

# Verse Affairs: The Perils of Reviewing Poetry

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## Culture

A reviewer must make themselves vulnerable if they really want to decode a book of poems.

Uttaran Das Gupta

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As the last year drew to a close, an article published in the *New York Times* claiming that “poetry was dead” led to paroxysms of outrage among poets and poetry lovers all over the world. The writer of the article, Matthew Walther, is the founder of a journal



called *The Lamp*, which provides, according to its website, “the orthodox Catholic perspective on the problems of modern life”.

Walther begins his article by bemoaning the fact that the centenary of T.S. Eliot’s landmark work of modernist literature, *The Waste Land* (1922), was hardly celebrated last year. Then he turns around to blame Eliot himself – the High Priest of Western Modernism – for being responsible for this. “I am convinced,” he writes. “Eliot finished poetry off.”

Walther’s main argument pivots around the observation that Eliot broke off the natural register of poetry, which aligned with awareness of the natural world. He picks up one of Eliot’s most famous similes from his breakout poem ‘The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock’ (1915): “When the evening is spread out against the sky / Like a patient etherized upon a table.” Walther imagines that this is an example of Eliot’s petulant break with “the entire established tradition of poetic diction and imagery” – a claim that would have shocked Eliot, and runs in the face of his advice to young poets in his essay ‘Tradition and Individual Talent’ (1919) to develop a “historical sense” that would allow them “to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order”.

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Of course, anyone who has read ‘Prufrock’ or *The Waste Land* is aware that both these poems – and several others from Eliot’s oeuvre – are packed to the rafters with imagery and references that are inscrutable or obscure. In fact, on first reading, a reader might spend more time on the footnotes and annotations rather than on the poem itself. Take, for instance, the last lines of *The Waste Land*, which might be of interest to Indian readers:

*Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata.  
Shantih shantih shantih*

These are quoted from the *Brihadaranyaka Upanashid*, a copy of which Eliot received from his Sanskrit teacher, Charles Lanman, writes literary scholar Allyson Booth. References and similes like this are the exact reason why people do not read poetry, claims Walther. Of course, a corollary to this claim is that there was once a golden age when people actually understood what the poets were writing. This, in itself, is a tall claim – can anyone say with absolute certainty that they have grasped all of Homer or Shakespeare or even a more simplistic poet such as Henry Wadsworth Longfellow?

Some of those responding to Walther claim that articles such as his are published from time to time – take this one from *The Washington Post* – to piss off poets and provoke such outraged reactions. Others have taken him to task for being unaware of

contemporary poetry and being stuck on a Dead White Man. Mahogany L Browne, the first ever poet-in-residency at the Lincoln Centre, wrote in her poem 'Another White Male Writer':

*Has written about poetry being dead as if no other stanzas  
have been structured to decolonize the page in the past 100 years.*

Surely, over the past hundred years, poets had ceased to look at the world through their constipated monocles and bemoan the crumbling of Enlightenment certainties. Last month, poetry festivals from San Francisco to New Delhi demonstrated that poetry continued to be a thriving part of human experience and existence.

Yet, Walther's article gave me pause, as the year-end and Janus-headed January often does. Could poetry actually be dead – or dying? As a poet myself, these are thoughts that keep me awake at night. In the insomniac hours, I try to sift through the evidence, and detect symptoms. My personal experience confuses me further. The attitude of most people towards poetry can be summed up by the reaction of one of my colleagues when I told him that I was going to read some of my poems at bookshop event in New Delhi. "And how long will this reading go on?" he asked. "About an hour," I said. "An hour of listening to poetry!" He could hardly believe that anyone would subject themselves to such torture.

At another reading, organised by Sahitya Akademi in December, I arrived to find that only my fellow readers had turned up, besides the organisers. We laughed and prepared to read out our work and appreciate it ourselves. Much to my surprise, the venue slowly filled up and the audience sat through more than an hour, listening to our poems. I suspect, however, that most of them might have been drawn to the event by the excellent samosas and hot tea that was served.

Also read: Two Poems on Dark Days and Hope From the Pen of Chandrashekhra Azad

Not all events turn out like this. At another reading at a bookshop in Gurugram in December, there was a formidable turnout on a Thursday afternoon. Another poet who was reading with me wondered who all these people were who had escaped from work or their comfortable homes and travelled through the unbearable smog and cold of the National Capital Region to come and listen to us. Perhaps, the presence of a Bollywood personality at another event at the venue had drawn the crowd.

Indian poetry in English – which I write and review – is a strange cat, partly domesticated and partly wild. There is no shortage of Indians writing poetry in English. In his landmark *The Penguin Book of Indian Poets* (2022), Jeet Thayil anthologises 94 poets he feels have or are making notable contributions to Indian poetry in English. As I had noted in my review, this number was far short of the hundreds of others, maybe even thousands, who are writing poetry in English in India.

But is anyone reading? “Those who write in English – a small, Westernised, middle-class minority – are divided by more than language from other Indian writers,” claims Thayil. “Where a Malayalam poet has a distinct readership, English-language poets do not.” This, too, does not consider the number of people in India who are more comfortable with English than their mother tongues, as the last Census revealed. In 2020, as I took stock of Indian poetry in English in a feature story, a publishing executive told me: “There seems to be a lot of buzz around poetry now, especially online – but will that transform into poetry?”

In this queer landscape, a reviewer is an even queerer figure. I have been this figure for a while now. Soon after my book of poems, *Visceral Metropolis*, was published in 2017, I started writing this column – first for the *Business Standard*, and then for *The Wire* since 2020. *Verse Affairs* is probably the only regular column on Indian poetry in English – though I am guilty of being irregular with it.

The reason for the irregularity is the difficulty of reviewing poetry, especially Indian poetry. Most Indian poets come from a dual poetic tradition – first, of their mother tongues; second, of English and international poetry. Most Indian poets writing in English are negotiating the challenge of translating their experience in one language to another, while also being aware of the poetic and aesthetic traditions of the target language. Even as I write this essay, I have books by a Bengali, a Manipuri, a Sindhi, a Malayali and a Hyderabadite on my to-be-read-and-reviewed list. As you can imagine, this only augments the challenges of reviewing poetry.

John Keats claimed in one of his famous letters that an artist has to be comfortable with “uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts”, without succumbing to an overwhelming desire to reach the certainty of fact. He called it “negative capability”. Other have described it as an artist’s vulnerability, the ability of the artist to use their deepest emotions and fears as the material for their art. To review poetry – in fact, any art – the reviewer must also make themselves vulnerable. They must emerge from the certainties of aesthetic standards to be able to discover new books, and decode the crystalised linguistic signifiers that make up poetry.

Perhaps readers might also be induced to surrender a bit of their vulnerability. No one will then make glib comments about the death of poetry. And, this column will remain relevant in the landscape of Indian literature.

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