

Tagore
and the
romantic
ideology



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BALDEV SINGH

This book was first conceived as a research thesis under the guidance of the late Professor N. K. Sidhanta of Lucknow University. In some aspects the author makes a conscious departure from the old and formal tradition, when Tagore's most erudite critics naturally read his work in the original Bengali, with the result that most of them were overwhelmed by the Master's critical method of exposition and reinterpreted him in his own literary terms.

The author, on the contrary, has deliberately avoided a general interpretation of the poet's creed, and confined himself to an analysis of a specific and hitherto unstudied aspect of Tagore's work. The reader's attention is not exclusively fixed on Tagore's poetic genius but also drawn to the cultural forces that nurtured it. Generous use has been made of untapped source material, notably *Bharati*, the family journal of Rabindranath, to support the break from traditional concepts.

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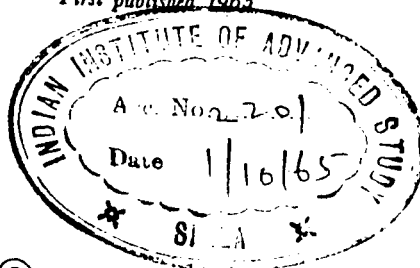
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The object of this study is to analyse the similarities between the ideology of Romanticism and the poetic outlook of Rabindranath in the first phase of his writing, which ended with *Chitra*. The formulation of his basic concepts is seen in relation to the general transformation of taste and thought which resulted from English education. Rabindranath's work is particularly suited to such a study because not only did he possess more social awareness than the average poet, but he was also one of those literary apostles through whom the collective sensibility of a race achieves its highest integration of outlook which the era allows. He is one of the immortals like Valmiki, Dante, Goethe, and Hafiz because he moulded as well as mirrored the mind of an age. The scope of this book is limited to his early writings because this span of his work is most relevant for various reasons. First, it was the outcome of the most impressionable period of his life, secondly, it was distinctly romantic in outlook, and thirdly, it easily lends itself to a self-contained study, as it completes in itself a significant stage in his poetic evolution.

To make the analysis intensive instead of comprehensive, fiction and drama have been excluded from it but his speculative writings have been used to elaborate his poetic concepts.

Barring a few, all passages quoted from Rabindranath have been rendered into English by the writer, because only a few famous poems of this period have been translated, mostly by the poet himself. These are more of re-written verse than translations and, therefore, not adequate for the kind of documentation needed in this work. In the translations used here a deliberate effort has been made to render the original as literally as possible so that its intellectual content is accurately reflected even if they fail thereby to catch the lyricism of the original.

Bengali words have been transliterated phonetically because this is simpler and generally does not lead to any ambiguity although it may lead to inconsistencies such as the same text having for an identical letter two different phonetical equivalents, particularly in words common to Sanskrit and Bengali.

The references to Rabindranath's works are to the first edition of *Rabindra Rachnavali* of 1361. References to the two volumes containing his juvenile writings, which were published apart from the series, as *Aprachalita* are denoted by the abbreviation (A).

This work is bound to suffer, like all comparative studies involving European literature that are undertaken in India, from the inaccessibility of the latest reference material. No Indian library possess more than a handful of works on European Romanticism, a subject on which bibliographical lists run into thousands. It is some consolation, therefore, that the main subject of this essay is Rabindranath and not an interpretation of Romanticism.

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“আমারে বলে যে ওরা রোম্যান্টিক ।

সে কথা মানিয়া লই

রসতীর্থ-পথের পথিক ।

মোর উত্তরীয়ে

রঙ লাগিয়েছি, প্রিয়ে ।”

.(নবজাতক)

THAT the cultural florescence in Bengal during the nineteenth century was a direct consequence of Western education is universally acknowledged and so also is the fact that of all its golden harvest Rabindranath was the finest fruit, but there is a singular lack of studies which relate the final fruition to the potent seed. There can be many reasons for this. First, there is the overwhelming quality of his genius; he created single-handed a new idiom not only in all the forms of literature but also in the music and education of his race. That creativeness of such merit should be attributed more to the qualities that are there in a genius *per se* than to historical factors is understandable, particularly in a country prone to apothecise its great men. It is not accidental that its foremost poet was called 'Gurudev' and its most celebrated political leader, 'Mahatma'. In the prolific crop of critical writing on Rabindranath there is a notable preponderance of adulation and sheer admiration.

Ideologically all the post-British reformatory movements, the Brahmo Samaj and Arya Samaj among the Hindus, the Aligarh Movement among the Muslims, and the Singh Sabha among the Sikhs were inspired by English education and the example of the Christian Church. Their common objective was to re-interpret their respective religious traditions in terms

of contemporary outlook, just as Christianity had been in the West, and posit it against the proselytising onslaughts of Christianity. This phase was followed by the gradual rise of political nationalism with the concomitant nostalgia for past racial glory. In the early decades of the twentieth century all Indian savants proclaimed with genuine conviction that although the West was materially their superior at the time, spiritually it had to learn from the East. This, for instance, was the burden of Iqbal's poetry. During the period when Rabindranath was being internationally glorified, he spoke as a seer-poet from the East offering the enlightenment of an ancient civilization to the West humbled by the spiritual debacle of the First World War.

The acceptance of this ostensible role of Rabindranath by the majority of his critics has detracted attention from the historical fact that the mind of the Indian intelligentsia had for decades preceding him been preoccupied with the analysis and comparison of two highly-developed civilizations and they could not help but work out in the process an amalgamation of the two. A set of new values had been created which were consistent with local tradition to the extent that their breach with the past was not noticed and were so imbued with the new learning that the intelligentsia, almost exclusively educated through English text-books, could adopt them without feeling isolated from the illiterate masses around them.

The creation of such a cultural pattern is perhaps the most significant result of English rule and it should deeply interest scholars of comparative cultures. The processes by which these readjustments were effected in the case of a great literary genius is the subject of this book.

Although the contribution of Rabindranath is phenomenal in many cultural spheres, his most important rôle may still be the formulation of a comprehensive and consistent *weltanschauung* for the new educated Indian. This prototype grew

up in a peculiar situation. He was born into a home where formalised rituals which originated thousands of years ago were still diligently practised, and he was taught in school, mainly through the medium of a foreign language, the ideals of an industrial civilization. To make such a twain meet calls for the highest intellectual and artistic resources.

To thus visualise Rabindranath as an intellectual Janus facing both East and West is not to question his cultural integrity, but on the contrary to stress the sincerity with which he voiced the understanding and aspirations of his epoch. No writer of Bengali, a language replete with Sanskrit usage, could escape the impress of the past, and how overwhelming it was is illustrated in writers like Madhusudan, a convert not only to Westernism but to Christianity, who paradoxically infused a new life into Hindu mythology. It would be equally preposterous on the other hand to imply that Rabindranath remained wholly uninfluenced by his intensive study of English literature. In fact, English education had modified the attitude of his generation in every aspect of life, and their outlook needed crystallization to form new collective ideals. This ideology was not imitative but spontaneous and true to both its sources. It was this new orientation in Indian culture, which Rabindranath affected and consolidated through an unparalleled variety of artistic media.

This work, then, is not directly concerned with the qualities of Rabindranath's artistic genius as with the transformation of cultural values as they obtained in the work of a universally accepted *littérateur* and thinker. For a study of this kind the talent of a writer is relevant to the extent it leads to an authentic representation of a collective viewpoint.

A few words need to be said about the inherent limitations of an analysis like the present. The genesis of art also follows the pattern of biology, the fruit comes at the end of a complex process of transformation of earth, rain and sun into tissue

and tendril. The student of botany has, of course, a definite advantage over the critic in the demonstrable accuracy of his analysis, the processes which produce a leaf being more verifiable than those which converted parts of *Paradise Lost*, Bartram's *Travels in North and South Carolina*, and Maurice's *History of Hindostan* into *Kublai Khan*, or the eighteen sources of a hundred and forty lines of *The Waste Land* quoted by its poet. To give an instance from Rabindranath, let us take his verse from *Manasi* :

I am the night, you are the flower.
As you blossomed the dawn approached
And my time came to an end

(*Sesh Uphar*)

It recalled to the mind of Kshiti Mohan Sen the famous Rig Vedic hymn :

The bright and beautiful dawn has arrived.
Night, her black sister, slips aside from the path
And in tears bids adieu to the glorious Dawn¹

It could recall to the mind of another critic the well-known Persian verse :

I light the lamp of life, you are the dawn of loveliness.
I yearn but cannot see your face,
Being so close to you yet so far that I cry,
"A union with you I dare not hope,
And your separation I cannot bear."

He could bring in external evidence to support this. The probability of this verse having been heard by Rabindranath in some literary discussion in the family is equally good because it was connected with a romantic episode of Nadir Shah's invasion, and the Maharishi, who was fond of Persian verse,

¹ *Visva Bharati Quarterly*, Tagore Birthday Number, 1941, p. 242.

would have known it. Of course, the chances are that Rabindranath's lines owed nothing to either source. An image like this could occur to any poet without any external suggestion. A mere comparison of isolated lines, therefore, is of no significance unless it is supported by a broader identity of sentiment and literary idiom.

The subject of this work has been presented, therefore, by juxtaposing Rabindranath's viewpoint on a subject with the traditional approach to it, and to whatever extent possible supported with the reasons which made the transition from the one to the other imperative. That is why it has been necessary to recount briefly the sociological changes which conditioned the cultural movements of the time and the unique position of the Tagores in the renaissance.

WHENEVER the word 'Romanticism' has to be used with any precision it has to be qualified because few words in criticism have led to such persistent controversy. The necessity of hazarding one's own definition, despite the impatience one feels, while doing so, is best illustrated in the remark of Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch:

I think, if you look into 'Classicism' and 'Romanticism' for yourselves, with your open eyes you will find—though the whole pother about their difference amounts to nothing that need trouble a healthy man—it amounts to this; some men have naturally a sense for form stronger than their sense of colour, some men have a sense of colour stronger than their sense of form.....All things considered, I advise that it may help our minds to earn our honest living if we discuss the terms 'classic' and 'romantic' out of our vocabulary for a while.¹

This view in its turn is contradicted by Abercrombie, who holds quite plausibly that attention to form is not incompatible with Romanticism.

The word 'Romanticism' emerged from the spontaneous identification of the movement with its most noticeable formal feature, and thereby became its first definition. Smith's

¹ Crane Brinton, *Political Ideas of the Romanticists*, p.3.

Four Words gives a classic analysis of the origin of the word. Heine and Sismondi called it the reawakening of the Middle Ages and Christianity; Hugo, the rise of the 'grotesque'—the word having a special connotation in his time—but he lived to realise the limitation of this definition and call it 'liberation in literature' and the even more vague 'mot de guerre'. In recent years Hugo's original definition would seem to have been revised by Beer. Of course, he further qualifies it as also having the element of 'the magical and the sense of mystery' that distinguishes such poems as *La Belle Dame Sans Merci* and *The Ancient Mariner*, with a further adaptation to cover the poetry of Wordsworth. So it is with other definitions, such as 'the renascence of Wonder' or 'return to nature'. Important exceptions challenge all these definitions not because they are incorrect but because they are only partial. A search for some unifying principle is inevitable but no single formula, however brilliantly conceived, could encompass all the diverse elements of an artistic movement which affected all the arts and spread over an entire continent.

In the Romanticist's pursuit of the strange, the exotic, and the ideal, the common denominator is the avoidance of the matter of fact and the conventional. Also it is unquestioned that the Romantic poet treated his own vision of life as sacrosanct and when he depicted reality it was tinged with its rainbow hues. Eliot considers these aspects the most distinctive of Romanticism. More or less, the same view is elaborated by Fairchild when he says:

Romanticism is the endeavour in the face of growing factual obstacles, to devise, retain or justify that illusioned view of the universe and human life which is produced by an imaginative fusion of the familiar and the strange, the known and the unknown, the real and the ideal, the finite and the infinite, the material and the supernatural.

These definitions and some of the best known key phrases defining Romanticism, such as, 'the triumph of self', 'the emancipation of the ego', and 'the revolt of emotion against reason' support the general summation of Abercrombie that if one does not enter into a subtle philosophical discussion as to what is 'inner' and 'outer' in consciousness, the romantic state is one in which the 'inner' dominates the 'outer'. Generally no critic could repudiate this broad definition but important variations occur in interpreting the romantic 'inwardness' according to different psychological principles. For instance, to one school the distinction between classicism and romanticism is 'mainly of degree, depending on the strictness with which if we may call them so, the reality principles and the super ego, control and censor such emanations from the unconscious mind'. The realistic writer tends to sacrifice everything to his sense of reality. The classicist, while ruthless towards some forms of unreality in the name of 'good sense', elaborately cultivates others in the name of 'good taste'. His impulses and phantasy are much more dominated by a social ideal formed under the pressure of a finely civilised class. Cazamian calls it a 'mass paramensia' under the effects of which the artistic consciousness undergoes something akin to the disruption of the mimetic order, and by regressing into a past state attains the sense of 'wonder' and 'mystery'.

Invaluable though these analyses of the genesis of the word 'romantic' are, they could not, without stretching the arguments too far, explain the ideological complexities of the movement.

It would not be easy to correlate idealism, naturalism, pantheism, and the melancholy of Romanticism to a single psychological process except in the broadest sense.

Even granting that Romanticism drew upon a single motivating principle, the variety of its expression is no less

significant than its unity. In each country the movement developed its own poetic idiom and had among its exponents the widest range of temperaments. The return to medievalism and Christianity distinguished it in Germany, just as worship of nature and beauty did in England. It would be therefore best to accept Fairchild's recommendation and define Romanticism as the sum of the elements that were characteristic of English poetry between the years 1780-1830. These elements are best enumerated by Bush as follows:

A change from a mechanical conception of the world to an enthusiastic religion of nature, from rational writing to emotional sensibility, from realism to optimism, from acceptance of things as they are to faith in progress, from contentment with urban civilisation to sentimental primitivism, from traditional doctrines of literary imitation to the conceptions, of the naive and original, from the poetic preoccupation with the normal, the true and the actual, to dream of the strange, the beautiful and the ideal.

This definition of Romanticism is unimpeachable because it is satisfied only with describing it and sets out clearly the various facets of Romantic ideology with which the following pages will be occupied.

THE BACKGROUND OF MODERN BENGALI TASTE

THE transformation of Bengali taste in the nineteenth century, which includes both stylistic habits and literary ideals, is an aspect of the general revaluations following the intricate reorientation of social life effected by English rule and its more important sequel, English education. It cannot be intelligently studied apart from its background, and so a brief resumé of its significant features is called for here. The basic sociological change was the transfer of social leadership from the agrarian aristocracy, hitherto bearers of the traditional culture, to a middle class bureaucracy informed with a new social incentive and inspired by an exotic vision. Politically this transposition may be dated with the Permanent Settlement, when the feudal nobility, already sick and decayed at the end of the eighteenth century, was shattered at a blow, and gave place to a struggling mass of progressive young men connected with the Company's services, led by a group of enterprising traders, some of whom had grown fabulously rich as agents to the Company. They filled the cultural vacuum created by the disappearance of the dismembered nobility; the new 'zemindari' that took the place of the old, could not play that rôle because it was more a

class of pensioners under royal patronage than a set of natural leaders.

The list of the leaders of the era is instructive for each figure repeats the same vocational history: all belonged to the Government services. Vidyasagar was in the Education Department, Dinabandhu Mitra in the Postal Service, Bankim Chandra was a Deputy Collector, and Harish Chandra Mukherjee, who drafted the first memorandum to Parliament for constitutional reforms, was an official in the Military Audit Department. Mukherjee illustrates the dynamism that impelled the enterprise of this class; individual talent was allowed opportunities of expansion because the old hierarchy of vested privileges had broken down and the selection of fresh leadership was on merit. He was a representative 'new' man, rising from humble birth and a salary of ten rupees a month to, the then considerable, four hundred a month and the editorship of *The Hindu Patriot*. Gurudas Banerjee, Taraknath Palit and Rash Behari Ghosh were all candidates for the Indian Civil Service. The earliest political demands voiced the urgent need of this group, namely a greater share in the Governmental offices.¹

The presence of this class is felt in the third and fourth decades of the century in occurrences as widely different as the establishment of the Brahmo Samaj in 1825, and the revolt of the colourful 'Decozio Group'. Its emergence has all the urgency of socially imperative events. In less than two decades it grew from a protesting minority into the most dominating section of society.² Both its association with

¹ 'In the sixties of the last century, and even earlier, the efforts of our national leaders were directed to securing for the people of India an adequate share of the higher offices of trust and responsibility under the Government.'

Surendranath Banerjee.

² The social effectiveness of the two groups, the old and the new, and the rise of the influence of the one at the cost of the other may be studied in the struggle which took place in the public institutions of the time. The conservative group was sufficiently strong to turn down the proposal to include

the administration of the country and its assimilation of the new outlook continued to deepen up to the end of the century. The renaissance of the sixties used the energies released by this expansion. As a new-born class it owed no loyalty to the culture of the last court, as the aristocracy did, and did not, therefore, resist the social habit of the new rulers, to whom it was affiliated as a junior partner in their bureaucracy, and related by the common ideology of English education.

English education, the greatest single factor contributing to this ideological metamorphosis, had a phenomenal expansion. The thin stream that had started with the Serampore Mission and the David Hare Academy acquired considerable proportions in the second decade of the nineteenth century with the sudden upsurge of missionary work and to combat its proselytizing influence, the establishment of the Hindu College further swelled this type of education. It became a veritable inundation in the fourth decade when the momentous decision was taken to make English the language of the courts.

Under the pressure of these compelling agencies the indigenous civilisation underwent a radical reorganisation. New forms of collective life intruded upon the cultural pattern and these re-orientations show in all its aspects. The theatre and the Western 'social' hurriedly ousted cultural institutions such as the musical soirée, the *akh dai*, *tappa* and *nautch* sittings. The function of these sittings was not merely entertainment but they served as nuclei for the practice of most of the fine arts, music, poetry and dance.

Ram Mohan Roy because of his views in the Managing Committee of the Hindu College. By the time the Society for Acquisition of General Knowledge came to be established, the contending forces had become equal, resulting in a stalemate that paralysed the Society. By the thirties the scales had already turned in favour of the dissenters. Their paper, *The Indian Patriot*, had attained the widest circulation in Bengal.

The private theatricals became significant social events.¹ The debating clubs and political associations which sprang up like mushrooms at this time were anti-authoritarian by their very nature, and encroached upon fields which were hitherto the exclusive charge of the organisation of the Hindu Church. The new configuration of collective life had clearly crystallized before the middle of the Century.

Significant though the influence of these institutions on public consciousness was, the really fundamental changes were effected by the intellectual content of the new education. The rationalistic scepticism which has characterised western thought since the French Revolution, the theory of Evolution and the comparative viewpoints of the new social sciences, completely reconstituted the ideological foundations. Its most momentous consequence was the revision of the Hindu *weltanschauung*, up till then embodied in the comprehensive, though none too precise, tenets of *dharma*, which extorted duties of worship and conduct with the strictest authority. By merely presenting a different set of values, English education worked a reformation which challenged the infallibility of this tradition. The old structure was defenceless against the onslaught simply because any effort to justify it implied a comparison and discussion of the two points of view, and that in itself struck at the roots of traditional authority. The sanction of belief, having once shifted from tradition to individual judgment, its acceptance or rejection became a matter of individual conscience. It would be relevant here to trace the sympathies of the Bengali mind placed between the two contending outlooks.

The first response to the West was intense admiration. Even the legendary Vidyasagar called the Englishman superior

¹The description of the private stage at Jorasanko by Abanindranath Tagore shows the incidence of this innovation on the family life of the élite. See *Gharoa*.

'in eating, drinking, standing, in short in all spheres of life'. That this was not an accidental remark but an expression of the natural enthusiasm which the impact of western civilization engendered in the first generation of Indian reformers is shown by an identical remark made by Sir Syed Ahmed, who a little later led a similar cultural renaissance in the Muslim community.¹ How sure the intelligentsia felt of their ground in their worship of the West can be judged from the audacity with which they openly advocated western views on subjects such as wine drinking. Drinking was not an unknown practice in India, but it had never had the social approval and currency that it had in the West. The core of the new élite, the alumni of the Hindu College, did not only drink but, what is more significant, publicly commended the habit. The minutes of an alumni meeting record a speech, part of which reads:

That wine is an abomination and that drinking is a great sin has been the belief in this country, but we cannot but condemn this belief as erroneous. Can the practice, so common among the most intelligent and civilised nation of the world, be but highly salutary and therefore commendable?

Such frivolities hastened the reaction which was bound to follow, because the saner minds among the intelligentsia could not fail to realise for long that a race's culture may be renovated but can never be replaced. The conservatives were already up in arms against this threat of complete cultural annihilation and such excesses started the alienation of the soberer elements among the progressives. Those of

¹Sir Syed Ahmed wrote in 1869: 'Without flattering the English I can say that the natives of India, high and low, merchants and shopkeepers, educated and illiterate, when contrasted with the English in education, manner and uprightness, are as like them as a dirty animal is to an able and handsome man.....All good things, spiritual, and worldly, which should be found in man have been bestowed by the Almighty on Europe and specially England.' O'Malley, *Impact of the West*, p.786.

them who had crossed the seas as pilgrims to the New Mecca, had also seen the clay feet of their idol. These factors, considerably helped by the regional patriotism which is the inescapable inheritance of western education, initiated a movement in the opposite direction.

The middle of the Century saw the tide turn. The organisation of the Temperance Movement, and the Jatiya Gaurab Sabha, which forbade the very use of an English word at the cost of a fine, are evidence of a rising protest against a demoralised servility. An era of vigorous revivalism set in, which preoccupied the Bengali mind throughout the second half of the Century, occasionally overdoing its purpose, as in the extravagances of the Hindu movement, but being amply justified by its main fruition in the works of Madhusudan, Bankim Chandra and Rabindranath.

Its most significant phase, called 'the period of reform and pro-vedantism' in the chronology of Western influence, focussed on the essential synthesis of Hindu and Western thought.¹ Hinduism could not be dispensed with, like the faith of the Zulus; on the other hand some of its social and ritualistic practices were intolerable to the reawakened conscience of the educated. The social and theological aspects of these restatements of belief figured separately into movements, led respectively by Vidyasagar and the Brahmo Samaj. Vidyasagar demonstrated the absence of scriptural sanction for practices such as polygamy, forced widowhood and sacrificial worship, and appealed for their eradication. The genre of popular drama following *Kulin Sarbasav* was inspired by his reformatory zeal which dominated the period.

Brahmoism effected a similar break in theology. It stood against idolatry and moved the godhead from the mythological pantheon to the pantheistic monism of the Upanishad.

¹ H. N. Das Gupta, *Western Influence on Nineteenth-Century Bengali Poetry*, p. xxviii.

Above all it admitted the fallibility of the Vedas and rejected almost all forms of traditional ritual.¹ Its services with their choir and organ were strongly reminiscent of Christian worship; the re-enactment of the Mass in some of the services organised by Keshub Chandra in the last phase of the Sadharan Samaj disconcerted some of his staunchest followers. Brahmoism was, more or less, an intellectual creed, with almost complete absence of dogma, except a monotheistic reservation, and repudiation of all formal accretions. Its freedom of conscience amounted to a sober eclecticism. So one could not impute to this religion much direct Western influence in doctrine because it had hardly any, but the principles which now defined religion were imported. Generally speaking, Western influence on Hinduism was more obvious in its social aspects than in theological. Western education had compelled 'Hinduism to restate its fundamentals in terms of world thought.'² Perhaps the reverse, that it was a restatement of the contemporary world thought in terms of Hinduism, would be more true.

The next period under Bankim Chandra's domination was informed with a wider awareness of Hindu civilization. This revivalism had naturally stronger literary proclivities, which expressed themselves in Bankim's fiction as the purest historical romanticism. His novels conjured up a glorious vision of the Hindu past, and through them he goaded his countrymen to a renaissance through which Hindu

¹When the students returned in a few years and gave out the results of their study of sacred books, there was much discussion in the Samaj on the infallible authority of the Vedas and finally the doctrine was given up. It was agreed that the Vedas, the Upanishads, and other ancient writings were not to be accepted as infallible guides, that reason and conscience were to be supreme authority, and the teachings of the scriptures were to be accepted in so far as they harmonised with the light within us'. W. S. Sarma, *'Renaissance of Hinduism' in the Nineteenth Century and the Twentieth Century*, p. 96.

²S. Radhakrishnan, *Hinduism and the West*, p.350.

culture was to be recreated.¹ For instance, Krishna ceases to be a deity to be worshipped, or an *Avatara* to be meditated upon, or a symbol of poetic eroticism, or even the subtle metaphysician of the Gita. His new significance was as an example of the ideal man during the most highly-developed period of Hindu history. Bankim Chandra was otherwise a positivist with a theistic reservation, professing almost a utilitarian view of human well-being. Like all the other savants he was decisively in favour of ruthless reform of Hindu social practices, but his emphasis was conditioned by his rôle as a writer. In his view revitalised history alone could rejuvenate the race; the past was needed both for psychological reassurance and cultural regeneration. 'A race that had no history could not live.' He succeeded in reassuring his people and teaching them to justify their heritage, which proved the foremost inspiration of literary activity for the next two decades, finally exhausting itself in banalities towards the end of the Neo-Hindu Movement.

The complex transformation of sensibility effected by English education is nowhere more graphically illustrated than in the formulation of the new literary taste. That Bengali literature was completely reshaped by the impact of the West is borne out by every history of the language. The extent and nature of this influence has been a subject of appraisal for nearly a century now; and lately there have also been some detailed studies on the subject. The progress of taste is always a difficult trail to follow and the pursuit becomes harder when the period under analysis is one like

¹ 'Those who polished the stone like this were they Hindus like us?.....then I recalled the (real) Hindus and to my mind came Upanishads, Gita, Ramayana, Mahabharata, Kumar Sambhava, Sakuntala, Panini, Katyana, Sankhya, Patanjali, Vedanta, Baisesak, all these are the glory of the Hindu, what is this clay, the idol. Then I felt that this life has been fulfilled by being born a Hindu.' Quoted from Bimal Chandra Sinha, *Sahitya-O-Samaj*, p.300.

the first half of the nineteenth century in Bengal, with its entire cultural gamut in a state of flux.

It is apparent that some exotic forms, such as the novel, the essay and the sonnet, had come into the language for the first time and having no indigenous precedents were frankly modelled on the English originals. Certain revaluations in taste were implicit in their very acceptance. Even in the case of forms that had well-established local traditions, such as drama and heroic poetry, the tendency was to select western prototypes. Each major poet from Madhusudan to Hem Chandra had his own European model, but that did not involve any essential conversion of literary outlook.

European literature offered a very wide range for selection and these writers were free to choose as their model anyone from Homer to Tennyson. In fact the gradual transformation of taste can be traced in the corresponding change of the Western models of the representative Bengali writers of the century. Pope and Dryden were the favourites of the thirties. Akshay Dutta toiled over these poets in school; it was possible for a literary man of Rev. Bannerjee's calibre to declare in public that these two poets deserved greater attention than the Hindu scriptures. English literary taste had outgrown these poets over half a century earlier and their anachronous popularity in Bengal was an evidence of lingering affinities of the Bengali literary mind with the quasi-classicism of Bharatchandra's period.

When the sensibility nurtured by contemporaneous Bengal turned to English literature, it instinctively selected the Augustans because they came nearest to what the Bengali was used to: just as a Sanskrit Pundit, even today, prefers Milton to Keats. It shows the continuity of Bengali taste more than its conversion. The transition is noticeable in the change from

this pronounced admiration for Pope and Dryden, to Madhusudan's eulogy to Milton.¹

Madhusudan was emphatically Western in his form; he would 'write, or rather wish to write, as a Greek would have done'; to his themes he would 'engraft the exquisite graces of the Greek mythology'. Hindu *dramatis personae* figured in his heroic poetry but their epical rôles had a strictly Miltonic configuration. The religious motive of the character of Rama in the Hindu epic is completely absent; in fact Madhusudan had an open hatred for 'Rama and his rabble'; his hero was Ravana, impelled by a different dramatic purpose, which was to err and find retribution on a lofty scale, like Satan and Faust. His work was derived from and addressed to the new sensibility.² Despite his outspoken repudiation of Sanskrit models and allegiance to Western 'ideas and modes of thought', his essential taste derived from his schooling in the Indian classics. English education, uninfluenced by such a training, would have inculcated more contemporary preferences. In other words his literary outlook would have been romantic rather than classical because 'Classicism was not a temperamental necessity to him as it was to Milton. His *Atam Bilap* evinces a characteristic romantic ego which had immense lyrical potentialities, and his epics were not isolated efflorescences as those of Milton, but were part of a literary genre which had a natural span of life and petered out to a natural death in works like *Brihatra Samhara*.

¹'Nothing can be better than Milton; many say that he licks Kalidasa; I have no objection to that. I do not think it is impossible to equal Virgil and Tasso, glorious still they are mortal poets; Milton is divine'. Madhusudan's Autobiography, p.191. Quoted from P. R. Sen, *Western Influence on Bengali Literature*.

²'I am writing for that portion of my countrymen, who think as I think, whose minds have been, more or less, imbued with Western ideas and modes of thinking, and it is my intention to throw off the fetters forged by servile admiration of everything Sanskrit.' *Jiban Charit*, p.67. Quoted from P. R. Sen, *Western Influence on Bengali Literature*.

Bengali poetry caught up with contemporary English literary ideals in Biharilal whose advent marks the beginning of the modern period. Tagore dates the birth of the new lyrical literature not with the passionate sonnets of Madhusudan but the introvert verse of Biharilal, which first appeared in *Abodhbandhu*. 'If *Bangodarshan* was the dawn of the new literature, *Abodhbandhu* was its morning star.'¹

Biharilal's complete repudiation of ornate diction (practised more scrupulously by him than by the enunciator of the principle) that poetry should cast away 'the bracelets and snuff boxes' of diction, his pastoral vision of nature with fawns and cataracts, his yearning love for the felicity of the peasant's life, his universal spirit of love, and finally his personification of beauty in the myth of Sarda throned on the 'lotus seat' as the 'light of the world', leaves no doubt about the sources of his poetic inspiration. There are not many romantic dogmas missing in this poetry. H. M. Das Gupta has documented that *Prem Prabahini*, the poem in which Biharilal's poetic thought first crystallized, owed much to Shelley in general and in particular to poems such as *Hymn to Intellectual Beauty*.²

The poetry of this period, despite classical diversions, came to be regarded as essentially the outcome of the poet's subjective life, and was responsible to it alone. The sanctity of inner life was comprehended in an inclusive concept of freedom from mechanical rationality, from social tyranny, and from formalism in culture, seeking its fulfilment in a state of nature of both the individual and society.

The Romantic Movement was re-enacted in its full variegation. Biharilal established its poetic principles, Hem and Nobin put on it the red cap of humanitarian emancipation,

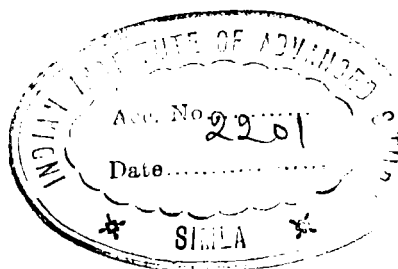
¹*Rabindra Rachnavali*, vol. IX, p.412.

²H. M. Das Gupta, *Western Influence in Nineteenth-Century Bengali Poetry*, pp.105-6.

a symbol which has accompanied it since the French Revolution. The poetic mind is seen to be growing gradually more introspective, the fanciful subjectivity of Biharilal yielded to a shriller passion in poems such as *Udbh'ranta Prem*, which Sir Brijendra Seal counted as one of the greatest romantic poems in any language. Medieval mystery and supernaturalism, two of the strongest charms of European Romanticism, are offered in *Chayamoyee*, despite its obvious emulation of the *Divinia Commedia*. Hem Chandra's iconoclastic zeal and Nobin's vehement patriotism are strongly reminiscent of the emancipatory verse of the minor Romanticists. The resemblance of some of Hem's patriotic songs to those of Campbell, James Thompson and Alfred Austin do not appear to have been accidental.¹ Byronic banter and dramatised patriotism are fully realised in the *Plasseyer Yuddha*, which not only took over the metre and manner of *Childe Harold*, but also the talisman of its luck: it was the most popular poem of the period. Thus romantic characteristics all appear *à la mode*: idyllic ruralism in Biharilal, a passionate social sense in Hem and Nobin, and the backward glance towards the medieval and distant in Hem; yet the integrated spirit of Romanticism flourished not in poetry but in the fiction of Bankim Chandra.

His historical fiction was no imitation, but it unmistakably reminds one of the Waverley novels; the approach was identical in the concept of the hero, in the notions of chivalry and above all in the pageantry of the action. His first triad of novels evoked a fantasy of the past replete with sworn loves, chivalry and the occult. It was a sheer feast of romance. It is true that his domestic stories introduced the conflict of character and temperamental incompatibilities but the approach never became analytical, it remained imaginative.

¹H. M. Das Gupta, *Western Influence in Nineteenth-Century Bengali Poetry*, p. 2 xxx.



The halo of emotion which he had thrown around the past now limned Bengal's daily life and his vision possessed his contemporaries. Of course, in the last phase his moral preoccupations with the Gita's 'desire-free action' encroach upon his art with a purposiveness which is external to it, recalling the incursion of ethics into the later works of Tolstoy. His direct debts to English literature, sometimes acknowledged, as in the case of *Ragini*, are not relevant to our analysis because their formative influence was negligible. Bankim Chandra owed much more to the general spirit of Romanticism than to any single writer, much less to Lytton or Wilkie Collins.

It is clear from the foregoing analysis that the first half of the nineteenth century was in every respect a turning point in Bengali culture. New influences played upon the entire gamut of life and the changes they effected were fundamental and comprehensive. The socio-economic pattern of life, the intellectual and artistic concepts, and religious outlook were all modified. The vociferous controversies of the time are evidence of the seriousness of the issues involved.

The fruitfulness of the period was largely the outcome of the balance that was maintained between the revival of the national heritage and its restatement in terms of recent enlightenment. Though Ravana was paraded in the costume of Satan his presence had never been more keenly felt; Krishna lost the halo of an *avtara*, but the significance of his message was never more deeply revered. These examples symbolize the spirit of the renaissance; everything traditional was revived with a fanatical zeal but was also completely recast to conform to a new set of values. Bankim Chandra's fiction was, for instance, a nostalgic glorification of the Hindu past on the one hand, and on the other it was an equally ardent affirmation of a distinctly exotic creed, namely Romanticism.

In the field of literature the most notable feature was the gradual transformation of taste from the extreme formalism of Bengali poetry at the end of the eighteenth century to a fairly orthodox romanticism by the middle of the nineteenth. This was not, however, a slavish imitation of the English revival but was the natural outcome of the vigorous aspirations of a nascent sensibility born out of the sudden collapse of old traditions. In such a situation some form of Romanticism was inevitable; the accessibility of the English example only made it the most convenient example to follow.

THE TAGORES of the later half of the nineteenth century could serve as a measure of the Bengali renaissance in all its manifestations in literature, drama, music, and manners. Nilmoni Thakur was the first to make a fortune under the East India Company and the family retained its prominent position in the new aristocracy under Dwarka Nath, whose lavish ways had earned him the title of 'Prince'. The Tagores were the Florentines of Bengal, who had imbibed the spirit of a new learning which blossomed in full glory in the poetry of Rabindranath and the paintings of Abanindranath.

A breach with orthodoxy is traced back as a family tradition to the 'Pirali' incident, when, some generations earlier, they had shocked their Brahmin brotherhood by accepting a Muslim preceptor. Since then they had been branded 'Pirali' Brahmins. They proved even more precocious to the new influences after the coming of the English. As an enlightened convert to the Western outlook, Dwarka Nath was second in eminence only to Ram Mohan Roy, whom he stood by at the first parting of the ways between the Raja and the conservative Hindus. The 'Prince' was one of the first Indians to visit England. As a member of the illusively

named 'Bango-Bhasa Prakashka Sabha' he was associated with the first political stirrings under the influence of European liberalism. Later, he actively led the 'Bhumi Adhikari Sabha', to which he was instrumental in bringing the famous George Thompson. After his death Devendranath took his place in these associations.

Devendranath was the first Indian to try for the formation of an all-India political organisation. The family organised the Swadeshi Mela, the earliest expression of economic patriotism which was destined to acquire historical proportions under Mahatma Gandhi. This association of the family with the political aspirations of the new intelligentsia continued for three generations; Rabindranath is said to have walked miles barefoot with the demonstrators singing his famous song composed for the occasion in the intense days of the partition of Bengal.

Brahmoism, which presented the Hindu outlook in terms of modern thought, was the creed of the family. The movement was headed by Devendranath who remained the leader of one of its major factions till his death. It was a period of intense intellectual struggle between traditional religious thought and modern ideas. The scions of the family must have been very familiar with the polemics preceding the New Dispensation, which freely ranged from Toaism, Vedanta, Christianity to Postivism.

Modern journalism and theatre came to the family with the establishment of the 'Tattvabodhini Patrika' and the private stage at Jorasankho. Dutta and Raj NarayanTarkaratna first practised their crafts on this stage. Jyotindranath experimented with new forms in drama, music and even a national dress.¹ The family contributed some of the out-

¹My brother began to busy himself with a national costume for all India, and submitted various designs to the association. The Dhoti was not deemed businesslike, trousers were too foreign, so he hit upon a compromise which considerably detracted from the dhoti while failing to improve the trousers.

standing works of the transitional period such as *Swapna Priyan* and the dramas of Jyotindranath. The leaders of the renaissance, Vidyasagar, Dutta, Biharilal and Bankim Chandra were familiar figures in the family.

In such an environment it is difficult to isolate any distinct threads of European influence. The family was devoted to the cultivation of Bengali literature but the subjects of their literary discussion were usually Shakespeare, Moliere, Goethe and Browning.

In this atmosphere, highly charged with new concepts, Rabindranath was born in the year 1861, which nearly dates the beginning of modern Bengali literature. In his *Reminiscences* Rabindranath narrates the evolution of his sensibility in relation to this environment.

His first literary memories are a folk-poem with the image of a flooded river and the readings from the *Kritibas Ramayana*. His study of the English language started almost along with that of Bengali. His primary education included modern subjects like geography and physiology. Richard A. Proctor's book is said to have been the text-book of the lessons in astronomy given by the Maharishi to his son. The more important teaching by the Maharishi were his discourses on Parley's tales, in which the distinction between the altruistic teachings evinced in the lives of the great men of the West and the spiritual values of their Indian counterparts were explained to a lad of twelve.

That is to say that the trousers were decorated with the addition of a false dhoti fold in front and behind. the fearsome thing that resulted from combining a turban with a sola-topee our most enthusiastic member would not have had the temerity to call ornamental. No person of ordinary courage could have dared it, but my brother unflinchingly wore the complete suit in broad daylight passing through the house of an afternoon to the carriage awaiting outside, indifferent to the stare of relation or friend, doorkeeper or coachman. There may be many a brave Indian ready to die for his country, but there are but few, I am sure, who even for the good of the nation would face the public street in such pan-Indian garb.' Rabindranath Tagore, *Reminiscences*, p.143.

The young Rabindranath's curriculum for the vernacular included *Meghnad-badha* in Bengali and *Kumar Sambhava* in the Classics also the traditional *Vidya Sunder* and *Kadambari*. His school course shows an all-round list of subjects, including elements of Latin. His most poignant memories are bitterness against bullying and the callousness of teachers in general, with the refreshing memories of a few sympathetic ones; he is delighted by the experiments of science, a trait strongly reminiscent of the young Shelley, who remained his favourite romantic poet for long. In his tutorial work at home he was made to translate *Macbeth* and *The Vicar of Wakefield*. It is apparent that he underwent a rigorous schooling which provided adequate introduction to both Indian and English literature.

His study of English literature, although sporadic, was extensive. There is little of importance in English literature which he did not read at some time or other. He started his formal study like all students with the Anglo-Saxon period and his essay on the subject in the *Bharati* of 1878 strictly follows Scott James' *History of English Literature*.¹ There is a more detailed essay on the Anglo-Normans dealing with the medieval concepts of honour and chivalry, the significance of the figures of Mary and Satan in the Christianity of the time and the social picture enacted in 'Piers the Plowman'. He translated some fifty lines of Anglo-Norman poetry, and commented on the bloodthirsty passions and the unforgiving rivalry of the ancient warriors. His *Rudra Chanda* was written at the same time and may have been inspired by such studies. From among the English works of the Renaissance period, *Religio Medici* was a text in his school in England and there is at least one long passage from Marlowe quoted in an essay. Most of his biographers maintain that he was very well read in Shakespeare.

¹Prabhat Kumar Mukherjee, *Rabindra Jibani*, p.71.

It is difficult to say whether he was intimate with the Restoration writers. They are hardly mentioned in his early writings. Lesny tells us that he read Milton while in England; he quoted only once from *Paradise Lost*. There is certain evidence of his having selected *The Vicar of Wakefield* and Addison's *Cato* from the literature of that period.

He knew the Romantics much more intimately.¹ Chatterton's story had a strong influence on him and his ruse to write under the pseudonym of Bhanu Singh is strongly reminiscent of it. The approach of his essay on Chatterton follows Vigny's play. Although he translated only two of his poems from *Inge and Elinsore* and *Christ*, he may have read more.

Burns comes to be translated quite frequently in the Editorial Section. Verses from major Romantic poets like Wordsworth and Coleridge are occasionally selected. Even examples of Nature poetry are not taken from Wordsworth. He is quoted only once and even then to illustrate imprecise cosmic imagery. Keats is never mentioned, although Rabindranath knew his important poems. According to Lesny he read Byron while he was in London. There are translations by him of two stanzas from *Childe Harold* and a comment on Byron's restlessness of spirit in one of his essays.

The one Romantic poet who overwhelmed Rabindranath was Shelley, whom he seems to have read extensively. He was particularly fond of *Epipsychidion* from which he often quoted, and he translated sixty-one lines from it into Bengali. The translations published in *Sharps and Flats* include a rendering of the *Stanzas written in Dejection*. He also translated *Love's Philosophy* and *The Wanderers*. In the essay *Why the*

¹An old associate recounted that Rabindranath later 'freely admitted that the impetus to poetical production came in major part from Wordsworth and the early Victorians whom he admired in his youth. He enlarged with themes and qualities drawn from Hindu sources.' 'Comments on Tagore Memorial Meeting', *Indian Art & Lit.*, II Issue for 1941, India Society, London.

Bengali is not a Poet: the examples of English Nature poetry cited are from Shelley's the *Woodman and the Nightingale*, *Epipsychidion* and *The Sensitive Plant*. The references to *Non-dualism and Modern English Poets* show that Ranindranath was acquainted with at least two of Shelley's longer poems *Hellas* and *Adonais*. There is also a quotation from *Queen Mab* in the essay. Rabindranath certainly was familiar with *Alastor* before he wrote *Kabi Kahini*.

Among the lesser Romantics Moore interested him the most. While he was in England he even tried to learn some of Moore's original airs, and he rendered some five poems into Bengali; the translations of Moore appearing in the *Bharati* of 1784 Magh are considered to be by Rabindranath.

Of the later nineteenth-century poets he used superlative terms of admiration for Robert Buchanan. He translated pieces from Christina Rossetti, Mrs. Browning, Swinburne, Edwin and Matthew Arnold. Tennyson comes in for serious study, particularly his philosophic poems like *In Memoriam*. *De Profundis* is analysed in a separate essay in the *Bharati*.

There were a host of lesser poets now forgotten, like Myers, Webster, Hood, and Marston, whose verses were gleaned by him for the readers of *Bharati*.

The Latin Rabindranath learned in Calcutta and then in London does not seem to have gone far. There are fifty lines quoted from the *Iliad* in his review of *Meghnadbadh*. In his essay on Dante and Beatrice in the *Bharati* of 1878 the story of the poet's life is narrated at some length and some lines from *Vita Nuova* and *Divina Commedia* are translated. Yet later in life he categorically stated that 'Dante remained a closed book' to him.

In the same year he wrote, not too enthusiastically, some six pages on *Petrarch and Laura* with Bengali translations of ten sonnets. His knowledge of more recent European classics

was better. He wrote about Goethe's love affair in the *Bharati* of 1878. He had read Heine in the original 'like a man walking in sleep crossing unknown paths with ease' and he found 'immense pleasure' in it. His German was good enough to allow him a 'comfortable' passage through Goethe's *Faust*, but he did not claim 'intimacy' with it.¹

There is no evidence to show that he knew sufficient French to read the masters in original. Many members of the Tagore family were at home in the language. Moliere was one of the subjects discussed in the family's literary group. The Bengali translation of one of his plays appeared in the *Bharati*. Rabindranath translated five small pieces from Victor Hugo and wrote a review of Gautier's *Madame Maupont*. He has narrated how deeply the idyll of St. Bernard's *Paul and Virginia* had effected him.

The wider reading public discovered Rabindranath after the award of the Nobel Prize, during the *Gitanjali* and *Gitanmalaya* phase of his writing. The deep humanity and the biblical simplicity of their diction made them the voice of an Eastern holy man evoking the spiritual resurrection of a war-torn world. It is with considerable mental effort that one travels back along the path which one had followed from the opposite end when, about a century earlier, we were at the receiving end of a similar message from the West. The mind of the entire Indian intelligentsia had turned a complete half circle.

The most notable feature of this transformation of outlook is the effort of the best minds of the country to accept all that was vital in contemporary Western thought without completely rejecting the concepts of their ancient and rigidly patterned civilization. It was more like a grafted branch of an old tree, which yields a new flower without other visible changes in the tree. The awareness of this basic intellectual problem of the renaissance is evident even in his

¹Rabindranath Tagore, *Religion of Man*, p.31.

adolescent writings. The soundness of his judgement in selecting the right elements from the two contending cultures and welding them into a pattern at once modern and Indian, has been a significant aspect of his greatness.

During the period under study here, i.e. the last decades of the nineteenth century, he stressed the need to naturalize the vital aspects of Western culture, admiring it in his younger days with the frankness of youth and pleading for it more persuasively later. He defended it against even a giant like Bankim Chandra.

The old numbers of the *Bharati* offer a continuous record of the intellectual nascence of a genius. The declared policy of the *Bharati* was, 'we mean to impartially draw on any country in matters of knowledge (*gyan-alochana*) but while dealing with sentiments (*bhava-alochana*) we shall view ours with greater indulgence.' This has been also the approach of Rabindranath, all along.

While picking up the threads of this evolution we have to start with the first number of the *Bharati*, and the frequently quoted *The Hope and the Despair of the Bengali*.

In acquiring wealth through commerce knowledge is also gained. Thus the country benefits from the riches of other races and learns by assimilation of their knowledge. That is why I maintain that our poverty, and an uncharitable government is not working entirely to our detriment, on the other hand it will be a blessing in the long run.

In the year 1878 Rabindranath started on his abortive visit to England. The nostalgia for home which brought him back without completing any course of study, and the somewhat critical tone of the *Letters of a Sojourner in Europe*, which was later described by him as a youthful posture of superiority, do not detract from his general admiration for the West. He returned early in 1880 and in the Aswin num-

ber of the *Bharati* appeared the vehemently pro-western 'Why the Bengali is not a Poet', with an undisguised bias to prove that the Englishman was in every way superior to the Bengali. It starts with the words. 'Why only say "we are not poets", in fact, we are nothing, neither poets, nor philosophers, nor scientists.' It is followed by a page full of eulogy of the English character. He even approved of the readiness of the Englishman to roll up his sleeves in situations where the Bengali normally resorted to abuse.

These were the days that saw the beginning of the New Hindu Movement with the publication of the *Prachar*. Rabindranath entered the controversy with natural ardour. He upheld without restraint the revision in poetic outlook brought by English education. He says:

In fact, due to the influence of English education, suddenly a current of great change has burst into the calm and placid waters of Bengali society, some banks of this society are falling and others are being formed. The earth around some of the most deep rooted beliefs are being washed away and hundreds of new beliefs are taking new roots. When so much outside and inside us is falling topsyturvy should we even then remain tied to the strings of ancient poetry, disregarding all sense of time and space. It would be extremely unnatural to expect that such a tremendous change would have no effect on our poetry.¹

Of course, he was not blind to the various forms of 'Cant' which a slavish imitation of the West had introduced into Bengal's social life. He described it with the devastating image:

European Culture is a doll which squeals at when pressed at the belly and we are constantly making it squeal and we dance to the noise with perfect solemnity.²

The writings of Rabindranath which appeared in the

¹*Bharati*, 1289, p.259.

²*Bharati*, 1290, p.540.

Bharati in 1881 are of immense importance to any study of the formation of his outlook. During this year he produced his first musical drama, wrote his first complete novel, and made his first public speech. Three-fourths of *The Bharati* of the year was filled with his writings. These contained his views on a wide range of subjects and we see the emergence of a coherent *weltanschauung*, which seemed deeply influenced by the West in all its aspects.

In the Jacisth issue appears 'The True Spouse' expounding his concept of love, which directly draws on English poetry with extensive extracts from Shelley, Arnold, Rossetti and O'Shaughnessy.

The Shravan number carries an impassioned defence of contemporary poetry and culture, which originated from scientific knowledge, democratic concepts and industrial advancement. The acceptance of its values was both desirable and inevitable.

There is also a discussion on Romantic melancholy and its self-conscious parading by poets like Byron. In the next number the Romantic concept of imagination as the primary source of poetry is introduced with an English illustration.

Two months later came the long essay on *De Profundis*, which according to him was a greater poem than even *Paradise Lost*. The profound effect this poem had on Rabindranath's religious outlook is discussed later in the book. Here we have to point out only that there are few intellectual issues that were discussed in these pages, and they all carry the strong impact of the West.

In the Aswin number of the *Bharati* the pantheistic monism of Shelley, Arnold, and Tennyson is shown to be vedantic, in 'Nondualism and modern English Poets'. The common factors between Indian monism and the pantheism of English poetry discussed in this essay remained the core of his philosophic outlook, albeit acquiring new propensities at different

times, a vaishnava devotionism in the *Gitanjali* period and a Bergsonian slant in his hymns to the *elan vital* in the *Balaka* phase.

The same number contained his note on the aesthetics of music based on Spenser's *The Origin and Foundation of Music*. More significant than the theory of music was the effect of Western music, the opera form of which found such a successful exposition in *Valmiki Pratibha*. Indira Devi narrates his fondness for the popular English songs of the period.

My memory in this case goes as far back as England in the seventies, when we were tiny tots and my uncle used to sing "Won't you tell me Mollic darling?" and "Darling, you are growing old" to us.....Later when I was old enough to accompany him on the piano "Come into the garden Maud". "Good-bye sweetheart" and "In the gloaming" were some of the songs he used to sing.¹

In the *Magh* number the origin of the arts is again described in which the emotive and connotative aspects of language are analysed with a reference to Arnold's *Epilogues* defining the nature of the different fine arts. There are also detailed discussions on the merits of 'subjective' and 'objective' poetry, with the inevitable defence of the subjective with the help of extracts from English Romantic poetry.

The treatment of human emotions and nature in traditional Bengali poetry was denounced with a convert's zeal and called 'sickening'. Our nature poetry had neither the 'form' nor the 'scent' of the original, our love poetry thrived on clichés like 'pour wine', 'bring poison' and 'strike dagger', and our feelings suffered from a general atrophy.

These views, expressed when Rabindranath was at the threshold of his creative career, have a serious bearing on his outlook. We can locate in the pages of these *Bharatis* the

¹ *Visva Bharati Quarterly*, Tagore Birthday Number. p. 62.

embryo of each important concept of his maturity. Despite the overstatement and imbalance natural to juvenile opinions their relevance to the formulation of his final outlook cannot be questioned.

Historically, the first flush of enthusiasm for the West in Bengal had spent itself by the eighties. A strong revivalist reaction had started, which came to be known as the Neo-Hindu movement, and it was well-equipped with the journalistic armour needed for such a campaign. The *Prachar* was its mouthpiece. The vehemence of the controversies that ensued forced on all intellectuals of the time a clear statement regarding their attitude to the West. Rabindranath had fully emerged as a poet and writer by the time he published *Manasi* at the age of twenty-nine. He had, therefore, to study the problem more carefully and declare his considered stand, which he did with understanding and clarity.

During this period he wrote extensively on all subjects—social, political, economic and literary—always appealing for a balanced synthesis of the two contending traditions. Despite his enthusiastic participation in the second session of the Indian National Congress in 1886, the opening song for which was composed and sung by him, his political sympathies did not blind him to the debt we owed to the West. 'A correspondence' (*Chithi patra*) stated the case for both sides with scrupulous objectivity and decided in favour of the new generation. The irrational vehemence of the Neo-Hindu movement was frequently satirised.¹ The need for regeneration in literary outlook was emphatically stated in *Leisure and Literature* (*Alasya-o-Sahitya*). The Bengali lacked vigorous life, therefore, he also lacked a keen imagination, and the result of such a debility was decadent literature such as *Ananda Mangal* and *Vidya Sunder* by Bharat Chandra, the last great poet to write in the old tradition. The sensibility

¹ *Rabindra Rachnavali*, Vol. II, p. 514.

of a race that was not enthused by as illuminating a culture as the Western, was well-nigh dead.¹ The current of Western influence had come like the very Ganges and the heart of Bengal had blossomed like a lotus, but the tendency that had recently developed to dub the West 'low born' was to reaffirm decadence, a sure sign of senility.² Although he saw in the rising commercialisation of the English, a threat to their racial superiority, Rabindranath was still a fervent admirer of the English.³

In a paper on Hindu Marriage, which copiously quoted English authorities, he discussed at length the need for reform and debunked the attempts of the revivalists to show with isolated extracts from the Hindu Shastras that the new concept of marriage; which was the result of English education, was actually supported by ancient Hinduism. The effort to find the source of all such concepts in the Scriptures was like the snake-charmer's trick which produced the snake that was always there in his bag from the nose of the spectator.⁴

In *New and Old* the need for rejuvenating our civilisation with the example of the West is strongly voiced, and those esoteric aspects which attracted the revivalist most are unsparingly attacked. The India of the revivalists' dreams

was like a solitary and mysterious laboratory with closed doors within which the experiment of a wonderful mental culture was being conducted.

Just as the medieval alchemist shut himself up in a secret house with curious and elaborate apparatus to extract the Elixir of life, our sages searched with a sensitive watchfulness, the means to attain eternal life.⁵

¹ *Bharati* 1294, p. 207

² *Ibid.* p. 209.

³ *Ibid.* p. 32

⁴ *Rabindra Rachnavali*, Vol. XII, p. 425.

⁵ *Ibid.* Vol. XI, p. 470.

The decay of this once living civilisation, now smothered by superstition is described with a characteristically apt simile:

It was an ancient city, now in ruins. It was so old that its history is not known. Because the human inscription on its stones have been covered with moss, it gives an impression that its history is beyond time. Now it was the citadel of wild nature. It was half city and half forest, only shaded rest and melancholy brooding is possible in these precincts. In this world of rustling leaves and strangely branched trees, amid remains of ancient houses, a thousand shadows appear real (*kaya moyee*) and a thousand realities appear shadowy (*chihaya moyee*). Truth and imagination reside here in perfect unison like brother and sister. The young ones of this ancient city play all day but are not aware that it was mere play, the grown ups only dream but consider that action.¹

A live civilisation depended on the very 'give and take' of cultures, which was being denied by the revivalists. Another exquisite simile describes the situation:

Contemporary India has its ancient civilisation as a mine has its coal. When the law of give and take, growth and decay operated in it, it thrived as a great forest. There was the activity of spring and rain in it, and the natural growth of flower, blossom, and plant. Now that it does not change and growth has become superfluous. The light and heat of many ages is still latent in it but for us it is dark and cold. As we do not have the flame that can light it, we produce out of it only columns of pitch black smoke. What we collect by digging tunnels of research to this past is also useless—and even this natural wealth we are not collecting ourselves. All our coal comes from the Englishman's stores.²

We had seen that Rabindranath was not for a blind worship of the West and ridiculed the slavish imitation of European manners, and it is apparent here that he was equally opposed to an irrational idolisation of the past. For him the rôle of the modern thinker was to act as a bridge between the East

¹ *Rabindra Rachnavali*, Vol. XI, p. 873.

² *Ibid.* p. 483.

and the West, the rôle enjoined by the Preceptor of the Brahmo Samaj, Raja Ram Mohan Roy. For Rabindranath this rôle was as much an act of faith, as an intellectual conclusion. His guiding light in all the rough and tumble of controversy was the Raja, who in his words

“First let loose the fiery outbursts of revolution in modern Bengal, Ram Mohan Roy did not run mad like them. He calmly examined the good and the bad.....That was his foremost greatness on one side was the yielding shore, on the other the furious waters of Western civilisation, coming with the speed of lightning Ram Mohan stood between the two, in all his greatness.¹

¹ *Rabindra Rachnavali*, Vol. IV, p. 519.

OUR earliest poetry, like the other arts of the period, was subservient to religion. The Vedas consist of hymns and liturgy. The Upanishads have some profound things to say about the mystery of life but have little to say about art, at least not in direct language, because the arts had not till then emerged as a differentiated social function. In the heroic period, the ritual that preceded the writing of poetry was religious, for instance we know that the inspiration of the Ramayana descended upon Valmiki very much like a revelation and that he maintained it with the help of meditation (*dhyana*), before sitting down to work.

Some opinions regarding art have been inferred from the general thesis of the Gita, the ideological core of the Mahabharata, such as the oft-quoted generalisation, 'The ultimate ideal which is impersonal from the point of view of philosophy, and personal from the point of view of religion, is expressional from the point of view of art.'¹ These are modern inferences from metaphysical concepts which were not originally concerned with the arts. In fact, the arts that were not a part of religion were not considered worthy of cultivation, and secular art was frowned upon by both the Brahmanical and the Buddhist traditions. Manus forbade the householder

¹ A. K. Coomaraswamy, *The Dance of Shiva*, pp. 41-2.

to dance and sing; the Buddhist *Visidhi Marga* enjoined the avoidance of the snares of 'painters, musicians, perfumers, cooks, elixir makers, prescribing physicians and other persons who furnish us with objects of sense.'

It was only after the cultural affluence of the fifth century, which provided a prolific crop of secular art, socially acknowledged for the first time, that the need for a doctrine of art arose. The tenets of classical aesthetics formulated then have served as the foundation of our criticism for nearly fifteen centuries. There are hundreds of comprehensive treatises on the subject, but they show remarkable conservatism regarding the basic concepts which, except for an occasional shift of emphasis, have remained intact, although two of the best-known of these works were written in the seventeenth century.

Like most of the ancient poetics, that of the Hindus started with the analysis of form and culminated in the discovery of a fundamental value in art. It began with the study of poetic ornamentation (*alankar*), passed on to the subtler subject of style (*riti*), then to the suggestive quality of language (*dhvani*), finally formulating the principal concept of *rasa*.

Theoretically, it is the state of mind evoked by the depiction of a particular fact of emotion in art. Emotional responses were classified with the Hindu love of codification and subtle distinctions into minor, major and lasting ones, and as many as thirty-three minor and transitory ones. Each of these had a corresponding *rasa*, which they evoked with the help of *vibhava* and *anubhava*, the formal accessories with which the poet embellished his expression.

It is difficult to define the subjective elements of the state of *rasa*, or what objective qualities in a poem beyond the observance of rhetorical laws, induced it, because the *Sahitya Darpan* calls it 'innate', without ideation, 'self-luminous' and

in the mode of at once ecstasy and intellect.' ¹ It was often maintained that it was independent of both the means the artist employed to achieve it and the reality it depicted. Obviously it was an absolute value in art. Naturally an exact English synonym for the word *rasa* would be impossible. Coomarswamy considers it equivalent to the idea conveyed by 'ideal beauty', though he has to admit that its general translation is 'flavour' or 'essence'.² Though it was maintained that a piece of art did not become *rasa*-evoking (*rasavat*) for any objective quality in it, the strictest adherence to the canons of the craft was enjoined on the artist. The work of the Hindu artist was a disciplined and conscious activity. The scrupulous training of the writer was taken for granted and the effort of *alankarist* was to provide him with definite rules for good writing.

The greater number of the commentaries written in terms of the doctrine of *rasa* are more useful as manuals on the craft of writing than as the documentation of the critics' personal responses.

Of all the literary edifices which collapsed before the onslaught of new ideas during the last century, the Indian classical poetics seems to have suffered most, because whereas other concepts were generally recast, the concept of *rasa* was just left alone. Madhusudan Dutt declared in no uncertain terms that it was no longer possible to write plays according to the rules laid down by Visvanath Kaviraj. Bankim Chandra, the law-giver of the next phase, did not formulate any principles for judging a work of literature, apart from what was implied in Positivism. The objective of all cultural activity, according to Positivism, was to broaden social awareness. Therefore, literature also had an altruistic aim. Although there was no well-argued doctrine imputing a moral purpose

¹ A. K. Coomarswamy, *Transformation of Nature in Art*, p. 48.

² Ibid. p. 47.

to art like Tolstoy's, the dissociation of this viewpoint from that of the *alankarist* is complete. By the time Rabindranath emerged as a poet, the irrelevance of the concept of *rasa* to contemporary literature had come to be generally accepted. He was aware that 'Today we don't forcibly cage poetry within the nine *rasas* and don't even look at the elaborate nomenclature of the *alankar sastras*.'

Rabindranath introduced into Bengali the modern commentative criticism, which more or less exclusively drew on the personal response of the critic, and which can be defined in the words of Coomarswamy as 'realistic and hedonistic, and perhaps for the first time illustrative, personal and sentimental'. The critical canons that guided Rabindranath are that in good literature imagination plays the most significant rôle; that its imaginative effectiveness is more important than its realism or formal perfection; that excellence in literature is better described in terms of 'beauty' and 'truth' than in terms of the equally esoteric *rasas*. The romantic antecedents of this critical outlook are easily recognisable and these aspects call for detailed analysis.

Romanticism will remain, despite the contemporary recession of literary taste away from it, a youthful adventure of the human spirit because it has always demanded some emotional significance from life. According to it, experience was valid to the extent that it retained its impact on the sensibility. It, therefore, rebelled against everything that tended to make life a dead routine of habit whether it concerned religion, society or art. Romanticism was heralded into England with the solemn vow to impart 'the charm of novelty to the things of everyday'. The quest of Shelley, the most quixotic of its knight-errants, was to 'strip the veil of familiarity and lay bare the veiled and sleepless beauty which is the spirit of forms.'¹ Different poetic means were

¹ A. F. Powell, *The Romantic Theory of Poetry*, p. 215.

used to achieve this end, varying according to the aptitude of the exponent concerned. Coleridge used supernaturalism; Wordsworth, his intense naturalism; Shelley, his platonic idealism; Keats, his paganism; to elevate everyday experience above the commonplace and the humdrum. The prime consideration in each case was to keep 'their soul unsubdued by habit, unshackled by custom', so that it could contemplate 'all things with the freshness and wonder of a child'.

Leavis dates the conversion of poetic taste to Romanticism in English literature with Warton's essay on Pope, which expounded that the true poet was not only different from a 'man of wit' and a 'man of sense' but was incompatible with them. He pronounced the judgment: 'The sublime and the pathetic are the two chief sources of genuine poetry. What is there sublime or pathetic in Pope?' he laid down in a phraseology that was still Augustan, a new criterion for judging poetry. Any poetry that failed to affect either the emotions or the imagination was without merit. Thereby English poetry of the nineteenth century commented itself to a pensive subjectivity, under which the poet's inner vision became the real source of poetry. At the end of the century, even a classicist like Arnold said about the Restoration poets. 'Their poetry is conceived in their wits, whereas all genuine poetry is composed and conceived in the soul.'

This criterion of judgment is implicit throughout Rabindranath's writings on literature. One of his earliest critical essays deals with the subject at length. In *The Subjective and Objective Poet*, he explains that poetry is the vehicle of feeling (*bhava*) and prose that of logic (*yukti*). Prose is the language of argument, its aim is to convince us: poetry that of suggestion. 'Conviction rests in the head, inspiration in the heart', hence the difference between the means used by the logician and the orator to attain the same end.¹

¹ *Rabindra Rachnavali*, Vol. II(A), pp. 87-8. The Bengali words employed are

The same theme treated with logic and wit produces one kind of poetry, and when described with feeling, quite another; the former is prosaic and inferior verse, the latter genuine poetry. Thus a touching subject like tears produces entirely different effects under two different poetic treatments. He quotes:

Tears, idle tears:

I knew not, what they mean

O, Death in life, the days that are no more.

This, according to Rabindranath, was an example of subjective, and therefore genuine, poetry, and in contrast to it he quoted a Bengali extract, which in translation would read somewhat as follows:

When this steeled heart did melt

And flow through the eyes in a myriad stream

Did it fail to show even then

The fiery hell which my heart endures? ¹

It is plain that the distinction between the two examples cited here is between the two kinds of poetry, characterised by Arnold as one composed and conceived in the 'soul' and the other in the 'wit.'

There is an even closer parallel to Warton's *Evaluation of Pope*, if we turn to Rabindranath's essay comparing Chandidas and Vidyapati, the two greatest names in old Bengali poetry. He calls Chandidas the greater poet because his songs emerged from the innermost depth of his soul, whereas Vidyapati was lost in the superficialities of form and diction, although his verse was more polished and clever. Chandidas' poetry

bhavagat and *bastagat*. *Bhavagat* should literally mean, 'imaginative' or 'emotional', the word *bhava* is used for different forms of mentations, and is therefore translated as 'subjective'. Similarly, *bastagat* is the materialistic or the realistic. In this context its appropriate translation would be 'subjective'.

¹ Ibid. p. 120.

is effective because it is personal. Vidyapati has sweetness of language and beauty of description, but Chandidas has freshness, a breadth of conception, and depth of feeling. He was completely immersed in what he wrote.¹ The greatest asset of Chandidas was what Warton had called 'the pathetic'; he is the poet of pain, just as Vidyapati is that of pleasure. Chandidas expressed the agonies of suffering, Vidyapati the languors of indulgence. Chandidas always sees pain, fear and doubt in the very heart of pleasure, he knew that love was at once 'nectar and poison', his eternal burden was 'there is no pleasure without pain'. Vidyapati was incapable of such feelings.²

For the same reason Tagore considered Tennyson's *De Profundis* a greater poem than *Paradise Lost*. Although the theme of Milton's poem was monumental, its appeal was to the head and not to the heart.³

The effect of good poetry is to transport one beyond the merely factual, 'subjective poetry is nothing but poetry that carries us beyond the senses (*atindriya*)', that is how it acted as the elixir that restored the life of the mind, deadened by its daily commerce with the commonplace.⁴

In his maturity Rabindranath expressed the same view with the aid of a simile when he said:

Our mind has in it both the man, the wanderer and the lover of experience and adventure, and the woman, the stay-at-home, enclosed by the walls of custom and belief, unseparably bound to each other. The one is the bird of forest and the other of the cage. It is the bird of the forest in us who usually sings.⁵

It would be relevant to bear in mind here the point made

¹ *Rabindra Rachnavali*, Vol. II (A).

² *Ibid.* pp. 113-14.

³ *Rabindra Rachnavali*, Vol. II.

⁴ *Rabindra Rachnavali*, Vol. II(A).

⁵ *Rabindra Rachnavali*, Vol. IX, p. 416.

by F. R. Leavis that Romanticism was not opposed to realism but to the 'hackneyed and the humdrum'.¹ The Romanticist often depended upon a graphic accuracy of description for producing its deepest effects. Realism was to be depreciated only if it were a mere recapitulation of the prosaic world as seen by an unpoetic mind.

It is only in this context that realism becomes anathema because by its insisting on the object it fails to transport us to the shadowy (*chaya moyee*) world of true poetry. The mind sickened by the material world and our daily struggle with it, yearns for a restful heaven, free from the bondage of forms and constantly seeks refuge from a world of facts in a kingdom of the imagination (*bhava*). It was for this reason that imaginative poetry is superior to factual poetry.²

As the world of common experience was uninspiring, it was the less important aspect of reality—the poet's vision was the real 'truth'. Blake's hyperbole that, 'vision and imagination is a representation of what actually exists really and unchangeably', was upheld with considerable conviction by the next generation of English poets, although they did not share his mysticism in any way. The word 'truth' came to acquire an altogether new connotation in poetry, and the gradual change in its usage is worth analysing. To Pope, the word was antithetical to the imaginative, as may be seen in the couplet,

.....that not in Fancy's maze he wandered long.

But stooped to truth and moralised his song.³

What it became in the hands of the romanticist is well-illustrated by Wordsworth's remark in the preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*.

¹ F. L. Lucas, *Decline and Fall of the Romantic Ideal*, p. 47.

² *Rabindra Rachnavali*, Vol. II (A), p. 94.

³ Mario Praz, *The Romantic Agony*, p. 12.

.....truth not individual and local but general and operative. Not standing upon external testimony but carried alive into the heart of passion, truth which is its own testimony, which gives competence and confidence to the tribunal to which it appeals and receives them from the same tribunal.

Shelley used the word in an identical sense when he called a poem 'the very image of life expressed in its eternal truth'. It is now generally agreed that Keats meant by the word 'truth' nothing more transcendental than the poetically sublime which is borne out by remarks such as 'what the imagination seizes as beauty must be truth'. These statements were no metaphysical dicta, but poetic annunciations made in support of an artistic creed which glorified the inner vision of the poet. They were in fact literary slogans announcing a revised concept of poetic creation and posing a new criterion for the judgment of literature.

The word 'truth' had become rather common currency in Bengal when Rabindranath started writing and it was expended quite generously by him. That the Bengali equivalent *Satya* was a mere adaptation of the English word without any local literary antecedents, was thrown at Rabindranath by Bankim Chandra when the former attacked with such over-used weapons.¹ In Tagore's earliest writings the word was often a mere rhetorical convenience; for instance,

The real fact is that the number of poems there are about truth are not about untruth. The imagination may knock at the doors of a hundred untruths but it is doubtful whether it can gather even a handful of poetry; but go to one truth and see if it does not give you ten times more poetry.²

Of course, this style of criticism was in keeping with the best in contemporary English. We have something equally effusive from as serious a critic as Pater, when he says:

¹ *Bharati*, Paus 1291, p. 400.

² *Rabindra Rachnavali*, A (II), p. 85.

Truth, there can be no craft without that. And further.....all beauty is in the long run only fineness of truth or what we call expression, the finer accommodation of speech to the vision within.'

Rabindranath, however, offered sufficient elucidation of these terms, which indicates their critical meaning without ambiguity. Truth was reality seen in both its subjective and objective aspects, first the material base of cognitive experience, and second its vision in the poet's mind, which, after various imaginative interpolations, brings out the significance of the experience —the 'truth' of art. The artist was as much concerned with the subjective truth of his experience as with the objective.

There are beliefs such as the existence of ghosts. When a poet describes a ghost without believing in the existence of one, the ghost is true for the mind even though non-existent materially. ¹

Poetry primarily deals with such subjective truths, because of their emotional significance. The very process by which this subjective material is used to beget the correct artistic response is described with insight, surprising for the age at which it was written,

when we imagine that there is a ghost, we touch upon a particular spot of the mind, so that so many things arise in it, darkness, loneliness, the scene of a cremation ground, the soundless steps of a ghostly presence, so many of the fears of boyhood are recalled. If the poet does not use them, who would? ²

This was the truth of imagination, for which experience was true to the extent it was evocative of the poet's responses. We have here expressed in the imprecise vocabulary of a budding critic, the mental processes that led to the writing of poetry according to Shelley when he said:

¹ *Rabindra Rachnavali*, Vol. II (A), p. 86

² *Ibid.*

A poet is the combined product of such internal powers as modify the nature of others and such external influences as excite and sustain these powers, he is one in both.

It is not always easy to decide whether a piece of poetry fails or succeeds in the imaginative effect that lifts the mind from this world of drudgery and habit. Rabindranath illustrates it with success in these writings of his apprenticeship in literary criticism. He explained that the descriptions of hell by Michael Madhusudan failed to achieve the sublime and therefore did not make the grade of great poetry. As examples of poetry which succeed in this aspect and which fail he cites two comparable descriptions of a journey through the firmament one by Shelley and the other by Wordsworth.

The magic car moved on.
From the swift sweep of wings
The atmosphere in flaming sparkles flew
With shackles of infinite colour,
And semicircled with a belt of
Flashing incessant

.....

The sea no longer was distinguished; Earth
A vast and shadowy sphere suspended
In the black concave of heaven

.....

Innumerable systems widely rolled
And countless spheres differed
An ever varying glory

.....

Below lay stretched the boundless Universe,
There as far as the remotest line
That limits swift imaginative flight

.....

This, according to Rabindranath, transports one to 'a limitless

infinity', where all direction and fixed points like earth and water are lost. In contrast to Shelley is the following passage from Wordsworth:

Up goes my boat among the stars
 Through many a field of breathless light
 Through many a field of blue ether:
 Leaving the thousand stars beneath her;
 Up goes my boat as bright
 The Crab, the Scorpion, the Bull
 We pry among them all; have shot
 High over the red haired race of Mars
 Covered from top to bottom with scars.
 Such company I like it not,
 The towns in Saturn are decayed
 And melancholy spectres through them;—
 The Pleiads; that appear to kiss
 Each other in the vast abyss
 With joy I sail among them,
 Swift Mercury resounds with mirth
 Great Jove is full of stately bowers;
 But these and all they contain,
 What are they to that tiny grain,
 That little Earth of ours.

His comment on the passage is significant not only because it shows how deep was his concern with poetic techniques even at a young age, but also because it places before the poet an unmistakably romantic objective. He says:

Only the first verse of the above is good i.e., there is no description of anything insignificant. What do we know of the infinite firmament? We can have only a vague appreciation of it.....therefore have we to map out its roads, lanes and quays? Should we locate there Crab, Scorpion and Bull? Should not the inquisitiveness of man's limited mind be overwhelmed by the sense of its vastness?¹

¹ *Bharati*, 1288, p. 29

It is obvious that Rabindranath is trying to illustrate here the function of imagination in the writing of poetry. The poetics of the Romanticists was built around the concept of imagination which acquired for him a significance far beyond its epistemological meaning. Being antithetical to the merely ratiocinative functions of the mind, imagination became a symbol of all that was creative and free in contrast to reason which was mechanical and soulless. It was an expression of the romantic apotheosis of individuality in the field of criticism. It affirmed the creativeness of the free will, for poets who considered any system built on the passiveness of mind was false as a system. Wordsworth saw a parallel between the working of the spirit of nature in the material universe to enliven its mechanistic dullness and the operation of imagination in the individual mind which lightens the soullessness of reason, thus imagination became the subjective aspect of the creative power of the cosmos. In *The Prelude* he recounts the growth of imagination from childhood to maturity and attributes to it all his spiritual realisation:

The feeling of life endless, the great thought
By which we live, 'Infinity and God'.

Obsessed as Shelley was with his own efforts to reform the world, he was more occupied with the prophetic rôle of the poet than the analysis of his creative process. Still the *Defence of Poetry* opens with the essentially romantic distinction between reason and imagination, when he says 'Reason is to imagination as instrument to the agent, as body to the spirit, as the shadow to the substance.'

A similar distinction between reason and imagination is drawn by Keats in his letters, where he called Truth his composite expression for all that was poetically valuable, 'What imagination seizes as beauty' and he had never 'been able to perceive how anything can be known for Truth by

consecutive reasoning'. 'The teasing of the spirit' by which he made the ordinary events of this wide world 'grow wings of immortality' was but the application of imagination to material facts, the same faculty which according to Coleridge 'vitalised' all that was dead and fixed.

Although none of the romantic poets attempted a well-defined theory of imagination, with the exception of Coleridge, they all expressed a deep conviction that it was the one source of creative work. To sum up the general trend of romantic criticism in this regard Welsh's apt remark is worth quoting, 'As reason turned out into mere analysis, and disappeared into the shadows of the laws of association, imagination was left as the sole active power of the human mind, and absorbed into itself more and more of the functions which the Divine creator had once performed. From the artists "fancy" it spread across the entire mind of man.'¹

It would be relevant to compare here the working of imagination according to the Indian poetics. The fact that *dhyana* was strictly enjoined before every creative effort and the artist was required to draw from his vision during meditation and not directly from reality, admits the presence of a mental process which modifies and improves upon the raw impression of the sense. It is necessary to recall here that *dhyana* has been generally an esoteric and not an epistemological concept. It was a discipline for the concentration of mental powers, which was necessary for inculcating all the higher functions of the mind, including the artistic. The focussing of the mind on an appropriate image which was a mode of worship became in the case of the idol-maker both a poetical and a ritualistic preliminary to work. Its application to poetic creation was analogous. Thus Valmiki, in his *dhyana* 'clearly saw before him Rama, Lakshmana and Sita and Dasratha, together with his wives, in his kingdom, laughing,

¹ H. Fairchild, *Religious Trends in English Poetry*, p. 100.

talking, acting and moving as in real life...' to the Vaisnava poet who was told by Rup Goswami 'to dwell upon with complete concentration on each limb from the plaited tresses to the nail of the toe' of Radha to be able to write poetry fully imbued with *bhakti*.

It was a practice that grew on to the cardinal belief in Indian thought that all significant aspects of reality can be apprehended by concentration of the mind.

The state of mind in *dhyana* contrasts with its working under the influence of imagination, as visualised by the Romanticists. According to *him* imagination was a faculty which freely played over a vast field of mental association, and selected according to some innate principle the best that go together poetically, whereas *dhyana* was a willed visualisation of a particular image or a set of images, usually induced by a devotional ritual. It is not that *dhyana* is without an implied element of the imaginative but the emphasis is not on the free play of this function but on the crystallisation of distinct images. Thus Coomareswamy has to circumscribe the meaning of the word imagination, as 'the power of having images'; when he makes the point that the poet of the Rigveda was aware of the operation of imagination because his 'ideas are hewn out in the heart and thought is formulated as a carpenter shapes wood.' When it is further admitted that this power was 'deliberately exercised' we see the limits within which the two concepts permit comparison.¹

Turning to the epistemological aspect of imagination it may be generally said that up to the eighteenth century imagination was referred to in Western thought as the faculty

¹ It will be observed that imagination (the power of having images) is here deliberately exercised... Similar concepts of the operation of imagination are to be found already in the Rig Veda.....ideas are hewn out in the heart and thought is formulated as a carpenter shapes wood'.....A. K. Coomareswami, *Transformation of Nature*. Quoted from *Parichay*, Shravan 1302, p. 175.

which reproduced co-ordinated images in the mind. Although even old Apollonius said that imagination was the creator of poetry, the concept was not developed beyond the Aristotelian notion that it was the function which reproduced for the intellect representational images of reality.¹

Until then the conception of the working of the mind was not far different from the Sankhya and the Yoga description of the working of *Manas*, according to which *Sankalpa* and *Vikalpa* are the processes by which the indeterminate material from the senses was constructed by assimilation and abstraction into conceptual knowledge, and it is to be noted that, 'its emphasis is not at all on the poetic meaning.'²

The concept of imagination came into eminence following Kant's surmise that the mind worked creatively in the act of knowing, that the unordered material of sensation is organised by the mind according to the laws of apprehension that pre-exist in it. Imagination had its own contribution to make in its interpolation between the states of 'sensibility' and 'understanding' and he called it 'a fundamental faculty of the human soul'. An attempt to analyse Kant's abstruse epistemology is not called for here, and would be pretentious in any case. It would be enough for us to know what it meant for Coleridge, who introduced it to romantic criticism in England.

Coleridge classified imagination according to its functions as primary and secondary. Primary imagination was the 'prime agent' which co-ordinated the reports of the senses into perception, an initial and essential step in the process of understanding. This process, however, was unconscious. In other words, to Coleridge primary imagination is what till then had been understood by the unqualified word 'imagination'. It had no special significance for the poet. The real

¹ Das Gupta, *A History of Indian Philosophy*, p. 225.

² F. L. Lucas, *Decline and Fall of the Romantic Ideal*, p. 160.

source of poetry was the secondary imagination, the magical power which 'dissolved', 'diffused', and 'dissipated', the perception formed by the primary imagination and then reorganised it on a different level. It was, in contrast to the primary imagination, a conscious process, as it was directed by a deliberate poetic purpose and therefore co-existed with the will. This reorganisation of awareness performed the main poetic task of 'vitalising' the objects of the world which otherwise appeared 'dead' and 'fixed'. Thus poetry means what the senses 'half create and perceive'. The most comprehensive definition of its working and objective is in Coleridge's remark:

The synthetic and magical power to which we have exclusively appropriated the name of imagination.....reveals itself in the balance a reconciliation of opposites or discordant qualities... The sense of novelty and freshness, with old and familiar objects: A more than usual state of emotion: with more than usual order; judgement ever awake and steady self-possession with enthusiasm and feeling profound or vehement.¹

By the time the word 'imagination' came to be used by Rabindranath it had already gathered round itself all the accretions of secondary meanings. The nomenclature of Indian Poetics having no equivalent to offer, a new usage of the word *Kalpana* came into vogue to represent the English word 'imagination'.

The earliest references to imagination by Rabindranath are to be found in *Banophul* and *Kobi-Kahani*. These are formal addresses to the spirit of poetry, the somewhat awkward efforts of an adolescent poet to reproduce the sophistications of poems like *Ode to Psyche*. That these poetic effusions were, at that time, without any support of corresponding intellec-

¹ I. A. Richards, *Principles of Literary Criticism*, see chapter on 'Imagination'.

tual concepts is evident in the passage regarding imagination in *Why the Bengali is not a Poet*, where he says.

The imagination prevails in the mind like a mirror. The mind whose imagination is clear and even will have a reflection that is full and complete. The reflected reality (*Satya*) resembles the concrete reality; but in an unclear imagination the image is indistinct and cannot be seen properly. When an event (*ghatna*) has not been clearly reflected, when I have not perceived it distinctly, how could pain or pleasure spring from it?¹

In fact the analogy of the mirror, were it to be accepted as a precise statement, would offer a view of imagination that would be confusing. It was at best one of those inspiring but vague statements which are characteristic of romantic criticism, Shelley had said something very close to it in his preface to *Prometheus Unbound*.² If these utterances are to be related to a definite concept, they refer to what Coleridge described as the primary imagination.

A clearer conception of the working of the imagination emerges later when Rabindranath visualised that sensory awareness was formulated by the mind in various ways for different modes of apprehension. The sensibility of the poet was organised differently from the comprehension of the scientist, and this was due to the operation of a differing integrating principle in each case. There was 'a place in the mind where smell, light, sound and touch, all became one. They are distinct only as long as they are outside. They collect random material from outside and deposit it in some inner chamber where everything loses its separate identity.' In the writing of poetry, imagination was the capacity to 'realise what made an object beautiful; to display it befittingly

¹ *Bharati*, 1787, pp. 260-1

² '... it (the mind) is the mirror upon which all forms are reflected, and in which they compose one form.'

in relation to other beautiful objects. It was the power to evoke at the sight of one beautiful object, images of ten similar objects, and the ability to visualise how the beauty of an object will be effected by a change in its relation to other objects.' Despite the obtrusive harping on the word *beauty*, he establishes, with a clarity remarkable for his age, the point which Coleridge and Wordsworth made with the help of detailed illustrations. Rabindranath's view had been preceded by Wordsworth's more precise comment on Shakespeare's image of an old man amid rocks who appeared to be a part of them, it reads, 'In these images the confirming, the abstracting and the modifying powers of the imagination immediately and mediately acting are all brought into conjunction. The stone is endowed with something of the power of life to approximate to the sea-beast; and the sea-beast stripped of some of its vital qualities to simulate it to the stone; intermediate image is thus treated for the purpose of bringing the original images that of the stone, to a nearer resemblance to the figure and condition of the aged man; who is divested of so much of the indication of life and emotion as to bring to the point where the two objects unite and coalesce in just comparison.'¹

Here we need to note the emphasis which Rabindranath put on the relation of imagination to the creative will. He was aware that it is the control exercised by the poetic will over the imagination which distinguished it from fancy. The fantasies of the child or the madman, for instance, though prolific were not poetic, because, to repeat Coleridge's phrase, they were not 'Co-extensive with the conscious will.' To the mind of a precocious child the moon will probably recall the image of a 'luchec', yet no child will ever feel that 'the moonlight sleeps'. The proper orchestration of associa-

¹ D. G. James, *Poetry and Scepticism*, p. 80

tions was the work of a trained and conscious sensibility, 'A man with a primitive understanding (*jnan*) can neither see nor realise poetic unity.'

The fulfilment of poetry was the order and harmony of the responses it evoked; any discord in the response caused by a defective selection of associations was a failure of imagination. Rabindranath gave an instance of such a failure from Marlowe's 'Come and be my love'. He comments on the poetic inconsistency of the shepherd offering his love a crown of wild flowers in one stanza and a studded throne in the next. The two images are discordant.

THE first thing that strikes the modern reader of old Bengali love poetry, whether it be *Vidyasunder*, a Vaisnav *padavali*, or even a *mangal gan*, is the implicit acceptance of the corporal aspect of love in contrast to the romantic infatuation, which was almost abstract. The poet admired, often with aid of exuberant imagery, the physical charms of the beloved. If he did not dwell directly on the pleasures of the body, it was to the extent demanded by the normal reticence observed on the subject, but nowhere is it relegated to a secondary position. The *Vidyasunder* stories often threw pointed hints at the hidden delights of the union of the lovers.

The recurrent themes of this poetry were the tryst (*abhisara*), the teasing and testing of emotions (*man* and *abhimān*), the social stigma of illicit love (*kalank*), and the pangs of separation and neglect, which were described with all the subtle nuances of feeling brought about by each passing season.

The romantic malady of emotional ennui, and the psychological entanglements of modern love did not exist for them. Emotions were uncomplicated and loyalties unwavering. The pathos of these emotions lay in their constant frustration resulting out of social impediments. Hinduism enjoined child marriage, which permitted natural love, only outside

the pale of respectability. Love in this context led to either adultery or the courtesan.

The situations depicted under this concept of love both in poetry and painting are the meeting of lovers against all the vagaries of weather, storms and lightning, the peering eyes of neighbours, and the watchfulness of the family. The strength of this poetry was its truthfulness to life, its weakness, the lack of abandon in the love depicted in it, because this was socially unacceptable. Its nobility lay in its inherent suffering and the triumph of the human instinct over all odds.

For the new Bengali poet, who was as intimate with English verse as with his native Bengali, the choice was predetermined. Poetically he could accept only free romantic love. The fact that it was unrelated to the life around him merely served to make the visionary love of English romanticism more appealing to him. This transfer of love to a private world of imagination thus saved the poet from a dilemma which was inescapable for his counterpart the novelist, who had to depict actions leading to this emotion in semblance of real life.

Rabindranath, who had been deeply affected by Vaisanav verse in his youth and retained a life-long admiration for it, also realised the need to break new ground. This, despite his having mastered the idiom of Vaisanav poetry in which he wrote the Bhanu Singh poems, the best output of his experimental period. He declared his position on this subject in *Why the Bengali is not a Poet?* which can be treated as a manifesto of his literary outlook:

Due to the lack of the sun's rays and the open air, love cannot be pure. It begins to stink. Our love never enters through the gate, it comes and goes through the small window passage, which has made it hunchbacked. It cannot look straight in the face, it startles at the sound of its own footsteps.

Not only is the old concept repudiated, but also the entire

treatment of the subject. In reply to a critic's charge that the ideal of love upheld in the new Bengali poetry was Western rather than Indian, he says :

Does the writer mean to say that the same old whispers, concealments, the hide and seek under the terrifying vigilance of the in-laws, the woes of separation amid sandal odours, the cuckoo (*kokil*) and the black bee (*bhramar*), the descriptions of the contours of the body with the recurrent references to Mount Sumeru should be continued as a poetic tradition. The contemporary poetry with open, fearless and liberalised emotions, free from the trammels of over-ornamentation and fierce, piratical emotions, should be eliminated because it is foreign. Which of the two is really harmful for us, the one that secretly sends poison into the veins or that which openly fights against society.¹

After the categorical rejection of the old concept, we are introduced to the new one according to which love becomes a mere brooding sentiment so diffused that it hardly needs an object of adoration. The key to the new concept is the last sentence of the passage:

The love of our poets of olden days was too personal. That there could be love without doting on the hands, feet, face, eyes and nose, was beyond their imagination. They were bewitched by an individual, hence their fanatical idolatory. They were lit up with joy at a union of lovers and collapsed at their separation. They always sang in high notes, never sighed in the low key of melancholy.²

According to Rabindranath the emergence of this 'soft' feeling in contrast to the 'hardness' of old Bengali poetry indicated that our instincts were getting 'subtler' and more 'civilised'. The vehemence of these views shows the immaturity of the writer, but it does not detract from their

¹ *Bharati*, 1789, p. 259.

² *Bharati*, 1288, p. 79.

significance to his future outlook for which this was the most formative period.

The love poetry which is under study here, almost entirely follows this ideal. Not only was the 'loudness' of passion avoided, but also the 'harshness' of the real. Up to the writing of *Chitra*, covering twenty years of uninterrupted poetic creation, there are hardly five poems that deal with an actual problem of love. For the first time we have two poems in *Manasi*, *Love Expressed* and *Love Hidden* which describe with exceptional poignancy the shame of a deserted woman and the despair of an ugly one. Even these are not free from the intrusion of the abstract, the ugly woman does blame her fate but rues her own inability to express the beautiful in her:

Mundane love seeks to ravish the eye
Hence it assumes the beauteous form;
I did not blossom thus
Hence my deadliest pain.¹

It was later in the *Golden Boat* that he came to recognise in *Vaisnava Poetry* the human becoming godly and the celestial descending to earth. He also reverts to the Vaisanav style in poems like *You and I* and *Do not Look so Humbly at Me*. Up till then he had pursued the *formless* ideal. The denial of the old tradition is reiterated in *Evening Songs*, the first poems of his poetic maturity. In *Poison* he voiced his aversion to the old *man* and *abhimān*, *milan* and *briha* which were all 'wasters of the heart', and demanded that love should fill the heart with youth.

Put a moonlit smile on the face of the earth.²

We find a similar transition from Restoration poetry to

¹ *Rabindra Rachnavali*, II, p. 190.

² *Ibid.* I, p. 21.

Romanticism. F.L. Lucas has analysed the change which is aptly illustrated in the two comparable passages from Congreve and Shelley.

You think she is false, I am sure she is kind
I will take her body, you her mind
Who has the better bargain.

(Congreve)

Nor Seeks nor finds he mortal blisses
But feeds on aerial kisses
Of Shapes that haunt love's wildernesses

(Shelley)

Similarly Abercrombie traces with a greater wealth of detail the gradual change in taste from Harry Pater to Campbell. The real is replaced by the imaginative, and on the theme of love. Suckling is one of the first to voice the new attitude,

that there are more delicate pleasures than these. I think of that deliciously unsatisfied desire for a woman, in the mood in which one likes to stay unsatisfied, and merely to guess at satisfaction; for as I have elsewhere said:

The romantic expectation feeds too high
For any woman ever to satisfy.

Rabindranath's *Unbearable Love*¹ describes Suckling's 'mood in which one likes to stay unsatisfied'. The Romanticist, even when he was an epicure like Byron, yearned for a *beau idéal*. Shelley, who considered himself sensualist enough to call Wordsworth a 'moral eunuch' was very little concerned with bodily delights in his poetry. Rabindranath openly declared his entry into the same airy mansion when he said,

We always want some flesh and blood to fondle. Our heart, like the skin of a rhinoceros, does not delight in a subtle and

¹ *Rabindra Rachnavali*, Vol. I, p. 19.

soft touch. We therefore, admire, Byron and the bodiless moonlike imagination of Shelley is liked by few Bengalis.¹

In *Evening Songs*, he is in love with something beyond a material person.

When I offer you flowers of worship
Believe not that it is love;
I do not know where my deity is,
You are merely, its image of stone.²

Morning Songs were mainly occupied with the vision he had seen, and the revaluations that followed it. *Songs and Sketches* present a chiaroscuro of dream and reality in which shadows dominate.

There is a short-lived anticlimax in *Sharps and Flats*. There is a series of Sonnets which defiantly eulogizes the human body. One of these held with complete frankness that physical consummation was the finale of emotional attraction, a boldness which has embarrassed some of his most discerning admirers—Thompson is one of them. Nihar Ranjan Roy holds that even these sonnets were inherently romantic in which the imaginative ideal takes precedence over the merely physical. In the body of a woman the poets search for the 'unblushing purity of the nude' and in her breast 'the mother-country of man, the god-child'.³ In any case it was a passing phase, which did not recur again. This mood of indulgence was fast overtaken by a romantic disenchantment:

The infatuation does not endure,
the fascination goes
And in no way can it be held;
The bondage of tender arms snaps.

¹ *Bharati*, 1287, p. 272.

² *Rabindra Rachnavali* I, p. 31.

³ *Rabindra Sahityer Bhumika*, p. 84.

And the wine brims no more in lovers' eyes,
The darkness of night descends engulfing all.¹

In *Sacred Love* indulgence becomes profane, the breath of desire a poison to the flower of love.

The defeat of emotion inherent in love, which Rabindranath describes here, was something that all Romanticists had to face because they all set out in search of a holy spirit, the image of a fated companion, which alone could meet the needs of their fevered imagination. Even Byron, the most earthly of lovers amongst the English Romanticists, yearned for an ideal woman he never found. F. L. Lucas repeats Peacock's parody of Byron, 'you talk like a Rosicrucian who would love nothing but a sylph, who does not believe in the existence of a sylph and who yet quarrels with the whole world for not containing a sylph'. He also cites the case of Chateaubriand who has narrated in his memoirs that in his younger days at Cambourg he lived through a long romance with an imaginary 'sylphide'.²

The advent of Romanticism in England is seen in Walpole for whom 'there was no wisdom comparable to the exchanging of what is called the realities of life for dreams'. As the inner vision of the poet acquired a higher validity than the material world, the dream lover came to be more passionately sought than the earthly one. During the period that is discussed here, the largest number of Rabindranath's love poems are addressed to imaginary personifications. He had illustrated his concept of love in *The True Spouse* with O'Shaughnessy's lines:

O, the soul of my soul's dreaming
When will you hear and speak?
Lonely and lovely seeming,
Thou art there in my dreaming.
I send my love forth flowing,
To find my unknown love—

¹ *The Decline and Fall of the Romantic Ideal*, p. 37.

² *Rabindra Rachnavali*, Vol. II, p. 89.

Scores of Rabindranath's love songs recreate this world of effusive make-believe in which lovers are often mere shadows or beckoning presences. Love is a mood filled with indistinct promptings and visions for the poet of *Wild Flower*:

Love is bathed in formlessness,
Formlessness in dreams
And enveloped by these dreams
In the unblossomed brightness¹

We have the very fantasy of O'Shaughnessy's lines and the imagery of Shelley's *The Question*, recaptured in the piece below:

Life appears futile today,
Meseems some one is not there
Because the heart looks around
And cries 'No, oh No, not this'.
In some world of Dreams,
In some shadowy paradise
There is some one.....

★ ★ ★ ★

There is some one with dishevelled hair
Pining for me in some lonely garden,
If I compose a song, in my heart's distress
To whom do I sing it but her;
If I string a garland of flowers,
Whom should it adorn but her.²

In the vocabulary of this love poetry the most overworked words are 'enchanted' (*vibhore*), 'absorbed' (*magan*), 'bewitched' (*mughdha*), and the state of half-sleep (*ghoom ghor*).

As early as the writing of *Alastor* Shelley had created his own image of the 'Kindred Spirit' in the search for which his

¹ *Rabindra Rachnavali*, Vol. I (A), p. 91.

² *Ibid.* Vol. II, p. 72.

symbolic poet was to give his life. This 'idol of thought' was later described as

A being whom my spirit
On its visioned wonderings, far aloft,
Upon the fairy isles of sunny dawn,
Amid the enchanted mountains, and the caves
Of Divine sleep and the air like waves
Of wonder loved dream

(*Epipsychidion*)

Keats, who was less of a visionary but possessed a more sensuous imagination, induced the same state of mind with the aid of a myth. He was an Endymion enchanted by the vision of a Diana in his youth, and the Knight enthralled by the 'Dame Sans Merci' in his maturity.

The poetry of Rabindranath's adolescence is comparable here. *The Mirage of Love* was meant to illustrate that love will remain eternally unsatiated. The 'True Spouse' is defined in the *Bharati* of Jaistha, 1288. Each human being had an exact counterpart elsewhere, and whatever the distance between them, they were bound by an unwavering affinity. Love was this eternal relationship between kindred souls that persisted through life and death. If one was drawn to a person other than the fated companion, it was only because he had some semblance of the ideal. 'Nature had performed their marriage' and 'they lived in eternal matrimony although separated by circumstance'. This concept is supported by profuse quotations from Shelley, Arnold, Rossetti and O'Shaughnessy.¹

In these loose formulations of his youth lay the origin of a concept that found eloquent expression in poems like *Unending Love*, in *Manasi*, and later in haunting songs like

The one that loved me age after age,
Meseems, he sits by my path today.

¹ *Bharati*, 1288, pp. 81-2.

Rabindranath's emotions, although always robust, were free from morbidity to an extent unusual for a poet of such sensitiveness. There was not much of the hallucinatory elements which distinguished Romantic poetry in some European countries, and came to England with the second generation of romanticists.

To him such idealisations as Shelley's came more naturally. We see, therefore, even in the mortifications of passion an attempt to find an ontological explanation. The reaction against the mood of the sonnet that glorified the body is described with feeling, but is accepted with a facile generalisation.

I hold her and press her to my breast;
 I try to fill my arms with her loveliness,
 To plunder her sweet smiles with kisses,
 To drink her dark glances with my eyes.
 Ah, but where is it? Who can strain the blue of the sky?
 I try to grasp the beauty; it eludes me, leaving the body in my
 hands.

Baffled and weary I come back.
 How can the body reach the flower, which only the spirit may
 touch.¹

A concept of love which forbids any loudness of feeling, and bans any description of individual beauty as idolatory, leaves scope only for Shelleyan hymns to some form of 'Intellectual Beauty'. Love becomes, therefore, a monotone of silent devotion to a perfect image, in an otherwise empty temple.

Sit alone at Sunset, in the Solitary house;
 Onto the altar of my heart, raise with tender care
 The wondrous sweet and luminous image

.....

¹ Gardener, *Rabindranath Tagore*—XLIX.
 (Book of English Translations by the poet himself)

Like a bee on its lotus bed
 Housed in scent, waits for no comings,
 Counts no footsteps, hearkens nought,
 I shall lose myself in a sanctified illusion.¹

The poems are not the result of a sudden inspiration but the emotional dead-end of a poetic approach which is quite deliberately accepted:

The poets of today see that love does not bring satisfaction, but it is not a feeling of futility born of despair, but of incompleteness. They are unable to find the object of love but there is no dearth of love in their heart.

Consequently 'they have to raise an imaginary idol of their love.'²

This image could be then deified, and all the weariness of waiting could be addressed to it:

Oh, the spouse of my being, the heart of my heart, I have got your throne ready, when will you come? It was a mistake to have given it to someone else—it never brought contentment or satisfaction.³

He is aware that this theme of love does not belong to our tradition and he is not without pride in introducing it through his poetry. He says, 'The old poets never had such a love, neither has the average man.'

The elusive presence of these personifications is felt in many of the *Evening Songs*, in poems such as *Dedication*, *Song Beginning* and *The Loss of Ego*. The very first poem of *Songs and Sketches* is an invocation to the dream-lover. In the third poem again there is the winged touch of the 'unknown beloved':

¹ *Rabindra Rachnavali*, Vol. II, p. 165.

² *Bharati*, 1288, p. 78.

³ *Ibid.* p. 84.

That distant inhabitant in the vale of heaven
Sweetly smiling and drowsy with pleasure¹

Her constant presence is felt in the series of poems beginning with *The Memory's Idol* but she is at the door and has not occupied the sanctum of the temple.

Come, come, O, Thou
Of my Childhood's memory,
Return to your own home.
Why do you stand at the door
In the garb of a beggar?²

In *Sharps and Flats*, the process of personification is reversed, instead of incarnating the imaginary, the earthly is deified.

The Sight of that form evokes
Memories of a hundred past births;
A thousand lost pleasures are in these eyes,
The spring songs of many lives.
As if my own oblivion is incarnated here
And the pleasures and sorrows of endless days.

From this deification of a human form to the idealisation of a person, is a short step. Emilia was to Shelley 'Sister, Spouse, Angel'; Indira Devi was the same to Rabindranath.

For Shelley the object of love was 'the glory of the lampless universe', 'the moon beyond the clouds', 'the star above the storm', and finally the very essence of existence, 'the harmony of nature art', its 'wonder' and its 'beauty'. Rabindranath says the same, only the images differ.

Compare

On your face, O, Mother plays the ray of heaven
In your heart the glow of dawn;
and

¹ *Rabindra Rachnavali*, Vol. I, p. 107.

² *Ibid.* p. 132.

An image of some bright Eternity
 A shadow of some golden dream, a splendour
 Leaving the third sphere pilotless

In her celestial glory she allays the pains of the world in the throes of a typically Shelleyan anguish. The image is at last installed in the temple.

Stand in that inner sanctuary of peace
 The ever lit, and the ever shadowy
 In that stormless, sunless, silent heaven,
 The eternal abode of life.
 Stand there with a holy smile,
 With a holy light on your face
 Like the life-giving Annapurna.¹

It is only with such glorification of the subjective that the legendary episode of the self-inflicted blindness of Surdas could be poetised. According to Rabindranath, Surdas did not wish to drift any more 'on the stream of idols' and hence sought the 'unfounded darkness of the heart' because he hoped that one day it would be rent asunder by

The holy face, and lovable form,
 The tender unwinking eye,
 Just as you stand now, an image of godliness.²

The further this ideal moved from the dust of life, the holier it appeared. According to this concept woman was a 'hundred petalled lotus' that blossomed in the 'boundless mystery of the Universe, and the poet stood at the shore of this sea, intoxicated with its scent'. It is to be expected that love etherealized to this extent could not descend to mundane existence without mishap. Even Shelley, who was affected by

¹ *Rabindra Rachnavali*, Vol. II, pp. 58-9.

² *Ibid.* p. 218.

an abstract concept as deeply as he was by a personal emotion; realised that a gulf would always remain between his ideal and actual love. He said, 'I think one is always in love with something or other: the error consists in seeking in a mortal image the likeness of what is, perhaps, eternal.'

Rabindranath, whose personal life was a model of restraint compared to the English Romanticists, was saved the anti-climaxes of emotion which beset Shelley, but within his moderate limits, he had disappointment enough.

Why did you not remain only the object of meditation?

Why did you take bodily form?

That vale of illusion, where has it vanished?

Why did the waters recede, when I took the plunge?¹

The poem ends with an invocation to the goddess to reappear on the lotus-seat. In *Manasi*, all significant love poetry has this note of disenchantment.

In *The Golden Boat* the vision acquires another dimension. The 'Beauty of the mind' (*Manasumdari*) incorporates in a single image all that the poet has ever sought. She is ostensibly the spirit of poetry, the fairy companion of his childhood, the partner of his past life and the bride of the future one, but in actual fact it is an object of love to which his most passionate poetry could be addressed without moral implication. All the indulgence of his ardent soul is poured out in this imaginary consummation, just as all the desired passion of the Hindu woman was addressed to Krishna because to love him was not ignoble. The Krishna legend owes its overwhelming significance in Indian art to the fact that through it, for once, natural love was sanctified, otherwise it was condemned to eternal ignominy. There is a similar transfer of genuine passion in his hymn to an imaginary being:

¹ *Rabindra Rachnavali*, Vol. II, p. 172.

Put these arms, slender as lotus stems
 Around my neck, in a close embrace.
 Let their touch thrill my flesh to the hair roots
 With inmost passion; a deadly enchantment fills the body
 The breasts are a tremble with life
 The vessel of senses is about to crack.¹

No other poem equals the description of consummation given here, not even the uninhibited sonnets of *Sharps and Flats*. The mysterious companion of *The Aimless Voyage* ominously pointing to perilous seas is another variation on the same theme.

Most of the love poems in *Chitra* follow this romantic apparition and it is no wonder that so much expense of spirit on unreal objects of love leaves him frustrated at the core. *Moonlight* expresses this 'weariness in its supplication to this denizen of heaven, to descend to earth':

Stand with gentle smile and downcast eyes, by my bed.

Here the treatment of love develops two distinct forms: the personal is described as a general principle and general concepts are converted into images of live and passionate love. In either case there is no reference to any person as an object of passion. It is difficult to say how far this was due to the new poetic outlook and how far to Rabindranath's natural deference for public opinion, which he could not ignore, if for no other reason than being the Maharishi's son and heir. The leadership of the Adi Samaj enjoined on him exemplary social conduct. His rise in popularity, which ultimately made him the greatest national poet of Bengal, owed much to his affirmation of current social values, of course, of the progressive section of society. The social adequacy of the poetry he was writing was unexceptionable. Buddhadeva Bose in his essay on Rabindranath's

¹ *Rabindra Rachnavali*, Vol. III, p. 55.

love poetry frankly calls him escapist and cowardly because he always evaded a direct statement of personal emotion.¹ In different words Nihar Ranjan Roy points to the same aspect when he says that Rabindranath was not a poet of love as Keats or Chandidas were.² This can hardly be denied nor the fact that it led to the development of a poetic form which raises abstract concepts to the highest pitch of lyricism as in *Urvashi*, the greatest poem he ever wrote on the theme of woman. The myth allowed the poet his ecstatic eulogy to the eternal ravisher in woman, with her fateful power over man, just as the imaginary 'Beauty of the mind' had prompted the finest display of his natural sensuality. Similarly, in *The Siving*, the traditional disport of lovers in Indian art and poetry, he achieves an unsophisticated intensity of emotion with a symbolic beloved.

Whatever the poetic nobility of such love, it cannot fulfil natural emotional needs. Rabindranath himself said about the 'Beauty of the mind', 'whatever she be, she does not bring luck. It cannot be said that she brings no pleasure but she is the farthest from felicity. Whomsoever she blesses with her favours she gives intense delight but at times with her hard embrace she will press the hearts blood out of you.'³ This description of the *manasundari* comes very close to the 'Dame Sans Merci' who had cast her spell over the entire Romantic movement in Europe. The romantic quest for the unknown is pursued under skies overcast with clouds of melancholy:

I have been a ranger
In search of pleasure throughout every clime
Alas, it is not for me,

¹ *Jayanti Utsarga*, p. 447.

² Nihar Ranjan Roy, *Rabindra Sahityer Bhumiika*, pp. 58-9

³ *Chirnapatra*, 8th May, 1893. Quoted in *Rabindra Jivani*

Bewitched I sure must be
To lose in grieving all my maiden prime

(*Endymion*)

Romantic poetry the world over suffered from an innate frustration, a strain of sadness can be heard in Tenfildrach's *Eternal Nay* as much as in Wordsworth's *Dejection* or Keats' *Ode to Melancholy*; in the poetry of Heine as in that of Leopardi. This brooding had been introduced into Bengali literature from abroad. It did not align with either our traditional poeti attitudes or the contemporary national outlook which was hopeful and expansive. Rabindranath in his early writings had referred to this discontent as the dominant mood of the modern poetry of the West and characterised it as the frustration of desires that did not know their own objective. He expressed the same opinion in his maturity. In a letter quoted in *Rabindra Jivani* we have the following explanation:

If we look more carefully, the part of love in *Manasi* is a poetisation—merely an exquisitely beautiful game—its true and real theme is that man does not know what He desires.¹

With his usual insight into the origin and processes of his own poetic creation, he knows that the despondency of his outlook was the outcome of a sensitized imagination, as it was with the entire genre of romantic poetry. He says:

The poison of despair is concealed in imagination and of that poison I have taken a full draught.

The very imagery of Keats' invocation to sorrow,

Come then sorrow
Sweetest sorrow
Like my own babe I nurse thee on my breast

¹ P. Mukerjee, *Rabindra Jivani*, p. 227.

is repeated in Rabindranath's:

Come sorrow, come

I have thy seat ready, come.

Tear out each vein of my heart,

And put your lips to them;

Draw my heart's blood drop by drop.

I shall nurse you with a mother's love.¹

¹ *Rabindra Rachnavali*, Vol. I, p. 15.

PLATONISM has formed such a significant part of the intellectual tradition of Europe that strains of it may be found running throughout the history of European literary thought. It was only natural that a movement like Romanticism with a pronounced inclination to idealise, should have found poetic inspiration in Plato's famous definition of 'Beauty, Absolute, Separate, Simple, and Everlasting which without diminution and without increase is imparted to the ever-growing and perishing beauties of all other things.'¹ We have a resurgence of this concept in the philosophies of Schelling and Fichte, and in England it undergoes a literary elaboration in Coleridge, Shelley and Keats which distinguishes it from the conventional Platonism of earlier writers like Browne and Spenser. It became so common an idiom in romantic thought that Keats could see in it a substitute for domestic happiness 'the mighty abstract idea I have of beauty in all things stifles the more divided and minute domestic happiness, an amiable wife and children.' Shelley's dedication to the spirit of beauty which consecrated all it shone upon 'of human thought and form' is well known. Even Wordsworth, who subscribed to a

¹ *Symposium*.

more concrete cosmology, saw a visionary 'Ideal Form' behind the world of matter:

Beyond the visible world she soars to seek
For what delights the sense is false and weak
Ideal Form, the Universal mould.¹

Plato's mystical belief that beauty was a 'Supersensuous Spiritual essence which is described by the mind when thrown into ecstasy' lent itself to an easy adaptation to the romantic concept of poetic inspiration during which the imagination played a magical role. Despite these close affinities, the Romanticists were no serious Platonists, in fact, as upholders of an iconoclastic outlook on most aspects of life, the romantic poets often posed a disrespectful nonchalance towards Plato, because of the unquestioned acceptance of his supremacy, as the father of Western philosophy. Don Juan called him

.....a bore
A *charlatan*, a coxcomb

as an adviser on love. But the general attitude which is a mixture of mockery and admiration is best summed up in Coleridge's remark 'I love Plato and his gorgeous nonsense'.

There are many learned treatises devoted to the study of the metaphysical implications of the Romantic belief in the eternal essence of beauty but as pointed out by Leavis, these concepts were more a literary 'bent' or 'tendency' than strict ontology. The word 'beauty' was broadly used for any Universal principle that was in need of poetic deification. It was interchangeable with the words, 'Truth', 'Wisdom', 'Nature' or 'God';² but it was synonymous with the word 'Love', its co-eternal essence:

¹ From the Italian of Michael Angelo.

² S. F. Gingerich, *Essays On Romantic Poets*, p. 217.

For love, beauty, and delight.

There was no death nor change

(*Sensitive Plant*)

The twin cults of 'beauty' and 'love' appeared for the first time in Bengali literature in the poetry of Biharilal, which implanted a new literary ideal. It was inseparable from the poetic outlook which accepted the universe only to the extent that it corresponded to its own subjective vision.¹ In other words, it was a purely romantic cult, the most widely accepted interpretation of Keats' famous phrase 'Beauty is truth' today being that 'There is nothing real but the beautiful and nothing beautiful but the real.'

The direct influence of *Alastor* and *The Hymn to Intellectual Beauty* on Biharilal's concept of beauty, has been analysed in considerable detail by Das Gupta, who concludes correctly that poems like *Prem Prabahini* largely drew upon these sources.²

Rabindranath's admiration for these poems of Shelley may have been caused by his close association with Biharilal or by his own intensive study of the English poet, but he is recorded to have confided to Thompson that during the phase of the *Evening Songs* it was the perfect expression of his mind, and that he recurred fondly to it even in old age. The celebrated phrase of Keats 'Beauty is truth', which is little more than a literary cliché in modern thought, was used by him in as serious a speculative writing as *Sadhana*. Keats' *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, we are told was an abiding inspiration. The poem *Chhabi* of Balaka repeats the theme of Keats' Ode, when it says that a work of art is as real as the 'stars' and the 'sky'. For Rabindranath it was not merely a poetic doctrine but a co-ordinating point of his views on art and religion, "I like the

¹ M. Mazumdar, *Adhunik Bangla Sahitya*, p. 49.

² H. M. Dasgupta, *Western Influence on Nineteenth Century Bengali Poetry*.

Grecian Urn very much, the idea appears to me that a thing, which is beautiful gives you the touch of the infinite.'

His ideas on the subject were in a sufficiently formulated stage to be developed in a series of notes in *Bharati* of 1291, where they appeared under the name of *Beauty*, and *Love*. The doctrine that there lies behind the world of forms a core of beauty of which all its earthly manifestations partake is directly stated. The sources of the concept are further confirmed by the unmistakable imagery of the Aeolian harp and the singing shell which was a romantic commonplace.

When we take the shell away from the sea, it does not forget the song of the sea. Put to your ear you shall hear the ceaseless voice of the ocean. Similarly, at the heart of the earth's beauty the song of heaven goes on, only the deaf cannot hear it. In the songs of the birds of this earth a song is heard which is beyond the song of the birds. In the light of the morning is seen, a light that transcends the light of the morning is seen; in beautiful poetry beyond the poem the shore of another continent of beauty is seen like a dim line.¹

Beauty was a universal attribute of the objects of the world just as mass was of matter, and it was their mutual attraction or 'love' which bound them together. The beautiful in the heart of the lover attracted the beautiful in the form of the beloved. This relationship applied to the animate and the inanimate alike. Thus beauty and love became the cause and the effect of the same principle.

When we love the flower so much it is for no other reason but that our heart has a very deep bond of unity with the flower. It appears to me, that it is the same thing which has blossomed as a flower; under different conditions has burst forth as my heart. That is why the flower wants my heart and I want the flower in my heart.

¹ *Rabindra Rachnavali*, Vol. II (A), p. 47.

We have here the repetition of Shelley's

There is an eloquence in the tongueless wind, and a melody in the flowing creeks and the rustling of the reeds besides them, which by their inconceivable relation to something within the soul stirs the spirit to a dance of breathless rapture....¹

And the ancestry of these views could be again traced back to Plotinus, according to whom the experience of love was nothing but the subjects and the objects sharing in the common essence of beauty. The soul never would have perceived the beautiful had it not first become beautiful itself, each must partake of the divine nature before he can discern the beauty of the divine.²

Under these broad connotations, everything the poet approved of was truth, which was sustained by a universal value at the heart of things. Beauty and love were the objective and subjective facets of this all-powerful essence. Thus every individual passion participates in and extends the glory of a cosmic festival of love which spreads over these and space.

These concepts are translated into poetry, to begin with somewhat awkwardly, in verses such as

I determine, I will leave and go
 But you pervade the universe,
 The further I go, the nearer to you
 I seem to draw.
 Even when before my eyes, you are far,
 And you are near when actually away.
 You fill the world and yet
 Live in a hidden palace.

Later in the poems of *Manasi* with a greater command of poetic means, we get a maturer exposition of the same theme. There

¹ A. M. D. Hugh, *The Nascent Mind of Shelley*, p. 211.

² James H. Cousins, *The Philosophy of Beauty*, p. 24.

risks behind every individual love the soulful vision of lovers of past ages floating down the stream of eternity, through countless births and deaths.

We two have floated down
 The twin stream of love.
 From the spring in the heart of Time
 We two have played
 in a myriad lover,
 In the bride's tears of separation
 and her timid sweetness of union.
 Ancient love appearing in an ever fresh garb.
 The happiness and pain of the universe
 Has mingled in this one love.
 The memory of all its romance
 The lays of all its poets, of all times.

That this was no mere poetic clichè but a deeply realised conviction for Rabindranath we know from the elegies of *Smiran*, in which he finds consolation in these thoughts even at a personal loss like the death of his wife. There is more of *Adonais* and *In Memoriam* in these poems than the anguished bereavement of a husband.

It is habitual with the critics of Rabindranath, while discussing his concept of beauty, to refer to some sayings of the Indian scriptures or to draw parallels between it and the Vaisnava's *rup aradhana*. The poet had himself led the way. In his discourses on the Upanishads such interpolations were quite frequent. For instance, the words of Maitrey were explained in one of his Santiniketan sermons as meaning

where do we find the touch of immortality in things mortal? Where there is love. It is love that casts the shadow of the infinite and keeps the old perpetually young and does not acknowledge death.¹

¹ Santiniketan—(On Prayer), First Series.

In poetry ancient myths like Urvashi and the burning of Madan and the dispersal of his ashes are employed by Rabindranath to symbolise the spirit of love pervading the wide world. The final conclusion of this line of criticism is that the genesis of Rabindranath's concept of beauty was from the traditional attributes of the Godhead, *Satyam, Sivam and Sundram*, rather than 'the true, the good and the beautiful' of the Romanticist.

It is necessary, therefore, to analyse this aspect in some detail. We take for this purpose the most elaborate expression of his views, his note *Sundryabodhi* in his collection *Sahitya*, although it appeared a few years after the period with which this essay is occupied.

We have in it a serious effort to construct from the postulate, 'The true is good and beautiful', a basic criterion for the judgment of value in art which would apply to all its aspects, aesthetic and moral. It is explained that beauty was distinct from the useful or the pleasant. Both the creator and worshipper of beauty had to approach its more universal aspects. Thus when a primitive man saw a painting he reacted only to its least significant qualities, such as the brightness of its colours, because he was incapable of comprehending its subtler features, the harmony of lines and tones, the depth of perspective merits which transcended the obvious.

Similarly the 'good' consisted in the expression of virtue which saw beyond the travail and immediate consequences of an action like Lakshmana's voluntary acceptance of exile with his brother. In Indian literature the beauty of the mighty was 'forgiveness', that of woman 'modesty' and not power and looks. The pleasure palaces of Ashoka have gone the way of all transient things but the beauty of his edicts, placed amid scenes of natural grandeur as homage to something greater than himself, partakes of the eternal. It explained the importance of harmony in art, the correlation of the past to the whole of life, of a sentiment and its expression. The subtle

aptness of the imagery of the lotus and the moon in a description of compassion was due to their inner harmony, which was an attribute of beauty.

It is in this context that he quotes the phrase 'Truth is beauty, beauty truth' as a description of the lotus-seated 'Saraswati', and an exposition of the saying of the Upanishad, 'All that is seen is His sacred and blissful Self.'

Turning to the Vaisnava influence, we may quote from his *Religion of Man*,

I was sure that these poets were speaking about the supreme Love, whose touch we experience in all our relations of love—the love of nature's beauty, of the animal, the child, the comrade, the beloved, the love that illuminates our consciousness of reality.

It is true that theologically the Vaisnava considered Krishna the incarnation of the Creator and Radha his creation seeking to regain its lost identity with him, but their poetry was almost exclusively preoccupied with the earthly episodes of their love-play. The worship of this beauty of Radha, a part of the Vaisnava cult, often consisted of a detailed description of her physical charms from her forehead to her small toe.

It would not be incorrect to say that some of our traditional notions could be interpreted to support the modern concept of beauty or even that we may be receiving back our own ideas through Plato, who is known to have been deeply influenced by Eastern metaphysics. It is quite a different matter to imply instead that Rabindranath merely revived a patently Indian notion of beauty.

Another point that is ignored is that epithets for the glorifications of the creator as Gita's 'whatever is glorious, good, beautiful, and mighty understand they that they go forth from the fragment of My Splendour,'¹ cannot be taken to imply a concept of beauty particularly when Indian aesthetics was cons-

¹ *World Famous Books in Outline*, Home Library, p. 73.

tracted around the concept of *rasa*. The nearest the Indian *alankarists* came to the idea of beauty as a category distinct from *rasa* was perhaps in Jagnath's upholding, in contrast to all others, that *raminyakta* determined the merit of literature. It must be borne in mind that beauty, which is the object of aesthetics, had been suspect according to both the Hindu and the Buddhist traditions because it distracted the senses, diverting the mind away from its true goal of salvation.

Broadly speaking, there is no ground to question the conclusion of a scholar like Oldenburg:

Neither can we deny that in the Vedic language and we may add, that even in the later language there was an entire lack of a word occupying the central position and his full and deep sound of the Greek (word). Even in the subsequent period India never placed the beautiful on the level with the great universal forces, such as Good and Evil, truth and untruth and connected with this, the final and deep problems of the relationship of the beautiful and the good were not raised here, in fact, could not be raised.¹

There are further accretions of Rabindranath's concept of beauty which have precedents only in Romanticism, such as the wishful hope of Shelley's that beauty would ultimately relieve

This world from its dark slavery.
That thou—O awful loveliness
Would's't give whatever these words can never express.

In one of his earliest notes on the subject Rabindranath says

Nature's effort is to do away with governance and establish beauty. To snatch away the sceptre from the hand of rule and put the crown on the head of beauty is the prime objective of nature. By the

¹ A. Oldenburg 'Vedic words for 'beautiful' and beauty and the 'Vedic sense of the beautiful', *Rupam*, 32, 1927, p. 98.

spreading of beauty all around us we are gradually preparing for freedom.¹

A few years later we hear again,

Freedom is the last born child of Creation. It is man who has realised freedom in his being. In the freed soul the power of the weakling, beauty, is the greatest, we use force against force but before beauty we surrender ourselves. It does not encroach upon our liberty and we gratefully submit our freedom to it.²

In the formation of his concept of beauty the most obvious influence had been Shelley, *Hymn to Intellectual Beauty* has been mentioned too often, while discussing Rabindranath's poems, particularly *Echo* and *Urvashi*, and his irritation was fully justified when he wrote to Charu Chandra on the subject of *Urvashi*, 'If an exact comparison with what Shelley called Intellectual Beauty leads to confusion, I am not responsible for it.' Scholars of Shelley's Platonism like Notopolous consider the *Ravine of Arve* as the most important reference to it, it is certainly more important than *Hymn to Intellectual Beauty*. It is surprising that in the prolific critical comments available on *Echo* the close resemblance between the two poems has not been noticed. Critics have been led on a wrong trail by the repetition in *Echo* of Shelley's dedication in *Hymn to Intellectual Beauty*.

I vowed that I would dedicate my powers
To thee and thine

(Shelley)

Standing in the heart of existence
you play the pipe of beauty
I will keep searching for you
on the endless path of life.

(Rabindranath)

¹ *Rabindra Rachnavali*, Vol. II A, p. 33.

² *Bharati*, 1299, p. 235.

Rabindranath has explained the feelings which inspired him in the following words:

The fact of the matter was that a longing had been born within my heart, and, unable to find any other name, I had called what I had desired an Echo. When from the original fount in the depths of the universe streams of melody are sent forth abroad, their echo is reflected into our heart from the faces of our beloved and other beauteous things around us. It must be as I suggested, this Echo which we love, and not the things themselves from which it happens to be reflected for that which one day we scarce deign to glance at one another, the very thing which claims our whole devotion. . . . This is the meaning of the longing which stirs within us at the sight of Beauty. The stream which comes from the infinite and flows towards the finite—that is the True, the Good, it is subject to laws, definite in form. Its echo which returns towards the Infinite is Beauty and Joy which are difficult to touch or grasp and so make us besides ourselves. This is what I tried to say by way of parable or a song in the Echo.¹

This could have been, without the change of a word, an explanation of Shelley's lines:

The everlasting universe of things
Flows through the mind, and rolls its rapid waves
Now dark now glittering—now reflecting gloom—
Now lending splendour, wherefrom secret springs
The source of human thought its tribute brings
Of waters—with a sound half its own,
Such as a feeble brook will oft assume
In the wild woods, among the mountains lone,
Where water falls around it leap forever.

It appears that Plato's imagery that the mind is a prisoner in a cave passively viewing shadows had made a deep impression on Shelley, because it is repeated in different contexts, e.g.,

¹ Rabindranath Tagore, *Reminiscences*, p. 225.

In the still cave of which Poesy
Seeking among the shadows that pass by
Ghosts of all things that are, ...¹

It had been there even in *Queen Mab*:

Life is its state of action, and the store
of all events is aggregated there
That variegate the eternal universe.

It is no wonder, therefore, that a theme so recurrent in Shelley should have found an echo in Rabindranath, who had read him so assiduously, even without being aware of it.

¹ James A. Notopoulos, *The Platonism of Shelley*, p. 210.

THE relation of poetry and faith raises intricate problems; both are concerned with belief but at two different levels. Poetry, like theology and metaphysics, attempts a co-ordinated comprehension of our responses to life; it differs from them in method and in the subjective and formal elements it involves. It is closer to theology because both utilise emotive means to correlate attitudes; 'the strongest part of our religion today is its unconscious poetry', whereas metaphysics depends exclusively on rationalisation. The distinction of the method being there, the rôle of the poet cannot be confused with that of the metaphysician, but the two do not thereby exclude each other, as emotion and conceptual knowledge coalesce in all living attitudes. Mallarmé's edict, 'Poetry is written with words not with ideas', is therefore refutable as words and ideas are inseparable; the merely connotative cannot be distinctly marked out from the purely conceptual. Though it is difficult to go as far as Arnold and say 'that poetry attaches itself to the idea, idea is the fact', the other extreme is equally untenable. Very often intellectual doctrines, the apices of rationalisation, not merely support poetic attitudes but are in fact essential to them, as they are in the case of Wordsworth and Shelley. And even the most tenuous poetic sentiment usually involves an attitude towards things which, in the final analysis, either confirms or denies

the doctrines operative in our lives. This is, however, not to contradict Scot James's just remark that a poem 'may stimulate logical judgements or be specially consistent with some logical judgements rather than other but its own method is never of logic'. Nor can it be said that the poet of *Evelyn Hope* was upholding the doctrine of transmigration of souls because poetic make-believe and belief are two different things, but we can certainly say that the poet of *Queen Mab* was not only upholding, but also preaching the doctrine of necessitarianism. The confusion is usually the result of mistaking the cause for the effect to which Eliot points when he says that poetry is not concerned with thought but with the emotional consequences of thought. Behind every consistent and intelligible outlook there has to be a coherent intellectual structure. It may be an overstatement to say that every one has a metaphysics, but certainly it is not so to assert that every poet has one.

When a poet is also dogmatic and sets out to justify his poetic outlook intellectually, the relation between poetry and faith becomes overt and the task of the critic is considerably simplified—an advantage we have in the present analysis. In Rabindranath, always somewhat of a doctrinarian, intellectual concepts show a Shelleyan obtrusiveness during the period under study.

In order to appraise the impress of Romanticism on Rabindranath's faith, we need an authentic statement of the essentials of his creed. For this purpose his own account of it is not only the least controversial—a considerable advantage in view of his apotheosis by his disciples but is critically significant because it starts with the same objective as this essay. *The Religion of the Artist* holds in retrospect all the 'visions and revisions' of his spirit; otherwise it would have been a start from the wrong end to begin a study of his early religion with a statement of it in his middle age.

To proceed with his account, he inherited the creed of

Brahmoism which he defined as 'the revivalism in our country of religion based on the utterances of Indian Sages in the Upanishads'. We know from his *Reminiscences* that he was initiated into these teachings by the Maharishi, even before his mind was ready to receive them. Before proceeding further the specific interpretation of the Upanishads in Brahmoism needs elucidation, for the ancient Sages gave utterance to widely differing statements and there are few schools of thought in India that do not claim their blessing.

The historical impulse behind Brahmoism was the iconoclasm engendered by the new learning which called for, above all, the establishment of some form of Hindu *monism*. Their basic tenet was, therefore, the worship of the 'One without a second', their cardinal principle on which they brook no compromise; but on the remaining questions they left the interpretation of the scriptures to the spiritual needs of the follower. It is alleged that Ram Mohan Roy always agreed with the Sankara Vedanta, whereas the Maharishi's faith from its very inception, was emotionally inclined; his dramatic conversion following the scrap of paper with the verse from the Isa Upanishad which the wind blew into his hand, is characteristic of his temperament. His devotional mind was naturally more inclined towards the Saguna Brahman rather than the Nirguna Absolute. He seemed to have completely accepted the *Bhakti* position, particularly after the return of the four Pundits who were sent by him to study the Hindu scriptures at Banaras. Of course, both Debendranath and Keshab Chandra rejected the 'I am He' doctrine, and the latter with characteristic vehemence dubbed it 'horrible'. Of greater significance than these metaphysical acceptances was the reconstitution of the function of religion, which had ceased to be an authoritarian code of belief and ethics, but a free faith chosen by individual conscience. It was now explicitly laid down that no scriptural dictum was valid if it was not ap-

proved by 'the light within us'. Rabindranath's underlining the fact of the complete freedom of his own conscience in this account is in keeping with the spirit of the new outlook.¹ Religion, thus emancipated from traditional encumbrances, becomes a conflux of eclectic spiritual ideas, which in the case of a poet are strongly influenced by literary ideology. That Rabindranath was conscious of this deviation is confirmed in his specifying his faith as the 'religion of an artist'.

His religion, he tells us, derived from 'vision' and not from 'knowledge', it was free from the theological preoccupation with evil and sin, and it was uncertain as to what happened after death and allied questions. His most valuable realisation was the harmony and beauty he saw in nature, and in the relationship of the individual with the Universe. The spiritual man according to him, was one 'whose inner vision is bathed in the illumination of his consciousness' and who at once realises the peace and inner harmony which dwell in truth, and not in any outer adjustments; and that beauty carried an eternal assurance of our spiritual relationship to reality, which waits for its perfection in the response of our love.² It was supported by no 'system of logic' but by the experience of the eternal assurance of our spiritual relationship to reality, which inner spirit of things through the conviction of joy evoked by the manifestation of physical and moral beauty. The closest approach to the mystic state is 'that sense of wonder which gives a child his right of entry into the treasure-house of mystery which is in the heart of the universe'.

We shall discuss each of these concepts, separately—the 'vision', 'the sense of wonder' and 'mystery', the harmoni-

¹ 'But owing to my idiosyncrasy of temperament, it was impossible for me to accept any religious teaching on the only ground that people in my surroundings believed it to be true. I could not persuade myself to imagine that I had religion simply because everyone whom I might trust believed in its value.' Rabindranath Tagore, *The Religion of the Artist*, p. 32.

² Ibid. p. 34.

ous unity of the individual and the cosmic life—and analyse their ideological implications.

Let us take up the 'vision', one of the oldest concepts in religion.

All that aspired to the name of religion up to modern times had sought its final sanction in revelation; so when Tagore calls 'vision', rather than knowledge, the real inspiration of his religion he comes very near to suggesting a divine origin for it. Esoteric associations cling to the word, despite its frequent use in poetry to mean the imaginative in general. The Hindu term for philosophy is *darshana* (vision), which suggests the close association of our philosophical speculation with mysticism. A more amplified definition will call it the science of the self (*atmavidya*) which is attained through gnosis (*jñana*), which, according to the Upanishads, is not conceptual reasoning or metaphysical perspicacity, but illumined perception being direct and immediate consciousness of reality.¹ This illumination had nothing in common with normal apprehension, in fact it seemed to reverse the order of usual cognizance; in this elated state 'father is not father—Vedas not Vedas, gods not gods'.² It was revealed inasmuch as it was different from 'proksha' apprehension, and for attaining this gnosis the mind had to be completely divested of the sensible. Both the Advaita and the Yogi, though differing in their methods to achieve this state, agreed on this point. The Advaita argued that all ideational knowledge was by its very nature descriptive and hence dissociated into mental pictures, ideas, images, and memory, whereas the state of illumination was 'unqualified unity, where there was no more the society of selves, but where there is only the self pervading the whole of consciousness and so also the whole universe resting in its glory (Sve mahi-

¹ Radhakrishnan, *Hinduism and the West*, pp. 339-40.

² *Bṛihadaranyaka Upanishads*.

mini protisthitam.'¹ Intuitive (*aproksha*) knowledge in the state of Samadhi envisaged by Yoga meant a complete *weaning* away of the mind from the disturbance of the senses 'by austerity and by uninterrupted self control'.

Any denial of the sensible world we know to have been anathema to Rabindranath because it contradicted his optimistic doctrines. *Revenge of Nature* is very explicit in its arguments against the denial of natural life, and the first lines of *Sharps and Flats*, 'Liberation through the Yogi's sadhana is not mine', have been quoted threadbare in this connection. The same view is reaffirmed in clearer terms, in one of his earliest sermons:

However, rather doing the work of the world in a pre-occupied way is commendable, but neglecting the world, shunning all action to attempt to cultivate the enjoyment of Brahma's union, for the sole purpose of the soul's joy is not desirable. It is spiritual sensuality not the service of Isvara.

His views on esoteric experience and its place in his outlook is unequivocal enough; yet there had been at least one 'vision' in his life, the one he saw at Sudder Street and described in the *Reminiscences* and *The Religion of Man*. Its narration in the latter context shows that it was relevant to his religious belief.

To repeat Bose, 'The experience is definitely of the type known as mystic. In fact it is the only record of mystic experience in the life of the poet.' The exultation of feeling which followed, the depth of its impression, and the noticeable transformation in outlook are effects that go with revelation, yet whatever its psychological or psychic significance, it flashed no inner reality on him, but led instead to eager extroversion. His sudden realisation of the oneness of his life with the world around him is no different from the experience described by

¹ Nalinkanta Brahma, 'Vedanta Intuition', *Proceedings of the Indian Philosophical Congress*, p. 169.

Wordsworth in his note to the 'Ode on the Intimations of Immortality', in which he wrote

I was often unable to think of external things as having external existence, and I communed with all that I saw as something not apart from but inherent in, my own immaterial nature. Many times while going to school have I grasped of a wall or tree to recall myself from the abyss of idealism to the reality. At that time I was afraid of such processes.

The naturalistic bias of this vision distinguishes it from the traditional vision, a fact which has to be acknowledged even by those who set out to analyse Rabindranath's religion with a view to establishing its descent from initial Hinduism. Das Gupta's admission is a telling instance: 'It is no longer the mystic ecstasy that burns the heart and destroys the individuality, but a communion which holds within it the beauty of external nature and the breath of humanity'¹ In fact it stands out from the usual mystical thought, ancient and modern. For instance it is in strong contrast to Paramahansa Ramkrishna's ecstasy at the sight of wild swans in the sky which brought about a typical trance in which objective consciousness was lost, whereas in Rabindranath it was considerably sharpened.

To take another aspect of the same question, the paramount gnosis, the *summum bonum* of Hindu spiritual life loses its urgency when perfectibility of knowledge is seen to be attainable by the gradual progress of the human mind. Rabindranath closely followed Shelley and Tennyson, who envisage in their poetry the progress of the soul in its journey through life and death. He affirms Shelley's conception in his exposition of it.

It is not that just after death our weak sight is opened to the infinite light of truth we shall pass through various ways and habits (sams-

¹ *Visva Bharati Quarterly*, Tagore Birthday Number, 1941, p. 222.

karas), put faith in different gods and scripture, gradually and slowly we shall progress to perfection.

At about the same time Tennyson's

Live thou, and of the grain, and the husk, the grape
And ivy-berry choose and still depart,
From death to death through life and life and find
Nearer and nearer him.

is interpreted to mean

Live, does not mean here mortal life but eternal consciousness. Passing through different births assimilate that which is good, discard that which is bad; in each step pass across the doors of death towards the immortal.¹

The view that the poetic experience verges on the mystical and under favourable circumstances the one may be easily transformed into the other, is not without modern defenders, such as the Frenchman Bremond and his English sympathisers like Middleton Murry. Rabindranath also saw the rapprochement of these modes of apprehension but from another standpoint, the romantic premise dressed in Platonism according to which the apprehension of beauty amounted to the experience of the infinite. A long note in *Bharati* is devoted to the description of this relation; the manifestation of the infinite in natural beauty was not an abstraction but was directly apprehensible in the poetic mood.² That he seriously believed in what he said is illustrated by his effort to transform actually the deep impression which the Karwar Beach had made on him on a moonlit night into a mystic trance the finale of which is described with the traditional image 'the drop losing itself in the ocean'. The poem was omitted from Mohit's edition of

¹ *Rabindra Rachnavali*, Vol. IIA, p. 103.

² 'On a moonlit night; on hearing a song from afar;
in the pleasure-laden breeze of spring

Rabindranath's works, because its esotericism was likely to baffle the uninitiated reader.

In his rendering of the poem in his *Reminiscences* later in life, Rabindranath rewrote it, reducing the esotericism of the original to the minimum, apparently realising the naivete of such mysticism. Some lines of the original poem would read in English something like this,

My eyes are closed,
Where am I, whither descending?
I hardly know
Let me see, see again—
Descend further, evermore,
Into the vast limitless void
In this infinitude lose myself today
Never to recover again.

There is no song, no word,
No sound, no touch;
Neither sleep, nor wakefulness

There is only a boundless night
In which I sink and extinguish
Dying in immeasurable sweetness
Losing myself and dissolving
Further into the far off infinite.

we experience a melancholy pleasure which was in fact 'a glance from the finite to the infinite'. The following English verses are quoted probably to illustrate the above experience; the context is rather vague.

'So young muser, I sat listening
To my fancy's wildest word—
On a sudden, through the glistening
Leaves around a little stirred
Came around, a sense of music
which was rather felt than heard
Softly it unwound me—
From the world it shut me in—
Like a fountain around me'

Rabindra Rachnavali, Vol. IIA, pp. 94-6.

This is no divine afflatus, it is only poetic ecstasy. If it has any spiritual purpose, its naturalistic bias marks it from the mystic ecstasy and the distinction applies to all similar moods.

To see God in the yearning that is produced in us by the phenomena in nature, sweet and calm, terrible and devastating is a view which is at once untraditional and unique. We do not find it in the life history of the great mystics of the past, either of India or the West.¹

It is true that if we have to look for prototypes of such poetic visions we have to turn to English Romanticism instead of religious mysticism. We have the well-known description of such a vision in Wordsworth's:

.....that serene and blessed mood
In which the affections gently lead us on
until the breath of this corporal frame
And even the emotions of our human blood
Almost suspended, we are laid asleep
In body, and become a living soul
while with an eye made quiet by the power
of harmony, and the deep powers of joy,
we see into the life of things.

The mystery and wonder that characterise the consciousness of the child and to which Rabindranath attributes the origin of his religion, have important bearings on this subject. That the divine is mysterious and fascinates is a venerable dictum, but Rabindranath was not considering mystery in the religious sense, as for instance did Rudolph Otto, who defined it as the irreducible metaphysical enigmas which face every enquiry into ultimate questions. On the contrary, the sense of mystery he refers to is characteristic of the least sophisticated stage of the human mind—the consciousness of the child.

¹ S. M. Dasgupta, 'The Faith and Philosophy of Rabindranath', *Visva Bharati Quarterly*, Tagore Birthday Number, 1941, p. 220.

It is indeed a fact that religion originated in similar states of the primitive mind, for which distinctions between the natural and the supernatural did not exist. The Romantic poet returns to it precisely because the modern man had lost this nascent state of mind which he wished to recapture for a deliberate poetic purpose, 'to give the charm of novelty to things of everyday and to excite a feeling analogous to the supernatural by awakening the mind's attention to the lethargy of custom and directing it to the loveliness and wonders of the world before us; an inexhaustible treasure.'¹ Rabindranath also seeks, in the very words of Coleridge, 'the treasure house of mystery which is in the heart of the Universe', and in selecting the apprehension of the child as his prototype he was following a recognisably romantic example. If a Romanticist is to be characterised as 'one who looked upon the world as a fairy land,' as T. S. Eliot does, the reasons for the child's apprehension being considered the most poetic are obvious. These reasons are not in any way mystical as were for instance those of Plato. To induce the 'sense of wonder' which is natural to childhood was not only an important poetic objective for the Romanticist but it also supported his general idealisations of the primitive, the child and the 'noble savage'. It is difficult, therefore, to avoid the conclusion that his 'vision' had no mystical implications, but ostensible poetic ones, particularly during his early life.

Modern philosophical enquiry begins with epistemological questions, just as the starting point of ancient philosophy was ontology. No subject has exercised modern thought as much as the nature of knowledge. Dresser has gone as far as saying that 'it was the discussion of this issue which has given us the modern mind'. Any detailed comparison of Indian and Western epistemology will be superfluous here because however striking

¹ Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, Ch. 14.

the resemblance the statements of Rabindranath may bear to the profuse dicta on either side, they were expressions of amateur opinions because there is no evidence that the subject engaged him seriously during the period discussed here. Here we can deal only with some basic concepts and inquire whether they were suggested by Western or Indian thought.

The Hindus had a highly-developed epistemology (two of their major systems are built on it), but the question of the validity of the knowledge based on the report of the senses was not dealt with except by Sankara, to whom alone can strict epistemological idealism be attributed. Before him 'that which appeared was regarded as real'.¹ Sankara's basic concept may be distinguished from the Western by its fundamental premise, the Nyay exposition of illusion by which a conch-shell appeared like silver or a rope like a snake,² whereas Western epistemology proceeded from the argument that as the subject's apprehension of the object was through the agency of the senses and whose report needed further subjective formulation in order to be comprehended, the object, as it was, could not be known.

Long before he wrote anything significant, Rabindranath seems to have been fully conversant with this relation of the subject and the object, the limitation of the knowledge dependent on the evidence of the senses, and with the Berkleyan conclusion that the world may only be a series of concepts in the apprehending mind. His early expositions do not remind us of the Vedantic view of the world, the 'Vivarta' notion based on the three categories of consciousness. His note on

¹ Das Gupta, *A History of Indian Philosophy*, pp. 417-18.

² He reasoned that just as the attribution of the quality of silver, which is not there in reality to the quality of the conch-shell which was there, yet was not silver; so the attribution of the quality of Brahma that was the only reality, to the world as distinct from it led to the illusion of the world; which was destroyed with the realisation that the Brahma is the only reality. See Das Gupta, *A History of Indian Philosophy*, 'Vedanta Theory of Illusion', pp. 485-9.

'The Unreality of the World' in *Bharati* deserves to be quoted at length, He says:

Those who say that the world is unreal, their contention is true in one way, and untrue in another. Ether vibrates and I see light; waves arise in the air and I hear sound; matter is made up of constantly attracting and repelling minute atoms and I see one vast solid. Why matter appears to me in this shape and not in another remains inexplicable. It need not surprise us, because what appears as matter to us might appear as mere sound to a new class of living beings; what we see, and they hear, will be the same thing. Nor would it be surprising if a new living being realises matter through a new sense beyond sight, taste, smell, and touch; something that we cannot imagine. By analysing matter we can make it more and more subtle (*sukhsma*), until it becomes something for which we have no word in our language and no concept in our mind. We may say that it is a play of forces but the word 'force' connotes nothing; therefore we cannot base a lasting faith on it. For the sake of convenience we have worked out a hypothesis, we have agreed to believe in it for the time being; should the arrangement be altered by the change of conditions we could not be answerable for it.¹

He is a strict idealist here, Another note on the subject, 'Reality of the World', is very lucid. He says:

One gradually feels that what we see is not what it actually is, that is why some people call the world unreal. That which is real is invisible and beyond the senses; it is just an idea (*bhava*). But the idea expresses itself in various forms, in language, in words, in the manifold relation of things. Just as that which is only a force and not matter, we grasp through its formal effects such as light colour, heat, so we see reality in the external world. It may easily be that to God this world is invisible, for Him it has no form,

¹ *Rabindra Rachnavali*, Vol. IIA, p. 131.

no smell, no extension, no sound, no touch, it is simply known to Him.¹

The last lines have a Hegelian ring and in view of the popularity of Neo-Hegelianism in contemporary Bengali due to its affinity with Upanishadic doctrines, the idea might easily have derived from that source.

Somewhat earlier his poem, *Echo*, had puzzled his friends. He had attempted to express in it that creation whose colour and form so absorbed us was only an echo of the Real which was hidden from us.² Das Gupta detects in it 'the spirit expressing itself in sensuous terms and coming back to itself through a new transfiguration, which was for Hegel the definition of art.'³ Despite this and other Hegelian utterances which he gave way to from time to time throughout his life,⁴ Rabindranath did not pursue Hegel's philosophy very far. His immanent and immutable Real was never the Hegelian Absolute, unfolding dialectically in the Universe.

Rather it was the poetic Eternal of Shelley, Tennyson and Arnold, the unchanging spirit of all ephemeral phenomena, and it is obvious that he did not care for the subtleties of their doctrinal differences because he considered them all to be 'meditating on a Vedantic Isvara'. According to him the 'One' which remains when 'the many change and pass' of the tenth stanza of *Adonais*, was not merely the ideal content of the visible universe and the same as Tennyson's.

They are but broken lights of thee
And thou O Lord, art more than they⁵

¹ Ibid. p. 15.

² Preface to '*Morning Songs*', *Rabindra Rachnavali*, Vol. I, p. 50.

³ *Visva Bharati Quarterly*, Tagore Birthday Number, p. 200.

⁴ 'But for the world which is an ever moving multitude advancing towards an idea, all its laws must have one principle of harmony. This is the law of creation.' *Letters from Abroad*, p. 80.

⁵ 'Non-Dualism and Modern English Poets', *Bharati*, 1288, p. 361.

He was profoundly moved by Tennyson's *De Profundis*, which he considered to be a greater English poem than *Paradise Lost*. Tennyson had arrived, through his own poetic logic, at conclusions not far different from Kant's, that the human mind can comprehend reality only in relation to time and space. Therefore, the Absolute which was beyond these was not within its ken. Rabindranath, explaining the message of *De Profundis* said that 'the one light' from which the world emerged was beyond human comprehension, the poet was lost and blinded in that domain of brightness. This closely approaches the Upanishadic 'from which all speech with the mind turns away unable to reach it' or 'the eye does not go thither, nor speech, nor mind.'

Tagore's early poetry hardly dwells upon the nature of the Eternal, His mind was attracted to its essential mystery for the first time in '*The Golden Boat*, the book which is a preamble to his mature faith. His earlier conception of the creative essence of things, which lay hidden behind the curtain of phenomena, closely approached the one expressed by Tennyson in *De Profundis*. His own image for describing the infinite in 'Realistic and Imaginative Poetry'¹ is notable;—

We are dwellers on a sea shore, we look in front and we see no limit before us. The limit begins when we look down to our feet. The shore on which we stand, alone, is matter and the senses, but all around is the fathomless sea of speech (bhasa). This tiny shore is not the abode of our heart. When we return here after the day's work we feel that somewhere beyond this sea is the country of our birth.

It is repeated from the stanza of *De Profundis* discussed by Rabindranath,

. that great deep, before our world beings whereon the spirit of God moves as he wills—Out of the deep, out of the deep my child

¹ *Rabindra Rachnavali*, Vol. IIA, p. 93.

from the true world within the world we see where of our world is but the bounding shore.

It is not to be ignored that Romanticism even in the heyday of naturalism clung to the idea of an Eternal Spirit; whether it was described with Platonic, Deistic, or Christian analogies it was always there. The significance of Plato, among whose disciples could be counted Wordsworth, Shelley, Fichte and Schelling, lay in presenting the Romanticists with the conception of an ideal world which lay behind the visible, the essence of the Good from which all being and knowledge proceeded. It is true that Shelley, and Coleridge too, looked at this eternal spirit with necessitarian eyes, but even Shelley, the excommunicated atheist, underlined that his contention that 'there was no God, must be understood solely to effect a creative Deity. The hypothesis of a pervading spirit co-eternal with the universe remains unshaken.'¹

Even in his earlier poetry, Wordsworth never departed from the notion of an immanent 'spirit of the universe' and in his later poetry came to envisage clearly the personal 'God who sees into the heart'.

Rabindranath's 'Non-dualism and Modern English Poets' and his commentary on *De Profundis* give enough evidence of the strong effect of English poetry on his religious sensibility and it is significant that when he had become a philosopher in his own right and a modern prophet, accepted both in the East and the West, he tried to affirm the consanguinity of his belief with that of the poets—English and Indian rather than with the metaphysicians. In his presidential address to the Indian Philosophical Conference, he aligned himself with Shelley and the *baul* poet, Wordsworth and the Rigvedic hymnist. For him they all agreed that the 'Awful shadow of some unseen Power' which haunted Shelley

¹ H. J. C. Grierson, *Classical and Romantic*, p. 201.

is the profoundest reality, though difficult of comprehension it is equally admitted by the English poets as by the nameless singer of Bengal in whose music vibrates the wing beats of the unknown bird—only Shelley's utterance is for the cultural few, while the Baul song is for the tillers of the soil.

According to him the famous English stanza

Were all the workings of one mind, the features
Of the same face, blossoms upon one tree
Characters of the great apocalypse,
The types and symbols of eternity,
The first and the last and midst and without end,

was a repetition of what the Rigvedic Rishis felt when they realised

that there was something real of which Agni, Indra, Varuna etc., were only forms and names. That something was not many but one, impersonal, ruling 'over all that is unmoving and that moves that walks or flies being differently born'.¹

It is imperative here to distinguish poetic pantheism from theistic immanence. In keeping with the inexactitude of critical usage, the term 'pantheism' has come to mean in literary contexts any form of attribution of life and sanctity to all objects, which is a departure from its academic definition. The critic has seldom to venture beyond the purview of this meaning and can, therefore, ignore whether what he calls pantheism derives from the idea of mere immanence, deism, or animism. It is due to a similar denial of ideological perspective that serious critics can allege that 'Shelley's *Adonais* is conceived in the spirit of the Upanishads and how nobly the doctrine of the *atma* and the world-soul is expressed in Wordsworth.' The *prima facie* identity of viewpoints accepted

¹ *Proceedings of the Indian Philosophical Congress*, p. 16.

here, needs to be correlated to their ideological origins to bring about their distinguishing features.

According to the Indian concept, the Upanishads enlarged upon the ontological argument that as everything originated in Brahma and finally returned to Him, nothing existed outside Him, hence everything partook in His presence and was, therefore, sanctified. It is not pantheism according to the strict definition that 'identifies God with the sum total of things and denies transcendence' because it visualised a part of Him beyond this creation. It was pantheism only 'if it is pantheism to say that God is the fundamental reality of our lives and we cannot live without it.'¹ In comparison the romantic view was more complex, resulting from a welter of philosophical and literary concepts, the most potent amongst which were the revolt against mechanistic deism and the emergence of the concept of nature in relation to the objective world and that of imagination to the subjective. In an emotional rebound from the depressing image of the universe as a clockwork wound up for eternity, the Romanticist fondly returned to the vision of a creative spirit permeating nature which worked from within each particle; even though the line between the spirit and matter grew extremely dim. The 'spirit' that inspired Wordsworth with the joy of elevated thought, so like a mystic elation, was also a 'motion', an appropriation of Newtonian terminology—

.....that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things

Similarly, Shelley saw the 'soul of Universe' as a 'beneficial actuating principle', the strongest proof of whose existence was the 'vast intelligence' which worked in 'each leaf of a

¹ S. Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy*, p. 203.

tree, the mean insect on which we trample'¹. It was the same 'active principle' which Wordsworth saw 'assigned', 'to every form of life'. This active sentience pervading the universe that resulted from objective knowledge, seemed to be confirmed by subjective apprehension of which the consciousness of the child was the prototype. The deepest inspirations of this verse came from experience like

I heard among the solitary hills
Low breathings coming after me, and sounds
Of undistinguished motions, steps
Almost as silent as the turf they tread upon.

Thus both logical inference and direct apprehension proved nature to be alive and it is very significant that to the sensibility of this period the latter was the more convincing by far, a fact that could hardly be better illustrated than by the description of such an apprehension by Sir Humphrey Davy, one of the greatest scientists of his time:

Today for the first time in my life, I have had a distinct sympathy with nature. I was lying on the top of a rock to the leeward the wind was high and everything in motion, the branches of an oak tree were moving and murmuring to the breeze, yellow clouds deepened by the grey at the base, were rapidly floating over the eastern hills, the whole sky was in motion. The yellow stream below was agitated by the breeze, everything was alive and myself part of the series of visible impressions. I should have felt pain in tearing a leaf from one of the trees.²

One would have expected from Davy a hylozoistic rather than a naturalistic bias, but he infers the livingness of nature not from the evidence of science but the emotional impact

¹ *Letter*, Jan. 3rd., 1811.

² John Davy, *Memoirs of the Life of Sir Humphrey Davy*.

of a landscape. It shows how deep was the influence of the poetic ideology of the day.

At the core of Rabindranath's pantheism, or whatever name it may more accurately deserve, lay the same sense of the sentience in nature. This fact is borne out by his effort to equate the Vedantic concept of immanence with that of the Romanticist in his earliest writings. His argument and its immediate inspiration are both unambiguous, he says:

Those who are true poets, whose minds have been moulded by genius. . . . are by their very nature pantheistic. They can in no case accept that nature is lifeless (jad). They see life in everything, hear a voice in the mouth of everything that exists; they see the whole creation alive and conscious. Hence Shelley who was a master poet, of the very highest order, could not help being a pantheist.¹

The final sanction of this pantheism lies in the testimony of the senses though its intellectual doctrines were determined by science which seriously occupied him at this period, to judge from his essays on plant and animal life in the *Bharati* of 1790. He quoted with apparent relish Tennyson's well-known lines:

Flower in the crannied wall
I pluck you out of the crannies
Hold you here, root and all, in my hand
Little flower but if I could understand
What you are root and all and all in all
I should know what God and man is.²

The afflorescence of the set of poems beginning with *Ahalya*, which Thompson considers 'the greatest he ever wrote', resulted from his observations such as,

¹ *Bharati*, 1788, p. 388.

² *Rabindra Rachnavali*, Vol. IA, p. 300.

we are sitting in the flower garden, there is an appearance of holiday on all sides, yet within each tree, leaf, flower, and blade of grass, ceaseless toil is going on. They are busy shops of chemical combination and separation but their faces show no trace of the sweat of labour. We find there instead only beauty, rest and peace.¹

It was this awareness transmuted by the golden glow of poetic imagination that yielded the unforgettable imagery and sentiment of *Vasundhara* (Earth).

Hence as some day I sit alone, Self forgetful on Padma's bank,
And turn enraptured eyes in front of me
I feel all over my body and mind
The tremor of the sprouting grass in earth
The blind transport of buds that open on
The ends of lonely stems and the joy of trees
And shrubs that are filled at dawn, with vague delight.²

Affinities with the sentiments of these poems have been discovered in poetry as diverse in origin and spirit, as the hymn to Earth in the Atharva Veda (Kshiti Mohan Sen), the Vaisnava's verse identifying the universe with the beloved (Binoy Gopal Ray), and Oscar Wilde's *Panthea* (Charu Chandra Bandhopadhyaya). The similarities established in these instances are no deeper than the common recognition in all these cases of the unity of the entire cosmic life. Their difference lies in the ever-varying conceptions of unity which underlie the poetic effusions. In the words of Narvane, "The commonest quotation in this regard is the extremely broad question posed by the ancients "Can this God be abstracted from the world"'.³ The hylozoism of Rabindranath should not be confused with the Vedic investiture of natural objects with

¹ Ibid. Vol. III, p. 137.

² Translation by A. K. Bose.

³ T. S. Narvane, *Rabindranath Tagore*, p. 16.

superhuman mythical forms, nor his poetic pantheism with the traditional non-dualism. One may object to the adjective 'primitive' with which Dean Inge qualified oriental pantheism, but the distinction he applied to differentiate Wordsworth's pantheism from Pope's which is merely ontological, is basically sound and may be used here. He said that Pope's God is 'as full, as perfect, in a hair as in a heart', is nearer to both Platonic and Indian Pantheism to which 'all is equally divine' than Wordsworth's sense of 'eternal and ubiquitous life of a universe animated throughout and obeying one law'.¹ It has to be noted that Rabindranath was not without his version of neo-Platonism. In his early poetry, as well as in his prose, few ideas are more obtrusive and redundant than the Platonic values, Beauty and Love; and these did implicate his poetic teleology. For example, he says:

Who can demonstrate that the universe is not so much matter heaped up and that there is feeling in its heart? Nothing but Love. He who loves this world genuinely can never admit that the universe is a meaningless mound of matter; he will see in it the glimpse of the infinite and the everlasting.²

No discussion of Rabindranath's early religion is complete without some comment on the concept of *Jivan Devata*, which coloured the most fruitful phase of his early writings. No other theme of the poet has engrossed his critics more or drawn more varied comments from them. Hence whatever be its true meaning, it was an unusually effective piece of poetry. Usually it is interpreted as a mystical image which is explained in terms of some metaphysical or religious belief. Poetically its effect largely depends on the ready responses

¹ Quoted from J. Cousins, *Philosophy of Beauty*, pp. 64-5.

² *Rabindra Rachnavali*, Vol. IIA, p. 16.

connected with the daily worship of a personal deity, the *griha devata* in countless Bengali homes. Any song of dedication to a personal *daemon* is bound to recall religious associations, particularly to a people whose most cherished religious music is the *vaisnav* lyric. Those preoccupations have detracted attention from the important fact that the *Jivan Devata* represented a new mode of poetic personification which in Bengali literature was no older than the poetry of Biharilal in which an abstract idea was transformed into a living image without turning it into a specious personage, as had happened in mythology.

Rabindranath's juvenile poetry is replete with personifications of flowers, clouds, and the four directions, and in the beginning they are as conventional as the sylphs in *The Rape of the Lock*. Gradually they develop romantic characteristics. The tantalising image of a dream-lover hovers over the horizon of his poetic vision in the *Saisav Sangit*, and becomes a closer and a more disturbing presence in *Sandhya Sangit*. Something of the ethereality of these visitations colours the otherwise formal personifications of abstract spirits of poetry, love, and death. These were counterparts of the romantic odes on subjects like 'melancholy' and 'fancy'. The title of Rabindranath's famous poem *Manasundari* can be aptly translated as 'Psyche'. The poem is indeed a reflection of his Psyche, at least on the subject of an ideal companion. He presents various images of this fairy partner as they come to his mind by free association, instead of creating a single consistent image. The first few lines of the poem are addressed to the spirit of poetry, 'the high meed of his life's toil'. A few lines later it is transformed into the imaginary companion of his childhood beckoning him to the 'lonely corners of the house of mystery'—the one who snatched him away from school and kept him enthralled on the roof of the great house. She takes yet another shape when during

his youth she occupies the throne of his heart 'in all the glory of a queen', inhabiting the same secret mansion in which sat the Antaryami 'ever awake to pain and pleasure'. The playmate of his childhood becomes 'the goddess of his fate'. She is at one moment the mysterious pilot of his boat in a shoreless sea, and at another the embodiment of the spirit of beauty in nature. All the time he is aware that it is the innovation of his own submerged passion, because he clearly says, 'her face has been created from the vision of my own eyes, the longing of my own heart'. Nevertheless he does not wish to forsake the feeling that she had shared his household in some past birth.

We have here six different images, most of which were later enlarged to become subjects of well-known individual poems. The strange pilot of his dream becomes the theme of *Nirudesh Yatra*, the spirit of beauty that of *Urvashi*, and the 'goddess of his fate' gives place to the *Jivan Devata* and 'Antaryami' which were more consistent symbols of the continuity and significance of individual life.

The poetic achievement of *Chitra* consists mainly of these superb personifications which were created by the most discerning admixture of rhetorical device with the imaginative virtuosity so characteristic of *Sonar Tari*. A significant point emerges here. The *Jivan Devata* was one of the many poetic personifications which were implicit in *Manasundari* and which later acquired larger contours. They were all purely poetic in origin and import. The belief that the *Jivan Devata* originated in a spiritual or religious concept, therefore, is not tenable. In fact, the difference between these poems and the devotional poetry of his next phase lies in the *Jivan Devata* being merely a poetic symbol circumscribed by the destiny of a single individual, albeit eternal, whereas the object of his religious verse is the spirit of the universe conceived by the poet as a person. This later concept was religion in all its essentials.

From the preceding analysis of the different aspects of Rabindranath's early religious outlook it would appear conclusive that his beliefs were humanistic and not denominational. The core of his religion was the strong sentiment towards nature, the appreciation of landscape being raised to the level of spiritual realization. There was a categorical rejection of the concept of *Maya* and the traditional goal of life, i.e. liberation from it. On the contrary, the material world was not only affirmed but considered sacred not as part of an indefinable absolute but as the living face of the Divine. This pantheism is not theological but poetic because like that of the Romanticists his conviction was derived from the evidence of beauty and intelligence in the working of nature. There is hardly any element in this view of the universe that goes beyond the ideological scope of Romanticism and the precedents of its poetry, except perhaps the doubts about the benevolence of nature expressed in *Sharp & Flats*, which belonged to a somewhat later period. His outlook was more closely aligned to the views engendered by the arts and sciences of the nineteenth century than to any religious tradition.

NATURAL landscape has always been present in literature as the inescapable backdrop to human action. The poetic response to it, and its features emphasized in that response vary with the ideological *conclusions* of each period. Any comparison of the attitudes towards nature in two different periods would be superficial unless they are seen in the perspective of contemporary beliefs and outlook. Local nuances of meaning have to be differentiated otherwise we may find little to distinguish the naturalism of a Chinese drawing of the Sung period from that of a Greek landscape of Hadrian's age or a recent Turner. On the face of it, the sentiment of a hymn deriving from prehistoric animism and a poem inspired by romantic pantheism is the same; both address with similar sentiment the specious spirit that seems to be animating all objects of nature, but the failure to date the two and to distinguish the wide differences of their sources and their implications would amount to ignoring the literary and intellectual changes of a few thousand years. These distinctions are normally obvious. If we place together, for instance, the description of the sea in *Seafarer* in modern English and that in a sonnet of Swinburne, few critics would fail to distinguish that the one is Anglo-Saxon and the other a recent nature description. This is despite the fact that *Seafarer* depicts the

very pagan love of waters that Swinburne was at pains to recapture.

Similarly, in spite of many generalisations implying that Rabindranath was the direct inheritor of Vedic naturalism none would think of attributing to him the following invocation to a stream.

The source of the roaring water is the sky, yonder above the earth, with its might it arouses endless fury. The torrents of rain thunder forth as from the cloud, when Sindhu strides forth like a bellowing bull. pouring her waters onward, brightly coloured, fair in her expanse, she spreads her breeze, through space, she the unerring Sindhu, the most active among those who are active, splendid like a mare, wonderful to behold. . . . Sindhu has harnessed her bright chariot drawn by horses, with this chariot she has won the prize in the race. The greatness of the chariot is greatly extolled, it is unerring, brilliant of itself, it pours forth blessing.¹

The images of 'the bellowing bull', 'the splendid mare', and the rhetoric of the final sentence are exclusively of the age they were expressed in. So also is the poetic purpose of the piece which is not to draw a word picture of a river but to personify its virility. We could take Coomarswamy's more scholastic expressions for this distinction and say that the sage was seeking the 'intelligible' in this hymn, whereas the romantic sought the 'sensible'. ✓

The Poetry of *Meghdoot* or *Gita Govinda* shows a keen delight in nature. For an unalloyed zest for nature few poems can compare with *Meghdoot*, but like all classical poets Kalidasa enjoys nature as it directly effects him and his characters. It is the setting of his story's action which belongs to a period when nature was still man's home. His landscapes like the

¹ A. Oldenburg, 'Vedic words for *beautiful* and *beauty* and the Vedic sense of the *beautiful*', *Rupam*, No. 32, 1927, p. 118.

magnificent description of the Dasarva forest are the actual environs of his characters and are informed with the dwellers' attachment to them. The spontaneity of their feeling marks it from the romantic devotion to nature that was practised as a deliberate creed and was supported by definite dogmas. The classicist's love of nature is completely free from doctrinal interpolations and the sophistications of a cult. His naturalism was not partial to the 'wild', 'primitive', or 'remote' and there is no return to nature in his poetry because he was still living in it. Thus even Binyon, who holds that the naturalism of the Sung drawings was essentially romantic, has to admit that in these landscapes there is no marked preference for either the wild and primitive or the sunny and comfortable.¹ This applies equally to the Western classical poetry, for instance.

Homer looks at nature as it effects man; its power of sustaining life; its subservience to our physical wants. Hence the side of nature which is lovingly regarded by him is not mountain, rock, or wild sea. . . . all fruitless and barren—but soft flat meadow land.²

Whereas pre-Romantic poetry treated nature casually or merely utilised it for drawing its imagery from it, the Romantics came to look upon the minute observation of scenery and its portraiture in a word picture as an end in itself. The minute analysis of personal reactions to nature would be possible only in an age that accepted introspection as completely as the Romanticist. A poem like the *Excursion* would be unthinkable under a less subjective poetic outlook. This poetry was founded on the prestige which the new canons of taste gave to the personal vision. This basic difference between the two attitudes, the intimate but casual appreciation of nature in ancient

¹ Lawrence Binyon, *Painting in the Far East*, p. 150.

² Myra Reynolds, *Treatment of Nature*, pp. 88-9.

poetry, and the emphatic but cultivated devotion seen in modern poetry is vividly brought out by Rabindranath in one of his similes.

Our relation with nature is like that of a brother and sister, that of European savants like that of a husband and wife. We are born kin. We feel we are one as a matter of course, we do not notice the everchanging variations of her moods. We live enveloped in a blind unconscious affection. The European approaches from outside, so his contact with nature is so pleasing, because he is able to maintain his separateness his union is so intense. He tries to win attention like that of a bride and nature also unfolds her peerless charms to capture his heart. He had known her as lifeless for long, with the emergence of youth he seems to have discovered at a glance her indescribable beauty and limitless charm, which we never discovered because we had never doubted it and never questioned it.

He points out, however, that this rediscovery of nature in European literature is more significant than our habitual intimacy with it, because 'The spirituality of a union is greater than that of identification', and 'To live in mere oneness is next to being unrelated.'¹

The naturalism of English poetry was a poetic creed exclusive to Romanticism, and it bore the distinct impress of contemporary philosophy. It was fed by some patent romantic sentiments such as the revolt against their formalistic and the philistinism of city life, the search for the primitive and the exotic, and the need for a living faith that would not be inconsistent with the new developments in knowledge. These attitudes in their turn were deeply involved with the intellectual controversies that raged at the end of the eighteenth century.

The most debated issues of the period were certainly the conclusions of science which questioned some of the oldest religious beliefs. The universe presented by science, then

¹ *Rabindra Rachnavali*, Vol. II, pp. 556-7.

dominated by Newton's physics was a correlation of immutable laws which by their interaction produced all phenomena. This tended to destroy the biblical image of the Patriarchal Creator, and in his place stood a hypothetical Celestial mechanic who ran the universe through an intricate system of impersonal forces. Subtle controversies arose regarding the precise relation of the Creator to His universe, whether He could be identified with nature or be considered a godhead that transcends the world of phenomenon. The dogmas that proceeded from the different philosophical stands on this issue led to the formation of various schools of thought which came to be distinguished as Deists, Theists, and Pantheists. The polemical elaborations of these schools are not so important as the fact that they all gave a new direction to contemporary belief. They questioned some old views about the universe and supported others with new arguments but in either case modified the existing picture. The physical world received an unprecedented emphasis, the Creator was eclipsed by the interest focussed on His manifestation and a significant result of this stress was the rise of the view that the earth was the face of the Divine.

The purposive intelligence discovered in the minutest form of natural life supported the religious belief in the immanence and benevolence of the Creator and all the important schools of thought—Deist, Theist, and Atheist—agreed on this point. Romanticism provoked a highly imaginative argument in favour of this view that an appealing landscape was the manifestation of beauty at the core of things. Taken broadly, the recognition of the beauties of nature as a gift of God was not an utterly original sentiment, having been there in the oldest religions, but the dogmas which the Romanticist further deduced from it such as, that undefiled scenery purified the human emotions and morals, were indeed modern. The proximity of wild nature was believed to be mysteriously conducive to the proper growth of the human personality in general and

the artistic sensibility in particular. The epitome of this creed was expressed in Wordsworth's oft quoted lines:

The anchor of my thought, the nurse
The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul
Of all my moral being

It was a transposition, although somewhat arbitrary, of the traditional attributes of a personalised deity, responsible for the care of the flock and the purification of the devotees' souls. The sense of mystery and wonder which overwhelmed the Romanticist when he looked at wild nature served the purpose of a spiritual revelation. His recurring nostalgia for the visions of childhood, which almost each of them from Blake to Rossetti had voiced, sprung from their having found in the nebulous apprehension of childhood closely resembled the religious realization of the immanence of spirit in the natural world.

Although the strongest protagonists of this viewpoint were anti-religious, except in the sense Dr. Leavis calls Wordsworth and D. H. Lawrence religious, yet most of them were temperamentally ardent souls and therefore much in need of a faith. The cult of nature met this need. It may be inaccurate to call naturalism a religion, free as it was from the formalities of an organised church, it was nevertheless a 'sabbatical cult' according to which, 'Nature was God, and nature and scenery were almost inextricably mixed.'

Wild nature came to signify to the Romanticist the world in its primal purity and this was in no small degree influenced by the political theory of social contract, which was concerned with an original state of felicity from which society was gradually weaned away. Fairchild's study captures for us the image of the 'noble savage' with his innate goodness nurtured by nature, that hovered over the romantic mind. The perversions of mankind were but the raving of a child separated

from his mother-nature and his only hope of recovery was a return to her. So, everything invented by man was at a discount and all that conformed to its original pattern in nature was upheld as the ideal.

Myra Reynolds has traced the gradual popularisation of the theme of nature in all fields of art. Her basic conclusion which is too well substantiated to be questioned by later findings is that 'the change is a great one. From Pope to Wordsworth, from Le Notre to Repton, from Kneller to Turner, from Richardson to Mrs. Radcliffe, from Brand Gilpin to Kent, the pendulum swings. Whether men painted pictures, or made gardens, or went on journeys, or told tales of love and adventure, or wrote poems, the new spirit was at work within them, sending them forth into the world of nature and bidding them bear witness to her power and loveliness.'¹ Kent had followed the pattern of nature even in as practical an art as the laying of parks to such an extreme that it invited the sarcasm that 'No follower of his would willingly go to heaven on a straight line.' Naturalism was more significant as a change in taste than as a dogma, which made landscape a major theme in all the arts.

Even in the most confident moments, the dogmas of naturalism had been beset with internal conflicts. Partly the concept of nature was the result of an aversion to the outlook of mechanical determinism. The idea of harmony in the working of the natural law, which was stressed so often in the early phases of the movement, was an effort to soften the image of the universe by comparing it to a musical symphony instead of a machine. But determinism was not thereby killed, because Shelley's necessitarianism is another version of it and even Wordsworth ultimately accepted 'the daughter of necessity'. Although it is true that personalised nature with

¹ Myra Reynolds, *The Treatment of Nature in English Poetry*, p. 327.

a maternal concern for the individual did not go happily with the view that saw nature as a clockwork of laws, yet the two concepts were not utterly incompatible. The fatal challenge to the concept of a benign mother came later from the principle of evolution, 'the survival of the fittest'. By the middle of the nineteenth century poets had been told too much about the 'pangs of nature'. The concept of nature completed the full turn of the wheel, from

.....nature is friend to truth

It is Christian, preaches to mankind

to one 'red in tooth and claw', a 'brute and brainless' automaton. It was ideologically a wound no preacher could heal, whether he spoke from the naturalist or the Christian pulpit.

Whereas this aspect of naturalism was weakened, another gained fresh strength from evolution. The Romanticist had exulted in the belief that the closest consanguinity existed between man and nature. He had upheld, with not too convincing a logic, the belief that the refinement of the human mind was in proportion to his contact with nature. He had maintained not only that man and nature were one in essence but, with a deeper anthropomorphism, that the mind of the microcosm reflected that of the macrocosm so that the spirit of beauty operated in nature as imagination did in the individual mind. However, these trends starting with poetic pantheism usually ended in some form of transcendentalism—Christian in the case of Wordsworth and Coleridge, and Platonic in that of Shelley. The moment nature is invested with a spirit either for the purpose of identifying it with man or for proving the immanent presence of beauty, the Romanticist is led on to an ontological position that hardly allows for an effective concept of nature.

From this quandary naturalism was rescued by evolution.

It proved that the material origin of man was from the earth, in other words it confirmed the oneness of man and nature. The fact that the emergence of the human brain was the result of the constant effort of living organism to adapt it to its environment strengthened the idea that the consciousness of man was moulded by nature. Similarly, evolution gave fresh support to the notions of progress and perfectibility although it demanded a much more robust optimism than was offered by the concept of a benevolent nature, in the earliest phase of Romanticism. The best illustration of this phase of naturalism is the poetry of Swinburne who saw in evolution the fulfilment of his Shelleyan dreams of progress and the hope that one day humanity will be freed from tyranny and superstition.

Turning to Bengali, we find that it has, like other Indian vernaculars, a long ancestry of seasonal songs. Its traditional 'baramasas' describe the ever-fresh woes of love to which each season gives a new poignancy. The love-play depicted in the lyrical masterpieces of Bengal, the Vaisnav *pada*, takes place in the lap of nature, on the banks of the Jamuna, amid the groves and pastures of 'Brindaban'. The poetic resources of some natural sights and sounds such as the plaintive call of the cuckoo, the dithyrambic ecstasy of the peacock and the rumble of the first rain cloud have been exploited to exhaustion. The use of nature as a source of poetic imagery which was an important literary inheritance from Sanskrit did not gain by its second lease in Bengali. In fact it killed whatever desire the poet might have had to observe nature for himself. Descriptions of nature in this poetry, are rare and whenever they occur are incidental to other themes. The position is summed up in Sen's remark, 'In old and medieval Bengali descriptions of nature occur no doubt at intervals but nowhere are they given pronounced, not to speak of independent interest. They are introduced because they reflect the soul of an individual, often simply set off the narrative, and that is the most that

can be said of them. Apart from this nature has no position in pre-British literature.¹

Nature as an independent motif came to Bengali poetry after the middle of the nineteenth century, though it had been adopted along with other themes in the transitional verse of Isvar Gupta. Although both Hem and Nobin accepted the main tenets of the creed, it was truly established by Biharilal who took it up as a cause, embellished its advocacy with his considerable talents and preached its dogmas with the zeal of a convert. He eulogised the moral and educative influence of nature, the beatitude of the peasant's life and the primitive state.

Samudra Darshan is considered the first genuine naturalistic poem in Bengali. The description of nature for the first time loses casualness and becomes a serious poetic pursuit. The question whether naturalism of this kind would have been possible in Bengali in the absence of English education is directly discussed by Rabindranath in that remarkable symposium of contemporary viewpoints. *The Diary of Five Elements (Panchbhut)*, in which he fully supports the view that if we were not acquainted with English poetry we would not be discussing nature nowadays and those who do not know English even today will not understand its spirit.² The story of the transference of Biharilal's naturalism to Rabindranath has been described by the latter himself in the memorial paper he read at the death anniversary of his preceptor. We are told that the subtle harmony that exists between the human emotions and nature was first revealed to him by the poetry of Biharilal and the romance of Paul and Virginia. Biharilal's picture of nature with gentle fawns, crystal streams, and dewy lawns, left an indelible impression on his mind, conventional though this picture was. Similarly, the image

¹ Priya Ranjan Sen, *Western Influence on Bengali Literature*, pp. 345-6.

² *Rabindra Rachnavali*, Vol. II, p. 556.

of the recluse who renounces all 'honour and glory' and chooses to live with the peasant, toiling under the open sky, sleeping in a thatched hut with a conscience free from taint made the young Calcutta dweller yearn for nature. The description of the forlorn ocean in the first poem of the 'Abodhbandhu' initiated him into the mystery of strange lands. He tells us, 'I could not count the number of times I read these descriptions, and through these verses the call of the ocean, the mountain and the forest had echoed into the heart of the young reader.'¹

The first phase of Rabindranath's naturalism begins with the '*Wild Flower*' (Ban-phul), his earliest work that can be dated. The immediate inspiration of the story is said to have been Akhshay Dutta's *Udasini*, an adaptation of Parnell's *Hermit*, but its burden is the disillusionment of adolescence which conjures up an idyllic dream world of fulfilment. The poem follows the deep ruts of romantic naturalism to reach the conventional position that the city is the home of evil and lucre, and nature the abode of peace and purity. It begins with the profession.

I crave not for learning, nor
 Knowledge of man, or his world.
 I would rather be a wild flower
 That blossoms in the wood,
 And withers there.

The heroine, a blend of Lucy and Miranda, lives in the forest away from mankind, with her father, the only human being she has ever known. Like Wordsworth's Lucy she reaches civilisation following a less unsophisticated lover. The very first impact of the world inflicts wounds that a return to nature alone could heal.

¹ *Rabindra Rachnavali*, Vol. IX, p. 414.

O Wild Flower, you blossomed
 In a sheltered woodland.
 The breath of man has withered you.
 The benign goddess of the woods.
 With her dewy balm will
 Restore thee back to life.¹

Ultimately, she returns to nature with the vow,

I would feast my eyes on the charms of nature
 My ears on the murmur of her streams.
 With the nectar of her harmonies
 Fill my soul and forget
 The existence of love.²

Much in the imagery and the narrative comes from Kalidasa, there is an obvious attempt to reproduce the farewell of the heroine but the objective of the poet here is not to give a version of the Sanskrit play but to expound the romantic axiom 'that civilisation had strayed away from the simple rules that nature placed in the heart of all mankind.'

The Poet's Story (*Kavi Kahani*) is a fuller expression of this characteristic phase in the growth of the romantic sensibility. It portrays the typical dissonance between the ideal of beauty visualised by a young poet and the disorderliness of the actual erotic happenings, the most disturbing realisation of an ardent youth. The incompatibility of the real and the ideal always led to a serious spiritual crisis in the case of the Romanticist because his faith in abstractions was as deep as his belief in free passions. *Endymion*, *Alastor*, and *The Poet's Story* all describe this struggle in different forms.

The childhood of the poet is dominated by a passion for nature, consecrated in *The Poet's Story* as 'foster mother'.

¹ *Rabindra Rachnavali*, Vol. I(A), p. 104.

² *Ibid.* p. 74.

From the lap of his mother he would break
And in the cradle of nature resume his play.¹

This communion is seriously disturbed by the intrusion of love and he passes through a state of anguish, divided between a grand passion and a tenacious devotion to nature. In *The Poet's Story*, love ultimately proves too localised a passion to satisfy the hungers of a poetic soul and so in the end he has to return to nature. Rabindranath is here even more Wordsworthian than Shelley, though *Alastor* was written under the influence of the *Excursion*, to judge from the quotation with which the preface to the poem ends. The role of nature in *The Poet's Story* is, therefore, more obtrusive because it is not merely the scene of the story's action but an active force which determines the course of events and the final dénouement of the story.

His dedication to the worship of nature is as solemn as Shelley's and the echo of the poet's vow in *Alastor* is unmistakable in.

Mother Nature, to pursue thy truth
To the farthest end with the faltering wit of man
By your grace, have I sought that far
And shall ever seek.²

It is an advantage for our purpose that Rabindranath was much younger than his English compères when he wrote this poem. The absence of that exuberance of imagination and the comparative maturity of craft which make Shelley's forest maiden and Keat's Cynthia rather tantalising allows in *The Poet's Story* to state the dogmas of the poem with greater simplicity. The conflict between love and nature

¹ Op. cit. Vol. I(A), p. 5.

² Ibid. p. II.

depicted in the poem can be real only for a poet who takes his naturalism too solemnly, the sign of obvious indoctrination.

After *The Poet's Story* Rabindranath's nature suffers a temporary eclipse. He admits, of course with deep regret, in *The Past and Present* that 'the dim blue skyline', 'the hazy clouds over the wooded seashore' of the world of nature were receding into oblivion. The subject of nature shares the hard formalism which encrusts everything written during this period. The growing self-consciousness about his role as a poet seems to have inhibited the use of natural language or the expression of a simple sentiment. For some time we have only conventional verse. The most ambitious nature poem of this period, *Flower Maiden (Phul bala)*, is a stilted melodrama narrating in some six hundred lachrymose lines the mute love of the denizens of a garden: trees, creepers, and bushes, tearfully languishing for each other. Poems written at this time like *Dik Bala*, *Chhin Latika*, *Kamini Phul* belong to the same genre. Only *Bhagna Tari (The Broken Boat)* in its visualisation of an island like Robinson Crusoe's revives momentarily the memory of *Paul and Virginia*.

The *Bharatis* of this period had a section for Bengali translations of English poems, which were done by Rabindranath. There are no translations of English nature poetry. This does not signify any change in his attitude to nature, but a deeper preoccupation with the themes of adolescence. Even at this time, nature remained a subject of his deepest reflections. In his juvenile verse, now published as *Saisab Sangit* it is not rare to find ardent verses addressed to nature such as:

Before me, O, Shoreless Sea
 You sing ceaselessly
 An unknown lay,
 Night and day

I long to dive and sound
 Your depths profound
 And explore
 The secrets of your heart.¹

In the distracted digression of fancy which fills the thirty chapters of *The Broken Heart* (*Bhagna Hriday*) nature is completely eclipsed but despite this change in emphasis it remains the irreplaceable teacher and cradle of the spirit.

The current of my spirit now dammed
 Would fain burst the barriers of clay
 And submerge the world entire.
 If its cradle were the open sky
 With no horizon to mark its limit,
 Then Mother Nature would herself teach
 The tale of Time.
 My heart, a wistful nursling at her breast,
 Would be filled with joyous harmonies.

The romantic antecedents of this nature poetry are obvious. These are further corroborated by Rabindranath's critical essays, which appeared in the *Bharati*. Naturalism was the stick he chose to beat Madhusudan with in his very first effort at criticism. He argued that Madhusudan is inferior to Valmiki because the descriptions of nature in *Megh-nad-badha* cannot compare with those of the *Ramayana*. But for a direct statement of his views on the subject we have to turn to 'Why the Bengali is not a poet?' He frankly admits the absence of nature poetry in Bengali and is outspoken in his condemnation of its entire tradition for this shortcoming. 'This indifference to the outer forms of the Universe is unquestionably obvious in our poetry. Can anyone who is a good poet,

¹ *Rabindra Rachnavali*, Vol. I, p. 488.

which means that he is particularly susceptible to beauty, but be fascinated by the face of such a beautiful world? How is it that in Bengali poetry the description of a garden by one poet is exactly repeated by the next?' The remark is illustrated with two Bengali nature pieces which have, in his words, 'neither the body nor the breath of the garden', Shelley's description of the Ionian island in *Epipsychidion* is quoted in contrast as an example of good nature poetry. A passage from his *Woodman and the Nightingale* merits the eulogy, 'Does it not appear that the eyelids of the poet are gradually closing at the music of the song and the poet is feeling as intensely as he possibly can'. In the same strain is the appreciation of the two stanzas from *The Sensitive Plant* where he says 'How many of us can realise the timid beauty of an occurrence such as the blossoming of the narcissus by the brook, or the withering of the rose, petal by petal. But look at our standards! Do we need imagination for such as these. . . .', the tirade is capped with an exceptionally unimaginative extract from Bengali. The essay ends with the lament 'To see these the heart and soul of a thing, is the highest function of observation. In the descriptions of nature in Bengali poetry these are missing.'¹

This criticism has all the intemperance and imbalance of youth but it is highly significant as an expression of contemporary outlook. The acceptance of Western naturalism is as unequivocal as the debunking of its Bengali counterpart. His later views on the subject lack such vehemence, but the critical preference acquired at this formative age persisted throughout his literary career.

The critics and the poet himself, are unanimous that he found his own voice in *The Evening Songs*. Nature remains one of the main themes, and even when it is not in the fore-

¹ *The Bharati*, 1287, p. 259.

front, it is never completely hidden by the mist of erotic melancholy which overhangs these poems. Nature is the usual refuge of his lovers, heartbroken and mocked by a callous world as they all are. *Again (Abar)* is an example. To his 'abode of love' the only welcome visitors are 'the soft hearted breeze', 'the winds', and 'the dawn' which recalls the rather commonplace effusion of Keats, 'The roaring wind is my wife, and the stars through the window-pane my children'. Up to *The Evening Songs* Rabindranath follows orthodox naturalism. Nature possesses all the stock qualities attributed to it by the Romanticist. It befriended the poet, the child, and the primitive, and nurtured the finer qualities of the mind and the heart, what is even more important to the student of literary taste, nature was accepted as one of the foremost poetic themes. Just as the old Vaisnav poet felt 'there is no song without Krishna' the new poet found nature inseparable from his verse.

A new variation on the theme of nature is heard in *The Morning Songs*.

On the path of the Wheel revolve stars and planets,
On the path of the Wheel move the sun and the moon,
With the mace of law in his (Siva's) hand
He rules the Universe.¹

The significant nature poetry of the book is inspired by a different cosmological awareness, engendered by the study of science. 'Conservation, Creation, and Destruction' his first poetisation of the universe as presented by evolution. According to Thompson he was 'giving us close reasoning and verse as scientific in outlook and illustration as anything written anywhere.' Mythology is furnished here with a contemporary meaning, new discovered forces such as gravity

¹ *Rabindra Rachnavali*, Vol. I, p. 87.

and solar radiation are clothed in old images and personify modern concepts. In the poem, the world emerges from the nebulous sea of mist, in place of the undefinable 'nought' of tradition. It issues from the sun as a fountain of fire, like the Ganges from the head of Siva. The family tie of gravity binds the wayward nebulae and enforces domestic cohesion. The planets congeal, 'Cooling their heat with their own tears'. The universe is at last organised and

Around the ample Sun danced in unison
A hundred sweet faced moons, hand in hand.

The lotus symbolising the apex of evolution blossomed at the advent of biological life. The end of the world is foreseen in the exhaustion of its heat through radiation when finally it grows cold and tired, and in a moment of impatience against the monotony of law it breaks, ending in a dance of destruction, the allegorical 'tandava' of Siva. The poem closely follows scientific theory and the old myth merely provides the scheme of the narrative. Even the then recent discovery of stars so distant that light from them was still on the way to us is utilised. The scientific sources of almost all the phenomena described in these poems are available in the various numbers of the *Bharati*, for instance, a detailed article discussing the end of the earth by the gradual radiation of heat appeared in the journal in the year 1287.

The image of nature as a benign mother is already on the wane. This poem stresses the mechanistic rule of law and the gradual evolution of nature, more than its beauty or benevolence. A brooding sense of the eternity of Time overshadows the present, however intense or vivid. Behind every 'flower in blossom' and 'every bird on its wing' he sees

Life 'astir and aflow everywhere.
An endless unfolding of the world.

The deepest realisation of the book is the growing sense of the flux of things and the initial efforts to grasp the reality behind the veil of phenomena. The affirmation of the world so felicitously announced in *The Awakening of the Fountain* in *The Morning Songs* continues and a keener appreciation of landscape is to some extent implicit in this extroversion. The descriptions of *The Songs and Sketches* show more attentive observations. His poetry has certainly emerged from the Dantesque forest of the mind in which it had strayed, though some conventional habits of the period still cling to his nature verse. His *The Inebriate (Mata!)* gets drunk on the rather stale wine of moonlight and the scent of flowers. In moments of desolation he felt as a 'madman' whom nature alone understood. But these commonplaces are more than compensated by such genuine nature poetry as *The Lonely (Ekakini)* which telescopes the themes of *The Solitary Reaper* and *The Devon Maid* and sets them in the heart of Bengal.

An ideological crisis develops in *The Sharps and Flats*. The world, the animistic nature of the child's imagination, replete with 'fairy princesses' and 'Cobra queens' on which his early romanticism was reared, is dying as if smothered by an oppressive awareness of the relentless law that rules nature. Earth, the origin of life, not only loses its motherly indulgence but becomes positively harsh:

O Earth; You beget life.
 I've heard them call you mother;
 Then why all enter your lap crying
 And so depart, wailing
 Meseems no law fetters creation
 We come, go and unite
 Driven by a blind fate;¹

The two conflicting visions of nature, the one held in childhood

¹ *Rabindra Rachnavali*, Vol. II, p. 49.

'when the universe was not bound', and the present one 'when each step is prescribed by law', struggle for ascendancy in *The Fairytale*. The growing sense of nature's indifference to individual happiness is fed by the characteristic disillusionment which turned the indulgence of the Romanticist into 'gall and wormwood'. Thus the impersonality of law which he accepted as a theoretical conclusion of science is aided by a mood of personal disappointment. Faith in the benevolence of nature is disturbed by a harsh impact of reality 'Cruel Nature' in Manasi's voices expresses a pronounced despair.

Destruction here and creation there,
This totters and that is reared—
None has time for another's pain.
On this unending abysmal path, it seems,
Burst the terrific flood of becoming,
Gushed forth a stream from the unknown summit,
Flew out suns and moons, rushed out a million worlds.¹

In *To Nature* we again hear,

Sometimes your mad eyes unblinking,
All aflame with raging heat,
Fling unrelenting curse of fire
At the heart of the helpless earth.²

This dichotomy splits his complacent convictions and the faith in nature is seriously threatened, although he tenaciously holds on to it.

The more I fail to fathom your depths
Mightier grows the sway on my mind
Of your overwhelming beauty (maha-rup-rasi),

¹ *Rabindra Rachnavali*, Vol. II, p. 143.

² *Ibid.* p. 147.

And with each increase of pain
Gains my love for you.¹

His romantic education is under its hardest test, the findings of science as well as the experience of life, seemed to question a facile optimism. He is himself aware of internal conflict. His ambivalent wavering between two irreconcilable attitudes, is illustrated in two poems written within three days of each other. *The Deserted House* is perhaps the most despondent poem he ever wrote, nature appeared completely indifferent to individual suffering:

Where the frail heart of man is racked
And it writhes in unbearable agony,
When life lies eating the dust
Why even there, your unflinching law?²

Again,

Will eternal newness remain unbroken
Over this wail of woe?
The heart of man, convulsive with pain.
Will never touch the steeled breast of law?³

This was the peak of his despair and he returns to his inherent optimism in *The Noon of Life* which is written in an almost penitent vein, to atone for a sinful loss of faith:

A feeling beyond words fills my heart
And tears fill the eyes
The agony of my soul so flowing
Has touched the cosmic heart;
My being sings in nature's sea of peace,

¹ *Rabindra Rachnavali*, Vol. II, p. 147.

² *Ibid.* p. 46.

³ *Ibid.* p. 174.

The dust tinged stream of dust and pain
Merges in the ocean of life¹

It was not a novel poetic situation but one that had been confronted by most of the English naturalists of the nineteenth century. When objective evidence weighed too heavily against the benevolence of nature it usually led to some form of transcendentalism.

For the first time in Rabindranath's poetry the inner spirit of nature is dissociated from its outer working and in a way relieved from involvement in its harsher manifestations.

Time and again, I am drawn
To You, O, Upholder of worlds
Covering the infinity of Time and Space,
You live in yourself.
I linger on my way, wondering
At your cosmic immensities,
Questioning where I be? whither bound
This universe, and I?
I have my fill today, from the eternal
Streams of peace, that flow in nature
Raising my eyes to the sky at night
I view a myriad orbs alight,
As if through rents in the veil of darkness,
Gleamed your luminous Self,
O Great Darkness, O Mighty Light!
Unexposed and Ever Manifest.²

It may be noted that we don't have here the facile separation of God and nature, with which these doubts were answered by Tennyson's '*In Memoriam*'. Both the personal daemon of Rabindranath and his Universal Godhead were to appear later,

¹ *Rabindra Rachnavali*, Vol. II, pp. 177-8.

² *Ibid.* p. 176.

here we have a nebulous idealism, which in his case always superseded mysticism in the end.

The third phase in the nature poetry of Rabindranath is ushered in by *Ahalya* and *To the Sea* in the *Golden Boat*, it is carried over to *Vasundhara* which is a Bengali equivalent of Swinburne's title *Hertha*.

The imaginative content of these poems is the deeply felt apprehension of the busy life of vegetation that goes on under the soil, the realisation engendered by science that all forms of biological life were a part of a single evolutionary force, which made a tree akin to man, however distant.

The close relationship of nature with the human mind which Wordsworth and his contemporaries saw in the aesthetic appreciation of landscape was reaffirmed with greater cogency by the hylozoists of the later period, who retracing the steps of evolution arrived at their undifferentiated identity with the earth. That this awareness of the bond of man with the soil is a major realisation of the poet is borne out by the lyrical intensity of the oft-quoted letter which described the first spurt of life in the protoplasm, which made it an individual organism.

I can very well recall many ages ago the youthful earth just rising from her sea-bath to salute the new sun; at that moment I sprouted somewhere from its soil in the primal exultation of life, and blossomed as a tree. There was no animal life yet on earth; the vast ocean swayed day and night, and at times like a senseless mother smothered the little new-born earth in a mad caress. On that new soil I absorbed with all my limbs the first sunlight, swayed under the blue sky like a child blindly alive, grasping mother earth with the roots of my head sucking her breast. I flowered in a stupid joy and my new blossoms came.....I have been born on the soil of this earth in each age. Whenever I am face to face with her that perennial intimacy gradually rises in my mind.¹

¹ Ajit Chakravarty, *Rabindranath*, pp. 50-1.

It was the same vision of the emergence of life which in English poetry had inspired the *Woods of Westernmain*.

The major nature poetry of Rabindranath of this period is infused with this realisation:

That is why on some days
When the autumn rays fall on the field
Golden with ripening ears of corn
Or when cocoanut leaves rustle in the breeze,
Glistening in the sun.....

A great restlessness fills my heart.
Perchance memories come of the days
When my omnipresent soul
Pervaded the earth, the water
The leafy nest of the woodland
And the blue haze of the sky.¹

The emergence of the earth is described with the same imagery,

O Primordial Mother Sea,
The earth is your only child,
The only daughter, in your arms
You hold with tender care her sleeping form,
Enwrapped in your sari of the blue
And you lovingly impress on her, a thousand kisses²

Charu Chandra points out a very close parallel from English poetry, Alfred Noyes' lines from *The Haunted Palace*.

The eternal sea
Which like a childless mother, still must croon
Her ancient sorrows to the cold white moon
sobbing tremulously,

¹ *Rabindra Rachnavali*, Vol. III, p. 137.

² *Ibid.* p. 55.

neo-platonic doctrine that there is soul in dumb inanimate objects of nature as well as to Schelling's doctrine of identity.¹

Rabindranath's earlier doubts arising from the obvious disparity of material phenomena to human feeling, which seemed at one time, to threaten his faith in an indulgent nature, are resolved here according to a more recent doctrine, epitomised in Tennyson's,

That nothing walks with aimless feet
That not one life shall be destroyed,
Or caste as rubbish to the void,
When God hath made the pile complete.

Violence in nature is no more antithetical to its benevolence because it impels the purposive processes of nature, which always progressed from a lower to a higher order. For the first time he extols the virile majesty of 'the healthy violence of the naked barbarian'. The poet of the moonlight, and the music of a stream expresses here, in a mood of unqualified acceptance,

.....the wish to taste
That violence-keened pleasure,
That wild glory

which the tiger has when he has the prey.² The universe is accepted here if not with its full load of evil, at least with all its violence. There is no metaphysical or transcendental subterfuge to avoid the conclusion, which the last phase of naturalism made inescapable.

The professions of romantic naturalism are completely negated here, and it ceases to be a tenable dogma, but this robust affirmation of the world allows for a more single-

¹ Amulya Charan Aikat, *Arnold, Browning and Tagore* (Extension Lectures, Calcutta University).

² *Rabindra Rachnavali*, Vol. III, p. 135.

mindful appreciation of landscape in *Chitra*. Nature again offers him an inexpressible peace in *Felicity*.

The *Evening* recalls the blissful image of man living amid nature's bounty visualised in *Creation, Conservation* and *Destruction* after the burning core of the earth had cooled to give place to the granary of Annapurna. Landscape description achieves a unique precision and mastery of means in *Ekakini*.

If the world of literary art is the world of tribal mythology become sophisticated and complex¹ then mythology is the primeval literature of a race. The continual reshaping of the initial myths indirectly reflects the progress of sensibility. In the West, pagan mythology was introduced through the New Learning and it acquired a new meaning when its characters came to be widely used as symbols in art during the Renaissance. In English Literature classical mythology was accepted and poetised by Marlowe, Shakespeare and Milton, for its narrative value, without any re-interpretative impositions, though there was an important departure from the attitude of the ancient poets inasmuch as this use of mythology was free from the belief in the factual existence of the world of the gods. The allegorical poems of Spencer, Drayton, Chapman and Milton superimposed a new significance upon the myths they employed, of which the original story was only a formal vehicle. This allegorical tradition had been carried right into the heart of the English Romantic movement in Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* and Keat's *Hyperion*. The revolt of the spirit of man against tyranny and ignorance which Prometheus had come to symbolise for the Romanticist² was not even

¹ Christopher Caudwell, *Illusion and Reality*, p. 36.

² That the legend of Prometheus had deeply affected not only Shelley but all the Romantics, is evident from Byron's:

remotely suggested by the story of Aeschylus. Bush, in his study of the Romanticists' use of pagan mythology, surmises that 'The Gods of Greece, no longer a set of rococo toys, were enthroned as Titanic symbols of power, beauty and harmony. Mythology held a more potent significance for the Romantic mind than allegorical symbolism. Thus the image of Bacchus was to it not only a symbol of inebriate youth but a creative stimulus also; it was a harbinger,

To trains of peaceful images.

The Bengali mind, being singularly visionary, strongly tends towards the mythical. The cult of the awe-inspiring destroyer-creatrix, the Mother, has the deepest roots in their soil. A considerable portion of the poetry in the language consists of 'Songs of Praise' (*Mangal Gan*) of the various incarnations of the Primal Power or Powers. In literature mythological characters not only interfered in the daily lives of men on behalf of their devotees, they also descended to earth to aid human beings in distress, even in secular writings of the class of Vidya Sunder. Mythological themes up to the eighteenth century were mainly a natural expression of current belief, but in the nineteenth century, during which a considerable part of drama and poetry continued to be occupied with them, they became a mere literary form. The new exposition of mythology was no more involved with faith and had no purpose other than the literary. Madhusudan, the writer of the new *Ramayana*, was no devotee of Rama. Sarada, whose *Song of Praise* constitutes the magnum opus of Biharilal, is a goddess without any Puranic ancestry whatsoever; instead she was akin to Shelley's Asia. Puranic mythology was

"Thou art a symbol and a sign
To Mortals of their fate and force;
Like thee Man is in part divine.
A troubled stream from a pure source;

reconstrued in the *Nava Jivan*, the very voice of the Neo-Hindu Movement. 'Many of the articles in this journal on Puranic gods and goddesses, on Hindu Pantheism and Ethics, on Hindu festivals, ceremonies and customs, illustrate that grotesque and incongruous blending of the physical with the spiritual which in Germany reached its apex in Novalis's *Disciples at Sais*.¹

It is essential to define here what exactly distinguishes the classical from the Romantic treatment of the mythological. The distinction could not be better drawn than in the terms of Abercrombie. The position of the mythological in Romantic art is akin to that of the supernatural in general. Abercrombie discusses it in relation to the idea of 'the faery'; and the same argument applies to the mythological figure, as both exist at the same level of belief. He demonstrates convincingly that the faery in Irish folklore, in Shakespeare, and Herrick is, on the one hand, a frankly impossible creature because of the perfection of its existence and, on the other, it has an appearance of 'downright actuality' for it too clearly simulates our own lives. It says grace, quarrels and gets tipsy in the tavern, and is therefore, a direct idealisation of reality.²

In the Romantic faery this 'specious' air of reality is destroyed and it is made to exist more positively in some comprehensible

¹ Brijendra Seal, *New Essays in Criticism*, pp. 89-90.

² That this is true of all original mythology, including the Hindu, is borne out by Oldenberg's remark, that 'the Vedic gods have hands and feet like men. They are given the actual bodily shape, the warring passion of the human breast, the outer polish of a fair skin, and the dignity of a long beard. They fight and feast, drink and dance, eat and rejoice. Some of them are described to be priests in functions such as Agni and Brahapati; others are warriors like Indra and Maruti. Their food is just the favourite food of man, milk and butter, ghee and grain; their favourite drink is soma juice. They have their share of human weakness and are easily pleased by flattery. Sometimes they are so stupidly self-centred that they begin to discuss what they should give. "This is what I will do—not that. I will give him a cow or shall it be a horse?" I wonder if I have had some soma from him.'"

Oldenberg, *Ancient India*, p. 75. Quoted by Radhakrishnan, pp. 106-7.

and mysterious way, convincing us of its existence not through vividness but the opposite quality of strangeness, not through its resemblance to our life but its difference from it.¹ The romantic effectiveness of *La Belle Dame Sans Merci* and *The Ancient Mariner* lies in their mystery and other-worldliness.

It is surprising to note that this distinctive feature of the Romanticists' attitude towards mythology was recognised by Rabindranath as early as 1881; and his awareness of the critical problem approaches Abercrombie's. His analysis in *The Change in Poetic Conditions* reads,

One of the characteristics of ignorance is that it creates an imaginative form, abode, and history, of a mystery, complete with a horoscope and considers it to be true which means that old poets served the idolatry of a mystery while modern poets by destroying its body and temple with the weapon of knowledge, are making it more mysterious. Our contention will be demonstrated if we look at the entire Puranic creation. Having existed for so long it has been fixed in our mind; it has become poetry because it evokes various feelings in us.....a contemporary poet describes a morning or evening in a particular form, which is poetically convincing; if everyone were to accept his description as being factually true, how very limited the effects of poetry will become.²

Thus Puranic mythology was of no poetic use because it was taken to be 'real word for word' and its characters existed as vividly as an 'idol' that had a distinct lineage and temple.

The ulterior significances, which, according to the above citation, mythology should express in the hands of the modern poet by virtue of his wider awareness of the world than his ancestors, were attempted in Rabindranath's first important mythological poem. We are not aware if the protagonists

¹ Abercrombie, *Romanticism*, Ch. I, Section 6.

² Rabindra Rachnavali, Vol. IIA, pp. 109-110.

of the Neo-Hindu movement, who never tired of forcibly wedding Western science to Indian mythology, ever argued that the Puranic story of creation symbolises the emergence of life known to science, but Rabindranath's poem did. So, in *Creation, Conservation, Destruction* Siva is the fiery nucleus of the Universe from whose head issued the stream of burning nebulae which filled space with the dithyramb of their nativity until they were drawn into a pattern by a domestic attraction, the pull of gravity. The wheel of 'time' in the hand of Vishnu symbolises here also the gyration of the heavens; the 'mace' represents the iron law of Nature's determinism; universal beauty, so dear to the poet, was idolised in the 'lotus'. The final *tandava*, so vividly portrayed with clashing stars and extinguishing planets on the burial ground of space, is the poetic image of the end of the Universe through exhaustion, brought about by radiation of heat. The allegorical device is rather naive, and its poetic intention too obvious, yet the poem evokes a truly cosmic vision.

Not so in *Ahalya* which offers a deeply realised feeling. The poem evinces a sympathetic cognisance of the vast life forces that stir in the soil and Tagore's vision compares with Maeterlinck's. The amorous intrigue of Ahalya and Indra is irrelevant to the purpose of the poem. *Ahalya* personifies the contemporary mind, with its apprehension sharpened by science, trying to realize forms of existence other than the animal. Rabindranath has not, though he easily could have exploited the harvest symbolism which others have detected in the myth the uncultivated land (*ahalya*) husbanded by the bullock (*gautama*) yielding the crop when benevolent showers (*Rama*) touch it. The vital quest in the first half of the poem is for an imaginative identification with the vast germinations that fertilise the earth and the sentience that underlies its mute face:

When you were merged in Earth
 One with its massive mould,
 Did you feel her great love?
 Was there below the stone,
 Some vague sentience?

.....
 The tremor of life that fills the Earth
 At the first breeze of spring,
 Did it touch you too? Did that eager gush of life
 In myriad forms, rampant over a thousand paths,
 To vanquish barrenness, feel defied
 And eagerly besiege you to break through
 Your curse of sterility.
 Did a quiver of life tremble inside you
 At this impact?

The effort is to perceive 'the indistinct consciousness', 'the eyeless semi-wakefulness', 'the dream in the sleeping soul' of Ahalya. The basic sentiment of the poem would not have been accessible to the ancient poet because it is a product of the scientific discoveries of the nineteenth century.

The latter part of the poem is a vignette which seeks to capture the stupor of a Greek nymph just recovering from a millennium of sleep, and still unaware of her vestal nudity. The portraiture does not revive the curse-stricken wife of an old sage, for nothing in the Puranic story could evoke the following:

The intriguing image, the incomparable nude,
 Full youth bathed in a new childhood;
 Stood there like a flower on a dark canvas:
 Youth and childhood interfused
 Blossoming on a single stalk;
 Rising like the dawn
 From the blue waters of oblivion.

The images 'youth and childhood interfused', 'blossoming

on a single stalk', the ascent from 'the blue waters', are unmistakable precursors of *Urvasi*, whom no reader of Rabindranath can forget.

The poem *Urvasi* focusses in an exquisite balance, all the qualities that make for great writing, imagery, diction, and inspiration. An outcome of the deepest stress of the creative faculties as the poem is, the evidence of English reading in it show with exceptional emphasis the fundamental nature of such influence. The poem begins with the personification of feminine beauty: woman the ravisher—not the mother, the daughter, or the wife. The Puranic *Urvasi*, who was created to disturb the trance of Brahma and was the quintessence of the charm of the dancers of heaven, was indeed a fitting symbol for physical beauty. But the image conflicts with Indian tradition in the very second stanza and we see behind the veil of the dancer in Indra's court the face of *Atalanta*.

According to the story in the *Padma Purana*, *Urvasi* was created from the essence of the beauty of the *Upasaras* of heaven though usually she is shown to emerge from the thigh of *Vishnu*. The picturesque rising of *Lakshmi* from the sea churned by the gods is applied to *Urvasi* in order to recapture the image of *Venus* rising from the waves because the wonderful sequence of divinities that emerged from the great churning does not refer to *Urvasi*.¹ The offering of gifts from the sea

¹ 'First from the sea rose up the wish bestowing cow *Surabhi*, gladdening the eyes of the divinities then came the Goddess *Varuni*, with rolling eyes, the divinity of wine; then uprising *Parijat*, tree of paradise, the delight of Heaven's nymphs, perfuming all the world with fragrance of its flowers; then arose the troops of *Apasaras* of entrancing loveliness and grace. Then rose the moon, whom *Mahadeva* seized and set upon his brow; then came a draught of deadly poison that turned his throat blue, wherefore he is known *Nilakantham*, blue throat ever after. Next came *Dhanwantri* holding in his hands a cup of the dew of life, delighting the eyes of the daityas and the rishis. Then appeared the Goddess *Srimthe* delighter of *Vishnu*, radiant, seated on an open lotus; the great sly-elephant anointed her with pure water brought by *Ganga* and poured from golden vessels while the enraptured sages

waters to Parurava by Urvasi which is mentioned in their dialogue in the tenth *mandala* of the Rig Veda is at the most an extenuation of the Vedic imagery which called Parurava the Sun and Urvasi the Dawn and the Sunset.

That *Urvasi* reproduces Swinburne's *Aphrodite* is very obvious, it is not only the picture of Venus that is redrawn, the association of feminine beauty and doom is very much of the period. The Greek vision of Venus emerging from the waves has never been obliterated from the European poetic mind; it has recurred in all periods. Among the English Romanticists Byron's and Keats' references to this particular image were casual. Shelley's portrait is colder than Homer's because his (Shelley's) concept of beauty suffered from a Platonic purity and was thus freed from the usual Hellenic eroticism; though their personifications of the ideal woman, in both *Alastor* and *Endymion*, were nine parts flesh and blood and one part Platonic. It was later, during the pre-occupation of the Pre-Raphaelites with the morbidly sensuous, that beauty came to be associated with a haunting fatality. Rossetti's images of beauty are all tainted with evil, the Helen of *Death's Songstress*, the various incarnations of Circe in the Lilith pieces: *The Wine of Circe*, *Aspects of Medusa*, *Venus Verti Cordia*, and *Astrate Lyriaca*.² Similarly Moore's image of Aphrodite was implicated with the idea of Nemesis. These amplifications of the meaning of the myth develops in Meredith, who was more heavily weighed down by this problem, into the struggle between the virgin huntress Artemis and the persuader Aphrodite. Atalanta was the climax of this conception which was

sang her praises. The milky sea adorned her with a wreath of unfading flowers; Visvakarma decked her with ecclestial jewels...' Sister Nivedita and A.K. Coomarswamy, *Myths of Hindus and Buddhists*, 1913, pp. 315-16.

¹ Even Nagendranath Gupta, who tries to justify Rabindranath's adaptation of the myth, has to admit that only Lakshmi arose out of the churning of seas. Refer Urvasir Utpati, *Prabasi*, Paus, 1336.

² Douglas Bush, *Mythology and the Romantic Tradition in English Poetry*, p. 411.

redrawn in Rabindranath's Urvashi as the comparisons below will show. Aphrodite was the 'evil blossom....blood red and bitter of fruit....and the seed of it laughter and tears'—Swinburne had addressed her:

Wilt thou turn thee not yet nor have pity,
But abide with despair and desire.....;

Rabindranath's Urvashi was no less 'perilous' a goddess and had

Arisen from the Churning of the Ocean
Nectar in thy right hand Venom in thy left

and the poet addresses her:

The ruddy hue of thy feet is painted with the heart's blood of
the three worlds;

.....
Thy lotus-feet, on the Lotus of the blossomed
Desires of the Universe.

In either case she thrives on the 'desire and despair' of mankind. There are repetitions of the minutest details of imagery, Aphrodite sends

In the uttermost ends of the sea
The light of thine eyelids and hair;

Urvashi makes

The companies of billows in mid-ocean swell and dance.

The light of thy bosom as fire
Between the wheel of the sun
And the flying flames of the air?

is echoed in the

From thy necklace stars fall off in the sky.

Further compare,

And the waves of the sea as she came
Clove, and the foam at her feet
Fawning.....

with Rabindranath's

The swelling mighty sea, like a serpent tamed with spells
Drooping his thousand towering hoods,
Fell at thy feet.

And

Sprung out of the sea without root,
Sprung without graft from the years

of Swinburne with Rabindranath's

Like a stemless flower, blowing out of yourself,
When did blossom Urvasi?

The simple fact of the resemblance between these two poems has been mentioned by a host of critics¹ but the comparisons made above have been taken from Mohitlal's valuable essay on Biharilal.²

The fourth stanza of the poem is an interfusion, not necessarily conscious, of the Hindu and the Greek concepts.³ The

¹ Binayak Sanyal detects even metrical similarities. He says, 'Nor can we miss the sound effects produced by the two. Indeed the affinity is too great to be the result of a mere accident'. *Calcutta Review*, Sept. 1932, pp. 395-46. Also see, Jayant K. Das Gupta, 'Western Influence on the Poetry of Rabindranath', *Calcutta Review*, April 1933.

² Mohitlal Mazumdar, *Adhunik Bangla Sahitya*, chap. on Biharilal.

³ Homer's *Hymn to Venus*,

'Who wakens with her the lulled delight
Of sweet desire, taming the eternal kings
Of Heaven, and men, and all the living things
That fleet along the air, or whom the sea
Or earth, with her maternal ministry,
Nourish innumerable, thy delight

Western origins of the imagery of the third stanza are plain; the singing mermaids in the jewelled chambers of coral palaces have been the exclusive image of Western fairy-tales.¹

The end of the poem is the romantic lamentation over the death of the mythological *Urvashi* in poetry. Rabindranath's own explanation of the last stanza recapitulates the opinion already quoted, that the difference between the Puranic and the modern concept lies in the latter being simply an abstract symbol of beauty, whereas the former was a living image as 'real' as you and I. The lines are addressed to the nostalgic memory of the Puranic *Urvashi*, 'the moon of glory' which will never shine over the earth again.²

All seek.....'

(Shelley's translation)

¹ In English literature the image is at least as old as Darwin's:

'So young Dione nursed beneath the waves,
And rocked by Nereids in their coral caves'

(*The Botanic Garden*, Pt. I, Canto II (ii)).

It was first used in Bengali literature probably by Bankim Chandra from whom, to judge from the exact repetition of phrasing, it seems to have passed on to Rabindranath.

² *Rabindra Rachnavali*, Vol. IV, Notes on the poem in the Appendix.

THE establishment of British rule not only affected basic political and social changes which had profound influence on Bengali life, but also brought about an even deeper re-orientation of outlook through its cultural impact. Western civilization suddenly opened out new vistas of thought and the best minds of the time were fascinated by it. The first half of the nineteenth century was a period of reverent acceptance and assimilation of Western ideas. By the end of it the new Bengal envisaged by Macaulay in his celebrated minutes, 'Indian in blood and colour but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect', had come into being.

As the inculcation of new ideas reached the point of saturation the psychological reaction in the opposite direction started. There were many factors contributing to it, such as the disillusionment brought by direct contact with the British, but the most powerful among them was the belligerence of religious feelings raised by the proselytising zeal of Christian missionaries. Consequently, there was widespread controversy over the merits of the two contending civilizations, which had two commendable results unforeseen by the defenders on either side. First, it made the Bengali exceptionally conscious of cultural values and, second, it brought about by constant comparison and analysis a fusion of the two cultures.

The transformation of literary taste during this phase offers a good illustration of some literary forms such as the novel and the essay which were new and therefore freely followed the English models. But Bengali poetry had a formidably old tradition which could not be discarded so easily. The great poet of the last era was Bharat Chandra a master of formal narrative verse. The taste of the first generation of the nineteenth century was nurtured by poetry such as his, a fact which accounts for the preference of eminent men of letters like Rev. Bannerjee and Akshay Dutta, for Pope and Dryden.

There was a fast but gradual transition from the Augustan to the Miltonic in the next phase dominated by Michael Madhusudan Datta, and from it to the Romantic in Biharilal.

Diverse elements, such as the emergence of a class which acquired a position of social dominance through their proficiency in the English language and administrative methods and the transfer of religious sanction from an orthodox church to personal conscience, contributed to the growth of strong individualism on which Romanticism thrives. With Bankim Chandra and Biharilal, Bengali literature caught up with the literary ideas of contemporary Europe.

By this time English education had become widespread, newspapers and theatres were normal features of social existence. The extreme reactions to Western civilisation had given place to its sober reappraisal and the assimilation of its essential contents when Rabindranath appeared on the scene. The time was ripe for the birth of a literature which was the spontaneous exposition of the new sensibility, instead of being an imitation of Western models.

As a Brahmo by faith and a Tagore by birth, he represented the most progressive outlook of the period, which the conservative derided as an imitation of the West. Owing to these antecedents and the gift of a versatile genius he became the natural formulator and exponent of the new culture. He had

expressed in explicit terms his stand in favour of a composite outlook. Those concepts that were irreconcilable with modern thought were rejected even if they were deeply entrenched in Indian tradition, for instance idol worship in religion, the concept of *maya* in philosophy, and the concept of *rasa* in literature. Other concepts were restated to align with the findings of the source and spirit of contemporary literature. The expression *prakriti*, which in traditional usage meant 'primal power', was vested with all the accretions of meaning associated with the English word 'nature'. Similarly, the word *kalpana* developed a new meaning and a usage in the very context in which *rasa* had been used to denote artistic merit. For the first time in Indian tradition the theme of love was completely purged of sensual proclivities. The attributes of the Absolute, *Sivam*, *Satyam*, *Sundram*, became more expressions of aesthetics than of metaphysics, to serve as the equivalent of Platonic values. Religion is dominated by a poetic devotion to nature, appreciation of landscapes is at times raised to the level of spiritual ecstasy. Indian pantheism is interspersed with a new hylozoist sentiment. The romantic sources which contributed to the formation of this ideology were most clearly discernible in the early writings of Rabindranath which have been so profusely referred to in this book.

It is apparent that despite the form and idiom of Rabindranath's poetry which was essentially Indian, its ideological core was deeply affected by the spirit of contemporary English literature. It was not so much the propagation of the Romantic creed as the consolidation of ideological attitudes brought about by the synthesis of two cultures. Rabindranath's own artistic resources were not in need of any importation and if literature could be separated from ideas—which by their nature are never insular—he could have developed a completely original idiom, as he did for instance in music, communication between the writer and his reader calls for not only

a common speech but a common language of ideas, and no true poet in post-British Bengal could eliminate from his ideology a substantial Western content.

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