

The Prophetic Dilemma & finding Prophets in our Times

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What has Prophecy to do with Freud, Harold Bloom and Shakespeare? The Old Testament Voice of Prophecy is a heteroglossic voice; both heterogeneous through the ages and yet being the Voice of the God of the *Shema*, strangely homogenous; Old testament texts are dialogic which yields the figure of the Prophet as a redemptive symbol up to sine die Nietzschean transvaluation of the same set of values. The paradigms of the values change over the centuries; each age misreads the previous age and suffers an *agon* to accommodate the timeless within a teleological framework. Thus, that person who repeats within herself or himself most fully this eternal struggle for *becoming* is a Prophet. Harold Bloom is the first literary critic to read texts as an *agon* with the Father figure; he positions the birth and becoming of a text as an anxiety ridden freeing of the Self from the strangleholds of the past. The past is here the pattern of the Old Testament Prophets; the present is the Redemptive Revelatory History of the Risen Man-God. There are two ways of searching out the Prophetic voices in our times --- we can either set forth the several nuanced types of Prophets found in Israelite history and then set against each corresponding types of contemporaneous people in whose life the same Light shines. This method presupposes stagnation on the part of the Divine Will. It is as if God chooses no longer to seek out newer methods or types of prophecy.

So we have two types of Prophets in our own times: the one who can easily confirm to our expectations of set ancient patterns and the one whose very existence is a challenge to conformity and all set patterns. While the former woman or man can be stereotyped best using the Hebraic terms of *nabi*, *roeh*, *hozeh* and *is elohim*, the latter type confounds all our expectations of the Prophet. Let me make this distinction clear by a few

examples. The *nabi* is one who feels an inner tug to heed a special call, a distinct call to live out the Kingdom of God in this life itself. It is to express this call that the ancient Hindu seer exhorted us to remember that we all are the sons of God Almighty Himself and it is in fidelity to this inner call, as had happened to Ezekiel much earlier, that a relatively secure girl called Agnes left the comfort of her high-walled convent, to serve the people of the gutters. She was called, she is the *nabi* of our times, and God chose her to be Blessed Teresa of Calcutta. An Irish Christian Brother once told me of meeting that other man of God, Padre Pio. He saw the covered stigmatized hands of Padre Pio and knew deep within, that there was in front of him another *nabi*; another one who had been set apart by God and called. In fact, in this sense of the term *nabi*, we are all called by God to be what we are finally meant to be, our teleological beings; our self-actualization can only be achieved if God calls us and God paradoxically calls each one of us by name to become Prophets of our times. This is easy of understanding. It is a rather intense hearing of the call for becoming a Prophet that compelled Henri Le Saux to write in his *Ascent to the Depth of the Heart: The Spiritual Diary* of his struggles with God while coming to terms with his firstly, a cloistered, contemplative Benedictine vocation and then his choice of giving himself up as an oblation to God in India. Who may be the equivalent of the Hebraic *roeh* or to quote Wordsworth, the one who sees deeply into the heart of things, today? Of course there has to be a sense of the Godly in him or her for that person to be considered Prophetic after the Old Testament fashion. In this pattern we may easily put the Carmelite Gertrude Stein, Swami Vivekananda and Don Bosco. Sister Stein literally saw into the heart of things, her philosophical musings makes her a pure *roeh*. Vivekananda, the founder of the Ramakrishna Mission, responded prophetically to the signs of the times and enunciated his Divine vision and mission through both his writings and works. He, as it were saw into the future

needs of India as a nation. His life illustrates a movement from the sense of being *de classe* and unbelief to one of being missioned by God Himself. In this sense he is the type of the Old Testament Prophet. Don Bosco and most Founders of Religious Orders are both the type of roeh and hozeh; they dream dreams and act often out of those dreams. Their visions are both real to the Faithful and also future-looking. Don Bosco's numerous dreams mark him out as a hozeh. Who then is the man of God, the *is elohim*? Mary Purcell, in her book, *First Jesuit*, calls Ignatius of Loyola, the 'man of God'. St. Ignatius went from place to place and sorted out disputes amongst couples and individuals. Those were the miracles he wrought. He thus came to be known as a man of God. In this sense of *is elohim* we look in vain in our own times for such a figure; who spontaneously is known by people to be *is elohim*; the recently deceased Great Pope John Paul II may be an exception to this aridity. Now all this is a simplification and essentially ossifies the Prophetic roles to set types. This type of categorization has often a reductive and academic role. We are in fact indulging in wishful thinking when we assign various people to various Hebraic patterns. This is where Bloom's reading of Freud and the latter's reading of Shakespeare comes into play.

Freud, as is well known, drew medical conclusions not only from the rich bourgeoisie Viennese women he treated but from Shakespearean characters. Now, Bloom, ever the Bardolater, sees Shakespeare as inventing the human in us. So according to Bloom, the western canon hinges on two poles, the Bible and what Shakespeare *misreads* as the Bible. Let me illustrate these with examples: the Shakespearean Fool ultimately disappears and most probably die in poverty and anonymity. Notice that Ezekiel ultimately dies anonymously and is heard of no more. So the search for Prophetic figures in our times, based on Old Testament criteria, should be rather a search for newer and richer types of the Prophet. So the whole Prophetic mode

and its present relevance need to be seen in a Freudian Oedipal struggle against the pitfalls of the past. The key example is Jesus. It is misleading to see the figure of the Christ as only a fulfillment to Old Testament prophecy; rather He struggles with previously set patterns of Prophecy and successfully rids Himself of the Bloomian *Anxiety of Influence*. Again it is a misnomer to term Oedipal *anxiety* as a sexual struggle; it is in fact a Prophetic struggle. A struggle marked by uprootedness and uncertainty, a struggle where the individual soul cries out: Why have you forsaken me Father to rot in lukewarm apathy and meaningless non-individuality? This picture of the Prophet is a literary type and a model to go by, not a fixed trope. To find this type of angst ridden Prophets in our lives, we have to read Shakespeare for he misreads the Bible to an extent that surpasses theological reading. Let us not forget that form criticism conclusively proves the textual nature of the Bible. I use the word text in the sense of canonicity which presupposes narrative art. Now this text can be critiqued in two ways, one by various dry exegetical methods; discovering this or that at any given point in time. The other ingenious way is to write another text which inter-textualises the original text and reinvents older forms in a more comprehensible manner to our own times. This in turn involves a struggle to rid the writer of irrelevant previous forms at the cost of being misunderstood and derided. This is exactly what Shakespeare has done as Bloom beautifully illustrates in his *Shakespeare: the Invention of the Human*. So we would do better to see Prophecy in our own times as not merely confined to individuals, which is more simplistic, reductive and thus popular but rather as being more of a collective Super-Ego which derives from God. To be Prophetic is to be unrecognizable and consequently, unacknowledged. Let me illustrate: the little girl who protests pedophilia against her kin at the risk of being disbelieved, the student who refuses to cheat, the Novice who will not hesitate to blow the whistle on her Novice Mistress if the latter asks her to do something sinful,

at the cost of letting go of the neophyte's entry into the Convent, are all touched by God. They all see into the future in ways that we might miss, they all fight against unbelievable odds, and cry out for help --- yet they do not know what grasps their souls and force action out of them.

Psychologically speaking, the prophet amongst us may be the one we call paranoid, the schizophrenic, in other words, the marginalized. The Old Testament Prophets did exist then and their spirit lives on now, but not as we understand them. God is a God of History, who intervenes in History to redeem us and this God now speaks to us through the exegesis offered by Shakespeare, deconstructed by Freud and his latter disciples. And wonder of wonders, Freud reads Nietzsche, that supposedly ungodly man. May be Nietzsche and Wittgenstein are our new prophets.