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Kunwar Narain. *Witnesses of Remembrance: Selected Newer Poems*. Translated by Apurva Narain. Chennai: Eka, an imprint of Westland Publications, 2021. pp. xxvii, 275. ₹ 599. ISBN 978-93-90679-02-7.

One of India's finest poets, thinkers and literary figures of modern times, Kunwar Narain (1927-2017) wrote in Hindi. His oeuvre spans poetry, short story, epic, criticism, essay, translation as well as writings on cinema, music, arts and culture. Within poetry his reach is wide ranging – from aphorisms and couplets to longer poems, from meditative and metaphysical works to those drawing on mythology and history, from motifs of nature and the personal to the rough and tumble of the socio-political and the contemporary. His literary reach is richly diverse.

A selection of his poems, *No Other World*, translated into English by his son, Apurva, was originally published by Rupa in 2008; an abridged edition was released by Arc Publications, UK, in 2010. The poems in *No Other World* were chosen from five of Narain's collections published between 1956 and 2002. The poems in *Witnesses of Remembrance: Selected Newer Poems* are from five books that appeared between 1979 and 2018. With about a hundred poems, this bilingual edition is divided into eight sections – each starting with a picture of one of the poet's belongings and a short poem or excerpt. "Several poems here, born from a memory, internalise past experiences ... and then, go beyond them," (xvii) writes Apurva Narain in his excellent "Introduction." He informs us that many of the "poems recall a place, person or period; these are then universalised." These poems are purer "witnesses of remembrance" (xviii).

Witnesses of Remembrance is a timely publication, a much needed antidote to a world no longer centred in a shared moral awareness, a down-to-earthness to which one can respond wholeheartedly. Narain's

belief in poetry's ability, even responsibility, to speak the truth is refreshing. Truth is not a rigid construct. The poems may appear simple and unadorned, but are expansive in their evocations. In "Guernica," "... the unquiet picture that emerged / from the peril of an apocalypse / could always be / of a being / and also of a world" (9). In making his sentience limitless, he "like a sculptor sees a statue in stone, / a poet sees a soul in a statue, / a saint sees the universe in a soul ... // and neither the universe has a limit / nor sentience ..." ("The Estrangement of Bhartrihari" 91). His words extend like roots in search of light and life in unexpected directions.

In "Some Days in Another Time, Another Place," Narain visualises "a strange book / that had no loops of language, / the biggest of ideas were tiny / word-sized images / with which children could play ..." (165). As in *No Other World*, "the experiment is often conducted not in the lurid exteriors of a poem but in its inner recesses." Giving "voice to the silences / that yearn for a voice – / put words where there's only / a wordless disquiet ..." ("Buried in the Earth Up to the Neck" 21) is what his poems do. Each reading of a poem throws up new layers of meanings and interpretations, new horizons.

In his "Introduction," Apurva Narain reminds us of his father's "inability to deal with the world on worldly terms – my world or his, your world or ours – to the limit of being aloof, impractical, even other-worldly ..." (xi). In his entire literary journey of seven decades, we learn Narain never launched his books, went to less than a dozen literary festivals, and remained reluctant about events, committees and positions of power. Narain's other-worldliness and reclusive temperament reflects an 'inner sight' – not just a metaphysical or spiritual sense – confirming poetry's restorative and humanising aspect. Though reclusive, Narain's engagement with poetry is like

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“loving or praying, a personal act” (“Introduction” xiv) – a complete immersion. In “Inner Insight,” the last poem that the poet dictated, Narain confirms: “I fumble around in the dark / Looking for the strange power of insight” (41).

Poetry for Narain “is not a declaration, but a witness,” (227) taking in everything around us –

... one cannot stop
its testimony in language
which only means truth,
only seeks a gentler being

it is in no scramble
to be pasted up like ads
marched out like parades
chanted like slogans
or won like elections

in the language of people, it be
alive somewhere, somehow, that’s all. (227)

The second section of ‘Poetry’ continues to define Narain’s credo:

it can give a lot
for so much can be poetry
 in life, if we give it space
as trees give space to flowers
as nights give space to stars

we can keep saved for it
somewhere inside of us, a corner

where the schism between earth and sky
between people and God
is the least ...

of course, if one wants
one can
love without poetry
live without poetry (229)

In giving us this choice, he bestows on us the freedom and the gift to be ourselves. Narain's stance on poetry connects him to other profound thinkers and writers. Like Seamus Heaney, he credits poetry "in our time and in all time, for its truth to life, in every sense of that phrase." And, truth demands a detachment that is not easily achieved. Mediating between opposites – earth and sky, life and death, dream and reality, self and other, tree and person, love and art – as his son and translator reminds us: "His vision allows for the oneness of things The poems speak of innocence and the loss of innocence, of creation and the cosmos, of lost worlds and exile, of the futility of ambition, haste and achievement. Their technique is eclectic and egalitarian, speaking a truth that can ultimately only be the truth of paradox" ("Introduction" xii).

Narain comes across as a thinker, holding on to opposites, like a scientist able to see both sides of the question. In his poem "Chakravayuh" (*No Other World*), he affirms: "... life has many sides / and time's eternal siege / sides with none." He does not say nothing can be done about it, instead he quietly asserts: "I am a part / of whatever I create" ("I Am Answerable" 37). He does this with the simplicity and directness of a child or for that matter a sage, acknowledging that "this world of mine / is also human" (39).

By refusing to look at life or literature as transactional, poetry for Narain was a means to connect to the inner sanctum of wonder, peace, and truth. Poems can be a memory, a comment, a discovery – all at once. “We have a language / in which I learnt to live – / ... / We meet / sometimes in the shadow of wars / sometimes in tranquil forests, searching / the most sentient codes of amity / that are truly universal” (“Amaranthine” 5). In “A Shop that Sells Peace,” he points out that “in a developing economy like India / where prices are skyrocketing / if a hundred rupees per month can buy / even two hours of peace a day / it is not expensive” (47). Knowing that he “can’t change the world / nor even fight it /and win,” he reminds us that “Living ordinary lives too / people have been seen / quietly getting martyred’ (“Living an Ordinary Life” 55).

The epigraph to his poem, “Words That Disappear,” a quote from Wittgenstein reminds us of our limitations: “The limits of my language are the limits of my world” (131). His own sense of purity, peace, and love, the oneness of life – lived and written – at a time when these words are leaving us, when “perhaps they turn into hermits / and make themselves so infinitely solitary / that then no language is able / to reach them again” (133). Yet, we encounter “words fluttering like flags” (“An Evening in Golconda” 75) and learn that “The books of good faith will / never close in the world” (“Errors & Omissions Excepted” 63) because we have a language in which we learn to live.

With a reputation for being a ‘true intellectual’ among poets, thanks to his extensive reading and encyclopedic knowledge, the burden of his learning sits lightly – both on the man and his writings. Firmly rooted in the Indian literary and philosophical traditions, his sensibility is cosmopolitan. Born on 19 September 1927, Narain came from a business family; initially he studied Science in college, which

may have enhanced his overall spirit of enquiry. Later, he switched to English Literature and got a Masters from Lucknow University in 1951. Uninterested in the family business, in 1955 he went travelling in Eastern Europe, Russia, and China, met with poets like Nazim Hikmet, Antoni Slonimskie, and Pablo Neruda. Narain read extensively, across literatures, languages, and disciplines. Upanishadic, Buddhist, Sufi, Western, and Marxist thought all played a role in shaping his work. One encounters an eclectic arc of references – Kabir and Amir Khusro, Cavafy and Kafka, Ghalib and Gandhi, Stéphane Mallarmé and Jorge-Luis Borges.

In the preface to *No Other World*, Narain alludes to a “*scientific* view on poetry; to the relevance of thought, not just sentiment – the relevance of a liberal sensitive intellect that precludes prejudice and intolerance.” Some of his poems have indeed been noted for their intellectually elegant and classical tendencies. It is not just a modernist concept of science he alludes to. Instead, it is “an informed, human notion of it that recognizes its own fallibility. In being dispassionate, passion is not compromised. In questioning blind faith, faith is only reaffirmed.” Asked by an interviewer what the role of thought and intellect should be in poetry, Narain is reported to have said: “Pretty much the same as in our life, namely, to enhance a better understanding of life, sensitivity and a sense of justice.” Narain’s faith in thought seems to be exceeded only by his faith in poetry, for which we may save “within ourselves a corner / where the gap is the narrowest / between the earth and sky / between man and God.”

Poets may no longer be ‘unacknowledged legislators’ or philosophers dealing with eternal truths. Historically, poetry played a key role in this context. In Homer’s time, poets were called *vâtês*, a diviner, prophet, ‘divine singer.’ The Romans also referred to poets as *vâtês*, defining them as diviner, soothsayer, or prophet. The word

poet comes from the word 'poiein' meaning to make. Poetry was believed to be a divine gift. For Yeats, 'the true poet' is a visionary. The Romantic poets subscribed to such a view and were influenced by German Romanticism. American Transcendentalism also embraced such a concept. In the Sanskrit tradition, the poet was not only a seer (*rsi*), the poet was also regarded as one who 'sees' – the poet was both actor and spectator. Poetry has been a form of knowledge in India, defined as the decisive perception of the soul. Poetry was recognised as a form of knowledge (*vidyā*), in addition to its significance as an art (*kalā*), *alamkāra*, ornamentation, *shringara*, *riti*, style or *vakrokti*, indirect or 'crooked' speech.

Narain belongs to this tradition of poets who are seekers, seers and witnesses. Such poets display an openness of heart and mind. The poet does not always choose his or her poems, they choose the poet. In his poem "Words," Edward Thomas echoes John Keats calling on words to choose him, moving instinctively from language to identity. "For a poet like Narain," writes Apurva Narain, "doggedly wedded to his conscience, this is indeed true. The poems defy categorisation. Alongside a thematic and stylistic range, his verse is varyingly intellectual, interrogative, meditative, elliptical ... at times even cinematic. There is little reportage or doctrine in his poetry; his politics derives more from ethics than any camp ideology, and his rebellion is more fundamental than 'within the construct'" ("Introduction" xxii).

In seeking to reinstate the sublime values of the human and natural worlds to literature – of patience, moderation, and giving – Narain's poetry is an exploration of that original wonder, the pristine expanse, which he attempts to re-create and restore. It is also an ecological imperative – greed being as much a human as an ecological sin – and a feature of his poetry is how the human and the ecological

coalesce, how our inter-being becomes “the wish of a leaf.” He sardonically laments a kind of helplessness in the face of evolution itself when he says “I reached this world a little late.” A quest for what it really means to be human runs through his poems.

In recalling fragments from past experiences of love, “which we, somehow, piece together / and again create a new / language of love . . .” (“The Languages of Love” 215), his words entail an intimacy that bridges poet and reader, where poetry and remembrance become languages of love. In them, he also celebrates the anonymity of life, of the ordinary and the unnoticed. It is the anonymity of love that perhaps ultimately sustains us. Residing in the realm of universal thought, if not consciousness, his poems transcend the poet’s personal limitations as a human being.

It is not surprising to learn that one of his main themes is about how to be human. His poems connect and resonate universally in their quest for faith in a world of disintegrating values. One encounters in Narain a profound humanism, “not in a rationalist sense but humanity both generous and vulnerable” (“Introduction” xxiii). In a section, titled “Humanesque” (*No Other World*), in “When One Can’t Remain Human,” Narain writes about the limits of being human: “If times are bad, one can’t remain human.” Yet all he aspires to is to become human. In *Witnesses of Remembrance*, Narain refers to this “humanesque idea” (21) in his poem “Buried in the Earth Up to the Neck.”

In the last decade of his life, old and blind, he rose above life’s limitations, “turned to the cosmos within, marveling at the paradox of god in a godless world, the numen of nature in us, and the moral as an evolutionary counterpoise to the physical” (“Introduction” xxv). *Witnesses of Remembrance* begins with these lines: “If I am the truth / nothing has been lost” (“Amaranthine” 3). In the end, the poet is

‘still as thirsty after living so much / still as desirous after having so much / still as unaware after knowing all’ (5).

He comes full circle when he writes of his search “for a life-companion / for myself, / a carefree, blithe, lively / book of my own // before whom I too could open up / leaf and page, like a book // and she would also then read me / with rapt attention, lovingly” (“New-Found Books” 223, 225). It is every writer’s dream to be such a book and find such a reader. In “Words Too Are Left Behind,” Narain speaks of the poignant “unease / that is there in leaving / behind everything here / – even words” (239). And, so he hopes “if only / by as much as a poem / I have to somehow stay linked / to all” (“No One Else” 261).

In his poems, the remembering and bearing witness acquire significance as they not only connect with each other but resonate individually with readers. Narain’s work is testimony to the hope that art triumphs over time and our words keep us alive in the memories of others, our readers and interpreters, new and old, bringing new insights.