

Making sense of “Presence” through “Absences”: A poem each, by Dom Moraes and Donald Justice

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Abstract

The poetry of Dom Moraes is abundant with several forms of experimentation, extravagant and sometimes unusual imagery, subtlety, nostalgia, a sense of separation and melancholia. Moraes, started his literary career in a great flurry, and then went downhill only to resurface again in the later years. *Absences* is one of his well known poems, where he develops the significance and sublimity of the concept of “absence” which is popularly contaminated with negativity. Donald Justice’s *Absences* is similar to that of Moraes, if judged from the perspective of motif, although the treatment and position of the poet, is where the difference between these two poems majorly, lie. In both these poems, the idea of “absences” is philosophically developed using striking images, sublime transitions, sweeping memories and enquiries into “presence”.

Keywords: Moraes, Justice, presence, absences, memory, life

Introduction: Dom Moraes was an Indian Poet, journalist, travel writer and autobiographer. Born in Goa and the only child of Frank Moraes, Dom is said to be, according to Sayan Chattopadhyaya, a “rootless wanderer” who claimed to have “visited every country except Antarctica”. At the age of 16 he went on to live in London for more than 20 years. Though he was a child prodigy and garnered much acclaim in his teens, his book of poems *A Beginning* winning the Hawthornden Prize, much of Moraes’ oeuvre remain untouched by critics and the academia and as R. Bhattacharya notes, there is a contradictory appeal to him. “We are faced here with a contradictory situation — a famous and a highly published poet whose works have been constantly neglected by critics and anthologists.” Bhattacharya goes on to show how there is a marked difference in attitude and approach by several critics, who at first identify him for being a “Mimic man”, “India hater” and “womanizer” while also making contradictory remarks and praising him for “his detailed knowledge of Indian seasons and landscape” and also appreciating his “Indian-ness”. Such is the ambivalence of Moraes’ poems and his personality.

Donald Justice, an American poet and teacher was largely hailed for his sense of both tradition and experimentation- surrealism intertwined with beauty while also falling back on rhyme and meter. He studied the piano and musical composition, which explains many of his poems being

dedicated to his piano tutors, his fondness for metrical harmony, rhythm and expertise with the traditional form of poetry. He received the Pulitzer Prize in 1980.

The Presence in Dom Moraes' *Absences*:

Presence is the state of being somewhere, the instance of something occurring or something being felt somewhere in that passing moment. "Presence" has been equated in philosophy, as a privilege next to meaning, reality and truth, over "absence". Although, in the latter half of the 20th century, Derrida's critique and enquiry into the metaphysics of presence sheds new light on the difficulty of privileging presence over absence, and opens up possibilities of interplay. *Absences* represents Moraes' contemplation over the greater equation of the cosmos. The configuration and assemblage of symbols that sketches one end of the binary, thus also brings forth the other end, so as to infer an "absent" presence. Revisiting the first line, "Smear out the last star", sets out the fundamental inquisition- if there is no one present or left in the world, who is it that has been tasked with the act of "smearing"? Perhaps, the first rational argument that comes in the forefront is, the addressee is a transcendental being, beyond time and space, beyond all signifiers and the constraints of absence and presence, unaffected and untainted by any such phenomena that concerns materiality. And after the said task is completed, a chain of spectacle will demonstrate the presence of several absences, speaking for themselves; the calling represents their being somewhere, even if in the past, sunken in the dark corners of memory, even if announcing their presence through immediate negation. "No polyp Admiral to sip" brings into mind, their very dwelling, so as to say, calls them from their grave in the act of negating their presence. The reader is introduced to a world conjured out of distant memories or tailored imaginings that represents the negation of all that there supposedly would have been, had the world functioned normally, according to the expectations of the poet. In the present scenario the world is devoid of certain natural or life-affirming conditions as "lights from the islands". The "vowel of silence" represents the disenchanting quietness that can only prevail in a world so bleak, still and frequency-less, the irony of hearing the "sound" of such quietness is sharply asserted.

The opening lines of the next stanza, ascertains the history of human civilization as a narrative drenched in conflict and warfare. "Vigils" are kept during a period of devotion, and it also means to keep a watch on intruders. The end of "vigils" and the lack of enemies to kill both point to how human civilization has always been acquainted with a long history of battles and bloodshed. Now, their absences would mean that peace and a no-conflict zone which is a "Utopian" ideal, is bound to prevail thereafter. The roofs of slopes are hosts to fossils and microliths that document these long years of crisis and turmoil. Considering these symbols that closely relate to a post-apocalyptic world resembling the idea of ghost towns in Ukraine or the simulated townscapes in the videogame "Fallout", Moraes' *Absences* emit a radiance of melancholia where the aesthetic rainbows are unwatched and are unappreciated, and where there are "No wounds left to be healed." Wounds, that are physical, inflicted through wars, and accidents, wounds that are psychological, emerging from nostalgia, loss and remorse, wounds from the ecohazard on the planet and finally, some wounds appearing from the fear of missing out; from unearthing the "absences", the contemplation of all that will be forever lost.

The “polyp admiral”, the symbol of the exterminator is championed over by death, which emerges as the ultimate equalizer. Death, hovers over the lifeless, as a dark shadow palls over the remains of all that began. While life asserts presence and Moraes’ quest is to scavenge for the life-like qualities in a world which promises no life; phenomena such as breathing, bubbles plopping, echoes being restored, movements, growth. And hence, even though a cloud that appears like a sheep and stromalites form bubbles that disturb the “balance of death” are non-living, they are resounding a hope for a presence. The lifeless take a stand for the presence, for the time being, as a substitute against the forces of absences, the void and the null, the all-engulfing darkness, which their movements and echoes must resist by all means. Death is thus betrayed by not only something that has life or consciousness, but all material objects that move and announce a certain presence. The tension between these two forces is strikingly evident and in the hands of Moraes’ they are rendered sublime and picturesque. Alternate histories and realities which though cannot be perceived or even known, can well be brought into presence through imagination.

There lies a greater significance of absence: to be still, and motionless, to be on the other side of the binary, to be the spaces between words, and the gaps between two notes- in placing this idea is where Moraes becomes profoundly philosophical.

No sound would be heard if

So much silence was not heard.

The certain possibility of death and the fear that arrives from such a realization is what leads humans to explore and experience the variance of life. The presence of solitude, separation, sadness, and grief are what asserts the importance of celebrations, gatherings, festivities and happiness. Hence, death, isolation, separation, silence stands for those absences that gatherings and music can fill, and without the presence of each of these qualities, the other can never come into existence. Their being in the world is relative and essential.

A closer look at *Absences*, by Donald Justice:

Presences and *Absences* by Donald Justice are supposedly companion poems, although, both these poems built on the quality of absence; the reason being that, presence is in a flux-always already fleeting. The poem *Presence* is structured around memories and contemplation.

And all that I saw was someone’s hand, I think,

Thrown up out there like the hand of someone drowning,

But far away, too far to be sure what it was or meant.

The images of clouds floating, everyone going, dreams appearing and disappearing, things drifting away, appear throughout the poem, persisting the significance of memories from the recent past and how we anthologize our present and future based on the narrativization of these flashbacks that recurrently appear in our consciousness.

But I could not hold onto them, they were drifting away,
 Everything going away in the night again and again.

At a point of time, nostalgia and dreams begin to intertwine and the task to separate imagination from an actual event from the past, starts to get Herculean, as time passes. What appears to be real and present in dreams, begin to drift as the sleep breaks gradually and reality kicks in.

Unlike Moraes, Justice's poem, *Absences*, resounds with an affirmation of life. His take on absences is plausibly different, yet the bleak melancholia persists. The absence of flowers suggests the drooping of life; winter and snow being a lasting metaphor for death and lifelessness. The sound, a signifier of sense perceptions confirm a listener, one who can distinguish the sound of snow falling as being quiet and remote, which makes him nostalgic. Memory becomes a vehicle to travel to the distant past, the only persistence that can link the sound of snow falling rhythmically, to the sound of scales descending on a piano. Memory asserts itself as a presencing agent, the past and present being interlinked, and the past being called to announce its presence and happening quality in the experience of the listener, for whom both these sounds represent a certain loss. Symbols of death confirm the absence or near-to-be-absent quality of things for the listener. This is familiar to Moraes' poem, where the fear of missing out and the haunting presence of loss is broadly developed. In case of Justice, the imagery of flowers appear multiple times, "And the heavy head of the cereus inclining", suggesting an intimate connection that could signify a life asserting presence, where the listener desperately seeks the greenery amongst the quietening sound of snow, harboring death and decay- with words such as "heavy head", "inclining", "let down" the symbol of falling and descending from a previous zenith, is incorporated.

The listener further laments on the presence of snow-flowers that pile up in a heap, which he/she compares with a "white dress cast down", once again bringing into focus the pastness of the past, and the dread that arrives from such a longing. The sense of a loss is built around nostalgia where a yearning for the past arrives, the fond memories of what was present and cherishable in the past, inflicts a desire for what is absent, in the present. The desire further extends to all afternoon where, there occurs a "listening" to hear a step, although the river of time is flowing and nothing pauses or stops for the listener. Each passing moment becomes a memory, which is here- a step, turns into a thing of the past, in a split second and alienates the presence from its seat: "Already in memory". Absences breeds isolation and isolation leads to despair, as the scales that the listener remembers become "terrible", the snow covers all that is visible while the absent flowers bulk up the load of longing that the listener is surmounted with. Justice structures the presence of several absences, in a similar vein to Moraes - because absences do not signify a void, rather, piling up of absences lead to a heavy heart, overflowing with desire and longing.

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