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The Volcano

Some Comments on the development
of Rabindranath Tagore's Aesthetic
Theories and Art Practice

Mulk Raj Anand



MAHARAJA SAYAJIRAO UNIVERSITY OF BARODA



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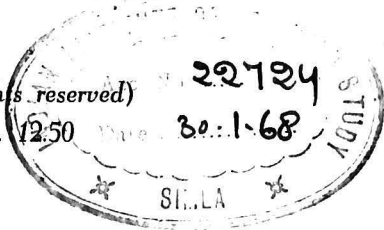
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Preface

The University has started a series of lectures called "The Maharaja Sayajirao Memorial Lectures" in place of two former series of lectures viz. "The Maharaja Sayajirao III Golden Jubilee Memorial Lectures" and "The Maharaja Sayajirao Gaekwad Honorarium Lectures". Under this series the University invites eminent scholars to deliver public lectures in the fields of Humanities, Social Sciences and Natural Sciences.

Dr. Mulk Raj Anand, B.A. (Hon.) (Punjab), Ph.D. (London), now Chairman, Lalit Kala Akademi, New Delhi, was invited to deliver a series of lectures under this series. He delivered two lectures on "The Volcano—some comments on the Development of Rabindranath Tagore's Aesthetic Theories and Art Practice" on the 24th February, 1966.

Dr. C. S. Patel, Vice-Chancellor presided over the lecture series.

It is hoped that the lectures will be found useful by the scholars and the students of the humanities.

B. K. ZUTSHI,
Registrar.

Maharaja Sayajirao University
of Baroda.

24th June, 1967.

THE VOLCANO

Some comments on the development of Rabindranath Tagore's Aesthetic Theories and Art Practice

There are certain insights poured out by Rabindranath Tagore in his essay, entitled *The Meaning of Art,* written towards the end of his life, which suggest a complete breakthrough from his earlier ideas on aesthetics to *avant garde* art imagism of the most revolutionary character. The earlier formulations had followed a prolonged period of creative writing, but came in the shape of orthodox reinterpretations of the teaching of the *Upanishads*. The primitivist, surrealist and expressionist manuscript-erasures, doodles, drawings and paintings, burst out of him like a flood, compelled from the forces for kinetic expression that had lain dormant for over sixty-five years. His nephew, the artist, Abanindranath Tagore, called him 'The Volcano' at this stage of his life. And, truly, it seems as if a million rhythms had been simmering quietly at the sources of his genius in the subconscious life, as a kind of formless, incoherent and meandering stream of consciousness, which suddenly erupted like hot lava, in startling colour schemes, lyrical portraits, horrifying masks, wild animals and strange distortions, which, by their twists and turns, and admission of the 'ugly' in art, shocked many of those who had always believed him to be addicted to absolute harmony.

Rabindranath Tagore did not apologise for the way in which the vital flow of the Volcano flooded the world around him, erasing old

'The Volcano'

boundaries, destroying many of the familiar landscapes and projecting the image of him as a disruptionist. In fact, he gloated over the advent of this flood, as though he knew that, after this violent upheaval, the world of Indian art would be fertilised through a new kind of soil thrown up from below the labyrinths. And, what is more, he wrote strange poems from his subterranean feelings as the only titles for these weird pictures.

Contradiction.

The contradiction between Tagore's aesthetic of harmony, and his aesthetic of the exuberant fantasy of the subconscious, is a fascinating problem, which lies at the very root of creative experience, in so far as it suggests that while we think in ideas and tend to make coherent systems of aesthetic theory, when we resort to 'visual thinking', or rather image-making, we are unable to generalise in terms of clear definitions.

If this hypothesis leads us away from system-making about the nature of beauty to the appreciation of the aesthetic experience of actual works of an artist, or of each particular work, then, I believe, that Tagore's contribution, both unconscious and conscious, makes for the shifting of emphasis from mere conceptualism to a new aesthetic, based on the contemplation of pictures, sculptures and architectural forms.

I will say something later about the implications of the change of attitude that the uprushing streams from the volcano have already brought about in contemporary Indian creative art.

Meanwhile, let me record the process of transition from the absolute aesthetic of Rabindranath Tagore to the aesthetic which insists on concrete form, and even formlessness, as part of the realm of beauty.

II

In an essay, The Religion of an Artist, Rabindranath Tagore has written about his upbringing:

Tagore's early love of nature

'I had a deep sense, almost from infancy, of the beauty of nature and intimate feelings of companionship with the trees and the clouds, and felt in tune with the musical touch of the seasons in the air. At the same time, I had a peculiar susceptibility to human kindness. All these craved expression. The very earnestness of my emotions yearned to be true to themselves, though I was too immature to give their expression any perfection of form'.²

This chance utterance gives some idea about the attitude of the poet when he first began writing his verses. We see him as a dreamy young man, a romantic contemplative, who seemed to be compelled from within him

to love and to be loved, to say what he felt most intensely and to communicate this expression to others.

During this time of his growth into self awareness, he came strongly under the influence of his father, Maharishi Devendranath Tagore, who was the leader of a new movement, 'a strict monotheism based upon the teachings of the *Upanishads*'.

And although the young poet was to modulate the teaching of his father and extend it into many fields unknown to the divine, essentially he imbued himself with the religio-philosophical hypothesis of the 'forest books' about the One and the Many. Desire arose in the heart of the Supreme God, Brahman, the universal spirit, the One, and he wished to split himself into Many: Now there arises a similar desire in each of the Many to become One, to realise themselves in the supreme, to attain Brahman, who is the essence of Ananda (joy), Rasa (flavour) and Moksha (release from the trammels of existence).

*Brahman
Ananda Rasa
Moksha.*

Actually, in his juvenilia, Rabindranath Tagore was only vaguely aware of this ideal. Like most adolescents, who began their creative careers in the 1890's, the renascent doctrines of the great intellectual, reformer and revolutionary, Raja Ram Mohan Roy, held sway. This pioneer had attacked all the dead ritual of the old faiths and asked for the assertion of the pure spirit of the ancient periods, as well as its synthesis with the modern knowledge of the west.

As the synthesis, which his precursor asked for, had not yet been worked out to any extent, except in the abolition of *Sati*, through which widows sometimes burnt themselves on the funeral pyres of their husbands, and some other social reforms, Rabindranath Tagore wandered about on his own, without any formal school education, imbibing what he could find useful for himself among the elders of his family, each of whom was interested in poetry, art, music or religion. So that he was saved from the 'grooves of imitationism'. He has recorded his mood of that period in the following words :

'In my versification, vocabulary and ideas, I yielded myself to vagaries of an untutored fancy, which brought castigation upon me from critics who were learned, and uproarious laughter from the witty. My ignorance combined with my heresy turned me into a literary outlaw.'³

Later, however, he read the Vaishnava poetry, with its symbolism based on the ardent desire of the divine couple for each other. These songs he valued for their transparent love-play, more than for their spiritual significance: 'What gave me boldness when I was young was my early acquaintance with the old Vaishnava poems of Bengal, full of the freedom of meter and courage of expression. I think I was only twelve when these poems began to be reprinted. I surreptitiously got hold of copies from the

*Influence of
Vaishnava
Poems*

desks of my elders. I must admit that the greater part of these lyrics was erotic and not quite suited to a boy just about to reach his teens. But my imagination was fully occupied with the beauty of their forms and the music of their words, and their breath, heavily laden with voluptuousness, passed over my mind without distracting it.⁴

Heart of Truth.

Then he read Dante's *Inferno*, Hiene's poems and Goethe's *Faust*. Although he could not understand very much of these writers because of the difficulties of the alien language in which he read them, he allied himself with the aspirations of these writers to probe the heart of truth.

Drunk with the ambition to know everything, he also tried to learn music and to compose songs, which defied the canons of orthodox propriety. Towards religion also, his attitude was uniquely his own. He says: 'I could not persuade myself to imagine that I had religion simply because everybody whom I might hurt believed in its value.'⁵

If, then, at this stage, as he said, he thought of everything in terms of his obsession with poetry, it may be correct to say that his aesthetic theories depended on each poem he wrote.

Fact and Soul

Of one thing, however, he was convinced even then: 'Mere information of facts, mere discovery of power, belongs to the outside and not to the inner soul of things.'

Harmony

And he seems to be seeking, through his creative writings, for some sense of *Harmony*, that is to say, his individual soul is searching for alliance with the universe at large, the affiliation with all the diverse phenomena of feelings, emotions and thoughts of the people around him and of the forces working in the whole universe.

III

The bulk of Rabindranath Tagore's work during his youth and maturity is in the form of poetry and drama, as well as some long loose narratives which he called novels. He was a prolific writer, who wrote a poem and some prose everyday. Compelled to ally himself with all the moods of nature and Man, the passions as well as the most delicate feelings, he remained an experimentalist all his life, touching in a miscellaneous manner, every conceivable form of creative art.

Of course, his development coincides with the dominant moods of his bloodstream. The young adolescent rebel gives place to the seeker after the beauty of the warm, lush and sensuous lyrical poetry in emulation of Kalidasa. A little later, he is influenced by the *Gita Govinda* of Jayadeva,

as well as the English Romantic poets, a period which one of his critics has called 'the heart wilderness'. To be sure, he is a magician who can call up in the most vivid images, the nuances of pleasure and pain.

The earlier urges for lyric *Harmony* give place to a certain richness and abandon which makes of Exhuberance a virtue. Exhuberance

The English poet, John Keats, wrote in a preface to his *Endymion*: "The imagination of a boy is healthy, and the mature imagination of a man is healthy; but there is a space of life between in which the soul is in ferment, the character undecided, the ambition thick-sighted."⁶

Rabindranath Tagore could have said this about himself. In fact, he wrote something like it:

'There is a vast forest named the heart,
Limitless all sides—here I lost my way.'

One of his first biographers and critics, Edward Thompson, has noticed the number of words which repeat themselves in the poetry of Rabindranath Tagore before he reached the age of thirty-five:

'Silence,' 'soul,' 'heart,' 'song' and 'speech,' 'lonely,' 'dense,' 'deep,' 'the skirts of the sky,' or 'the forests,' 'tears,' 'size,' 'stars,' 'bride,' 'caresses,' 'love,' 'death.'⁸

There are two obvious comments one can make on seeing such words woven and rewoven in the garlands of Tagore's songs.

In the first instance, it is quite clear that he was dominantly an imagist, a poet who thought in terms of concrete pictures rather than in terms of vague abstractions.

Secondly, he seems to be a soul-searcher, trying always to express the drama of his awareness of reality. He called his *Morning Songs* the first throwing forth of the inner self outwards. I think, one could say, that all his art was mainly expressionist in this manner. He enters the bondage of human affections and sees that 'the great is to be found in the small, the infinite within the bounds of form, the eternal freedom of the soul in love.' (*Nature's Revenge*.⁹)

This exhuberance led to his being called, alternately, the Bengali Shelley, the Bengali Keat, the Bengali Byron.

Certainly, after the Shelleyan moods, and the Keatsian echoes, there was a Byronic phase, in sonnets like *Bodily Union*, *Her Arms*, *Her Feet*, *Kisses*, etc.

Once he apologised for this sensuality in a conversation: 'I am willing to admit that there is an element which is carnal. But there is also the reaction. . . . The trouble to escape from the same sensuality.'¹⁰

The exhuberance also finds expression in the days of maturity in poems like *Sea Waves*, and in the ferocious satires.¹¹

Again, in the attack on social problems and the tense plays, such as

King and Queen and Sacrifice, he wrote with a full-blooded passion which was a kind of defence of his sensitiveness against the violences of an unequal society.

Jiban Debata

He rationalised these moods into a creative doctrine called *Jiban Debata*. Professor Mahalanobis has defined this 'life deity' motif as something personal—'the presiding deity of the poet's life, not quite that even, it is the poet himself—the inner self of the poet, who is more than this earthly incarnation'.

I think *Jiban Debata*¹² is not to be identified with god, but the demiurge who controls the poet's creative life.

And this powerful, vital *Jibandeveta* was to inspire many poems, including *Urvasi*, dedicated to the heavenly nymph whom he conceived to be beauty,¹³ dissociated from all human relationships, like Lucretius' Venus, 'the Delight of Man and Gods, the beloved', or like Swinburne's 'Perilous Goddess'.

Abundance

The flood of poetry that continued during the years before the 80's and the 90's of the last century led him instinctively to the worship of *Abundance* itself as an aesthetic concept.

This was an advance beyond the idea of *Harmony*, which was lyrical and personal, because by *Abundance* Rabindranath Tagore seeks to express the 'richness and plentitude of the spirit' that one may feel 'when one is above a narrow worldly life of profit and loss, when one is freely generous and loving, taking the light in everything that is beautiful, true and good.'

It must be understood that so far there is very little in the form of essay writing. And the doctrine of *Abundance* appears not as a theory, but as a kind of reflection of the essential spirit of poetry and prose. This remains true even of his definitions of religion, because most of the categories appear as offshoots of religious poetry, rather than as doctrinal beliefs. Perhaps, the English translations in the book, the *Gardener* and the *Gitanjali*, as well as *Fruit Gathering*, illustrate the kind of pursuit of beauty which Rabindranath Tagore preferred—through imagery and metaphor than through didactic writing, until the end of the 19th century.

IV

*Sahitya
Lectures*

In the year 1905, Rabindranath Tagore, summed up many of his hunches, insights and beliefs, specially in regard to literature, in his lectures entitled *Sahitya*,¹⁴ delivered before the then newly founded National Council of Education. Of the three volumes of these lectures, the first concentrates

on aesthetics. And here we have some of the theories which he had been practising as a creative writer, defined in a number of aphorisms and arguments.

Apart from the fact, that he enunciates beauty as against mere charm, or sensuous pleasure, of the kind which many hedonists in the west have called aesthetic delight, Rabindranath associates it with spiritual discipline and tranquillity of mind, thus emphasising the sense of harmony which he had been looking for in most of his poetical writings. Beauty is a form of self realisation, as *Ananda* was the highest aspiration in the ancient *Upanishads*. He writes :

'The story of man's seeing beauty in all things of the world, the history of his possessing the Universe with joy—this is automatically preserved in the literature of Man.'¹⁵ This interpretation of beauty as the very stuff of the Universe with which man seeks union is almost a paraphrase of the aphorism in one of the forest books:

'Verily, is it not thou lovest everything, because thou desirest thy known self.'¹⁶

This orthodox interpretation is in line with most of the Indian theorists on aesthetics, who have considered beauty to be *Brahmasvadasahodara*, meaning the flavour of the absolute *Brahman*, or the Supreme God. But, with characteristic originality, Rabindranath Tagore extends this idea of *Harmony*, as the ultimate beauty and the goal of self realisation, into the kinship with other people, in fact with every sentient thing in life, a kind of solidarity with the whole Universe. He says :

'The function of our soul is to fraternise with others.'¹⁷

In this sense self realisation and beauty is a kind of self enlargement, a spiritual self-aggrandisement, because by absorbing the world into our highest consciousness, we also enlarge this awareness, make it deeper and more intense. 'Only connect', the poet Shelley had declared to be the ideal of creative literature. Doubtless, Rabindranath Tagore has also in mind this kind of sharing of the inner life, among men and women through his doctrine of 'fraternisation' of living souls. In a later text, called *Panchabhut*,¹⁸ he defines this metaphorically: 'Just as a spider spreads his web while still remaining at the centre of it, similarly our soul, seated at the centre, is active in establishing an intimate relation with its surroundings; it even makes the ugly beautiful, the distant near and the stranger friendly. It is building thousands of bridges between the self and the not self. Beauty is but a bridge between the self and matter.'

Panchabhut

Again, Rabindranath quotes the *Upanishads* to reinforce the adequacy of his doctrine of *Beauty as Love*:

Beauty as Love

'It is not that thou lovest thy son, because thou desirest him, but thou lovest thy son, because thou desirest thine own soul.'¹⁹

On this aphorism from the forest books, the poet comments:
'The meaning of this is that whomsoever we love, in him we find our own soul in the highest sense: The final truth of our existence lies in this: *Paramatma*, the Supreme soul, is in me as well as in my son, and my joy in my son is the realisation of this truth. It has become quite a commonplace fact, yet it is wonderful to think about, that the joys and sorrows of our loved ones are joys and sorrows to us—nay they are more. Why so? Because in them we have grown larger. In them we have touched the great truth which comprehends the great universe.'²⁰

Of course, he is aware that often our love for our children, our friends or other loved ones, debars us from the further realisation of our soul:

'Nevertheless it is the first step and all the wonder lies in this first step itself.

And yet, he suggests, that one must be on one's guard against being bound down by egoistic motives because these militate against the spirit of love altogether:

'In this way, our friendships become exclusive, our families selfish and inhospitable, our nations insular and aggressively inimical to other races. It is like putting a burning light within a sealed enclosure, which shines brightly till the poisonous gases accumulate and smother the flame... To know our soul apart from the self is the first step towards the realisation of supreme deliverance. We must know with absolute certainty that essentially we are spirit.'²¹

Beauty is born of the *Exhuberance* of this spirit.

In view of the clear distinction between the ego and the higher self, aesthetic contemplation is not sensuous, nor disinterested in the absolute sense, but partaking of both areas, in a realm, which Rabindranath does not define, but which seems to be a kind of mystical self absorption. This interpretation is reinforced by Rabindranath's dissociation of beauty from any practical gain or profit and loss account or utilitarian value:

'Art and literature belong to the revolutionary region of freedom, where need is reduced to unimportance, the material is shown to be unsubstantial and the ideal alone is revealed as a truth.'

The purity of this contemplation is further emphasised by the separation of true joy from the mind, or the *mana* with its rationality, the body's passions, and the will. These are supposed to obscure the soul. The poet states negatively:

'When the burden of his mind is not felt, we know that condition to be joy.'²²

This uncompromisingly spiritualistic definition of aesthetic experience as pure joy is realised through intuition, and not through sensuous

*Beauty not
Utilitarian*

apperception, ratiocination or conative ability. 'Observation and reason,' he says, 'give factual knowledge, which is in bits and pieces and not integrated in Harmony.'²³

Obviously, the *Ananda* of the *Upanishads* seems to Rabindranath Tagore to be the end of all art. And, like the ancient theoreticians, Ananda Vardhana, Abhinavagupta, and the mediaeval scholastics of the west, as well as his contemporaries, Aurobindo, Coomaraswamy and Radhakrishnan, he resuscitates the doctrine of the essential interconnection of Beauty with Truth and Goodness. In order to draw parallels with his own thinking as a poet, he comments on the Keat's famous line. 'Beauty is truth, truth beauty..' But to give an Indian garb to the same hypothesis, he says:

*Beauty
Truth
Goodness*

'In our *Puranas*, Laxmi is not the goddess of wealth and beauty only but of goodness also. The form of beauty is the perfect form of Goodness.'²⁴

Clearly, the poet seems in his didactic writings about Beauty, to have gone far beyond the miscellaneousness of the contributory sources of aesthetic contemplation to a systematic theory of pure joy as the spiritual essence. In this he is in line with orthodox thinking and more purist even than Immanuel Kant. Because, though the latter also believed in pure contemplation as the end of aesthetic experience, he saw it to be the interplay of the faculties of understanding and imagination, in which conceptual knowledge, with its categories, dissolves itself into an illogical logic and fuses the sensuous impressions into an organic whole. But while the illogical logic still plays a part in Kant's view, Rabindranath Tagore dissociates reason from the experience of pure joy and relies on the intuitive activity which arises above and beyond the cognitive faculties.

Similarly, Tagore's theory of aesthetic joy is different from the views of Plato, Aristotle, Cezanne, Paul Valery, Clive Ball and Roger Fry, who all seem to understand Beauty as the essence of some ultimate form, like circle, cone, cube or triangle, and of the organisations of these forms into a new whole.

If Plato admired the beauty of the circle, and Aristotle declared that beauty is a matter of size and proportion, and the Cubists made form emerge from the juxtaposition of squares, to yield significance, Rabindranath Tagore considers all these attitudes to be merely factual, non-significant, and not yielding aesthetic joy: 'The size and shape of a rose', he writes, 'the charm and harmony of its parts, point to same unity by pervading its entire body; for this reason a rose is not a mere fact to us, it is a thing of beauty'.²⁵

Already he had emphasised:

'Mere information of facts from which we discover power, belongs to the outside and not to the inner soul of things.'²⁶

After receiving the concept of *Ananda* as the ideal of beauty, and rising to the realm of pure abstraction, which is realised through the intuitive experience of a mystic, Rabindranath Tagore had to explain the connection between this sublime concept with actual expression in creative art and literature.

At first sight, it would seem to us that this would be difficult for the poet, in so far as the mystic experience can hardly be communicated except in such phrases of the forest books as: 'It is not this, it is not that'.

But Rabindranath Tagore adopts the Upanishadic idea of *Lila* (sport), as a kind of spiritual game of hide and seek, in the maze of the Universe, which is the self of the artist:

'In literature', he says, 'Man is really extending his field of what is dear to him, that is the field of his distinct realisation. Literature is the playground of his unchecked, manifold and vast plane.'²⁷

And, later, he likened the process of artistic creation to the creation of the world by the Supreme God. He quoted from the Vedic commentator, Sayanacharya, the following words:

'The food offering which is left over after the completion of sacrificial rites, is praised because it is symbolical of Brahma, the original source of the Universe.'²⁸

And he gives an exposition of the meaning of this aphorism, which is a summary reinterpretation of the process of creative activity in the artist and the need for communication. Tagore writes:

'According to this explanation, Brahman is boundless in his superfluity, which inevitably finds expression in the eternal world process. Here we have the doctrine of the genesis of creation and therefore the origin of art. Of all living creatures of the world, man has his vital and mental energy vastly in excess of his need, which urges him to work in various lines of creation for its own sake. Like Brahma himself, he takes joy in productions that are unnecessary to him, and therefore representing his extravagance and not his hand to mouth penury. The voice that is just enough can speak and cry to the extent needed for every day use, but that which is abundant sings, and in it we find our joy. Art reveals man's wealth of life, which seeks its freedom in forms of perfection which are an end in themselves...' 'All that is inert and inanimate is limited to the bare fact of existence. Life is perpetually creative, because it contains in itself that surplus which

overflows the boundaries of the immediate time and place, restlessly pursuing its adventure of expression in the varied forms of self realisation. Our living body has its vital organs that are important in maintaining its efficiency, but this body is not a mere convenient sack for the purpose of holding stomach, heart, lungs and brain; it is an image—its highest value is in the fact that communicates its personality. It has colour, shape and movement, most of which belong to the superfluous, that are needed only for self expression and not for self preservation.’²⁹

There is in these words a development from the resuscitation of the Upanishadic position to the admission of the body as a part of the soul. The end of creative art remains the same *Ananda* of the *Sahitya* lectures. But the warp and woof of life is admitted in order to explain expression on the terrestrial plane as well as communication for what is expressed to other people.

VI

Although he got over the difficulty of coming down from the heavens to the earth by admitting the living human organism as a medium of soul expression, he had to face still another difficulty of the Absolute aesthetics. If the ideal of beauty is the Supreme God, then the technique of realisation of Brahman can be elaborate or very simple.

One can attain God by prolonged penances, austerities and prayers, or one can touch him by repeating one simple word AUM... or by reciting two lines of a song. The organisation of forms in the pictorial and plastic arts, or even the composition of a poem according to the rules of prosody or free verse, would not be quite necessary. That is why one of the European absolutists in aesthetic theory, the Italian philosopher, Benedetto Croce, considers intuitive expression as the most important thing about artistic creation. If a peasant looks at a sunset and feels that it is beautiful, to Croce that will be the peasant's expression as a creative artist: 'Intuitive knowledge', he says, 'is expressive knowledge, independent and autonomous, in respect to intellectual function, indifferent to later discrimination... to intuit is to express.'³⁰

*Benedetto
Croce:*

*'To intuit
is to
express'*

Rabindranath Tagore, having been a practising poet, does not feel, that Croce is right in saying 'To intuit is to express'. And though he also thinks that what is to be expressed is more important than the expression, he considers the relationship of art and literature to human life and its artifices and skills important for genuine creative expression:

Tagore:
Literature is
'Suggestion of
human life'

'The chief indication of literature', he says, 'consists in its suggestion of human life. Where does the mental life of a man reside? If it is there it is where our intelligence and feelings, cravings and experience all have melted and mixed into one perfect unity, where our intelligence, will and taste, work harmoniously together, in a world, where resides the essential man. It is there the literature is born.'³¹

So he treats the content and form of art as one:

'My main point is this: the world of literature means a world in relationship with the human life... We humanise great nature by mixing with it our joys and sorrows, hopes and desires; only then it becomes proper material for literature.'³²

Unlike Croce, then, who regards the harmony of form and content unnecessary, Tagore insists that this harmony is the indication of the unity of fragmentary experience with the universal spirit: 'The extension of our soul that occurs in the feeling of oneness with others is really its great possession; inspired by this unity man begins to express himself in a variety of ways. When Man is alone he has no expression.'³³

Thus he seeks to permeate the poet's or the artist's personality with the stuff of experience and connects the expression of organised experience with the godhood.

Asceticism

In this sense, Tagore even includes social and political cause in the realm of aesthetic expression. He thinks that to live in society, and to communicate with each other, is the natural and conscious desire of man, part of the fraternisation with others through which man knows and through which man seeks to know himself and to enlarge his soul experience.

Of course, the organisation of artistic experience, according to Rabindranath, requires a tremendous discipline. He said:

'Chastity is the calmness of steadfast devotion that enables us to penetrate to the mystic depths of beauty.'³⁴

In this declaration, he is echoing the dictum of Abhinavagupta, the Indian theoretician of aesthetic of the 11th century A.D., who held tranquillity or *Shanta* to be the basic aesthetic sentiment. In *Panchabhut*,³⁵ Rabindranath Tagore even compared creative activity with yogic self-control, suggesting that, by the control of the senses, there accrues to man a spontaneous power through which he somehow attracts all those feelings, colours, sounds and sights, from which he builds an integral whole. This again is a repetition of the ideal of contemplative vision or *dhyanamana*, spoken of in Indian aesthetic theory and *Silpashastras* as the method of conceiving the image before executing it.

Although Rabindranath Tagore had lived his life fully and tried every human experience, in his exposition of the doctrine of self-control he introduced asceticism as the ideal method for realising works of art, thus

removing aesthetic joy from the uprush of the unconscious, the bursting of energies and vitalities as well as delight in sensuous experience or the ordinary pleasure, raising the concept of beauty to the transcendental plane of *Rasa*, as the universalised, disinterested, emotional essence to be tasted through intuition.

In spite of the miscellaneous of his essays on aesthetics, he, therefore, made a system out of the various ancient theories by reinterpreting the aphorisms in his own individual manner, fundamentally allying himself to traditional thought. And, in this way, he became a sponsor of the neo-theosophical revival of the ideal of ancient art by E. B. Havell and his nephew, Abanindranath Tagore, who started a kind of pre-Raphaelite movement which was to revive the age of the gods and of the classical ideal of Buddhism, by painting the Indian pantheon in the manner of Ajanta and Bagh, as well in the technique of water colours used in the miniatures of mediaeval India.

VII

The sudden volte-face from the Absolutist system of aesthetic elaborated by Rabindranath Tagore, came, when he was sixty-five years old. Suddenly, he found himself doodling and making the manuscript erasures on proof sheets of his books into free forms, almost with the automatic gestures of the kinetic hand, without much conscious control, so that what appeared from his subconscious was very different from the harmonies which he had tried to perfect in his poetry. In fact, the system of aesthetic, he had suggested in his various essays, seems to have little relevance to the macabre world that rushed up in various desultory, casual and rhythmic forms from the volcano of the sub-conscious life. With a remarkable honesty to the nature of his kinetic experience he did not even give titles to these pictures. He left the early doodles to speak for themselves and then wrote one line poems to suggest what might be the significance of these formless forms.

Thus the realm of words consciously thought out by the poet-philosopher, disappeared in the realm of images which emerged. The finely constructed lyrics, the vast epics, the sweet, even sentimental, songs and the rounded musical compositions, as well as the highly conceptualised prose, were all put aside, as it were, and a new phase began in which there was not even visual thinking or *dyanamantra*-contemplation, but everything appeared in an imagery, mostly harsh, sometimes cruel, occasionally warm and sensuous, then demoniac, brooding, intense, and highly charged with passions and desires which seemed to have been buried at the base of the simmering volcano and then exhibited with a startling fury. And the lava of the brush

swept aside all the old frontiers, boundaries, and irrigated the soil around him with a new kind of fertility.

There were many people in our country, who could not believe that a man who enjoyed the status of the national poet, could throw up these weird birds with triangular beaks, these squarish, hard figures, these egg-shaped carnal females, these nightmarish ghosts with hungry eyes, these ghouls and hobgoblins of the underworld, these sombre landscapes which lead to ever new seasons of Yama's hell.

I am inclined to believe that the essays in aesthetic theory and even the reinterpretation of the Vedanta philosophy by Rabindranath Tagore were influenced, to a large extent, by the need to put forward classical doctrines on par with the similar European systems which were being elaborated in the 19th century. The creative writer, Rabindranath Tagore, had always been addicted to the soul-search, which has been the dominant pre-occupation of the poets of India. The mould of Shelleyism, Byronism, Miltonism, and other Europeans, which he adopted (or which were adopted for him by the English educated intelligentsia) were a superficial veneer, which often revealed, underneath the categories, the burning and melting of the indigenous heart.

Actually, compelled by the urges of his inheritance to express himself from within the confusion of the 19th century India, when the alien conquerors were prone to look down on the native culture, he resorts, on one plane, to adopt the European models, but seeks to give content to the intense emotions, the fervid imagination and the inner vision of what was being condemned as barbaric.

During the end phase of his career, all pretensions of living up to, and creating respectable words and pictures was given up. And then there was a return to the sincerity, naivety and fantasy of the child. The stirrings of his inner life, the tremors of the flesh, and the sensuous power of the racial unconscious, were given free reign.

It is not irrelevant that many of his European admirers of the older generation, and the cliché ridden Indian followers of the British critics, who had appreciated the "spiritual" heights attained by Rabindranath Tagore, could not accept his drawings and paintings as his work at all, but the work of some Asura of the *Kama loka*, the underworld of desire.

This is due to the fact that there was, has been, and is, a fundamental difference of outlook between those Europeans and Indians. The Westerners look at India mainly as the land of the *Vedanta*, of vague idealism, and transcendental godliness, which has little relevance to the problems of contemporary creative art as a secular practice. Perhaps, the revolt against the imitation of life and nature in European art of the renaissance tradition, having ended in the 19th century realism, the more imaginative and visionary

Kama-loka

European intellectuals, and their followers in India, began to find compensation in the so-called 'other worldly, transcendental and spiritual art of India,' leaving its integrated formal life qualities out of focus.

Whereas, in fact, I believe the most important works of Indian imaginative art have always been thrown up from the synthesis of the inner and outer, through the intuitive passion which works in the sensuous realities of colour, line and disposition towards the release of the body-soul and the suggestive qualities latent in the highest talents.

This difference of attitude has now yielded to a similarity of approach in the most important creative men of our time both in the West and East.

This is the reason why many of the *avant garde* artists have welcomed the non-sentimental, genuine, even though naive and childlike, outpourings of the emotions, intuitions and projections of the soul of Rabindranath Tagore, in its uninhibited, unashamed and daring expressions in the paintings. The surrealists claimed him as their own.

I feel, however, that the label, Surrealism, is as inept as the previous labels which, by willing surrender to European categories of criticism, Rabindranath had accepted for himself in his poetry.

If an English term has to be applied, one may accept 'Expressionism' and apply it to Tagore's paintings (since one has to use the English language), but by redefining it to mean the drama of the human soul as it works itself out through the acceptance of all the inspirations, intuitions and imaginative forebodings, whether they interpret the fury of destruction, the horrors of evil in man, the terror and the gloom of the living hell or the lyrical graces of hallucination.

*Tagore's
Expressionism*

The creative artist, at his intensest, seizes upon the stirrings in some part of his nature, broods upon them, in order to release them from the unconscious, allows the rhythmic life to resurrect the abnormal emotions, ideas and images and coheres them into an aesthetic. And, if the compulsion in him is vital enough, he allows himself the luxury of ranging freely over all the silent areas, to uplift with the kinetic movement, a delineation, beyond reason, into suggestive planes urged by the gestures of the inner daemon. The process may be even more complex, but it is all embracing and it has the *quick* of life about it, and it shows not two legs but two-leggedness. And the stream of consciousness is given a powerful direction by the strength of the passions, moods and prophetic visions.

VIII

The hallucinations of the poet-painter, in his second childhood, go through many phases which cannot be strictly defined. But,

*Second
Childhood*

like all soul-expression, as in child art, they go through the stages of scribble, symbolism, supernatural form and expressionism, in so far as the drama of the inner life is driven to projections of the strangest and most primitive forms, to end in graces, as a kind of compensation for the brutal vitalities that have been witnessed.

At the scribble stage, certain sharp lines are being formed from the page proofs like dagger thrusts of the *Asura* bent in this erstwhile neo-Brahmin.

These thrusts emerge from the gloom of black surfaces, into the ardent sex symbols, of the phallic snake, entering the coils of the receiving curves.

The lingering decorative feeling in Tagore's hand seeks early to convert the *parry and thrust of triangular gestures* to form themselves into *Curves*, as in the cock, but the formalist assertiveness and strength of the painter's vanity makes the image into a fighting cock.

There is a return to scribble, as though to gather force for the symbolic ebb and flow of pessimistic sadness and rapture, through the play of the curvacious lines into themselves, perchance to rescue a form which may be vital yet joyous. The total effect is that of the effort to release, from within the sorrow and terror and gloom, the radiances beyond the habitual reactions of form—a kind of formless *Whirlpool* which has its own catharsis.

The painter allows himself to be submerged in the sources: His unskilled but genuine kinetic propulsions trace onto the gloomy black background certain *Crystal forms of terror*, shrouded like ghosts in a day dream, making violent gestures, or floating detachedly in the broken universe before the artist's own abstracted vision of himself; The long beard is elongated and the cloak swirling down to merge with the figures. As though not to allow the terror of the forms to become too cruel, the medium deliberately moulds the figures into *Ovoids*.

It would seem that the 'spiritual' in Tagore is still shrinking from the challenge of the total terror of the underworld, which has been waiting to be faced. He identifies himself only with some of the *Ghosts*, who do not frighten him, and makes them into *Crystal forms hanging down*, as it were, in the cosmos of his unconscious, in *swirls of paint*, to describe lyrical feelings almost longingly beckoning to be recalled.

But some of the visions pushed themselves like fierce instruments of destruction. The *beaks of the birds* became sharper than even the scribbles and doodles—the *claws are outstretched* and the *abstracted, hard, central figure* become a *symbolic crucifixion of terror itself*.

The monstrous *Rakshas* and *Rakshinis*, in spite of the directive effort to humanise them, are dominantly expressive of the cruel world of Yama's dhoots in the hell of India. The policeman's scowl transforms the indogenous features into the universal image of the twisted Nazi, the symbol of violence

Scribbles
Dagger Thrusts

Phallic Snake

Triangular gestures

Whirlpool

Crystal Forms of terror

Ovoids

Ghosts

Crystal forms hanging down

Swirls of paint

Beaks of Birds

Claws outstretched

Abstract hard figures become crucifixion of terror

itself, with all the twistings of the face from within and the scowl of anger radiating its roughness from every part of the physiognomy. It must be recalled that the painter's soul was full of the forebodings of disaster of the thirties and he expressed himself also in words with a passionate indictment of civilisation which seemed to him to be destroying itself.

Going deeper into his psychosis, he brings up, in this phase, all those supernatural forms which had been waiting for resurrection.

There is 'The Tender on the stony head'. Soft eyes embodied in parallel lines, with wooden lips stare out against the upraised cowl. The remote form is almost cruel, though she is a source of life and goes to fetch water.

*The tender on
the stony head*

There is another ink sketch which might be the incarnation of the brooding Rishi contending against the tremors lower down in his personality by invoking the more harmonious flourishes. The struggle of the white and the black, of the beaky nose and sharp bearded sage, is sought to be patternised but the struggle of the painter for expression shows through.

Brooding Rishi

The same effort at making for a decorative stance of a Vulture-like bird, fails to create a pleasant image, because the curved lines assume sharp angles and the chiaroscuro disturbs the figuration and creates the effect of violence. In the landscape of hell, there do appear lovable cylindrical forms and the naive painter uses soft colourwashes against the black background to tone down the horror of the ghosts—the effect is certainly lyrical; but the anonymous black face allies the slender female with Kali in her potentially fearful incarnation rather than with the idealised goddesses of the Indian pre-Raphaelites, whom Rabindranath had himself promoted during all his mature life.

Kali

In spite of the nostalgia for the tenderness of remembered childhood, the mother and child figure in another panel is essentially a confrontation between two hard ghosts, one rectangular with sharp edges and the other a helpless victim seeking suffrage.

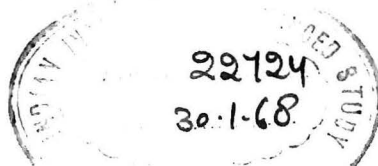
*Two hard
ghosts*

In the confrontation between two rigid ghosts forms, ostensibly husband and wife, or lovers there is a reproach, as between those who had once tormented each other, the one from the orthodox attitude of mastery and the other from the sentimental reactions of husband worship or Patiseva. The separateness compels a tragic sadness, the whites emphasising the atmosphere of gloom, specially the monsterish grey hard well between them.

Tormentors

The drama of the horror of life is intense in the theatrical scene where the cruel judge sits ensconced on a demoniac cloud, while the rigid supplicating male figure appeals in vain, from beside the shrouded female. These are characters from some season of hell, where even compassion, or Karuna, is no longer possible. The painter exaggerates an ultimate violence,

*Drama of the
horror of life*



throwing aside compassion and all the lucid unities, in a composition of distorted postures, which seemed to be spontaneous, once the hand has been freed to allow almost automatically the release of the heart's pangs.

The procreation of pictures from the boiled cauldron of Rabindranath Tagore's unconscious was as sudden and continuous as had been one of his early poem, *Creation, Preservation and Destruction*, where he had let himself go. The chaotic genius painted three or four pictures a day, almost in a somnambulist manner. The poem titles are mere indications of the flow of the lava.

The tender on the stony head

'*The tender on the stony head*' is a relentless imaginative reconstruction of an ovoid on the massive wooden bloc of a rectangle which assumes a certain unity between the strong base and the face above, while also contrasting the barely integrated forms.

Helplessness of self-expression

The agonised cry of the animal suggests, with the open triangular mouth, the helplessness of self-expression itself. The cry seems not to reach out of the soul, but becomes an objective condition of protest from a twisted mass whose ugliness cannot evoke pity.

Witch

The triangular witch with one arm raised to the sky, and the other down, almost as though in a yogic exercise, reduces the horror to a bizarre demonstration, which cannot even give the eye access to the body-soul, because it suppresses the phantom into the stance of its own asceticism.

The ghosts multiply from the remembrance of things past—the poet had once written :

'Devils and spirits lurked in the recesses of every man's mind, the air was full of ghost stories, and even the atmosphere was enmeshed in the ghostly terrors. In the dark room of the ground floor (of the Jorosanko house) stood rows of huge water jars, filled with the whole year supply of drinking water. All those musty, dingy, twilight rooms were the home of furtive things. Great gaping mouths they had; eyes and breasts and ears, like weaving fans, their feet turned backwards.'

The season of hell of youth was thus resurrected in old age. The almost sculpturesque washes of paint were used to adumbrate those very figures which thrust their heads upwards, as though from the cremation ground. The texture of fire and ash have been interwoven in their omnipresent phantamagoric forms.

Masks

Sometimes, the denizens of hell laugh from mask faces, with dead eyes and gaping mouths, and seem to evoke those monsters whom the poet had absorbed without protest in his sub-conscious meekly during the years, when the *Asuras* slayed him. Now the evil in them is reproduced as a mockery of death against life.

Frog

The arrogant frog is another supine monster surmounted by a



13

13. *The anonymous black face allies the slender female with Kali in her potentially fearful incarnation rather than with the idealised goddesses of the Indian pre-Raphaelites.*

14. *Mother and Child figure in this panel in a confrontation between two hard ghosts.*

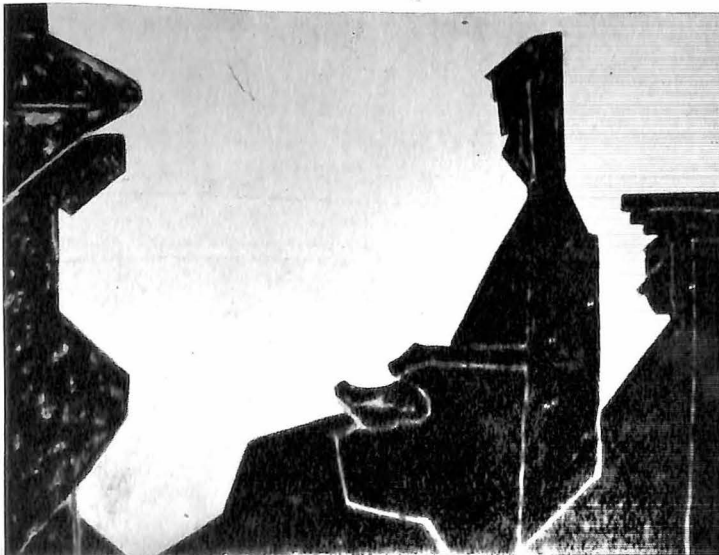


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15

15. *There is reproach between those who had once tormented each other.*
16. *There are characters from some season of hell where karuna has not been possible.*



16



17

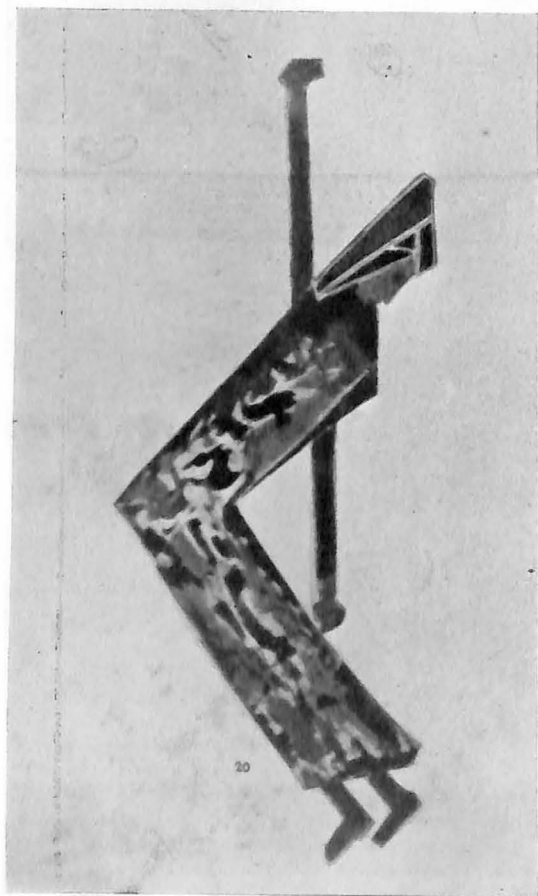
17. *The head is an ovoid against a rectangular background—a contrast of love against hate.*

18. *The agonised cry of the group suggests the helplessness of self-expression itself.*



18

19. *The triangular which with
one arm raised to the sky.*



20. *The denizens of hell laugh
from mask faces with dead
eyes and gaping mouths.*

21. *The arrogant frog is another monster almost like a fossilized bird.*



21



22. *In the veiled woman the phantom erupts from colour almost like a phallic form.*
23. *The mother and child is a transition towards lyrical faces.*
24. *In the shrouded female the atmosphere of the haunted house lurks everywhere, the gloom, the sorrow and the terror all round.*

22



23



24

formalised bird, suggesting the psychic force of the twisted mask enlivened by an open eye.

The instinctive outbursts, which had become wild beasts, birds, ghosts, demons and monsters, could not be altogether formalised, because they belong to the affirmation of nihilism of the period during which the inner life of Rabindranath Tagore was coincident with the disenchantment of the outer storms, violences and disconnections of the era of fascism. And he became a primitive, naive, child painter, without the skill of a Picasso, a Klee or a Dali, but with a sincerity that was to make him a significant contemporary.

Later, however, Rabindranath Tagore began a conscious research into form, perhaps under the influence of Edward Munch and Odilon Redilon. Even here, however, as in *veiled woman*, the phantoms erupt from the colours, only assuming fundamental phallic forms, such as had lain suppressed in the child consciousness, but do not become important works of art for all their honesty.

*Veiled
Woman*

There is a prophetic sentence in one of his *Letters to a friend*, "The Child has grown but never grown out of his childhood".

It seems to me that even in the transition when he attempts lyrical faces, such as the *mother and child*, *the worshippers*, the *horror mask* and the *shrouded female*, the atmosphere of the haunted house lurks everywhere, the gloom, the sorrow and the terror come through and the solemnity and the suppleness of the later pictures retains a diminished expressionism, until the poet began to believe he was a professional painter and attempted futile colour harmonies, and formal arrangements.

*Mother and
child*

*The
Worshippers*

We will not concern ourselves with those later pictures, but will stop with the hallucinations which have mocked at the harmonies of the rounded verses offered to the gods in his long idealistic career as a creative writer.

Horror mask

*Shrouded
Female*

VIII

Let us sum up:

There is no doubt about the integrity of the theoretician and critic turned painter, but the super-ego of the critic was not allowed to disturb the overflow of the artist in his mature age.

When he was asked, and he was asked many times, why he had painted these pictures, he was tentative and tried his best to rationalise his creative activity in words which are not circumscribed by his traditionalist attitude towards beauty, in terms of what Bishnu Dey has called, 'something delicate, well mannered, spiritual, aristocratic and a little Tennysonism.'

Poem
Explanation

In a poem written about a year and half before his death, he had suggested the development of his various creative processes :

'Over this continent of my life,
at the end of so many plains,
across so many floods,
I have journeyed since my childhood...
In some places, the shaded verbiages of the mysterious forest,
In some the despair of dry deserts
On the wooded path of youth loud as flowers,
of the ancient mountain wrapped in stillness
with its obscure words hidden in clouds—
all those I have gathered in my poetry
putting on them from memory their own rhythms,
but now I see that a great deal has been left out,
the delicate pen in its timidity
did not collect in its picture gallery
what is rude or crude or horrible,
that is why in its harmony the rhythm has suffered a lapse.
Or why did he refuse to comprehend
why did it shrink?'²⁸⁰

The answer is that 'it' did not quite shrink.

Actually, after his enthusiastic backing of the revival of Ajanta and Mughal traditions by his nephew, Abanindranath Tagore, and his followers, Rabindranath had begun to prefer the fantastic experiments of his second nephew, Gaganendranath Tagore. And then, in 1916, he had written despondently about the Vichitra society which used to meet in the Tagore household in Calcutta :

'I had hoped that from Vichitra would flow a great stream of art fertilising the whole country. But there was nobody capable of dedicating himself wholeheartedly to the cause. I was prepared to do all that lay in my limited power, but found no response. I am no painter myself or might have shown what was to be done. However, some day, someone will arise and hew the pathway for the swift progress of the artist's talent that lies scattered all over the country. But where is that masterbuilder? Where is that longing, that imagination, that power of sacrifice by dint of which man fulfils god's purpose.' These words proved to be prophetic. And he seems to have prepared himself, somewhere away from the 'poetry of words' to the 'poetry of analogy' of the paintings. And then came the onrush of bursting formless forms.

In a letter to the painter Jamini Roy, he confessed, even beyond the rationalisations of his other explanations, something which lies at the core of the pictorial situation—how it is felt, away from concepts words:

Letter about
Vichitra

Letter to
Jamini Roy

'When I had not yet turned to painting, then from this universal scene notes of music used to invade my ears, then the poetry of freedom—*rasa* or *bhava*—used to pervade my mind. But when painting attracted me then my mind found its place in the grand pageant of the eyes... Trees and flowers, men and beasts, everything, became concrete objects to me, with their own distinct forms. Then lines and colours began to recreate what was in the process of expression in itself. No other explanation is necessary. In this visible world, the being of the painter as the unique spectator was discovered. This pure visible world and the joy of showing it up—only a real painter like you will appreciate this intimate story.'³⁷

This contradiction between harmony and discord had occupied his mind for some years. For in his satirical novel, *Seshar Kavita*, (*Last poem*) he had attacked himself from the point of view of the *avant garde*: "My second contention against the poet, Tagore, is that his creations, even like his handwriting, are full of curves and remind one of roses and female forms and floating moons! Primitive! Trying so to copy nature's idioms. For the new literary dictator, we expect creation, straight and sharp like thorns, like arrows, like spear-heads. Not like fragile flowers, but like the lighting flash and the pain of neuralgia, piercing and angular, like a Gothic church, not rounded like a mosque dome, not self complacent but aggressive, even if they be crude like a jute mill, like a government secretariat. Let us disenchant ourselves from the witchery of musical forms."³⁸

Seshar Kavita

Later on he was to write the essay, *The Meaning of Art*, which I have referred to at the beginning of this essay. This is a kind of summary of all his opinions both as a theorist of beauty and as an artist. He tried very hard here to reconcile his Vedantic interpretations with the new realisations which had come from his formless forms.

New Gospel

One of the most significant passages in this essay, however, reads like the revelation of a new gospel:

"When in the name of Indian art, we cultivate with deliberate aggressiveness, a certain bigotry born of the habit of a past generation, we smother our soul under ideosyncracies unearthed from buried centuries. These are like masks with exaggerated grimaces, that, fail to respond to the everchanging play of life."³⁹

It would seem that here he was breaking away completely, even in theory from his previous writings, to the inauguration of a new era of art activity.

He confirms this in concrete terms:

"Every object in this world proclaimed by the dumb signal of lines and colours is a fact which is not a mere logical abstraction, or a mere

thing of use, but it is unique in itself, it carries the miracle of its existence."⁴⁰

Clearly, Rabindranath Tagore had enacted a revolution in his outlook. *The concept had given place to the image.* And, as he himself put it, 'The Rabindranath Tagore of the poems and the Rabindranath Tagore of the paintings are not one and the same person'.

The autonomy of the artist in our country as an individual confronting his belly, and creating from within himself the images of his body-soul experience, may be said to have been asserted, for the first time in the contemporary period by Rabindranath Tagore.

Thus he is the precursor of the school of experimentalism in the art of our country today, which seeks to grasp the pictorial situation, often without the use of words, in order to achieve silent areas which have their own rhythmic flow, and which are perhaps as eloquent in communication of the inner worlds of faculty and experience as poetry and music are in the world of sound. Perhaps, when the conceptualist tradition is given up for a more integrated human approach in our country, we may find that 'the poet ranks for below the painter in the representation of visible things,'⁴¹ because the painter often suggests musical sound if he has the listening eye, and takes us to subtleties beyond words.

I do not think, however, that the nature of creative experience has been adequately analysed in our country and we are still largely dominated by conceptualist traditions. And it has not been realised that, specially in the field of modern art no explanation in words can be adequate substitute for the experience of art itself. Of course, information about the personal, social and historical background does help, but it remains background material. If then we are to train ourselves to appreciate works of art, images are as important in the release of the human personality as thoughts, and we will have to notice the example, which I have given, of the transition of Rabindranath Tagore from a poet-philosopher of aesthetic theory to the painter of free form.

Let me end with an exhortation given by this painter to the new generation:

'I strongly urge our artists vehemently to deny the obligation to produce something that can be labelled as Indian art, according to some old world mannerisms. Let them proudly refuse to be herded into a pen like braned beasts that are treated as cattle and not as cows...'⁴²

*Autonomy of
the artist*

*Poet below
painters*

*Transition of
poet-philosopher
to painter of
free form*

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