

Versions and Voices: *Fulcrum: an annual of poetry and aesthetics*
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In *Fulcrum* 2005, one hears a profusion of voices. There is biography, artwork, interviews, essays as well as lots of poetry. It is an accommodative philosophy that works well for a journal that proclaims itself “an annual of poetry and aesthetics.” It is wonderful just to hold this volume, with the readability of its print, the feel of its paper, the black-and-white photograph of Dom Moraes at his battered work desk. *Fulcrum* demands to be read slowly, to fill the year until the next volume arrives—hence, this can be no more than a reviewer’s hurried estimate.

Inside, the two main features—“Poetry and Truth” and “An Anthology of Indian Poetry in English”—provide a sense of organization. The feature on Landis Everson is more scattered and one collects its traces upon reading along. Central to the [re]discovered “Berkeley Renaissance,” the photographs, letters and poems by Everson bespeak a poetic revival, awash with the sense of a recaptured youth.

As for the questionnaire on “Poetry and Truth,” I don’t know quite what to make of it. In bold print, the cover proclaims: “nineteen leading poets and critics respond to *Fulcrum*’s questionnaire regarding the fundamental nature of poetry.” But perhaps, the questionnaire, like the “fundamental nature of poetry” could have done with some explanation. What was the impetus behind the questionnaire? Why did the editors choose these questions? And what did they hope the accumulation of answers might provide? Clearly, it is a well-intentioned effort, but what is one to think when confronted by a list that asks, in all seriousness, questions such as the following:

- [1] What is and what isn’t poetry? What is poetry’s essential nature [if any?]
- [2] What is the most important poetry? Who are the greatest poets? What do they accomplish?
- [3] What is the relation between poetry and truth? Is there such a thing as poetic truth?
- [4] How does poetry relate to the human condition? . . .

It could have been terribly pedantic, but the final result is actually interesting. Poets are subversive characters; they tend to do exactly what they like. In this case, they were also given the leeway to do so. For some, answering the questionnaire becomes a serious mediation on their craft;

others proffer what seems to be an exercise in name-dropping, while still others make amply clear their irritation with the prescribed format.

What one also wonders about is the extent to which poetry can transgress the boundaries of cultural specificity. “The warble of the ammonia bellied barkeep” or “Squandermania, or: Falling asleep over Delmore Schwartz” may not be equally intelligible across the English speaking world. But themes do overlap and stories do cross over, and *Fulcrum* must be credited for the regularity with which it sets up forums linking poets across the world. Within this space, it was interesting to encounter Eliot Weinberger’s retelling of a macabre but rather funny story of how Shiva curses a headstrong [or principled?] critic of his poetry:

. . . The God became enraged and revealed his terrifying third eye of flame. The critic said, “I don’t care if you have eyes all over your head. Your poem is no good.” So Shiva cursed him and turned him into a leper.” (71)
Then as now, for better or worse, only gods can treat critics in such a summary fashion!

In contrast to the sensitivity with which he made the selections, Jeet Thayil’s introduction appears a quickie, providing a history of Indian English poets in the age before Ezekiel, juxtaposed with the stunning Clearing House covers of work published in the 1970s. Nissim Ezekiel, Dom Moraes and Arun Kolatkar stride through as heroes of the assortment, seen not only through selections of their work, but also in the featured essays and poems dedicated to them. There are voices here that one knows: Eunice de Souza, Keki Daruwala, Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, Adil Jussawala. . . But there are also lesser known figures, such as Lawrence Bantleman—author of the title poem in the collection—who published four books of poems and then, “vanished so effectively that none of his acquaintances knows what became of him.” One could ask why Thayil chose the leave out A.K. Ramanujan and Agha Shahid Ali from all places but the dedication? But then again, each anthologist makes certain choices that shouldn’t be quibbled over endlessly.

There are also the debates on location that emerge sharply in the context of Indian English writing. Thayil seeks to intervene on behalf of poets, but what is meant to be an aggressive rebuttal, actually gets on a defensive mode. He quotes Nirmal Verma’s statement that while Indian English writers have no roots or linkages with the culture of the land, “My language [i.e. Hindi] links me to a tradition of 5000 years . . .” What Thayil could have critiqued is the assumption of a continuous, unitary Indian tradition, instead, here is his rejoinder: “Verma’s own stories are fine character studies of not belonging anywhere: they mine not Indian tradition, but the decade he spent in Prague” (234). As the short biographical pieces preceding each poet’s work show, the Indian English poet lives and works in New York, Chicago, Melbourne, Berkeley, Itanagar, Madras, Denmark, Vancouver, New Delhi, Connecticut, Allahabad and Bangalore—places spanning far-flung corners of the

world. Is the debate on authenticity terrain worth venturing into, this attempt at defining percentages of “Indianness”?

We all write about the worlds we inhabit, the worlds we choose to inhabit. Why then should anyone get to define who is identifiably Indian? I think the poets in this collection successfully portray an India that goes beyond billboard stereotypes or an exotic east. Some do it better than others, and there can be no better mascot for the Indian English poet than Kolatkar’s Pi-Dog, a bastardised maverick dog who can quote the Gayatri mantra while sitting in the middle of a crowded Bombay street, and who claims, without apology, his place under the sun.