

(St)Uttering Caste in Another Tongue: A Critique of *volte-face* in Sundaram's Poetic and Political Ideologies

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Abstract: Sundaram (1908-1991), the winner of prestigious awards like “Padmabhushana” (1985) and “Shri Narsinh Mehta Award” (1990), claims a special attention in Gujarati literature because he defies all critical attempts at putting him into ideological or literary pigeonholes. In spite of being an extremely versatile litterateur ploughing into almost all literary forms and being instrumental in ushering in what is called New Poetry in Gujarati literature, Sundaram's oeuvre is informed with a continual conflict between progressive and regressive tendencies, fluctuations between the zenith and the nadir of creative excellence and, most importantly, convictional oscillation between fiery activism and ideological autism.

Keywords: Dalit, Gujarati Literature, Gandhism, Identity politics.

As an articulate progressivist, a febrile communist and a committed Gandhian, Sundaram, in his early work, remarkably accomplished a conscious engagement with socially tabooed and hitherto unacknowledged issues like casteist Indian society and nature of human sexuality. He remarkably endowed Gujarati literature with attributes of radicalism and modernity as well as democratized the language of poetry. Explicating this dimension of the poet's writing, Mansukhlal Jhaveri rightly notes, “...the writer of Gandhian Era, unlike his predecessor, tried as best as he could to reach the masses. The odd situation created by the economic inequity made him feel uneasy. He could not bear to see the lot of the poor, the exploited and the underdog. Being inspired by Gandhiji's activity in the fields of service of the poor, village uplift, and eradication of untouchability, he wrote about the unsophisticated rural folk of the lower strata instead of the rich or the educated of the upper strata of the society.”(Jhaveri, *History of Gujarati Literature*) To the poets of Pandit Era (1885-1915 AD), only the lofty and sublime elements like the cloud, the moon, the stars, the lotus, the cuckoo, the sea could appropriately and exclusively form the subject of poetry but due to his fascination with the square view of reality, the poet of Gandhian era deemed a scavenger girl, a latrine fly, a garbage dump etc. as fitter focuses than those of his predecessors. Apart from being influenced by Gandhism, Sundaram admits of having been profoundly influenced by his reading of Karl Marx's *Das Kapital* during his stay in jail in late twenties and early thirties. Art for life's sake was an international literary credo after the October Revolution of Soviet Russia in 1917. Consequently, on the substratum of social realism and class-consciousness was located a kind of literature which sought to achieve autonomy, equality and social justice for all, irrespective of class, color and creed and the world literary firmament

witnessed the rise of Progressive Literature i.e. literature based on the theoretical concepts of dialectical materialism. Progressive literature in India arose as an analogue to such a literature in Europe and came to hold that poverty, inequality and obscurantism generated by feudalism, casteism and religion respectively posed the greatest danger to human progress particularly in the lives of poverty-stricken people of the countryside. Sundaram was a key figure in the Progressive Writers' Association, established in Gujarat in 1940. The association brought out a volume in Gujarati titled *Literature and Progress* containing poems, short stories, one-act plays and essays. Out of the four short stories anthologized in the book, one was "Pekord no Prawas" (A Ride in Packard) by Sundaram.

Under Gandhian and Marxist influences, Sundaram published his first collection of poems *Koyā Bhagatni Kadvivaniane Garibona Geeto* (*Bitter tongue of Koya Bhagat and Songs of the Poor*) in 1933, a work that unmistakably disapproves of the lopsided Indian society founded on the canker of caste-system. In 1934, he got the Ranjitram Gold Medal, which even today is considered one of the top literary awards in Gujarati, for his second collection of poems called *Kāvyamangalā* (*Auspicious Poems*). In and around that time, the poet actively participated in the freedom struggle led by Gandhiji and even passed a few months in jail but only to grow increasingly disenchanted with it after a tour of South India in 1934-35 when he visited Pondicherry. He came back to Gujarat, but the lure of Pondicherry, the attraction of Mother and Sri Aurobindo turned him restless and anguished. Eventually the poet, already hailed as the New Poet in Gujarati who sang the songs of the poor and launched an embittered tirade against social anomalies and even the Almighty, migrated in 1945 with his family to Pondicherry to settle in the Sri Aurobindo Ashram never to return. The feeling among literary circles that his creative journey, seen in his finely sensitive poetry, full of compassion for have-nots, was coming to an end was not entirely unfounded as, in the long stretch of time following the publication of *Yātrā* (*The Journey*) in 1951, Sundaram gave no major work and slipped into a life of occult reticence. After his death in 1991, the poet's daughter published massive volumes of poetry corroborating Sri Aurobindo's philosophy of PurnaYoga that professed more solid and palatable transcendental truth, but unfortunately they miserably lacked the verve and vigor that enlivened his early work. Critical attempts have been made to explain away Sundaram's withdrawal from society and consequently from his commitment to literature as the poet's Mahabhinishkraman, the great departure in search of Truth. However, Dalit writers and critics have an altogether different view to offer. According to them, Sundaram could have become a trail-blazing proponent of *Bahujana Sahitya* (Literature of Masses) as he had done path-breaking work in the history of Gujarati literature by writing poems and short stories with activist overtones voicing his disenchantment with the existing social system and power politics. *Koyā Bhagat...* is an irate response of an intellectual with an egalitarian and catholic frame of mind to invidious man-made distinctions perpetrated in society in the name of caste, creed and class. Written in the style of traditional bhajans, the poems in this

collection blend together new way of expression and an absolutely radical subject. Before Sundaram the mediaeval poet Bhojo and later Dalpatram did aim a mild satire at social maladies by exploiting the bhajan form but Sundaram is officially the first singer to use the form of bhajan successfully as a vehicle to carry out his satiric, reformist intentions. To him, man is the supreme creation and everything should aim at his welfare. In the long Introduction to the collection the poet explains, "To whomsoever, God or his devotees, *Koyā Bhagat* addressed his speech, is inarguably liable to his love. He has affection for birds and animals, man and god, for everybody. The pain of all of them is his pain. *Koyā Bhagat* is practicing austerity to relieve that pain. But till date he has not attained the fruit. Thus this speech is nothing but a sort of simmering response consequent upon an absolute disgust with life." (Sundaram, *Koyā Bhagat*...) Blending oblique humour, mild satire and heart-rending tragedy, the poems like "Bhangadi", "Tran Pādoshī", "Inatalā", and "Pāndadi" render the reader face to face with the disturbing reality of our society where a wide unsurpassable valley of difference yawns between the rich and the poor. The poem "Bhangadi" ("The Bhangi Woman") presents sharp contrasting pictures of the rich and the poor in terms of profusion and paucity of the means of subsistence.

The *shethāni* wears a *chundadi*, | O a colourful *chundadi*, when she is no more living, | The *bhangadi* wears a *chundadi*, | O a colourful *chundadi*, in the procession of her son's wedding." (*Koyā Bhagat*...36)

What is really striking about this poem is the courage with which it employs a particularly derogatory community address, *bhangadi*, which outright signifies caste identity, as the title of the poem in colonial India, something which Sundaram becomes wary of uttering throughout the rest of his life whether in his creative works or in public interviews. In yet another story titled "Bidio" (Bidis), Sundaram offers a masterful rendering of the marginal life in realistic terms. It revolves around a day in the life of an untouchable family suffering the ostracization and oppression at the hands of people of privileged village communities. Two children, Chhitiyo and Fulki, go about the village picking smoked-out stubs of bidis and happen to beg away a full pack of cigarettes from a condescending *thakore*. Overjoyed, they run into their father, a sweeper by profession, on way home who cajoles the pack away from them with a promise of family-smoke in the evening. However, in the evening he returns home without his job (and without the cigarettes which he smoke away in frustration) thanks to the scheming headman. As he beats his grumpy children, his disconsolate wife chides him why he smoked away the children's cigarettes, to which he grumbles,

Let it alone! Bloody smokers lusting after cigarettes! *Bhangis* by birth and... ' snapped Hariyo and washed his hands. Amlī didn't eat anything and god knows why she poured water in the *chulo*, that day, like never before. (Bidio, 68)

Once again, in this story, Sundaram uninhibitedly engages with what M. S. S. Padian calls the explicit language of caste. In his insightful article, "One Step outside Modernity: Caste, Identity Politics and Public Sphere", Pandian brilliantly pins down the fact that in most of the upper

caste autobiographies, caste “masquerades as something else and makes its muted appearance.” (Pandian, “One Step outside Modernity...”) Referring to R. K. Narayan's autobiography, he says that Narayan maintains a diplomatic silence about his caste identity throughout the work because talking about caste incarcerates one supposedly in the realm of pre-modernity. Even when Narayan lets slip his caste identity at two places in his autobiography, he makes sure that caste and caste relations as they unfold are transcoded into something else. He explains, “Caste always belongs to someone else; it is somewhere else; it is of another time. The act of transcoding is the act of acknowledging and disavowing caste at once.” (Pandian, “OSOM...”) On the other hand, Dalit autobiographies openly engage with the issue of caste because for them self-definition of their identity is located explicitly in caste as a relational identity. The story “Bidio”, collected in his short story-collection *Piyasi*, becomes the harbinger of stark realism and a powerful pre-cursor to Dalit Movement on Gujarati literary landscape because it deals with issues of untouchability, the untouchables' lifestyle, their hopes, aspirations and subjection in times when India was still a colony, anti-colonial nationalism was in its heyday and in spite of Gandhian social-reformist movement aiming at eradicating untouchability, the identitarian politics of caste was written off by subsuming it in the domain of sovereign anti-colonial, elitist, national culture. It is to the credit of the poet, who hailed from the community of ironsmiths, to be the first writer to invoke in his works casteist issues and identitarian politics as the foundation stones of Indian society and to dare to talk publically about caste in its own terms without transcoding it into something else. But what is shockingly unnatural and even scandalizing is the fact that, after choosing to talk about caste in an explicit language and imparting it a socio-historical specificity, Sundaram not only turns dumb all of a sudden but blatantly explains away his reticence by pushing back caste into domain of sovereign national culture. It's not that Sundaram was not outraged by the invidious hierarchy along which Indian society was and is still organized. His sense of disgruntlement and horror are very well reflected in his early work as well as in the following interview conducted by Ramanlal Joshi in 1979 and telecast frequently on Ahmedabad radio thereafter. On being asked to reminisce about his childhood memories of Gujarat, the poet resorts to politically-correct language to talk about the system of *jati* which governed the rural society then. He recounts,

The society in Gujarat then was stratified as per the directives of *jati* and every human being carried along a distinct and unmistakable mark of his respective *jati* as he entered the social interaction. ...The economics of life lived in Gujarat was unmistakably organized. Farmers till the land, *baniyas* do business, Brahmins carry out rituals etc.; the working classes performed their respective duties efficiently and the *status of lower classes working as farmhands was quite distinctive.* (Joshi, “Kavi Sundaram ni Mulakat”)

The obvious purport of this circumlocutory statement is that in the poet's native village as well as in the entire state, the determination of professional aptitude was based exclusively on the dictates of the

prevalent system of social stratification and resultantly every human being was allocated a specific fixture in the socio-economic super-structure. Here one can see the poet's conscious effort to transcode caste into a euphemistic phrase "quite distinctive" as a way of acknowledging and disavowing it simultaneously. Before moving on to interrogate exactly what could have impelled the poet to resort to the alternative, transcoded language of (st)uttering caste, listening to the poet speak out in yet another interview on the issue of caste would be particularly worthwhile. Responding to "Questionnaire" conducted by Suresh Dalal in his edited volume called *Tapovan*, Sundaram connives at the appalling power-politics on which caste feeds in Indian socio-cultural context.

In such a society, our family was that of *Luhār* (ironsmith) which people contemptuously called '*Lawār*'. The salient typicality of the respectability or civilization, whatever you may please to name it, of that rural society was that nobody was addressed with a respectable title in it. Every single person would talk about other communities with utmost meanness. May be the air of '*Thakarāti Sanskruti*' (The Culture of *Thākardās*), that of the *Bāpus*, was limited to royal courts. But the fact that the nature of ordinary everyday affairs remained of this type, seems quite natural also because in it there is no burden of culture, sophistication or spurious development. In it, people live with natural ease. However, this all-pervasive air of contempt and disrespect really piqued me. But I kept on tolerating all these with a mysterious reticence. (Dalal, "Questionnaire")

In the above paradoxical statement, the poet confesses his disgruntlement with the canker of caste system, though somewhat reluctantly. The use of the phrase 'all-pervasive air of contempt and disrespect' insinuates to the poet's acute sense of disapprobation of the society and culture in which a human being has no respect for a fellow human being. Such a degraded society or corrupted culture sullied despicably with stratification is the gift of '*Thakarāti Sanskruti*' or in turn of the caste system. However, it's quite revealing that Sundaram, instead of criticizing the '*Thakarāti Sanskruti*' for having created such a disparate society, indirectly tries to endorse it by reasoning that it is quite natural, light and free from the burden of civilization and sophistication. What has kept Sundaram from becoming a trend-setting proponent of Dalit literature in Gujarati is admitted by him in the last sentence where he says that he stomachs all these contumelies and humiliations with mysterious reticence. This is where Sundaram seems to have missed the mark because the '*Thakarāti Sanskruti*' against which he had declared an open war by the medium of his writings is kept going and in fact is nourished by "the mysterious reticence" of the social subaltern. In plain terms, Sundaram, with his mysterious reticence, celebrated something, which he was committed to vociferate against and subvert. In his later work, quite expectedly, the tone of the poet underwent a *volte-face* from that of an activist trying to change the world, to a man who saw the way to salvation within himself and strove to show it to others. On being asked the reason behind not writing short fiction of the robust and committed variety in his later years, the poet doesn't mince words, "You know, to write those stories I have to go down, and I don't feel like going down." (Purani, "Sundaram – The poet")

If Sundaram's drastic shift in ideological leanings is laid against the backdrop of Althusser's concepts of ideology and subjectivity, it would probably yield some precious insights into the rationale behind it. As a Marxist cultural theorist, Althusser's brilliant cultural analysis examines complex interconnections between social structure, power and culture and the relationship between ideology and the roles and identities society creates for people that help to perpetuate social conditions favorable to capitalism. Althusser's seminal formulation posits that ideology i.e. dominant beliefs, values and norms in particular era construct and regulates, in subtle as well as obvious ways, subjectivity which refers to the roles, identities or subject positions that individuals willingly take on in society. The powerful sweep of ideology is all-pervasive and one cannot be unaware of the extent to which they determine our thoughts, behaviour and relations to others (Smith, *Cultural Theory: An Introduction*). Building on Marx's formulation of state as a machine of repression, Althusser further extrapolates the nuances of repressions in what he calls repressive state apparatus (RSA) and ideological state apparatus (ISA). Whereas RSAs, epitomized in the government, administration, army, police, courts and prisons, function for the most part by violence, ISAs, manifested in forms of organized religion, the education system, family unit, legal system, political parties, trade unions, media and the arts (Leitch, 1489) function primarily by ideology. Althusser further proposes that human subjectivities are transformed into the position of a subject through ideological mechanism of interpellation. (Chandler 181) Ideology works through ISRs too interpellate or construct individuals into particular subject positions in which an individual's actions, thoughts belief systems, speech and lifestyle benefit those who control the means of production.

A closer examination of the historical conditions under which the gross reversal in the Sundaram's value-system was brought about straightaway leads to the cultural domain as enunciated by Indian nationalism in its struggle against colonialism. An objective study of the ideological underpinnings of anticolonial nationalism impels one to postulate that the discourses of anticolonial nationalism and postcolonial national modernity negotiated the divide between the material and spiritual domains in such a peculiar manner that articulating caste and caste relations in public sphere came to be regarded as illegitimate and premodern respectively in these two eras. The contention here is that Sundaram gradually turned inarticulate about his "real" subaltern identity in deference to this dominant nationalist resolution which, being essentially elitist and exclusivist in character, declared caste as an invalid category in public sphere and national politics. The ideological apparatus interpellated and configured the lower castes into subject positions of the inadequate, lesser beings, filled them with silence and self-hate and constrained them to willingly undergo the processes of Sanskritization and to some extent Westernization. Let's look at this in greater detail.

In his influential formulation, Partha Chatterjee contends that in its struggle against colonial domination, anticolonial nationalism carved out the domain of culture or spirituality, the inner sphere, as the domain of sovereignty as against the material or outer domain which was endorsed

as a site of unmediated dominance. Of course, Chatterjee's contention invests the colonized with unprecedented political agency, but unfortunately, at the same time, imagines the domain of sovereignty as an undifferentiated, homogenous category. The inner domain of culture and spirituality which the nationalist so vehemently cherished was very often constructed in the absence and at the expense of subaltern social groups and marginalized communities like Dalits, women, linguistic minorities and tribals. "This is indeed the way the elite Indian nationalism scripted the story by working through the binaries of spiritual/material, inner/outer and valorizing the inner or spiritual as the uncolonised site of national selfhood. But it has a less triumphal implication for the subaltern classes." (Pandian, "OSOM...") What anticolonial nationalists upheld in the name of generic Indian cultural space was no different from the Culture of Thakaradas that Sundaram also so readily espoused i.e. the elitist, brahminic culture of Vedic civilization. The problem with this elite inner cultural space is that it neither takes into account the individuality of the cultural values, traditions and lifestyle of the subaltern communities to which Sundaram belonged nor does it set these social groups free from the casteist hierarchy in which they are frozen for ages. Thus, political valorization of elitist culture as *the* national culture in colonial India, on the one hand, constructed the lower castes as lesser beings or as "inadequate citizens-in-the-making" and "significantly delegitimized the language of caste in the domain of politics by annexing it as part of the cultural" (Pandian, "OSOM...") on the other. In the two interview excerpts quoted above, Sundaram is not only transcoding caste (by citing the deprived and oppressed living condition of the *lower classes as quite distinctive*), but also naturalizes it by pushing it in the inner domain of the national politics i.e. the cultural. He virtually speaks in the capacity of the upper caste custodian of the touted, elitist national culture in graphic contrast to what he promised to do as a young poet i.e. to navigate across the divide between the material and the spiritual so as to challenge the politics of exclusion played in the name of national culture, the way Ambedkar did it. It would be instructive here to take Gandhian notions on caste system as a reference point because in his early writings Sundaram admits of having been profoundly influenced by Gandhian philosophy. In general, the anticolonial nationalist discourse attempted to explain away and naturalize caste by taking recourse to the rhetoric of hygiene and the eternal law of Nature which logically divides labor. Though Gandhi opposed the practice of untouchability consistently throughout the last quarter-century of his life, his views in regard to some other aspects of the caste system fluctuated between the essentialist to the reconciliatory. In the early 1920s he held that the caste system, fixing people's "duties and occupations", was "a natural order of society" and that every Hindu "must follow the hereditary profession"; and "prohibition of intermarriage" between people of different varnas was "necessary for a rapid evolution of the soul" (Lindley, *Changes in Mahatma Gandhi's views on Caste and Intermarriage*). He says,

I believe that if Hindu society has been able to stand, it is because it is founded on the caste system... To destroy the caste system and adopt the Western European social system means that Hindus must give up

the principle of hereditary occupation which is the soul of the caste system... [The] hereditary principle is an eternal principle. To change it is to create disorder... It will be a chaos if every day a Brahmin is to be changed into a Shudra [a member of a caste in the lowest varna] and a Shudra is to be changed into a Brahmin. The caste system is a natural order of society... I am opposed to all those who are out to destroy the caste system. (Lindsey)

Even in the matter of the doctrine of untouchability, Gandhi seems to instruct in condescending tone the Harijans to stop eating beef and carrion as a necessary precondition for having the privilege of entering temple in particular and following Hinduism in general. In the letter addressed to R. B. Talegaonkar dated December 19, 1932, the Hinduism Gandhi upholds is typically brahministic and elitist, the one upheld by nationalist discourse of the time.

"Every Harijan knows that one of the essential conditions of being a good Hindu is to abstain from taking beef or carrion. Therefore my formula is that those Harijans who are in the habit of taking beef or carrion should be induced to give it up, irrespective of whether the temples are opened to them or not, pure vegetarianism is the ground that beef and carrion-eating is prohibited in Hinduism." (*The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, 237)

Elsewhere he seems to naturalize the evil of untouchability by laying it indirectly on the foundation of unhygienic eating and living practices of the Harijans born of their profession of carcass disposal. Oddly enough, he seems to promise emancipation to the untouchables by purification. In a brief letter written to N. Narayan Murthi on January 8, 1933, he congratulates the man for facilitating Harijan-entry into Sree Raghunath Swami Temple of Berhampore. He further says,

I take it that you are carrying on an agitation amongst Harijans for self-reform and for conforming to the common requisites of temple-entry - avoidance of beef and carrion, the taking of daily ablutions and the wearing of clean clothes. (*The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, 398)

Gandhi's pedagogic, reformist attitude towards untouchables implies and confirms an existing hierarchy of power between the untouchable and other high-caste Hindus and further facilitates perpetuation of the cycle of oppression. One can't here miss the inherent dichotomy in Gandhi's logic because the existing caste-system, espoused so idealistically by Gandhi himself, does not allow for the possibility of purification principally because their fundamental existence is rooted in the profession of filth, a profession which by the dictates of *varna* system could not be altered. The above discussion makes it easy to recognize that the inner life of the nation in the colonial era was too suffused with anti-casteist sentiments to make it possible for a Sundaram to mediate concepts of caste and identity in the language of caste in public sphere. As for the outer/material life on the other hand, in both colonial and postcolonial periods the benefits consequent upon the courting of western modernity, especially through English education, were concentrated in the Indian elite only. Such an iniquitous distribution of authority and power in the colonial era served to exclude the marginalized groups from the self-definition of national community as well as

structures of modernity. Even in the postcolonial era, when policy of reservation for backward classes and scheduled castes showed a great promise to improve their quality of life, the underdog could not be assimilated in the mainstream of national life and consequently lower castes and the language of caste got represented as *the other* of the modern. M. N. Srinivas's diachronic study of westernization in India summarily rejects the idea that lower castes fully or partially modernized under the influence of the colonialism.

Only a tiny fraction of the Indian population came into direct, fact-to-face contact with the British or other Europeans, and those who came into such contact did not always become a force for change. Indian servants of the British, for instance, probably wielded some influence among their kin groups and local caste groups but not among others. ...Similarly, converts to Christianity from Hinduism did not exercise much influence as a whole because first, these also came from the low castes, and second, the act of conversion often only changed the faith but not the customs, the general culture, or the standing of the converts in society. (Srinivas, 60)

Curiously enough, the nationalist discourse in colonial and postcolonial periods remained queerly elitist and defined highly polemical and complex concepts like culture and modernity simplistically and homogenously. This, in turn, led to the location of the subaltern outside the binaries of inner/outer, material/spiritual and proscription of the language of caste as collusive or pre-modern/backward. The condition of the postcolonial subaltern is very much akin to that of Bakha in Mulk Raj Anand's novel *Untouchable*. "He is clearly disenchanted by the confines that the class-system has imposed on him and attempts to appropriate himself amongst the ruling English-class. This produces, in effect, a state of double alienation. As a result, he is both rejected from his own culture, and repelled by the other." (Stracuzzi, *The Indelible Problem: Mulk Raj Anand and the Plight of Untouchability*). Caught in such self-gagging ideological trap, it should have been natural for Sundaram, as it would be for all lower castes, to adopt, at best, a diplomatic silence while articulating caste in public domain and to transcode it into a language of endorsement when compelled to (st)utter it. Sundaram's faith reversal is symptomatic, in a way, of general tendency of lower caste subjects to undergo the process of what Srinivas calls Sanskritization i.e. attempts by lower castes to trigger cultural mobility by adopting upper caste practices and beliefs and giving up those of their own considered to be impure by the higher castes. It is not without significance that in the Pondicherry period of his creativity, Sundaram turned to writing bhakti and meditative poetry only singing paeans to Aurobindo's philosophy of Purna Yoga, so much so that Gujarati criticism started placing him in the tradition of Bhakti Poetry alongside the likes of Narsinh Mehta and Mirabai. No doubt, Sundaram has written some wonderful poems of *premlakshana* bhakti as well as philosophical poems explication the relation of *atman* with *paramatman*, but if one fine morning, a researcher with indisputable evidence decides to call the poet's ideological shift as a tactic of scaling social ladder, some of us won't be surprised.

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**Children****- Rosaline Jamir**

Children!
 God's fairest creation
 Forever frisky
 Good health insurance,
 Cricketing the world more.
 They eternally question??
 Science on two legs!
 They who find
 Mother's love.... beauteous
 Father's touch... a beatitude
 They spell, Chastity.

Children!
 Refreshers of our senses
 Much we learnt from them
 Obedience from innocence
 Knowledge from ignorance
 Compassionate without
 reservations
 Charitable without options
 Ever in the awe!
 Of life,
 And what beholds!
 His, naked eye.

