

MUHAMMAD HASAN ASKARI

“Star” or “Sail”*

BECAUSE OLD HABITS DIE HARD, a French colonel, who had spent his entire life drilling soldiers “Left, Right; Left, Right,” had the bright idea after retirement to put writers through the same paces. He launched a literary journal to teach them how to write French. His greatest gripe about the new poets was that they wrote atrocious French. They lacked simplicity, polish, and flow, and had this damnable habit of obfuscating simple matters. And so Monsieur Colonel started improving on poems in each monthly issue. In due course, Paul Valéry’s “Le Cimetière Marin” (The Graveyard By the Sea) also came in for a face-lift. One line of the poem read: “*Le vent se lève! ... il faut tenter de vivre!*” Monsieur Colonel improved it in chaste, authentic French thus: “*Le vent se lève! ... il faut tenter de ma vie!*”

Whether the Colonel’s retouching made the language more idiomatic I cannot say—I wish I knew French that well—but it did make the “poetry” disappear. First of all, notice how the thought has changed. The Colonel has rendered “I must live!” An English translator has made it into “You must live!”¹ By contrast, Valéry (1871–1945) has expressed his wish as a general principle. That he is the addressee there can be no doubt, but he has spoken these words as though all other humans are being addressed. And thus he has transformed his inner urge into a veritable attitude toward life. The Existentialists say that when a man chooses something for himself, in fact he chooses it for mankind as a whole. Valéry has selected words that fuse both levels of choice together and cause the difference between the particular and the general to disappear. Perhaps the Colonel assumes that words are the outer garb and ornaments of thought. But here he seems to have missed the thought altogether.

*“*Sitāra yā Bādbān*,” from Muḥammad Ḥasan ‘Askarī, *Sitāra yā Bādbān* (Ali-garh: Educational Book House, 1977), 5–16.

¹And still another “we must live.” (All notes, full author names and dates added by the translator.)

Let's turn to the poetry. Sartre mentions that the painter Tintoretto (1518–1594) could transform his melancholy into a pale sky. Precisely, this is true of the line of poetry in question. Valéry has turned his own inner yearning into song. This is not just an expression or a proclamation of the desire to live, rather the line itself is an effort to live. The line has two sentences. One is about nature, the other about man. Unfortunately it is impossible to transcribe French phonetics in Urdu script. It is quite absurd to write an essay without reflecting on the lines of poetry, though such absurdity is commonplace in Urdu. Anyway, "*Le vent se lève!*" is not merely a phonetic evocation of the "wind." Here the sounds embody man's envy of, and underscore a genuine concept of, nature. How easy it is to live for nature! "Living," by contrast, demands a sustained effort and a relentless struggle from man, often pitching him against external objects, and as often against himself, that he must fight. The balance of this struggle is reflected in the phrase "*il faut tenter de vivre!*"

The entire semantic content of the line is located in its words. If we change the words, the experience is lost. The difference between the Colonel and the poet is that the latter had a heightened sense of the music of words, far in excess of what the former could ever have mustered. Then too, this sense develops from a particular attitude toward life and art. Unless a person allows every one of his senses to penetrate deep into external objects and external objects to permeate his senses, it is well nigh impossible to write like Valéry.

What is this attitude? How does an artist relate to the external world, to himself and to his art? I do not think I am entitled to speak about these matters. To think after writing my short story "P̣hislan" that I have also grasped Shakespeare's mental processes would be tantamount to self-deception, indeed to sheer ignorance. But such questions do and must arise even for an ordinary student of literature. Lacking the direct experience of creating literature, all I can do is make an attempt, however groping and muddled, to understand the internal mechanics of creation in light of what great poets have themselves said about their works. But this would be like drawing a map of the North Pole after reading someone's travelogue. Well, even if in jest—one must try to live!

I have selected two items for this purpose: a poem by Stéphane Mallarmé (1842–1898) and an article by the German philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) in which he has presented five basic points about poetry culled from the work of Friedrich Hölderlin (1770–1843). It is best to give Mallarmé's poem in the original French (because what the other two have said philosophically Mallarmé has said through his technique); however, I'm constrained by Urdu to quote it in English translation.

Lacking Mirāji's (1912–1949) audacity, I solemnly believe that Mallarmé absolutely cannot be translated into Urdu, and even Roger Fry's English translation is at best an audacious attempt. Anyone who translates Mallarmé's poems with no thought to "rhyme" may well have good intentions, but it is doubtful that he understands Mallarmé's poems. So, while the meanings of the lines are here, Mr. Fry has left the poetry in the safe-keeping of the poet. As it is impossible to make do without the English translation, I offer it below. The title of the poem is "Salutation," which Mallarmé had read in a gathering of writers.

Nothing! this foam and virgin verse
to designate nought but the cup;
such, far off, there plunges a troop
Of many Sirens upside down.

We are navigating, my diverse
Friends! I already on the poop
You the splendid prow which cuts
The main of thunders and of winters;

A fine ebriety calls me
Without fear of its rolling
To carry, upright, this toast

Solitude, reef, star
To whatever it was that was worth
Our sail's white solicitude.²

²From *Poems*, trans. by Roger Fry with commentaries by Charles Mauron (NY: New Directions, 1951), p. 47. The French original, "Salut," (p. 46) is as follows:

*Rien, cette écume, vierge vers
A ne désigner que la coupe;
Telle loin se noie une troupe
De sirènes mainte à l'envers.*

*Nous naviguons, ô mes divers
Amis, moi déjà sur la poupe
Vous l'avant fastueux qui coupe
Le flot de foudres et d'bivers;*

*Une ivresse belle m'engage
Sans craindre même son tangage
De porter debout ce salut*

Solitude, récif, étoile

Mallarmé is drinking a toast to the health of the young writers in this gathering, hardly the time for philosophical hairsplitting. It is a formal occasion for cheerful, light-hearted talk. With due regard to the occasion he has made it abundantly clear in the very first line that his poem is nothing except the foamy bubbles of the wineglass. In other words, the whole poem is just a sport. However, like the poem, artistic creation itself begins with this “Nothing!”—this sport.

There is no dearth of critics nowadays who are turned off the second “sport” is mentioned in connection with “art” and immediately launch into a harangue about its psychological meaning and its biological importance for man. But an artist does not set out to write with some extraordinary service for man in mind. However significant the results of his creative engagement might be for humanity, he is impervious to them at the moment of creation. Before falling in love, a person does not think that procreation is his duty. An artist too is seized by an uncontrollable creative passion and surrenders himself to the drive for the sake of sheer enjoyment. In this an artist somewhat resembles a woman: years of pain dissolve in the pleasure of the creative moment. In the exhilaration of the sport an artist quite forgets the enormous torment he is foisting upon himself. Regardless of how deeply Mr. Herbert Read (1893–1968) feels about the biological importance of the sport, for an artist creation is, among other things, a sport—and precisely as children understand it.

And this is the primary point Hölderlin makes about poetry—that it is the most innocent sport. Heidegger explains why. Poetry does not affect reality directly. Poetry is not action. It does not compel us to make judgments, which might result in crime and sin. This is not entirely true, of course, but artistic creation does resemble a sport by all accounts, particularly to the artist, at least at the moment of creation. Creation is such a frightening thing that if it did not assume the form of a harmless sport no artist would come anywhere near it. Hence, sport is a necessary part of poetry. One cannot create a line without it. Heidegger considers sport a harmless appendage of poetry. Just as valleys are an inevitable part of mountains, playfulness is likewise part of a poet’s persona, and according to Ezra Pound (1885–1972) every great poet is at the same time something of a jester. Well, what do I know of creation? But a giant like Thomas Mann (1875–1955) has at least taught me that what frightens non-artists most about artists is their gaiety, their lively fidgetiness. Even the illustrious Nietzsche (1844–1900) was scandalized by Richard Wagner (1813–1883)

*A n'importe ce qui valut
Le blanc souci de notre toile.*

for this very reason. Well, creation begins the way Mallarmé's poem does: Nothing to get too serious about. It is just plain "fizz"—bubbles!

When the foam begins to rise, what does Mallarmé see in the effervescence but the Sirens splashing around. This, then, is the second element of creation: dreaming. Don't start psychological and biological interpretations of the word. We are still speaking a human tongue and want to humiliate artists. Later we will be forced to accept that all other realities are merely insubstantial shadows by comparison to the reality found in art, but since art is something quite apart from what we call "reality" in our quotidian life, it appears groundless to us at first sight and without reality. Art does not reject any activity of the human mind, it moves at all levels simultaneously. When Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772–1834) became a critic, he filled page after page explaining the difference between imagining (*khiyāl ārāʿī*) and imagination (*takhaiyul*). The artist, on the other hand, purposely isolates the reader from quotidian reality, knowingly gives himself up to dreaming, and is not embarrassed by it at all like ordinary people. It is through this imagining, which Mallarmé had turned into a regular exercise, that the artist's artistic imagination begins to stir. The act of dreaming is also part of the artist's sport. Without it even Émile Zola's (1840–1902) realistic novel is impossible, let alone poetry. Zola had written the saga of the Rougon-Macquart family with complete fidelity to reality but was having difficulty knowing quite how to bring it to a close when, in 1870, Germany defeated France. Well now—Zola chuckled—I've got the ending. I needed just such an event. If this is not the Sirens rising out of the bubbles then what is? Such an unreal atmosphere is as necessary for art as clouds are for mountains. In order to drown himself in his own reality an artist needs disengagement from the reality of everyday life. You must have noticed the phrase "upside down" qualifying "Sirens," which in the original French reads "*l'envers*." Mallarmé rhymes it with "*vers*," i.e., verse, lines of poetry. Both items are deeply interconnected. Creating poetry makes the poet stand "upside down." This is how reality can be seen in its true form. And obsessed as the artist is with his sport, he goes through the painful exercise. What transpires within him after he has crossed the frontier of reality?

Mallarmé opens the second stanza with "We are navigating." As long as the poet was observing detached from his dream, it was just a sport; the minute he stepped into the dream, the game became a veritable exploration—as difficult and perilous as any voyage. What is this exploration? A probing of one's inner world? The desire to know the mysteries of human nature? The search for absolute reality? Call it what you will. One searches for everything on this voyage, but the exploration also has a

much more basic meaning. Hölderlin says that the most dangerous gift man has received from God is his tongue, which is given to him to explain who he is. If a stone started to construct a philosophy of life, we do not know what it would say about itself. However, looking from our vantage the difference between the two is that whereas for man existence is an inner experience, for a stone it is not. Whatever man is, he is only *that* when he first admits to his *being*. Without this affirmation he does not come into being, his foremost and fundamental task is just that. Everything else comes later. What is this being which man affirms for himself? It is his relationship to other objects. Hölderlin calls the principle that holds things together or keeps them apart “closeness.” To come into being man affirms that he is part of this “closeness.” That is, man acquires his being with the help of others. His acknowledgment and affirmation amounts to his being. The means by which he affirms is speech. For the sake of ease I use the word “means.” Actually, speech is even more essential. Words are not merely appellations or descriptions of things. Things morph into words. Speech too is thus part of the same “closeness” that includes man. Man’s being and speech are tied together. Why then is speech “dangerous”? Because it brings us face to face with things, and we perceive the existence of other things as dangerous to our own existence. Man desires to become the ONE and ONLY; to him other things appear poised to take this right away. His greatest inner dilemma (which Charles Richet has shown to be a biological problem) is that while he cannot achieve his own being without a consciousness of other things, he also fears this consciousness. This is precisely that “capital of rapture” which Firāq describes as *“balāʿēn̄ ye bhī muḥabbat ke sar gaʿī bōṅgī* (These calamities/ordeals too would have fallen to Love’s share...). This ecstasy is such that there are times when man prefers death.

tumḥīn̄ to abl-e havas imtīḥān̄ sē bhāḡ čalē
ye kyā zarūr ke hōtī tō maut hī hōtī

A concupiscent lot you, avoided the lover’s ordeal
In which death was never a certain prospect

But artists knowingly suffer this ordeal. And if one plays with words, even as a game, he confronts death. According to Hölderlin, the poet could be struck any moment by “celestial lightning.” But this is what artists do: they walk straight into the bowels of death in jest. And such is the nature of Mallarmé’s voyage. The “sea” implied in the last line of the second stanza is just this “closeness.” Without drowning in it, man does not acquire being. Then too, this sea sometimes freezes in winter, and is sometimes struck by thunderous lightning. When man, dreading his consciousness of

things, begins to withdraw into himself, this is like the freezing of his being. And when he gains consciousness, it rattles him to the core. In short, whether it is separation from Laila or intimacy with her, both are a torment. But the fun-loving artist accepts both. Absorbed in beholding the frolicking Sirens of his dreams, he realizes with a start when awareness hits him that he is sailing on a harrowing sea exposed to two enormous dangers: the ship will either be lodged in ice or struck by lightning. But if he abandons the voyage, he will not be able to maintain his status as an artist. Even at this point he does not let go of his sportive streak and says with perfect equanimity: "*Nous naviguons*" (We are navigating).

However, he is not navigating alone. Not only his contemporaries but also artists who have preceded him and those yet to come are all his fellow-sailors. So when he travels, the entire tradition of his art travels through him. A comparison with chain and link will not do here. Although as an individual the poet stands apart from his tradition, the tradition resides within him and works from there, and the poet works from within the tradition. This is a kind of "closeness," which the poet inevitably affirms. The manner in which Mallarmé has expressed it is missing in the English translation. The English "diverse / Friends" fails to bring it out. In Mallarmé's original poem, though, the first line of the second stanza ends with "*divers*" and the next one begins with "*Amis*." In French, both words will be read together as though they are simultaneously *together* and *apart*. Although this is the relationship of one artist with others of his ilk, the voyage includes all of humanity alongside the artists because language is a common property and in itself a relationship, a bonding agent. The very meaning of language is that someone is talking and someone is listening. In another poem Mallarmé says only that a poet mostly gives meanings to the words of the tribe. But since language is in its essence an exchange of speech, when a poet accepts it and uses it as the means for his voyage he moves everyone around. When language begins its voyage through the poet, everyone who speaks it is dragged along in its wake. They are all tied to the poet, and the poet to them.

Coming to the last stanza of the poem, what started as the poet's sport has become a voyage and the poet is aware of its dangers. He is now sailing among things and knows that they threaten his own being. At the same time, he is beholden to them for it. The question before him now is whether he should surrender himself to them. But by now the exhilarating "inebriation" produced in him by his "closeness" to them has completely dulled his senses. Henceforward, whatever he decides is not his own decision, the inebriation decides for him. Things are calling him and he is quite swept away by the ecstasy of the call. He has no qualms about

staggering and stumbling. Imagine how far his lighthearted sport has brought him!

What, after all, is the purpose of the voyage? Let's see what Hölderlin and Heidegger have to say about it. Man does not obtain existence until he has affirmed his "closeness" to existents. And he affirms this through language, in a way that things become words. So on one hand language brings man into being and on the other it confers permanence upon things. The world would cease to exist for man if there were no language. Language is essentially a conversation, hence man's existence is nothing other than conversation. He affirms his being through language; as such his life and poetry are just two separate names for one and the same thing. The entire meaning of a poet's struggle is to give man and his life existence.

In this poem Mallarmé is thinking from the perspective of a creative artist. That is why he is totally indifferent to the outcome of the voyage. If an artist begins to enumerate the benefits of his work and even slightly relaxes in his support for it, he absolutely cannot create. What counts for him preeminently is his creative inebriation. Mallarmé has therefore laid out in a very carefree manner three aspects of his struggle—"*Solitude, récif, étoile*" (solitude, reef, star). It is entirely possible that the ship of these voyagers will be lost on the desolate seas, or crash against some massive outcropping, or perhaps reach all the way to the stars. The artist is aware of these possibilities, but he is also indifferent to them. His only obsession is to somehow continue the voyage.

"Our sail's white solicitude." The English translator has only partially captured the essence of "white." The French "*blanc*" means both: "white" and "blank." And it is the notion of being "empty" that is central to the poet. Not just an emblem of "nothingness," "*blanc*" is also a sign of "being." After all "being" comes from "non-being." Hence, whatever it is that the poet's "sails" are after, it is not just something pure and sublime, it is also "blank." In other words, the poet has not set out on his voyage with a predetermined purpose: a search for something definite. His search might take him anywhere, even to the stars, or cause him to perish. What he is searching for is "creation," an affirmation of his own and others' being. And this is the sole purpose of his work. A true artist does not embark with the fixed purpose of reaching the stars, he just sets out—out from the confines of his ego toward others, regardless of how he might fare on the way. Mallarmé has said all this in the choice of his rhymes. The first and third lines of the concluding stanza are identical: "*étoile*" (star) and its response: "*toile*" (sail). For the poet his "sail" is his "star." His voyage is his destination.

As for the rest—you should ask the German philosophers. □

1955

—*Translated by Muhammad Umar Memon*