

A Note on Poetic Craftsmanship in the Prefaces of Stephen Gill

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Abstract

This paper critically examines the poetic theory and craftsmanship articulated in the prefaces of Stephen Gill, a globally recognized poet, novelist, and critic whose works foreground harmony, human values, and spiritual resilience. Focusing on key texts such as *Songs Before Shrine*, *Shrine (Revised Edition)*, *Flashes*, and *The Flame*, the study explores Gill's conceptualization of poetry as an experiential, intellectual, and aesthetic practice that bridges inner consciousness with external reality. The paper highlights three central concerns in Gill's poetics: the definition and function of poetry, the essential qualities of ideal poetic expression, and the limitations inherent in poetic composition. Gill posits poetry as a medium of profound human experience, shaped by a dynamic interplay of inspiration and sustained intellectual labour, wherein "perspiration" outweighs mere spontaneity. His emphasis on beauty, precision of language, economy of expression, and freshness of imagery underscores a disciplined approach to poetic creation. At the same time, he critiques contemporary poetic practices for their reliance on clichés, lack of structural coherence, and insufficient revision. The study further situates Gill's ideas within broader critical traditions, drawing parallels with figures like John Dryden and T. S. Eliot, who also articulated literary principles through prefaces and essays. Ultimately, the paper argues that Gill's prefaces function as a significant theoretical corpus that not only reflects his own creative philosophy but also contributes to a larger discourse on poetic art, ethics, and craftsmanship. His vision of poetry as a vehicle of peace, catharsis, and spiritual liberation reinforces its enduring relevance in a fractured modern world.

Keywords: *Stephen Gill, Poetic Craftsmanship, Prefatory Criticism, Inspiration and Perspiration, Aesthetic Theory*

Stephen Gill, the globally recognized poet, novelist and critic, is also the poet of harmony and recreation of human feelings in the dead veins of humanity. His concern for the world, its people, their values and their conscience is the diadem of success on him. His literary career is already studded with several recognitions, awards and honours and his deep concern for the people around is visible in his poetry. Actually the literary oeuvres of the poets mirror their literary bent of mind and it is also indisputably true that 'with this key poets unlock their heart and soul' to their readers. The poetry of Stephen Gill is also no exception to this statement.

The prefaces of the books and especially of the books of poetry usually give a graphic glance in the psyche of a poet and have some instances or notes on writings an ideal poetry. Like

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Dryden or T.S. Eliot, Stephen Gill's criticism is chiefly in the form of prefaces where he both justifies his own poetic creations and propounds certain rules and regulations of writing ideal poetry. He is one of those chosen few poets of the world who besides, providing *spiritual solace* and *intellectual pabulum*, gives invaluable notes (both subjective and objective) on poetry and poetic craftsmanship. This paper focuses on the prefaces of Stephen Gill's major works titled *Shrine* (Revised Ed.), *Songs Before Shrine*, *Flashes* and *The Flame* wherein the poet has explored some unknown and untouched regions of poetry and its art and craft. Stephen Gill's mind is prone to writing of poetry since his childhood days so his sense of understanding poetry and its principals is much more mature than other poets. George Hines says:

He aspired to be a writer from his childhood... He used to write poetry also, which he never bothered to have published because he was never satisfied with his attempts.. Yet he was considered as a poet by his friends. (Stephen Gill and His Works, XXIV)

Stephen Gill considers poetry as the power to relieve the monotonousness of isolation and in more comprehensive term a way to be a mature poet. To him, poetry is a companion to cheer up while dolorousness pervades all-round. The poet, in his early life during his studies in India, found life of the people around him struggling under the trauma of Hindu-Muslim religious fanaticism, so poetry proved to be giving him consoling effects at that time. He himself says:

I saw the glass of peace being smashed into pieces when I was growing up in India. I developed the feeling of isolation, rootlessness and terror. The muscles of those feelings smashed the glass of my peace even during the early years of my life. (SBS Preface-VIII)

These quite contradictory situations brought him to the world of poetry. He says:

Lack of security in the land of those physicians led me to isolation in the early days that revealed to me the path of my poetic destination. I began to find ways to establish myself as a writer and poet. My struggle was based more on perspiration than inspiration. One can say that it was my inspiration that led me to perspiration. The shadows of inspiration and perspiration walked side by side with me everywhere. I grabbed every opportunity to sharpen my tools to be a better poet. (Flame14-15)

In his prefaces, Stephen Gill has raised two major points particularly, One - *what is poetry?* And the other - *What kind of the poetry must be?* Subsequently, he has also raised the limitations in poetry which to some extent let some fragments of expression remain intact from expressing them in poetic form. In this paper, the discussion will be on these three aspects of poetry focused by Stephen Gill in his prefaces. Gill informs that poetry is not different from life and has an active involvement with its time and its concerns. Poetry, according to him, is

the simplified version of complex situations. It is a medium between the poet's self and his surrounding milieu. In the preface of *The Flame* he states:

Poetry is an unusual experience that shakes a poet thoroughly. A poem is by a human for human about a deep inner experience that is symbolized through a language. To describe or illustrate, poets need tools and the struggle to master the use of the tools is perspiration. Through images and arrangement of words and other tools, poets convey their experiences to their readers." (Flame 18)

Although, experience and inspiration are the basis of penning poetry, the poet also holds perspiration more significant in the process of composing poems. O.P. Bhatnagar also supports labour in poetry and observes in the same manner:

Poetry is not magic the maneuverings of which can be acquired by smart tricks. It has to be worked on and work after, the labour of which is a virtue and fitness denied to saints and Gods. Sweating makes poetry more organic and less abstract and obtuse. For labour is the poetry of existence. (Vision And Voice, 4)

The concept of beauty in poetry has far-reaching effects. Gill considers language, words and images as enhancement to the beauty in poetry. Actually the poetic craftsmanship is a key of poetic beauty. The example of the God is nicely hinted by the poet. According to him good poetry is an intellectual exercise dipped in amazing words. So the concept of beauty in poetry is well described by Stephen Gill:

I believe there is beauty everywhere. That is what the Bible says in its story on the origin of the universe. After every creation, God said beautiful. There is beauty in every object and so is poetry. Beauty is poetry. (Flame 17)

His insistence on beauty in poetry can be sought out easily in each of his talk on poetry. He says:

Poetry is not only to convey that experience to readers, it is also to convey it in a beautiful way and that beautiful way should also be something like a new and delicious dish. (Flame 18)

The very striking point that the poet raises, is whether the powerful thoughts suddenly strike a poet's head and heart or he has to do a lot of brain jostling exercise for it. In its answer we may quote his words:

There is a myth that poetry strikes a poet like a flash, or it is a divine bolt. For a serious poet, it may be bolt and divine, but mostly it is cooking. (Flame 17)

Really, the divine bolt is a rare case for rare geniuses who always submerge themselves in the world of poetry, but in the case of common poets, thoughts do not come naturally to them. They have to commence on the path of mental labour. Famous critic Longinus in *On The Sublime* considers firstly natural thoughts which are coming naturally to a poet and secondly beautiful words, imagery and so forth. But those divine bolts can be used as they are, creating a sweep

in the poem and the excess of beautiful words, imagery, symbols, and difficult words create ostentation in an otherwise beautiful poem. So, giving a turn to the subject of creation of a fine verse, Gill tries to judge a poet's work by the ideal truth and power, the perfection and beauty of his presentation and utterance of it. Nevertheless, poetry is a cosmic awareness, out of which a poet can have the experiences, the universal beauty and consciousness to human psyche. It exhibits the growth of man's psychological motive and power in words and ideas that form the aesthetic expression of his soul and mind. Gill also says:

It is a poet who gives that god a shape with the beauty of the language. Language is a media between an object and poet that gives life, as God did when he created the universe with his words. What is important is a poem is the arrangement of words. This is an intellectual exercise that needs dipping into the amazing world of words. These efforts need the proper knowledge of the tools. (Flame18)

In his preface to *Songs before Shrine*, he states on the impact of experience on the poetic tools of an artist and, hard work as an inventory of the good poetry.

The tools of an artist keep changing while zigzagging down a labyrinth of experiences. When it is said that artists are born with talent, this implies to me that they have a natural aptitude for particular skills. These aptitudes or talents are rough diamonds to be chiseled and polished to become hard, bright, precious and flawless gems. Writing is a profession and the skill of every profession needs to be improved with hard work, patience and study. (SBS, VIII)

Again, the illustration of God is noticeable:

Artists strive to touch the highest pinnacle of perfection, but perfection is confined to the divine being who is the creator of the inheritors of his spark of creativity. Prominence is the result of years of labour in obscurity to find a market and an audience. (Ibid)

God is the eternal spirit of beauty and delight, so also is a poet who takes out the expressive raptures and high revelation of human psyche out of chaos and obscurity. The poet who creates is not only a maker of beautiful words and phrases, but also a spokesman of eternal spirit of beauty and delight.

For Gill, thoughts are the 'airy beings the robins of' his art. 'These robins are not meant to be caged. They are the words of freedom. They enjoy their freedom when poets send them to publications or present them in a book for the enjoyment of the reader.' He says:

Poets are wordsmiths who have knowledge and education about the tools that are used to cloth these airy being in a graceful way. This is an art. A person may be born with a propensity to be a poet, but that is not enough.

Propensity and talent is like a raw diamond that has to be chiseled and polished into a beautiful form. In order to acquire the knowledge of chiseling and polishing a poet needs work that I call perspiration. To

me poetry is seventy-five percent perspiration and twenty-five percent inspiration or talent. (Kafla Inter-continental 48)

To enhance the creativity in him, man must realize that he is the child of God, an apex creator of this vast universe.

Words are the roads to expression. They are the energy providing device for poems. Stephen Gill says:

Poets use words as rocks. History has proved it over and over again that words are the atoms of the nitroglycerin which are suffused with energy. The first poet was God who created the universe with His words. God created human in His own image. In other words, human is also creative. (SBS XX)

Words in poetry have the integral position. They sometimes assume the place of colours and sometimes of lyrics. A person of any stream can see the effect of words in each line of poetry. Sometimes, words become more than a word and become thought content as crucial to poetry. He is well aware of the multi-layered and multi-dimensional nature of poetry and poetic process. So, Stephen Gill thinks that success of poet depends to a large extent upon the right choice of words.

Poets have great love for words which they nourish with tenderness and give them unique personality. Words in poetry carry fine meaning and gather depth from a fix order of uncertainty enshrined in them which is the outcome of imaginative functioning of human intellect. Whenever a poet fails, it is due to ineffectual use of words. Poetry grows up with words with visionary values. Gill sees the importance of words in poetry from different angle and says:

Poets are painters who use words, instead of colours, or they are dancers, who use lyrics instead of using the movements of their hands, legs and facial expressions.

In addition to the arrangement of words, the most important of a poem is economy of expression. (Flame18)

In the last line, the poet simply suggests that the poet should use words verifying his intent in the poem avoiding the repetitiveness of the same expression with the help of different words. Emotional depth is considered as the hallmark of good poetry. According to him, the poem written with intensity of emotions always stumbles on the stones of typical or unnecessary words. So he says:

I believe that the language of poetry is more compact, energetic, of great intensity and emotional depth than the language of prose is, and it has no room for clichés and unnecessary words. Poetry is a villa of glorious shape where every brick that is chiseled in a unique way belongs to its exact spot. (SBS 7)

Poetry is a bridge from internal world to external one. The poet reflects on the world around him and registers his thoughts. The tools of poetry make the poet's ideas more compact and intellectual. Mental and intellectual labour make the poetry devoid of general lacks. In an interview to N. K. Agarwal, Gill discusses these tools and says:

I try to use fresh language and images, cautions to use allusions that are hackneyed. Trite expressions are often used in Indian English literature, such as Ram Rajya, apple's eyes, at a stone throw, a faithful friend, Mother nature, leave no stone unturned, wear and tear, axe to grind, nip in the bud and many more. These are worn out phrases. Sometimes, original expressions may be obscure to the reader and may prove enigmatic. (Kafila Inter-continental, 49)

For him, while composing poem, language and expression are worth noticing. The poet reflects his soul's self, felt and experienced and its reaction to the objects of external world.

To express something in sensible way, a poet needs intellectual element that is the foundation of poetry. He emphasizes to include intellect in poetry to make people 'think and envision things' afresh and alive. He is of the view that all that guides the poet is the intellectual aspect--the involvement with issues, values, morals in life. He says:

Poetry is an art of expression and expression differs as does the appearance of individuals. When a person perceives an object --beautiful or ugly-- it produces a reaction or feelings. Those feelings, reactions or sentiments, are formless. A poet expresses those formless objects in a sensible form. One can use a cliché that is easy and needs no effect, but there is no inventiveness in its use. One can find new ways and modes to express the object. That needs real effort. This is called individual approach- a distinctive element-fresh memorable piece of art. Such a treatment needs intellectual exercise. (Ibid, 49-50)

Besides, giving his own concept of poetry in his prefaces, Stephen Gill also mentions the shortcomings prevalent in modern poetry. New poets are just writing their thoughts without measuring their adaptability to the basic principles of poetry.

His own approach to poetry is not of enjoying his ideas and considering it as *art for art's sake* but poetry has a motto behind it. He is the harbinger of peace, hope and harmony. He has seen a lot of violence, destruction and terrorism. So, he says:

Poetry is to present my vision and my concerns and to conceive peace in a peaceful way. The compelling influence for my crusade is the peace that is beauty, the peace that is creative; the peace that makes life meaningful. I attempt to illustrate that peace in its myriads forms on the rocks of my words. These rocks shout that Lazarus buried under them longs for life. (SBS XXI)

The inquiring eye of Stephen Gill brings forth some limitations in poetry which are frequently found as patches in an otherwise good poetry. These limitations find more space when one tries to compose a long poem that requires the limited range of words, images, thoughts, symbols and expressions. He states:

One problem that a poet usually encounters in a long poem is the possibility of repetition of words and phrases. Another is maintenance of logical flow and continuity. I am a proverbial enemy of clichés though some are animating and some may creep in without my being aware of them. I believe that poet should use fresh images. I have tried to use every word carefully as a brick to build the edifice..." (Flame 9)

So, the short comings in modern poetry are:

Repetition of words and phrases.

Lack of the maintenance of logical flow and continuity.

Use of clichés.

Lack of fresh images.

Lack of revisions.

Lack of special knowledge to use tools of poetry.

He feels that often poets do not review their own creations because it is trying calling and needs an observant eye. He says:

A poet should never be tired of revisions. A time comes when a poem would tell when to stop. Sometimes poets have to stop revision because they get tired of what leads them nowhere, even knowing that the poem needs extra work. In such situations, I put my poem aside to take it up some other day unexpectedly. This procedure works in most cases with most poets. Often poets will know themselves if a poem needs further work. It is like knowing when the stomach is full." (Flame 17)

He also suggests that in case of non-satisfaction one can 'consult an editor' also. Besides, suggesting the techniques and modes of doing good poetry, he also shares his own experiences in this field with his readers with complete honesty.

There is clarity and transparency in his self-developed theory of poetry. He accepts that besides inspiration, all labour depends on the poet and says:

I began to find ways to establish myself as a writer and poet. My struggle was based more on perspiration than inspiration. One can say that it was my inspiration that led me to perspiration. The shadows of

inspiration and perspiration walked side by side with me everywhere. I grabbed every opportunity to sharpen my tools to be a better poet. (Flame 14-15)

According to him, the rules of poetry are to be strictly followed.

They must not be sacrificed on the altar of propagation of poet's views. Views are the soul of poetry but they must be expressed in a suitable form to express the inner- self of the poet. If this process is done successfully, it can be called spiritual liberation unmistakingly. So, he says:

Poetry is an art I do not try to break rules of the art for the sake of the propagation of my views. I am a votary of beauty and beauty is peace. I use poetry also to escape. I feel relieved when I clean the glasses of the self to glimpse a panoramic view of a new Island. I am at my best when my fingers tingle and arms begin to cry. That is the time when I feel happy that I am able to communicate better with the inner self and give birth to my thoughts and feelings. I call this process a type of spiritual liberation.” (SBS XXI)

He feels that the mode of expression varies from man to man because every one sees and reacts to a thing according to his nature and ‘in a sensible form’. Each creative mind has its own individual approach. Perhaps this is the reason that so many new forms of poetry have been in vogue i.e. Tanka, Haiku, Quatrains and Rondel.

Stephen Gill has always tried to explore something new in the field of poetry. His poetry collection *Flashes* is a ‘trilliums in haiku spirit’. He has well narrated its traditional form and the short history of Haiku. According to him, ‘the ignorance of the original shape of haiku has helped to develop its variety.’ The history of Haiku in Japan is also that of the constant changes. He favours change in Haiku's traditional form:

Most creative artists are not satisfied adhering to established norms, because they want their work to be more unique and personal. This applies to Haiku writers as well. Yet, I am not against established norms as long as they serve some useful purpose. Otherwise, it would become boring to follow the pointless practice of travelling again and again along the same beaten path. It is like trying to fly in a cage.” (Flashes, 8)

And he suggests the poets interested in Haiku with proper examples to accept any change in its form ‘with open arms’ and says:

We know stagnant waters become breeding grounds for mosquitoes-anything that becomes stale will soon start to stink. It is in the interest of its health to let haiku breath in fresh air. No one should be afraid of change or experimentation. If haiku is alive today, it is largely due to its flexibility to allow new trends to be incorporated into it.”(Ibid)

He also advises the poets that they should not ‘repeat one element again and again without any purpose’ because it ‘makes the writing dull’. Secondly, they should use telegraphic language because ‘brevity is the soul of poetry’ but they should not use it without any reason. He also feels some relaxation in the process of composing Haiku.

He feels that ‘there is no need to revise again and again to get rid of articles and verbs without any purpose’. Because of the absence of articles and verbs the meaning is always somewhat confusing that takes away the beauty from poetry. A poet is actually a medium between his self and his surroundings. It is an inner and tangible conversation so it has always an appeal that creates a magnetic effect in it. It is open and artistically secular and expressive of all forms of human expression. The poor quality of creativity in poetry also arises out of the insensitivity of the poet to the time and surroundings. He says:

A poet has to manage an unmanageable horse of emotions that needs skills, guidance and control to be able to achieve smooth efficient operation of a poem. In order to achieve this object, a poet needs time to work in different ways to bring those feelings out... it demands devotion, skill and professionalism.”
(Kafla Inter-continental 50)

His idea of poetry is significantly different from that of the other contemporary poets in English. He plans his poems on the basis of idea that appeal to him from time to time. It is a self conscious craft emerging from long contemplation.

For him, poetry is a fortress in which he can roam and strengthen himself with complete sacredness. By giving illustrations from his personal life, he makes the poets realize that poetry can expel the darkness from human life that prick and coax them each time. He summarizes the whole sacred motto of poetry and says:

I breathe in the fortress of poetry under the roof of security. Within its genial walls I strengthen the feathers of my pen around the fire of beauty while the demons of daily life surround its entrance of sacredness. I have stopped drinking because of my muse. I have learnt to co-exist with the pangs of the invisible enemies of tension. Nightmares still bother me but poetry opens a gate to calmness from the neurotic world that is full of theatrical despair. Poetry opens a window to breathe the mystical power of catharsis that purifies my emotions about the mirage of the images of my early life.” (SBS XXI)

Thus, the prefaces of Stephen Gill speak volumes of the art and poetic-craftsmanship, definition of poetry, its prevalent limitations and consequent suggestions. Intellectual element is also highlighted in poetry. He doesn’t feel that poet’s are different from common man. They are also ‘anxious to share their experiences in order to forge a line of communication that enhances

their pleasure'. He also emphasizes the poets to publish their work. The poetry which leads to no expansion of vision frustrates the functions of both mind and poetry.

Each tool of the poetry must be used in balance to make it better. If a good poem is created, it makes the poet feel the paradise, so, he says in his poem 'The World of Poetry':

The world of poetry
Is woven with rainbow strings
52... Essays on the Poetry of Stephen Gill
Stored in the secret caves of desires
To recreate
The source of that supreme grace
That evolves
In the womb of solitary hours
During the creative nights of its conception. (SBS 40)

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