

Instrumentality by Ravi Shankar

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A review by Ric Carfagna

Ravi Shankar possesses quite an impressive list of poetic accomplishments. To name just a few, he is currently poet-in-residence at the University of Virginia and Columbia University and a founding editor of the internationally acclaimed online journal *Drunken Boat*. His poems have won numerous awards, including Gulf Coast's annual poetry prize. His critical writings have also appeared in major poetic journals and reviews.

Instrumentality is Ravi's first collection of poetry to make its appearance. Similar to Wallace Stevens first opus *Harmonium*, Ravi's first book promises to make a lasting impression on the poetic world. It is not randomly that I make the comparison to Stevens and his *Harmonium*, for similar to Stevens, Ravi speaks with a lyrical meditative tone, full of color, changing timbres and hues, revealing to the reader intriguing philosophical landscapes. He portrays a comprehensive world at a first reading, and with further probing the reader unearths an inexhaustible ruminative potential.

Originality is at the heart of *Instrumentality*. The first poem, "The Condition of Certain Evenings" places the reader in an anticipatory modality:

Have you noticed it? In a tower
On a depilated hillside, bells clap.
Arrival's color has faded from the sky,
Snow spreads its blanket on gray mountains.

Elsewhere, lights go on and off in the cities,
Avenues clad in shadow's apparel.
Breaths go in and out of many lungs.
One by one, we wait.

A defining world is set out for us in this first poem. Not so much an invocation to the muse as a setting of the scene, it establishes a definitive trajectory that the book follows. It is subtle yet strong in its gestural simplicity. The punctuation and syntax alone speak of a measured peace, a careful observation and absorption by the meditative mind. The seeds have now been sown, the roots stimulated as *Instrumentality* bursts forth with its distinct spectrum of poetic diversity.

These poems always leave a presence, an aura if you will, that the reader feels is deeper than the words on the page. We do not lose our way in an oblique world of abstraction; there is a purity of expression, a patient observation which makes us perceive the ordinary in an evanescent and metaphysical light, but not to the point of losing the reader in a fog of obfuscation. This is “Union”:

The clearing in the hills entreats
Empty rapture, shepherding hours'
Stray flocks until nothing bleats
Under the skies; insures the dower
Left for us will never cease to remain
Itself if only we proceed by twos
Into duration-spiky vervain
Is ubiquitous regard malentendu,
Our home's away, the sun's ablaze,
The way you hold up the spheres
Forms a love opaque to paraphrase
But I'll try: we've abolished fear.

Instrumentality is immediately accessible, open to our inquiries and rousing our imagination to awaken. What we see on the page is permanence, concrete images and concepts with which the reader can identify and assimilate into their lives. This is not the tone of an overbearing bard, but one who is forthright and faithful in proffering us lucidity and beauty in his poetic message. No sooner do we absorb one image and/or situation, then we are whisked away into another adjoining but sometimes totally contrary scenario; thus the diversity that I spoke of earlier.

Ravi possesses a keen and discerning eye, alive to the inevitable and visible flow of life, yet also aware of the hidden mysteries harbored beneath a surface essence of matter. This from “Marine Pastel”:

Chromatic waves of sound wash vibration into inlets,
Shape the place bacteria emerges from the unasked
Pressure merging atoms into and out of ionic bonds
So that microscopic life can develop from tidewater,

or from : “Thought at Night”:

Crossed behind my back, I stare
At the great nothing of the roof and the trees,
Slowly taking shape in the greater nothing
Of night, wondering what to do with the dark
Realization that I don't belong to myself.

Notice a freely flowing eloquence and technical proficiency, but not the sometimes stifling static elements that one encounters in some academic verse. Ravi is hard to pigeonhole and/or categorize, and that's a good thing. His are eclectic yet accessible utterances, speaking in the form of the informal aspects of day-to-day existence; grasping the moment cognitively and 'saying it like it is'. Superfluous and ostentatious embellishment is not part of his vocabulary and that's also refreshing. Heavy dross and imbrications of artifice encountered with other poets can be hindering and tedious. Ravi seems to hold no motive for misrepresentation, even when fusing abstract theories with empirical modes of expression, and even the title of this work "Symbiosis" as well as its content reflects this:

One alternative to speech is wheatless streets
Where caught mid-impetus, even lampposts
Rusted cursive partake of flow:
This into that, shadow ceding mass, intake output,
Not heading anywhere particularly but particular
Nonetheless the way the cracked curb
Appears granular in sunlight,
Both existing not from their own end,
But in symphony with that which converts
Their presence into nouns . . .

There is a singing quality that pervades these poems, in fact a notion of harmony and symmetry seems to be at the heart of *Instrumentality*. But as is true to life, not all singing and harmony is necessarily pleasant. Some poems look at the darker side of social issues. In "Exile", Ravi presents us with a bit of confessional soul-searching. But the situation he brings to our attention, albeit personal is an issue that all humanity has to contend with and endure. The first and last lines of "Exile" seem to frame the piece both literally and metaphysically. (And with the current world situation -wars and the like- this poem seems painfully poignant):

There's nowhere else I'd rather not be than here,
. . .

I'm still unsure what effect it has on my soul.

The lines in between the opening and closing lines clarify why Ravi is “unsure”:

Even as a child when I was slurred in school-
Towel head, dot boy, camel jockey-
None of the abuse was precise . . .

Ravi seems to have transcended this dispossessory alienation, this attack on his person:

If, as Simone Weil writes, to be rooted
Is the most important and least recognized need
Of the human soul, behold: I am an epiphyte.

But as with all human aspects of life, the creeping indeterminacies and insecurities, even though ‘rationalized’ away still scar the psyche and soul in search of identity and ultimate autonomous freedom:

This alien feeling, honed in aloneness to an edge,
Uses me to carve an appropriate mask each morning.

There are other moments of personal epiphanies, the result of interior rumination, and although specific to Ravi they possess a resonance with which we all can harmonize, being part of a collective ‘lived’ experience; from “Stillness”:

Before the advent of expectation
Lives emptiness: distant hills blushing
With the horizon, one b flat pulled
Apart at song's end,
A hush of atoms holding together a plant. . . .

. . . .

Relinquishing control. Not the path
Of least resistance. Not a path,
But sanding still as the sun drifts west,
As silence shorelines
Music, as hollow particles assert hallowed architecture.

Ravi is in the vanguard of young 21st century poets now emerging. A glance at the back cover of the book reveals another ‘major’ accomplishment for Ravi: the diversity of his ‘blurbers’. To see Charles Bernstein and Gregg Orr share the same page praising *Instrumentality* (and Ravi), speaks volumes for the book and the writer’s universal appeal: Bernstein, by all opinions a giant of the ‘alternative’ scene, while Gregg Orr is a major figure in the more ‘accessible’ schools of the poetic art form. For all intents and purposes and by all estimations quite a feat and glowing recommendation, and I can’t but whole heartedly agree. The only one negative I can say about Ravi’s poetry and *Instrumentality* is that at 89 pages, it’s over much too soon!

Ric Carfagna