which makes a work of art so different from other articles, the artifacts. Their 'truth' lies in their purpose, in their usefulness, while art is useless, it leads nowhere, but to itself. In the words of Blanchot: "if the sculpture uses stone and if the road builder also uses stone, the sculpture uses it in such a way that is not used, consumed, negated by usage but affirmed and revealed in its obscurity as a road which only leads to itself." The same end applies to the words used in a poem different from those used in an advertisement, in a newspaper report. Once you consume the necessary information, their usefulness is exhausted. Does the poem exhaust its usefulness, once you have read it? You go to it again, because unlike other articles, you cannot completely consume or appropriate its meaning, for its meaning lies in words which lead nowhere but to the poem itself. When once the painter Degas lamented before his poet friend Mallarme that he has so many ideas, but cannot write a single poem. Mallarme replied, "My dear Degas, poems are not made of ideas but of—words!" Words in a poem or a story "are like light which become colour in a painting, space which becomes stone in the house."

But a poem and a painting are different from other objects in another, in a more profound sense also—in that



while other objects are merged with the material of which they are made, art, on the contrary, manifests itself in the 'matter' itself and it applies to words in a poem as much as the marble used in making sculpture. As a piece of sculpture reveals the hidden essence of stone, so in a poem is hidden, in the words of Marina Tsvetayeva, "the animal sounds of the dark forest and the screams of a newly born child... because what is all art, if not finding of lost things, the immortalization of things lost."

Language in this sense is the most elemental, the earliest of man's discovery about himself when he was not estranged from nature and not yet someone outside it. That is why when embodied in a poem, one can still hear the rustle of the infinite in it, and the whisper of the timeless. This is what perhaps Rilke meant when he exclaimed: "Earth, is this not what you want, to be reborn invisible in us?"

It is this dimension of art, which leads it nearest to what I earlier called the divine passion; its divinity lies in "the passion of the heart, which accomplishes in a poem what God desires in the world outside. It is the last remaining outpost where the divine fleeing from the ruins of the secular world finds a shelter" (Blanchot).

Or perhaps, it is a self-delusion and what we term as 'modern art' has already been stamped by the ruins and became a part of them, a pale streak of light falling on the temple where once God resided and which now stands empty?

But even if that were so the awareness of loss is there and the memory of what had been the essential beginnings of man on this earth. In world literature the most poignant, the most revelatory moments are those in which a character, when in mortal danger and extreme agony suddenly becomes aware of the abyss that has opened up between him or her as he or she is in reality and the reality of the world as represented by the commandments of history, and the customs of the state. It is this awareness which enables Draupadi in Mahabharata to question the notions of duty and righteousness held by no less a person than a Dharmraj himself and gives strength and moral grace to Antigone to ignore and defy the tyrannical law of the king to be able to give a decent burial to her brother. A work of art illuminates such epiphanic moments, where the very act of self-awareness, becomes the most scathing critique of the notion of right and wrong, *dharam* and *adharam* held by the powers to be at a particular point of time in history.

If we so desire, we can call this as 'moral' purpose of art. The difficulty arises when we start imposing our own ethical presuppositions cast on it in the mould of our own ideals and beliefs. We tend to forget that the language in which a poem or a story create its own world, the sources from which they draw their energy, which transform clay into a statue, sound into musical composition, a cluster of words into a poem—the laboratory in which the entire alchemic transformation takes place is distinct from our ideals and beliefs, our understanding of good and evil, our desires and



aspirations. When we look for the fulfillment of our own ideals in a work of art, then we lose sight of its own truth in which the inner mystery of language desires to manifest itself. Once it is manifested in a work of art, it is there like a tree, whose fruit we can eat in order to appease our hunger, but the *dharma* of tree as of art is to bear fruit and not to satisfy our hunger. What Goethe said about the truth of art is still valid today: "The professors of ethics are always worried about the influence of art on others. The artist is however as indifferent to it as nature whether it creates a tiger or a singing bird." Art is not very different from nature in its infinite playful manifestations which is God's *lila* on earth. If man was exiled from the Garden of Eden because he tasted the fruit of knowledge then he re-enters the garden by the backdoor of art by recovering the memory of his original state, when he was at home in himself. It is a site, where the celebratory act of 'home-coming' is enacted.

I would like to conclude by quoting a passage from the First *Samvatsar Lecture* was given by the late Hindi poet, Agyeya, for it sums up so beautifully of what I was trying to say earlier—about the experience of 'beyond', what he calls (*Virat*), in a work of art:

कवि का विराट-दर्शन अन्तिम नहीं होता। शायद यह कहना भी अन्याय नहीं होगा, कवि का विराट दर्शन होता ही नहीं; वह विराट के स्वरूप को नहीं देखता, बल्कि केवल वह बोध प्राप्त करता है, कि विराट है— और वह भी जब तब विरले क्षणों में। इस बोध का प्रकाश उसके शब्द को दीप्त कर जाता है और उसकी भाषा को अपूर्वानुमय बना जाता है।



II  
Vishnu's Mouth







## II

*"His torso shouts at you with every muscle 'Do change your life'.*

*"Torso of Apollo"*

*Rilke*

I concluded my last lecture by making a reference to the 'divine', which is inherent in the nature of 'aesthetic experience'. What could be a better way to begin this one by quoting the well-known statement of the English poet for whom beauty was truth and truth beauty. Can we imagine a man of the 20th century ever being able to say with as much nobility and confidence as that of Keats? After the massacres of two world wars, the gas chambers the labour camps, the horrors of the holocaust all we can say is that all our notions of truth and beauty that we hitherto associated with art need to be radically redefined. One of the greatest artists of all times, Tolstoy in his later years felt deeply uncomfortable about his own art precisely because he suspected that what is created in the name of beauty somehow distorted the overwhelming complexity of 'truth' that we live through in the real life. And it was no accident that it was his near contemporary, the most prophetic philosopher of his time, Nietzsche, expressed the same apprehensions when he made the ambiguous statement "Man possesses art lest he should perish by truth".

This is an extraordinary statement coming from a person in whose work philosophy and art were so

deeply fused, and for whom metaphysics was no less a product of creative mind than poetry. Could art be detached from the quest for truth or truth itself has surpassed the reality of life? A Japanese friend of mine, who himself is a writer, once told me that all attempts to encompass the horror of Hiroshima in a novel or a poem are doomed to failure. Doesn't it echo the sentiment of the eminent art-critic of Frankfurt school, Adorno, who felt that after Aushwitz it was impossible to write poetry in German? This is perhaps the first time in history that anyone has declared that there are certain truths which seem to defy human imagination. When some critics speak about the 'death of art' in the 20th century, they seem to refer to the dark abyss which has opened up between art and life, an abyss which cannot be bridged anymore. Have we begun to believe that we can be safe from the grim and bitter truths of life only if we can find refuge in art?

While sharing the despair which lies behind all such statements, I wonder whether art can really provide us with a safe haven? Are we not expecting from art which in the first place it was never meant to give us and turning our face from that, which we can not get from anywhere other than art? Do the tragedies of our daily lives—a failed relationship, death of the beloved one, the illnesses of old age—are more explicable than the historical disasters of the times we live in? To say that there are experiences which lie beyond the realm of language seems to me a contradiction in terms. When we say that we feel something but cannot find words to



express it, we are merely commenting on our own inadequacy and not on the limitations of language. What is said in a work of art is a part of what has been left unsaid, but that 'unsaid' cannot be appreciated without reading the words which have already been 'said' in a work of art.

Returning to the episode of Draupadi which I mentioned earlier, the horror of the whole scene enacted in the court of Dhritarashtra lies not merely in her physical humiliation, but in the inexplicable silence of the elders who witness the act. And this silence is very different from the mere inadequacy of the words to convey the depth of outrage; it lies in their inability to rationalize the entire episode within the pre-existing code of *dharma* and morality. A great work of art, by posing extreme situations of moral dilemmas, questions the legitimacy of the conventional framework of right and wrong, thereby throwing us back to the primeval premises of human existence, where man stands alone without being sustained by any false illusions. The sacredness of a work of art, to which I referred in the first part of lecture arises from the depth of this solitude. It impels him to encounter himself—in his essential *beingness*, where human destiny becomes indistinguishable from natural phenomenon.

It is precisely in this sense that truth of a work of art, transcends the boundaries of time and space. Though created at a specific point of time, it acquires relevance for every age and even though shaped by the cultural

mores and moorings of a particular culture—it strikes a chord of response in a reader belonging entirely to a different social milieu and religious tradition. If this were not the case, then great epics like the Mahabharata and Iliad, written thousands of years ago, the Icelandic sagas of the early medieval ages and the Russian novels of the 19th century would not seem to be either so universal in their appeal nor so contemporaneous in their concerns. What comes across the difference in time and cultures is precisely that which is close to the dark and primordial drives of what we call 'nature' in man, the human nature. It is a rare moment of awakening when through a rude shock of personal grief or historical catastrophe, man is pushed against a wall, which when looked closely is nothing but his own *self*—a self shorn off from all conceits and consolations. There is a remarkable scene in *War and Peace* where the entire city of Moscow is burning in the wake of Napoleon's invasion. The hero of the novel, Pierre in a state of dazed bewilderment is wandering among the burning houses, the screaming women, the noise and scramble of people fleeing for shelter. Eventually he was arrested by the French soldiers and suddenly he was struck by a strange thought, as if he was awakened from a deep slumber "They have at last caught me" he starts thinking, "I am a prisoner now, but who is this which is me, who am I? Whom have they arrested, this my soul? He began to laugh and looked at the night sky, where millions of stars were shining. "This is me", he thought. 'This all belongs to me'. And he suddenly felt a profound peace in himself, as if the entire load of anguish has been shed away



from his soul." I am quoting from a novel written far from our country by a writer of the 19th century—and yet reading this passage, I felt as if I am listening to Raman Maharishi in the pages of *War and Peace*.

The same feeling of liberation is experienced in a story of Premchand, *Poos Ki Raat*. After the farm of a poor peasant is destroyed by stray animals having lost everything, he shouts with joy, "Now I am free and we can go anywhere", he tells his wife in wild abandon.

This joy, this rapture of an identification with the entire reality is precisely the *rasa*, the aesthetic emotion as expressed by Viswanatha in *Sahitya Darpana*. "It is pure, indivisible, self-manifested, compounded equally of joy and consciousness, the twin brother of mystic experience (Brahma, *Savdan*, *Sahodara*), "its perception being indivisible from its very existence. Here the artistic work transcends all the temporal and cultural barriers reaching the height where the boundaries between the aesthetic and religious experience are fused. One becomes aware of one's identity at the same moment when one identifies oneself with the reality of the world.

But this self-transcendence, this *Atmabodh* though real, is not formless. This is the crucial difference between an aesthetic experience—*Rasabodh* and the spiritual one *Adhyatam Bodh*. In art, the experience is infused with the specific images and symbols, which are deeply steeped in the particular tradition. Each image opens a different door of perception. Kabir's poetry is no less mystical than that of St. John of the Cross, but the symbols through

which they realize their vision are borrowed from traditions very different from one another. The artist does not translate his vision in a work of art, *the vision itself is realized in the process of creation*. There is something very profoundly 'advatin' in Blake's visions, but in his poems they come to us through very Biblical images.

I cited the examples of Tolstoy and Premchand, two writers of very different calibre, belonging to entirely different cultural and social background and influenced in their work by *samskaras* having little common between them. Even the truth experience of one story has a different ring and resonance from the other. The real miracle however is that a poem or a novel carrying specific memories, symbols and *samskaras* of one tradition suddenly illuminate the dark, hidden aspect of truth which hitherto remained unacknowledged by the idiom available in the other tradition. Universality of experience is realised not, as it is usually assumed, by negating these differences, but because of their co-existence in the emotive structure of every human being. It confirms that which was already lying somewhere in the dark corner of our unconscious; making articulate that which hovered around the margins of silence.

This does not mean however, that when such cross cultural communication is realised through a work of art, one internalises the truth of that tradition in the same way as one feels at home in one's own literature and I think the reason of it lies in the atavistic connections between one's language and the archetypal memory it evokes in us. Myth, memory and image go together in

this case. The truth of a Greek epic could be extremely overpowering. But its failure to move us in the same way as the stories of Ramayana or Mahabharata is due to its close relationship with the mythical allusions which remain largely alien to us. And yet despite its remoteness, there is a remarkable complementarity of motifs between classical works of different countries. In the great Greek epic Iliad the motif of 'honour' plays the crucial role and it is as central to its conception as the overarching power of 'Dharma' in Mahabharata. They are two distinct truths of a universal experience, one being revealed in the Indian tradition, the other manifesting itself in the great epic of the Greeks.

As boundaries of different cultures get blurred in the experience invoked by the great works of literature, so also the divisions of time get transcended. The "time" in a work of art flows out and spills over the historical framework of past and future. Just as the past of the person is subsumed in the memory of the present, and the present moment of his life bear in some clairvoyant manner the signs of things to come in future, so also in a work of art time is congealed in the contemporaneity of the present. Unlike a film in which the flow of time is revealed through a series of images which flash on the screen for a moment and are at once replaced by other images, in a literary work all the milestones of a man's voyage across the ocean of time are present in the text in their simultaneity. Two points of time so remote in the context of a novel are connected suddenly by a flash of memory. "What we call reality", as Proust said, "is a



certain connection between these sudden sensations and memories which envelope us simultaneously... truth and life too can be attained by us only when, by comparing the quality of two sensations, we succeed in extricating their common essence and reuniting them to each other liberated from the contingencies of time, within a metaphor".

It is through the metaphor that the innumerable negatives which lie in the photographic darkroom of our past are developed and illuminated. What Arjuna sees in the 'Vishvaroop' of Krishna in the battlefield of Kurukshetra, we see it in the several worlds of Homer, Valmiki and Shakespeare revolving simultaneously in the infinite space of literature, worlds which centuries after extinction of the fire from which there light first emanated, send us still each one its special radiance. As Faulkner once observes "in a novel time is frozen like ice, but the moment we take it down from the bookshelf and begin to read it begins to flow out of the book into the life of the reader." Art encompasses all time, including the time of historical disaster.

That is why Adorno's statement that after Auschwitz there can be no poetry, though deeply poignant neither tells us about the nature and depth of human's sufferings nor about its relation to a work of art. Art of course, doesn't deal with distress caused by some specific historic event like Fascism or Communism—and yet—and this is important, distress which is total and absolute, which is the most unremedial aspect of human suffering can only be expressed in art. What is this distress? Art at



one time was the language of gods. Distress results from the memory of their disappearance. It is through art that their absence is remembered. The most deeply religious artists of the last 200 years were not those who affirmed the existence of God but those who mourned his *absence*. Coomaraswamy once observed that traditional art was created for no one but for God. Modern art does exactly the same but by proceeding in the opposite direction, where man reaches out to his essence through an unending grief of God's absence. Bereft of God he lives in the 'vacant time' of history.

The writers who have experienced this vacancy in all its depth happened to be precisely those who were most prophetic about the nature of evil; for evil is not merely the absence of God, it is the loss of the memory that He ever existed, a sense of vacancy at the second remove as it were. Years before one had heard of Nazi concentration camps an unknown Jewish writer living in comparative isolation in Prague had foreseen the 'evil' in his novels in all its sinister horror. Kafka's novels were prophetic. They were the fantasies of the real world, a world which was destined to become the truth of our century in the same way as *devils* in Dostoevsky's novel were to reincarnate themselves in the post-revolutionary Russia after hundred years. What was to happen in history in future had already been *actualised* in the realm of art, imaginary events becoming the precursors of historical disasters that were to defy all imagination. Herein perhaps lies the most profound truth of art that it gathers together the entire history of our past and can

look into the infinite expanse of future, making them a part of our present existence.

These novels of course were not meant to be the moral critiques of the 'evil' they portrayed—indeed even the use of the term 'evil' seems to be an imposition. They refuse to play the game of the people who know what they want and take sides. The compulsions of art are very different. "Their 'ethics' is the ethics of being, not the morals of 'doing' ". Since they brood over the state of Godlessness, they are deeply moralistic, moralistic in the only sense where the emphasis is laid not in looking out or looking in—but just on the act of *looking; literature as a gaze*, which though not judgmental, leads to the most ruthless, uncompromising critique of human actions. Here aesthetic of art is merged with the ethics of being.

Aestheticism is a bad word, often shunned by modern critics, I think wrongly. When we say that someone is an 'aesthete' we mean someone lacking conscience and yet from the '*rasa* theory' of Indian poetics to the troubled meditations of Thomas Mann in our own time, we realised that 'aestheticism' has always been the fate of every true artist. Aesthetic conscience operates not in making judgment about what is right or wrong, but in positioning itself before "truth" where it can be observed from all sides. It was an ill-reputed aesthete Oscar Wilde who could say that "Truth in art is that whose opposite is also true". The great Russian writer Turgenev once confessed that he felt always a little lost when asked to

give his own opinion on this or that and deprived of the chance of hiding behind the exchanges of imaginary characters. "It always seems to me that one might just as well and with equal right assert the opposite of what I am saying".

Strange though it may seem it is only in his aesthetic imagination that an artist attains the impersonal objectivity of nature. Nature acquires its wisdom not because it is kind and compassionate, but because but it makes no distinction. Passions of Hamlet and Othello sear through our soul precisely because Shakespeare himself remains dispassionate. The anguish lacerating the soul of King Lear is no different from the tempestuous fury of the storm raging outside. Art is the manifestation of secret which lies in the very heart of nature.

What is this 'secret' which baffles us as much as it overwhelms us? I think it lies in the inevitability and compulsiveness of human acts, even when man knows that he could do something differently that he could be something else than what he has chosen to be. Man is willing to destroy his freedom in order to be loyal to the moral order of his heart. What could be a more grievous sin than adultery for a moralist like Tolstoy and yet the most beautiful, the most terrifying moments in *Anna Karenina* is that when she chooses death rather than ignore the dictates of her heart. Here the aesthete in Tolstoy overpowers the moralist in him—or perhaps one should say that the real morality of art is precisely realised in such an 'overpowering' act, for here the

aesthetic of art is able to attain that luminous height when in the words of Simone Weil "beauty becomes necessity which while conforming with its own law and with that alone, is obedient to the good... It captivates the flesh in order to obtain permission to pass right to the soul".

It is this "law" hidden in nature which a writer transforms into a work of art. If the great epics and novels remind us something of the oceanic depths which can never be fathomed, it is because men are flung into it shoreless expanse of good and evil. Who could understand it more profoundly than the author of the greatest novel *War and Peace* who cried at the fate of man in this moving soliloquy: "if man had only learned not to judge and think so sharply and decisively and not always give answers to questions which are only put in order that they may forever remain questions. If he would only comprehend that every thought is at once false and true... Men have divided up into sections this every-rolling, boundless, eternally mingled chaos of good and bad, they have drawn for themselves imaginary boundary lines in this sea and they expect the sea to divide according to their lines. As if it were not possible to make millions of other divisions from other points and on different planes... Civilisation is good, barbarism is evil; freedom is good, unfreedom evil. This imaginary knowledge destroys in human nature the original blissful and instinctive striving toward good".

I think the phrase "instinctive striving for good" is significant through became art enables us to touch the



primal sense of our being. At this point, not merely the conventional canons of morality break down but also the notion of 'progress' in art becomes meaningless. The truth realized in the cave paintings of the primitive societies is no less illuminating and profound than what is seen in the art of the so-called developed civilizations. It is impossible to find any evolutionary pattern in art as we can do in the sphere of science. Einstein's theory of relativity can succeed in demolishing the Newtonian concept of the universe, but it would be senseless to say that Picasso's paintings are more 'truthful' than what we find in the works of Vermeer or Rembrandt. D.H. Lawrence found the modern western art 'vulgar' in comparison to what he saw in the reproductions of Ellora sculptures. Can we subject the African masks, the *adivasi* figurines, the ancient epics to the laws of progress? If we cannot do so, it is because, as I said earlier, the 'content' part of the subject matter is least important in a work of art. It is a product of history which can become obsolete and outdated. But the form in which it is embodied, transforms the content into something else, which history in its march leaves behind but which in the memory of mankind has been metamorphosed into a 'presence', as palpable and immanent as a tree, a stone, a river... It is in this 'inhuman' aspect of art where terror of beauty is born—terror because, though created by man, it goes beyond his anthropomorphic image; beauty, because there, he finds, not what he is, but what he has forgotten.

It is precisely in this intuitive understanding of what is lost, what has been forgotten, which in a work of art is both an occasion of grief as well as of enlightenment, an awakening from a long sleep. In the extreme situation, man ceases to be what he happens to be in his daily life—a life of make-believe illusions of lies and self-deception, a life of patched-up compromises. In a novel or in a play he is put in situations of such dramatic intensity which are almost unbearable, from which he often shies away in his daily worldly existence. Art on the one hand provides open spaces of unlimited freedom, on the other it closes all the exit doors of escape. To many professed critics of literature, such situations may appear to be highly exaggerated, highly unreal but it is precisely through the troubled passage of such extremity of situations, that we discover in ourselves that which was upto now lying in dark, undiscovered and yet an inseparable part of ourselves. Pitching his base camp on such 'sites' of extremity, the writer like a mountaineer can survey an unknown, unmapped terrain of truth hidden from the eye. Gora in Tagore's novel finds his true identity precisely in this epiphanic moment of self-discovery. Stripped off all his self-imposed social masks, of being an orthodox Hindu or patriotic Bengali, a saviour of Bharat Mata, he goes beyond himself, back to his own selfhood.

Or shall we say to his sainthood? Tagore, it is said had Vivekananda in his mind as a prototype which he wanted to recreate in Gora. And yet what he created in his novel was just the opposite—Vivekananda

renounced the world to reach out to realize his true self, while Gora abandoned his asceticism to enter the world with a new insight about himself. His 'saintliness', if we may use such a term for Gora, arises not from faith, but from doubt, when he starts questioning the worth of all the baggage he was carrying on his back—the baggage of false identities. By shedding them he becomes free. This freedom he earned not by renouncing the world but by establishing a new relation with the reality which was a part of his self and of which he was oblivious. By this Tagore gives us a clue to the essence of truth in art—it doesn't change the world nor does it pretend to change us—what it does is more fundamental, more profound—it changes the nature of our relationship with the world and in the process changes both us and the world.

In this miraculous act of metamorphosis, Tagore, seemed to be following not the model of Vivekananda, which in any case was nothing more than superficial device of resemblance, but his Guru, Swami Ramkrishna Paramahansa. On one occasion, he told Vivekananda that previous night he encountered God in a dream. "Did he say something?" Vivekananda asked. "No". Ramakrishna replied. "He said nothing. He only showed me a large reservoir of water covered with green scum. The wind moved a little of the scum and immediately the water become visible, but in the twinkling of the eye, scum came from all sides dancing in and covered the water." What does it all mean? Vivekananda wondered and the Guru laughed..."Don't you see, it is all so simple. Water was like *Sachidanand* and the scum like



Maya. On account of Maya, *Sachidanand* is not seen. Though now and then one may get a glimpse of it, again Maya covers it."

If I have given this example of Ramakrishna's dream—or to be more exact of a dream within a dream—then it is to exemplify the nature of 'fictional' truth of a novel which cannot be determined at a fixed point, but which perpetually oscillates from the real to unreal, from what appears to be true to be what is really true. Literature has been continually attracted to this interplay between appearance and truth right from the adventures of Don Quixote to Raja Rao's novel significantly entitled *Serpent and the Rope*. The house of fiction—and perhaps all art—is the Borgesian palace of mirrors, which the Pandavas had built in Indraprastha, at one end of which stands the deluded Duryodhana, who was blind to that which existed and saw that which was not there and at the other hand stands the tragic figure of Madam Bovary who tried to find love in a life which was an illusion and thereby lost the life in reality.

But what is illusion and what do we mean by reality? If nothing is what seems to be, then could we never say with a measure of certainty—this is true, this is real, this will remain, this will not pass. I would like to draw your attention to a wonderful story in *Matsya-purana*, which seems to me the only answer to this overwhelming question. The mystic event takes place sometimes after the world has been annihilated. There is nothing but the dark sea all around. Vishnu Bhagwan is asleep and floating on the waters. Maharshi Markhandaya is



wandering inside Vishnu's body. Everything within Vishnu's body is pure and radiant. Suddenly, he finds himself near Vishnu's mouth, which is slightly open. His feet slip and he falls out of Vishnu's mouth into the surrounding sea. There is nothing but darkness and water all around. He can see nothing. Unprepared for such a catastrophe, he panics. He wonders if he is dreaming or has fallen into the trap of a dreadful illusion. Where am I, he wonders? At that very instant, he catches sight of Vishnu's body floating on the waters. Vishnu's body is beautiful, luminous and glorious. Markhandaya swims up to Vishnu so that he can see him clearly. But the moment he opens his mouth to ask him a question, Vishnu picks him up in his hand and puts him in his mouth. Markhandaya finds himself back in the same place from which he had slipped out into the dark sea back in a pure, radiant lighted world. He can't understand which of the two worlds he has experienced is the real one—the world of the dreadful dark sea or the one in which he now finds himself?

I think that both the mystery of art and its truth are hidden in the unresolvable question that the one *Matsya Purana* poses. It is there in both the worlds, and yet it belongs to neither one nor the other.

Once we understand this, we will not go to a work of art to seek answers but we shall return with an enhanced awareness of reality. Realist writers imprison reality within their ideological and sociological straitjackets, art

on the other hand liberates reality from the confines of 'realism'. I think it was this which made Lawrence call his novel "a big bright book of life" precisely because it raises its voice against what he termed as "tyranny of fixed laws." Perhaps a small, hesitant voice, but a voice we can still hear coming out of the rubble of those ideological systems which had all the answers, and now at the end of our century—lie in ruins. In the modern world, where all the tricks and terrors are exercised to compromise human conscience, art in its freedom is perhaps most deeply committed to the language of truth without which all social and political commitments lose their values. Artistic forms may be universal, artistic truths are not. They are inevitably embodied in the language in which they find their unique voice.

If at the end of these lectures, I have returned to the question of language it is because I feel in the last few decades we Indian writers, or most of us, tend to ignore or underestimate its importance in the role it plays, not merely in the individual work of a writer, but more fundamentally, in making the writer's word as the vehicle of truth reflecting the conscience of the community. We have a tradition to serve literature through our 'beliefs' but haven't much faith in the power of written word to be the independent bearer of beliefs *in its own right*. It sometimes seems to me that despite all the awards and honours showered on writers, literature itself finds itself in a subordinate position where it plays second fiddle to other disciplines. Literature in our

country finds itself in an embarrassing position where entering an over-crowded room, it has no room left to itself and perforce has to share the seat either with sociology or political science or history—or what is now fashionably called 'literary theory'. It is good enough to be used as a raw fodder—a Balzac story by Roland Barth, or a Mahasveta's novel by Gaytri Spivak, but that it could have a distinct voice of its own, operating as an independent agent in the life of the community doesn't seem to bother us much.

There was a time when under the title of each Hindi novel it used to be mentioned—a social novel, a psychological novel, a historical novel. Of course now in these days such labels have been discarded from above the cover-jackets, but I am afraid they still stick around somewhere in the godowns of our consciousness. They are still there, only now they are named differently, coming under the more intimidating nomenclatures of Dalit, or feminist, or dissident, or protest literatures. Not that they don't have their use; they in their different ways mark those areas of experience, which were hitherto invisible in our literary map. But by 'naming' an experience and fixing it, cataloguing it, turning it into a fortress with a flag and a nameplate is already an act of closing the door to artistic truth; nor I am sure whether the artistic truth, so vague and so uncertain, so timid in its speech so evasive in its silence would ever dare to enter it. The corridors of our century are littered with the faded lables of schools, ideologies, literary fashions. Like



the rag-tag of theatre scenery they are still there, while one has forgotten what the play was all about.

There are no general ideas in literature which can be capsuled in some big Truth. Art like a wandering monk is required to knock at different doors and fragments of truths, which are thrown into its begging bowl turn into nuggets of gold when they enter our own experience.

In one of Checkov's remarkable stories a failed actress goes to her old friend, to find some truth which could sustain her in her empty life. The old man, retired professor of Philosophy looks at her in despair. He has nothing to give to her, nothing which could comfort her suffering soul. "I look at her," he thinks, "and feel ashamed that I am happier than she... the absence of what my philosophic colleagues call a general idea I have detected just before my death... while the soul of this poor girl will know no refuge in her life... all her life."

In the failure of the old philosopher to give any truth lies the triumph of Checkov as an artist. As for us the readers, unlike the lost girl in the story, we the more fortunate ones, have already found the 'refuge' nowhere else but in the — story itself.





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The **Samvatsar Lectures—XI** delivered by Sri Nirmal Verma in two parts on **Concept of 'Truth' in Art** is a profound mixture of his deep erudition and experience as a writer. To Verma, a work of art does not communicate truth—it is the truth itself. It carries within itself multiple layers of meaning, coexisting or sometimes colliding. A work of art acquires the numinous quality of the sacred—a 'return' to the primal sense of our being. He strongly believes that the truth in art can never be governed by the evolutionary laws of progress. The progress in art is an illusion.

Man on earth is a fragile creature—incomplete, weak and vulnerable—but in a work of art, in a painting or in a piece of music or in a poem, he is able to get a fleeting glimpse of what can be called the 'advaitic' feeling of wholeness from which he has been exiled by the forces of history and the fragmentary nature of life.

**NIRMAL VERMA** (b. 1929) did his M.A. in History from Delhi University. Sri Verma is a well known writer in Hindi with over 16 books to his credit. He is also well versed in Hindi and Czech. His important works include *Ve Din* (novel), *Lal Tin ki Chat* (novel), *Ek Chitraha Sukh* (novel) *Rat ka Reporter* (novel), *Parinde* (short story collection), *Kavve Aur Kala Pani* (short story collection), *Shabd Aur Smriti* (essays), *Cheeron Par Chandni* (travelogue) and *Teen Ekant* (play). The several awards and honours he has received include the Sahitya Akademi Award (1986), Sadhana Samman (1994) and U.P. Hindi Sansthan Award (1995).

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