

Limbs, Torsos, Gains, Losses, and the Art of Chiaroscuro

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We have all at some point contemplated gains and losses in our lives, weighed them against each other, and asked ourselves a series of rhetorical questions, even though we know that these are life puzzles there are no answers to. The questions are mere placebos to a restive mind and the enigmas the very *raison d'être* of human existence. How then, does one gauge this dichotomy – and moreover, is it so? Are two opposites not simply interchangeable facets of the same structure after all? And if so, why do both these entities have such different repercussions on our psyche? One is reminiscent of light, the other of darkness; one triumph, the other failure; and one evokes pictures of positivity, whilst the other has negative connotations.

Also, why is it that the gains we've spent years running after barely leave their marks on us but the vestiges of our losses cling to us all the time? Why do we lug our failures around, finding it difficult to let go of them? Is it because they have over the years developed phantom limbs and torsos upon our persons, having the power to bleed and throb just as any other body parts would do were we to try and wrench them away – and whose pains we experience at once, whenever placed in similar situations even as time goes by? V.S. Ramachandran, the renowned neuroscientist and author of *Phantoms in the Brain*, among other books, often talks about the various traumas we have been subjected to at certain points in our lives that oddly enough lie trapped in parts of our brain and whenever a similar situation occurs, they light up and drag us into that very state of being again. It does not really matter if the limbs feeling that

pain have long been amputated from our bodies. We still feel those physical excruciations that had afflicted them at one time. Is this because pain is really a manifestation of the memories stored in our minds somewhere?

This I feel holds especially true with emotional aches and suffering. As much as we like to think it, we are not all begrudging or wallowing people who cling to bygones knowingly, but we are mainly victims of our past wounds, our responses of course being directly proportional to the intensity of the pains felt at that earlier stage as well as the obduracy of the scars still left inside us. Traumas are symptomatic of loss, anguish, fear or other such malignant emotions and they mutate into mammoth brutes laying quiescent inside us yet incarcerating us in their invisible grip when roused; and they can grow alarmingly large over the years with the onslaught of added losses rather than shrinking to nothingness as one would have thought they would.

The pains and losses experienced during certain impressionable stages of our lives then are like landmines planted in different parts of our brain and we go about our lives treading gingerly around those ‘keep-off’ warning signs to avoid sparking explosions that bring us crashing down to our past anguishes. I often find myself musing over this thought and inciting further questions that seem not just unanswerable but are also at loggerheads with each other: Do these very losses dictate me all the time then? Am I a prisoner of my own wounds that refuse to heal but bleed at the slightest — or are they merely there to add depth and dimension to my overall emotional portraiture? Then again, would not an onslaught of gains without any loss whatsoever become null and void in the long run? Would they not become another of those status quo situations carrying on and on and on in perpetuity? We keep condemning our losses and wishing ourselves free of them but how meaningful would these much sought-after gains be if we did not know loss or failure or darkness?

Similarly, how can we know the relevance of sunlight if we have not walked our tunnels of darkness? And how can we be certain of sunshine being an idyllic state if we have nothing to weigh it against? Would it be as enchanting if that were all there ever was and without the interplay of shadows gaining in on it? Every state of being shares a symbiotic relationship with its counter-state and each is unable to exist without the other. Imagine a proverbial paradise where harmony stretches before you endlessly, where gains drown you in their bounty, where there’s no

pain, no fear, no loss, no darkness. I wonder if such a state after reaching that platitude of a happy *foreverness*, might not become its very own burden of predictableness.

The conscious or sometimes unconscious use of chiaroscuro in the paintings of Da Vinci, Caravaggio, Rubens, Rembrandt and such masters, reinforces the significance of the perfect equilibrium, the juxtaposition of light and shade, the so-called sublime balance, or the use of *repoussoir* and other techniques to attain that perfect visual and what the lay onlooker calls a beautiful piece of artwork or masterpiece. The greatest of artists themselves have very rarely delved into the scientific cause-and-effect of these techniques but know them viscerally – colours, shades, forms and formlessness – whilst producing their works; they feel it in their bones and cannot rest until they have transferred that inner calling of theirs upon their canvasses. It is their intuition, often referred to as *genius* that is at play and which so seamlessly produces works having poise, equipoise and extraordinary energy such as is seen in the works of Van Gogh or Picasso among others.

Da Vinci's *Virgin of the Rocks*, one of the earliest examples of chiaroscuro, perhaps accidental, perhaps reached at after much experiment as the great master was notorious for, holds us spellbound in its layered shadows, the gradations of smoky blackness in order to accentuate the luminescence of only what he wanted most to speak out to his viewers. The heavy-lidded gaze of the Madonna, the compassion glinting from her face and her eyes; the angel, beguiling almost in her exquisiteness; the infants John and Christ, sombre yet sublime; the blues, the browns, the blacks; the darker phallic rocks looming up behind them all; the robes, the water, the uterine grotto that births a celestial congregation effulgent against those shadow works behind it – a paradigm in itself of light redeeming an all-pervading darkness. Leonardo da Vinci was a seer when he said: *'The beginnings and ends of shadow lie between the light and darkness and may be infinitely diminished and infinitely increased. Shadow is the means by which bodies display their form. The forms of bodies could not be understood in detail but for shadow.'*

A 'forever Elysium' could then in this context be akin to the Kitsch art of the mid and late nineteenth century, an imitation of the Renaissance period and striking in its profusion of light, ornamentation, and splendour, until one gasps for breath, until one yearns the anonymity of shadows. The artists mushrooming around this era, steeped in the influence of the

earlier masters and their infatuation with them, failed however to grasp the significance of emptiness, of negative space, of darkness, of the beauty of silence punctuating non-stop prattle. They produced works that spoke of loveliness, splendour, and radiance alone, until there was a surfeit of it all, until beauty and magnificence became epithets for vulgarity.

I had no idea that *Lethe*, the mythical river of oblivion was merely an extension of its own manifestation of *Alethea*, the ‘unconcealed’, or the ‘truth’. Every seen has that unseen coiled about it; every rising stone its own uterine tomb that once birthed it; every masculine form its own feminine that finally completes it; every loss its own set of gains, concealed yet potent within us. A curious example of this interplay of opposites is the male and female in every aspect of our lives, in the animate of course but also the inanimate, the structures built and destroyed or those standing for centuries upon stretches of land in their *menhirs*, the pyramids, the phalluses. All these seem to assert their masculine presence overground whilst their unseen feminine equivalents lie below them in caverns, more commonly known as foundations to us all, which, besides guarding their age-long secrets of death, birth or living, hold them upright. What rises above is merely an extension of the profoundness of what lies beneath and neither would be better off without the other. In Indian philosophy, if it were not for the hidden femaleness or *Shakti*, embracing the darkness of her subterranean womb and darting like electricity everywhere, her energy pervasive, infusing life in her other half, there would hardly be that manifestation of the *Shiv-power* or maleness that tears the earth to rise upwards as the conspicuous part of a larger whole in the form of the archetypal *Shiv-ling*.

This male-female dynamic has been widely represented in the arts – painting, sculpture, music, dance, poetry and so on. Sometimes these two halves of a whole are represented visually. Sometimes the synergetic presence of one half is simply palpable, throbbing away like a heartbeat deep within though unseen to the naked eye. Both the manifested and the unmanifested entities are inseparable. An example of this is Anthony Gormley’s stupendous *Angel of the North* in Gateshead, England, made of Cor-ten steel weighing 208 tonnes, rising to a height of 20 metres and with its wings spanning 54 metres. The vertical ribs on its body and annexes not just reach out in an all-encompassing embrace from the hilltop it stands on but also allow it to withstand wind speeds of over 100 miles per hour by directing the air currents to its 20-metre-deep foundation

made of concrete piles which is in turn anchored to solid rock down under.

Would this splendid near-phallic sculpture rise erect and solid above the ground, without its cavernous other half propping it up from deep underground? Would the pines, walnuts and white oaks stand upright without their corresponding roots boring into the earth, sustaining them in more ways than one, buttressing their trunk, branches and foliage? Would mountains of gains accumulated over a lifetime be worth their weight in gold in the absence of losses to balance them against? Would a candle flame burst to its brightest if it were not cradled by its well of darkness below? Questions. More questions.

have you watched shadows
skitter in sunlight? or held
them in your palms and

set them free? have you wondered
why they choose never to leave? (Baoni)

Works Cited

Baoni, Rupam. <https://rupambaoni.com/project/18-oils-and-acrylics/>