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The Migrant as a Poet

The Poet as a Migrant

Every creator is a poet.

Every creator is a migrant.

The difficulty exists when the poet is a migrant.

More difficult yet is when the migrant is a poet.

When both are in one person, it can be a catastrophe, or it can produce a unique creation from the suffering he has witnessed.

The poet is a person who leaves his time

The poet is a person who leaves his time because there are many things he does not accept. So he rebels against language and uses language against the rigidity of habit and the stupidity of intelligent policy. The poet looks for another time with which to harmonize. He hates running with the herd. He hates the argument “everybody is doing it.” He leaves his time metaphorically, to rise to another place, to bring back innovations, not only for change but to motivate the independence of others, to free thought, to create a better way, and he does this in peace. He does this tenderly.

Now I need to explain the word “poet” in my mother tongue, Arabic. It comes from the verb “to feel”. In this case the poet becomes the “feeler”. I don’t know where the word comes from in English, but the first time I heard the word “poet”, I wondered a little. The sound of this word, po-et, means “small house” in my language. “Small” because in Arabic, the short syllable of e makes the diminutive. As we say “Hassan”, we make it smaller with “Hussain”. In German, my second language, “poetry” is “Dichtung”, which means “create, arrange, *erdenken*”. Perhaps this meaning strays from feeling and moves towards intellect.

Most people doubt the word “poet”. They don’t consider it a profession. The poet produces nothing visible for them. Poets produce words, and perhaps books later on, but for the majority of people, poetry books may as well be invisible.

Twenty-five years in Cairo during the first part of my life, I never met anyone who called himself a poet. I never met a single person who claimed it as a profession. I met poets, but first they would say, “I am a journalist,” or teacher or translator or another job. The title “poet” was refused. Only after the society had recognized one’s work through publication and notoriety, could one say,

“I am a poet.” However, 1500 years ago in the same society, a poet was present at each great occasion to express its significance. The poems of this past era have been respected across the generations and continue to be respected today. However, in this current era, in which the ear is inferior to the eye, and everything is translated through images, poetry is valued as a quality, not as a thing in itself. It is valued as an adjective, not a profession.

The migrant is a person who leaves his place

The migrant is a person who leaves his place because he cannot accept many things. He rebels against the political environment. He rebels against the claim that the powerful simply deserve their power more than others. He rebels against the stupidity of intelligent policy. The migrant looks for another place with which to harmonize. He hates the argument “everybody is doing it”. He wants to leave a place physically, to flee from violence, to save himself in this life, to change his path and preserve his dignity.

After time has passed, some migrants become aggressive to other migrants. As migration is a relative issue, depending on place and time, he who has migrated long ago may no longer feel like a migrant. The generation that follows rejects their migrant history. Often, the hardest pressure on the new migrant comes from the old migrant, like someone who recently quit smoking and now preaches as if he were the head of the World Health Organization, or a recent vegetarian who holds himself as the great defender of animal rights.

From the other side, the new migrant is a person who rarely speaks of himself as a migrant – especially in his earliest years. To many of those who label the migrant as such, the migrant is an incomplete person, having lost something, above all the home. Few people consider that a migrant could achieve greater things without the need for a motherland, which has been my experience. But for most, the migrant appears as a person who lacks a home, lacks money and lacks language. The word “migrant” becomes a title and not a quality or adjective.

The poet and migrant first meet as they depart the norm.

The poet brings a new language from the original language. And the migrant brings a new place from their origin.

Both the migrant and poet are similar in their reasoning and goals.

A migrant is a person who leaves a place looking for a better time and place. A poet is a person who leaves his time looking for a better place and time.