Poetry, Poiesis and 'Poem'-Omachia: A Study of Bishnupada Ray's Poetry

Subashish Bhattacharjee
UGC-Research Fellow
University of North Bengal
subashishbhattacharjee@gmail.com

Abstract

The word 'poetomachia', coined by Thomas Dekker, signified a war between poets. However, the word itself was inadequate in showing the possibilities of conflict and resolution that can be found in the poetry of the same poet. The poems of the Indian poet Bishnupada Ray are possibly eligible for a new coinage in its lieu—'poemomachia'. The latent poetic sensibilities and the inherent contestations of meanings and the truths that verily signify the ambit of Ray's poetry allow for a Heideggerian interpretation of the poems' ontological potential for resolution through conflict. The paper showcases how Ray's poems are ideal instances of Blanchotian 'desoeuvrement' besides their Heideggerian affiliation and latent transnational-ness that helps them transcend the perimeter of national or linguistic markers of poetry.

The rubric of mainstream Indian English poetry has often been determined within an exclusive canon that intrinsically precludes the possibilities of philosophical exploration, instead opting for a quasi-religious, political or fundamentally canonical tradition of exerted historical sense. An attempt to break away from such a confounding liminality to assert a dynamic poetic credo is perhaps most visible in the Siliguri, Darjeeling based bilingual poet, Bishnupada Ray. Writing simultaneously in English and Bengali, Ray's poetic oeuvre consists of a constant movement without pretensions, a non-quidnuncial way of appropriating the contemporary and portraying it with a rare sonority, an effect that is also produced with a tinge of erudition and distinct references undoubtedly sourced from his academic pursuits. Apart from numerous poems published in some of the leading journals in India including *Indian Literature*, Ray has published several anthologies of poetry in English including *Possibilities* (Writers Workshop, 2007), *Dark Age* (Writer's Workshop, 2007), *A Place in the Sun* (Writer's Workshop, 2007) *Discarded Self and Selected Poems* (Hyphen, 2012), *Winter Sky and Selected Poems* (Brown Critique-Sampark, 2013), and *White Lotus and Other Poems* (Adhyayan, 2014), and apart from widespread appreciation and other laurels his poetic career is also mapped with a prestigious Pushcart Prize nomination in 2009. In the words of Anindya S. Purakayastha: "The encryption of the ontic and the quotidian, the rudimentary and the apocalyptic—these are the stuff that one encounters in the poetology of Bishnupada

Ray" (Purakayastha 2014: 57), the innate polyphony of associations that one fails to see otherwise. The poetic allowance, as will be subsequently argues, showcase the potential to transcend the appropriative advocation of Thomas Dekker's coinage of the 'poetomachia'—war between poets—to propagate the resolution-orienting poetic thesis of an abstractly titled 'poem'-omachia.

A reader, upon encountering Ray's poetry for the first time, could trace the signifiers of material understanding as marking the poems. Such material understanding is not to be confused with materialist designs as the poems enshrine the principle of transcendental configurations without upsetting the balance of the texts. It can be said that Ray's poems elicit a cognitive response as the reader interacts with the poems in a pattern of one's own psychosocial makeup instead of a cultural presupposition. On the question of cognitive poetics and Ray's poetry, the reader could be immediately transferred to the question of texturing and the ability of the text in creating its own designs. The following referential definition of cognitive poetics is wholly applicable to certain manifest aspects of Ray's poetry:

> "The word *texture* reminds us of the etymological origin of concepts of text and textuality in weaving. If there is one thing that is common to many different attempts to describe or characterise literariness, it is the notion that there is a texture to a text, a sense that the materiality of the object is noticeable alongside any content that is communicated through it. Literature draws attention to its own condition of existence, which is its texture." (Stockwell 167)

The texture of Ray's poems, it can be successfully argued, is an introspective ontological query that causes the possibilities to increase instead of diminishing. As a further continuation of the same configuration, by being variegated without intent, Ray's poetry is also innately transnational, transcending the closed finiteness of national, regional or linguistic markers. Ramazani remarks: "poetic compression demands that discrepant idioms and soundscapes, tropes and subgenres be forces together with intensity, poetry—pressured and fractures by this convergence—allows us to examine at close hand how global modernity's cross-cultural vectors sometimes fuse, sometimes vertiginously counterpoint one another" (4). Considering the artefacts that combine to produce these affinities to transnational poetry, we are able to locate the same in Ray's poetry as he effortlessly infuses these quotational measures throughout his poetic oeuvre.

Ray's poems do not require external appendages for the reader to encounter meaning, ontological excavations or even epiphanic attributions. The poem-ness of these poems are inclusive and free from the jargonal excess of poetry that seek to attribute philosophical indexes to themselves. This attribute is decidedly Heideggerian as,

> "In encountering an entity […] we allow it to show itself, show up, or be seen, as something. In Heidegger's broad, or 'formal,' sense, an entity is a *phenomenon* for

someone just as long and insofar as it shows itself to her as something. Heidegger calls encounters of present-to-hand entitles *apophantic interpretations*. Their unique goal is *apo-phansis*, allowing entities to show themselves from themselves just as they are in themselves."(Boedeker Jr 159)

The ontological necessity to be honest or true is a poetic essence that has been privileged since the antiquity, and its position in the current conjecture of addressing Ray's poems as 'poem'-omachia is of immense significance. While poetomachia depended of external resolution through objective properties, Ray's poems create ontological dialectics, conflicts that attain synthesis through the effective accomplishment of meaning and interpretation. At the end of each reading the poems create at least dual meanings, coexisting and without binaries, that defer themselves for the reader solely, both creating and attributing the poet with plurality and multiplicity.

The inclusiveness of the images in their capacity to initiate a sequence of non-binary knowledges in Ray's poetry establish the potential to locate immanent truths that do not require the aid of external images but lead to an extensive *aletheia*—truths that are established through their 'disclosedness'. The poem "Mannequin" from the anthology *A Place in the Sun* presents this act of revelation with remarkable acuity:

> Mannequin in a shop
> displaying clothes
> quiet beauty, silent
> looking directly at you
> no bashful coyness
> no small brain reign
> no weaker sex syndrome
> but standing erect
> equal like man
> wearing virtue, bold
> ideal position near glass
> transparent to see
> and get seen equally
> no vanity of smile
> dignifies, eyes settle
> all doubts and pain
> like the lady with a lamp.
>
> ("Mannequin")

The innate images possess the impact of a blunt instrument and are deceptively narratorial at the same time. The rational centres are referential to manifest truths but the inferred symbolisms are active in generating realities that exceed the paradigms established by the

artifices of linguistic procedure in poetry. In poems such as this, and "Zero" from *Dark Age* one feels the dialectic of multiple knowledges and irrefutable truths drawing into a spiral of networks. The following poem, "Zero," establishes the truth with consolidating effect:

> A zero is the world
> to come back to where we start
> tight, taut
> and the entry is difficult
> like a foreign land
> you have to open it
> manually, painfully
> you can feel the tightness
> on your skin
> before you can make
> much headway
> you spell out your doom
> like orgasm.
>   ("Zero")

Ray's anthology of poems, *Discarded Self* contains poetry with a wide spectrum of affect—its dedication, "for romanticism" is in itself a prediction of the poetic direction that the book is about to adapt. Of the seventy-two poems in the volume twenty-four are selected from the anthologies *Possibilities*, *Dark Age*, and *A Place in the Sun*, published by Writers Workshop in 2007, five years prior to the publication of the *Discarded Self*, but possessing an equally sonorous maturity that is to be found in Ray's more contemporary poetry. The reader encounters the volume's eponymous poem as the first in the book—"Discarded Self"—a poem with a startlingly precise questioning of the collapse of the self that gives momentum to the other poems:

> "in the dark I see my shadow
> hiding behind the pillars and following
> and crying to call me back
> [. . .]
> now I see trains full of people
> so nicely dressed and comfortable
> life must have offered them all
> a joyous ride to their destination
> colours, seasons and chameleon nature
>
> I hear the rumbling of wheels

> turn to a fiery screeching
> I see hair sprouting like a shield
> to cover my naked skin on the rails
> albino death has no shame."
>
> > ("Discarded Self")

At the very onset of this pseudo-phenomenological invocation to the origins of sublimity the poet seeks to 'discard' his definite self, his being, in exchange for a nomadic persona that possesses a 'becoming' instead of a rigid 'being'. Interpretively, and consequently, this depth ensures a perpetual philosophical interaction between Ray's poetry and the question of ontological definition, but it also allows for an enriched reading that leaves as residue fragments that allow similar 'becomings' for the readers. The erasure of the psychological being is also addressed in the poem "Moving towards Sainthood" that evokes a transgressive possession in its second stanza:

> "a demon is an inside job
> like sabotage, it shares your bed
> like vice, it shares your thought
> beware of that friendly mask
> experience is a betrayal of trust"
>
> > ("Moving towards Sainthood")

But the direction of the psychological invasion is not always intrusive or evocative of a discarding, it also speaks of a lacuna and the efforts to essentialise its perpetuation as a means of aggravating the process of actualization:

> "a frail insect on frail wings
> flies over the mountains
> to catch the clouds."
>
> > ("Hard Sun")

The poeticisation of the conquest of this almost basedly immanent being is, ironically, questioned in a poem titled "Being", more of an interrogation on the constitutive argument of 'being', following a Heideggerian model of *dasein* rather than the biological presence itself, ending with a titillating balancing act that projects the transcendent and the immanent together:

> "that sense of being a stranger
> that eternal pilgrimage to death
> that balances sheet of lucks
> or the just principle of karma
> there is no end of the evil eye
> the light falls from the sky

to be trapped in the base matter."

<p align="center">("Being")</p>

The constant threat of nihilistic prejudice against the self, or its allied preconception of external annihilation, although imminent in Ray's poetry in these poems, equally explored in such poems as "Death", "Is this the End?", "Crisis", "Day of the Dead" and others including the short poem "Moth" is never as obsessively complex as it had the possibility of, and thus to have descended into unnecessary abstruse weaknesses, but remain substantially sophisticated and yet poignant enough to be revisited for an entirely cogent new interpretation:

> "fire consumes my soul
>   like dissipation
> the outside fire is just
>   a funeral pyre
>   a conflagaration
> where I dissipate my fire
>   and try to imitate
>   the phoenix."

<p align="center">("Moth")</p>

There is neither an abnegation nor an abrogation of the self-sustaining instinct but merely a revisitation of and an interrogation of the reinforced and hackneyed idea of the being that usually entrenches itself as tradition while reconsidering the romantic. But also importantly, as Purakayastha reminds us,

> "If language is really the house of Being and poetry is the desired unconcealment or *aletheia*, then the talisman of the poematic and the singularity of the redeeming other voice, which is poetry gets a sustained and nuanced worlding in the words of Ray who seeks to enframe the existential blues and its aligned dememberment in an arresting lexicon of the ennui and ontological subterfuge." (Purakayastha 2014: 57)

Ray's second volume of poetry, *Winter Sky and Selected Poems*, is perhaps the most illustrative of physical nomadicity, a prerequisite of travel poetics, but also showcases intensity of emotions across societally imposed paradigmatic relationships. The poems contained in this volume are "descriptive, manufactured out of everyday zeitgeist, some are profoundly observant of ontological nuances, while others are endowed with a unique touch of nostalgia and pathos . . . [capturing the poet's] preoccupations with the current destitute times and the resultant existential quagmire" (Purakayastha 2013: 11-12). The philosophy of the poet's explorations of the 'everyday zeitgeist', albeit with a personal lyrical touch, is most

visible from the titular poem onwards, privileging the poetic process and the poetic mind with equal measures but also implying the possibilities of the quotidian as substantial:

"my thinking follows the chasm
convoluted eroded broken
wading through the stream shallow
and seemingly innocuous
shadowing the groves and temples
and the sudden jeopardy"

("Winter Sky")

The cognitive process is an act of benign plagiarism, following from Plato and negating it, where the imitation is no longer a reflection but a recreation that produces references and ideas seldom seen in realism-ridden poetry—but there is in Ray's poetry a hyperrealism within the polyphonies that each contingent fragment produces and re-produces, and interrogates the fixedness of 'being' in the process:

"or is it like being against the glass
that the insect shudders at its own feeling
trying to get through a transparent world?
[. . .]
but before the final point is reached
like all moral acts, it fails."

(ibid)

The poetic being is predominantly nomadic, travelling and progressing through a world of interpretations and possibilities like the insect making its progress through the transparent world, but is actualised when, instead of finding a definition, it locates continuities that merely serve to enhance its becoming, its nomadicity, and validates its voyager sensibilities—an effect which comes to fruition in Ray's poetry, whether it is physical/tangible, or on a *non*-visible plane. Ray, by his evolving sensibilities and progressive existence, is able to create tangential emotions that coordinate with the process of creative affect as well, veering on a paralysing fear that his interpretive arguments may not be completed within time:

"sometimes I wake up with a chest pain
with heartburn sensation
beads of sweat appear at every pore
billions of atomic explosions
of many light years away
light up the morning sky
I become afraid of death."

<div align="center">("Fear")</div>

One of more outstanding poems in the volume, "Eco-poetry", makes ample use of an ecological cacophony in the form of an onomatopoeic device, the crow's shrill cry that resonates across the thematic coherence as a possible reminder of the grimness of the underlying theme. The poet says:

> "the river is a dead fish
> to the irreverent crow
>
> ka ka ka
> [. . .]
> the shrine of life
> is an empty signifier
> there is no evil
> that you may make a wish to happen
> there is no good
> that you may wish to happen."

<div align="center">("Eco-poetry")</div>

Although in terms of poetic assertion the 'shrine of life' is 'an empty signifier', for Ray it becomes a floating signifier, where the objective reality of each element transmogrifies into something that is desirable but not prophesied. The movement of Ray's poetry itself speaks of movement that endorses the underlying possibility of movement and constant evolution. But a similar ecological disruption is visible in another poem of the volume, "River", where we find the floating signifier as the point of contention and continuation:

> "but there is no liberation
> even after it gets to know
> all the secrets of the world."

<div align="center">("River")</div>

Unlike poems that may glorify the ecological excursion into the metaphorical, or at times metaphysical, exploration of the river motif, Ray's poetry, while discussing the presence of the spectacle dismembers it and allows the metanarratives of human and posthuman Nomadism to be equally resonated by the flow of the river. Perhaps an explanation to the accumulation of these metanarratives could be obtained from a short, almost fragmentary poem in the same volume, "Pebbles":

> "I collect the dark pebbles at day
> whitewash them at night with dreams
> to squander them on the path I tread."

<div align="center">("Pebbles")</div>

Poetic thought, which has also been a lingering contestation for Ray, is here induced with the status of creation through addition and inclusion—the fragmentariness leads to a completion that is coherent not when it accumulates all experience but when it starts reducing some of those experiences as interpretive excess.

Ray's most recent volume of poetry, *White Lotus and Other Poems*, endorses the very Nomadism that courses through much of his previous poetry—an imminent desire to 'become' through travel that is both cerebral as well as physical—but the evolution that is led on to in this volume is in terms of the affect on the psychology that is apparent. As a statement that attempts to unfold the veritable intricacies of 'poetic creation', Ray writes in "White Lotus":

> "the unique cannot be measured
> in terms of rationality
>
> that is
> a statement
> about poetic creation"
>   ("White Lotus")

A possible prehensile meaning to the above reference could be derived from Ray's own words when he explores the fundamental scaffolding of poetry and 'poetic truth' in his Foreword to *White Lotus*:

> "Poetry resists absolutism because all entities, positions, capacities and points
> of view are relative in terms of space, time, history, biology or in any other
> term. [. . .] What is poetic truth then? It appears that to speak of truth is to
> follow an outdated mode of expression. Truth has two sides—facticity and
> veracity . . . the material side of truth is facticity and the spiritual side is
> veracity. [. . .] The fable that poetry presents is neither true nor false. But it is
> true in this spiritual sense of veracity. The truth that poetry tells us is
> foundational for the individual—an expression of the non-grammar of being."
> (Ray 2014b: x-xi)

It is important for ray to dwell on the poetic truth that resides on the 'non-grammar of being' because a realised poetic existence will be fraught with improbabilities that are transgressive and consumptive, producing the desire for a deleted existence:

> "our surreptitious devil tail or horns
> our Pandora's box of lustful desires
> our collateral damage
> the human rot of mortal flesh
> and the longing of the earth

for a race of sages."

("The Kreutzer Sonata")

The nomadism is, in *White Lotus*, almost regressive, returning to the roots for an exploration of the subtle but visible nuances that one almost locates in the poems but which disappear at the slightest intimation of a possible fixed, determinate or definite interpretation. Ray, himself as much as his poetry, thrives on the movement and the ability of the floating signifiers to affect non-instructive, non-institutional changes and paradigm shifts—his poetry is that of fluidity that thwarts genre specification or canonical coding at every possible instant when generic markers appears on the poetic plane, ensuring the validity of Purakayastha's remark: "this poetic wish to remain unborn as a potential is of great import as it defamiliarises the surrounding to unleash a possible quest for the impossible, for a different spatio-temporal zone of possibilities" (Purakayastha 2013: 12).

Drawing from Blanchot's concept of 'desoeuvrement' that "the work (of art) is the effect of the non-work or the un-power of being" (Arsić 145) could act as a catalyst to understanding the underlying physics of Ray's poetry. The poetic consciousness of Ray's poetry "arrives only from the utmost un-power of passivity, of 'acting' without intention. Far from being the effect of the intention of an I or ego (of the author), the work is possible only when the I suffers its own total abjection" (ibid). An important segment of Ray's poetics can be equated with Blanchot's description of the transition of the poetic I to the work of art, using Blanchot's coinage "subissement"—"from the infinitive *subir*, to 'undergo' or to suffer, and the adverb *subitement*, which means 'suddenly'. *Subissement* would thus mean the sudden suffering of letting oneself go from oneself. 'This is abnegation understood as the abandonment of the self', Blanchot explains. Only out of this utmost impersonal passivity of the absence of work will the work start shaping itself" (146). Indeed, when we look at the selection of poems in the above paper, the affect of the ontological segmentation is liberated from a configurative and volatile assumption of relay-poetics. The relay of meanings is cognitive and disengaged, which leads to the creation of multiple meanings instead of one closed definition to the poems. The enactment of desoeuvrement is in addition to the Heideggerian statement that is absolute and starkly painted in the poems.

Before we sum up the review of ontological interrogation, conflict and resolution in Ray's poetry, it is necessary to situate the Heideggerian essence of poetry as an assimilation and amalgamation of the various positions in both Ray's poems as well as the philosophical and theoretical loci that have been catalysed:

> "[In] our ontological position we experience the *logos* of *alētheuein* as both *pathos* and *phronēsis*, that is, as that which both affects us in our being by determining our state of disposition and also calls us to care for our being by drawing us into the moment of its own-most possibility […] the meaning of our being is not primarily experienced as *theoria* or *poiēsis*, but as *praxis*; it is not something that we 'view' or

'make,' but live, insofar as it is that which constitutes what we 'do' and 'how' we are, and that becomes apparent when it is taken to its limits (*peras*), which is the basis for Aristotle's understanding of the definition (*horismos*) of meaning." (Allen 29)

This *praxis* of poetics that stretches the poematics to a its limits and into an Aristotelian definition, which is itself a delimiting, and a consequential authorisation of the resolution of ontological crises is what drives or courses through Ray's poetic oeuvre and inlays it with potent philosophically interrogative stance.

Works Cited:

Allen, William S. *Ellipsis: Of Poetry and the Experience of Language after Heidegger, Hölderlin, and Blanchot*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007. Print.

Arsić, Branka. "Desoeuvrement." *The Edinburgh Dictionary of Continental Philosophy*. Ed. John Protevi. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005. 145-6. Print.

Boedeker Jr, Edgar C. "Phenomenology." *A Companion to Heidegger*. Ed. Hubert L. Dreyfus and Mark A. Wrathall. Oxford: Blackwell, 2005. 156-75. Print.

Purakayastha, Anindya Sekhar. "Foreword" *Winter Sky and Selected Poems*. Bishnupada Ray. Kolkata: Brown Critique-Sampark, 2013. N.p. Print.

——. "Butterfly Folded in a Rainbow & the Dismemberment of Orpheus." *White Lotus and Other Poems*. Bishnupada Ray. New Delhi: Adhyayan Publishers, 2014. 57-60. Print.

Ramazani, Jahan. *A Transnational Poetics*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2009. Print.

Ray, Bishnupada. *A Place in the Sun*. Kolkata: Writers Workshop, 2007a. Print.

——. *Dark Age*. Kolkata: Writers Workshop, 2007b. Print.

——. *Discarded Self and Selected Poems*. Shimla: Hyphen Publications, 2012. Print.

——. *Winter Sky and Selected Poems*, Kolkata: Brown Critique-Sampark, 2013. Print.

——. *White Lotus and Other Poems*, New Delhi, Adhyayan Publishers, 2014a. Print.

——. "Foreword." *White Lotus and Other Poems*. Bishnupada Ray. New Delhi: Adhyayan Publishers, 2014b. vii-xi. Print.

Stockwell, Peter. *Cognitive Poetics: An Introduction*. London and New York: Routledge, 2002. Print.