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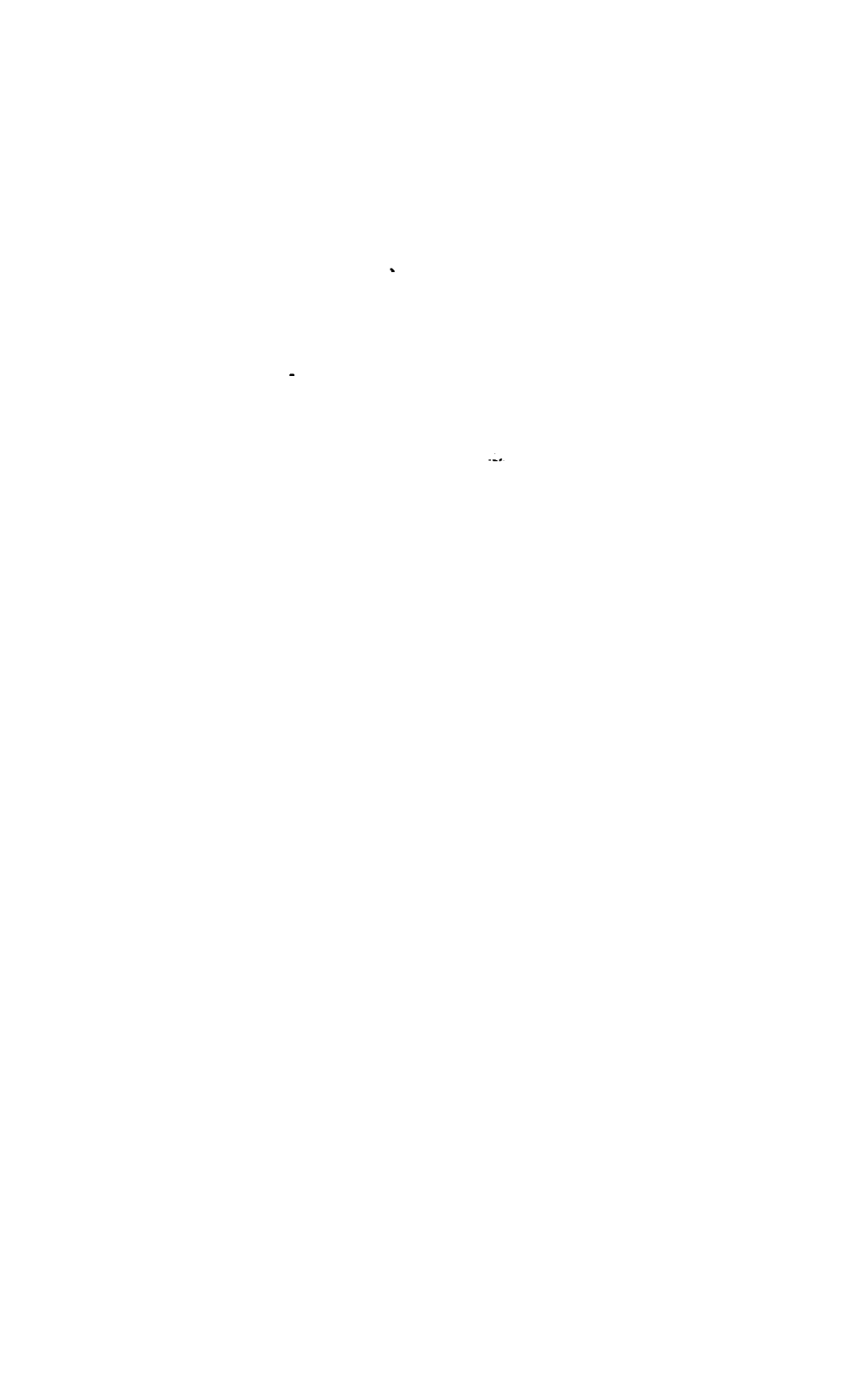
THE SWAN AND THE EAGLE

C. D. NARASIMHAIAH

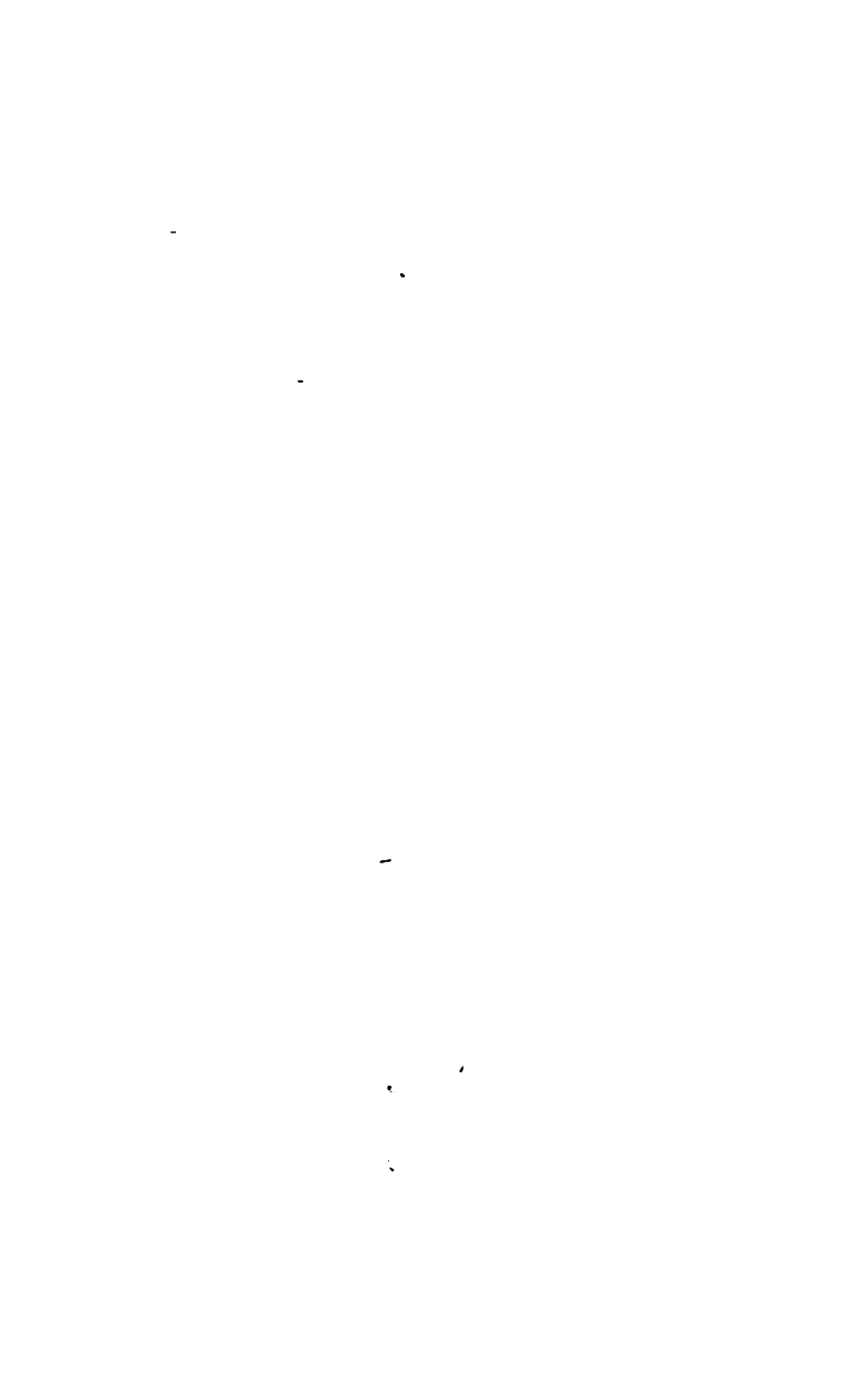


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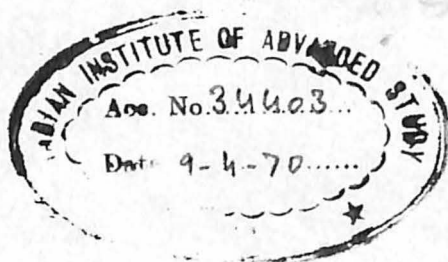
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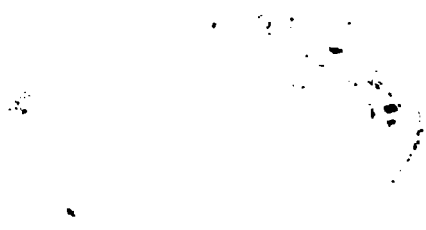
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TO THE MEMORY
OF
MY FATHER



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FOREWORD

Even those of us to whom some slight recognition has come from abroad for our scattered efforts in spheres of scholarship cannot but value highly the notice taken of us by the Indian Institute of Advanced Study in Simla both because of what the Institute stands for—it stands alone in this country in its unprecedented concern for standards—and what its Director, Professor Niharranjan Ray, has tried to make of it, since its inception not very long ago. I have known his independence and courage in intellectual matters but I should think that even for him it must have been an act of daring to have invited someone to speak on Indian Writing in English at a time when the 'right' thing would have been to join the rest, run down English, and call the work of Indians in English third and fourth class, and those who pursue its study with devotion, unpatriotic.

It is possible that precisely for this reason—disinterestedness in this matter has been so rare—Dr Ray must have felt prompted to say as did Thoreau: ' . . . if it proved mean . . . why then . . . publish its meanness to the world; or if it were sublime . . . give a true account of it . . . '

At any rate, I do think it is very important that an Institute like that, if it must leaven the lump, cannot exist in a world which 'neweth' everyday by taking the lead in matters of vital interest to the nation from the slogans of the market-place or by even watching them helplessly, to play safe. It must on the contrary create opportunities for those interested in the play of ideas to pursue them in an attitude of detachment, such detachment as is possible for the truly involved, and make them known to the country and win attention to them—approval or disapproval, acceptance or rejection, of thoughts and ideas must be considered less important than an understanding of them by creating a critical climate. This, I should naturally like to think, was the intention in the present case.

I am the more grateful to Dr Ray that he took a certain risk in asking one he didn't personally know, to participate in the

Institute's seminars and then, to be the Visiting Professor at the Institute for 1968. It is an honour of which I am deeply sensible and I thank the Director and the Governing Body most sincerely.

It is at the Institute that I made many valuable friendships with scholars and writers from various parts of the country and none that I cherish so much as the warmth and affection I have received in abundance from Mulk Raj Anand. It is, again, at the Institute that I renewed contact with my former teacher, Mr K. Venkataraman, after having lost touch with him for over twenty years. He, Mr Malhotra the Public Relations Officer and other officials of the Institute made my stay very comfortable.

But for the stimulus I have always received from my students and colleagues at Mysore I should have found it difficult to do anything intellectual: they have been my collaborators in a more real sense than is ordinarily conceded. The lectures in this volume are the outcome of my interest in the subject for at least two decades during which I have constantly spoken and written on it and I beg to be forgiven for the many echoes and repetitions of earlier remarks in the present volume.

I owe a special debt to Mr K. A. Korula and Mr Warren of the Wesley Press, Mysore for their personal attention from the time they received the typescript till the release of copies from the press.

I dedicate this volume to the memory of my father: I have not ceased to wonder even at this distance of time how a semi-literate shop-keeper in a small village in the far interior of Mysore, rooted in the culture of the masses, showed a true appreciation of the need for higher education in English Studies though it meant untold hardship to the family. His vision and courage despite our poverty of those days, which may well have crushed many like us, have been my source of strength.

C. D. N.

INTRODUCTION

Indian Writing in English is to me primarily part of the literature of India, in the same way as the literatures written in various regional languages are or ought to be. It can present the life of a village like Bulashah or Kanthapura, a small town like Malgudi or Kedaram, or sweep through continents and eternity itself; and so long as the operative sensibility of the writer is essentially Indian it will be Indian literature. Sanskrit was not an 'Indian' language, nor were Arabic and Persian, but the one became the very breath of India, that by which all else is known—*devabhasha*, *devajanavidya*—and the other two, Persian more than Arabic, have fathered forth a very sophisticated 'Indian' language, namely, Urdu. A time may (it may not, and one is not prophesying but dealing with an existing situation, is making a pragmatic approach to it) come when we can speak of Indian English as they do of American English, Australian or African English. For the term 'English' is no longer restricted to the language spoken in the British Isles, but denotes a wide variety of English, wherever it is spoken and however well or ill-spoken. If Indian English does not figure in the pages of the linguist yet it is because there is a time-lag between a social phenomenon, even the observation of it, and its verbal formulation by the social scientist. Linguists *are* seen observing and gathering data as reflected in their scattered contributions to periodicals and professional conferences. It is good to remember that a kind of American English was growing up for two or three hundred years before linguists could identify it as such; indeed, they have yet to identify Australian as well as African English.

Almost always, the linguist's formulations arise out of a body of written literature and spoken word yet to be rendered in writing. Perhaps there isn't at present a sufficient body of English writing in India or, which is more likely, the linguistic activity in this sphere of scholarship has yet to catch up, in either case, eluding the linguist's attempt at labelling.

What should compel recognition of this body of writing is the marked difference between the work of British writers who

depicted the Indian scene and that of Indians who addressed themselves to the same task through the medium of English: the former—by and large, most of them lacked the equipment—had no access to the deeper layers of Indian life or they (with the exception of Kipling) brought to fiction writing a language which had proved an admirable instrument for working in a social nexus and could not ordinarily cope with a life whose mainstream was religious and metaphysical. The language had to be forced to accommodate a very different sensibility from the one with which Anglo-Saxon temperament had learnt to grapple on native grounds. It *has* been, it is true, rendered flexible by the American, the Irish and the Polish sensibilities in major ways but the Anglo-Indian writer inhibited by his notorious insularity and linguistic laziness or incompetence has proved unequal to his undertaking in India.

On the other hand, the first generation of Indians who had learnt their English from Shakespeare, Milton, Wordsworth, Shelley, Byron and Scott could not, in fairness, be expected to make the language supple in speech or writing. Besides, their concerns were not creative. The ambition of those who used the language was to function as the Company's employees and, in rare cases, as petitioners to the British Government. Only subsequently did they feel called upon to distinguish themselves as lawyers, politicians platform speakers and journalists, and in all these roles—such was the state of the country in the nineteenth century—as agitators against the rulers. In the circumstances, it was too much to expect anything other than the language of agitation.

The language they had learnt from their reading of English literature could not have been of much help, especially at a time when there had hardly been any other means of knowing how the language functioned at various levels when used by those who *spoke* it. The language of Victorian statesmen and even contemporary British writers for that matter—Burke, Sheridan, Disraeli, Gladstone, and Macaulay himself must have confirmed the Indians in the rightness of its use by them.

The paucity of good prose or verse in English in India in the nineteenth century was not therefore a peculiarly Indian limitation: Victorian England had set the tone and showed the way for high

sound and breath-taking periods. It is astonishing how in such a set-up the country could still make a Toru Dutt and Vivekananda possible, one a distinguished minor poet, another who spoke and wrote prose of deep conviction, and both original geniuses prevented by a perverse fate from realizing their full potentialities, one dying at twenty-one, the other at thirty-nine. And yet they were remarkable innovators who originated a tradition of creativity in the English language, that is, they demonstrated the finer possibilities of the language in Indian hands. Others in the last century, mainly Raja Rammohan Roy, R. C. Dutt, Dadabai Naoroji, in prose, and men like Derozio and Malabari in verse had proved their gifts in this direction but their importance cannot be considered in any strict valuation of the literary scene as anything more than historical. In Toru Dutt and Vivekananda, one notices the most sensitive possible response of Indians in the English language to the challenge of their times in so far as they both represented the finest fusion of tradition, their own tradition of thousands of years, and modernity which meant an expression of the scientific spirit of the age that had also ushered in democratic concepts, mainly the importance of the individual. What is most interesting to students of English literature is that while the Victorian writers of prose and verse floundered in England itself in the presence of the 'pulverising' (the word is Vivekananda's) attacks of modern science, the Indians found the spirit of the new age was in complete consonance with the essential teaching of the Upanishads. What we need to appreciate is, that while the sages of the Upanishads had found it possible to experience the still-centre in the very midst of the raging storm, the West with its commitment to a life of 'action', came to identify action with the happenings of the external world, almost to the neglect, even exclusion, of that from which all action must issue forth and in which all action must find its supreme fulfilment. As though they perceived the dichotomy and were disturbed by it, the Indians sought to marry the two mentalities —of the still-centre and the storm, the Apollonian and the Dionysian, the *sattvik* and the *rajasik*, the swan and the eagle, and produce a conflagration. Vivekananda says to his disciples: 'Now be lost in deep meditation, now go and till the land; now expound the intricacies of the sastras, now go and sell the produce in the market.'

They were quick to recognize that the time was past for the pre-eminence of any one civilization, of Asia or Europe, and the two giants were seen in an encounter with each other. With a rich tradition of creative synthesis behind them, but lying dormant for long as though a stupor had come upon them, the Indians of the nineteenth century saw in their new encounter with the West the possibility of a new synthesis, richer than any forged by their predecessors in India's long history, and in their wisdom, let the twin-stars of India and the West dominate and guide their destinies; let, that is, the infinity of India find its incarnation in the chiselled moulds of Anglo-Saxon genius—the two were not isolate, disparate, entities either. Max Muller reminded his British audience once that 'Sanskrit and English are but varieties of one and the same language . . . even as the language of the Vedas is the most ancient type of English of the present day, so its thought and feeling contain in reality the first roots and germs of the intellectual growth which by the unbroken chain connects our own generation with the ancestors of the Aryan race . . . We are by nature Aryan, Indo-European, not Semitic; our spiritual kith and kin are to be found in India, Persia . . .'

And Romain Rolland reinforced the same idea a quarter of a century after. He thought that the West had made a wrong choice in history. And so he exhorted it:

'Let us return to our eagle's nest in the Himalayas. It is waiting for us, for it is ours. Eaglets of Europe, we need not renounce any part of our nature. Our real nature is in the nest whence we formerly took our flight; it dwells within those who have known how to keep the keys of our keep—the Sovereign Self . . . Our "Mother India" will teach . . .'

But a man like Vivekananda rooted in his own culture nevertheless sought to use the machinery of the West when he described the British Empire and the English language as 'the most effective instrument for disseminating Indian thought' especially as the Indians had 'lost the powers expression . . . that we are considered a dead nation. The Anglo-Saxons have created a future for India, and the space through which our ancestral ideas are ranging is simply phenomenal.' The Swan and the Eagle must have been seen by him as complementary, a fruitful

conjunction; he seemed to say that we are citizens of both these spheres simultaneously.¹

One can see the source of this conception in *Hamsagita* or *The Song of the Gander*. It discloses the secret of *ham sa*, and at the same time *sa ham*—This am I. This is the song sung to man by every movement of inhalation (*ham*) and exhalation (*sa*), asserting the divine nature of Him in whom breath abides. According to the *Hamsagita* Markandaya's doubts as to what is real are put at rest after he hears this song :

'And when the sun and moon have disappeared I float and swim with slow movements on the boundless expanse of the waters.'²

And now the resurgence:

'The Highest Being, in the form of water gradually gathered and stored within himself a glowing energy. Then in his boundless strength he determined to produce again the universe. He who is himself the Universal visualized the form of the universe in its five elements of ether, air, fire, water and earth. Calm lay over the ocean fathomless, and subtle. Vishnu, having entered the water, gently stirred it. Waves rippled. As they followed each other,' the five elements manifested in succession.³

Now here in the myth is the conjunction of Brahma and Vishnu or the symbols by which they are known, the Swan and the Eagle—a supreme example of the creative principle at work. It is this which we see—it is one way of seeing—manifest in different degrees in the major Indian writers of prose and verse, dealt with in this volume. Only one writer, Mulk Raj Anand, seems to work in a social nexus which, even in his case, broadens into a kind of humanism offered by him as an alternative to, a substitute for, religion. But he too is in the main tradition by virtue of an essentially Indian sensibility which largely shapes his work. In one like Jawaharlal Nehru the claims of the religious impulse and the scientific spirit hold the writer in a subtle knot of artistic ambivalence.

Now what holds writers so divergent as those whose work is examined here, together? First and foremost, their writing

¹ Compare with this the startling view of Nirad C. Chaudhuri in *The Continent of Circe*.

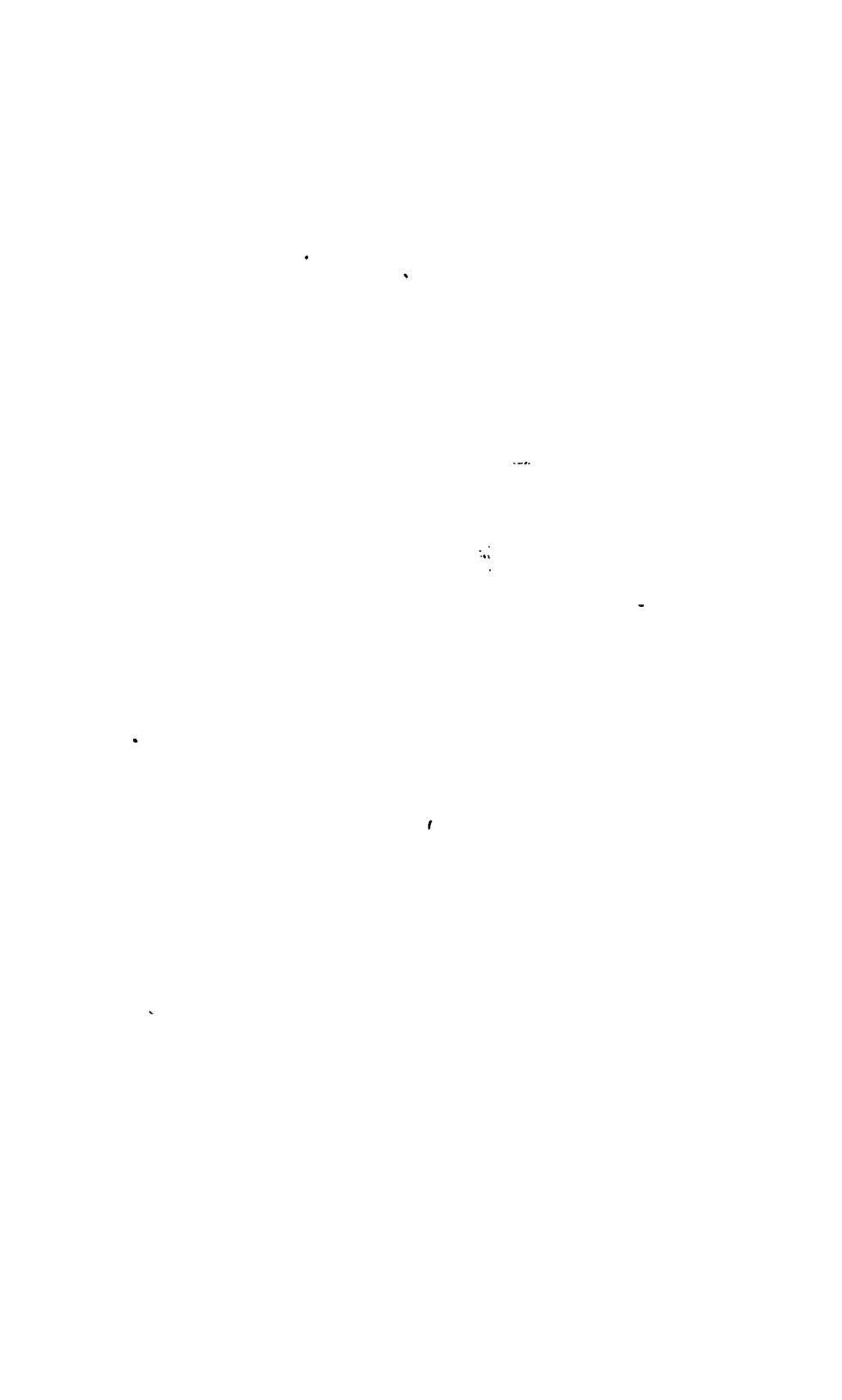
² Heinrich Zimmer: *Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilization*, p. 48.

³ *Ibid*, p. 51.

is the expression of a distinct, identifiable sensibility which is Indian, and the language, foreign in the sense that it is not picked up on the mother's lap but learnt assiduously by a most sensitive exposure to its practitioners in a wide-ranging variety of speech and writing in India and abroad. This is seen not in the sprinkling of Indian vocabulary, though it is there, but in the manner in which they dislocate the conventional syntax to approximate to the patterns and rhythms of Punjabi, Kannada or Tamil speech, in the attempt to catch the very tone of voice, the gesture of hand and the twinkle in the eye of the men and women who figure in the work of art. Not all the Indians who used English, and not all the works even of those treated in these lectures, are examined in detail. It will be seen that these lectures exclude examination of the work of our immediate contemporaries, especially in fiction as that should form an independent treatment not envisaged in the scheme of the six lectures given at the Institute.

It should be interesting to attempt close analyses of those writers of verse and fiction in the 'fifties and 'sixties and see if any of them extended in a significant way the concerns and modes of expression of those who had begun writing earlier though a large number even of them established themselves in the 'fifties and 'sixties. That is to trace the line of development in the manner of F. R. Leavis's main critical work in poetry and fiction, but the foundations for such an approach had to be laid first and that is what has been attempted in these chapters. Here is no chronological survey of Indian Writing in English from Raja Rammohan Roy to the present day—there clearly is no need for such a survey after that most exhaustive account, *Indian Writing in English* (Asia 1962) by Dr K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar who by his patience and hard work has placed us all in his debt. My effort is more selective, because less ambitious, and the entire field of Indian Writing in English is viewed by me in terms of important writers and their significant works on the assumption that a literature has its life in individual authors and works which together make it what it is. As was remarked earlier, this account has yet to be completed and the coming years may see the younger writers mature and bring forth their masterpieces; and thus make the critic's task more challenging and rewarding—the challenge and the reward should be seen as

concerning, not the critic of their work only, but all those writers whose writing has been examined in this volume: it is possible what they will do in the next few years may necessitate a change in the existing order of reputations. But in that hope, I cannot suspend judgement of what is before me—the reason why I have been content to let my lectures appear in print.



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TOWARDS AN UNDERSTANDING OF THE SPECIES CALLED 'INDIAN WRITING IN ENGLISH'

In a correspondence* between Sri Aurobindo and Nirodbaran the latter reports that an Englishman named *T* who visited the Ashram at Pondicherry said that he could not understand at all why we Easterners should write poetry in English deserting our own languages, and Sri Aurobindo remarks:

'Is his understanding of such immense importance? I might just as reasonably ask him why Westerners like him should go to practise an Eastern thing like spirituality or yoga, leaving their own parliaments, factories and what not. But not being *T* in intelligence I don't ask such absurd questions.'

When the questioner persists and follows up with an actual English passage by *T* depicting spirituality, Sri Aurobindo dismisses him sarcastically, and the sarcasm matches *T*'s theme so appropriately that one will hardly miss it:

'I have no interest in *T*'s opinions and set no value by them. Even the awful fact of his being an Englishman does not terrify me. Strange, isn't it? I have seen some lucubrations of his meant to be spiritual or yogic and they are the most horrible, pretentious, inflated, circumlocutionary bombastic would-be-abysmally profound language that I have seen. For a man who talks of English style, tradition, expression, feeling, idiom it was the worst production and most un-English possible. Few Indians can beat him in this.'

It is not worth debating if Indians cannot beat Mr *T*, but it is of interest to note that some of the practitioners of verse and prose in our own languages who assume a superior air towards Indian

* Nirodbaran, *Correspondence with Sri Aurobindo*. Second Series, (Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry).

Writing in English are themselves guilty of writing their mother-tongue like a dead language. This is true of some even among those who have won Akademi awards. It can be true no less of Englishmen who take it for granted that they have mastered the nuances of English language because it is their mother-tongue.* John Wain, who should have known better, has remarked that the Indian's use of English has been at the level of a *lingua franca* and lacks the fineness of nuance that makes literature possible. Well, 'Indian' and 'English' are blanket terms, and one fears that Mr Wain's own unqualified statement is an example of the lack of 'fineness of nuance' he so much deplors in the Indian, for the presence of it could not have withheld from him recognition of such achievement as that of Mulk Raj Anand, R. K. Narayan, and Raja Rao, among others, which has caused Mr Wain to be relegated to a rank unrecognizably below that of any of these. Mr Wain whose own writing figures in the periodical press need not be told of scores of Indians who practise literary journalism in English with a sophistication—for that is what Mr Wain seems to value in a writer and not the more enduring virtues—that may well be the envy of more disinterested men than Mr Wain on both sides of the Atlantic. Mr Wain should not have permitted himself so crude a generalization being annoyed, presumably, by the writings of less than fourth-rate aspirants with a colonial complex, who ceaselessly seek proficiency certificates from British celebrities. And Mr Wain is not alone. (Read the articles on 'Indian Writing in English' in *The Writers' Workshop Miscellany* No. 29 by Mr David McCutcheon). Nor are Indians the only ones who are asked to keep out of the charmed circle. Time was when the Englishman asked 'who in the four corners of the globe reads an American book?' (It is unfortunate one has to make a generic reference, though it is a national characteristic—who does not remember Tennyson's 'Better fifty years of Europe than a cycle of Cathay'—because there have occasionally been distinguished English critics like Professor V. S. Pinto and Professor William Walsh, not to speak of Edmund Gosse and Arthur Symonds of an earlier day, who have rated Indian writing in English quite high.) He privately maintains to this day that the American does not know how to speak or write

* Victor Grové says in *Language Bar* that English 'remains an adventure and a constant source of worry' to the Englishman himself.

English, nor for that matter, the Australian and the Canadian, though they are all his cousins in the Commonwealth. Ironically enough, it is the country cousins who have made twentieth century literature what it is. And in a last-ditch effort to save face and prop up his decaying prestige, the Englishman tells Indians that they cannot use English creatively (teaching them to use it for higher education meant his political disaster—he cannot have forgiven Macaulay for over-ruling the East India Company's Directors). But so strong is the Englishman's sense of survival that he does not hesitate to tell Africans and Asians that Shakespeare and Milton no longer serve the needs of an emerging society and that they should therefore learn the official British Council brand of English imparted through its semi-literate education officers. And when their better men in the erstwhile British colonies affirm their faith in themselves to write and teach the kind of English that suits them best a more sophisticated argument is advanced: that English, being foreign to their genius, inhibits their creative responses which, by implication, overflow spontaneously in their own languages—it doesn't cost him any thing to say that now, having denied them all sense of history, literature, philosophy and religion in the attempt to justify his rule over Indians. It is curious how the old 'divide and rule' policy, intended or otherwise, pays dividends even here, because the writers in native languages take the cue and fight, as their anglicized counterparts have done in the past, the Englishman's battle. And it works as long as he is not asked how *he* came to speak and write with unquestionable authority on, say, the least known aboriginal tribes, the Tibetan Lamas and Tantric worship, the Vedic deities, Upanishadic philosophy, subsequent religions, art, literature, metaphysics, social and political institutions, even the *sanctum sanctorum* of Hindu temples—all incomparably more difficult to handle than a foreign language with which a country's best minds have acquired inwardness by several means including prolonged first-hand contact with the life and literature of the people who speak it. Well, it is an unpleasant fact but the Englishman must learn to exempt himself in one sphere (linguistic) at least, where his competence is at the lowest in comparison with Europeans, Africans, and Indians, from being the earth's first-born: One is amused at the sight of Englishmen, who have read for the French Tripes

at Cambridge, hesitating to launch on elementary conversation in French in Paris. But then the French are intellectually arrogant!

I am afraid I must say at the cost of sounding somewhat arrogant that I shall have no time for such theoretical, because futile and fatuous, questions as: Can Indians write in English? Or what future has English as a medium for creative activity in India? It will be agreed that these are questions more relevantly raised by speculators in stocks and shares and answered quite appropriately by oracles and astrologers rather than by scholars. My position is simply this: Here before us is a concrete situation, which is that Indians have for over a century and a half used English in speech and writing with conspicuous ability and that as scholars we should try and understand the nature of that achievement, and if the term achievement irritates some, I shall say, effort. We should assess it not merely because such writing has now acquired respectability quantitatively but it can also count among its practitioners writers of verse, prose, fiction and criticism, who are read and written upon by serious scholars in India and abroad—and this, not because it is an exotic plant. If I didn't add drama to my list it is because few have had any real success in that *genre*. But, then, there has hardly been any distinguished drama in our own languages. For that matter, it cannot be disputed that even in England with its most impressive record of first-rate poetry, drama and fiction for over five hundred years they haven't produced any great novelist since Hardy except D. H. Lawrence, no poet of the order of T. S. Eliot (T. S. Eliot continued to be American in his sensibility despite his English citizenship), and no drama of any real worth (it is good to remember Shaw's brilliance made him an entertainer, and in any case he was Irish, not English). There are, it is a pleasure to acknowledge, some celebrated names in criticism. Now India hasn't done too badly in comparison, and this in spite of obvious handicaps of a diminishing English-speaking environment, the enormous damage done by semi-literate politicians in teaching disrespect for all learning and especially for English in the name of patriotism, the less than dubious value of the Central Institute of English and the Regional Institutes which promise shortcuts to success in learning English. Add to these the prejudice of many English teachers in respect of English

written by Indians; and the most deplorable lack of understanding and enterprise in our publishing trade, coupled with paucity of criticism with a concern to get a hearing for the better writers. Even so, criticism has not abdicated its responsibility when we know that hardly three Indians (because Verrier Elwin is for all purposes English and his work belongs to anthropology, not literature and the third Indian to get the award was a dark horse which, after a mention in the day's news, reverted to darkness) have been recipients of the Akademi award, while it is an exceptional year when no award has been announced for the other languages. It is good to add, too, that the members of the Advisory Board recommending awards for English are not Englishmen or Americans, but Indian scholars who are unfairly accused of making tall claims for English writing by Indians. Their very intimate knowledge of the Anglo-American literary scene and an awareness of the European tradition as it enriches or weakens the former, has made for certain ruthlessness in their literary standards, even as its absence has elsewhere made complacency a virtue—the situation is rendered worse by the unhealthy dominance of regional consciousness and the shameless intrusion of caste politics and terrorist methods—from which English is fortunately free. The freedom is inherent in the national and international framework in which English operates.

One fervently hopes that the English version of Tagore's *Gitanjali* will meet with strong disapproval by the discerning Bengali critic for, otherwise, I should view the award of the Nobel Prize to Tagore as prompted by extra-literary considerations. Nor is one to blame the translation alone, for it cannot be that Tagore took care to improve on the original while translating Kabir's poetry and neglected his own especially when both his and Kabir's poetry called for the same kind of resources in the translator. We cannot shift our ground as it suits us. This is not to detract from Tagore's undoubted greatness which, one gathers, can stand independently of the crutches offered to him by a gullible Indian, or condescending Western, public.

It is, then, either arrogance or jealousy to accuse the Indian Writers of English, as has often been done, that they know their craft all right, 'have sophistication and success but that they receive experience on the surface, with the romantic expectation of turning it into a commodity acceptable to Western readers

hungry for an exotic revelation of the East'. By implication it means, (a) that only those who write in the regional languages have a monopoly of the deepest levels of experience and their readers are among the most discerning—deep responds to deep; and (b) that those who write in English have neither artistic ability nor integrity of the kind so easily taken for granted in the other writers, and, worst of all, (c) that their readers are no more than a herd of gullible sheep who can swallow any stuff.

Such ill-mannered generalizations cause bad blood among writers and injure the life of the mind and prevent our taking legitimate pride in the achievement of our writers whether in English or regional languages. And I should take pride in everything which contributes to human achievement, and perhaps in an immediate sense adds to the glory of my country and my people. We have in this respect much to learn from Mexico, where Spanish is not an indigenous language, but a transplanted one and we have it on the authority of no less a writer than Octavio Paz (See Octavio Paz's article, 'The Word as Foundation' in *The Times Literary Supplement*, November 1968), perhaps the greatest living Mexican poet, that there is a greater linguistic unity in Spanish America than in Spain. He goes on to say that Spanish spoken in America is more open than that of Spain and more exposed to outside influences, among them the indigenous languages. While the Spanish spoken in Spain is closer to the soil and concrete things, in America, instead of taking root in the ground it seems to extend itself in space. Again, if the hybridism of Mexican writers is exasperating, the linguistic purity of some at least of the Spanish writers is no less so. Most important of all, in Mr Paz's account of Mexican Spanish, is his remark on the attitude to language which should be of immediate interest to us in India. The Mexican attitude to Spanish is 'critical', that of Spaniards a 'confident one'. Spaniards, he adds, 'do not feel at a distance' from their language. How strikingly similar is the Indian situation is seen in the summing up of the Mexican linguistic scene by Mr Paz: 'We in America have been denouncing our Spanish heritage since the time of our independence, but in Spanish. . . . Spanish is not our own. To be exact Spanish is one of our uncertainties; at times it is mask, at times a passion; but it is never a habit', Notwithstanding this, South America has produced some remarkable writers in Spanish even as India has in

English. If its not being a habit is a handicap to the writer, his sense of detachment towards it, and his learning it as different from picking it up, both of which give him a chance not to take over the word too readily or easily, and the exposure of the language to various influences which increase its plasticity for creative purposes—are all distinct advantages*.

But such is the social complex of Indian society that it is not uncommon to find people who do not, cannot, take pride in any good that befalls someone outside one's own state, one's small village, caste, family, or, oriented as we are, in any good that may accrue to anyone else than oneself. And so national pride is a virtue only in relation to parochialism, even as national pride can appear to be shameless jingoism *vis-à-vis* the larger world. The test then is: Anything is good if it helps realization of the full potentialities of the writer, and an unpardonable abomination if it hinders that, be it country, religion or language. He is a poor writer indeed who chooses to write with a view to serving any of these for, according to W. B. Yeats, a poet by serving his art with utter integrity serves the nation also. Actually, the Indian Writer of English is the only writer who enjoys nation-wide, and even international, reputation—and the reputation because it is national and international, as in science, psychology, economics or political thinking, must either be sustained by a critical demonstration of the excellence of the work or be consigned to the lumber room; while it is common knowledge that disproportionate praise is not unusual in regional writing that might pass as hardly above the average in the international context. But as R. K. Narayan has observed that in this land of castes the Indian Writer of English

* Samuel Beckett, a Protestant Irishman born in Dublin, has written that the bulk of his most important work is in French, because, as he once put it: 'When writing in a language in which he has to concentrate on saying what he wants to say, there is less temptation to be carried away by sheer virtuosity in language for its own sake.'

And Saul Bellow, it seems, was told when he studied literature in the university that as a Jew, and son of Russian Jews, he would probably never have the right feeling for Anglo-Saxon traditions and for English words. And he had occasion to tell the world later: 'At the sight of a man's face, his shoes, the colour of light, a woman's mouth or perhaps an ear, one receives a word, a phrase, at times nothing but a nonsense syllable from the primitive commentator.'

Both Beckett and Bellow thus give the lie to popular generalizations about the use of a learnt language as medium of creativity.

lacks the label granted to his compeer in the regional language (who may not be read or understood but will be considered as serving the nation by writing in his mother tongue). Narayan goes on to say how he was once assailed by a writer in one of the regional languages as a *drohi*, a traitor, for writing, as he puts it, to a public thousands of miles away giving no thought to our peasant or his enlightenment! And yet Narayan's accuser will give anything to find at home or abroad a patron who thinks his work worth translating into English or worth writing upon in an English or American journal. He has, beyond a doubt, nothing against English writing by Indians if it can be devoted to translation or favourable appreciation of *his* work, instead of minimizing his importance. It is obvious he is a victim of his own jealousies and frustrations. He must realize that intolerance in intellectual effort is no less shameful than intolerance in religious matters; indeed worse.

Besides, English is no more, if any, less, foreign to the highly educated modern Indian than Sanskrit which is our *dēvabhāsha* and its learning *dēvajana vidya* and which in the past signified the first flowering of Indian sensibility and, in the centuries, when it spread, represents the mainstream of Indian culture. Without comparing with the greatness of Sanskrit, it may not be wrong to say that English has in one respect at least an advantage over Sanskrit in that it is a powerful world language and is today the language of art, science, commerce, diplomacy and intellectual intercourse. And in the context of contemporary Indian politics that it is not the language of any region is precisely its strength, and its extraordinary cosmopolitan character—its Celtic imaginativeness, the Scottish vigour, the Saxon concreteness, the Welsh music, and the American brazenness—suits the intellectual temper of modern India and a composite culture like ours. English is not a pure language but a fascinating combination of tongues welded into fresh unity. 'Teutonic, Latin, French, and German elements went into the making of this Proteus among European languages' (*Language Bar* by Victor Grove). It does not seem to be a peculiar Indian malady when we learn that English-speaking Canadians know less about the French-speaking community in their midst than they do about almost any other culture in the world. Mr K. M. Panikkar, one of India's most distinguished historians and no particular friend of the English

or their language in India, and himself a writer in Malayalam, has gone so far as to say in his *Foundation of New India* (Allen and Unwin) that if the new education had been imparted through the Indian languages the Hindu community would have split into as many different units as there were languages in India and would have repeated the pattern of Europe*. From this development India was saved by a common medium of education which Macaulay introduced in India. He demonstrates how English has been woven into the warp and woof of our life by citing two English terms which have become so indispensable in our structure of parliamentary responsible government—the word ‘advise’ in ‘The President shall be advised by a Council of Ministers’, in which it bears a meaning which can be understood only ‘in reference to English constitutional practice and its extensive literature’. No translation, he adds, ‘can convey its significance and constitutional evolution in India will take unexpected twists and turns if the Hindi version is recognised by law as being the authoritative official text’. His other term is the ‘due process of law’. What is true of law is true, more true, of science, technology, the arts and their criticism—English has taken root in all these spheres.

I am not sure that many will agree this to be either a satisfactory state or one that will endure for ever. But what satisfactory state can we expect to have linguistically with large chunks of population scattered in every region whose dominant language they do not speak at home, and yet for generations they have

* India had the start of the whole world in the beginning of things. She had the first civilization; she had the first accumulation of material wealth; she was populous with deep thinkers and subtle intellects; she had mines, and woods, and a fruitful soil. It would seem as if she should have kept the lead, and should be to-day not the meek dependent of an alien master, but mistress of the word, and delivering law and command to every tribe and nation in it. But, in truth, there was never any possibility of such supremacy for her.

If there had been but one India and one language—but there were eighty of them! Where there are eighty nations and several hundred governments, fighting and quarrelling must be the common business of life; unity of purpose and policy are impossible; out of such elements supremacy in the world cannot come. Even caste itself could have had the defeating effect of a multiplicity of tongues, no doubt: for it separates a people into layers, and layers, and still other layers, that have no community of feeling with each other; and in such a condition of things as that patriotism can have no healthy growth.

(Mark Twain in *Round the Equator*)

found no difficulty in preserving the mother tongue at home, while identifying themselves with, and taking pride in, the achievements of the regional language, and learning English for higher intellectual pursuits. But today, thanks to the aggressiveness of the exponents of the regional language their old identities are destroyed—their self-respect impels them to identify themselves with *their* mother tongue as those around them do with theirs, while self-interest demands them to bid good-bye to self-respect. For when English loses its national status—and Hindi will be refused its claim to take its place—the regional languages with their aspirations to dominate in the region will restrict their movement to the region (only Hindi has as many as six states for its speakers to move about and will either demand and win the allegiance of the other regions or, which is more likely, succeed in fragmenting the country into as many regions as there are languages and this will in course of time foster the fissiparous tendency to further sub-divide on grounds other than language*. Then history will know who to thank for bringing about this sad state of affairs. It will record that short-sightedness and self-interest of political pressure groups betrayed the future of India.

What the champions of regional languages need to appreciate is that there is no statute which binds us to write in English. Indeed it would be unfortunate if all Indians wrote only in English and ceased to produce literatures in their mother tongues spoken and understood by masses of people. One cannot sufficiently emphasize the need for a large number of us to write in our mother tongues, for otherwise we would soon be a nation of philistines and barbarians. But we have more than a dozen national languages to choose from and different levels at which to function, so we should not make the mistake of equating it with patriotism to write in one of the regional languages. Were the authors of the Vedas, Upanishads, epics, and dramas unpatriotic for not writing in the language of the masses? I ask whether in our set-up the Tamils will not turn a cold shoulder to, if not frown on, someone living in their midst and writing distinguished poetry or fiction in Telugu, Kannada, or a prestigious language like Hindi. Will they simply proceed to judge the writing as literature?

* It has started already with creation of the separate state of Haryana, and there is no knowing where disintegration stops.

I wonder. If they do not frown, it is obvious, that the Tamils will be indifferent to his writing and are most unlikely to take pride in the achievement of such a writer. One has reason to suspect that the situation is the same in the other languages as well. Such is our patriotism that some Members of Legislature in a Hindi State were not allowed to take the oath in Urdu, their mother tongue, and as much an Indian language as Hindi, according to the Constitution of India*. But the strange thing is that Indian writers in Tamil, Bengali, Hindi, Marathi, Urdu, and so forth make a common cause in denigrating the Indian Writer of English—he is their public Enemy Number One, the dragon that stands at the door and forbids entry to all of them into the Hall of Profit and Fame. Anyone who pretends to have some awareness of the creative process should know that no one who can write a better poem or novel in a regional language prefers to write an inferior one in English though it is not unusual for a frustrated writer of English to feel tempted to try his hand at writing in the regional language because of what one is constrained to call easy recognition and not infrequently quick rewards under government patronage of nationalistic and regional art and literature, although ostensibly he writes in his own language because he takes to it as duck to water. It would be interesting to speculate—yes it is only idle speculation to those whose interest is in the work—why a writer chooses one language rather than another.

Is it his inwardness with the medium? Is it its artistic possibilities? Or the chances of getting larger audiences and better returns? Is it the tradition to which one belongs? Or is it above all the challenge of a particular medium to an artist with particular dispositions and susceptibilities which can only

* It is gathered that in the predominantly Hindu city of Mysore there are as many as 75,000 Muslims whose mother tongue is Urdu. And in Bangalore, the capital of the Kannada State, the Tamils constitute the largest single linguistic group, the Telugu-speaking people being the second. It is claimed that in Bombay and Delhi (the first in Maharashtra and the second in the Hindi state of Uttar Pradesh) there are several hundred thousand Kannada-speaking people. Do we ask them to give up their mother tongues or arrange to shift them to their respective linguistic states? And Urdu has no state of its own except West Pakistan. Such is the linguistic complexity of India: It was many times easier to partition the Indian sub-continent into India and Pakistan and even sustain the partition than it will be to sustain the linguistic states, within India.

respond to the possibilities of a medium—only in its presence will he feel called upon to give shape and substance to the unwrought urn, the unheard melody and, generally, give to airy nothing a local habitation and a name. It may be one or all of these that animate the artist and neither legislatures nor governments, nor prize-giving academies can prescribe for the true artist, for he obeys his own inner law. Why, one asks, did Sri Aurobindo, Toru Dutt and Sarojini write in English while Tagore and Bankim Chand wrote in Bengali? Why did Nehru write his *Autobiography* and *The Discovery* in English, and not in Hindi over which he is said to have had a fine command? Why did R. K. Narayan not write in Tamil, Mulk Raj Anand in Punjabi, and Raja Rao in Kannada, especially the last one since he can write impeccable Kannada? Is it for the same reason that Synge invented an English of his own without attempting to write either in Gaelic or British English? Which Englishman could have written *Riders to the Sea* or *Easter 1916*, *The Tower* and *The Countess Cathleen*? Isn't his very Irishness Yeats's distinction as is that of Synge in his plays? Katherine Mansfield admitted that though much of her work was done overseas New Zealand was in her bones. What of the Australian Bush Ballad, the Drum rhythms of West African poets or the fictionalized biographical novel of West Indies? Again, could any Englishman have written *The Scarlet Letter* or *Moby Dick*, *The Leaves of Grass* or *The Sound and the Fury*? It was a cheap jibe of Gordon Bottomley, unless some ambivalence was intended, to have called the verse of one of our women writers 'Matthew Arnold in a *sari*'. Would Matthew Arnold in frock or skirt be less incongruous? I wonder. Why, Arnold in Victorian suit and tie is not always distinguished minor verse, while a young woman from India, Kamala Das, incomparably less known than Matthew Arnold, would have made Arnold, had he been alive, sit up and take notice if only for her daring in the use of English. And the long passage is worth quoting despite its incessant citation, as it sums up so succinctly the cases of most Indian writers of English:

'I am an Indian, very brown, born in
Malabar, I speak three languages, write in
Two, dream in one. Don't write in English, they said
English is not your mother-tongue. Why not leave

Me alone, critics, friends, visiting cousins,
Every one of you, why not let me speak in
Any language I like? The language I speak
Becomes mine, its distortions, its queerness,
All mine, mine alone. It is half English, half
Indian, funny perhaps, but it is honest,
It is as human as I am human, don't
You see? It voices my joys, my longings, my
Hopes, and it is useful to me as cawing
Is to crows or roaring to lions, it
Is human speech, the speech of the mind that is
Here and not there, a mind that sees and hears and
Is aware. Not the deaf, blind speech
Of trees in storm or of monsoon clouds or of the
rain or the
Incoherent mutterings of the blazing
Funeral Pyre.'

It is not merely the daring of this Indian writer that is in evidence but her superb confidence, her capacity to play with the language for a variety of purposes and, generally, her enviable inwardness with it. It is perhaps this kind of command of English that so early as 1834 made Macaulay burst into unqualified praise of 'the native' for whose intellectual attainments he had not otherwise much regard: 'There are in this town natives who are competent to discuss political or scientific questions with fluency or precision . . . Indeed it is unusual to find even in the literary circles of the continent any foreigner who can express himself in English with so much facility and correctness as we find in many Hindus'; the same that 'astonished' Bentham, namely, the English which Raja Rammohan Roy wrote and spoke (though he learnt it when he was 22), and which made the entire American continent marvel at the 'stormy' monk, Vivekananda, when he thundered across in resonant English, exactly as England was to do later when it heard Srinivasa Sastri, the Empire's silver-tongued orator of whom the Master of Balliol said that he had not realized the beauty of the English language until he heard him speak. Within two decades of the introduction of English language in India, with hardly a handful of Indians learning it, D. L. Richardson, a prominent teacher of the newly founded Hindu College

challenged his 'narrow-minded' countrymen to ask themselves—'could they write better verses not in a foreign tongue, but their own?' (He had in mind the verses of Kashiprasad Ghose who was by no means a distinguished writer by our present standards. Madhusudan Dutt did not, it is true, write distinguished poetry in English, felt frustrated after repeated failures and took to writing in Bengali, but what interests us today is that even after this he wrote most of his private letters home in English and it seems that when news of his wife's death was brought to him, while he was himself on his deathbed, he muttered to himself the memorable words of Macbeth caught in a similar predicament:

'Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow'

We should not forget that in the early days of our English studies young men like Derozio and Malabari made a mark for themselves by writing distinguished verse. Then, as subsequently, parents and children, brothers, friends and even lovers have exchanged their intimate letters in English—they still do without being phony or frivolous. And those who criticize them also do so in English, because they know that otherwise they will not reach those who count in the intellectual life of India. One of our distinguished journalists, who has spent a major part of his working life in editing an English language paper, nevertheless sought to have a gibe at Indian Writing in English. (See *The Illustrated Weekly of India*, May 26, 1963.) He cites in the course of his most consciously ingenious attack (through the medium of English) an example of Babu English: 'A British superior officer was laboriously correcting a letter an Indian officer, by the name of Mukherjee, had drafted for sending to a brother Indian official. But Mukherjee intervened: "Your honour puts yourself to much trouble correcting my English and doubtless the final letter will be much better literature, but it will go from me Mukherjee to him Bannerjee and the Bannerjee will understand it a great deal better as I Mukherjee write it than as your honour corrects it".' Needless to remark that the Babu who can twist and turn the English language to suit a given character and situation, has achieved a near-mastery of it for fictional purposes thus rendering the gibes at 'jabberjees' cheap and irresponsible. As for the much dramatized Babu errors of English by Indians it is salutary to turn to Mark Twain who lists many delightful examples of

Babu English in his *Round the Equator* but nevertheless quite frankly admits that 'Babu errors are no more or worse than ours' and that India is 'well-stocked with natives who speak it and write it as well as the best of us'; and when he records some specimens of English spoken by certain classes of Indians he 'merely wish (es) to show some of the quaint imperfect attempts at the use of our tongue'. Referring to the American pupil's use of 'but one language and that one his own, his performance is nowhit better than his Indian brother's', says Mark Twain. That was in America half a century ago, but there is living evidence of the disconcerting use of English in the ancient university of Cambridge (England) for any one who cares to look up the English Tripos paper for 1947 (it may well be in many more) in which one sixth of the total mark of the paper was allotted to correction of errors of usage most of which the Indian student has been taught to eliminate at the Pre-university level. Let us not dramatize our faults—it smacks of 'colonial complex' to ignore the graver errors in the use of ones own language and play up the errors of usage in wielding a foreign language.

It is time that instead of expending our energies in futile polemics we started facing facts. Unless one chooses to play the role of the false prophet or astrologer one will realize that, situated as we are today in India, we cannot do without English for most of our important concerns. It is significant that all India Writers' conventions, conferences, seminars still have to transact all their business in English, while every one of the delegates from the fourteen languages nevertheless has a dig at English while showering encomiums on efforts in his own language. The Union Sahitya Akademi installed to patronise and promote Indian languages sees no alternative to publishing its journal in English and there is hardly a learned periodical, that is, of any high national standing in the humanities, sciences, and the arts, in any language other than English. Indeed, the Bengalis and the Maharastrians can know about each other's literary scene through English translations, and commentaries in English. Most of these languages have their own journals in English.* It is this pervasiveness which

* If this is so in literature it is needless to dwell on difficulties in the arts and the sciences. The truth is that English has sent deep roots into our soil—it is interesting to consider why Sanskrit then, and English now, both of them rulers' languages, took root in the Indian soil while Arabic and Persian, also

Gokhale so early realized when he observed (in 1911) that 'whereas the contact of the West with other countries had only been external, in India, the West had, so to say, entered into the very bone and marrow of the East'. And this admission, by an Indian patriot whom Gandhi acknowledged as his master in politics! For all his advocacy of Indian languages he himself had great love for the English language (he himself says that the columns of *Young India* and *Harijan* speak of his love for it) and that he cultivated it, in his own words, 'carefully and prayerfully'.

The medium, it is now trite to say, is a matter of inner compulsion, inevitable, inexorable and has to be tested by its adequacy for one's immediate concerns and intimate preoccupations. It will be rejected if it inhibits response, distorts truth, does not create what it pretends to convey*. Joseph Conrad, a singular instance of greatness in English fiction has recorded: 'If I had not written in English I would not have written at all'. It is said that he spoke English like a Pole; indeed, it seems Polish still remained his 'inner speech except in moments of literary labour'; he often got 'confused between shall and will'; and yet so great a master of fiction as Henry James confessed: 'I read you as I listen to rare music—with deepest depths of surrender'. Conrad knew enough French to write in it, while he had not learnt English until he was sixteen. And yet for anyone to find fault with Conrad for not writing in Polish or French instead of English would be as

languages of (Muslim) rulers and State languages for a longer period than English, did not; and even Urdu, their offspring, is generally confined to the educationally backward Muslim community. A language cannot spread or take root unless it has vitality and serves the growing needs of a people. It is worth reflecting why, for all their bitterness towards the British, the Irish have retained English at the expense of Gaelic. We need to appreciate the hard unpleasant fact that not all languages in the world can be made to do all the things, a privilege which forces of history have conferred only on some languages—which is to say we should understand and appreciate the limited spheres in which alone many languages can operate. It is not an argument for giving up a language but for recognizing the need for different languages for different purposes.

* Mr K. M. Panikkar remarks "The Intellectual temper of modern India is international and cosmopolitan, no doubt partly as a result of her European inheritance, but mainly from her own tradition . . ." English can do justice to it as the new learning of the nineteenth century brought about in Panikkar's words 'a revival of universalized religion based on the highest teachings of Hinduism itself'. It is significant that the new learning did not westernize us any more than it christianized us.

Indian Writing in English

absurd as admonishing Dom Moraes to feel ashamed of writing in English instead of Konkani, Marathi, or Gujarati or asking young Zuben Mehta to conduct an orchestra in Carnatic music instead of Western music, without realizing that his achievement far from detracting from his merit as an Indian or musician is a tribute to our composite culture that has nurtured so uncommon a gift. Cricket is not an Indian game, and playing it is not considered unpatriotic any more than pursuit of Western science and technology, or allegiance to its economic and political institutions is frowned upon as being treacherous to one's own culture. It is important we should not allow our attitudes to English to be formed solely by the small thinking of those who are operating at the municipal level.

It all depends on how thoroughly one has mastered one's medium. Mozart is reported to have said he could not express his feelings and thoughts in poetry or painting but that he could in music, 'because I am a musician'. To say one can write great poetry or fiction in one's own language because it is picked up at the mother's knee woefully minimizes the importance of *learning* a language. Right around us are living many thousands of Anglo-Indians whose mother tongue is English but not one of whom is a notable writer in English. I know that in my part of the country except for a couple of writers almost every distinguished writer of the previous generation happened to speak at home some language other than the one in which he gained distinction in the region. It is true also of many distinguished Urdu writers in the North—the language they speak at home is Kashmiri, Punjabi or Hindi, but they have *learnt* Urdu. Which supports my contention that a language is not inherited as an imbecile son inherits his father's loot. One has to acquire it by hard labour, by *sād-hana* (practice) and *tapas* (meditation) because the word and the sound must cause deep vibrations in the inmost being of one's personality. You cannot become a great writer by simply picking up the language of domestic drabness, of quarrels of the market-place, of rhetoric from the press and the platform, of love-talk from Sunday papers and cinemas. What does Mr Smith make of T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* or *The Waste Land* in spite of his acquaintance with a very large number of words and phrases used in these poems? It is their *organization* which baffles him because he is not acquainted with the *organization of experience*

which words and phrases embody in the more important sections of these poems.

I submit it is of such writers as those who have acquired inwardness with the English language and not of anyone who can speak and write it with fluency and facility of a sort that we are concerned with—writers for slick periodicals and authors of Books of the Month. I do not say that we shall continue to produce writers who enjoy inwardness with English. Perhaps yes, perhaps no. But as long as there are such writers, I hope we have an obligation to judge them. We shall not relax our standards and try to be concessive, but deal with our writers precisely in the manner we deal with English and American writers except that we have an added advantage in dealing with *our* writers in the sense that the reader and the writer are both nourished by the same soil, sun and sky, and both share many assumptions, and in both the operative sensibility is of the same kind, allowing for differences of degree, of course. One does not, surely, mean one ought to deal with literature from the national standpoint. No, it isn't that at all. What one has in mind is a shared tradition, a community of interests, and a set of values that a people live by, all of which give a sense of identity to individuals and nations. The individual artist has to 'discover' as well as 'create' his own identity; he does not find it ready-made. Of course in the process he discovers and creates his national identity too. Indeed you 'probe' the one in terms of the other—the two are connected and not mutually exclusive.

TRADITION AND EXPERIMENT

THE POETS: SAROJINI NAIDU, TORU DUTT, AUROBINDO
AND AFTER

It is said that Indian writing in English is practised by men and women who are dubbed exiles in their own country. But then every sensitive man is an exile in his own place. Didn't one of India's greatest patriots, Jawaharlal Nehru, say he often felt he was an alien in his own country? Every country, every place is home to some, exile to others. Significantly, it is the 'exiles' who have enriched the great Indian tradition in literature during the past hundred years or so. Not all of them, however, count in the same way, and even of those who have helped to continue the vital line, only such writing is taken up for examination as matters by strictly relevant critical standards, and not anything that nationalistic considerations force on us. First to engage our attention are the practitioners of verse. For tactical reasons, I shall first take up Sarojini Naidu rather than the earlier Toru Dutt, and my reasons for doing so should be apparent when I pass on from Sarojini to Toru Dutt.

Arthur Symons, we gather, admired Sarojini's 'maturity of mind at seventeen' and had never known anyone exist on such 'large draughts of intellectual day' as this child of seventeen, to whom 'one could tell all one's personal troubles and agitations as to a wise old woman'. A wise old woman at seventeen—she might well have looked or sounded in the drawing room, but there is no evidence whatever in the poetry of her having absorbed, if she existed on, 'large draughts of intellectual day'. And the advice of Edmund Gosse—to make her poetry out 'of some revelation of India, some penetrating analysis of the native passion, the principles of antique religion, and of such mysterious intimations as stirred the soul of the East'—was offered, one would suppose, to a girl who had only learnt to be 'correct in grammar' and not as Gosse would politely claim for her, 'blameless in sentiment'. For sentimentality, sugary sentimentality, is the bane of her verse, because it had not been informed and supported by the strength of cerebration. It is the failure to discover and probe the

identities we spoke of earlier that condemned Mrs Sarojini Naidu to an inferior status as poet. She did of course write on the Indian scene, but consider how the very titles of her poetic collections betray her fragile romanticism: *The Golden Threshold*, *The Bird of Time*, *The Broken Wing*, and the posthumous *The Feather of Dawn*. Poor Sarojini! She had the aspiration: she 'hoped to be a Goethe or Keats' for her country; and it was her supreme desire to write poetry—'one poem, one line of enduring verse even'. It is most unlikely she could have written better in Bengali or Telugu and Urdu (the first she was born into, and she must have learnt the other two as resident of Hyderabad for almost the rest of her life). For she simply did not have the equipment. Her poems are made of such adolescent stuff as snake charmers, koekils and champak blossoms. And what do they bring forth? A recurrence of 'fairy fancies', 'gem-like fires', 'raptures', 'ecstasies', 'mellifluous wooing', 'smiles entwining, like magical serpents', 'the poppies of lips that are opiate sweet'—that our appetite sickens and the sense almost faints. It was unfortunate that this young woman got mixed up with political agitators (good for them, but it spelt ruin for her) and the patriotic public being lulled by her melody and jewel-tinted words conferred on her the title of 'the Nightingale of India'—the same standards still operate in the recognitions accorded to many of our writers in regional languages. But to say that is an unpatriotic act, is being treacherous to one's own language and culture!

Sarojini's language of inspiration, rhetoric and sentimentality received additional stimulus from a literary source which far from being a corrective meant her undoing as a poet: Neither the Victorians nor the Georgians, whose contemporary she was, had in them the power to give her a lead; they had made a mess of their own poetry. Much of the poetry she had been brought up on at home and in school was largely romantic and the critical aids she received from both Arthur Symons and Edmund Gosse could not have amounted to much, though it would not be fair to say that she received no stimulus from her contact with them—it did make for some sort of modesty in her estimation of herself amidst the sychophancy of her patriotic friends and admirers. She writes in a letter to Symons: 'I am not a poet really, I have the vision and desire, but not the voice, but I sing just as the birds do and my songs are ephemeral'. If her songs are ephemeral it is

because she did not work her gifts into full fruition, or because she stopped writing well before she was thirty.

But in fairness to Sarojini it must be said that where she succeeded in keeping her emotion somewhat tidy, her sentiment genuine and her rhythms faithful to the folk songs of South India she did compose some very good verses as in the poems 'Corn Grinders', 'Indian Weavers', 'Festival of Serpents', 'Song of Radha the Milk Maid' and 'Leile'. In 'To a Buddha Seated on a Lotus' the poet rejoices in inaccessible desire and heavenward hunger, and in doing so she sums up the central philosophy of the Vedanta:

And all our mortal moments are
A session of the infinite

Consider just two lines from *Leile* where the scene is set in an Indian evening inducing an atmosphere of stillness:

A caste-mark on the azure brows of heaven
The golden moon burns sacred, solemn, bright

The figure of the moon as a caste-mark (*Kunkum* or *tilak* might have been better) on the forehead of heavens is in itself a work of daring imagination. J. H. Cousins grows so enthusiastic about this as to remark that 'the image lifts India to the literary heavens; it threatens the throne of Diana of the classics, it releases Luna from the work of asylum-keeper and gives her instead the office of the remembrancer that the Divine is imprinted on the open face of Nature'.* I should have liked to attempt a close analysis of Sarojini's 'Indian Weavers' but must be content with a few brief remarks on the nature of the realization. The poem, however, must be quoted in full.

* J. H. Cousins in *Renaissance in India*, Ganesh & Co., Madras, India, 1918.

INDIAN WEAVERS

Weavers, weaving at break of day,
 Why do you weave a garment so gay?
 Blue as the wing of halcyon wild
 We weave the robes of a new-born child.

Weavers, weaving at fall of night,
 Why do you weave a garment so bright?
 Like the plumes of a peacock, purple and green
 We weave the marriage veils of a queen.

Weavers, weaving solemn and still
 What do you weave in the moonlight chill?
 White as a feather and white as a cloud
 We weave a dead man's funeral shroud.

Here, in twelve lines, is an elliptical, allusive, and symbolic presentation of life's journey from birth to death. Now who are the weavers? Do they correspond to the three Fates or Sisters of Greek mythology? Perhaps yes. But the Hindu Trinity is quite firmly impressed on Sarojini's mind and the poet gives convincing proof of the intimate knowledge of her own tradition with surprising economy and sharpness of touch: the weavers are Brahma, Vishnu and Siva, each taking a stanza unto himself. Brahma, the patron-deity of birth associated in myth and legend with the lotus which blossoms at break of day in the blue pond under the blue sky, is clearly implicit in the poet's choice of time of the day, the colour, and the context. The second stanza is about Vishnu, the foster-father, traditionally associated with colour, gaiety, and, possibly, even vain display—all symbolized in the plumes of the peacock, purple and green. And at journey's end when the joys of all his life are said and sung, and when the school of life has administered sufficient knocks and jolts, what remains? 'Solemn and still' in 'the moonlight's chill' is Siva, smeared with ashes, and sitting in meditation on the snowy heights of Himalayas. Breaking through 'the fury and the mire of human veins' one settles to a perception of the truth of life,

that He is no destroyer like the third Sister of Greek Trinity who cuts the thread of life, for he transforms man from death to life; and at death life, the 'dome of many-coloured glass', breaks and is restored to the 'white radiance of eternity'. Astonishing that none of her characteristic vices of rhetoric, sentimentality, and vague longings, and the poetical diction which usually mar her verse should be present here to vitiate the poem. It is not merely a competent poem, but a very distinguished one for Sarojini because the poet here is in full possession of rare gifts—a profound awareness of her own tradition, admirable poise, economy, and an ear and eye for striking rhythm, image, and symbol, all used to fine advantage to make the poem most evocative.

As a song to be sung, 'The Song of Radha, the Milk Maid' captures the very tone of voice of the milk maid, the chanting rhythm, and the evocative power of the name, Govinda, Govinda, as she carried her curds, her pots and the gift of her inner self to the shrine of Mathura. The full-throated ease of the devotee's song manifests itself in the free flow of the verse:

When the bees grew loud and the days grew long
And the peach groves thrilled to the Oriole's song

That is how Sarojini can claim

'We'll conquer the sorrow of life with the sorrow of song'.

That is also how she carried the banner of song into the thick of political struggle as well. Dull debates and discussions on a subject country's political and economic conditions were enlivened and relieved by many a musical phrase, rich image and above all by her dominating and colourful personality. While neither her speeches nor her poetry can today be considered great, they came at a time when India's self-respect, self-confidence were at a low ebb. At such a time an Indian and a mere woman with all the disabilities common to her sex to voice forth the country's deepest aspirations in the language of the rulers was in the nature of a challenge to them and inspiration to her own countrymen—she infused into their lives song, form, and colour. She is all the same not a major factor in English verse written by Indians.

If instead of looking into English Romantics she had turned back to her distinguished predecessor, Toru Dutt, in her own country, there was much to learn from her. The equipment one missed in Sarojini is a remarkable presence in Toru Dutt. A Hindu convert to Christianity, she nevertheless made it a means of enriching her own cultural inheritance. She went to France and in a few months learnt an astonishing amount of French sufficient to translate many French poems including a large number of pieces from Victor Hugo and the translation met with enthusiastic response. It was claimed that 'if modern French literature were entirely lost it might not be found impossible to reconstruct a great number of poems from this Indian version'. Edmund Gosse who reviewed *A Sheaf Gleaned from French Fields* in *The Examiner* of 1876 remarked:

'This shabby little book of some two hundred pages without preface or introduction, seemed especially destined by its particular providence to find its way hastily into the wastepaper basket . . . A hopeless volume it seemed with its queer type. . . . But when at last I took it out of my pocket what was my surprise and rapture to open at such verse as this:

Still barred thy doors! the far East glows
 The morning wind blows fresh and free
 Should not the hour that wakes the rose
 Awaken also thee?

These are not Toru's but those of her less distinguished sister, Aru. The remaining two stanzas are just as good and drew from Gosse most enthusiastic praise:

'When poetry is as good as this it does not much matter whether Rouveryre prints it upon Whatman paper or whether it steals to light in blurred type from some press in Bhowanipore.'

This is no conventional praise, nor what follows: 'Occasionally she showed a profundity of research that would have done no discredit to Mr Saintsbury'. No small praise this for an Indian girl in her teens whose pursuit was not scholarship (as was Saintsbury's), but verse-writing. Add to it that of James Darmesteter, the renowned French scholar, according to whom Toru showed a promise 'which betokens really great minds' and had already

earned 'a right to a mention in the history of our literature'. One is not sure that the great scholar's verdict has materialized, though she was also hailed by another French critic for her *Le Journal De Mademoiselle* as a linguistic prodigy: 'This one surpasses all the prodigies. She is a French woman like ourselves. She thinks, she writes like one of us'. Darmesteter places his review of the *Journal* next to his critiques of Shakespeare and Shelley in the collection. We know that Edmund Gosse's prediction, too, that 'there is sure to be a page for this tragic, exotic blossom of song in the history of English literature' has not come true, but Toru is not to blame: either the critic's inaptitude or ignorance of her work, or, more likely, his prejudice against the work of a mere girl, and a colonial to boot, may have operated in Toru's not getting her due measure of praise. But Gosse was loyal to his young protégée and wrote an introduction to her second collection of poems, *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan*, which ran into three editions in succession, the third one by Kegan Paul, Trench and Co., London. It shows at once her knowledge of Sanskrit and the tradition it nourished, not to speak of the folk culture which had also received its nourishment from Sanskrit. The choice of themes—Savitri, Dhruva, Prahlad, Buttoo, Lakshman, (each a household name in Hindu India), the time-honoured Indian way of story-telling in verse which must keep the story going and the listener engrossed in it; the admirable economy of word and phrase—she had not read her Sanskrit, French and English in vain—, the evocative power of Sanskrit, the precision of French and the concreteness of English are potentially present, potentially because her life and work were in the nature of a rare promise since she died at 21. So well told are these great tales of India that I should have no hesitation to prefer them to anything of their kind in English by anyone else and I should like them read by children of all lands including our own. Take the very first poem of the collection, 'Savitri' and consider the consummate opening and the smooth flow of the verse:

Savitri was the only child
Of Madra's wife and mighty king.
Stern warriors, when they saw her, smiled,
As mountains smile to see the spring.

Not only the narrative, but the reflective, nostalgic and dramatic qualities are also fully developed. And her admirable insight into the character of so mysterious and elusive a person as Narad Muni, and the realization of it all in a few sure strokes is the work of one who had grasped her country's legends:

No god in heaven, nor king on earth,
 But Narad knew his history—
 The sun's, the moon's, the planet's birth
 Was not to him a mystery.

Consider now the ease and perfect command of the dramatic form, so crisp and fearless that hundred years have not made any difference to the speech rhythms employed here. And yet the vocabulary is just enough archaic to distance the story from our own times—it is the dim antiquity of India that is evoked here but the tone of voice makes it sound as something which happened but the day before yesterday:

'Now welcome, welcome, dear old friend
 All hail and welcome once again!
 The greeting had not reached its end,
 When glided like a music-strain
 Savitri's presence through the room.
 'And who is this bright creature, say,
 Whose radiance lights the chamber's gloom—
 Is she an Apsara or fay?
 'No son thy servant hath, alas!
 This is my one,—my only child'—
 'And married?'—'No'—'The seasons pass,
 Make haste, O King'—he said, and smiled.

Toru is not translating from the *Mahabharata* story; it takes shape in her vision of it. She gets into her poem all the essential *facts* from the original story *and* her own assessment of it. The controlling Indian metaphysical view of life on earth as *appearance*, Maya; and the transience of this illusory world, she could not have better expressed than the uncanny choice of words does here (Italics mine):

I know its *shows* are *mists unfurled*
 To *please* and *vanish*. To renew
 Its *bubble joys* . . .

.....
 Is not my aim. The gladsome sound
 Of husband, brother, friend is *air*.

And the self-effacement of a Buttoo in search of the ideal teacher reinforces the same power:

And what if I should chance to die
 None miss one bubble from a stream.

If she could conceive the 'insubstantial pageant' of this world as 'air' and 'bubble' she could also take delight in the passing things and respond to them energetically. Consider the zest behind the amazingly original and vivid image in the opening lines of 'Sindhu'

The fireflies gemmed the bushes all
 Like fiery drops of rain

or

the robustness with which she can ignite a cliché and renew its potency (in the same poem):

'Blood calls for red blood still'

or

the daring literal translation of an Indian folk saying to evoke the poignancy of a mother's heart beating in premonition of the death that has overtaken her child in the forest:

Why do my bowels for him yearn?*

But for the most successful seizing of the folk element one should still turn to the first four lines of 'Jogadhya Uma' where there is a fine fusion of word, syntax and rhythm in the bangle-seller's street cry. The sensibility is exclusively Indian, of the folk,

* The idiom is also Biblical; but although Cromwell could use it naturally, its vigour frightens modern translators! Both Norman Douglas and Aldous Huxley have remarked on its 'truth'.

that is to say, but the concretization is in admirably adequate English:

Shell-bracelets ho! Shell-bracelets ho!
 Fair maids and matrons come and buy!
 Along the road, in morning's glow,
 The pedlar raised his wonted cry.

The long narrative, thanks to the interest sustained by the 'story' is most successful in Toru's hands. But it is in a short poem that she could achieve intensity by a concentration of her great gifts. And these are the poems which even a slightly advanced level of readers can approach with respect. For example, 'Our Casuarina Tree'. The very imaging of it as a 'huge python' and the romantic imagination (recalling Kalidasa's *Sakuntala*) which sees the 'giant' 'gallantly' wearing 'a scarf' and found in the 'embrace' of 'a creeper' place the poet in her tradition. And a tradition which assimilates other influences—here, Wordsworth and Keats of 'The Solitary Reaper' and 'The Nightingale' Ode:

And oft at nights the garden overflows
 With one sweet song that seems to have no close,
 Sung darkling from our tree, while men repose.

The nostalgia of the first two stanzas becomes apparent when in the third stanza the 'magnificence' of the tree recalls her childhood association—the memory of a brother and sister who are now no more, as evoked in 'dirge-like murmur' and 'eerie speech'. And both memories lend full support to the last line:

Love defend thee from oblivion's curse.

But it is that less known sonnet 'Lotus' which shows the best concentration of her gifts. It looks as though Toru consciously carries forward the effort of young Keats in 'the rose blendeth its odour with the violet', and by one act of daring crosses the 'lily' and the 'rose' and creates the 'lotus'. Notice the metaphysical audacity of the opening lines:

Love came to Flora asking for a flower
 That would of flowers be undisputed queen

and that stroke of genius, the metaphysical wit at its very best which produced 'Flower factions' in 'Psyche's bower' ending in Flora's final gift of the Lotus, 'the queenliest flower that blows'. For an Indian girl in her teens to demonstrate in English such acquaintance with Greek mythology, Christian and Hindu symbolism, a rare feeling for words coupled with a reliance on speech rhythms, an enviable control of the sonnet form, and, above all to vindicate with such seeming playfulness the strength of her own tradition—it is not surprising that Edward Thompson, so often critical of Tagore (on whom he writes a whole book) should bracket Toru with Sappho and Emile Bronte.* Like the latter, she has left behind novels too, one in French and one in English though they come nowhere near Bronte's in quality. But she is important as originating in poetry a tradition which had to wait till Sri Aurobindo for mature handling; for Sarojini's neglect of it was disastrous to her as well as to Indian verse in English.

Like Toru and Sarojini before him, Sri Aurobindo also went to Cambridge, not for a brief visit like them, but to read and distinguish himself in Greek and Latin. Add to these a good knowledge of French and Italian and a profound scholarship in Sanskrit and English. I don't know of any poet of our time, unless it be T. S. Eliot, who knew so many languages and literatures, ancient and modern, in addition to history, philosophy, theology, science and the arts. He even enjoyed an advantage over Eliot in that he was for some years deeply involved in the national movement and after his mystic experience in jail, left it all behind and went to meditate in the seclusion of his *āshram* at Pondicherry. If poetry is a mode of meditation, *dhyānamantra*, you find it here. But a distinctly different sensibility from the one so far embodied in the English language had to be expressed in it. Perhaps the language of concrete imagery was a help (French was not congenial for his purpose: 'too clear and limited to express mystic truth', on his own admission), because it served as a corrective to the excess of emotion and sentiment for which the Hindu mind is notorious. The Slav sensibility of Conrad made perception of the mysterious possible in the art of fiction, a possibility generally denied to the hard-headed Anglo-Saxon temperament. And it is

* Harihar Das *Life and Letters of Toru Dutt*, 1921 contains an essay on Toru Dutt by Edward Thompson.

this which distinguishes Conrad from Stevenson and Kipling who also wrote novels of the sea. But English helped him to make you 'hear', make you 'feel' and above all to make you 'see'. Like Conrad who broadened the descriptive range of the English language, it may be said of Sri Aurobindo that he made the English language accommodate certain hitherto unknown (inconscient) areas of experience* both through his prose work *Life Divine* and through his epic *Savitri*, not to speak of the numerous translations from Sanskrit poetry and drama as well as his other less known but important works. This is a gain to the English language somewhat inhibited by the Western faith in versimilitude. Sri Aurobindo knows that in the past 'the seeker of the spirit tended to become the cloistered monk, the ascetic, and the mystic and thus caused to set the spiritual apart from and against the material life. The lover of Nature went away from the din and bustle of life to commune with her largeness and peace'. 'The gods were found more in lights of solitude than in the thoughts and action of men'.

While, being so deeply rooted in the past, he is prepared to concede it as a 'legitimate seclusion', he knows his present business is to 'go beyond', and 'not to repeat' the past. Perhaps he thinks the time, too, is opportune because 'the natural world already is becoming transparent and the material world cannot be our sole and separate world of experience, for the partitions which divide the material from the psychic and other kingdoms behind it are wearing thin and voices and presences are beginning to break through and reveal their impact on our world'. He claims that poetry dealing with this new area of experience 'need not make our earthly life less, but more real'. To bring God into life is to help to divinise our actual being, he asserts. This, Aurobindo knows, is not to be achieved by any individual, in isolation, but is a matter of belonging to one's tradition. 'Poetry', he says, 'does not depend on the individual power of vision of the poet, but on the mind of his age and his country, its level of thought and experience, the adequacy of its symbols, the depth of its spiritual attainment'. Here, one would concede, is a poet who gave us the Indian equivalent of T. S. Eliot's 'Tradition and the Individual

* Sri Aurobindo writes that a country like India which has a contribution to make to the world's thought can legitimately use a world language which can embody the richest stuff, the most vital touch with life.

Talent'. And like Eliot, Sri Aurobindo too relies on scientific aids, though not as concretely as Eliot. He asserts that yoga is not 'mysticism and moonshine'. He does not tire of assuring us that he depends not on faith alone, but on knowledge which we have been developing all our lives: 'I think I can say that I have been testing day and night for years upon years more scrupulously than any scientist his theory, his method, on the physical plane'. But the reader does not always receive the help of concrete idiom and imagery in gaining access to the bowels of heaven and hell in Aurobindo's poetry.

Let us turn to *Sāvitrī* now. Anyone of the numerous stories in the *Mahābhārata* could have presented him with opportunities for the full realization of his preoccupation. But the legend of *Sāvitrī*, took the poet in him back to the Vedas, where it was a *mantra*, an incantation and a prayer to the feminine principle sustaining the universe. And nothing could have suited a poet's purpose better. In the *Mahābhārata* *Sāvitrī*, daughter of King Aswapathy married Satyavān disregarding the warning of Sage Nārada that the young man had hardly a year to live. The legend was a symbol of the victory of love over death. Sri Aurobindo invests the popular legend with mystic significance and makes it serve as a symbol of the conquest of darkness by light, of ignorance by knowledge. By so doing he is imparting to the story a contemporary relevance and a terrific urgency in the context of the world's suffering, caught up in the abyss of hate, ignorance and inaction. He makes Aswapathy (who as king has a responsibility for mankind's well-being) travel through the occult worlds, which are really gradations of consciousness, until he has the Beatific Vision, and *Sāvitrī* is born. The child is gift of the gods in answer to his meditation that is at the popular level in the *Mahābhārata*. But in Aurobindo *Sāvitrī*, the daughter, marks the birth of a new knowledge in man. With this knowledge she has to conquer death and save Satyavān, the symbol of truth. The knowledge, the expanding consciousness, belongs to Aswapathy and the striving to *Sāvitrī*, for woman is Mahāsaraswati, Mahālakshmi and also, Mahākālī, the moving spirit behind the universe.

It is significant that his own epic reminds Sri Aurobindo of the *Rāmāyana*. But the symbolic meaning does not become clear at once in Aurobindo's epic. While the *Rāmāyana* is a

symbolic fight between Good and Evil and was fashioned, according to Sri Aurobindo, to 'serve the greater and completer national and cultural function' his own is meant for the cultural minority like the *Divine Comedy*. It is a moot question whether an epic can survive without assuming many levels of audience; but it is claimed that a literary epic like Dante's or Milton's can stand on one level only. But to address ourselves to what is before us. *Sāvitrī* is a magnificent conception and a colossal undertaking. Consider the very opening of the epic, with the title, 'The Dawn'.

It was the hour before the Gods awake.
 Across the path of the divine Event
 The huge foreboding mind of Night, alone
 In her unlit temple of eternity,
 Lay stretched immobile upon Silence's marge.
 Almost one felt, opaque, impenetrable,
 In the sombre symbol of her eyeless muse
 The abyssm of the unbodied Infinite;
 A fathomless zero occupied the world.

The first line, a complete sentence in itself, in its poise and simplicity, is to me a remarkable improvement on the magniloquence that rides a high horse and starts breathlessly in Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Here in *Sāvitrī* it presents a point in Time. The very next line brings in Space so casually. And the mind in its journey is caught up in 'the unlit temple' and is 'immobile'. The word 'Almost' gives the shock of recognition, as it were, and brings you down to the earth with a thud. I hope it isn't my prejudice against Milton but I think his 'no light; but rather darkness visible' is a memorable phrase but the poet of *Paradise Lost* gives his case away without any resistance while Sri Aurobindo sees the huge foreboding mind of Night, alone, in her unlit temple.

How many negatives have been summoned to the poet's aid in his presentation of the night! 'Across', 'foreboding', 'immobile', 'opaque', 'impenetrable', 'sombre', 'eyeless', 'abyssm', 'unbodied', 'fathomless', 'zero'. The cumulative effect of these words coming in steady succession, whether one looks at them as images or simply as words yielding dictionary meanings, is a triumph of the poet's art. What at first appears to be a vague abstraction, yields on subsequent readings a central image (of darkness)

which is itself a product of several contributory images which the words listed above evoke, each adding a distinct aspect of the night and helping to deepen the total impression of the dark hour before the dawn, thus taking you back to the Upanishads where one comes across 'darkness hidden in darkness' which only those who live in the tropics, and are alive to the varying moods of nature can appreciate, seeing as they do, dark clouds hidden by layers of dark clouds in quick succession before they all burst upon the earth. But words like 'unbodied' and 'zero', especially the latter with its traditional philosophical overtones, carry a rich ambiguity of meaning, and suggest value at one level and deny it at another, the popular. These are not unintended, either, by the poet*. More than the dictionary meanings it is the mental images that the words call forth which add to the poetic value. The unlit temple provides for the possibility of some pilgrim kindling a light. It is as though Sri Aurobindo is ready to reverse Keats a little and suggest that in the very temple of darkness veiled dawn has set her sovran shrine. In any case it is eternity where darkness and dawn co-exist and jostle.

Sri Aurobindo no doubt sees in the dawn a rich legacy of poetry and prophecy which has come down from the Vedic fathers, our path finders. The word dawn at once evokes such rich images as Usha and Ahana with their western poetic counterparts Eos and Aurora, each helping to irradiate the Eastern horizon with an earthless glory. Of these first lines, one can say in Sri Aurobindo's own words from *Urvasie*.

... as if a line
Of some great poem out of dimness grew
Slowly unfolding into perfect speech.

No one will pretend that all the 24,000 verses of *Sāvītri* have this richness and density. There are many, many passages of second, third, and fourth degree of poetic intensity (if that is the word) which seem flat and sound feeble. In the first place these can hardly be helped in a poem of such immense length

* Sri Aurobindo claimed for himself in *Sāvītri*: 'I am not seeking for originality but for truth and the effective poetical expression of my vision . . . What I am trying to do everywhere in the poem, is to express exactly something seen, something felt or something experienced.'

with which, personally, I have no sympathy, but if in a long poem there is something more than mere length, it has its justification as poetry; and if *Paradise Lost* is a great epic I should be prepared to put aside my personal predilections and feel bold to declare *Sāvitrī* a very great epic indeed, perhaps the greatest in the English language, an opinion shared by some of the better English and American critics. If it fails to appeal to the sophisticated reader brought upon T. S. Eliot, it is probably because Sri Aurobindo being cut off from modern movements in English poetry has not altogether discarded the idiom of an earlier age, and to this add the other handicap of his operating in the labyrinthine mazes of mysticism to which a majority of readers have no access; and both become forbidding factors in our response. But he has his strengths in *Sāvitrī* and elsewhere, especially in the slender collection called *Last Poems*, all of which must be read along with his critical work, *The Future Poetry*, and the scattered bits of criticism that abound in periodicals and private correspondence revealing an astonishingly original mind. It is the criticism largely of a practitioner of verse, perhaps the best and the greatest by a poet in extant Indian literature. And yet this has gone unnoticed or mentioned only in passing by Indian scholars and critics. Consider for example his marvellous courage to experiment with vocabulary, syntax and form, in one of the *Last Poems*. The sheer recklessness of

I made an assignation with the Night
In the abyss was fixed our rendezvous

.....

I came her dark and dangerous heart to woo,

compels one's immediate recognition of the rendezvous, in a way better than Vaughan's 'I saw eternity the other night like a great ring of pure and endless light' does. Here is daring in verse-making which is incomparably greater than in all the feigned boldness of younger experimenters. Or take that memorable piece 'A Dream of Surreal Science':

One dreamed and saw a gland write Hamlet, drink
At the Mermaid, capture immortality;
A committee of hormones on the Aegean's brink
Composed the Iliad and the Odyssey.

A thyroid, meditating almost nude
Under the Bo-tree, saw the eternal light
And rising from its mighty solitude,
Spoke of the weel and eightfold path all right.

A brain by disordered stomach driven
Thundered through Europe, conquered, ruled and fell,
From St Helena went, perhaps, to Heaven.
Thus wagged on the surreal world, until

A scientist played with atoms and blew out
The universe before God had time to shout.

Here in this sonnet, the poet plays, as it were, with the inflated balloon of Almighty Science, armed with no more than a pin, and pours scorn and ridicule over it. Here is evidence of the Graeco-Christian tradition as much as the Indian, of much contemporary history which is made by neurotics presiding over the destinies of Europe. Add to these his fine awareness of the latest fads and discoveries in arts and science, nuclear and biological. He looks at the insolence of small men cast by a perverse fate in big places, and, rooted as he is in the ancient wisdom of a life-affirming tradition, he dismisses the insolent claims of passing fashions with the homely word 'wagged' which invites its own comment.

Against the blind energy and neurosis of the contemporary scene may be pitted love and devotion of the spirit, which can save the situation, and a thrill that ensues from the life of the spirit. One has in mind lines taken from one of his last poems, the sonnet on Krishna:

Nearer and nearer now the music draws
Life shudders with a strange felicity
All Nature is a wide enamoured poise
Hoping her lord to touch, to clasp, to be

It is difficult to guess how the Western reader responds to these lines but to me it is poetry deeply felt and superbly realized. It is true the Indian reader is considerably aided in his response by the Krishna legend kept alive in formal poetry and folk-song. But the Western reader who cares to transcend his insularity and self-sufficiency, has to do hard work.

To pass from Sri Aurobindo to the more recent poetry is to pass from tradition—the great Indian tradition carried forward by him significantly—to experimentation the stimulus for which has come wholly from abroad. The critic of poetry is faced with as delicate and difficult a task in dealing with them as with Sri Aurobindo. While he may have some sympathy for the mood of the generation which, deriving its subject matter and syntax from the early T. S. Eliot, revolted against ‘the blurred and rubbery sentiments’ of the Aurobindo school and has waited in eager hope of backing the achievement that must result from so brave a reaction against Sri Aurobindo, it appears to him that the time is not yet propitious to take a stand on their efforts, because there still isn’t a sufficient body of poetry which has advanced beyond the initial stages of experimentation and promise, sometimes remarkable promise, as in Dom Moraes’ splendid first effort, *A Beginning*, which won the Hawthorndon prize which had been lying, presumably without a worthy recipient, for fourteen years in the very home of English poetry. Let me at once confess that, looking at a line here and a line there, I almost thought the award was irresponsible, and a condescending British gesture to an erstwhile young colonial, looking for love ‘too young’ and playing ‘the drunken king’ and still aspiring to fame via Oxford and English. There was much to support this stand in the volume which appeared a couple of years after: such lines as the following, all from his second volume of verse entitled ‘Poems’ (1960)

The fallen rain glitters like stars
In the dark river of her hair

or

For me my dark words are
Quietened by your bright hair

or

My true love, a skylark in each eye

And his ‘heart’, the ‘nest’ where his love ‘must rest’—all of which are in the romantic tradition. But in his better poetry, for example, ‘The Garden’, in which the critic in Dom Moraes has the better of the romantic lover, he is a very different kind of poet. But the opening lines

I wake and find myself in love
And this one time I do not doubt

hardly promise a bright career for the poem despite the apparent daring of the beginning. But the lover's fear gives the poet a chance to ignite the stock response and send him out,

To hold long parley with a dove.

There is yet shyness to conquer; and that keeps the poem going:

My poems dancing down the street
Telling your name to every-one.

Fear and shyness make room for disenchantment in

My conversation bores the dove
He knows it all.

And disenchantment, far from causing despair, helps to renew his strength of mind

I shall stay here and keep my word
Glumly I wait to marry dust.

Not so 'glumly' if you look at what follows. He still grieves that he can 'speak not to you but to a bird'. A deft handling while playing at so conventional a game as love. It is not sophisticated idiom alone but also a changed sensibility that controls the organization of the poem. And the creative tension is kept up successfully by a natural sequence of instincts that love generates in the lover—such as a sure self-confidence, fear of disappointment, and recourse to substitutes ('parley with a dove'), reticence and shyness, disenchantment, resignation, and yet the persistent regret for lost love.

To take one more poem 'Ophelia', in which with one original impulse the poet brings back to us the Shakespearean character, that young life, the pity of it and the tragedy of it all:

Lice in the pale weeds of her crown creep.

And the following ambivalent line

She is pendulumed in Time

suggests a denial of what it seems to convey for, far from being tied to Time, every tick of the pendulum announces her name and as the pendulum swings it strikes a tender chord in us:

The child who touched us in the side.

And on the sea as the tide flows it acquires a meaning because of 'the departing light' that was once washed into a place of no return. As before, it is at once the tragedy and triumph of her life that commend themselves to our attention. Many critical accounts have issued out of minds more learned than Mr Dom Moraes' but few have helped to bring back to us this 'poor child' in her defeat and glory:

With idiot motion in the sea
Her driftwood shape will travel far
Never will it seek land, for she
Has fled our troubles and our war.

It is the compassionate heart of the poet which invests a mere 'driftwood shape' with the light of the stars which watch over her, and makes a common 'tide of the sea' glow with light—the same that 'touches us in the side'. She who was drowned has been recovered to us from the sea as a vision to contemplate and then returned to it, but not before winning our compassion for her and inducing self-reproach in the world for its pitiless war on her in life, and hypocritical tributes in death.

His second collection is thus distinguished on the whole, but does not mark a real progression in the poet's growth. And considering that he won the prize in his teens and is now past 30, one is apt to grow a little impatient that some kind of coherent view of man and the universe has not emerged from his poetry yet. Also, one is not sure that one can identify an unknown poem of Dom Moraes by any characteristic theme or craftsmanship of which he is now a master.

Would one be wrong to say the same of Nissim Ezekiel? Mr Ezekiel is a serious poet, perhaps the most serious of them all. He has a distinct voice in poetry, but one is not sure that the poet shows any profound awareness of the entire Indian tradition from the Vedas and Upanishads to the present day in all its complexity. The base on which he stands is Indian, of course,

but in a limited sense. There is also evidence of his having imbibed the best elements of the poetry of Yeats, Eliot and other English poets of the thirties. He has to date more than half a dozen collections of poetry of which the third, *The unfinished Man* is deservedly the best known. That the title is not a chance borrowing from W. B. Yeats, but a mature poetic response of a younger poet to one of the two greatest poets of the century is seen in the way that in poem after poem he is himself 'brought face to face with his own clumsiness'. But the impact of T. S. Eliot is more pronounced. Consider, for example, a poem like 'Enterprise' which has distinct echoes of *The Waste Land* and 'Journey of the Magi'. But the way the poem develops is entirely original including possibly what he makes of 'the crowd' and 'the thunder' in the last stanza but one; and 'Home' in the last line of the poem is significantly reminiscent of the *Four Quartets*. The last stanza sums up the futility of much human enterprise:

When, finally we reached the place,
 We hardly knew why we were there
 The trip had darkened every face
 Our deeds were neither great nor rare
 Home is where we have to gather grace.

The word 'gather' inherits all the poetic associations of the word from Herrick, Milton, W. B. Yeats and finds fulfilment in one who values his tradition and puts his own faith in the things of the spirit, both suggested by the words 'Home' and 'grace'. Consider also the Eliot-like humility in his prayer to

Grant me the metaphor
 To make it human good

(though Eliot's humility would have transcended the 'human'); and the rare awareness of

Not all returned as herds who had fled
 In wanting both to have and eat the cake.

Beneath the deliberate triteness of expression of the second line is a freshness of response.

One is not, however, seeking to make a full assessment of Mr Ezekiel's poetry in a survey like this, but trying to see by means

of a few not so arbitrarily chosen examples how rewarding it will be to read his best efforts. One seems to be better able to place an unseen Ezekiel poem with a sureness that one couldn't muster in respect of Dom Moraes. Ezekiel's sensibility to me is rather more distinctly Indian, despite its obvious limitations, than that of Dom Moraes. But no one can pretend that this poet has inherited the great past of India in a significant way, which is to say that he does not command all the resources available to him—it is thus that the 'Indianness' employed as a criterion of judgment is intended not to 'amputate' but to evaluate poetry. But to the extent he has availed himself of the composite culture of India to which he belongs he must be said to be an important poet not merely in the Indian context, but in a consideration of those that are writing poetry anywhere in English. What distinguishes him from a crowd of versifiers is a genuine sophistication in the use of language born of fine insights into life—which is very different from the phony elegance that ekes out a precarious living in the best poems of a vast majority of the younger poets writing today in India, England and Australia. But Mr Ezekiel is so only at his best, perhaps in a dozen poems culled from half a dozen collections, and at the very next level he shares almost all the limitations of his contemporaries. One realizes it is unfair to say that without substantiating the charge—it is hardly necessary, though, as the poems betray themselves—but I must hasten to add that he is still the kind of poet that invites an adult reader's attention not merely to the best he has so far written but that which he is likely to write in future.

P. Lal of Calcutta has written and published much verse in his Writers' Workshop *Miscellany* which has offered incentive to many a young writer. While he has taken note of the need for a change in the idiom of verse, his translations from Sanskrit poetry and drama as well as his own compositions tend to be rather precious and one is constrained to observe that his preciousness threatens to stifle his creative gifts. Also, one who in the early days of the Workshop did commendable campaigning to get a hearing for Indian Writing in English has, without his knowing, I fear, relaxed his standards and is in danger of being very inclusive. What can be said, said not in cynicism, but in his favour as editor and publisher, is that a pyramid must have a broad base and at the base one should be prepared to suffer much mediocrity

in the hope that in good time one may witness a masterpiece, however remote such a hope may be—such, in truth, is the pattern of literary history everywhere. A. K. Ramanujan's translations from classical Tamil as well as medieval and modern Kannada are acknowledged to be more faithful to their originals than Lal's and have drawn deservedly wide attention, but his own verse can at best be described as elegant and urbane. Mokashi Punekar has published a volume of verse to which Sir Herbert Read has contributed a generous foreword, and A. Madhavan has earned his inclusion in the annual collections of *P.E.N. International* and has subsequently collected his scattered verses in a volume. Kamala Das has received enthusiastic praise in serious academic circles in our universities but she too must wait before one can attempt an appraisal without being concessive. The same must be said of Gieve Patel and R. Parthasarathy.

Our writers have perhaps done well by contemporary English standards but not created their own identity. Is it because they have not discovered their cultural identity? Indeed, they have not seriously probed it at all. Only when they do it, will the acting, on each other, of oriental and occidental mentalities cause a poetic ferment. None of them, it is obvious, have taken the pains to show Eliot's kind of equipment though almost all of them have followed the manner of early Eliot.

One is not sure, either, that anyone of them is aware, that is, in their *poetry* that, as Sri Aurobindo reminds us, ancient India was created by the Vedas and Upanishads and the vision of inspired seers made a people of us. Then the epics of *Rāmāyana* and *Mahābhārata* through their ideal types of character gave a poetic manual of conduct for people of all strata. And later the religious poetry of the Vaishnavites, Saivites and Sakta poets has been a powerful formative influence in our lives. One is not so naive as to want them to revive that kind of poetry, but they can't afford to forget that both folk and formal poetry in this country has been functional, a humanizing and spiritualizing force, never a mere instrument of pleasure that it now threatens to be. And, so judged, many of the younger poets can hardly be said to belong to the tradition, let alone continue it in a significant way. And yet which of them can say his own talent can stand him in good stead and carry him through the crisis facing modern man?

‘A TONGUE OF FLAME’

THE SPEECHES AND WRITINGS OF SWAMI VIVEKANANDA

It is the gentle, urbane Addison of the *Spectator* Essays who said of Socrates that he brought philosophy down from heaven to inhabit among men while his ambition was to have it said of him that he brought philosophy out of closets and libraries, schools and colleges to dwell in clubs and assemblies, at tea-tables and in coffee houses. We are here concerned neither with Socrates nor with Addison but with one of our own men of the late nineteenth century, namely, Vivekananda, who was variously described by those that marvelled at the man and his work as ‘storm’, ‘cyclone’, ‘thunder’, ‘lightning’, ‘hurricane’, while he himself claimed to be ‘first and foremost a poet’ on which Romain Rolland comments ‘. . . a word that may be misunderstood by Europeans, for they have lost the meaning of poetry—the flight of faith—without which a bird becomes a mere mechanical toy’. Now the parallel between Socrates and Vivekananda is interesting, though it is somewhat blasphemous to compare him with Addison, for it was Vivekananda’s mission to bring out ‘the most wonderful truths’ from our Upanishads and Puranas, from the monasteries and the possession of selected bodies of people and broadcast them to the world so that ‘the truths may run like fire all over the country’. The expressions ‘noblest truths’ and ‘run like fire’ at once provide a clue to his profound spiritual concerns, his sense of urgency and the transmuting artistic cast of his mind. ‘Run like fire’ is a vivid image, and Vivekananda thought in images; his expression was strewn with analogies, anecdotes and parables which became the very medium of his thinking; it was almost always eloquent, an eloquence that issued forth from a ‘tongue of flame’*, but

* Romain Rolland: *The Life of Vivekananda and the Universal Gospel* (Tr.) Advaita Ashrama, Mayavati, Almora, U.P.

Romain Rolland records: ‘He had a beautiful voice like a violin-cello (so Miss Josephine MacLeod told me), grave without violent contrasts, but with deep vibrations that filled both hall and hearts. Once his audience was held he could make it sink to an intense *piano* piercing his hearers to the

it was not the vicious rhetoric of a political agitator—he treated politics as trash—or a social reformer, but a rhetoric which was alive with truth, reason and imagination. Sister Christine said: ‘... his was no case of abstract and prepared dissertation. Every thought was passion, every word was faith. Every lecture was a torrential improvisation’.

His speech as well as writing, even when it was religious and philosophical, was almost always that of an artist because they both fell into the category which is forgotten in current critical jargon, but still valid, the ‘literature of power’, as against the mere ‘literature of knowledge’. It is true he did not propound any philosophical system like the poets of Europe—Lucretius, Dante, and Goethe. Vivekananda abhorred all ‘isms’, whether Naturalism, Transcendentalism, or Romanticism. He is more in the tradition of the poet-teachers of the Vedas and Upanishads, the later Veerasaiva Vachanakaras and the Haridasas of Karnataka, of the mystic poets and social reformers of Maharashtra and Bengal, and, unlike any of these, made alive by the spirit of European science. He tells us, in one of his discourses, of an Indian Brahmin who, when he visited Socrates in Athens, asked him: ‘What is the highest knowledge?’ to which Socrates replied: ‘To know man is the end and aim of all knowledge’. ‘But how can you know man without knowing God?’ queried the Brahmin. As though he was prompted to contrast the Greek ideal with the Indian, Vivekananda recalls the Upanishadic story of Narada who went to Sanathkumara to learn about Truth. Narada knew philosophy, Veda, astronomy, but he was not satisfied, and Sanathkumara says that the knowledge of philosophy is secondary, science is secondary and only that which made us realize the Brahman is supreme, that by knowing which all else is known, which he therefore called the ‘Supreme Science’. Now, Vivekananda’s chief distinction consists in making this supreme science, that which appears to be an intuitively-arrived-at apprehension comprehensible by rational, demonstrable means.

soul. Emma Calve, who knew him, described it as ‘an admirable baritone, having the vibrations of a Chinese gong’.

The advertising prospectus in American cities announced Vivekananda as ‘One of the giants of the Platform’ and his portrait bore the inscriptions: ‘An orator, by Divine Right’, ‘perfect Master of the English language’ among other things.

Before Vivekananda Raja Rammohan Roy, that 'first earnest-minded investigator of the science of comparative religion in the world' had insisted: 'Even in ordinary matters like purchasing provisions in the market we choose and weigh carefully. Shall we resort to faith in matters of supreme ultimate significance?'

Vivekananda's is not the method of scientific *statement* but informed by the temper of science, even the methods of science. It is not the dry *exposition* of the academic philosopher, the reason why perhaps he turned down offers of full professorship from two of America's greatest universities—Harvard and Columbia, offers made to one who had neither Ph.D. nor 'published work' to commend him. All he had was a first degree from a colonial university, on this side of Suez, founded with a view to imparting to the natives modern scientific education through the medium of English. And yet Professor J. H. Wright of Harvard university said, 'Here is a man who is more learned than all our learned professors put together'. Vivekananda was a student of philosophy, but nevertheless a fine product of modern university education, and he seemed to feel the full impact of the Age of Science. The 'two cultures' of C. P. Snow, neither existed, nor were pressed upon our attention with vulgar assurance as though culture can be compartmentalized. Vivekananda, it is seen from volume after volume of his collected works, had an omnivorous appetite for amalgamating disparate experience and his inquiring mind sought the unity of things which appeared to be different. He must have felt not merely the impact of science but with it the clarity and precision which it imparted to thinking and expression. And it is largely with that that I am concerned in this lecture.

If I may digress a little from Vivekananda to consider the place of science in language, literature, and thought in the West, it is interesting to recall to an audience composed largely of scientists and philosophers what the first historian of the Royal Society claimed for it. It was intended to contribute

. . . towards the correcting of excesses in Natural Philosophy, to which it is of all others, a most profest enemy . . . the only remedy that can be found for this extravagance . . . to reject all amplification, digression and swelling of style; to return back to the primitive purity and shortness when men delivered so many things in an equal number of words

. . . natural way of speaking, clear sense, a native easiness, bringing all things as near the mathematical plainness as they can, and preferring the language of artizans, countrymen, and merchants before that of wits or scholars.

It is interesting that so late as in the beginning of the present century philosophers in the West felt the necessity to polish the tools of thought—because they perceived that experience was one thing, expression another; between the two fell a shadow, a phenomenon which made language a prime preoccupation of I. A. Richards at Cambridge, and which in its turn involved him in interminable discussions of poetry and science, psychology and literary criticism. Perhaps the same that made T. S. Eliot put so high a premium on expression when he said 'sensibility alters from generation to generation but expression is altered only by a man of genius', and of expression, of his kind of poetic expression, he admitted that the rhythms of modern poetry were conditioned by the internal combustive engine.

No wonder that Donne who described the lovers in terms of legs of the compass became Eliot's hot favourite. But poor Donne had to be in wilderness for almost three hundred years for saying, 'The new philosophy calls all in doubt'. He, a church divine and poet, was nevertheless troubled by the new scientific inventions and discoveries and his scepticism which, while it produced great poetry, ran counter to the faith of his forefathers and consequently Donne nearly 'perished' 'for not being understood'. It is distressing that science in the West has invariably invited the hostility of the man of religion, literature, and philosophy as though science is anti-religious, anti-poetical and anti-philosophical. But it is a fact of history that religion in the West sought to burn the scientist as heretic, in some cases it even succeeded; and philosophy when it pursued the methods and results of science propounded materialism. As for religion, the Christian saints were satisfied with the 'sweetness of believing' without the necessity of seeing, presumably, for the fear of its not standing the test of seeing, touching and hearing. The men of letters, when they did not, like Jonathan Swift, make the scientist the butt of ridicule as in *Gulliver's Travels*, only paid lip-service to science. Milton, for example, incorporated the old system of astronomy while he was aware of the new—he visited Galileo and knew of the work of

Copernicus. Milton did so because to believe in modern science was to let his entire theology, his cosmology and with it his famous epic which it supports, fall to pieces, as though the poet was poet *because* of the theology, and not because of his vision and his poetic impulse. Perhaps science in the seventeenth century did not, generally, provide for vision or the shaping spirit of imagination. It is well known that Blake rejected Newton for his absence of vision, and for his materialism, and himself entered in his Note-books:

To teach doubt and Experiment
Certainly was not what Christ meant.

Another poet of great excellence, Keats, proposed the toast to the memory of Sir Isaac Newton as one who destroyed the poetry of the rainbow. But Keats alone of all the Romantics seemed to have a truly scientific awareness. He writes to his brother George not to throw away his books of Chemistry and Physics, for a poet has need of them all. Wordsworth only paid lip-service to science and did not let it affect his poetry deeply. Tennyson and Arnold felt completely baffled, indeed (to use an expressive colloquialism), were bowled over by the then recent theory of Evolution which proclaimed man not a fallen angel, but an improved ape. Browning was blissfully ignorant of sciences and liked to think that

God's in His Heaven—
All's right with the world.

Dickens was only aware of the sordid side of science and technology which brought about slums and poverty. Only T. S. Eliot, as was observed before, had the courage to let in science in his poetry in a central way when he posited:

Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future:
If all time is eternally present
All time is unredeemable.

Whether Eliot agreed or disagreed with Einstein or even felt his impact is not the point of interest—there is no doubt he was keenly aware of his work. But an Indian scholar especially cannot

fail to detect in these lines the Eliot who speaks of his thought and sensibility being considerably influenced by the metaphysical maze of Patanjali, the Upanishads and the Gita. He uses the very language of the Gita when he seeks to find the still centre in the midst of the storm, of the petrel and the porpoise. Here is happy accommodation of science and religion, far from their being at war with each other.

To a philosopher's question as to how he got the theory of Relativity Einstein answered: because he was so strongly convinced of the harmony of the universe. Indeed Relativity is said to be a decisive step in the reconciliation between science and religion though he had feared that thinking might degenerate into metaphysics or empty talk unless it was connected with sensory experience. He expressed himself unequivocally when he said 'Science without religion is lame and religion without science is blind'. He believed too that 'pure thought can grasp reality, as the ancients dreamed'. One does not know which of the ancients he had in mind. We have it on the authority of Bronowski that Peter Abelard had said: 'By doubting we are led to enquire and by enquiring we perceive the truth'. Bronowski remarks ruefully 'the words could have been a recipe for the scientific revolution'. Yes, *could have been* had the Church encouraged a spirit of free enquiry among philosophers. But how could slaves encourage others to be free? As Einstein observed: 'I am convinced philosophers have had a harmful effect upon the progress of scientific thinking'.

Now the Einstein that accuses philosophers of having had harmful effects on scientific thinking nevertheless aspires to recapture the dream of the ancients. I submit to the scientists that there may be something here for them to ponder. For in our discussions of science, especially in its interaction with society, we seem to reject with Einstein not merely the philosophers but reject also the ancients, as Einstein *would not*. And Einstein too, was he not thinking of the philosophers of Europe? I sometimes wonder whether, in rejecting philosophers and ancients wholesale as hostile to scientific progress, we are not importing into the Indian scene the quarrels which were Europe's and not of this century either, but of mid-nineteenth century.

It is here that one feels that the education of the scientist may perhaps be supplemented and completed by an education in

history, philosophy, literature and even anthropology. Otherwise there is a danger of his becoming as much of an anachronism as the scholar in the humanities unaware of the scientific process. For we can talk with a great deal of sophistication of *a* time and *a* place and this becomes empty verbiage unless it has relevance to the Indian scene today.

If the ancients of Einstein can include as I presume not merely the Greeks and the Hebrew prophets, but what Matthew Arnold recommended to his insular English public, 'Eastern antiquity', that is, the thinkers of the Upanishads, no one can miss the temper of science in the poetry of the ancients. We say in the arts that tradition is the means by which the vitality of the past can enrich the life of the present. I would like to know if science can do without tradition, can reject tradition; and tradition is not to be confused with the dead wood of convention, but tradition in the sense of growth in understanding for, after all, the inventions and discoveries of twentieth century science must be the result of a tradition of scientific thinking started in the seventeenth century, if not earlier.

It is precisely here that Vivekananda must come back into our discussion, and the rest of my talk is devoted to a study of the several facts of his work as the wandering monk who blazed a trail across the globe. Vivekananda analysed the nature and scope of science when he explained:

Science means that the cause of a thing is sought out by the nature of the thing itself. As step by step science is progressing, it has taken the explanation of natural phenomena out of the hands of spirits and angels. Because Advaitism has done likewise in spiritual matters, it is the most scientific religion.

He claims that Vedanta is unharmed by the terrible onslaughts of science, '... while the sledge-hammer blows of modern science are pulverising the porcelain mass of systems whose foundation is either in faith or in belief or in the majority of votes of church synods...' He cites the case of a Western scientist who 'scarcely has time to eat his meal or go out of his laboratory but who yet would stand by the hour to attend my lectures on the Vedanta', for, as he puts it, 'they are so scientific, they so exactly harmonize

with the aspirations of the age and with the conclusions to which modern science is coming at the present time'. That is why he adds Vedanta suits the intellectuals of the West; it is the religion of the future. Interesting that so distinguished a scientist as Oppenheimer was a student of the Upanishads and is reported to have described his response to the burst of the atom bomb as comparable to Arjuna's description of *virātarūpa*—the effulgence of millions of suns put together *Kōtisūryaprakāsa*. The scientist of today cannot find a stouter champion of science among non-scientists: Vivekananda's argument was, 'If reason be weak, a body of priests would be weaker'. He went so far as to say:

It is better that mankind should be atheist by following reason than blindly believe in three hundred million gods on the authority of anybody. It degrades human nature.

How extraordinary that a man of religion should have felt that he could afford the luxury of a frontal attack on the practices of his own religion and vindicate the invincibility of Vedanta in the face of science while in the West as C. E. M. Joad has reminded us:

Rushing in where savants feared to tread, an army of unprepared and uninformed clergymen were beaten off the field by the withering fire of fact with which the biologists, the geologists and the physicists bombarded them. Rarely has there been such a humbling of spiritual pride.

Vivekananda's contention was that if the chemist and the physicist do not require demons and ghosts to explain their phenomena why should a man of religion depend on them? Every science wants its explanation from inside, from the very nature of things and religions are not able to supply this. He argues, it is not enough to say that God is the cause of this universe and to say that, as for Him, He is the unmoved Mover: 'this does not explain the cause any more than the fall of the stone: it has to be discovered like the law of gravitation—it is already there'. If the man of science did hard work and arrived at his discoveries so should the man of religion.

☞ No man of religion in this country, in modern times set out to demonstrate religious experience in scientific terms with the

knowledge and courage which he displayed. Consider a few examples of Vivekananda's capacity to render into the concrete what appear to most of us as only intuitive apprehensions. Einstein put it in a different way when he said, 'the most incomprehensible thing about the world is that it is comprehensible'. Well, a thinker of the order of Einstein can get off with such an aphorism but if like Vivekananda one is obliged to drive home the truths, sometimes to men of average ability he has to break the thought and free the thing. That precisely is what we witness in Vivekananda's hands. The concept, for example, of cause and effect which in the language of metaphysics sounds like casuistry is put across in the language of science: Cause and effect are the same at one level, as the beginning and the end are the same, but at another level they *are* different. Now comes the elaborate 'objective correlative' of these abstract concepts, to use a literary critical jargon of our age:

The mountain comes from the sand and goes back to the sand; the river comes out of vapour, and goes back to vapour, plant life comes from the seed and goes back to the seed; human life comes out of human germs and goes back The universe with its stars and planets has come out of a nebulous state and must go back to it. What do we learn from this? That the manifested or the grosser state is the effect, and the finer state is the cause.

At the end of the scientific working out of the concept covering so wide a range of natural phenomena he takes us back to Indian metaphysics which had anticipated the explanation of modern science at the dawn of civilization. He says:

Thousands of years ago it was demonstrated by Kapila, the great father of all philosophy, that destruction means going back to the cause. The effect is the same as the cause, only the form is different.

Now I ask whether Eliot did not mean the same when he said 'In my beginning is my end/In my end is my beginning'. 'The way up is the way down'. And we have it on Eliot's own admission that he owes much of this to Indian thought and sensibility.

Or, is it that most intellectually baffling concept of Advaita? Vivekananda will say:

A straight line infinitely projected becomes a circle. The force sent out will complete the circle and return to its starting place. We are all projected from a common centre, which is God, and will come back. Each soul is a circle. . . . God is a circle with circumference nowhere and centre everywhere. . . . Death is but a change of centre.

But the best of all for its simplicity and clarity is his account of man's struggle to reach God:

If you put a simple molecule of air in the bottom of a glass of water it at once begins a struggle to join the infinite atmosphere above. So it is with the soul.*

While Vivekananda took reason for his guide, he knew it could lead him three-fourths of the way and thereafter he had to look to something higher than that. Not to recognize it and to think reason could do everything was to be guilty of a superstition. If there was religious superstition, he contended, there was scientific superstition, too. How else can one explain the total reliance on Newtons and Darwins in the West? He was convinced that ancient Indians had known areas of experience not accessible to modern European science. That is how he seeks to carry the theory of evolution beyond the limits of physical science. Science

* Compare these fine presentations of a man of religion with the pathetic attempt of specialists in English language teaching on an analogous topic in physics:

PRESSURE

'Hydrogen is inflammable and strict precautions must be taken to minimise the danger of an explosion, which would occur if the hydrogen got ignited through some carelessness. If the balloon ascends too rapidly, an aperture at the top can be uncovered for a time, and some of the hydrogen can be liberated from the balloon. If the balloon descends, some of the load, e.g., some sand, may be ejected. So it is possible to maintain a steady height. Making a successful landing is a delicate operation; obviously most of the hydrogen originally enclosed in the balloon must be liberated, but the basket must not come into collision with the ground.' [From 'Preparatory General English Course for Colleges (Physical Sciences)' prepared by the Central Institute of English, Hyderabad 1963].

explains 'the evolution of the amoeba into man but does not explain the Buddha-man or the Christ-man'—the seeming simplicity is not only challenging to science but scandalizing in the extreme. Here, he contends, the myth which finds its validity in the science of Yoga has explained the evolution of Buddha through twenty-five lives, and Vivekananda has drawn our pointed attention to it. Evolution in Buddha's case was made possible by profound 'involution', and he makes a trenchant generalization out of that:

There is no evolution without involution. The tree is the seed evolved: and the seed is the tree involved. Man is the child evolved and the child is the man involved.

Hence, one would suppose, is the insistence on action in the Indian approach to life. The passage is an example of Vivekananda's penetrating thought and incisive expression. Wordsworth's 'Child is father of the man', the formulation of a poet and one so preoccupied with the use of language, too, owes its brevity and neatness of phrasing, it is true, to a clarity of perception, but a clarity achieved at the cost of cerebration and which, by the side of such complex working of the mind as Vivekananda's, hardly does any credit to so great a reputation. And the complexity of Vivekananda's thought is most adequately objectified too. The concretization is in the choice of such images as tree, seed, child and man—that is but obvious. But what is not so obvious is the manner in which the very action is imaged in the play of verbs and the polarities are emphasized in the onomatopoeic abstract nouns—'evolution' and 'involution'.

In an important discourse on law and freedom he asserts his disagreement with the idea that freedom is obedience to nature and cites in support of his stand: 'The trees never disobey law, I never saw a cow steal. An oyster never told a lie. Yet they are not greater than man'. The entire stand in unsurpassed exposition is a counterblast to the Laurentian kind of flight of poetic fancy about the superiority of nature over man and demolition of the view: 'I am no more free than a rooted tree'. It is his view that man can be free by striving but freedom does not mean the cessation of activity resulting in a dead lump, and thus inimical to social progress, but more activity; only you act in freedom, not under compulsion.

Vivekananda is careful enough to point out how in subsequent ages we went against freedom and introduced too many laws: 'no nation possesses so many laws as the Hindus, and national death is the result'. But fortunately there was freedom in religious matters and the result was phenomenal growth in religious thinking. The ills we see around are not to be confused with religion; they are social ills. It is in the light of the degradation that had come upon Hindu society that Vivekananda preached advaita wherever he went. He did not preach it as a sectarian—the artistic ambivalence was too strongly ingrained in him to be that—but, as he put it, 'on universal and widely acceptable grounds'. In fact he squarely faces the accusation of preaching too much advaita and too little of dualism:

I know what grandeur, what oceans of love, what infinite, what ecstatic blessings and joy there are in the dualistic love-theories of worship and religion. But this is not the time with us to weep even in joy; we have had weeping enough; no more is this the time for us to become soft. This softness has been with us till we have become like masses of cotton and are dead. What our country now wants is muscles of iron and nerves of steel, gigantic wills which nothing can resist, which can penetrate into the mysteries and the secrets of the universe and will accomplish their purpose in any fashion, even if it meant going down to the bottom of the ocean and meeting death face to face. That is what we want. . . . Faith, faith, faith in ourselves, faith, faith in God, this is the secret of greatness. If you have faith in all the hundred gods. . . . and still have no faith in yourselves, there is no salvation for you.

It is interesting that Vivekananda refused to be bogged down in sectarian polemics of the day. He straight away admits the joys of dualism. But it is his art of indirection which dismisses so unoffensively and subtly the products of dualism—effusions of love and worship. That brings him to his present concern: Is this the time to weep and become soft? Once he gets at his point he knows how to work on to his desired goal. He can employ very concrete images like 'masses of cotton' to induce in

his hearers enough self-reproach and even self-contempt. But he must also energize them and hence the succession of a different order of images like 'nerves of steel and iron'. But what is needed is not physical vigour only—it is vigour of the mind and the spirit which call forth equally appropriate images: gigantic will with which to penetrate the mystery of the universe, and if the expression is abstract and needs sufficient objectification there he is ready with a powerful, activating image—of going down to the bottom of the sea and meeting death face to face. After this stirring and shaking comes the inward-directing exhortation to have faith in themselves, the repetition of which word—faith—has a *mantric* effect. And to crown it all and make sure of the efficacy of his appeal the iconoclasm of the last warning: 'If you have faith in all the hundred gods and still have no faith in yourselves. . . .' Here is a muscle-making, mind-stirring and soul-inspiring speech so carefully organized and presented, but seemingly spontaneous. For the hearer it was an aesthetic experience and only retrospection could reveal the impact of a great master's art.

It must not be forgotten that Vivekananda aimed not merely at energizing the individual in the light of his own divinity but at regenerating society, collectively speaking. In fact his Advaita had an altruistic motive as well:

The real vedantist alone, will give up his life for his fellow-men without any compunction, because he knows he will not die. As long as there is one insect left in the world, he is living; as long as one mouth eats, he eats, so he goes on doing good to others.

Thus his social ethics—the enactment is a fine piece of art, so convincing and memorable—has metaphysical foundations, metaphysical not in the esoteric sense but, according to him, in the scientific.

Einstein somewhere says: 'Concern for man and his fate must always form the chief interest of all technical endeavours . . . Never forget that in the midst of your diagrams and equations'. Statements like these abound in Einstein's writings. But it is important to remember they are not germane to his scientific work; they fall *outside* the sphere of science, because the scientist

is also a citizen. This might appear strange to Vivekananda to whom all knowledge is one unit, without the religious or scientific compartments. It is this tradition of free inquiry from time immemorial that brings out from him the stoutest defence of the Indian religious tradition. It is a tradition which is rooted in renunciation and the life of the spirit.

While the great men of other countries take pride in tracing back their descent to some robber-baron who lived in a mountain fortress and emerged from time to time to plunder passing wayfarers, we Hindus on the other hand take pride in being the descendants of Rishis and sages, who lived on roots and fruits, in mountains and caves, meditating on the Supreme.

That is because, in India, religious life forms the centre, the keynote of the whole music of national life. 'Let all your nerves vibrate through the backbone of your religion', says Vivekananda. In a memorable statement instinct with a sense of history, philosophy, religion and a high sense of the national destiny he writes with a finality that reflects a mature understanding of the Indian tradition:

Every man has to make his own choice; so has every nation. We made our choice ages ago and we must abide by it. And after all it is not such a bad choice.

He highlights the unique features of Indian religious life which made it possible for Buddha to travel all over India denouncing her gods and even the God of the Universe. Then, there were the Charvakas who 'preached impossible things, the most undisguised materialism. They were allowed to preach from temple to temple, and city to city that religion was all nonsense, that it was priestcraft, that the Vedas were the words and writings of fools, rogues, demons'. It is the same magnificent freedom in religious matters that brought forth the mosques, stupas, churches and synagogues in honour of those who came to wipe out Hinduism. And within Hinduism itself, while the main basis of belief is an all-pervading Principle it also provided for *Ishta Devata*, a personal god, because, he would say, you have to reckon with the freedom of intelligence.

Vivekananda exemplifies in himself the freedom carried to its farthest limits in religious matters and sounds downright iconoclastic. Consider the following, uttered in moods of indignation and disgust:

Our religion is in the kitchen. Our God is the cooking pot, and our religion is 'Don't touch me, I am holy'. If this goes on for another century, every one of us will be in lunatic asylum.

You will be nearer to Heaven through football than through the study of the Gita.

You will understand the Gita with your biceps, your muscles a little stronger.

When the mood is on him he comes out with blistering denunciation of our numerous ills, callous attitudes, and corrupt practices. He is careful, in doing so, to dissociate himself from the flourishing trade of social reform and politics:

I am no preacher of any momentary social reform. I am not trying to remedy ills, I only ask you to go forward and to complete the practical realization of the scheme of human progress. . . .

Addressing the junior Swamis of Ramakrishna Mission he asks them:

Now be lost in deep meditation, now go and till the land; now expound the intricacies of the Sastras, now go and sell the produce in the market.

He did these himself. But if progress means slavish imitation of passing fashions of the West he would rather vote for old orthodoxy: For the old orthodox man may be ignorant, he may be crude, but he is a man, he has a faith, he has strength, he stands on his own feet; while the Europeanized man has no backbone, he is a man of heterogeneous ideas picked up at random from every source. He reminds his countrymen of their splendid heritage and asks them to be worthy of it and worthy of their millions of ancestors who are watching every action of theirs. But he can

also be quite fierce and lash out at them all at their infantilism and triviality:

Think of the last 600 or 700 years of degradation when grown-up men by the hundreds have been discussing for years whether we should drink a glass of water with the right hand or the left, whether the hand should be washed three times or four times. What can you expect from men . . . writing most learned philosophies on these!

More than a quarter of a century after, Jawaharlal Nehru was to speak in the same strain when he saw around him pathetic faces talking of national independence and wanting to bring about a revolution by passing resolutions at sedate meetings relaxing in their reclining chairs. He asked: Are these the men who can bring about a revolution? But where Nehru has softened the attack by putting it down in the third person, Vivekananda's attack comes while the admiring throng is hanging, so to say, on the hero's lips, and there you witness the torrential downpour of a summer day in the tropics:

Your blood is only like water, your brain is sloughing, your body is weak. . . . you have talked of reforms, of ideals, and all these things for the past hundred years till you have disgusted the whole world . . . but when it comes to practice you are not to be found anywhere and the very name of reform is a thing of ridicule.

These words were spoken in Victorian times and three-quarters of a century after they have a freshness and relevance, and an edge which none can miss, rather, make every one despair that time has made no difference to this slumbering nation.

It is not sledge-hammer blows always. If the audience is somewhat sophisticated he can be cool and have recourse to intellection; can invoke history to his aid and try to be persuasive:

Can you adduce any reason why India should lie in the ebbtide of the Aryan nations? Is she inferior in intellect? Is she inferior in dexterity? Can you look at her art, at her mathematics, at her philosophy and answer 'yes'? All that is needed is that she should de-hypnotize herself and wake from her age-long sleep to take her true rank . . .

No single individual, before Gandhi and Nehru came upon the scene, did more to de-hypnotize a complacent, slumbering people so much as Vivekananda. It is refreshing to watch him bring forth fresh arguments from his ever resourceful mental bag to meet contingencies as they arose in ever-varying contexts. Now is it the upper classes who insist on privileges on grounds of birth? He will turn the pistol and beat them with its butt-end: 'Ay, Brahmins! if the Brahmin has more aptitude for learning—than the Pariah, spend no more money on the Brahmin's education, but spend all on the Pariah. Give to the weak, for there all the gift is needed. . . . Our poor people, the downtrodden masses of India. . . .' It is possible he was the first to use the expression 'downtrodden masses' which was later bandied about by nationalistic orators and politicians until it became an abominable cliché and a farce in all cases, a sure sign of lack of fellow-feeling. But in Vivekananda it issued forth from an anguished heart; 'the masses' on another occasion became 'unnumbered millions' whose curse, he warns the privileged classes of India, will be on them and hard to redeem. If the priest should let loose his vendetta on the 'meat-eating Kshatriya' Vivekananda shows neither embarrassment nor intensifies the attack in personal terms, but blows up his precarious prestige as the repository of all learning and spirituality:

Meat or no meat, it is they (Kshatriyas) who are the fathers of all that is noble and beautiful in Hinduism. Who wrote the Upanishads? Who was Rama? Who was Krishna? Who was Buddha? Who were the Tirthankaras of the Jains? . . . Is God a nervous fool like you that the flow of His river of mercy would be dammed up by a piece of meat? If such be He, His value is not a pie.

Where a Gandhi would have prolonged the controversy, Vivekananda could dismiss the whole thing in a spirit of understanding: 'Jealousy is the bane of our national character, natural to slaves'. He tells the orthodox to be ashamed of their 'holier-than-thou' attitude. India's doom, he says with sorrow, was sealed when she invented the word *Mlechcha* for foreigners. This provokes him to unrestrained abuse, not unjustly perhaps, when one considers the incalculable harm done to Hindu society and to international relations.

This is all for his own countrymen. There were occasions when he was confronted with stupid questions by gullible foreigners who had picked up scraps of information from ignorant missionaries about Indian customs, caste, status of women, widow marriage, and so forth. In all cases, he came out unscathed in a controversy, not as a logical argumentator but as a literary controversialist—it is interesting how he can defend and even justify caste reminding us of Emerson's smart little poem 'The Mountain and the Squirrel':

Caste is a natural order. I can perform one duty, and you another; you can govern a country and I can mend a pair of old shoes, but that is no reason why you are greater than I, for can you mend my shoes? Can I govern the country?

He could dispose of the other pet prejudice of western audiences with the same ease when he spoke on India, and make them smart under his rebuke for ever:

I am asked again and again what I think of the widow problem and what I think of the woman-question. Let me answer once for all—am I a widow that you ask me that nonsense? Am I a woman that you ask me that question again and again? Who are you to solve women's problems? Are you the Lord God that you should rule every widow and every woman? Hands off!

Elsewhere he faces the question squarely and replies quite frankly: 'If it is widow's tears in India, it is the unmarried girl's sighs in the West'. As for the status of women he holds up the character of Sita as unique and as representing the ideal of womanhood. And to the epic he adds the historical name of Vachaknavi, the maiden orator at Janaka's court where she gave debate to Yajnavalkya. He says that our people took it for granted so much that even her sex is not commented upon. If his audience found that instance incredible he could ask them to compare Kalidasa's *Sakuntala* with Tennyson's *Princess* and ask: What has the latter to teach us?

He has occasion to warn the missionaries who spread these notions among their countrymen and he does so with

considerable restraint and avoids at all costs a brutal attack:

If, foreign friends, you come with genuine sympathy to help and not to destroy, god-speed to you. But if by abuses incessantly hurled against the head of a prostrate race . . . let me tell you plainly, . . . the Hindus will be found head and shoulders above all the nations of the world as a moral race.

As he corrected religious and social prejudices so did he seek to correct intellectual prejudices and misconceptions which had gained currency, because few among our nineteenth century intellectuals had his kind of equipment and concern. In the controversy between Buddhism and Brahminism he lays the blame squarely at the doors of Buddhism because Buddha, himself blameless, nevertheless failed to take into account the receptivity of the people who in their incapacity to assimilate his great truths 'brought out their snakes, their ghosts, and all the other things their ancestors used to worship and thus the whole of India became one degraded mass of superstition'. 'Where formerly the sacrificial fire was burning in every house, you now have gorgeous temples, priests and ceremonies in public'. He can go into more minute particulars, because he has read books, classical and contemporary, Indian as well as foreign, and, above all, has a rare capacity to perceive the motivations of biased scholars and critics. While engaged in a discussion of Buddhism he has occasion to bring in a book written by a Russian on the Life of Christ in which the author says that Jesus went to the temple of Jagannath to study with the Brahmins, became disgusted with their exclusiveness and their idols and so went to the Lamas of Tibet instead, became perfect and went home. Vivekananda calls the whole thing 'a fraud' 'because the temple at Jagannath is an old Buddhistic temple. We took this and others over and re-Hinduised them. . . . That is Jagannath and there was no Brahmin there then, and yet we are told that Jesus Christ came to study with the Brahmins there (and now comes the thrust), so says our great Russian archaeologist'. Vivekananda was far too well-read and far too sensitive, delicately sensitive, to endorse without reservation the work of the European Orientalists and

he warned his unwary associates to pay heed to the work of their own scholars, a stand which required tremendous courage and confidence, more so, then:

In translating the Suktas, pay particular attention to the Bhashyakaras (commentators) and pay no attention whatever to Orientalists. They do not understand a single thing about our shastras. It is not given to dry philologists to understand philosophy or religion.

It is amazing that an Indian of the nineteenth century brought up on European philosophy and traditional Sanskrit learning could take the stand of the newest Anglo-American literary critic who would dismiss philological exactitude and attention to words for their own sake as mere pedantry and not a creative literary enjoyment. It seems he once began the study of Vedic grammar in all earnestness but found to his surprise that the best of the Vedic grammar consisted only of exceptions to rules. Perhaps true of all grammars where a language is highly developed. But that requires a sensitive awareness of its literature which so few grammarians have. He says:

The world reads scriptures but they are only words, external arrangement, syntax, the etymology, the philology, the dry bones of religion. The teacher may be able to find what is the age of any book, but words are only external forms in which things come. Those who deal too much in words and let the mind run always in the force of words lose the spirit.

He^m did not like this 'text-torturing' and hunting up of sources, dates, and such other pedantic details but demanded sensibility. Consider the following remarks: 'If you want to be a Christian, it is not necessary to know whether Christ was born in Jerusalem or Bethlehem, or just the exact date on which he pronounced the Sermon on the Mount; you only require to *feel* the Sermon on the Mount. It is not necessary to read two thousand works on when it was delivered. All that is for the enjoyment of the learned. Let them have it, say amen to that. Let *us* eat mangoes'. (He is referring to a remark of Sri Ramakrishna who was sick of

men counting the leaves on a tree in a mango grove while they should be eating the fruit.) The word 'feel' in the passage above gives a clue to the operative part of his intelligence and sensibility which in a scholar given to the exposition of metaphysics is most striking and singularly exceptional. But one should not forget that Vivekananda was overwhelmed by the poetry of the Vedas and the Upanishads, was alive to the evocative, incantatory effect of words and rhythms and he brought to the exposition even of the sastras the equipment of a sensitive reader of poetry. He had a rare awareness of the difficulties involved especially in expounding Hindu ideas in English—he was in the nature of a pioneer in the field and was alive to the difficulty if not the intractability of the medium for his purposes—this is a great gain to Indian philosophy and to the English language; the one gained in clarity and the other enlarged its boundaries thanks to the work of Vivekananda. In a letter to Alasinga, a Mysore disciple in Madras, Vivekananda states his difficulty and sets forth his objective:

To put Hindu ideas into English and then make out of dry philosophy and intricate mythology and queer startling psychology, a religion which shall be easy, simple, popular and at the same time meet the requirements of the highest minds is a task only those can understand who have attempted it. The abstract Advaita must become living, poetic in every day life.

There is an acute realization in the foregoing remarks of his predicament as an Indian, but there is no bafflement. He knows that it has been brought about by the forces of history and his distinction consists precisely in proportion to his responding to the challenge of the times with conspicuous success, a success to which his originality and ambition, personal and national, contributed so remarkably. Vivekananda realized as only a creative genius can, that the very maturity of Indian civilization posed a problem with respect to verbalization, because of the *tacit assumptions* that people belonging to old societies share among themselves. He says quite sadly:

. . . it came to pass that our force of expression did not manifest itself before the world . . . and we worked to

hide everything we had. It began first with individuals as a faculty of hiding, and it ended by becoming a national habit of hiding—there is such a lack of power of expression with us that we are now considered a dead nation.

He casts a thoughtful glance at the West and he sees that the great idea of Greek civilization is expression. And through the centuries the backbone of Western civilization has been expansion and expression. Without chafing impotently at the sad plight of India, wise man that he was—he was fortunate in his great fore-runner Raja Rammohan Roy now known as the father of modern Indian renaissance—Vivekananda saw the wide vista before him and seized at once the opportunities which opened out to him. Talking of Western expansion and expression he says:

This side of the work of the Anglo-Saxon race in India is calculated to rouse our nation once more to express itself. The Anglo-Saxons have created a future for India, and the space through which our ancestral ideas are ranging is simply phenomenal.

He wrote in a letter in 1896:

The British Empire with all its drawbacks is the greatest machine that ever existed for the dissemination of ideas. I mean to put my ideas in the centre of this machine and they will spread all over the world.

How prophetic! There is hardly a doubt that he means both the medium of the English Language and the organs of communication that will effectively disseminate his writings and speeches. Look at the ideas he had to disseminate, even the literary part of what he had to say, apart from religion that is central to his life's work. One is not sure that any other Indian of his day had the calibre or the courage to say in English what Vivekananda has said about art and the language of art. One is aware that Jawaharlal Nehru has written the most incisive account of our past in his *Discovery of India*, but no one before him except Vivekananda. The Upanishads to Vivekananda are, 'in the first place, the most wonderful poems in the world'. Interesting that a monk and an exponent of Indian philosophy does not treat them as philosophy but as poetry. He talks of the sublimity of the poetry of the Vedas,

for example, the line 'when darkness was hidden in darkness' to which I had occasion to refer yesterday. His method of bringing out the greatness of this line, used almost as a touchstone of poetic excellence, is one of comparison. The comparison is with Milton and Kalidasa:

When Milton or Dante or any other great European poet, either ancient or modern wants to paint a picture of the infinite, he tries to soar outside, to make you feel the infinite through the muscles . . . That attempt has been made here also. You find it in the Samhitas.

Astonishing that he should analyse and compare lines of poetry dealing with the theme of darkness in the Upanishad, in Kalidasa and in Milton: Kalidasa's 'Darkness which can be penetrated through the point of a needle'; and Milton's 'No light; but rather darkness visible'. He thinks poorly of Milton; and says even Kalidasa cannot stand a comparison with the poetry of the Upanishad. Even so, one is very likely to miss the sublimity of the line unless one has knowledge of the Indian background, that is, has lived in the tropics and watched Nature's varying moods and seen how in a few moments, as Vivekananda says: 'the horizon becomes darkened and clouds become covered with more rolling black clouds'. Without this explanation perhaps even an Indian might prefer Kalidasa's line. It is good to remember that Kalidasa was after all a city poet; at any rate, he was writing for the city folk and a needle is more immediate and certainly more concrete than a black cloud (though Kalidasa has written a whole poem on the Cloud Messenger) and perhaps is more meaningful to the less elemental gentry than 'darkness hidden in darkness'.

Again, in the passage that follows there is something very abstruse and not accessible to the life of the senses, namely the quest for reality: 'From whence words come back reflected, together with the mind', 'There the eye cannot go, nor can speech reach'. Vivekananda comments:

All declare the utter helplessness of the senses, but they (our ancients) did not stop there; they fell back upon the internal nature of man, they became introspective, they gave up external nature as a failure as nothing could be

done there, as no hope, no answer, could be found, they fell back upon the shining soul of man. . . .

Vivekananda adds 'What poetry in the world is more sublime than this':

There the sun cannot illumine, nor the moon, nor the stars, there the flash of lightning cannot illumine; what to speak of this mortal fire.

or, that oft-quoted passage:

Me, the sword cannot cut, no weapon pierce; nor the fire cannot burn; me the air cannot dry; I am the omnipotent, I am the omniscient.

If the passage comes home to us with the force of freshness and truth it is probably because of the prestige of the speaker, his voice, his tone, his terrific earnestness with which he could engage his audience who were reeling prostrate under foreign rule, priesthood and capitalistic tyranny and were looking for an inspiring lead to give them back their manhood.

Vivekananda's supreme triumph lies in the art of exposition which is really a triumph of recreation. Consider one representative example—'My Life and Mission' in which he explains his mission. What is his mission? To give the Americans a picture of what India is like. He evokes the picture of contemporary India through a very vivid image: 'It is like a gigantic building all tumbled down in ruins'. In one sentence are captured the past and the present, the embers and the ashes, the glory and the misery—that is India. He does not leave his audience there; he will progress to a hopeful state. But first the transition: 'At first sight then, there is little hope'. Then he speaks of the principle which has sustained us despite the surface troubles that have affected India. Again he works through an image which carries tremendous conviction:

If your coat is stolen twenty times, that is no reason why you should be destroyed. You can get a new coat. The coat is unessential.

Now he spells out why it did not very much matter. He works in terms of balance and antithesis in order to make his valuation.

The Indian race never stood for wealth . . . although they acquired immense wealth. It was a powerful race for ages, yet that nation never stood for power, never went out of the country to conquer.

What then? This nation believed, and believed intensely that this life is not real, the real is God, and they clung unto God through thick and thin and, I should say in parenthesis, that he retained the word 'God' because it had come to acquire an evocative power. In the midst of his degradation religion came first to the Indian: 'The Hindu man drinks religiously, sleeps religiously, walks religiously, marries religiously and robs religiously'. Did you ever see such a country? With half pride, half cynicism he says, 'If you want to get up a gang of robbers, the leader will have to preach some sort of religion, then formulate some bogus metaphysics and say this method is the clearest and quickest way to get to God'.

Then comes a comparison in history:

See, Rome—Rome's mission was imperial power. And as soon as that was touched Rome fell to pieces, passed out. The mission of Greece was intellect, as soon as that was touched, why, Greece passed out. So in modern times Spain . . . India will never be a great political power, a conquering power, never, that is not their business, but God and God alone.

'I don't recall a time that has not given birth to several new sects in India'. He justifies it most convincingly and in terms of images: 'The stronger the current the more whirlpools and eddies. Sects are not signs of decay; they are a sign of life'. He uses the opportunity to condemn conformity: the conformist has to join in this rush or he dies. Now he gathers both the folds of the East and the West, holds them in his hand, as it were, attempts a valuation and suggests an integration. He sees no reason why the American should not sit down and look at the tip of his nose if he likes, and why in India a man must not have the goods of this life and make money. He is emphatically against the tyranny of the sages, against sacrificing millions to produce one spiritual giant. His mission is: 'Better that the one great man should suffer for the salvation of the world'. Now this

exposition is straightforward, for the theme he is expounding is historical.

But he has not one method. Anyone who has read even a few pages of his work could see that strength has been the constant refrain of his talk. That is the lesson he learnt from the Upanishads. And to what in dry philosophical and ethical accounts sounds didactic and commonplace he can impart a liveliness and immediacy. It is born of the speaker's personal experience and therefore enriches the reader's sense of gratefulness thanks to the engagement inherent in the dramatization. This is how he could break the concepts:

Strength, strength is what the Upanishads speak to me from every page. Are there no human weaknesses? says man. There are, say the Upanishads, but will more weaknesses heal them? Would you try to wash dirt with dirt? Will sin cure sin, weakness cure weakness? Strength O man, strength, say the Upanishads, stand up and be strong.

Half a century after Vivekananda's death Jawaharlal Nehru pays him a most handsome tribute when he says he cannot place before children another name from the history of India as apt as that of Vivekananda. Every word of his, says Nehru, 'drips with energy. Strength and fearlessness are the two qualities which he gave us'. Even in the exposition of so difficult a theme as Yoga he had the genius to apprehend clearly and put it with admirable lucidity, because he can speak from inside. He will tell you how you should sit, breathe, look, talk, think, eat—everything is given scientifically because Yoga is a science. And he can recreate a spiritual experience which is not available for experimentation, but which is authentic, though it eludes grasp. He can, however, convey the authenticity of the experience by poetic means and make it credible, more credible certainly than some of the mystic poets to a mind not ordinarily capable of responding to mystical experience. This he does by relating the stages of Yogic experience:

. . . sometimes there will be sound as a peal of bells heard at a distance, commingling and falling on the ear as one continuous sound. Sometimes things will be seen like little specks of light floating and becoming bigger.

Now he warns aspirants to Yogic power that the object of Yoga is not to gain power for oneself over the rest of society but to *make* power and impart it to the world: 'First hear, then understand, and then leaving all distraction shut your minds to outside influences and devote yourselves to developing the truth within you. Be like the pearl oyster'. He will even explain the work of the oyster.

It is the same intelligence, imagination and literary sensibility that stand him in good stead in his exposition of the four systems of Yoga. Even those of us who are rather allergic to philosophy and repelled by the congealed titles of Raja Yoga, Bhakti Yoga, Jnana Yoga, Karma Yoga, will find their efforts most rewarding if they can overcome the initial resistance and get to read them with the help of Vivekananda's criticism. Indeed, I cannot think where else one can get treatment of the four systems of Yoga expounded with such clarity, intellectual sophistication and awareness of their immediate relevance to the contemporary situation. The guarantee against any deception or delusion is his insistent criterion: 'You had better die an unbeliever than be played upon by cheats and jugglers'.

His means are the same whether he approaches Yoga sastra or secular writings: a first-hand response. In his exposition of the *Ramayana* one witnesses the personal urgency of a man who has felt deep down in his heart the profound significance of the epic. It is a short incisive account of the *Ramayana* and he takes up Sita's character for special consideration, presumably, for the striking contrast she offers to the Western woman. The West says 'Do'; show your power by doing. India says 'Show your power by suffering'. The West has solved the problem of how much a man can have. India has shown how little a man can have. Sita is typical of India (and he is careful to add), of 'idealized India'. And more perceptive: 'There is no other Pauranika story that has permeated the whole nation, so entered into the very life, and so tingled in every drop of blood of the race. She is everything that in woman we call womanly. Through all this suffering she experiences there is not one harsh word against Rama. There may be many Ramas, but there is only one Sita'. In his portraits of others too he can capture what Hopkins calls the inscape or the essential, the irradiating, quality by which all else is understood as a flash of lightning lights a mile of

darkness. Of his own Master, Sri Ramakrishna, first a personal, emotional reaction: 'my Master, my ideal, my God in life', and later he places him in history: 'This man had in 51 years lived five thousand years of national spiritual life'. But it is significant he was not invoking his name too frequently and too cheaply. His criterion was that the name should not be made prominent, it is his ideas that he wanted to see realized. This is the Vivekananda who strongly disapproves of Plato's Dialogues of Socrates on the ground 'they are Plato all over!' He had the true impersonality of a poet, essentially speaking. And yet when it came to response, how intensely personal is his involvement. See what Buddha means to him: 'I wish I had one infinitesimal part of the Buddha's heart'. Elsewhere: 'I will be the servant of the servants of the Buddha'. This does not mean he had no reservations about Buddhism: 'India was hypnotised by Buddha's voice, not made alive by it'. This is acute criticism and superb realization of the distinction between the man and his work—Buddha and Buddhism; and the incisive use of 'made alive', making one feel as though one is reading some critical essays of Leavis. His admiration for Sankara was unbounded and he could evoke his energy, intellect and dynamism in emotional terms, for Vivekananda felt the immediacy of Sankara's personality and work most profoundly and wrote as though he had *seen* him in action: 'Up rose that young Brahmin', he says and conjures up the figure of dynamic Sankara 'who at the age of sixteen had completed all his writings, the marvellous Sankaracharya. The writings of this boy of sixteen are the wonders of the modern world, and so watch the boy'. Not all the learned accounts of philosophers had helped one to visualize the kind of man that Sankara was. But then Vivekananda was no dry academic; he had the gifts of a poet, novelist, painter, all in one.

His enthusiasm for Sankara is understandable in view of his own advaitic position but he can be equally fair to Chaitanya who preached dualism, for such is the compelling power of Chaitanya's personality and work and such is his own integrity that he responds fully and completely. Vivekananda's emphasis is on the two contrasting halves of his personality and the mode of change from the first to the second. Born of 'one of the most rationalistic families of the day, himself a Professor of Logic, fighting and gaining a word-victory—for him the highest ideal

of life—and yet through the mercy of some sage the whole life of that man became changed. He gave up his fight, his quarrels, his professorship of logic and became one of the greatest teachers of Bhakti—mad Chaitanya', the last two words intimating a deep emotional response almost in spite of himself, being an unqualified champion of Advaita. Similarly, while he was strongly opposed to the Christian missionaries, he could still speak of Jesus in the most touching terms: 'I would have washed his feet, not with my tears, but with my heart's blood'.

That is what makes Vivekananda part of literature rather than of petrified philosophy or the tangled mazes of metaphysics: He is expounding the spirit of free inquiry in the Indian tradition—and does it as a scientist is expounding a physical phenomenon, or rather, as an artist is enacting the intermediary stages. He wants to understand the secret of India without mixing up emotion. 'It is collision of forces that produces motion, so does the clash of thought, the differentiation of thought that makes thought'. As though he fears his metaphor did not click he has recourse to an analogy, not one but two, one static, the other dynamic and both so concrete but not so commonplace as to insult our intelligence, and further argument is rendered superfluous:

Now if we all thought alike we would be like Egyptian mummies in a museum looking vacantly at one another's faces, no more than that—whirls and eddies occur only in a rushing living stream. There are no whirlpools in stagnant, dead water.

The last sentence, which recurs again and again in his speeches is in the nature of an endorsement, a commendation for our acceptance. He is not prepared to admit into his scheme of things even Eternal Law. Eternal Law is dreadful to the Vedantist because there would be no release or freedom from it. How is man different from a blade of grass if the law is always in operation? For instance a scientist can send an electric shock to a distance of some miles, but nature can send it to an unlimited distance.

Why do we not build statues to nature then? It is not law but the ability to break law. We want to be outlaws. Nature with its infinite power is only a machine; freedom alone constitutes sentient life.

How can anyone write this unless he had walked away with all the fire that Prometheus kept? It is that flame in him which burnt like a gem that makes him sound disdainful even to the idea of God when ill-understood. He demolishes the idea of the Kingdom of Heaven:

God sitting in a cloud! Think of the utter blasphemy of it—it is downright disgusting. Is that religious? It is no more religion than is the Mumbo-Jumbo religion of Africa. God is spirit and he should be worshipped in spirit and in truth. Does spirit live only in Heaven? ... we are all spirit.

And adds sarcastically, 'Of course the impersonal idea is very destructive; it takes away all trade from priests, churches and temples'.

Disdain makes room for sarcasm not merely when he thinks of priests but all meaningless ritual: As for bathing ritual, if its merits were accepted we 'should expect a fish to reach Heaven before anyone else since it bathes all the time'. And sarcasm gives way to irony. He is even capable of the Swiftian kind of satire, the kind we notice in Swift's *Modest Proposal*. When American audiences asked such foolish questions as: Why did Indians give only female children to the crocodiles, he would reply: 'Probably because they were softer and more tender and could be more easily masticated by the inhabitants of the rivers in the benighted country'. He could not help if the ironic part of it was lost on his obtuse audience.

Why do Indians kneel before all kinds of images? Yes, they should kneel before women and say 'you are my life, the light of my eyes, my soul, my life', and ends up in a neat formulation, and crushing because of its neatness: 'There is no use trying to cover festering sores under a mass of flowers'. His writings and speeches abound in such aphoristic statements. He tells his American audience not to fight over methods; after all it is the passionate integrity behind the method which matters: 'The message makes the messenger; the Lord makes the temple, not vice versa'. Or, 'out of trees comes the knowledge of treeness'; or, 'we are all waves; when the waves are stilled, then all is one', 'a spectator without a spectacle'.

He can even invent Biblical language in order to give his thoughts a force, a pointedness, and a simplicity that stems from the heart and goes straight back to it:

Why weepst thou, brother? There is neither death nor disease for thee. Why weepst thou, brother? Neither change nor death was predicated for thee. Thou art Existence Absolute.

I know not what God is—I cannot speak Him to you. I know not what God is—how can I speak Him to you? But seest thou not, my brother, that thou art He, thou art He.

But when the context demands he can exploit the colloquial element in the English language as hardly any known Indian of his time has done. Such was his mastery of, and inwardness with, the English language that he could twist and turn, and play with it as children do with clay or wax. This is conspicuous in personal correspondence especially. So pure and therefore so completely uninhibited that he apostrophises one of his women correspondents, 'fat laidy, old laidy'; and another, 'my Joe, dear Joe, my eternal Joe'; or refers to himself as 'a piece of Indian antiquity'; asks missionaries not to feed people on 'stuff and nonsense'; 'namby-pamby sugar candies'; and his countrymen to treat the pariah properly and not wait till the missionaries convert him and call him 'Mr Hodge-Podge'; has a dig at the frustrated women who join the church and become very 'churchy'. Now witness the playfulness of a boy, and in verse too. That was when he wrote to Miss Mary Hale one of his most important disciples and *she* versifies her reply which is worth quoting as it helps us understand Vivekananda better.

The monk he would a poet be
 And wooed the muse right earnestly.
 In thought and word he could well beat her
 What bothered him though was the metre.
 One day he sat and mused alone
 Sudden a light around him shone
 The 'still small voice' his thoughts inspire
 And his words glow like coals of fire.

But Vivekananda would not be deterred by metre so long as he could make 'coals of fire'. He persisted in writing verses as though he anticipated Ezra Pound who said, metre does not matter, the musical phrase is everything.

A monkey chat
For monk alone can make

That a saffron-robed sanyasi from colonial India, an outlandish figure in American streets and assemblies, should have drawn repeated applause from his audience when he spoke and that he should have been reserved by the organizers till the end of a conference as a bait to keep the audience in their seats for hours on end was a great tribute to his learning and powers of intelligence and expression. Of one of his addresses, it was reported in the papers: 'For nearly two hours Vivekananda wove a metaphysical texture on affairs, human and divine, so logical that he made science appear like commonsense. . . . This dusky gentleman uses poetical imagery as an artist uses colours, and the hues are laid on just where they belong, the result being somewhat bizarre in effect, and yet having a peculiar fascination'.

This is probably true of his stylistic effects. But one who should normally have spoken Babu English and without any help in the nature of a corrective from Victorian English models, themselves beefy and bizarre, and yet had to function as a pamphleteer, a shade aggressive sometimes but always noble and high-minded and invariably a nobler pamphleteer than Burke, Ruskin, Newman or Carlyle—that he could put the English language to such a variety of uses and leave as many as eight sumptuous volumes of his writings and speeches which the world has read with devoted attention is something to be grateful for in our brutal times. He is far more worth reading than Ruskin or Carlyle by the educated Indian and everyone that cares to. Romain Rolland truly said:

His words are great music, phrases in the style of Beethoven, stirring rhythms like the march of Handel choruses. I cannot touch these sayings of his, scattered as they are through the pages of books at a distance of thirty years, without receiving a thrill through my body like an electric

shock. And what shocks, what transports must have been produced when in burning words they issued from the lips of the hero!

And yet the same Romain Rolland has remarked that Vivekananda's 'pride is only a hair's breadth removed from the bragging of Matmore'. Surprising that he who spoke of the monk in such glowing terms as the foregoing should, by any stretch of imagination, bracket him with a comic character in Spanish and French comedy known for boasting of his imaginary victories. It is true Vivekananda was proud, was ambitious, but both pride and ambition were more than warranted by the universally acknowledged merits of the man. Nor was there anything cheap and egotistic about him. He knew he was the voice of an undeservedly oppressed people and symbolized its hidden strength and glory, and his mission was to vindicate them both. It was his conviction, and his great Master's wish, that he should be the instrument of that great awakening.

‘THE SUBTLE KNOT’

Or THE AMBIVALENCE OF JAWAHARLAL NEHRU'S SCIENTIFIC HUMANISM

Let me start with a reference to T. S. Eliot's criticism of the Humanism of Irving Babbitt, the great American Humanist who translated the *Dhammapada*. I do it not so much to lend literary prestige to my discussion of the work of one who is allegedly a politician first and only secondarily a writer*, but to try and relate Nehru's work to the accepted norms in the *genre*. Humanism, says T. S. Eliot, 'is either an alternative to religion or ancillary to it', and he goes on: 'To my mind it always flourishes most when religion has been strong and if you find examples of humanism which are anti-religious, or in opposition to religious faith of the place and time, then such humanism is purely destructive . . . Any religion, of course, is for ever in danger of petrification into mere ritual and habit, though ritual and habit are essential to religion. It is only renewed and refreshed by an awakening of feeling and fresh devotion or by the critical reason. The latter may be part of the humanist. But if so the future of humanism, though necessary, is secondary. You cannot make humanism itself into religion'.

One of my objects in quoting Eliot is to anticipate the confusion that the word religion may generate in the minds of, say, ill-informed Hindus and, possibly, the pseudo-scientists. For Mr Eliot, as for a vast majority of Christians religion is Christ, and Christ is Church. In that case there is no room for confusion. But it is obvious that Hinduism can eschew a person like Christ or an institution like the Church, and still flourish, not merely survive. But Mr Eliot's description of humanism is helpful to our discussion of Nehru's scientific humanism up to a point, because humanism according to Eliot can exist only as an alternative

* The scope of this lecture excludes close study of any of Nehru's works for which those interested may read my *Jawaharlal Nehru, A Study of his Writings and Speeches*. Rao and Raghavan, Mysore (1960) and *The Human Idiom*, Blackie, India, (1967).

or ancillary to religion. Now here, for Nehru as for any of us who know enough of essential Hinduism, is the subtle knot which holds 'critical reason' and 'religion' without the need to relegate either to a secondary place, as Mr Eliot postulates in his discussion of historical humanism—a knot in which one acts on the other and tempers the other so as to respond to life's problems fully. Perhaps Mr Nehru would have had no objection to my calling *that* subtle knot scientific humanism. But that is only preliminary and hardly central to the main thesis of my lecture. For my main preoccupation is to try and demonstrate as best I can how scientific humanism, a term that Nehru himself has often used to describe his essential outlook on life, has led in his case to an ambivalence which is so conducive to creativity. The subtle knot I speak of represents to me the amalgamation of disparate experiences, the juxtaposition of opposites even, resulting in different degrees of artistic experience and expression. Such I hold a large part of his writing and speeches—his history, his story of the earth in the form of letters to his daughter, his autobiography and the scattered remarks on art, language, and literature; because they do not take the form of two-dimensional statements but are cast almost always in the form of an *enactment*, inevitable in one who is not out to prove or disprove a thesis, but is content to concretize his inner tensions or debates without an irritable desire to reach after fact or reason—no artist shows this desire except at his peril.

It is important that we should have some appreciation of the way, since it is available in his own words in the *Autobiography* (a classic of its kind in the English language), he gathered experience in his boyhood and youth from two of the major areas opened to him, I mean religion and science. I am anxious we should not miss the built-in ambivalence in his remarks, the manner in which he now sympathises with religion, now withdraws from it almost alternatively: From his mother and aunt he listened to stories from the old Hindu mythology and from the epics—he adds that his knowledge of Indian mythology and folklore became quite considerable. *However*, religion seemed to be a woman's affair and the men-folk refused to take it seriously. *But* he enjoyed the various ceremonies at home *though* he tried to imitate to some extent the casual attitude of the grown-up men. *Nevertheless*, he tells us, he accompanied his mother and aunt to the Ganga for a

dip or went to see a sanyasi reputed to be holy. And then, there were the festival days of Holi, Diwali, Krishna Janmashtami, Dusshra, Ramalila and Moharram. Add to these his early membership of the Theosophical Society for which, he tells us, he later *lost* his regard which, *nevertheless* gave him opportunities to listen to metaphysical arguments, references to the Upanishads, the Gita, Dhammapada, Pythagoras, and Appolonius. Extraordinary that so early, he was 14, he began to think 'consciously and deliberately' of religion, and adds that 'the Hindu religion especially went up in my estimation, *not the ritual or ceremonial*, but the great books. I did not understand them, of course, but they seemed very wonderful'. He even became rather *critical*, quite seriously speaking, of his otherwise most admired father's lack of spirituality. 'I was a little hurt by his *lack of feeling*', he says. It is obvious he has continued to alternate between polarities since his early boyhood almost to the end of his life—now for religion, now not so much for it. He keeps going back and forth between these two positions, as we have seen in the oscillating positions he took above, which I have tried to suggest by italicizing my words leading to those contrary positions.

His Irish Tutor, F. T. Brooks, who introduced him to Theosophy was also the man who initiated him into the mysteries of science. Tutor and pupil together even rigged up a little laboratory and there he used to spend long and interesting hours working out experiments in elementary physics and chemistry. This was further strengthened at Cambridge where he did his Tripos in Geology, Chemistry and Botany, recalling which later in life, he tells a science conference he was addressing that he was 'a votary of science and have worshipped at her shrine, though fate and circumstance have drawn me out to the dust and din of the marketplace'. It was an exceptional year when Nehru did not inaugurate the All-India Science Conference. As Prime Minister, one of the epoch-making things he did was to start a dozen or more National Laboratories to collect scientists of promise and generate scientific activity; indeed, to bring about a revolution in our living conditions. He was himself directly in charge of scientific research and was President of the Atomic Energy Commission; and earlier had written as many as thirty letters narrating the story of the Earth—*Letters from a Father to his Daughter* was the first ever

book to be published by him. He had met many a great scientist of the world, some he even knew reasonably well, among them Einstein, Oppenheimer, Neils Bohr. As Prime Minister he had encouraged Members of Parliament—he knew he had to educate his masters—to set up a Parliamentary Science Club which was addressed by distinguished scientists. An Oxford scientist, a mere Reader in rank, whose little book *What is Atomic Energy?* he had read was personally invited by the Prime Minister for a brief stay in Delhi while he was passing through India. At home, he was aware that the scientific worker was praised and patted but not wholly approved of because he disturbed the *status quo* of things. That he was not himself guilty of this is proved by the scientific pool which he started to subsidize young scientists of promise looking for proper openings. A touching concern for science considering that he was the first Prime Minister of a country just emerged from colonial status. Such is his concern that he is quite critical of a statesman of an earlier age as he did not have a scientific outlook. He writes: 'that eminent statesman of the 19th century, Gladstone, in spite of his deep erudition, neither understood nor was attracted to science'. (And adds) 'Even today there are probably many statesmen and public men (and not in India only) who know little of science or the scientific method though they live in a world governed by the application of science and themselves use it for large-scale slaughter and destruction'.

Nehru is aware, as few statesmen of the world are aware and knows from inside knowledge of both men and the workings of science, that 'the human animal is generally conservative, and the Indian particularly so'. He knows of the split personality of even the scientist who talks physics or chemistry and conducts experiments in the laboratory, but hardly brings the scientific attitude to bear on the day-to-day questions of life. Nehru should have known that the scientist was not alone in this. The artist and the art-critics who speak with extreme sophistication of the play of light and shade, line, colour, rhythm, tone and gesture are themselves crude men and deny what they profess, most brutally in their own lives. The lawyer who insists on facts of the case' while discussing the law gives himself to most 'irresponsible and malicious gossip about his neighbour's daughter. And the teacher of logic has hardly ever given a stranger

cause to suspect his profession in a non-professional conversation.

To come back to Nehru. His scientific (or is it aesthetic?) susceptibility was presumably offended when at a Research Institute the presiding scientist spoke of 'science declaring war on Nature.' He asked if *he* 'could put it in a different way'—the difference is not just verbal but indicative of a true appreciation of scientific inquiry by the presence in him of a strong streak of the artistic: 'We seek the co-operation of nature, we seek to uncover the secrets of nature, to understand them, and utilize them for the benefit of humanity'. Even there he is careful to qualify his remark by saying: 'But science is more than something which gives us better living conditions'. He would like to think that science 'not merely betters the old but upsets the old, disintegrates some part of the old truth, and upsets men's thinking and their lives'. What Nehru values is the way science affects human consciousness—to teach us to think straight, to act straight, and not to be afraid of discarding anything, or accepting anything provided there are sufficient reasons for doing so'. He is ever on the search for what he calls 'the active principle' of science which is 'discovery', and that prompts a parallel line of enquiry: 'What is the active principle of a social framework or society? Usually it stands for conservatism, for continuity, rather than change', which therefore makes for 'a conflict between continuity or conservatism and discovery that brings about change and challenges conservatism'. Hence his insistence on science and the scientific method. Giving his Azad Lectures for 1958 he reiterated more strongly than ever, his position that 'it is not possible to solve the problems of the nuclear age with the conventional approaches of yesterday. Neither in politics nor in economics can those conventional ideas yield satisfactory results'. And in the manner he has gone about applying these to the problems of life, there is a singular absence of cocksureness. His language as well as tone of voice is one of tentativeness. Such expressions as 'suppose', 'possible', 'probable', 'should think', 'I am afraid', 'if one may say so', 'try and understand', the recurring 'ifs' and 'buts' and 'however's'; and answer-seeking interrogative sentences where a far lesser man would use the affirmative, a qualifying clause instead of an assertive, an intimation of groping, searching, travelling rather than having arrived. Those reflect the very

texture of his thinking, giving room for simpler minds to call him 'the Indian Hamlet'. His misfortune was he knew, as any true artist must know, all the colours of the spectrum while his critics thought only in terms of black and white.

It is true he had, academically speaking, an exceptional scientific background but even so there is not a vulgar, aggressive projection of it at the expense of others into the problems that face him as Prime Minister. For that, he would have thought, would go against the very spirit of science which values an attitude, a certain frame of mind, a freshness of response rather than a dogmatic assertion. It is as a politician that he is now looking at science: Politics, he says, led to economics, and this led him inevitably to science and the scientific approach to all our problems of life. Before I take up for consideration the subtler aspects of this play of science on his personality and work, I should like to consider very briefly how his scientific temper and an essentially aesthetic approach to life continually interacted on each other and manifested themselves in his activities as Prime Minister, and both so faithfully reflected in his prose. As the world well knows, Jawaharlal Nehru's interest in Marx and Marxism was more than superficial. In fact time was when his critics dubbed him 'a product of pre-war Harrow and post-war Moscow'. It is true that he always stood for social equality and economic opportunities for the underdog and the oppressed. But his central position was: 'We have too many dogmas. The world has suffered for a long time from religious dogmas. It now suffers from economic dogmas'. One witnesses in him a sharp realization of the terrific fact that the world today is in the midst of very rapid changes but the human mind and imagination lag behind. He almost seems to raise his voice a bit and admonish: 'To talk of *laissez faire* economy is to talk of the bullock-cart in the age of jet plane and has no relation to the present. To talk of buyers' market and sellers' market, he maintained, is to talk as if it were "pre-ordained by providence that there should be a cycle of ups and downs".' This is to him a petrifying economic phenomenon. Surely, he asserts, economic science and industrial science have advanced since these ideas filled the minds of the people. More than all, he wants to take into account 'the powerful urges that shape the human mind'—the reason why he welcomed any opportunity to escape from the deadly static atmosphere of

paper and files and ink in which 'one forgets there are human beings'. He believed that the human being grows, or ought to grow like a flower or plant—the reason why Rabindranath most appropriately called him 'Rithuraj of India'. He answered to that description in every gesture, word or deed, and managed to keep an amazing resilience of mind which to him is a necessary concomitant of life, as against death.

Consider an example of the resilience he speaks of and the *enactment* of various possibilities of a given situation, the kind of which one notices only in a work of art. The occasion was an address to the international Air Navigation Conference. It throws open at once the past and the present before him. He talks of 'conquest of the air'. Flying an aeroplane is a banal detail, after all, compared to its symbolic value. It is to him the acquisition of a dimension, a 'third dimension', by man who could 'only walk' until then. The Prime Minister falls into a reminiscent mood and imparts a personal touch and transforms a dead official routine into a voyage of adventure in which his audience become partners. There, surely, is the artist seeking collaboration from his audience. Consider the way he builds it up in the way a poet or a painter adds authentic detail after detail to project an extended image. He starts with his writing a school essay on aviation in 1900; because, we are told, it was then that the Wright Brothers were crossing the Channel or flying somewhere. He was greatly 'excited' by their exploits and 'had dreams of being an aviator or something like it' himself and, at that time, 'even thought of week-end visits home'. He remembers the various exhibitions and flights of airships in Europe and since then his chief regret has been he pursued other avocations, but adds daringly, 'Still I hope it is not too late yet', thus putting us in mind of T. S. Eliot's 'old men must be explorers'.

He knows that in a conference like this it would be folly for a Prime Minister to talk of technical matters. Besides, for him the significance of this conference lies elsewhere. He says, 'one's imagination is fired by this major development in the history of mankind—this conquest of the air—that the human being crawling about on the surface of the earth more or less in a two-dimensional way, suddenly leaps up to the third dimension'. Look at the choice of the verb 'leap'. Rather, there is no question of choice really—the thing and the deed cohere and become one,

are one, and conjure up before us the image of flying. What should strike one is, not the leap of the plane or the man in it into the air, but the leap of mind as though he is indicating a scientific process where it is usual to speak of leap of imagination. But he deplors the lag between the scientist's leap of mind and of the rest of society. And now the sad reflection: 'We get the wherewithal to do things. We do accomplish all manner of great deeds and yet we do not have the wisdom to know how to do them well'. He has no doubt that it is a subject 'for philosophers to discuss and not for this conference'. But he does not forget to drive home to his audience: 'Nevertheless it is good to bear that in mind, because technical excellence, important as it is, has to be allied to some other kind of mental quality if it is to be used for proper ends'. A question of ends and means.

When one would have thought him to have said more than his audience of air navigators could take in, he starts another inquiry—the position of vantage in air navigation that India enjoys, geographically speaking. And geography leads to history: From ancient times, he reminds them, India has never been isolated from the rest of the world. She had over-land contacts with her neighbours and she was a sea-power and commercial nation. That takes him back farther to Greece and Rome with whom India had intimate contacts once upon a time. He reminds them also of her linguistic, cultural, archaeological and architectural contacts with the countries of South-East Asia. Now history is brought up to date—to the coming of the British which resulted in the languishing of old contacts by land and sea with India's neighbours. Then her contacts increased with Europe and her old neighbours became more distant and alien and in a sense more difficult of access to her. It is a change that affected India greatly. Now the circle is complete and there has been a change again: Air routes across the West Asian deserts from Baghdad connect India and revive old contacts. All this geography, history, commerce, personal reminiscence, and the philosophy of third dimension and hopes for the future are evoked by a Prime Minister invited as head of the Government to lend the function colour and dignity, hardly to speak on so many aspects of air navigation. This is a typical instance of the range of interests and the mode of approach he used to make wherever he went, and whatever the subject he was called upon to speak

on. He would have a firm base of course but would also explore all possible ramifications of a subject in the attempt to expand his consciousness as well as those of others.

Even a Museum of Children's Toys brings forth something fresh and appropriate from him. Children's Toys, he says, should first of all 'excite their curiosity' but that is not enough: they must sensitize them to beauty. From the toys and the children to the Keeper of the Museum—an antiquarian! 'An antiquarian is necessary to collect museum pieces' but, he quips, 'he must not himself become an antique piece'; he must have a sense of the present, of the modern world. Only then can we make antiquity a living reality'. He is provoked to say so by the petrifying specialization which makes the practitioners fine specialists all right, but they lose all perspective, the larger view of things. And a few lines of poetry help to give a formulation to his present thoughts and imprint them in our memory:

A primrose by a river's brim
A yellow primrose was to him
And it was nothing more

These bring to mind the botanist who studies the Latin names of flowers but loses all sense of the beauty of flowers. Interesting how in a logical sequence fact, thinking, emotion, and attitude generate their kindred.

It is in his nature to resent anything that shackles the mind of man and let it fall into a rut. Even his policy of non-alignment in foreign affairs is, apart from all known considerations, basically intellectual and artistic. To him the question is: Are there only two ways of looking at a thing? Do the two power blocks exhaust between them all possibilities of thinking and doing things in life? He is not for a third group either for, even that limits human thinking and hence his 'dynamic neutrality', which fits into my 'subtle knot'. The entire Indian tradition is there to support him. He dwells on it on various occasions and tells us repeatedly how the Indian tradition has always encouraged freedom of inquiry and has not hesitated to 'look into the deep well of truth'. But he is too realistic to be carried away by romantic notions and hastens to add 'it has also allowed many social encumbrances and hindered the growth of thought'. It is this

polarization that is to me the constant source of his intellectual and artistic appeal.

It is much in evidence whether he is dealing with nations of the world or his own, now or through centuries of history. Consider his writing of history or science or his dealings with human beings, and one finds the same pervasive spirit of inquiry, the same interaction of the mind and the heart, of thought and feeling—resulting in the thought that moves you to feel and the feeling which compels you to think, and both making for what John Stuart Mill said of Coleridge's politics—'a poet's politics, full of variousness and possibility'. He starts quite rationally all right; it is, what one may tentatively call a scientific view of history, a scientific view suffused with the imagination of an artist. It is India's history—*The Discovery of India*. Watch how by a process of elimination—the elimination is not with a view to concentration on a chosen area but with a view to defining what is possible and desirable—he comes to his present concern. He cannot write about the present unless he can experience it—and he must experience through action, for mere thought without action is abortive: 'Nor can I assume the role of a prophet and write about the future. It will not be history', he contends. And so what remains is the past. But he does not care to write about the past in the manner of an academic historian—a dull catalogue of names, dates and dynasties. The academic historian and the political thinker (not in India only) usually lack a sense of art and thus inflict endless dull expositions. Whereas Nehru finds the past touching the present and becoming alive. That is because he can break the clay lump of past and put it on wheels. And as the wheels move they catch fire. Otherwise the past becomes 'a burden' and 'oppresses' us. And an appropriate quotation to clinch the 'past': 'Not only the wisdom of centuries—also their madness breaketh out in us'. History thus becomes a matter of personal urgency, a means of gaining some relief for the writer, and therefore his reader. And the following passage is a fine example of the urgency that we spoke about:

It is not this that we have to break with, but all the dust and dirt of ages that have covered her up and hidden her inner beauty and significance, the excrescences and abortions that have twisted and petrified her spirits, set in rigid frames and stunted her growth.

What no discerning reader can miss here is Nehru's inflexible devotion, indomitable energy and a concern to get at the inner core—he presents the image of a robust, determined young man, jostling and pushing his way through the crowd to rescue a suffocated man trapped under a collapsed ceiling or a passionately devoted archaeologist who, being in full possession of proof of valuable findings, excavates layer after layer of earth which has hidden his image or jewelry which will revolutionize our present notions of history and civilization. And the torment of the spirit finds most adequate expression in words like 'excrescences', 'abortions', 'twisted', 'petrified', 'rigid', 'stunted'. To break through them is a veritable rescue operation. Hence perhaps the title 'Discovery'. It is his own discovery. If it is said that every age must write its own history Nehru would take it a step beyond and ask that every man be his own historian. Each must experience it all, make up the whole, lock, stock, barrel out of his bitter soul. Nehru's scientific view which in his case is a global view of life makes him regard himself, not as an Indian except in a limited sense, but as 'heir to all that man has thought and felt, suffered and taken pleasure in, to its cries of triumph and bitter agony of defeat and to that astonishing adventure of man which began so long ago and yet continues and beckons to us'. His imagination encompasses all and has taken him away from a statement of fact with which it cautiously began. Again the same cautious approach, but a critical one. He approached India, he tells us, almost as an alien critic and came to her 'via the west' and wanted to give her a 'garb of modernity'. And soon doubt assails him; there is insistent questioning: 'Do I know her? Is there something vital in her? If so, what is it? How did she lose it? And has she lost it completely? He came to write Indian history almost the same way as a scientist proceeds to his experiment—collects his data patiently, observes, verifies, goes wrong, and starts over again. Consider his equipment for his task:

I read her history and read also a part of her abundant ancient literature. . . . I journeyed through India in the company of mighty travellers who came in the remote past and left records of their travels. I thought of what India had accomplished in Eastern Asia . . . I wandered over the Himalayas which are closely connected with old myth and

legend, the mighty rivers of India reminded me of innumerable phases of history. . . . visited old monuments and ruins and ancient sculptures and frescos, the lovely buildings of a later age. These journeys and visits of mine with the background of my reading gave me an insight into the past.

Now it is obvious he is doing something more than what a scientist does, certainly what most historians who sit cooped up in the national archives do. 'To a bare intellectual understanding was added an emotional appreciation and gradually a sense of reality began to creep into my mental picture of India. Hundreds of pictures stood before my mind and the past of India, the panorama of India, began to unfold itself'. But the one that is of interest to our present preoccupation and something that is central to his own inquiry in the entire book is: Why did India fall behind Europe? He has no doubt it is because of Europe's technical progress. He sees clear as daylight that behind this technical progress lay 'the spirit of science and a bubbling of life which displayed itself in many activities and in adventurous voyages of discovery'. New techniques gave military strength to the countries of Europe and it was easy enough for them to spread out and dominate the East. That is the story not of India only but of almost the whole of Asia.

It is not enough for a historian, though it may be more than enough for a writer of textbooks in history, to know the cause but he must also seek for the remedy, not suggest it himself but seek from history itself—a country's strength is inherent in its tradition and a historian, like the man of letters, must invoke what American scholars call the usable past to his aid and enrich the life of the present. Now he learns that India was not lacking in technical skill or mental alertness. Further investigation reveals a gradual deterioration but it is not deterioration only, he presents contrasting pictures of past splendour and present memory—'the urge to life and endeavour becomes less, the *creative* spirit fades away and gives place to the imitative'. Note the opposites which create images by means of key words (italicized by me).

Where *triumphant* and *rebellious* thought had tried to pierce the mysteries of nature and the universe, the *wordy commentator* comes with the glosses and long explanations.

Magnificent art and sculpture give way to a meticulous carving of intricate detail without nobility of conception or design. The vigour and richness of language, powerful yet simple, are followed by highly ornate and complex literary forms. The urge to adventure and the overflowing life which led to vast schemes of distant colonization and the transplantation of Indian culture in far lands, all these fade away and a narrow orthodox taboos even the crossing of the high seas. A rational spirit of enquiry, so evident in earlier times which might well have led to further growth of science, is replaced by irrationalism, and a blind idolatry of the past. Indian life becomes a sluggish stream, living in the past, moving slowly through the accumulation of dead centuries. The heavy burden of the past crushes it and a kind of coma seizes it. It is not surprising that in this condition of mental stupor and physical weariness, India should have deteriorated and remained rigid and immobile while other parts of the world marched ahead.

The passage with a concentration of heavily consonanted words evoking a sense of burden and oppression shows an unerring and amazing insight into India's past, her strength and weakness, in art, science, language, literature, religion and social organization. It is the manner in which he juxtaposes strength and weakness that illumines our present plight and suggests simultaneously sources of rejuvenation.

His disinterestedness and eagerness to know the truth and communicate it are so strong that at the end of that incisive account of the past he is careful to add: 'Yet this is not a complete or wholly correct survey! For if that were so it should have meant the death of an era. There were luckily bright and vivid flashes of rejuvenation from time to time'. Now he reminds himself of the myth of national destiny which every people have and he is convinced that anything that had the power to mould hundreds of generations must have drawn its enduring vitality from some deep well of strength. And the moral is obvious: We must renew that vitality from age to age. Nehru is only commenting implicitly on various attempts at renewal of this vitality especially during the past 150 years, thanks largely to the efforts of various social reform movements of the 19th century, and of leaders like Rammohan

Roy, Keshub Chander Sen, Ramakrishna Paramahansa, Vivekananda, the Tagores, and Gandhi pre-eminently.

But these reformers of the 19th century—where did they get this genius for synthesis? The answer is in India's past, in the astonishing assimilating capacity to absorb foreign races and cultures. Perhaps that is the way India retained her vitality and rejuvenated herself from time to time. Now starts his inquiry of the past—starts with the Vedas and Upanishads. Nehru admires their poetry vastly but refuses to look upon them as 'the Revealed Word of God' and rather likes to look upon them as 'creations of the astonishing mind of man'. And so they were. When he comes to consider the Upanishads he draws attention to the respect shown to the Vedas there but also the spirit of gentle irony: 'The Vedic gods no longer satisfy and the ritual of the priests is made fun of'. It is all there and why take it upon himself to break the idols when it has been done three thousand years ago in texts held sacred by our own people'. Blind reverence did not make them sacred, but the daring spirit of questioning and inquiry. Of course, he adds, the questioning in the Upanishads is not by the objective methods of modern science, yet there is an element of the scientific method in them. He gives a few beautiful examples of such questioning which must take our breath away:

At whose behest doth mind light on its perch? At whose command doth life, the first, proceed? At whose behest doth man send forth his speech? What god, indeed, directed eye and ear? (And again:) Why cannot the wind remain still? Why has the human mind no rest? Why, and in search of what, does the water run out and cannot stop its flow even for a moment?

And to clinch this spirit of adventure inherent in the Upanishads he singles out a hymn from *Aithreya Brahmana* 'whose every verse ends with the refrain: *Charaiveti, Charaiveti*. Hence, O traveller, march along, march along!

There is no humility about this quest. . . . it is the triumph of mind over the environment. 'My body will be reduced to ashes, and my breath will join the restless, deathless air, but not I and my deeds. O mind remember this, always remember. In the morning prayer the sun is

always addressed thus 'O Sun of refulgent glory, I am the same person as makes thee what thou art'—what superb confidence! (he adds).

Now I have read many histories of India by European as well as Indian scholars, and nowhere do I find such an incisive account of the Upanishads, with aptly chosen quotations—to quote as Nehru does must be said to be a sign of originality. There are, scholars say, as many as 108 Upanishads and more. But here in four pages we get what even in specialized studies of the Upanishads we may miss—the daring originality, spirit of inquiry, the magnificent poetry and the astonishing adventure that was started in this country thousands of years ago which Nehru highlights as of value to the present. Progress in science, says an eminent scientist, is not by *answering* questions but by *asking* more questions. What questions did these teachers of the Upanishads ask at the dawn of history!

As with the Upanishads, so with the Buddha. Nehru admires Buddha for his courage in attacking popular religion, superstition, ceremonial, priestcraft, and all the vested interests that clung to them. Buddha's approach, Nehru remarks, comes like 'the breath of a fresh wind from the mountains after the stale air of metaphysical speculation'. If earlier religion comes to grief at Nehru's hands Buddhism does not escape either: 'The rational ethical doctrine had become overlaid with so much verbiage, so much ceremonial, canon law, so much in spite of the Buddha, of metaphysical doctrine and even magic'. There is deep indignation when he thinks of these accretions to the great Indian tradition. But also pride at India's staying power. Both give rise to some of the most passionate prose in the book:

The tremendous inertia of age and size have weighed her down, degrading custom and evil practice have eaten into her, many a parasite has clung to her and sucked her blood, but behind all this lie the strength of ages and the subconscious wisdom of an ancient race. For we are very old, and trackless centuries whisper in our ears; yet we have known how to regain youth again and again, though the memory and dreams of those past ages endure with us.

Now look back on the negatives in the passage above and consider the choice of nouns, adjectives and verbs in the early part: inertia, age, weighed down, degrading custom, evil practice, eaten, parasite, clung, sucked—all these meant to evoke the burden of the past; and now study the second half of the sentence starting with the transitional 'but' indicating a turn, a hope, and the positives that follow to neutralize the effect of the negatives in the first half, reassuringly: lie, strength, subconscious wisdom, ancient race, trackless centuries, whisper, regain youth again and again, memory, endure.

He causes a wound with his surgeon's knife, makes it bleed, and smears the soothing balm with his fingers of feathery delicacy. It is easy enough, he knows, to demolish what we don't like but no one who has a concern takes pride in pulling down edifices. That is to be like Samson who pulled the edifice upon himself, may be, on his enemies too. But what is strength without a double share of wisdom? And this, Nehru knows, he owes it to himself and to his country (not only to pull down the dead wood of the past but create a lasting edifice) for they both must go on, and, in Goethe's words 'the only important thing is to go on'. He points to these agents of resurgence in the Indian tradition again and again. He has double agents, as it were—the devil and the angel; the one demolishes and the other gets down to reconstruction without loss of time. The dual process goes on simultaneously as in Nature; she is both Destroyer and Preserver, so is he. Contraries, we know, make for progress, after all.

Even a superficial reader of *The Discovery* can see for himself how the floodlight falls on these rather than on sterile dynasties of kings and emperors and their victories and defeats. It is more on the things that made history in the best sense of the term. Even a seemingly dry subject like science seems to gain wings. He praises India for her great mathematical contribution but in the course of centuries she grew conceited, withdrew into her shell and remained wrapped up there, while the Arabs kept the flame of scientific knowledge alive through the Middle Ages. He regrets how unfortunate it was for India not to have had contacts with the Arabs then, for that was the time of the Arab renaissance, and contact with Arab flowering would have done her great good.

It is the same when he comes to the six systems of philosophy. His criterion is scientific—he praises Nagarjuna 'the bold,

baffling and seemingly arrogant' Buddhist, for the way he shocked people by his ruthless logic till it led him to deny even what he believed in! Nehru has a sneaking sympathy for *Sankhya* philosophy which ruled out God thanks to its extreme rationalistic approach. But now starts the soothing process and even grammar can be the agent of soothing. It is Panini's grammar and Patanjali's *Mahabhashya*—both, in the opinion of a Russian academician, whom he quotes with approval, provide 'the ideal scientific work for India'. His unreserved praise is for Yoga because of the repeated stress on the experimental character of Yoga. For the same reason Sankara wins his unqualified admiration—his amazing energy, action, vision—and in all these Sankara functioned on the intellectual plane.

Dates normally don't hold his attention, but they do when he has to compare two identical or opposite situations and this makes his valuation felt for good.

When he comes to 16th century, he gives high praise to Akbar but his double vision can't help remembering that Akbar's age saw in Europe the birth of dynamics, a revolutionary advance in the history of humanity. With that discovery Europe forged ahead and built a new world. And Asia carried on in the old way. He soon corrects himself to say Asia is a large continent and no blanket answer would do. He can only speak for India and he knows that in many respects the countries of Europe would have seemed backward and rather crude to an Indian visitor of those days. Akbar with his inquiring mind could have forged ahead but he was interested in consolidating his empire and he had to reconcile a proselytising religion like Islam with the dominant religion of India. But a little later there is unqualified praise for Jai Singh who, he thinks, would have been a remarkable man anywhere and at any time. What is significant for Nehru is that he should have functioned as a scientist at all in the feudal set-up of Rajasthan. The way he selects historical material and organizes it so as to make a pattern emerge out of it is the same as a painter chooses his colours or a writer his words so as to invite the desired response without the need for personal comment.

If in *The Discovery of India* Nehru has functioned at a mature level and made some very fine revaluations and demonstrated in chapter after chapter the vitality of the Indian tradition he had

a different and difficult, though seemingly simple, job to do in his *Glimpses of World History* and in the earlier *Letters from a Father to his Daughter*. In both of them he is telling stories to a girl of 10 to 13; in one he is telling the story of the earth and in the other it is the story of peoples and civilizations through centuries of history. The story of the world has been told by many historians, big and small, and so is the story of the Earth, but I don't know of any except Nehru's which I can put in the hands of little boys and girls with hopes of reward for the hard-earned rupees I spend on them. State and Central Governments in India and the resourceful UNESCO have all tried to bring out children's books and we have not stopped complaining of the dearth of good books for our children. Seminars are frequently held on children's books and directions are given as to how they should be written but the results are poor. Now consider the very first story, a letter of three pages, that Nehru wrote to his daughter which I wish to consider as superb science writing for children. Our grandmothers had an accepted pattern of story telling, of opening the story and keeping the children absorbed: Long long ago there was a king. The king took a wife and made her his queen. The queen gave birth to a son. Before the son grew up the queen died, and then the king died too. Mr E. M. Forster, the novelist, asks: 'And then? and then? and then?' That is another way of saying suspense, expectation and surprise are the pattern into which most stories fall. Now Nehru accepts the time-honoured pattern of stories woven round living and loving human beings, with their suffering and rejoicing taken in their stride—with this difference, though: It is as though he anticipated an intelligent—or is it impertinent?—child's question: You always say 'long long ago there was a king. Why so? Was not there anyone or anything before the king?' Yes, Nehru would say, and begin with the beginning, not the biblical beginning of 'In the beginning was the Word', which would be useless pedantry—but the beginning of the earth, and he has the confidence in his powers of story-telling to say that this story of the earth is more interesting than any other story or novel that you may have read. He uses the novelist's technique and achieves the same success with more intractable material, it appears to me. Like the novelist he too relies on words and images, images more than words, to help the child picture events before its mind's

eye. He has not taken much liberty with facts or chronology and no scientist can frown on him for distorting truth to suit the story.

He begins: 'You know, of course that our earth is very, very old'—the repetition of the word 'very' builds up suspense instantaneously in a child's mind and when she is ready to accept the tremendous old age of the earth, he adds after a moment's pause 'millions and millions of years old'. The story now: The narrative is traced backwards, one stage dovetailed into another effortlessly and quickly. 'And for a long, long time there were no men or women living in it. Before the men came, there were only animals, and before the animals there was a time when no kind of life existed on the earth!' He must tell her why. He prepares her again for a fact:

It is difficult to imagine this world of ours, which is so full today of all kinds of animals and men, to be without them. But scientists and those who have thought a great deal about these matters tell us there was time that the earth was too hot for any being to live on it. And if we read their books, we can ourselves see that this must have been so.

The next stage in the story:

You read history in books. But in old times when men did not exist, surely, no books could have been written. How can we find out what happened then? We cannot merely sit down and imagine everything. This would be interesting for we can make up the most beautiful fairy tales.

This is the kind of story where the story teller is also the running commentator, a father who is also the loving tutor, and so he warns her that such stories will not be true—these fairy tales, he means. But fortunately, he goes on, we have some things which tell us a great deal. We have rocks and mountains and seas and stars and rivers and deserts and fossils (with meaning of fossils in the brackets) of old animals. 'These are our books for the earth's story. And so go to the Book of Nature'. The

expression, Book of Nature, even to grown-up people still remains an abstract concept and they cannot visualize it in terms of images. But Nehru has worked from the vivid concrete, step by step, to reach the abstract which to the little girl has now its concrete counterpart and will not be missed.

And to the story again: 'You will, I hope, soon begin to learn how to read this story from the rocks and mountains. Imagine how fascinating it is!' Again his method of narration is to proceed from the immediate to the distant, from the particular to the universal—it is at once the method of science and the method of art. He says: 'Every little stone that you see lying in the road or the mountain side may be a little page in Nature's book and may tell you something if you know how to read it'. The metaphor, Book of Nature, is now extended in its scope: 'To be able to read any language, Hindi or Urdu or English, you have to learn the alphabet. So also you must learn the alphabet of nature before you can read her story in her books of stone and rock. He brings her to the immediate and the commonplace:

If you have seen a little round shiny pebble, does it tell you something? How did it get round and smooth and shiny without corners or rough edge? It will tell you its story if you have good eyes to see and ears to hear it.

Now the process is reversed and the story moves forwards:

It tells you that once upon a time, may be long long ago, it was a bit of a rock, just like the bit you may break from a big rock of stone with plenty of edges and corners. Probably it rested on some mountain side. Then came the rain and washed it down to the little valley when it found a mountain stream which pushed it on and on till it reached a little river. And the little river took it to the big river. And all the while it rolled at the bottom of the river and its edges were worn away and its rough surface made smooth and shiny. So it became a pebble that you see. Somehow the river left it behind and you found it.

The narrator has come back to where he started from, but he has yet to complete his story by taking it to its logical end—and draw the moral as in the stories of *Panchatantra*: 'If the river

had carried on', he writes, 'it would have become smaller and smaller till at last it became a grain of sand and joined its brothers at the sea side to make a beautiful beach where little children can play and make castles out of sand'.

The moral is not explicitly stated, but other possibilities are suggested: 'If a little pebble can tell you so much, how much more could we learn from all the rocks and mountains and the many other things we see around us?' He has literally helped her to see the world in a grain of sand and eternity in the palm of her hand.

It is extraordinary how Nehru can quicken to life a little pebble that a child picks up from the road, treat it as if it were a child and other stones as its brothers, trace its origin to its parents, the big rocks and mountains, tell us how it grew up until it became the companion of the girl playing with it now. Look at the story either from a geological point of view or the metaphysical point of view of cause and effect, or the philosophical point of view of the beginning and the end, or simply as a story with a beginning, middle and end with a well-knit plot—it is fascinating. Nehru is trying to impart the facts of science and at the same time sensitize children to their surroundings—the beginning of all art and science which our system of education has failed to appreciate. Here is geography, history, fact, fiction, and philosophy, if you please, not to speak of good English—all rolled in one. And yet our educationists with all their formidable knowledge of psychology, linguistics and methodology successfully avoid such material to teach English and resort to drilling the children in structures and graded vocabulary—a plague on them both—making all teaching an abominable nonsense and a distressing farce.

And yet Nehru has built a 'mountain of letters', one as interesting as the other and together they form an essential part of a boy's or girl's education. They are among the undying children's classics which will not be found to be superfluous by adults. Let me confess I read them as an adult with profit.

While it is my intention to avoid as far as possible going over the ground covered by me previously I must be excused for making an exception which appears to me justified in the context of our treatment. H. G. Wells, writer of scientific fiction and best-seller, was also the author of *An Outline of History*, of world history,

and it should be illuminating to compare Wells and Nehru on one of the famous men of history*:

Wells's prose is cumbersome and pedantic. He writes either in first person plural which is so pompous or in third person singular which is so archaic and impersonal. There isn't in him that compelling urgency, the engaging tone, of Nehru. Above all we miss there his human touch. Let us briefly consider the treatment of Alexander and Napoleon by these two historians. Wells calls his section 'The career of Alexander the Great'. To Nehru he is 'a famous conqueror but a conceited young man'. Wells's account sprawls like a huge animal all over the place; whereas Nehru's gift is for economy, there is no essential which Wells mentions and Nehru omits. But Nehru helps us to assess Alexander's life and work better. He says that Alexander's greatness is 'doubtful' and that 'history has succeeded in attaching a glamour to his name'. He admits his having won some battles and being 'undoubtedly a great general' but he is 'vain and conceited and sometimes very cruel and violent'. In 'fits of anger or whims of the moment he killed some of his best friends and destroyed great cities together with their inhabitants'. He left nothing solid behind him, not even proper roads. 'Like a meteor in the sky he came and went and left little of himself behind him except a memory'. There is nothing like the last sentence anywhere in Wells's account: Imagination and intellect apprehend the value of Alexander's life in Nehru.

Wells's chapter on Napoleon, like the previous one on Alexander the Great, reads: 'Career of Napoleon Bonaparte'. The different phases of Napoleon's career are studied and the prosaic treatment smacks of the conventional treatment of emperors and generals in history books. He repeats in the same paragraph the qualities of Napoleon in very abstract terms. The portrait is vague, not concretized; whereas, Nehru's poetic approach to the character of Napoleon has yielded excellent results in one paragraph. In the very next paragraph he asks us:

'What manner of man was Napoleon? Was he a man of destiny or a wrecker?' He thinks both the views are 'exaggerated'. 'All of us', says Nehru, 'are curious mixtures of the good and the

* I have quoted the succeeding paragraphs from my book *Jawaharlal Nehru: A Study of His Writings and Speeches*.

bad, the great and the little. He was such a mixture, but unlike most of us, extraordinary qualities went to make up this mixture'.

In Nehru's moving narrative we follow Napoleon's fortunes with hope and fear and anxiety alternately. In one paragraph he tells us briefly of his birth, his French-Corsican blood, his military training, his affiliation to the Jacobins and his victory at Toulon by a 'masterly attack'. And then a general observation to crown it all: 'His star began to shine brightly now, and at the age of twenty-four he was a general'. This wave of hope soon gives place to one of fear and anxiety: 'within a few months, however, he got into trouble . . . and was suspected of belonging to his (Robespierre's) party'. And we are soon relieved to hear: 'But the only party he really belonged to had a membership of one only—namely, Napoleon.' Hope, fear, anxiety and relief, engage our emotions in natural succession.

Now, Nehru analyses the secret of his success and popularity: 'In his own army he shared in many ways the lot of the common soldier, and he shared also his danger, for an attack usually found him wherever danger threatened most. He was ever on the lookout for real merit, and rewarded it immediately, even on the battlefield. To his soldiers he was like a father, a very young father!—known affectionately as the "Petit Caporal"'. Is it any wonder that this young general in his twenties became the darling of the French soldiers?

Mr Wells doesn't do justice to this aspect of Napoleon. But Nehru doesn't suppress his opportunism or his dramatic poses. And yet, or rather, because of it, it is in Nehru that Napoleon lives in flesh and blood in these pages—his strength on land, his weakness on sea, his scholarly disposition, his partiality for men of letters (he took with him to Egypt a whole crowd of savants and learned men and professors, with books and all manner of apparatus) and the daily discussions of this 'Institute' in which Napoleon joined as an equal; Napoleon's interest in the proposal to cut a canal at Suez; his negotiations with the Shah of Persia and Tippu Sultan of South India, etc., etc.

Napoleon becomes a tragic figure in Nehru's hands, certainly more tragic than in Hardy's *Dynasts*—his ambition for founding a dynasty, his simple life, his vast energy, his divorce of the first wife; his desertion by her in the hour of trouble and the opposition of his own Generals and his family except his mother and son;

and then the inevitable end: 'The star that shone must now have its setting'. He becomes a prisoner of Europe and is treated shabbily by the British in an unhealthy part of the island and all manner of irritating restrictions were placed on him with not even enough to eat, with no news to reach him from his old mother and his son. Nehru refers to his vision of a league of nations; his testament to his son to reign in peace, not in violence and his artistic temperament (even when he loved power, Nehru says, he loved it not crudely but as an artist); his final fall and restoration of his statue on the Vandome Column. But this imperial theme must have a tragic ending and Nehru is, of course, equal to it when he says (after the statue was put back on the column): 'And the unhappy mother of Napoleon, blind through age, said, "Once again the Emperor is in Paris".'

It is hardly an exaggeration to say that Nehru has realised all the tragic possibilities of Napoleon's complex character for which we look in vain in Wells's *Outline*.

Let me turn now to Gandhi, one of the most enigmatic personalities of our age and examine how in his dealings with Gandhi, Nehru presents us with opportunities to watch the tension between the essential attitudes of science and religion which while not completely resolved nevertheless help to bring into fine play the creative possibilities of such a conflict in one so unusually endowed. In the early days of the National Movement the Congress under Gandhiji spoke endlessly about 'Swaraj' but paid no attention to its actual aspects. Nehru wanted a 'well-reasoned philosophy'. But Gandhiji was 'delightfully vague on the subject and he did not encourage clear thinking about it either'. Now compare this position with what follows immediately: 'But he spoke of the underdog and gave a boost to a broken up people. A demoralized, backward and broken up people suddenly straightened their backs and lifted their heads'. Now the two positions stand apart and Nehru takes no stand; he is ambiguous but one would think he has made his valuation—in favour of Gandhi. But there is no conformity to a doctrine for when it came to machinery he would not make any concession to Gandhi. Nehru's allegiance was to the adventure of ideas: 'Personally I have always felt attracted towards big machinery and fast travelling'.

With the sudden suspension of the civil resistance movement after the Chauri Chaura incident he was provoked to ask 'Must we train the three hundred and odd millions of India in the theory and practice of non-violent action?' He feared the movement would always fail, and criticized Gandhi for not making 'a rationalistic approach to problems'. At the same time he was aware that Gandhi was making a psychological approach, a breaking of the barriers of anger and distrust, an approach to the others' good-will and fine feelings. Nehru concedes that it may be all right in minor, personal matters where disagreement may be toned down by a personal approach, but what is one to do in major matters of principle?

Only he among Gandhi's followers had the courage not merely to disagree but even to dismiss as a metaphysical conception, Gandhi's claim to be a 'born democrat'. Later in *The Discovery of India* he thinks Gandhiji was 'consciously humble and spoke in his best dictatorial vein'. All the same Nehru reconciles himself to the fact that Gandhi did represent 'the millions of India, indeed, he was their idealized personification. He gave dignity to our spineless politics, was a revolutionary born for big changes whom no fear of consequences could stop'. Hardly had he reconciled himself to his position when Gandhi's unpredictable conduct took his breath away, for example, when he signed the Delhi Pact with the Viceroy providing for safeguards in most important matters such as Defence, External Affairs, Minorities and so forth. Nehru writes most helplessly:

There was nothing more to be said. The thing had been done, our leader had committed himself; and even if we disagreed with him, what could we do? Throw him over? Break from him? Announce our disagreement? That might bring some personal satisfaction to the individual, but it made no difference to the final decision.

Reconciliation, however, was not as easy as he makes it out to be though even here the agitation of his mind is unmistakable judged by the persistent self-questioning. For the deep anguish of his heart comes out:

Was it for this that our people had behaved so gallantly for a year? Were all our brave words and deeds to end in

this? So I lay and pondered on that March night, and in my heart there was a great emptiness as of something precious gone, almost beyond recall.

At the end of this laceration comes a quotation from T. S. Eliot's *Hollow Men*:

This is the way the world ends,
Not with a bang but a whimper.

It is interesting how Nehru quotes lines of poetry to crystallize an inner tension as though he was seeking relief in poetry for the deep wounds caused inside and forget his own sorrow in the sorrow of the world. On another occasion, again, in the *Autobiography* and in a similar predicament, he quotes Gerard Manley Hopkins:

Thou art indeed just, Lord, if I contend
With thee, but Sir, what I plead is just
Why do sinners' ways prosper?

If in Hopkins deep tension of the heart made for first-rate creativity in poetry, in Nehru (I am not bracketing Nehru with Hopkins) some of the most poignant prose is born out of his inner predicament, caused by frustrations inevitable for a sensitive intellectual leading a mass movement. Consider the following passage which was a consequence of Gandhiji's decision to fast unto death. Nehru was angry at his religious and sentimental approach and his frequent reference to God and the impression that God had even indicated the date of his fast. But all his anger was neutralized by the agonizing impact of the news:

If Bapu died! What would India be like then? And how would her politics run? There seemed to be dreary and dismal future ahead, and despair seized my heart when I thought of it. So I thought and thought and confusion reigned in my head, and anger and hopelessness and love for him who was the cause of this upheaval.

He was thus in his own words 'torn between rival loyalties'. Nehru wished he could make 'a clean sweep of religion because it was all

reaction, dogma, bigotry, superstition and exploitation and vested interests'. But soon he is prepared to modify his position, almost reject it:

And yet I know well there was something else in it, something which supplied a deep inner craving of human beings. How else can one explain the tremendous power it has been and brought comfort to innumerable tortured souls? Was that peace mere blind belief?

At another time, what he said in somewhat sentimental language, he seems to rationalize and present in the language of science as befits the occasion—he was addressing a Science Congress in Calcutta:

Science looks at the universe and the mysteries of the universe and tries to fathom them in a spirit of humility. It realises that truth is too big to be grasped at once, that however much one may know there is always much else to be known and it is possible that others may possess a part of that truth and so while the pagan view of life worships its own gods it also does honour to unknown gods.

The two passages, in effect, take more or less the same position. He does not of course make any intellectual compromises with religion or science but one is a language essentially of sentiment, though it is sentiment in full control of cerebration, the other is essentially a language of intellection without any touch of sentiment. In the latter he succeeds remarkably in rationalizing an important position but without admitting sentiment into it. But the impact these passages make on different people, and even on the same set of people at different times, is different. One makes us feel, the other makes us think, if a rough distinction is permissible.

While such diverse approaches in him produced two different types of prose, one, prose of faith, the other, of intellectual conviction and leave him blameless, one does not know what to say of numerous positions like the following because they leave one confused:

When his criterion of judgement is 'men's receptivity to truth and not truth itself'; or his seeming approval of 'the strategy of

indirect method' which despite his protests permits certain compromises with truth as against the strategy of direct method which a prophet or saint living in isolation from society can afford to take; or his preference for 'loyalty to colleagues and friends in a clash of ideas without seeking the merits of the case'; and when let down, taking the extreme position that 'one has to journey through life alone, for to rely on others is to invite a heartbreak'; or the personal admission made in the thirties: 'A Brahmin I was born and a Brahmin I seem to remain whatever I might say or do in regard to religion or social custom'; or when he says that 'in olden days the high-priests of religion talked about mysteries which the common people did not understand, today we have the high-priests of science who flourish the mysteries of science before us, not only flourish but threaten us with'; or when he posits: 'Perhaps science has been too narrow in its approach to life and has ignored many vital aspects of it and hence it could not provide a suitable basis for a new unity and harmony'; or when he half seems, in the context in which he was writing, to implicitly endorse Voltaire's famous statement: 'If God didn't exist it would be necessary to invent Him'—in all these instances one witnesses a different kind of prose, the prose of paradox. Are we then to apply to Nehru the stand he took in respect of Gandhi? He calls Gandhi a paradox and adds 'I suppose all outstanding men are to some extent paradoxes'.

Is it possible that the freedom of inquiry he claimed for science is so permissive that it admits even a paradoxical position? Shall we, then, despair, saying: There are more things in man's thought and action than science knows of; or humbly remind ourselves that the great Buddha who revolted against ritual and superstition to make a rationalistic approach to life is today remembered for his compassionate heart? The ambivalence of Buddha the Enlightened and Buddha the Compassionate.

Is Nehru's ambivalence a product of the exigencies of politics—especially of one who is artistically bent but cast for the role of a leader of an emergent society like ours, where he has to carry with him large masses of men and women with any alternative course threatening universal chaos—which render paradoxes inevitable. But the paradox did neither demolish nor blunt either his scientific temper or humanistic approach but offered a supreme practical example of the artistic possibilities of blending

both in a way which only older societies like the Indian seem capable of doing even in an age of science and technology which raises, in despair, the cry of two cultures. Consider, for example, one or two extracts which emphasize the paradox we have been talking about, taken from his will—one of the strangest wills in world's history, a unique document besides whose nobility and transvaluation of all earthly values the wills of greatest emperors, statesmen and business magnates look like paltry parchments and impudent nonsense.

Nehru writes:

I wish to declare with all earnestness that I do not want any religious ceremonies performed for me after my death. I do not believe in any such ceremonies and to submit to them, even as a matter of form, would be hypocrisy and an attempt to delude ourselves and others.

That is in consonance with the essential scientific attitude of his life. But read the extract dwelling on the disposal of the ashes in the Ganga and over the fields of India in which he denies any religious significance to his last wish:

My desire to have a handful of my ashes thrown into the Ganga at Allahabad has no religious sentiment in the matter. I have been attached to the Ganga and the Jamuna rivers in Allahabad ever since my childhood and as I have grown older, this attachment has also grown. I have watched their varying moods as the seasons changed, and have often thought of the history and myth and tradition and song and story that have become attached to them through the long ages and become part of their flowing waters. The Ganga, especially, is the river of India, beloved of her people, round which are intertwined her racial memories, her hopes and fears, her songs of triumph, her victories and her defeats. She has been a symbol of India's age-long culture and civilization, ever-changing, ever-flowing, and yet ever the same Ganga. She reminds me of the snow-covered peaks and the deep valleys of the Himalayas, vast plains below, where my life and work have been cast. Smiling and dancing in the morning sunlight, and dark and gloomy and full of mystery

as the evening shadows fall, a narrow, slow and graceful stream in winter, and a vast roaring thing during the monsoon, broad-bosomed almost as the sea, and with something of the sea's power to destroy the Ganga has been to me a symbol and a memory of the past of India, and flowing on to the great ocean of the future.

And though I have discarded much of the past tradition and custom and am anxious that India should rid herself of all shackles that bind and constrain her and divide her people and suppress vast numbers of them, and prevent the free development of the body and the spirit, though I seek all this, yet I do not wish to cut myself off from the past completely. I am proud of that great inheritance that has been and is ours, and I am conscious that I too, like all of us, am a link in that unbroken chain which goes back to the dawn of history in the immemorial past of India. That chain, I would not break, for I treasure it and seek inspiration from it. And as witness of this desire of mine and as my last homage to India's cultural inheritance, I am making this request that a handful of my ashes be thrown into the Ganga at Allahabad to be carried to the great ocean that washes India's shores.

The major portion of my ashes should, however, be disposed of otherwise. I want these to be . . . scattered . . . over the fields where the peasants of India toil so that they might mingle with the dust and soil of India and become an indistinguishable part of India.

Note all the details of fact and attitude:

That the body should be 'cremated' and the ashes 'thrown into the Ganga at Allahabad'; his attachment to the Ganga 'the river of India', beloved of her people, round which are intertwined her racial memories; her being 'a symbol of India's age-long culture and civilization'; her flowing on to 'the great ocean of the future'; and the rest of the ashes to 'mingle with the dust and soil of India'.

Now it is a commonplace that these represent the essential Hinduisim as embodied in the *Vedanta* and the ceremonies which

Nehru rejects are an accretion of later ages, a corruption of the pure spirit of *Vedanta*. Read the lines of Bhartruhari:

Mātar medini tāta māruta sakha jyoth sabhando-jala

O mother earth and father air,
O friend fire, great kinsman water,
O brother ether—to you all
In final parting I make obeisance.
Through your long association
Have the right deeds been performed.
Through you I have won pure shining wisdom,
Unweaving the sweet delusions of the mind.
Now I merge in the supreme Brahman.

Except that Nehru does not make any mention of 'the supreme Brahman' as such, his will is in its essentials strictly in accordance with the spirit of Bhartruhari's passage. Culture, on which there is considerable stress in Nehru's Will, represents everything from the way you greet a stranger to the observance of the profoundest ritual. It does not exclude religion except to the perverse. Indeed, it must include religion—according to one of Nehru's own working definitions of culture: 'All inclusion is a sign of culture, all exclusion is want of culture'. Names do not matter, and they must not matter to a truly cultured man, especially when names of things holy to the spirit have suffered disgrace by endless distortion and vulgarization at the popular level. Is it this which made Gandhi claim for Jawaharlal Nehru that he was profoundly religious, was much nearer to God than most people who profess His name? Another paradox, and his death the crowning ambivalence of his life, a life of paradoxes.

MULK RAJ ANAND

The Novel of Human Centrality

Popular opinion has bracketed Mulk Raj Anand, R. K. Narayan and Raja Rao as the three distinguished Indian novelists writing in English, largely because their names have been making news for more than three decades now. And that has been too readily endorsed by scholars and critics, reviewers and writers of Ph.D. dissertations—the endorsement taking the form of brief biographical accounts of authors, summaries of ‘plots’, ‘sketching of characters’ and sociological treatments of the ‘life’ depicted in the novels, and, in conclusion, a paragraph or two on the ‘style’. Where distinctions are made they fall into neat categories of Anand the Marxist, progressive or committed writer; Narayan the comic genius or writer pure and simple; and Raja Rao the religious or philosophical novelist. Perhaps there is something in these tags and it is therefore not with the classification that one quarrels but with, if one may say so, the mode of assessment. Except for scattered magazine articles by younger Indian and foreign critics attempting sophisticated approaches to Narayan and Raja Rao there hasn’t been any systematic study of the nature of their achievements, and sophistication has quite frequently degenerated into dilettantism (originality has come to mean that) by its preoccupation with peripheral matters in the name of ‘form’ and neglected the central vision which informs the novelist’s material, that is, in the way the material organizes itself in the presentation of human significance—the way our sympathy ‘flows’ and ‘recoils’. Even so, the attention of critics has stopped with Narayan and Raja Rao, the latter bursting into international prominence with the publication of *The Serpent and the Rope* in 1960 after suffering a neglect of nearly a quarter of a century.

But the neglect that Mulk Raj Anand has suffered in India and in the English-speaking countries, is of the most grievous kind—I said, English-speaking countries, because in the countries of East Europe his stock has always been high. But popularity in that quarter of the globe has only helped to confirm the suspicion of the West and therefore of most Indian critics whose critical

modes as well evaluations are derived from the West, that he is a writer with an axe, or many axes, to grind, as if any one will write, and can write, without an axe to grind—the integrity of the writer as writer and not merely as a man with a mission does demand a terrific earnestness of the kind that D. H. Lawrence speaks of: ‘I always feel as if I stood naked for the fire of Almighty God to go through me and it’s rather an awful feeling. One has to be so terribly religious to be an artist’.

It is inconceivable how anyone could have put pen to paper in the twenties and thirties without reflecting the sense of the age, the spirit of the times that so largely shaped his sensibility. One is not thinking of the political novels of the thirties produced in Europe and America as an aftermath of the Russian Revolution nor of T. S. Eliot and D. H. Lawrence; for an Indian at least can not be so naive as to overlook the fire that raged through the length and breadth of this land thanks to the national movement led by Gandhi, a movement which released the energies of men and women slumbering for centuries, and roused their conscience against our degrading social practices no less than our abject submission to imperialism, all of which to one like Gandhi was tantamount to spiritual weakness, immorality and irreligion. And so while opportunities of higher education in the older British universities, extensive travel, and association with progressive movements and causes popular in the Europe of the early decades demanding the liberation of the human spirit have obviously had their impact on Anand’s thinking and imagination his distinction and originality consist in the urgency with which he reacted to the problems of his own society, for they could not have failed to impinge on the consciousness of anyone with some show of concern. The product of such a concern, one will not forget, was Raja Rao’s *Kanthapura* and that remarkable short story of his, ‘Javni’. Now, that Raja Rao’s novel treated predominantly political material and the short story a social and human problem do not detract from their merit as works of art—the criterion surely is how much of human potentiality having its bearing on the total personality of man is brought into full play in the work and what it means in terms of significance for our lives today. That Shakespeare’s history plays contain so much political wisdom will not surely argue against Shakespeare’s poetic and dramatic genius. Nor did Hopkins’s religious preoccupation exclude his involve-

ment with the total predicament of man. The social, political or religious nexus stifles art only when the writer is under obligations to further a cause as, I fear, Anand seems to be, say, in short stories like 'The Barbers' Trade Union' and 'The Tractor and the Corn Goddess'. See how 'The Barbers' Trade Union' opens:

Among the makers of modern India, Chandu, the barber boy of our village, has a place which will be denied him unless I press for the recognition of his contribution to history.

It may well be a fact of history but I fear an unequivocal statement like this offends against art. Anand gives his case away in the very first sentence, for if a writer of the history of modern India had said so it would not sound so objectionable but when a writer who should let the situation and character interact and determine the identity of a person rather than impose it on them, he obviously lays himself open to blame. Consider 'The Tractor and the Corn Goddess'. That is what one would call a propaganda piece, a propaganda for the tractor as against belief in the corn goddess—all right when employed by the publicity officer of the Department of Agriculture projecting documentary films for the villagers. But it will not make it a work of art. As against both these, one has to read that beautiful piece that can legitimately find a place in any anthology of short stories, I mean, 'The Cobbler and the Machine' where the writer's love for the Cobbler and love of the Machine are seen in conflict and the response is mixed. He makes the narrator say:

And the mixture of resentment and pity I felt for the old man became transformed into feeling of hate for the machine, for as it stood hard and unbending, it seemed to have become a barrier between Santgar and me and the thing which had emphasized his self-interest so that he never seemed to put a stitch on any one's shoes without insisting on being paid for it.

And that evening we are told he fell dead as he recited the devotional line:

The days of your life are ending
And you have not made your accounts with God.

Strange that Anand, whose own predilections are for the machine and against religion, should let himself be swayed by the overwhelming human impulse as against the machine which seeks to stifle it and let the story proceed on traditional lines—such is his fidelity to the life around him that he lets the character seek his fulfilment in the only way known to his stage of life, class, and the milieu to which he belongs. The doctrine or his leftist sympathies, such as they are, are nowhere allowed to do violence to the integrity of his art. That is how one can explain the old cobbler reciting, as he lay dying, the lines from devotional folk poetry so common throughout this land. Mulk Raj Anand informs us in his *Apology For Heroism*, an essay of more than hundred pages which I read at one sitting with deep admiration, that he saw less privileged populations deliberately kept at a level of sub-humanity in view of which 'all one's presumptions about theory of knowledge and philosophical doubt seemed to become a mockery, a series of private jokes'. And later: 'In this "pink decade" there was less heroism, but many heroic gestures'. But as writer, he tells us, 'my media was the whole of my varied experience, the theme of my work became the whole man and the whole gamut of human relationships rather than only a single part of it'—which for him meant the introduction into creative literature of whole new peoples who have seldom entered the realms of literature in India.

Let me now go back, for a while, from the writer to the critic and begin with a personal confession, for in any case, an apology is called for for the delayed attention brought to Anand's work. The Indian literary critic of my generation maturing in post-Independent India had virtually to start from scratch and, what is worse, function in isolation with hardly any communication between his fellows although it is possible he had silently shared with them a common concern. But without its articulation and without the channels of dissemination of what was articulated the concern was as good as dead. While a scholar of the immediately preceding generation, like K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar, gave evidence of assiduous devotion to his literary studies and his own personal example must have inspired similar devotion in some serious minds and brought forth scattered scholarly work, their training, temperament and modes of treatment of literature did not always enable them to win attention to the work of art in the only way attention can be won, I mean, by demonstrating to the reader the nature

of the achievement inherent in a work of art. Even when they spoke of the achievement, the necessary discriminations were not made and it will not be unfair to say that seldom did these scholars succeed in sending the reader to the work itself—which I consider to be the chief function of criticism, for they tended to offer, in place of analysis and assessment of the works, their felicitously phrased appreciation of the works they sought to criticize, and the generous praise bestowed on all alike did the rest to prevent the work from being taken seriously as a guide to reading in unknown areas.

In the case of Anand, however, the writer seems to *share* the blame at least with the critics for his own neglect. Look at the titles of some of his novels and short stories: *Untouchable*, *Coolie*, *Village*, *The Sword and the Sickle*, *The Private life of an Indian Prince* as well as 'The Barbers' Trade Union', and 'The Tractor and the Corn Goddess'. Such published information as one had about his leftist leanings was enough to put one on one's guard against the possible risks of launching on unknown adventures especially when one had so much of proved merit to choose from. His active association with *Marg* for about two decades and his publications ranging from such exotic things as Indian curries to serious studies of Persian painting and Hindu view of Art were unlikely to have offered much help to the unwilling and the indifferent among readers of fiction to turn to him as a novelist of importance. And yet the misfortune is that a novelist of considerable importance has been living in our midst without our recognizing the immediate significance of what he has realized as an artist. And the way to recovery is hard and arduous: one has to take the trouble to read the immense quantity of his work—he is more prolific than Narayan as a writer—and the resources required of the critic are an ability to shed popular prejudices and a courage to set out on the exploration in the hope that a gifted writer can make art out of material ordinarily used by the mediocre for purposes of propaganda, and to speak out, if convinced, of the merit of the work, without expecting to find support for his stand realizing that prejudice after all dies hard. It is this conviction that has dictated the present inquiry and I think it suits my purpose to do all one can do to assess the nature of Anand's achievement—to see his powers and admit his weaknesses as a novelist—by focusing attention on, say, such

novels, as *Untouchable*, *Coolie* and *The Big Heart*; and these are chosen out of more than a dozen titles in the belief that they are fairly representative of Anand's art.

In *Untouchable* Anand creates a character who is seeking identity for himself in a world which has for ages suppressed his kind—a degrading social ill against which philosophers, poets and reformers have fought for over a thousand years. While Bakha occupies the centre of the stage throughout the novel there isn't any attempt to idealize him. He is a type and an individual. For Anand maintains an ambivalent attitude towards this character; and that he has no intentions of illustrating an idea, espousing a cause, and establishing a thesis becomes evident as we go along through the pages of the novel. While he leaves us in no doubt whatever as to his sympathies for this character because of the centuries of exploitation and suffering that have been his lot—his indignation at the society that so treats a fellow human being is unmistakable—he does not for that reason identify himself with Bakha, for he preserves his detachment and there is continuous mingling of approval and disapproval. Actually it is this tension which has redeemed a novel which otherwise may justly be accused of being a propaganda piece. In fact there seems to be more disapproval than approval of Bakha's obsession with aping the ways of the British 'Tommies' in the name of 'fashion'. There is, it is true, a psychological factor behind it—the 'Tommies' have treated him like a human being, while to the caste Hindus he is untouchable. And Anand has drawn our attention to it. He could very well have added that the British were also untouchables—Mlechchas to the orthodox Brahmin who refused to teach Sanskrit to Oriental Jones. Great reformers of the nineteenth century have denounced the 'touch-me-not' attitude of the caste Hindus culminating in Gandhi's attack on untouchability as the greatest blot on Hinduism. Anand does not, of course, employ the tone of attack—that would go against the grain of the artist—but makes an excellent use of the tone of subtle irony unsuspected in Anand because of the popular assumption that he is a propagandist who hammers his point home.

Young as he is—he is only eighteen—and spurned as he is like a dog, Bakha still fights to seek his identity. Anand suggests it in the choice of his incisive title without the definite article. And the name lends support to it almost, for Bakha is one of those

millions who crawl and creep and exist almost anonymously—he is the son of Lakha, and his brother is Rakha, all three of whom may have derived their names from the historical Ukha, an untouchable serving in Mahatma Gandhi's household when Gandhi was a young boy. Anonymity can only perpetuate anonymity unless the individual can fight hard for every inch of ground he adds to his poor estate; indeed, as we see in the novel, he has to fight for his very survival as 'scum', 'filth', 'dirt' by sweeping which, he is it.

The novelist lets us recognize his identity first by means of a few obvious strokes—he is a young man of eighteen, strong and able-bodied. But there are other subtler means at the disposal of his art: 'the rest of the outcastes were content with their lot, while only Bakha had his admirers and imitators. Only he thought of the 'uncongeniality' of his home. The novelist brings out the authenticity of such an awareness by showing it as the product of an aspect of Bakha's character which has 'caught the glamour of the white man's life'. While the disapproval underlining it is obvious it is neutralized by a sympathy implied in the observation that the Tommies had 'treated him as a human being'. If the phrase has hardened into a cliché the novelist can break through it by his irony when he posits that Bakha had learnt to think of himself as superior to his fellow outcastes—we are not merely told so, but we see it too. It is as though Anand is not sure whether or not to approve of it, for Bakha can preserve his identity only to the extent that he can be conscious of his superiority. It is by such subtle tensions that he sustains our interest in Bakha. Notice again how the same tension is sustained by the pulls of the positive and the negative when Anand says that Bakha would rather shiver and suffer the cold willingly because he could sacrifice a good many comforts for the sake of what he called 'fashun'—by which he understood the art of wearing trousers, breeches, coat, puttees, boots etc., as worn by the soldiers. There is a mixture of the comic and the pathetic in the attitude of an outcaste Indian scavenger who says 'I will look like Sahib', 'And I shall walk like them just as they do in twos with Chota as my companion'. There is a moment of realization too when the fantasy breaks down: 'And he knew that except for the English clothing there was nothing English in his life'. Anand reinforces the pathetic quest of the character for identity by other—more poignant—means. 'He often thought of his mother . . . her goodness, generosity and her

abiding love for him'. And the shattering comment that qualifies our sympathy for Bakha: 'He didn't feel sad, however, to think that she was dead. He just couldn't summon sorrow to the world he lived in, the world of his English clothes and "Red-Lamp" cigarettes, because it seemed she was not of that world, had no connection with it'.

We have been provided with opportunities of watching him caught between a world which despises him and a will which fights against it, to keep him whole. Even those who ill-treat him think he is 'a bit superior to his job'. But his 'exotic dress' or his absorption in his work—that gave him the look of distinction. A kind gesture from Havildar Charat Singh brought out a soft smile—'more akin to pride than to happiness'.

In the numerous episodes which he puts his character through, the novelist tries to give him his identity in the very act of our witnessing the world deny it to him or to those around him. The marvellous way he prepares us to meet the catastrophic point in the novel is worth a close look. Bakha having finished his day's work, is walking along with thoughts of the joy in store for him in the afternoon at the hockey field—Havildar Charat Singh has offered him to give a new hockey stick. The mood is evoked by means of a few vivid strokes when Bakha appeared with his 'basket under one arm, his broom under the other, and in his heart a song as happy as lark's'. A 'Red Lamp cigarette' and four annas worth of *jhelabis* complete the circle of his delight. Even as he is unfolding the paper to attack the *jhelabis*, looking at the signboards on either side of the bazaar, remembering the new arrangement he has made for his English lessons he suddenly hears some one shouting at him: 'Keep to the side of the road, you low-caste vermin! Do you know you have touched me and defiled me, you cock-eyed son of a low-legged scorpion. Now I will have to go and take a bath to purify myself. And it was a new dhoti and shirt I put on this morning!' We should, by the way, learn not to be shocked by these swear words which abound in Anand's novels, and must abound, if they are to reflect the life faithfully.

Bakha stood amazed, embarrassed—his senses were paralysed. Only fear gripped his soul, fear and humility and servility. Soon crowds gathered round him jeering and teasing, without a shadow of pity for him until a Muslim tongawallah came to his rescue—

one untouchable to the rescue of another. Mortified by the experience Bakha resumed his way shouting 'Posh, keep away, posh, sweeper coming, posh, posh, sweeper coming'. Against this humiliation of the centuries and the renewed, present affront to his soul how would Bakha stand up? The novelist preserves him by the 'fire that was a smouldering rage in his soul'. He is smarting under it and is angry with himself: 'Why was I so humble? I could have struck him'. All this fretting only helps him to realize he is only an untouchable. It is in this state that he is seen approaching the temple where his sister Sohini is working. His ears listen to the chants of 'Ram Ram Sri Hari Narayan Sri Krishna'. And from within the temple came the 'loud soprano of *Om Shanti Deva* and the hoarse shout of triumphant worship: *Sri Ram Chander Ki Jai*. Anand, as though in spite of himself but under the pressure of the character that is shaping itself, lets Bakha respond to it with all the spontaneity the moment calls for. Bakha, we are told, conquers the temple steps one by one—the word 'conquer' does what whole paragraphs of description of Bakha's state of mind may not have done—and Bakha is now close to the front approach, but nowhere within the temple:

Bakha was profoundly moved. He was affected by the rhythm of the song. His blood had coursed along the balanced melodic line to the final strength with such sheer vigour that his hands joined unconsciously, and his head hung in the worship of the unknown god.

The novelist uses this gesture of touching adoration to the unknown to shame the deaf and dumb at heart into a recognition of their inhumanity to one who while socially very much their inferior is in matters of the spirit infinitely better than they. Anand later enhances Bakha's religious stature still further by placing Bakha in confrontation with Colonel Hutchinson, the Chief of the Salvation Army, whose protrait, by the way, is a masterpiece of satire on Christian missionary activity. Carried away by his zeal for conversion the Colonel behaves like a clown but his intentions are innocent—to save the souls of poor benighted heathens while our inference from what transpires is that he really needed to spend that time more profitably at home. We are given a chance to have a glimpse of his sensation-loving wife shouting at the husband and making fun of his missionary

work. Bakha showed himself too strong in will for the missionary's manoeuvres: he thought he was happy with the religion of his father who similarly had occasion to resist the missionary in his time thinking that the religion which was good for his forefathers was good for him.

It is this steadfastness on the part of the lowliest untouchable for his religion and his fervour of devotion that are placed in contrast to the barbaric treatment he received from the caste Hindus. Even as Bakha was absorbed on the temple step in his adoration of the unknown spirit the cry of 'Polluted', 'Polluted', 'Polluted' disturbed him, and the shout rang through the air and completely unnerved him. At the same time another cry of 'Polluted' came piercing from a priest who made suggestions to his sister and molested her and in self-defence against her cry shouted 'Polluted'. This barbaric shock came to her after hours of waiting at the well at the pleasure of caste Hindus for a mere pot of water—she, an untouchable could not contact well-water directly, that would pollute the well for all time! We are now shown brother and sister suffering ignominy and shame, with the lie not in *their* hearts but in those who pretended to keep the truth of God, His abode and themselves in pristine purity. The untouchables, Anand's art has made us see, are not Bakha and his sister but those others who called them so. But the hypocrisy goes on and the novelist lets us witness the cry of defilement, pollution and a torrent of abuse greet Bakha as he goes out to beg the food for himself and his family. While a lazy sadhu presumably of the same tribe as the priests of the temple is treated as an honoured guest by the women Bakha is turned away with a curse into the bargain; with better luck at the next house, a paper-like pancake flung from above comes floating down and falls near a drain which he wipes and puts into this bag—it is such crumbs that he takes home to share with his ailing father and a hurt sister. At home his father adds his own bit of bitter reminiscing about the cruelty of the caste Hindus when Bakha as a child was nearly dying. The coming of Rakha, the younger brother, helps to reinforce the mood of the moment, for *he*, we are told, is the true child of the outcastes and belongs to a world where 'the day is dark as the night and the night pitch dark'.

But Anand relieves the gloom of the house by a human touch he can impart to it—a gesture of togetherness, family feeling

in a society in which the traditional family ties are today seen loosening and the well-knit structure is crumbling under the impact of technology and urbanization. The novelist informs us: 'They all ate from the same basket and the same bowl, not apportioning the food in different plates'—the solidarity of the family now the envy of affluent American tourists (torn inside) going through South-East Asian countries. But notice the poignancy behind the observation: 'Only Bakha felt a thrill of loathing for his brother go through him after he had eaten his first few morsels of the day'. Meanwhile his hand touched a piece of sticky wet bread and Bakha shrank back from the basket.

It is in this mood of disgust that Bakha strays into the open hill slopes outside the town with his nostrils full of fresh air and his heart as light as the spirits of the sparrows. As though Anand feared his own proneness to idealize his character, he pulls himself back to be faithful to reality and a wealth of knowledge of the world is there to enrich his thinking. Bakha's joy in natural surroundings we learn 'was a kind of crude sense of the world such as the peasant' or 'like the Arab seaman who sails the seas in a small boat and casually determines his direction by the position of the sun' or like a beggar singer who recites an epic from door to door. 'It wanted the force and vivacity of thought to transmute his vague sense into the superior instinct of the really civilized man'.

The observation is a testimony to Anand's ability for analogical thinking which by the way can also over-shoot the mark in its enthusiasm to idealize the untouchable into 'a lion which lay enmeshed in a net'. But observe the complexity of response which juxtaposes man and nature in a rather uncommon relationship even as Bakha lay down on the bank of the pool and exposed himself to the stillness of the sun:

In a moment or two his frame seemed to have sunk into insignificance . . . while the things on the sunny bank began to take life, each little stem of plant becoming a big leaf, distinct and important. The whole valley seemed aglow with life.

Did even Nature, who normally ministers to the soul of man and lightens 'the burthen of the mystery' and 'the heavy and the

weariness of all this unintelligible world' only add her share to underlining the anonymity of the untouchable while a leaf and flower assumed their identities from 'almost nothing'—almost nothing—the expression is Anand's. Or was it the reaction of Bakha's oppressed mind which could not register any response to the glow of life around? In either case it is the sharp and subtle triumph of the novelist's art in drawing attention to Bakha's acute awareness of his loss of identity. One can't help speculating what a novelist brought up on the Vedanta and aspiring to lose the individual in the universal, in the complete annihilation of the self, as the *summum bonum* of human existence would have made of the situation, and whether in that case the response of the reader sharing this tradition would be inhibited. Are value judgments involved in the two responses made from the humanistic and spiritual centres? If so how does one arrange them along the scale of values? But more primarily, must one's belief interfere with one's judgment of a work of art—especially, if it is admitted that a work of art is an autonomous object?

To go back to the novel, I have covered a major part of it and do not propose to attempt here an assessment of the rest of the book despite the obviously supreme importance of Gandhi's address and its impact on the inner workings of Bakha's mind, (as I believe I have done enough justice to it in one of my lectures on the Writers' Gandhi, I gave at the Punjabi University). But one hopes that what is so far attempted has not failed to win some recognition for the conspicuous achievement of this little novel, the first Anand ever wrote. It is a God-send (would Anand be offended by the invocation of God!) that he refused to write a treatise on untouchability in response to Gandhi's exhortation of him but stood his ground and kept his integrity as an artist, for the book will remain a human document long after untouchability as a social evil calling for a reformer's tractate has ceased to be a problem of the Hindu society. And that all this experience should have been packed with the intensity of the poetic into a short span of twenty-four hours is a remarkable triumph of the technique the full implications of its application to this novel being hardly realized by those who glibly comment on its 'stream of consciousness' technique as though that were in itself a merit of the book. The technique from Joyce and the iconoclastic inspiration from Marx and Lenin that he may have received in the treatment of his own

country's social problems, are in the nature of a catalyst, and the success, when we remember that it is the first novel of a young man, is one of rare originality in the Indian Novel.

If *Untouchable* owes its undoubted success to the edged economy with which the material is selected and marvellously organized so as to focus attention on Bakha's mind which is the scene of a deepening tension and an awareness of transforming the boy into a youth, in the next novel, *Coolie*, Anand uses a larger canvas so as to accommodate an incredible range of Indian life from the extreme North to Bombay in the South-West, using it on another layer as transition from the pastoral to the industrial phase, and then to let the character die a near-destitute while in the service of a phoney memsahib, an Anglo-Indian woman, living from minute to minute, away from her English husband.

The novel opens with the real raciness of the peasant speech—its very syntax, cadence and diction have been captured by one who had the audacity to do it in the early thirties in a novel meant to be published in England—and captures the very locale, the valley, through which 'the piercing soprano resounded':

'Munoo ohe, Munooa oh Mundu!' shouted Gujri from the verandah of a squat sequestered little mud hut, thatched with straw which stood upon the edge of a hill about a hundred yards away from the village in the valley.

All the concrete particulars in one sentence. And the next:

It is the beautiful Kangra valley with the majestic Beas which roved angrily among the greenery against the purple gleam of the hills.

There is a point in our remembering this pastoral scene intended, no doubt, by the novelist as a mode of valuation, as the central character Munoo, a boy of fourteen, turns to it in his mind with the nostalgia which only happy memories can induce in one. Every crisis—there are at least three of them—sends him back in mind to this abode of his childhood—despite the fact it was an unhappy childhood with a father dead, a mother left a penniless beggar but she too following him to the grave before long, leaving the orphan to the care of an uncle not always well disposed, and a childless aunt—who beat him more than the boy beat his cattle.

The lure of town life was an incentive which retains its edge till his death but the reluctance to leave his childhood home and friends was equally strong. Once out of his village we see the boy passing through various phases of life, essentially gaining no experience but retaining the state of innocence, by and large. The situations Anand creates are convincing on the whole and reveal aspects of life hitherto generally kept out of fiction as though they were tabooed from it. Almost every situation is painful but relieved, if one may so, by a marginal comfort which Anand takes care not to omit, but he leaves comfort no more than root room. And when pain looms large not merely on Munoo's horizon, but in the world to which he belongs nowhere is there a touch of exaggeration or even distortion of the life so presented. The singular point in his favour is the complete freedom from any desire to idealize his hero. Whatever the motivation which originally prompted his choice of character the novelist does not intervene to manipulate Munoo's fortunes but lets him work out his own destiny which both here and in the next novel would have been vastly different had he not been responsive to the cruel stresses of life and had conformed to a doctrine or pre-determined formula—that is why the ending continues to tease us in both the novels. One, however, has the inescapable feeling that there is more pathos than the potential to transcend it, or rather the potential is there but he does not invest his characters with enough fire to match the filth in life and so it appears to me they border on the passive. His characters do not seem to realize fully Proust's dictum that 'happiness is good for the body, but it is faith that develops the power of the spirit'. Well, Anand seems to say, there precisely is the tragedy of it all—here are people, young boys of fourteen and eighteen, who have for centuries been treated no better than street dogs. He lets them stray into respectable homes with consequences they cannot stand up to any more than the street dog. In the circumstances, sheer survival must be looked upon as a triumph of the spirit, the very will to live must be reckoned a strength. Consider all the acts of inhumanity the wife of Babu Nathu Ram subjects the boy to from the moment he sets foot in their place, and to top it all, the insult: 'Three rupees a month is a good wage, more money in fact than your mother or father ever saw'. In the midst of the misery and drudgery of work, Anand tells us with Swiftian mockery, there was the cool,

odorous draught that came in from the drain and dried the sweat on his face while scrubbing utensils in the dingy corner of the house. At other times the very proximity to the things the boy prized—a carpet, the mahogany varnish of the throne-like chairs, the various photographs sent him to a fairy-land although he was balancing himself on the heels sweeping the carpet.

There was occasional human warmth too when the younger brother of the master gave him a smile or threw some sweets at him or when the little daughter offered to scrub the utensils with him for play, though that was discouraged by the mother. But in the presence of the young girl we are informed:

He was vaguely aware of the need of love in his orphan's body.

But he was as yet essentially an ineffectual pawn on the chessboard of destiny such as the village priest had declared all men to be—perverted ambitions in a world of perverted ideas, and he was to remain a slave until he should come to recognize the instincts.

Well, Anand affords us an opportunity to watch the perverted ambitions of people—not perverted so much as degrading to one's ordinary esteem of oneself or one's country. That is realized in the manner Nathu Ram, the Sub-Accountant of the Imperial Bank of India tried to ingratiate himself into the favour of Mr England, the Chief Cashier, an Englishman just arrived in India. The entire episode is a superb success of art though as a matter of fact it finally proved to be a 'fiasco'—Anand's own word echoing to us from a distance, the muddle that E. M. Forster's attempt to bring Indians and Englishmen together was in *A Passage to India*. Anand has exploited the Indian's ignorance of the English social background and the nuances of English language even as Mr Forster has done, but in the process, poor Mr England does not escape unscathed. It looks as though Anand was returning Mr Forster's compliment and in just as good taste. But it must have taken no small courage to do it at a time when Indian Independence was nowhere in sight. One has only to compare Anand's handling of the Indo-British encounter with that of K. S. Venkataramani in *Murugan the Tiller*, a novel published in 1927. It is good to divert our attention a little from Anand to Venkataramani if only to appreciate what a formidable task India's first important novelist had to face in the handling of the

English language. Consider a novel published just six years before Anand's and commended (imperial condescension is unmistakable in the commendation) by such celebrities as Saintsbury, William Archer, Frederick Harrison, A. C. Benson and Lord Haldane, and in such magazines, too, as *The Times Literary Supplement* and *The Review of Reviews*.

We see here a novelist not merely insensitive to the English language but totally indiscreet in his choice of characters and situations. And this innocent had the temerity to let in Englishmen and English women into his novel and make them speak English while he could not make a success of what may be called Received English—that is, English as received in India. The British civil servant Mr Cadell writes to an Indian:

I was very glad to read both officially and from *The Madras Mail* that your Dusi-Mamadur lake scheme was a perfect success—beyond all expectations. Not only was the lake benefited to the full but also the innumerable minor irrigation tanks linked together lower down, received a full supply from the surplus water.

Again, in another letter:

I dare say you know I am now the first member of Council in the charge of the portfolio for Law and Order. The police here give us a lot of fantastic stories about the criminals who have not spared even the Government House.

Now, the long-winded sentences, and the clumsy phrasing are so apparent, and incredibly so when put into the mouth of an Englishman that further comment is simply labouring the obvious. Apart from the English of it consider the too easy harmony and fulfilment which can be likened to the millennium when towards the end of the novel Murugan becomes 'the God-Anointed Tiller':

Work was light as play for everyone in the settlement. . . .
None slaved for another. And labour was of the kind
which nourished body, mind and soul.

It is against this background for an immediate predecessor in the art of fiction writing that one has to view Anand's work. And yet look at the confidence, that is, confidence informed with know-

ledge, and alive with a keen intelligence and an eye for the incongruous that has gone into the presentment of an episode like Babu Nathu Ram's encounter with Mr England:

At first he (Nathu Ram) had tried for several mornings to muster enough courage to say something beyond the usual 'Good morning, sir'.

When as a result of constant pestering Mr England did agree to come, Anand describes with keen insight every little detail that went into the preparations—the news of the Sahib's projected visit spreading round the neighbourhood, the elaborate house-cleaning and the hanging of 'dirty, sack cloth curtains to guard female decorum from the intrusion of foreign eyes'; and the description of the tea party itself, a fiasco to match in a minor way the muddle of the visit to Marbar Caves in *A Passage to India*. But it is enough to get the highlights such as Mr England's being stupidly dressed for the occasion in a warm navy blue suit, with Nathu Ram on one side and his doctor brother on the other, with Daya Ram, the chaprasi in full regalia following behind, he felt hot and bothered; the noise of several people rushing behind the sack cloth curtains; the tall Englishman and the short, narrow doorway; the low-ceilinged six foot-by-ten room in which he felt like Nelson's Column; Mr England's blushing at the reiterated gratitude and flattery, the garland of faded flowers round the neck of the image of Ganesha, 'one of the heathen idols' which he had been taught to hate in the Wesleyan Chapel he had attended with his mother; the Doctor brother seeking advice from Mr England about 'courses of study' in view of his hopes of going abroad for higher education in medicine and Mr England's embarrassment on the realization that though he had to pose as a big top to these natives, he had never been to a university and knew nothing about courses of study except those of Pittman's typewriting and shorthand school in Southampton Row; the family photograph and the introduction of members of the group; and then the 'throaty wail' of North Indian classical music to a ear used to Rumba or 'Love is like a Cigarette' and 'Rosemarie I love you'; the children's obstinate presence at the doorway awkwardly staring at the pink face; the pastries on the huge writing table, the perfume of rasgullas and gulab jamuns, the pakoras (Mrs Nathu Ram's speciality) whose sight made Mr England sick; and Nathu Ram's

profound disappointment at Mr England's not wanting to eat anything in the hot weather except a cup of tea; and to complete the fiasco, the china falling into pieces from the tray while the excited servant Munoo hurried with it to bring tea. There is nothing to match this masterly presentation of the fiasco in all Indian fiction in English.

Munoo's troubles followed this fiasco; indeed he was blamed for it all, and given a good thrashing which made him turn to his uncle—his last refuge in this world and his only blood relation, and his kicking Munoo out with: 'I have neither sympathy nor food for you'. But such is the novelist's compassion for the poor and the destitute that when man plays false to fellowmen he could still find some hope in the lap of cool earth—'cool earth' rather than 'Mother Earth', for if Anand hasn't given way to hate, nor does he fall a prey to sentimentality though still in the grip of melting sentiment which is not allowed to be slippery, as we see from the following:

But the cool earth seemed to sponge his brain and suck up his strength till he fell asleep. Then he was like a corpse . . . even though his soul bubbled inside him, for Munoo still had a soft spot for Chota Babu and Sheila who played with him.

He remembered 'how nice' she was though elusive. The elusiveness is made concrete and in the concretization he imports a touch of the erotic into the picture:

The picture of her as she came out of the bath after her mother had subjected her to forcible ablutions came before his mind: a tracing of the outline of her figure behind the poor concealment of her wet muslin dhoti, which stuck to her limbs, a silhouette of pale bronze, with a delicate light on her regular, mobile features, a light which seemed to burst into a merry laugh and to cast a halo around her sometimes active, sometimes somnolent body.

Anand brings into the portrayal his finely cultivated inside knowledge of the plastic arts with which he infuses his description in words. And the remarkably controlled use of sex in a modern novel written in the generation coming between that of *Lady Chatterly's Lover* and *Lolita* demonstrates for all its rebelliousness

against custom and convention of every kind, the inescapable Indian temperament and upbringing. Sex here, one notices, is not anatomical crudity even when the anatomy is the focus of interest—it is invested with an aesthetic, a moral, dimension, and all the more remarkable considering it is a teen-ager's reaction that the novelist is offering us here. He invokes to his aid the sustaining power of family upbringing:

He had been told in his childhood to regard every woman as a mother or sister. He called the apparition of Sheila in his mind, 'sister'. But as it recurred again and again and made him want to play with her he forgot to label it 'sister'. Only he bent his head as one does in early spring at the ripening fruit in someone else's garden in his village, with the faint tinge of a hungry smile on his dark lips. The half-conscious sigh of tenderness that trembled upon his lips was smothered by another thought, another desire, arising from anticipation of the hopelessness of his love.

Anand, it seems to me, uses the opportunity to indicate the growth of his boy-hero's consciousness by making him recall his classmate's old mother who worked on others' fields, the hollow eyes of his own father who fell asleep for the last time, and the warmth of his own mother's lap as she was 'moving the millstone round and round till she had languished and expired'. The present emptiness that he was not alone but many, many others lived and died like his parents was some comfort, though a poor one. I recall my asking Dr Leavis of Cambridge how he would judge a nude. It depends, he said, whether it reminds one of one's honeymoon or one's mother's affection and wife's devotion. Anand's response to the near-nude to me shows striking nearness to Leavis's, such is the sensitivity of the response—the response of an art critic getting into a creative work.

To come back to Munoo. He who was brought into the town somewhat against his will is now ready to slip out of it voluntarily—such is his plight. But where will he go? He had found his way into a railway carriage as most unfortunates do and was picked up by a passenger called Prabha. If the first phase of Munoo's town life was packed with misery the second started with some relief, a balm to soothe his hurt soul. Anand brings out the tenderness, the warmth and affection that only the poor in

their instinctive response to the plight of the fellow-poor could show. For Prabha was a coolie like Munoo and being orphaned worked his way to a better state until he was swindled by his partner. Prabha's wife, a contrast to Munoo's previous mistress, in the wonderful eagerness with which she came up to Munoo, and without asking who he was, took him in her arms and patted him on his forehead, and later, when he fell ill nursed him like a mother. This modest woman showed a rich warmth and affection which Munoo had not known after his mother's death.

Contrasts, reinforcements, parallel situations seem to be an important part of Anand's technique in concretizing in words the pattern of life which he knows best. The wife of Nathu Ram has now her counterpart in Ganpath, Prabha's swindling partner, even as Prabha and his wife are a happy contrast to the family he previously worked for, not merely in their treatment of Munoo but in their entire outlook on life, in their honest, simple, almost gullible ways. Prabha had no intention of hobnobbing with big people or using them to advance his interests as can be seen in his dealings with his partner Ganpath and Sir Todar Mall as well as his wife and son. He was in such deep anguish (having been swindled by his partner) at human depravity that he could only say: 'I wish I were still a coolie and not in business'. The remark carrying its implicit endorsement from the novelist has its reverberations encompassing the entire theme of the novel; for Anand is making his usual valuation that economic prosperity of the kind aspired after by Munoo is no criterion of happiness. But the irony of it is not in participating in it, but being denied of it, the one is longing for it and the other, the older, knowing the transitoriness of it all is disillusioned and looks back on his earlier life as coolie, as a mode of keeping his soul intact. The Nathu Rams and, later, the Todar Malls owing their prosperity to opportunism, sycophancy and such other modes of self-degradation make interesting contrasts to the life of the coolie and make superb pieces of gentle satire—a satire which has its grounding in the moral standards shared by the novelist and his public alike and hence the reader's anticipated response.

It is the skilful handling which without despising them directly makes them despicable in the total scheme of the novel seeking as they do to build their happiness on the corpses of the poor with which the bazaar pavements of Bombay are strewn;

and the entire section depicting life in Bombay and the factory to which Munoo goes to work with an older man, Hari, and his peasant family forms the third phase of Munoo's town life, and that to me is most heart-rending. I don't know where else we get so vivid and so poignant a picture of the life of the pavement dwellers in Bombay. I shall not try to reproduce it except draw attention by a few phrases of Anand's own: 'an emaciated man, the bones of whose skeleton were locked up in a paralytic knot', 'a grey haired black blind man leaning half on the arm of his daughter, half on a stick', and the tormenting picture set off by the little girl with 'clear cut features that had once beamed with life', and next, 'a heap of patched quilt that half enclosed the rotting flesh of a leper'. The gruesomeness is relieved by the tenderness and compassion that the novelist imparts to these unfortunates: 'the hoarse moan of a sleeping beggar who protected her child as she lay close to it, resting her head on her elbow and looking out into the dark with a tiger's steel glance in her eyes'. When Munoo nearly stumbled on these there is Hari, himself trudging miles and miles with his wife and children in the hope of finding a job in the factory but who, amidst the pathos of his own miserable life, has the presence of mind, the serenity born of a determined acceptance of the hard facts of life to tell the boy in a tone of quiet dignity 'walk carefully, my son, let us not disturb other people's rest'. But the most poignant picture of all is offered to us when a few yards ahead they see a clearing on one side of the pavement to which they make a dash to rest for the night. What do they find?

A half naked woman who sat nursing her head in her hands, as if she were struggling to control the most excruciating pain, looked up and said amidst sobs 'My husband died there last night.'

And Hari's austere remark is offered not certainly in arrogant heartlessness but in utter humility: 'He has attained the release'; so is his decision, 'We will rest in his place.' I see in these simple sentences the wisdom of an old living culture which has sustained our peasantry through centuries of misery and manifesting itself now in an uprooted peasant in search of a factory job. Death has ceased to frighten these poor—they are past all fright; it is life that is a threat, and death is a release as Hari puts it. Besides,

to leave that place *then* was to be callous to the woman's plight in her grief, it is to isolate her and drive home the loneliness of her situation when what she needed was some fellow-feeling—all that one coolie could offer to another. And yet another little touch which is a crushing comment on the fanciful frustrations of the affluent section of society when the destitutes feel a sense of thankfulness to God that they could scrape a little sleep. For as the day dawned the wretches on the pavement woke up thankful to God even in their discomfort and they murmured *Ram Ram Sri Sri*.

Contrast these little pictures with the sordidness of rich merchants being complacently carried in motor cars and troops of school girls in their uniforms strolling along leisurely innocent of the world's suffering. Anand can build the contrast into inanimate, because flamboyant, architecture of the commercial quarters of metropolitan cities. Even that comes to consciousness:

The ostentatious splendour of the jumbled styles of architecture was realizing the significance of its garish stupidity under the floodlight of sunlight that spread from heavens.

I am not sure that 'significance' is the right word in the sentence above. But my object is to demonstrate how here as in the previous example depicting Sheila's sculptured look Mulk Raj Anand shows himself as our only important novelist who has paid any attention—though done in passing—to the plastic arts. His interest in them is well known but what is not known is the admirable manner in which he can incorporate and make functional an interest which in most people remains a compartmentalized accomplishment to prate about in drawing rooms.

The novel virtually ends with the section on the Bombay factory life which points out most incisively the inhuman side of our industrial city which has not got into fiction anywhere else. But what follows this section, the Simla episode of the Anglo-Indian woman, isn't an organic part of the total pattern of the novel and exists apart as it were, an after-thought, an accretion on so well-knit a work of art. I wish Anand could cut it out ruthlessly and restore the health of an otherwise admirable work—a work by which along with the earlier *Untouchable*, Anand can command a comfortable standing in Indian Fiction without the aid of anything else. I say so because after that most impressive

piece of self-introspection which young Munoo gives himself to when he says 'Am I really ominous? My father died when I was born and then my mother and I brought misfortune to Prabha and it seems I brought misfortune to Hari now. If I am ominous why don't I die?'—after this the next section is in the nature of an anti-climax and does not contribute significantly to our final assessment of either Munoo or the novel. Having said so, I must make a single exception for the very last sentence of the novel which speaks of 'the tide' of his life having 'reached back to the deeps', which is a tribute to Anand's unconscious spiritual predisposition for all the conscious protests he makes to the contrary. It sums up the tide that was Munoo tumbling from episode to episode without a conspicuous corresponding vertical development. As Anand says, to the end he thrilled to all the raptures of the senses. But it must be remembered in fairness to the boy and his creator that he was just past the stage of his childhood and had hardly transcended the state of innocence in the light of which the little evidence of self-awareness he shows from time to time and the self-torment at the end of the Bombay phase must be considered as an impressive achievement, but not surprising when one realizes that the underlying currents of his consciousness had been fed on the living religion which was so pervasive as to affect his total outlook on life, despite the degradation and sordidness he saw around. If we are not to view the novel thus, what then is its design according to the novelist? Does he want us to think that the character is a passive creature suffering all his life and dying unredeemed? If he lays the blame squarely on the society that cut short a life of promise is he not, I wonder, perpetuating the fatalism of the past against which he has clearly set himself strongly in novel after novel? But the ominous persistence of fatalism is there and is best seen in *The Big Heart*.

I should skip ten years in the writing life of Anand and take up for consideration *The Big Heart* published in 1945, but already anticipated in *Coolie* in which the wrestler Ratan who speaks of the need of a 'big heart' as the solution to happy human relationships. I propose to include this novel after the almost unqualified success of the first two novels as I think it will give us an opportunity to have an insight into the great gifts of a mature artist together with, I fear, instances of careless craftsmanship. *The*

Big Heart is most magnificently conceived, yes, magnificent in conception but the execution is not an unqualified success like *Untouchable* and like *Coolie* despite its last section which can be cut out without any injury to the work. We shall best see the merits and the weaknesses of *The Big Heart* by a close reading of the text, but not so close a reading as I would have wished it to be because of pressure of time.

See how a mature novelist is at work in the way, in the unobtrusive way, the theme is set forth. It is done most suggestively, imagistically giving convincing proof of the master that he has shown himself to be in the handling of language in the two novels we have so far considered.

The fact about water, like time, is that it will flow: it may get choked up with the rubbish and debris of broken banks; it may be arrested in stagnant pools for long years; but it will begin to flow again as soon as the sky pours down its blessings to make up for what the other elements have sucked up; and it will keep flowing, now slowly, now like a rushing stream.

One is taken by the admirable control of feeling and phrase that have fused into a union so perfectly and is indeed sustained at that level in the entire first section, and a large part of the second. But alas! it is not always so. Consider the rhetoric that vitiates the portrait of Ananta, the hero, by the conspicuous omission of the concrete and the piling up of the abstract:

But all the moral condemnation of himself and others, and his attainment of the splendorous heights above the spurts of sulphurous regrets in him, did not prevent him from succumbing to the abysses of delivery in the volcano below his stomach.

The adjectival insistence brackets Anand with that great European genius in fiction, Conrad, but it is poor comfort, thanks to the indiscrete use of adjectives. For read the next sentence:

And he hoped against hope.....even as the titanic choir of his arteries rose like a great chaos inside him

or, that clumsy construction.

.....began to press the balls in the necks of the soda-water bottles with the thumb and forefinger of his hands

—something to frown on whether in English or Punjabi.

And now the sentimentality of a sentence like:

The incarcerated sorrow welled up in his eyes, the saliva gathered in his throat, and the whole of his fluid nature slipped across the rocks of principles and the drifts of ideas swept over all the languages he spoke and understood, and flooded across the cheeks and his beard in hot scalding tears

Just one more instance of exasperation in section XV, where expressions like 'the protracted hum that was the undertone of the factory' and 'the ragged rhythm of the workshop' are repeated thrice in the course of one page, elimination of which would not require a Pound-like genius which reduced T. S. Eliot's *Waste Land* to half its original length but much lesser talent than Anand's to go over the script and do the needful—I shall make bold to use that expressive government office-clerk's word for the first time in a formal composition!

Did Anand repeat 'the hum' and 'the ragged rhythm' to reproduce the noise of the factory? Ah, if that were so I can show how marvellously he can elsewhere reproduce it by onomatopoeic expressions like 'the monotonous shrill, the rasping whine of the wheels revolving in a never-ending movement', 'the sharp twangs of the small riveting machines'—how these 'pulled him and enveloped him in the strange aura of the factory's roar'. If it is admitted that the rhythms of modern poetry are conditioned by the internal combustion engine, Mr Anand has demonstrated it adequately even in prose, but I am only objecting to the carelessness that has so pervasively crept into an otherwise admirable novel, in conception, that is. I spoke of the magnificent conception of the theme. Here it is:

In the centre of Amritsar is Kucha Billimaran, a colony of traditional coppersmiths called thathiars, now uprooted and on the brink of starvation due to the advent of the factory and the consequent loss of their traditional occupation.

The novelist intimates the change wrought by the years by the symbols, 'age of truth' and 'age of iron' which need to be clarified further. But that is by the way. What is important is how he can create the ethos of Billimaran from inside knowledge:

...the dilapidated hovels blackened by the coppersmiths' furnaces and foundries greased by the mustard oil saucer lamps ...and sweat of the men who hammer metal into shape day and night.

And a little below on the same page:

But the spirit of the time has not quite assimilated this innovation (the machine); men pass by the factory gate, their faces knitted into frowns like question marks.

One sees in these two extracts cited above the immemorial way of living of the coppersmiths—the simple mustard oil saucer lamps, the sooty walls, the sweat of men and the rhythmic hammering of the metal standing for tradition and the factory gate for modernity, and the implicit valuation of the novelist when we learn that the factory gate was a symbol of deprivation and hated by the men thrown out of occupation and hence the 'face knitted into frowns'—their present predicament.

Where does the novelist stand in relation to the two ways brought into conflict with each other? His artistic integrity is quite intact and refuses to be violated by the one or the other. He maintains an ambivalence suggested by the 'two headed snake', both the heads fraught with peril though Anand now and then seems to sigh for the vanished glory of old brass idols contemplating with their eternal stares on the celluloid stuff. It will be seen that the coppersmith community is composed of men who are themselves divided in their attitudes and so the colony is a melting pot and meanwhile there are the rich few, very few, and the starving many, who do not know how to set about the business and redress their grievances.

Into this troubled world comes Ananta a victim of the unreconciled pulls and pressures of these two modes of living. We see him in action smoothing the rough metal into shape by his rhythmic hammer-strokes and imprinting the moonstrokes on the finished pots. But he is too full of idealism—the 'moonstrokes' he imprints are a symbol of Anand's consummate art—and fellow-feeling to be mindful of himself while his brother-thathiars are starving; more so, as he has some knowledge of the labour movement thanks to his stay in Bombay. But the tragedy is his

vague idealism does not help him to come to grips with the realities of the situation—mouthfuls of cold water moralizing or what they call sob-stuff is no substitute for food which the starving urgently need. Mr Anand might well have turned to Shelley rather than Byron for a more appropriate foreword to his novel because Ananta has all the vaporous idealism of a Prometheus. But he is not rescued by Asia, the angel of love. In fact for all his idealism there is a strong prejudice against him among the thathiars because he is living with Janki, a widow from Bombay—a tubercular patient living on his hands and on his conscience, as he fears he has brought her to ruin. His loving solicitude for this 'childling' as he calls her and his dismissing thoughts of marriage because of his devotion to her is one of the tenderest things in the novel. Anand has fused the personal issue into the public one of leadership of the coppersmiths and has posed the issue of the suffering in store for a leader whose lead is questioned because of certain social injunctions interfering with the holiness of the heart, sacred to the leader, as an individual.

And here unfortunately is the additional factor of an idealism that cannot negotiate with the pressures of a socio-economic situation and, added to it, the jealousies of the adventurer seeking to build his personal glory on the grave of his rival to leadership. Ananta's tragedy is like that of Hamlet who is fortunate neither in Ophelia, innocent in her calf-love, nor in Horatio, his ineffectual friend. So is Ananta in his friendship of the poet Puran Singh Bhagat who cannot come to grips with the situation but can only speak of love begetting love and hate bringing hate. What Ananta needed was a man of action drawing him to the immediate particulars—so much was needed for one who had no sense of the concrete himself. We are repeatedly told by the novelist of Ananta's roguery, his turbulent spirit, his being stubborn as a mule, his 'untamed spirit' 'the impetuous Punjabi extremist' but nowhere except in the last act where he rushes in vain like Samson to bring down Raliah who was demolishing the factory in his bitter frustration and gets killed—nowhere do we have an opportunity to see Ananta, the man of action. Is it because the novelist to some extent identifies himself with Ananta? I am not sure that he loses himself in his hero, for there is throughout the novel an awareness of his hero's limitations in not keeping at bay the ghosts of the past, the voice of Kali crying

for blood, and his inability to deal with the grim present despite his frothy claim 'I feel I can fight fate'.

It appears to me that it is as foolish to blame Anand for the hero's inaction as to blame Shakespeare for the intractability of the material he was faced with in *Hamlet* which is a study in the failure of idealism. Like Hamlet who pitied himself in the idealism of his youth: 'O cursed spite that ever I was born to set it right', here was Ananta who sometimes believed 'in the faith in which the thathiars believe' and at other times 'feels that he could change the world'. Does Mr Anand gently smile at these idealists who thus delude themselves and serve neither the world nor themselves? And that is precisely the tragedy, the kind of tragedy that was Brutus's, and the tragedy that was Hamlet's. To speak of *The Big Heart* in the same breath with *Hamlet* is not to say that it is as successful as *Hamlet*, but to point out that while Anand, like Shakespeare, knew the dangers of frothy idealism in one who was to play the role of a man of action, unlike Shakespeare, Anand fails to fuse the various components of his art into one whole: the failure is not so much of art—he has the vision all right—but one of craftsmanship. Perhaps this has contributed in a very large measure to his work after the first two novels—*Untouchable* and *Coolie*—not being taken seriously in critical circles. Had the discipline that shaped a prose-poem like *Untouchable* not relaxed its grip on the creative mind at work for the next thirty years and more we should, despite his operation in a humanistic framework in a society whose mainstream is religion—we should, still be referring to him in superlative terms, but the valuation now takes the form of: 'A major novelist, yes; but.....' the 'but' announcing the failure of form in a succession of novels, failure, that is, of the content to form itself into an unqualified work of art. A much lesser talent than the one that has now gone into his works can still rectify it. Why should it be the privilege only of poets to subject their work to endless revision? But Mr Anand, still in the full vigour of body and mind,—would he care to consider what naturally sounds so impertinent and preposterous?

There are obviously many more things which one would have liked to dwell on in the novel but I hope that what has been said does help in some measure to see that we have in Mulk Raj Anand a novelist who is not so interested in portraying the

beauty or ugliness of life and espousing Marx or the machine, as in sensitizing us to the horror of poverty and suffering, the heartlessness of the few which thwarts the promising life of the helpless young, and the flaming idealism of others which will burn itself out because it can't cope with the many-cornered attack in its half-developed state. And I for one feel grateful to a writer who has tried to do it all in terms of art; and its value we best appreciate when we remember Tolstoy who responded to a similar situation in his own society when he exhorted 'Art must remove violence, only art can do it'.

R. K. NARAYAN

The Comic as a mode of study in Maturity

For some odd reason I came to read, re-read I mean for the purpose of this lecture, R. K. Narayan's first novel last, of all he has written to date. I noticed for the first time on the paperback cover of *Swami and Friends* the following flattering—flattering for a first novel—views expressed in responsible quarters. To Graham Greene *Swami and Friends* is 'one in ten thousand'. Compton Macenzie thought: 'An entirely delightful story. I have never read any other book about India in the least like it'. A critic of the *Spectator* claimed 'there isn't a single dull page in the whole book'. Re-reading this novel of a school-boy's life after twenty years—I was surprised, because of their otherwise inclusiveness, to find myself endorsing fully the reviewers' first flush of enthusiasm for a novel by an entirely unknown quantity from colonial India. All the more surprising when one realized that R. K. Narayan has not been educated in any of the older or the more modern redbrick universities of England or America, no, not so much as visited them until 1951, and, I believe, had scarcely left South India; had learnt English mostly from Indian teachers, themselves ill-equipped for their calling; spoke Tamil at home, a sort of Kannada in the streets and English with a South-Indian accent in educated circles; did not pass examinations at school or college with any credit to himself or the institutions which are now seen contending to own him as *their* product. Nor has Narayan claimed to have much concern—a valuation which goes against him—for the state of the world, or, considering the troubled times in which he was writing, for his own country's cause in politics. Indeed the world-makers and world-forsakers never ceased to amuse him, such was his detachment from everything that was going on around him that it only helped to sharpen his wit and quicken his compassion for everyone, everything, but mainly for what fell within his province. And his province was the South Indian middle class, which he knew how to handle in fiction, a fiction written not for an audience six thousand miles away (as his jealous detractors writing in the

regional languages accuse him), but largely for his own English-knowing countrymen.

Himself a product of the Hindu middle class, sharing the beliefs, superstitions and perhaps the prejudices of his class in a small town and viewing its goings on with sympathy but also with a keen eye for the comic in the life around him, he had qualified himself to be a writer of his own class and the provincial town. Actually the odd men or rather, the oddities in men, in the ordinary men, seemed to evoke his interest most but they are invariably common men with a marked potential for the uncommon, trying to win attention to themselves: how do such men struggle towards maturity, such maturity as they can achieve within the accepted religious and social framework? That seems to have been Narayan's preoccupation enacted in a succession of novels with different degrees of success. At any rate the novels lend themselves to such a view.

I should like to study this struggle towards maturity with reference to three or four novels which I consider representative. Take his very first, *Swami and Friends* if only to know how his preoccupations have remained constant through these three decades of his writing career. He has scarcely stirred out of Malgudi nor have his characters; and if by ill-luck they did stray out of the municipal limits of Malgudi they invariably came back, sadder and wiser—such is the spirit of place, Malgudi the microcosm of traditional Indian society. We are introduced in this very first novel to Malgudi and its interior—Nallappa Grove, the Lawley Extension, Kabir Road, the Albert Mission School, the spreading tamarind tree, the river Sarayu, the Mempi Hills close by with all of which our familiarity grows in novel after novel. Take a look at the characters that make this world: Swaminathan, Swami for short, the child that is father of the man, the Narayan man, who is Chandran of the *Bachelor of Arts*, Krishnan of *The English Teacher*, Sampath of the same title, Margayya of *The Financial Expert*, Raju of *The Guide*, and so forth.

Consider now the first paragraph of *Swami and Friends* which introduces us straight away to some of Narayan's characteristic concerns as seen in situation, character, tone of voice, and mode of treatment:

It was Monday morning. Swaminathan was reluctant to open his eyes. He considered Monday especially unpleasant in the calendar. After the delicious freedom of Saturday and Sunday it was difficult to get into the Monday mood of work and discipline. He shuddered at the very thought of school, that dismal yellow building; the fire-eyed Vedanayagam, his class teacher; and the Headmaster with his thin stick.....'

Mark the expression 'the delicious freedom of Saturday and Sunday' juxtaposed with the rest of the sentence with the menacingly mounted terms—'work', 'discipline', 'fire-eyed teacher', 'Head Master' with 'thin stick' assuming their ghost-like images and scaring away the free spirit of Swami. The same Monday morning we have seen, was 'like doomsday' to Mulk Raj Anand's coolies, 'it meant death' (*Coolie*). Interesting how this single point of time can bring out the different attitudes and pre-occupations of our two writers, the one whose interests are so limited that he almost sounds uninterested and the other with a passionate concern for man.

Note Narayan's eye for the comic in our first encounter with Swami standing in front of his teacher: 'Swami's criticism of his teacher's face was that his eyes were too near each other, that there was more hair on his chin than they saw from the bench and that he was very bad looking'. By the time Swami enters Narayan's novel he has changed two schools—an understatement to intimate that he has been twice sent down—no wonder that a boy with such predilections as his has been sent out. The four boys whom Swami has honoured with his friendship—to others, his attitude was one of haughty indifference—what are *they* like? *They* would have passed unnoticed by most of us but could not have escaped Narayan's eye in a crowd of ten thousand: Somu the Monitor who carried himself with such an easy air 'and more or less the uncle of the class'; Mani the 'Mighty Good-For-Nothing—he 'seldom brought any book to the class'; Sankar, 'the most brilliant boy of the class' whom normally Narayan might have dismissed as dull but for the opportunity he affords for his ironic comment, a comment less on Sankar than on his jealous critics or to be precise, for the opportunity he affords to the novelist for his interesting insights into human nature: one

section of boys asserted he could defeat the teachers in argument, the other, the more interesting set to Narayan, asserted he was a dud who secured an advantage over the rest by sychophancy, and by washing clothes for his teachers. The fourth was Samuel, known as Pea on account of his size.

Now consider their range of interests:

We watch them in class and at home preparing for the examination by which is meant an elaborate listing of the needs of examination: four quires of paper, two pens, two inkpots, six clips and a dozen pins, the father's approval and the excitement of buying—an excitement in which reading is the first casualty; and on the last day Swami emerging from the examination hall with the all too familiar 'parched throat' 'ink-stained fingers', 'exhaustion on one side, and exaltation on the other'—the desired attitude is struck.

Then we see Swami and friends at a mass meeting—who else should be there?—arranged to protest against the arrest of a political worker, the boys being taken by the lecturer's eloquence expended on the usual clap-trap—'the plight of the Indian peasant, boycott of English goods, the pining for vanished glory (the muslin) and exhortation to wearing home-spun khaddar'—all ending with the reverberating cries of 'Gandhi-ki-jai' and the subsequent heroics on the part of the boys as to what should be done to drive the British out, a replica of what was done in adult circles at the time. Now all these had assumed an understandable gravity in the hands of Indian historians, economists, political thinkers, platform speakers and of course political agitators of the day led by Gandhi. It was a time of knit brows, clenched fists and shrill or savage voices all round. Perhaps Narayan didn't have much sympathy either for the agitators or what they agitated for, but that is hardly the point of interest. What interests Narayan is the brave talk of the youngsters who collected in street corners and echoed the high-sounding words of their elders, most of whom could not have been any more effective than the schoolboys who employed nationalistic postures to no purpose. It is these that brought forth Narayan's comic gestures in fiction.

But the best part of the book is the one given to cricket-talk. Yes, talk, not play, now a well-established national pastime, the talking, and the listening to it, that is. In the novel it starts

with making an album of filched pictures of cricket players and the excitement and wrangling over naming the Club. There was no end of suggestions: Friends Eleven, Jumping Stars, Excelsiors, Champion Eleven, and finally the simple Malgudi Cricket Club because of its irresistible magical associations with M.C.C.

Consider the following bit of conversation on cricket bats: 'Oh! what bats! There are actual springs inside the bat, so that when you touch the ball it flies'; and the better: these nonentities called 'M.C.C. Malgudi' write to the sports dealers in Madras—the language and the easy confidence behind which there is neither cash nor credit prompting the dealers to honour the letter:

Dear Sir:

Please send to our team two junior willard bats, six balls, wickets and other things quick. It is very urgent. We shall send you money afterwards. Don't fear. Please be urgent.

Yours obediently,
Captain RAJAN (*Captain*)

The rest of the novel deals with cricket practice and the match which necessitates absence from class on grounds that keep shifting, but the best which Narayan exploits is a malapropism in language since Swami brings it up as the most effective: he complains of 'the most violent type of delirium'; and when the headmaster of this last school exposes him Swami decides to run away to Madras but collapses in the outskirts of Malgudi. This is followed by prayers and vows of offerings to gods to descend from their heights and rescue him, and finally the return of the son home—quite in the conventional mode which Narayan will repeat in *The Dark Room*.

Narayan's sense of the comic is sustained not by the Dickensian kind of exaggeration but rather, if a comparison has to be made to enlist understanding and evoke response, the irony of understatement practised by a Jane Austen. Was this, one asks, Narayan's reaction to the flamboyance of speech employed by his countrymen during the days of our political agitation when interest centred on what had been accepted as the 'large', 'major', 'serious', issues of life. It suited Narayan's shy temperament to withdraw from these serious questions and concern himself with

mediocrity—like the sun it shines everywhere and easy to exploit by one whose gifts for it were unquestionable. He must have felt that attention to the common in a somewhat uncommon way was the only mode of getting recognition to it and the recognition was sought in our appreciation of the discrepancy between actuality and aspiration. And it worked, first in England where the response was from a social nexus nurtured by the rich comic tradition in drama and fiction, especially the country-house comedy. Thanks to imperial approval, largely at any rate, a steady growth of response to his work in India followed. He is perhaps the only novelist of his generation which also witnessed—but ignored—the fine work of Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao, that may be said to have been in contact with a living response to his work, a response which kept him going, no doubt and, not being a critical response, but one which issued out of a love of entertainment, did not always prove conducive to the best growth of the novelist. This naturally leads one on to a consideration of the responsibilities of criticism which hardly did anything to train the sensibilities of the reading public with the result the surface answered to the surface and thus did not help to bring out the deeper and profounder resources in the writers—unless the writers, thanks largely to their acquaintance with good fiction abroad, because there was hardly any fiction at home, set themselves high standards and refused to take the primrose path to success. One recalls with amusement the reactions of the establishment in the forties and even the early fifties to an attempt at prescribing *Swami and Friends* for the entrance examination of a South Indian university for which *The Vicar of Wakefield* was a hot favourite for no known reason other than that presumably the teachers were familiar with it and were too lazy or afraid to go off the beaten track. Besides, Narayan was an Indian who lived in the next street, did not write ‘chaste’ English (what they meant by it I still fail to understand) and the illustrations by the renowned cartoonist R. K. Laxman were ‘obscene’ which also I fail to comprehend, but all of which have now come to be looked upon as merits of the book commending it for universal acceptance as one of the best of its kind for our school-boys reading English—for here is the life of all Indian school-boys seen through an adult vision, and registered for the first time in respectable creative writing.

Such scattered, cultivated response as Narayan was able to win for *Swami and Friends* from England must have encouraged him to continue to bring to fiction the life he knew so well. From the schoolboy Swami to the college youth is a natural step as though Narayan was reminiscing the days of his own boyhood and youth in his early novels; and I say this to appreciate the firm grounding in experience, his own experience which gets transmuted into fictional material.

As in *Swami and Friends* so also in *The Bachelor of Arts* Narayan intimates in one page the tone and tenor of his novel:

Chandran was just climbing the steps of the college union when Natesan, the Secretary sprang on them and said 'You are just the person I was looking for. You remember your old promise'.

'No', said Chandran promptly, to be on the safe side. 'You promised that I could count on you for a debate if I was hard pressed for a speaker. You must help me now. I can't get a Prime Mover for the debate tomorrow evening. The subject is that in the opinion of the house historians should be slaughtered first. You are the Prime Mover. At five tomorrow evening'. He tried to be off, but Chandran caught his hand and held him: 'I am a history student. I can't move the subject. What a subject! My Professor will eat me up'.

'Don't worry, I won't invite your professor'.

'But why not some other subject?'

'We can't change the union calendar now'.

Chandran pleaded 'Any other day, any other subject'.

'Impossible' said the secretary and shook himself free:

'At least make me the Prime opposer', pleaded Chandran.

'You are a brilliant mover. The notices will be out in an hour'.

Chandran did move the proposition and 'felt he was already a remarkable orator'. Here in this extract we have an insight into Narayan's characteristic handling of his material: The right man for the wrong thing and *vice versa*; and the man's awareness of his self-importance and the attempt to be equal to the task despite the incongruity, for such is his craze for personal distinction. See the way Chandran cuts the professor

to size—a size with which the student feels quite comfortable. It is this which makes survival possible for Narayan's heroes: the illusion of their own loftiness coupled with a healthy disrespect for others, teachers not excepted. At first he felt nervous when he went to see the professor. He suddenly pulled himself up—

'Why this cowardice? Why should he be afraid of Raghavachar or anybody? Human being to human being. Remove these spectacles, the turban, and the long coat and let Raghavachar appear only in loin-cloth and Mr Raghavachar would lose three quarters of his appearance. Where was the sense of feeling nervous before a pair of spectacles, a turban and a black long coat?'

Quite clearly this posture is the comic equivalent in life of the pride that comes before a fall in tragedy except that the former is a more tolerable attitude, even endearing, and calls for the reader's indulgence. Not so the tragic. But the question is not one of comic or tragic but whether it engages the more important part of our personality actively. And when it does, comedy is perilously close if not to tragedy, certainly to the tragic—such, we all know, is Shakespearean comedy. But Narayan's art is seldom aware of the profoundly tragic except in *The English Teacher*. Some slight pathos, and that not sustained at any length, is all that Narayan seems to permit into his world and just what is enough for the character to gain some little knowledge of himself.

Now Chandran's adolescent infatuation for Malathi whom he had only seen from a distance and the subsequent disappointment caused by his parents' disapproval under pressure of social conventions as a result of which he runs away from home to become a sanyasi—he has grown a beard and donned the saffron robes. In the course of his wanderings he strays into the country and is seated under a banyan tree. News spreads of a holy man under vow of silence for ten years sitting spending his time in rigorous meditation under the banyan tree. The appearance, the place, the gullible peasants—all help achieve the effect. The situation is very similar to what makes the Railway Guide a Swami in Narayan's later novel, *The Guide*. But whereas the Guide, a hardened scoundrel, could hold on and become a swami

in spite of himself, the inexperienced Chandran, with the idealism of a youth fresh from the university, retrieves himself from the undeserved role of the ascetic foisted on him by others—and goes away with remorse for ‘humbugging through life’. But the irony is imbedded not so much in Chandran’s coming back to his parents, for the return is instinct with a sense of failing in his filial obligations, and in any case would have given a conventional ending dealing poetic justice to the character concerned. The irony is in his present willingness to marry Susila, a girl chosen by his parents. To him there was now ‘no such thing as love; it was a foolish literary notion’. He secretly, excitedly compares his fiancé, Susila, with Malathi whom he could not marry. He exclaims:

Her name, music, figure, face, and everything about her was divine. Susila!—Malathi, not a spot beside Susila, it was a tongue twister.

Narayan may well join Shakespeare’s Puck and ejaculate: ‘What fools these mortals be!’ though he would not go the whole hog with him to add ‘Those things do please me that befall preposterously’. For the next novel, *The English Teacher*, gives the lie to it and shows his preoccupation with life and death in all their seriousness.

The English Teacher is a logical sequel to *The Bachelor of Arts* and one may without loss skip the intervening *Dark Room* which for all its pathos develops melodramatically and has a didactic ending. It is probably the only novel in which Narayan has also introduced sex rather overtly, something that would embarrass his admirers, more so, in view of the illicit relationship that occupies a considerable part of the novel. It would probably have made, some twenty years ago when it was written, a tolerable script for a bizarre film offering the orthodox among our women situations for a good cry, and the ending an opportunity for cheap moralizing about the place of women—which is one of submission to man.

The English Teacher, I said, is a sequel to *The Bachelor of Arts* largely because of the persistence of the reminiscent mood ending the personal phase in Narayan’s writing career. It carries forward the possibilities of introspection started in the second half of *The Bachelor of Arts*, for the maturing of character.

Compare the relaxed tone of the opening of *Swami and Friends* and *The Bachelor of Arts* with the tenseness of the *English Teacher*, surprisingly free for a Narayan novel from the comic or the ironic and free also from the oblique in expression, for the presentation takes the form of direct statement. Which makes one miss the irony of understatement that is Narayan's strength. Consider the rather prosaic opening for all the sincerity of attempt at self-introspection:

The feeling again and again came upon me that as I was nearing thirty I should cease to live like a cow (perhaps a cow with justice may well feel hurt at the comparison) eating, working in a manner of speaking, walking, talking etc., all done to perfection. I was sure, but always leaving behind a sense of something missing.

The insertion in parenthesis of a strained-after, hackneyed joke about the cow being hurt in comparison with himself, and the 'etc.' at the end of a succession of participles, like the word 'kindly' in the next paragraph of the same page beginning with such banality as 'I took stock of my daily life', both of which might well have been reserved for an official communication in wooden English—all these jar on one's ears in creative writing.

But when the *English Teacher* turns his attention from himself to his young wife the prosaic gets ignited as it were and feeling flows into his prose displacing wit, but sentiment does not degenerate into sentimentality, at any rate in the first half of the book. But it is still the prose of direct statement only. Consider a few examples:

'An alcove at the end of the living room served for a shrine with a few silver images of gods, two small lamps lit every morning.'

'I often saw her standing there with the light in her face, her eyes closed and her lips lightly moving'.

'She seemed to have a deep secret life.'

'In her hands a hundred rupees seemed to do the work of a two hundred'.

But the prose improves in its structure, such is the texture of involvement in another's life that it acquires a character, a dimension, more so, when wit is at the service of genuine feeling,

somewhat rare in Narayan. Such for instance are the following in which the English Teacher is reacting to his wife's illness:

'The sick room is a world in itself. My vision of a paradise was where all the entries would be confined between normal and 100'.

'The chief ambition was to see a fall in the chart. The height of contentment was reached in observing perfect bodily functions which at other times pass unnoticed'.

'The patient is hungry'—'Excellent'—'The patient gives sensible answers'—'Marvellous.' The depth of misery was touched when there was any deviation from these standards.

Narayan's perception of the uncommon in the common is still a success; though with this radical difference in approach. The potential here is for going out of oneself, an ordinary man's capacity to raise himself in the ordinary things he does at home, while normally the Narayan character is seen using the uncommon potential for inflation of the ego. Is it because here in *The English Teacher* the impulses and attitudes are born of personal involvement, a true suffering of the spirit and therefore what critics call 'felt experience'? But Narayan was not to employ this tone anywhere else including that very personal account, *Dateless Diary*.

Observe for example the Swami who comes to smear holy ash on his sick wife's forehead. The saffron-robed swami must not fail to tap all the inventiveness of Narayan for comedy, but here the situation is such—the sickness of the loved one (the identification of the novelist and the English Teacher is so complete even for an unsuspecting reader), and the Swami's presence may make all the difference between life and death—that it has virtually freed all the powers of the novelist. One is therefore constrained to ask whether comedy and tragedy are not exclusive categories for Narayan and his comic vision is not one which has no awareness of the deep, underlying currents of the tragic in life—such as a Shakespeare saw in great drama or such as even Charles Lamb in the second rank of English writers was able to juxtapose in his *Essays of Elia*. But *The English Teacher* is the farthest Narayan could go in the tragic mode. Or, is one to assume that Narayan deliberately excludes the serious in the other

novels as a possible threat to his kind of art? We have seen him pay for concentrating on the serious in *The Dark Room*.

After the wife's death there comes a clarity of vision which will not countenance any indirection or ambiguity in the English Teacher's reaction to life—such is the nature of grief, such the end of all human existence that it calls for most direct expression of experience:

'There were no more surprises and shocks in life; so that I watch the flame without agitation. For me the greatest reality is this and nothing else...Nothing else will worry or interest me hereafter'.

'The days had acquired a peculiar blankness and emptiness. The only relief was my child'.

A woman in the English Teacher's position could not have told this tale more tenderly, more poignantly but there is a streak of the feminine in his make-up which now gets strengthened as we see that he played 'both father and mother' to the child.

Narayan who normally celebrates human folly and seems to think that the fool cannot be cured of his folly now turns to human achievement, the humane and spiritual resources in the ordinary man. The exploitation of the humane we have seen in his tenderness and solicitude for the wife and babe, and as for tapping the spiritual resources in man of which Narayan is presumably aware but does not seem to know the mode of realizing them through character and situation, he turns to the occult as a substitute for the profoundly spiritual which his own heritage could have offered in abundance. The inference, then, is clear: that Narayan eschews the long and arduous journey of the soul and takes refuge in short-cuts and substitute living which, if crudely put, means that there is no strong base of spirituality in the equipment of the novelist which could have made death meaningful to the living; and so he seeks to make good in the easy way of exchanging messages with the dead wife through a medium—understandable in one who has picked up fragments of Indian thought and philosophy from Aldous Huxley and Christopher Isherwood in California or from the fake swamis and yogis visiting world capitals to spread the 'message' of India. Well, that is Narayan's serious limitation in this novel and it shows up here because of the nature of his undertaking while elsewhere

he tries to exploit his other resources and carefully avoids treading the dangerous ground.

That Narayan is not impoverished of it, indeed, that he is alive to it is shown in the English Teacher's decision against leaving the house after his wife's death in deference to superstitious fear that continuous occupation of the house may spell ruin to the living. See for instance the following:

I realized the experience of life in that house was too precious and I wouldn't exchange it for anything. There were subtle links with a happy past; they were not merely links but blood channels, which fed the stuff of memory.

The poise that ensues from it and the strength it now gives is a thousand times more valuable than all the exchanges through the medium which in any case was sought by a young man in the days immediately following the death of a dearly loved one. But that Narayan should have contended privately that but for the second half he would not have written the novel at all is either to put too much reliance on the occult as a means of sustaining life and art or, worse, for the reader to confirm the folly of endorsing the novelist's personal view of the novel.

Don't trust the artist, trust the tale,—Lawrence was right, after all. But that he need not have had recourse to the occult and might have done well to turn inwards to find strength is brought out by a tender dialogue between the English Teacher and his child: The child one day asks the father:

'Father, why is that door shut?' And the father says it threw them into a frenzy because he did not know what to reply. Despite what he says he shows remarkable strength of mind when in the evening the little one comes and asks him once again:

'The door is still closed, father. Is she bathing still?' and Narayan comments: 'That was enough to choke him but manages to overcome it by a superficial reply': It is not superficial but the wit that often went into the comic has now served him in a tragic situation admirably, as we see here. The conversation continues and the father replies:

'If the door is open, she may catch a cold.'

'Don't you have to go to her?'

'No.'

'Is she alone?'

'There is a nurse who looks after her.'

'What is a nurse?'

'A person who tends sick people.'

'You don't have to go and stay with mother any more ever?'

'No, I will always go with you. She let out a yell of joy and threw herself on me'.

And here is a rare instance in Narayan of the irony that can deal with a tragic situation when he remarks: 'She let out a yell of joy and threw herself on me'. How one would wish that Narayan had pursued the possibility of tragic irony in his novels. It was no more rare in Indian than in Greek tragedy—he could have turned to *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata* which abound in instances of tragic irony, for his models.

After the novels we have so far considered only one remains to be examined in detail and that is unquestionably *The Guide*, though *The Financial Expert* is worth a close look for which there is hardly any time in this lecture, and as for the novels Narayan wrote after *The Guide*, *The Man Eater of Malgudi* is in the nature of an anti-climax after the astonishing success of *The Guide*: though in *The Sweet Vendor* Narayan makes a quick recovery. With *The Guide* he established himself as a master of fiction, no longer the Indian Chekhov or Joyce Cary—titles with which Western reviewers had greeted him in condescension to a colonial writing in the imperial language; he was now accepted as a novelist in his own right, an Indian writing on the India he knows best—the traditional past and the changing present which with all the degradation that has come upon it still holds fine possibilities for survival—some deep springs of vital energy sustaining her; and Mr Narayan's comic mode seen able to handle so serious a vision of life, put to uses unsuspected before, and now finding expression in an English which is spontaneous, scintillating and quite adequate for all the purposes the novelist cares to put it to. And the purpose is the most incredible you can imagine though the material is of a thriller which is why film producers were so enamoured of it: a ragamuffin, a rascal, whose only education is what he has picked up from odd bits of newspapers, periodicals and old books brought to him for sale, and of course from meeting people and talking to

them in a small town railway station where he earned a precarious living by turning his wits to guiding tourists—how to make *him* fall in love with a highly educated married Indian woman, married to a scholar (cultural historian), without outraging Indian sentiment, and let him take charge of her life completely, promote her as a great dancer, become prosperous and hobnob with judges, civilians and ministers and get into trouble, go to jail, come out, and be acknowledged as a swami by everyone, from the gullible villagers to the Government of India. Narayan has done the most incongruous things and made them credible in terms of high art. It is the nature of his achievement that we must learn for a proper appreciation of Narayan's contribution to Indian fiction.

In *The Guide* we are still in the world of Malgudi with its spreading tamarind tree, the scene of Raju's boyhood except that this predominantly agricultural community is now beginning to feel the impact of the industrial age with the coming of the railway which meant the undoing of the old ways of living. The novelist realises it through Raju who has already picked up swear words from the men working on the railway track; and his father's words 'just my misfortune' sound portentous. Actually the railway meant the undoing of Raju—a small shopkeeper's son becomes a railway guide, and starts living by his wits. As he is later going to tell Velan: 'I am not so great as you imagine, I am just ordinary'. Well, here is the clue to an understanding of Raju, indeed of all Narayan's characters—'just ordinary', 'not so great'. It is in the struggle of the ordinary man to realize the full potentialities, not of his greatness, but of 'not so great'—that which lies within the reach of many, but goes to waste except in men like Raju—that Narayan's gifts are best employed. Narayan gives us an insight into these gifts by operating on two levels at the same time, or rather, alternately, now making Raju recount his past and now transacting the business on hand. But we would do well to watch Raju's evolution in the three successive stages of his life—as the railway guide, as Rosie's lover, and as the swami—(an undertaking which takes out of my hands consideration of the other important aspects of this novel which have been examined in my article on *The Guide* in *The Literary Criterion*, (Volume V, No. 4). Raju's potential is first seen in the initiative he took in closing his father's 'tame

business' and setting out on new lines—starting with the books schoolboys left with him for sale, and stocking old magazines and newspapers and buying and selling books: 'I bargained hard; showed indifference while buying and solicitude while selling'. In the intervals between two trains while anyone else in his position would have dozed off or gambled, he 'read the stuff that interested me, bored me, baffled me,...stuff that pricked up a noble thought, a philosophy that appealed, and gazed on pictures of old temples and ruins and new buildings and...I learnt much from scrap'. It is evident in the fragmentary view of life he has held till the last stage of his life when he was forced by circumstances to take a more complete view of things. Life, which can promise much when under the control of a moral order or is deferential to a higher view of the universe, goes to pieces because of man's *hubris*, his inordinate self-esteem, his love of the lime-light. And Narayan presents the predicament in the idiom of the common folk: 'It is written on the brow of some that they shall not be left alone. I am one such, I think'. 'Perfect strangers, having heard of my name, began to ask for me' he informs us. And his ready response to any inquiry, posing to be what he was not brought him to grief. 'If I had had the inclination to say, 'I don't know what you are asking about,' my life would have taken a different turn', he would have been like one of those thousands of normal human beings. It is this stuff of tragedy that Narayan handles in terms of comedy and therein consists his unique achievement in Indian fiction.

As Railway guide he has in him the gift to study the psychology of tourists or what he calls a kind of 'water diviner's instinct': 'If he (the tourist) was the academic type I was careful to avoid all mention of facts and figures...letting the man himself do the talking'. 'On the other hand, if an innocent man happened to be at hand I let myself go freely'. But it was years before he could 'arrive at that stage of confidence and nonchalance'—'confidence' and 'nonchalance' are both terms carrying high voltage in the tragic vocabulary, and Narayan's art has demonstrated that even through the comic mode the disastrous results of 'confidence' and 'nonchalance' can be brought out—these are demonic qualities in the Indian tradition and demons are comic figures of the Popular Stage. It is Raju's confidence that makes him claim 'I had classified all my patrons.' And it is this that at

first sight helps him size up Rosie and her husband as the type that would be his 'life-long customers'.

Now it is the 'confidence', the 'nonchalance', 'the water diviner's instinct', that brought him closer to Rosie—when her husband sent him or rather, when Raju offered to bring her from the hotel room as the husband was waiting in the car. He had the audacity to tell her to come out as she was, without changing her dress. And added 'who would decorate a rainbow?' Her reluctance gave him another opportunity to whisper 'because life is so blank without your presence'. And Narayan makes it credible by his comment put in Raju's mouth: 'She could have pushed my face back, crying "How dare you talk like this" and shut the door on me. But she didn't.'

If he could make further advances to her it is because of his water diviner's instinct to size up the relationship of Rosie and her husband. Which by the way is a remarkable piece of observation of the ossified intellectual pursuit and its denial of the moving, pulsating life while some reverence for it could have invigorated the intellect and integrated life into one unified whole. The novelist says:

'Dead and decaying things seemed to unloosen his tongue and fire his imagination rather than the things that lived and moved and swung their limbs'. The husband was interested in sculptured figures on walls and stones in caves but not in his wife who as dancer was the living embodiment of those images. She had intellectual interests too; she looked for ideas in the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* and remarked to her husband enthusiastically: 'I have so many ideas I'd like to try just as you are trying to...' He would brush it aside with 'I doubt if you can. It's more difficult than you imagine'. And yet this was the man who insisted on marrying a graduate wife. But Raju the ignoramus, wished he could keep pace with her idiom and learn. He claimed 'when she indicated the lotus with her fingers I could almost hear the ripple of water around it' while to Marco it was all a monkey-trick. What bothered Marco was not the present realization of these musical notations but how there could be such a wide period-difference since he knew it to be fifth century. And so what interested her seemed to irritate him. It is this that made her confess to Raju: 'I would have preferred any kind of mother-in-law, if it had meant one real, live husband'.

It is against this background also that Narayan makes credible Raju's gaining a sway over her. Nowhere do we read of her losing her heart to Raju, but in a context which denied life, Raju came to symbolize for her the warm flow of life that ministered to the vital human needs which had been starved. For a moment she felt he gave her 'a new lease of life'. And even in the matter of more cultivated things her art was such that the unsuspected Raju could register the right response, however unsophisticated: 'I could honestly declare', he says, 'that while I watched her perform, my mind was free, for once, from all carnal thought. I viewed her as pure abstraction'. Such is Narayan's recognition of the uplifting quality of art and such the means he employs to win our sympathy for both Raju and Rosie and counteract any attempt on our part at castigation of either as violating the social code. Out of his slender means Raju offered to provide her with all the facilities to practise her dance and supplemented them with his own personal involvement by sharing her concerns and her enthusiasms. But the husband would be most happy without her: 'Oh, perfect, perfect!' he cried 'That Joseph (the butler) is a wonderful man. I don't see him. I don't hear him, but he does everything for me at the right time. That's how I want things to be, you know'. But here is Rosie who has realized she 'had committed an enormous sin and didn't want anything more in life than to make peace with him'. She didn't want to dance. She went and apologized to him, he gave her a cold look but she 'followed him day after day like a dog waiting on his grace'. His last words were 'Don't talk to me. You can go where you will or do what you please'. A remark which enlists the reader's sympathy for Rosie and places us in a position antagonistic to Marco, her husband.

Even so, the novelist has a very delicate and difficult task of making the Raju-Rosie relationship acceptable, authentic in the Indian context, even though the husband had spurned her and sent her away. And so he builds up his defences. He makes Rosie say again and again 'After all he is my husband' and 'it's better to die on his doorstep'. When his book is published and a review of it appears with his photograph she frames the cutting and places it on the table. She loses interest in dancing as Raju puts it more and more to commercial use and decides not to have

anything to do with him as he forges her signature on a cheque and shows 'lack of ordinary character' in many other matters.

It is strange that Rosie is completely free from Narayan's ironic handling. Considering she was a highly educated woman—a Master of Arts—and a married woman at that, and in the Hindu society, too, and considering, above all, that Narayan is operating within the framework of traditional Hindu society whose code of conduct he largely endorses, it is curious that Rosie's departure from that code invites no adverse comment from the novelist, no, not so much as an insinuating or ironic gesture. It is not that Rosie could not have provided opportunities for the exercise of Narayan's comic gifts but he leaves her alone as outside their orbit. For one who doesn't make his sympathies for any of his characters so obvious Narayan stands steadfastly by Rosie. In fact she is the one character in the novel who seems to offer a singular example of recovering from folly as the novel progresses. In fact she has always been dignified, noble and the very picture of ideal womanhood in spite of her loss of chastity—there is enough atonement for it and that is what matters. And significantly, this has been achieved by as serious a treatment of the character as any novelist in the tragic mode may have done. This seems to be true of almost all the women characters of Narayan—they are not many, though, all his novels taken together. But especially in the way he takes care to preserve Rosie from inner taint Narayan seems to be affirming what has been hailed in the Indian tradition as the Feminine Principle in life.

Narayan does not abandon Raju, but he has to eke out his maturity the hard way. He is made to realize his lack of ordinary character, the Saitan within him in his relations with Rosie, when later he comes out of jail. But he is still in good spirits when we see him in the beginning of the novel sitting on a slab of stone as if it were a throne; the words give enough insight into the psyche that released this feeling in him. Considering the ruin he had brought upon himself and on a young married woman one would have thought of him as a recluse not wanting to be in touch with life but fly from every trace of it. But no! Observe now the opening sentence of the novel:

'Raju welcomed the intrusion'—that is when a villager, Velan, appeared before him and Raju talked to him patronizingly.

He was brash enough and insensitive enough to say to the barber soon after he came out of jail 'Not a bad place'.

And when Velan consulted him about his sister, "'Tell me about it", Raju said, the old old habit of affording guidance to others asserting itself', and when Velan prostrates before him he can speak pontifically: 'I do not permit anyone to do this', but in making him say this Narayan can only render the serious in terms of the light-hearted: 'God alone is entitled to such a prostration. He will destroy us if we attempt to usurp his rights—it is the word 'usurp' that translates the serious to the comic. That it is so becomes more evident when in the very next sentence he says of Raju: 'He felt he was attaining the stature of a saint' and later he 'felt he was growing wings'. It was partly at least that he felt pampered by the gullible Velan's god-like references to him.

When Raju is left alone, such is his make-up that he turns to attempt the impossible: he started counting the stars. Which is a daring undertaking and even if one does suspend judgement of its foolish implications, the motivation surely is impure. For he reflected: 'People will say "He will be our night guide for the skies".' And as though he should deserve it he makes an original approach too: 'The thing to do is to start from a corner and go on patch by patch. Never work from the top to the horizon, but always the other way'.

And the same attempt to sound big, not merely feel big when he talked to children 'in the manner of big men he had seen in cities'; and to a group of admiring villagers: "'What can a crocodile do if your mind is clear and your conscience is untroubled?"' Raju said grandly and was himself surprised at the amount of wisdom welling from the depths of his being'; he was 'hypnotized by his own voice'. His doom is gathering round him steadily.

That is also how one can account for his decision to grow a beard—'A clean-shaven close-haired saint', he thought, 'was an anomaly'. As days went by, he 'seemed to belong to the world'. He not only chanted holy verses and discoursed on philosophy; he even came to the stage of prescribing medicines to children and telling mothers: 'If he still gets no relief, bring him again to me'.

He could say what he did because he had all the external trappings of a saint:

His beard now caressed his chest, he wore a necklace of prayerbeads round his neck; his eyes shone with softness and compassion; the light of wisdom emanated from them.

It was at this stage that Raju was faced with new challenges. Such was his relationship with the village that nothing could pass in the village without its being referred to him. When this was the case ordinarily what must the villagers do if the rains should fail, if the cattle had no fodder, human beings had no water to drink, if prices went up and people started picking up quarrels over foodstuffs and in one such quarrel Velan himself was injured. When the news of Velan's injury was brought to the swami by Velan's excited brother who added 'And they will kill us soon', Raju felt bothered that it might affect the isolation of the place and bring the police on the scene. Natural enough fear of an ex-convict. The boy kept repeating the same things that transpired between his brother and others at which Raju impatiently shouted: 'Tell your brother, immediately, wherever he may be that unless they are good I'll not eat'. An excellent exploitation of the Gandhian principle of which, by the way, Narayan has made a muddle in his *Waiting for the Mahatma*, a novel which he would do well to withdraw.*

To go back to *The Guide*, Narayan now relies on the misreporting of a moron to cause the crisis. The boy ran and announced that the Swami had refused to take food, 'because it doesn't rain'. It is a masterpiece of make-believe when Narayan records the enthusiastic comments of admiring disciples of the Swami; and confronts the Swami with the cumulative effect of them all.

One said: 'The Swami wants no food until it is all right'. Another said: 'This Mangala is a blessed country to have a Swami like him in our midst... He is like a Mahatma'. The atmosphere became electrified. They all forgot their quarrels and went to pay respects to their saviour. And Velan, their spokesman submitted: 'Your penance is similar to Mahatma Gandhi's. He has left a disciple in you to save us'. Raju could see that he spoke with feeling and gratitude. Lest he

* Narayan's response to Gandhi in *Waiting for the Mahatma* is examined in my lectures on Gandhi entitled *The Writer's Gandhi* (Panjab University, Patiala) 1967.

should feel inclined to share Raju's feelings and take his side the novelist views the entire episode with shattering irony: 'as a matter of fact, it seemed possible that he himself might bow low, take the dust of his own feet, and press it to his eyes'. In that mood of elation Raju asks the villagers to go home, for 'Tomorrow I'll take my usual food, and then I shall be all right'. Velan naturally connected it with rain and asked 'Do you expect it to rain tomorrow, Sir?' Raju felt puzzled as Velan told him of the effect of his fasting for rain on the population around: 'The saviour was expected to stand in knee-deep water, look to the skies and utter the prayer for two weeks completely fasting during the period—and lo! the rains would come down provided the man who performed it was a pure soul'. The whole countryside was happy with the news of the Swami's fast.

Into the response that follows from Raju, Narayan puts his comic art to splendid use as though it was inescapable, and the only thing to do, for the alternative would be melodramatic and frustrating in the extreme.

Raju, we are told, felt he had worked himself into a position from which he could not get out: he now saw the enormity of his own creation. 'He had created a giant with his own puny self, a throne of authority with a slab stone'. Narayan fuses the comic with the serious bent as he is on exploiting all means to see the successful end of the possibilities of his art. 'There is pathos in the manner in which Raju remembers what his mother used to say, 'If there is one good man anywhere, the rains would descend for his sake and benefit the whole world'. Raju therefore lit his fire, cooked his food and gulped the meal down and got ready for the ordeal because he could not run away from it. Public interest was aroused and papers flashed the news all over India and crowds started pouring in until at last the pose fell off from Raju and he was driven to think:

If by avoiding food I shall help the trees bloom, and the
grass grow why not do it thoroughly?

Well, here is almost the end of the comic, for the realization brought about by high comedy strictly belongs to the province of the tragic mode whose essence is the triumph of the spirit, starting with a rare self-awareness and extending its widening circles to include the rest of creation in an identification with oneself.

For the first time in his life he was making an effort; for the first time he was learning the thrill of full application outside money and love; for the first time he was doing a thing in which he was not personally interested. He felt a new strength to go through the ordeal.

Where did the strength come from? There is no direct answer to the question. But it is implicit in the way the story enacts itself. The strength, we know, came from the hitherto untapped reserves of the stories of good men that sacrificed themselves for others he had daily heard from his mother; it came from the simple faith of the villagers, a faith which by its purity and depth could move even the hard hearted; it came from, if one may so, from the locale itself—such is the spirit of place that Narayan carefully creates to put his character in tune with it—an ancient temple, surrounded by hills, the river Sarayu flowing in front of it, whose very name, if not the river, carries its obvious implications for a reader of the *Ramayana* even as the name of the village—Mangala—has its rich overtones and evocative power. And all these when aided by the old ingrained habit of Raju's incorrigible penchant for wanting to rise to the occasion, of living up to one's reputation—of being a guide, must bring their due reward. The strength comes also from within—from Raju's readiness for the first time to rise above himself for others' sake.

It is here that one witnesses the fusion of the comic and the tragic. It is the surpassing triumph of the art which makes the comic pursue the ends of the tragic, in the attempt to resolve the duality and perceive the hard core of things. It has been rightly claimed that all prose fiction is a variation on the theme of Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, of appearance and reality, love, beauty, money, prestige—those generators of illusion which mislead the individual and complicate human relationships and perpetually place him in a false position with man and God have to be broken through. The tragic muse who normally grapples with so serious an enterprise is here seen surrendering her privilege in favour of her rival, the muse of comedy, who accepts the opportunity with a daring and demonstrates her possibilities in the hands of a consummate practitioner of art. And so successful is its demonstration in *The Guide* that it demands a reversal of the patronising comment of glib Sunday reviewers

by announcing what the Indian Narayan can offer to Chekhov or Joyce Cary. And what he can offer is a rare study in maturity or 'quest for reality' very different from what a Jane Austen can do—he can explore deeper layers of reality than is ever possible for Jane Austen with her preoccupation with manners.

Aristotle described tragedy as involving action of a certain magnitude with a beginning, middle and end. Now Narayan's novel has a fairly wide canvas for its action and we see Raju maturing before us by stages, over a length of time. His self-awareness is hard-earned but not in the way in which a tragic character earns it, self-wrung, self-strung. The cleansing takes place no doubt but not in the heroic strain. For the central character is a kind of anti-hero, Narayan's common man with potential for the uncommon. Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice* may be described as anti-hero, so may Malvolio in *Twelfth Night* but they both border on the tragic and evoke pity in us. Not so Narayan's Raju. Nowhere does he reach anything like the tragic height of a Lear, although Raju's self-awareness and the sense of social and spiritual fulfilment that results from it in the end is something that extorts our admiration, and we even marvel at it especially because he is no victim of discomfiture as Shylock, Malvolio, and Tartuffe are. Only his fortunes and his progress are set in a lower key—the province of the comic mode. Artistically speaking, may be, this calls for a greater degree of detachment and far subtler means on the part of the author than what is at the disposal of the tragic artist. But what it gains in detachment it loses in intensity and capacity for profound engagement—the strength of tragic art. But to penetrate areas clearly outside the bounds of tragedy and sensitize us to the possibilities of the commonplace for the apprehension of reality can only be the privilege of comic art. And it is a rare privilege of Narayan to use the comic mode to prove the highest kind of reality in *The Guide*—it is a strength which is his and that of his own tradition.

RAJA RAO

The Metaphysical Novel (*The Serpent and the Rope*) and its Significance for our Age

Let me at once admit that I have, ever since I first read *The Serpent and the Rope* in 1962, considered Raja Rao the most significant Indian writer in English, and a major novelist of our age. I thought it fair to my audience to begin the lecture by announcing my claim at the outset rather than reserve it to the end, so that if my elucidation does not substantiate the claim, your disagreements and differences may help to correct the excess of my enthusiasm for Raja Rao and arrive at a more just assessment of his work than I have been able to make so far. I said I read his *The Serpent and the Rope* in 1962, but it was published in 1960 and, to my knowledge, did not come to India, or it came and was not noticed, till 1961 and, with the pressures on an Indian University teacher who is supposed to have an intimate knowledge of half a dozen periods of literature and at least as many authors in each, I could only read it in 1962. I say this to draw attention to the paucity of critical challenge that made it possible for a professor of English to ignore a work of such importance for two years after its publication. That is by the way, and to come back to *The Serpent and the Rope*, I do not remember reading any other novel—I must hasten to add I have not been an avid reader of fiction—with such respect and admiration, which for me is a way of saying that hardly anywhere else in my reading did I experience a fuller and more complete engagement of the deeper levels of personality. I must not forget to add, though, that I had during those years a special interest in Indian fiction, had been looking for a great Indian novel, and reading *The Serpent and the Rope* I remember I felt a sudden thrill that here at last was the finest and fullest possible expression of an essentially Indian sensibility. A second reading and even a third one only confirmed my first impressions, though with successive readings I naturally came to register several reservations especially in regard to the considerable chunks of metaphysical disquisition scattered throughout the work, which fortunately are such that

one can cut them out without injuring the organic structure of the work.

Merely as a matter of chronology, I wish to intimate that I was probably the first to attempt a full-length study* of the work though before I wrote there were a couple of reviews of the novel. This, again, I feel obliged to say with a view to emphasizing how hard it may have been for an Indian scholar to interest any editor of a good journal in it so as to find the required space for the close study of a novel by an Indian in English. It got published in a mendicant magazine I happen to edit, but I cannot vouch for the kind of response it elicited. Meanwhile, it so happened that I was asked by the Editor of *The Illustrated Weekly of India* to write a 1,500-word article on *The Serpent* which I did with an additional 500 words or more and it was published to my surprise without any omissions or editorial maltreatment that better contributions than mine suffer in middle-brow magazines.

Almost immediately after that I set out to read everything that Raja Rao happened to have written. It was so little, I found to my great satisfaction, for it meant that here was a writer in whom insistence on inner compulsion had held out against the need to write to make a living, especially when, if one may say so, those were years of precarious existence for Raja Rao. There was *Kanthapura*, published in 1938 and there was a collection of short stories published in 1947 under the title *The Cow of the Barricades*, neither of which had been read by any one of my acquaintance in university circles though some had read one or two of his short stories, especially 'Javni' and some few had heard of *Kanthapura* being mentioned by a British Professor of English in India in the early forties, one does not know, whether with approval or disapproval. Well, *Kanthapura* was prescribed in a South Indian university for undergraduate study in 1964. The award of a prize for *The Serpent and the Rope* in 1963 by the Sahitya Akademi at Delhi as the best novel in English by an Indian for the preceding three years, one assumed, had helped to make Raja Rao respectable and part of the establishment. But no, for before long those responsible found themselves the target of a vicious campaign to compel the university

* See *The Literary Criterion*, Vol. V, No. 4, 1963 for aspects of *The Serpent and the Rope* not covered in this lecture.

to withdraw *Kanthapura* from the prescriptions because, ostensibly, it was obscene, and because it was written in Indian English. Letters were written to the press, resolutions were passed by interested English teachers' associations in some colleges demanding the prescription of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (frequent prescriptions of it as a textbook in college classes and the abundance of 'aids' and 'guides' in the bazaar had made for a comfortable feeling of familiarity among teachers which obviated the difficulty that a first response often entails) in place of *Kanthapura*, and the executive council of the university recommended to the academic council that the council take steps to withdraw the prescription. As it happens on all such occasions, it was not known to many members what it was all about, some endorsed the decision of the executive council vigorously, while a couple of members who had read it did have the courage to express themselves against so popular a demand. But these in any case did not matter, and would not have mattered, in the Indian academic set-up, but fortunately the vice-chancellor upheld the prescription because it was not good to break healthy academic conventions.* Meanwhile many Indian universities had adopted *The Serpent and the Rope* as one of the set books for the Master's Degree Examination in English either under the 'Twentieth Century' or under 'Indian Writing in English'. And subsequently a few very intelligent articles on some aspects of *The Serpent and the Rope* appeared in journals and it was gathered that some bright young scholars in universities had registered for Ph.D. degree on Raja Rao's work. In other words, for the first time in Indian academic circles did one hear among teachers of English serious discussions of an Indian novel—it was considered worth discussing, first for its Indianness and soon, as a natural consequence of it, because of the challenges it posed to critical intelligence. In retrospect, it is very gratifying to recall how the reputation of an Indian work had been made in India while the accepted pattern was for the Indian intellectual to echo the valuations of the Western critic on the Indian scene

* What adds interest to a dry fact is that early this year when the President of India honoured Raja Rao with the award of Padma Bhushan the newspaper which had earlier published the letters of protest about *Kanthapura* announced him on its front page as 'Raja Rao, the author of the controversial *Kanthapura*'.

—nothing must be good or great unless it won Anglo-American approval. Western reaction to the novel was mixed: The title was attractive, the language was more than competent, and the theme international; but its 'Asiatic vague immensities' (quoted by a Western reviewer of the novel) repelled many and baffled some, precisely which challenged and absorbed the attention of the Indian mind. And the challenge persists—the reason why I feel impelled to take a close second look at the novel. Besides here is an opportunity to emphasize certain things which may have received only scant attention and, in some few cases, to make the necessary reservations and qualifications, a luxury which a critic of *The Serpent and the Rope* can today permit himself now that the work is acknowledged a classic of our times.*

Consider how Raja Rao sets out on his present preoccupation in the opening paragraph of the novel—a preoccupation which for our brutal times assumes, for an Indian at least, an urgency and a sharpness of relevance despite—or is it because of?—the implicit irony of the last words in the sentence: 'I was born a Brahmin—that is devoted to Truth and all that'. Then comes the more explicit criterion: 'Brahmin is he who knows Brahman'—the repudiation of which occurs in many places in the novel through character and situation but never so unequivocally stated as in the following towards the end of the novel:

The Brahmins sold India through the backdoor—remember Devagiri—and the Muslims came through the front. Purniyya sold the secrets of Tippu Sultan and the British entered through the main gateway of Seirangapatam. Truth that is without courage can only be the virtue of slave or widow.

The betrayal is more subtle than it appears: Muslim historians attribute the betrayal, not to Purniyya, but a Muslim; and the British knocked a hole in the wall with their cannons and entered through that. We are really betrayed from within—in a deeper sense. And because of the betrayal, motivated, it appears, by the sordid ambition of the cultural elite to be the governing elite without the necessary courage; and the consequent general levelling down,

* For close studies of *Kanthapura* and *The Cat and Shakespeare* by the present author see *The Literary Criterion*, Vol. VII, No. 2 and Vol. VIII, No. 3.

we witness another outburst, this time not on the Brahmin but on those whom the failure of the Brahmin made possible—the vulgar politician and the present-day intellectual, a descendant of the decadent Brahmin:

India would never be made by our politicians and Professors of Political Science, but by these isolate existences (like Ananda K. Coomaraswamy) in which India is rememorated *experienced* and communicated; beyond history, as tradition, as the Truth. Anybody can have the geographic—even the political—India; it matters little. But this India of Coomaraswamy, who will take it away, I ask you who? Not Tamurlane or even Joseph Stalin.

Now the entire novel is an evocation of this Truth, the tradition of India and its vitality especially in its encounters with the West—India seen as an idea, not as an area on the map. To the reader, and perhaps to the author, the evocation gains an edge, an immediacy because of India's present degradation, and the manner of presentation is not historical but strictly in terms of art, despite the protest to the contrary of Ramaswamy, the central character, a student of history, almost half-way in the novel:

The rest of the story is easily told. In a classical novel it might have ended in palace and palanquin and howdah, or in the high Himalayas, but I am not telling a story here, I am writing the sad and uneven chronicle of a life, my life, with no art or decoration but with the 'objectivity', the discipline of the 'historical sciences', for by taste and tradition I am only an historian.

It is obvious that no one but a mature artist could have afforded the confidence to deny his own claims to art and called himself a historian—his art is history in the sense in which Henry James speaks of 'the art of fiction' in an essay of that title. To revert now to the opening paragraph where history and legend are fused into the great chain of Indian tradition which is here evoked as a significant part of Indian consciousness: Yajnyavalkya, Sankara, Madhva and their descendants 'who left hearth and riverside fields and wandered to distant mountains and hermitages to see God "face to face".'

And some of them did see God face to face and built temples.

But when they died—for indeed they did ‘die’—they too must have been burnt by tank or grove or meeting of two rivers, and they too must have known they did not die. I can feel them in me, and know they knew they did not die. Who is it that tells me they did not die? Who but me?

A very challenging beginning for a novel—challenging to the novel ‘form’, which invariably evokes in its first pages the spirit of a place or a time, but what is summoned here to our imagination is neither place nor time but something that transcends both—it is, what has made the great Indian tradition and sustained it through the vicissitudes of history: the Vedas, Upanishads, Brahma Sutras, the Gita, the great teachers and their lineage; and these again made alive to us by their modes of life—wandering to ‘mountains and distant hermitages to see God face to face’—and death—‘burnt by tank or grove or meeting of two rivers’ (the confluence of rivers as hallowed by tradition)—and brings the immemorial tradition quite up-to-date, to the present, to himself, and the faith by which he ‘feels’ them in him. Such is the vitality of a living tradition, inarticulate but accessible to those who ‘feel’ it in them—it flows in their veins and now is brought to the surface by one who *belongs* to it. The story is one of belonging to a culture by means of its ‘yes’ and ‘no’, for culture is a ‘struggle’ rather than a ‘flow’.

The novelist has not one method but has recourse to many to make his tradition alive, for it is so varied, so rich and complex, as only vital old cultures can be. It is at once a tradition, a myth, an idea, which is metaphysical rather than historical. It is not a moment in time which the novelist captures and gives endurance to, for it is actually a continuity, a palimpsest, layer after layer of which points to the authenticity of its timelessness and pervasiveness, both of which by implication vindicate its relevance in time and space, any time, any space. Well, that is the central theme of the novel—that India represents an idea, the idea of the Absolute which makes the relative meaningful, but man must learn not to confuse the relative with the Absolute, the moment for Eternity, the particular for the Universal, the shadow for the Substance, the rope for the serpent. Only that knowledge is Knowledge which makes for this discrimination, and

space, time, the country and the world, wife, family, friends, all help if one knows they are means to an end—the end of all earthly endeavour is that knowledge of the Self. Self is here used in a profounder sense than the Greek ideal of 'know thyself'. Not until then can man be said to belong anywhere; he is, in the words of the central character, a 'wanderer on earth', at best 'a holy vagabond'. And wander he must, fulfilling obligations that are proper to him, with his perception growing keener, his realization surer.

Is all this legitimate to fiction? Nothing really is excluded from this 'bright book of life'. To the Western man, to the Englishman in particular, literature is all that concerns 'man, society, civilization' and his concern with these made, as one could expect, for social morality as a central preoccupation of the English novel. But turn to American fiction, Melville especially, and how inadequate becomes the social yardstick with which to measure the spirit of man. As Arthur Miller remarked, the Professor of Economics in the American University knew how to measure the giant's boots but could not look you in the eyes. And for an Indian the centre of interest shifts from both the moral centrality of the British and the transcendental ego of the American to, if one may venture a tentative generalization, Man, World, and God—the last manifested variously as the Truth, the Absolute, the Brahman. To deny or dispute the legitimacy of such a criterion is to erect critical standards which 'amputate' literature not 'judge' it; it is to reject what Matthew Arnold so wisely termed in his celebrated essay, *The Function of Criticism*, as Eastern antiquity. That is to be, in short, not merely complacent but vulgarly exclusive while the endeavour must be towards inclusiveness.

It is against this background that one must watch the course of Ramaswamy's life in the novel, the way he belongs to the world and transcends it, the transcending rendered possible in terms of his own tradition, a tradition which recognises identities as well as differences and respects them, instead of destroying, which is not to perceive the unity of life.

Home, they say, is where one starts from. And for Ramaswamy, that is awareness of the human condition, his own condition and the aspiration to reach the point of no return, though he does not set out in that direction consciously and deliberately,

for that is what is *explored* and *enacted* in the novel as he goes through life, which represents the progress of the novel; and the novel does progress, it does not end where it began, as some seem to think. The Buddha, as the picture on the cover page indicates, leaves the palace and his sleeping wife and child behind and sets out on his horse to a point from where there is no returning, in an ultimate sense. That is one way (*nivritti marga* renunciation); and there is another way (*pravritti marga* life of activity)—of suppressing desires; and of directing them. Both ways lead to the same destination, each prescribing its own obligations. And Ramaswamy takes the way of active life—a student of history who goes to France for research in Albigensian heresy, of connecting the Cathars with the Vedic ancestors, marries a Frenchwoman (older than him) who teaches history and is interested in tracing the origin of the Holy Grail in the Cathars. They have a child, Pierre Krishna, each trying to give him his own identity, national and cultural, as reflected in the two names. The child dies. Meanwhile Rama's father has also died at home, in India. But he was already an orphan when the story starts and there is a poignant note about his state; the poignancy is personal and metaphysical:

'...because my mother was dead and I had to perform her funeral ceremonies, year after year—my father having married again. So with wet cloth and an empty stomach, with devotion, and sandal paste on my forehead, I fell before the rice-balls of my mother and I sobbed. I was born an orphan, and have remained one. I have wandered the world and have sobbed in hotel rooms and in trains, have looked at the cold mountains and sobbed, for I had no mother. One day, and that was when I was twenty-two, I sat in an hotel—it was in the Pyrenees—and I sobbed, for I knew I would never see my mother again.'

The homelessness which was personal and cosmic now takes on an acuteness with the death of the father. But even before this he had known many deaths in the family: Grandfather Kittanna who 'had the shine of a Dharma Raja' and his horse Sundar—'Where is Sundar now? Where?' he asks sadly. Then there was Aunt Lakshamma, 'married to a minister once and he died when she was seven or eight', who now found fulfilment in

looking after the children and grand-children of brothers, sisters, and cousins. Now she died too. His father married for a second, and a third time, the step-mother having died leaving three children, Saroja, Sukumari, and the eldest Kapila—is 'another story'. Enough to humble a child, but Rama was an extraordinarily sensitive one, who had 'read the Upanishads at the age of four, was given the holy thread at seven, because my mother was dead and I had to perform her funeral ceremonies—my father having married again'.

It is not enough to talk of the 'human condition', the 'loneliness of the human situation' 'the predicament of modern man' in glib language without feeling it deep down in one's entrails or dismiss it as an absurdity for fear of sounding sentimental, a word behind which an Indian at least sees much hypocrisy and unnaturalness. Art is no escape from death; only humility makes it acceptable. Compare the opening passage of Camus' first work of fiction, *The Stranger*:

Today my mother died. Or perhaps yesterday. I don't know. I received a telegram from Home: 'Mother deceased. Burial tomorrow. Sincere condolences'.

with the second paragraph, in the first page of *The Serpent and the Rope* already quoted, and with the deep anguish of the following:

She died, they say, having sent someone to the goldsmith, asking if my hair-flower were ready. When she died they covered her with white flowers...they took her to the burning ghat. They shaved me completely, and when they returned they gave me bengal-gram and some sweets. I could not understand what had happened. Nor do I understand it now. I know my mother, my Mother Gauri, is not dead, and yet I am an orphan. Am I always going to be an orphan?

Here is no preoccupation with a sick conscience as in the novels, in different degrees, of Camus, Moravia, Greene and Silone. There is no shaking of man's faith into an 'abyss of nihilism'. 'Art', as a critic of European fiction put it, 'may provide a heaven among ruins, but it cannot supply a basis for sheer existence'. The predicament, an Indian would say, is:

'It is just in so far as we do now see only the things as they are in themselves, and only ourselves, that have killed the metaphysical man and shut ourselves up in the dismal cave of functional and economic determinism'. It is in so far as he frees himself from the operation of such determinism that man's true estate lies. But in Western fiction there is a 'rancour that is contemptuous of immortality and will not let us recognise what is divine in us'.

Now precisely in this aspiration and attempt lies the distinctiveness of *The Serpent and the Rope*. And it is all done in terms of the fictional art whose scope has now been enlarged and deepened by this Indian novelist—and this not by means of a messianic fervour or sentimental intoxication with Truth and God of which he has been accused by one of his Western reviewers.

Consider Rama's visit to Benares with his step-mother (Little Mother as he called her, for she was that what with her affection, and his devotion); which, by the way, is not introduced to cater for the European tourist's delectation—exotic scenes of the Orient which form part of guidebooks in airport- and railway station-bookstalls displaying *Kamasutra* and *The Serpent and the Rope* (alas, the cheap paperback of the novel now issued in India does carry a certain risk with it). One does come across formulations like the following which have surface justification for accusation of the type mentioned above, this time connected with that rarer tourist with a weakness for Indian philosophy:

'In Benares death is illusory as the mist in the morning'; Benares is a 'surreal city'; 'you never know where reality starts and where illusion ends'. 'Benares was indeed nowhere but inside oneself'; 'all brides be Benares born'; 'I dipped in the Ganges and felt so pure that I wondered any one could die or go to war...'; 'The Ganges knew our secret, held our patrimony'; 'The cows have such ancient and maternal looks'; 'The Himalaya was like Lord Shiva himself, distant, inscrutable, and yet very intimate there where you do not exist....The Himalaya made the peasant and the Brahmin big...'

Now one doesn't know how a European would react to such sentiments but these are the stuff of which India is made and by which peasant and intellectual India (despite occasional cynicism) lives. A country's culture lives in such insubstantial things as a little gesture, or a mere 'recognition' without the need for an

'explanation' (the two words suggest the difference between Savithri and Madeleine, according to Rama); and until one can learn to develop an inwardness with another culture by such subtle means, any attempt to dub such formulations, (which are but the distilled wisdom of an old race), pathetic fallacy would be like running a crude road-roller on a flower-bed, a reflection of intellectual ill-breeding. It shows an obtuseness which perceives no significance in the millions that to this day journey to Benares and dip in the Ganga and go by turns to the numerous other places of pilgrimage on the banks of India's rivers, believed to be sisters to Ganga (the Ganga is believed to go and live with the other rivers by turns throughout the year); and in the fact that no Hindu ritual at birth, death, marriage, house-building and house-warming can to this day take place in rural as well as the most sophisticated sections of India without the Ganga water and without reference to Kashi—*Antaraganga* (The Ganga is inside) and *Kashikshetram Sariram Tribhuvana Janani* (Kashi is within us). These Brahminic convictions distilled into widely-shared popular beliefs that abound in the novel are not for pompous display but are strictly functional, that is, evocative—and evocation implies a shared tradition.

That Raja Rao was not indulging his sentiment but knew what he was doing is seen from a set of contrary observations, (made not in the language of metaphysics but in that of fictional characterization)—the reason why a remark of Lionel Trilling on culture as 'struggle' not a 'flow', was posited earlier. The novelist, himself a Brahmin, is nevertheless sick of the 'sacred Brahmins', (the irony of the adjective is not missed) that wail for alms: 'I would rather have thrown the rupees to the begging monkeys than to the Brahmins' who 'do three funerals a day', while their 'belchings and rounded bellies' belie it all, for 'just fifty silver rupees made everything holy'. The Benares which is witness to Brahmin degradation is the one that also exhibits the 'lovely smile of some concubine just floating down her rounded bust and nimble limbs for a prayer and a client'. 'The juice of youth in their limbs' in one sentence, and in the very next: 'When you see so many limbs go purring and bursting on the ghats of the Ganges, how can limbs have any meaning?' These insights into the contradictions of Benares should not be missed by the critic of *The Serpent and the Rope* any more than that

poignant picture, one of the most moving in the whole novel, of the poor Brahmin taking his own child in his arms to let it float in the Ganges because he has no money for fuel or priest. But it isn't such smooth-going:

Nor must any poor Brahmin of Benares be allowed to take his own child to the Ganges' banks—for there he would pay nothing, not even the hire of four shoulders, being just a child, his own arms would do. Because whatever happens the Ganges is always pure, and he has no money to buy firewood from all those clamouring scoundrels on the pathways to the ghats. 'Oh, Panditji, I've received such fresh, dry consignments from the tarai—and I'll sell it to you for two annas a maund less than that rascal, the robber, across the road'. 'Oh, Panditji, you know me, and your father knows me' says the other, 'and did I ever sell you bad firewood? No, never. Whereas—ask the street-cleaner Panhan—yesterday the body would not burn with the fellow's firewood, so they came running to me. And look at this deodhar, heavy as gold...' But he needs neither, for he can afford neither; so he takes the child, wraps him in the white of his shoulder cloth, and muttering some mantra goes into the water, and lets the little one float down. 'Float down, float down', little circles like flowers, and there is not even a tear in his eyes, for who can weep? Why weep and for so many dead.

The pathos of this profoundly moving passage is realized without the slightest touch of exaggeration. It ensues from the vulgarity and callousness of the firewood sellers, but these in turn are the result of a keen struggle for existence among the poor and the miserable, and the grief-torn father is being obliged to carry his little one himself, but without a tear in his eyes. The novelist who reflects a realistic situation does offer the unfortunate father the necessary strength of the spirit when by a sure stroke of genius the father is made to witness 'circles like flowers' where the child's body was let in to the water—so much of learned philosophy, metaphysics, epic and legend about life, death and immortality is captured in that astonishingly appropriate image, 'circles like flowers' witnessed by the father 'without a tear in his eyes'. Both the Indias are there before us and there is no attempt

to suppress the one and project the other, but the organization and evocation meant to recapture the 'real' India is the work of a great master of his art—to accommodate the vulgar and sublime and make both of them functional is a rare achievement.

It is, then, that death in Benares has not the kind of meaning it has elsewhere: 'Benares is eternal. There the dead do not die, nor the living live'. Besides, deaths, funerals, worship, wedding processions, and concubines out for 'a prayer and a client'—all seen simultaneously on the ghats of the Ganga in Benares makes him wonder 'where reality begins' and 'illusion ends'. It is this that gives edge to a saying of Sankara cited with approval by Ramaswamy that the world is like a 'city seen in a mirror' or 'Life is a pilgrimage, I know, but a pilgrimage to where and of what?' There is persistent questioning by a gifted but distracted intellectual hero side by side with the endorsement of age-old popular beliefs. It is this double vision which makes a tradition vital but also keeps the novel going. What in another novelist without shared beliefs to back him, would have ended in despair is here transmuted into a flow, a continuity—'*Charaiveti, Charaiveti* march on, march on O ye traveller' is a well-known verse of the Upanishads. The transmutation is the work of a well-grounded belief in the metaphysical view of life. It is this central operating principle which irradiates the entire material of the novel and without an informed appreciation of it much that happens in the novel must sound rhapsodical or sentimental. For one sees the pattern persists on the personal and national as well as international planes. Not merely in Ramaswamy but in his mathematician-father: for example, he who 'worshipped' Euler (that spoke of the 'algebraic proof of God') and 'boasted before the world of his intellectual daughter-in-law' (a Frenchwoman), disliked the marriage chiefly because 'she could not sing at an *arathi*', suggesting a deeply-imbedded Indian sensibility. But it is the contradiction which makes the father so convincing. Similarly his grandfather had at one level desired the performance of ceremonies for Rama's dead father, but, on protest from the grandson, was catholic enough to say that *he* should continue to be interested in the serious things of Vedanta and 'leave religion (by which he meant rituals) to smelly old fogies like me'. Rama remarks that 'he almost touched his feet' when grandfather added 'God is not hidden in a formula nor affection

confined to funeral ceremonies. Be what you are'. This sophisticated response, which at one level is belied by our meaningless ritualism is, at another level, a tribute to what Jawaharlal Nehru called the culture of the masses—who are heard articulating at marketplaces such wisdom as will do credit to the philosophers of Europe. Which means the catholicity of the convention-respecting older generation precisely in respect of the very things the young resent, helps to receive the allegiance of the rebellious young—the novelist's mode of intimating the way tradition is made in India and the reason it has endured by its permissiveness, but not in the sense historians of culture apply the term to affluent societies like the American: 'the permissive' and 'the coercive' attitudes, co-existing, interact on each other in a society like the Indian so subtly that they break through each other and impart enough stiffness to the one that would otherwise lose its form (and tend to promiscuity), and suppleness to the other lest it become wooden and lose its usefulness in the preservation of society's stable virtues.

When not merely the pattern but the idiom is allegedly repeated without noticeable variation to describe his responses to corresponding situations in other countries and cultures the reader is a little uneasy. For example: 'Mother Ganga surging out to purify mankind'; 'Truth is the Himalaya and Ganges humanity' are expressions which may be considered legitimate in a people who invested every tree, stone, water-source with divinity. But what is one to make of the 'intoxication' of Ramaswamy in the following passages relating to France, London and Cambridge.....

'Only France has universal history; it has fought all wars for humanity'.

'Mother Rhone', 'Sister to Ganga', 'what fools we are in thinking that the Rhone divides mankind'.

'What an imperial river Thames is! . . .'

'but she flows with a maturity of her own knowledge of herself. . . .' 'The Cam is silent, self-reflective'.

'The Cam is a river that lives on giving dreams'.

'I felt England in my bones and breath; how I revered her'.

'For Savithri London was not a city, a place in geography—it was somewhere, a spot, may be a red spot, in herself'.

- 'London was no longer a city for me, it was myself: the world was no longer space for me, it was a moment of time, it was now'.
'Lord would that I could make the moment stay and make the world England'.
'There's holiness in happiness, and Shakespeare was holy, because Elizabeth was happy'
'Paris is not a city. It is an area in oneself, a concorde in one's being.'
'King's Chapel was not made by workmen but the prayer of pilgrims.'

Now do these formulations help to identify any particular country, river, city, person or time? If the answer is 'No' is it because, as alleged, the emotions are clumsy and the sentiments misplaced? Then, also, aren't these formulations easily interchangeable? But consider whether it is true that all countries have 'universal history'; have 'fought wars for humanity' as France 'the Niobe of nations' has done through history, especially through that great event in history, the French Revolution which brought, among others, the English Romantic poets out of their splendid isolation and made them the champions of human Liberty. And the formulations relating to the rivers, they are not all uniform except to a very naive reader. In fact the novelist identifies each river by its unique quality. 'Mother Rhone is sister to Ganga'. For an Indian water is mother, and all water is Ganga and the Ganga becomes a generic name for water (hence Eliot's 'Ganga was sunken' in *The Waste Land*) and legends abound about all rivers (the title of Raja Rao's forthcoming book is *The Ganges and Her Sisters*) being sisters to Ganga and, by a process of extension, even the Rhone becomes sister to Ganga. If 'Mother' and 'Sister' are tabooed except within the context of a Christian order, it is another matter. Again Thames *is*, certainly was, 'imperial', and it speaks of his admirable insight to think of the Cam as 'silent and self-reflective' and as living by giving dreams to the young—'sluggish Cam' would have been a sickening cliché and bookish while both the 'self-reflective' and the 'dreams' aspects of the Cam are tributes to Raja Rao's freshness of vision and profound understanding of the spirit of that ancient university.

France and French character perhaps receive the most incisive treatment at Raja Rao's hands largely because, it is obvious, he has lived in France almost as long as he has in his own country, knows the French intellectual tradition from inside and has no small sympathy for the language, religion, and the tender humanity of the common people, especially of Southern France. And the aphoristic statements with which the novel abounds must not be dissociated, indeed even when they are scattered, they have, in fairness to the author, to be related to the abundant elucidation of experience. The aphoristic way, the time-honoured Indian way, *assumes* at the highest level the *presence* of experience which alone can make the aphorism possible, inevitable, but at another level (of the *Purana* or legend, and the epic) there is, to a highly cultivated mind, an embarrassing amount of enactment. In Raja Rao there is a wise combination of both, though the modern reader, becoming increasingly a stranger to the speculative cast of mind, would find the aphoristic mode preponderating in the novel and therefore would prefer the author to spell out things. And this author has not ignored his readers of today with impunity.

Consider the way or the variety of ways in which France is evoked to us through Ramaswamy's contact with his French wife Madeleine and her uncle and aunt who have brought her up: Uncle Charles and Tante Zoubie, their daughter Catherine, and several others whom they encounter on various occasions. Uncle Charles especially offers opportunities to the novelist to explore France and Paris—to Uncle Charles, the notaire, this 'outlandish' creature who has married Madeleine, is '*notre Rama*', despite his general suspicion of strangers of which he makes no bones, and to his daughter Catherine, he is her very 'brother'. Uncle Charles carries his filial affection and fear of mother to his old age (there's a touch of the ridiculous in it), has married Tante Zoubie, herself a former minister's wife, for the third time—both of which invite their own comments on the French social scene—and there is hardly any love left for her; she knows it when she posits that after all he needs someone to 'wipe the saliva off his mouth', for we gather he feels 'young' when he visits Paris, and 'looks up old addresses' for 'other, rarer pleasures' of a perverse kind which brings forth the angry comment from Ramaswamy: 'this barrack-room mentality is the bane of Europe'.

The same is the occasion of one or two more memorable expressions: 'the sorrow of a French prostitute seems somehow to give meaning to one's own sorrow'; 'was the body so important, so constantly in demand that man forgot Peter Abelard who preached Conceptualism just on the other side of the river?'—which is an example of a deep understanding of the intellectual tradition of France of which there is confirmation everywhere, but chiefly when Ramaswamy's Professor remarks how French intelligence ended everything 'with a question mark'. Add to these the humanity of Henri the French taxi driver who while driving Ramaswamy from the railway station stops his car, buys a bunch of flowers and offers them for Madeleine saying 'These azaleas will go with Madame's grey-green suit. We call them the flowers of the Queen'. Which draws forth from Ramaswamy his appreciation of how one receives this civilized attention everywhere in Southern France, 'for the Provenceaux all is a festival of joy, and they live by the stars.' Raja Rao can bring a whole way of life into focus by one such subtle stroke, and this is not isolated, for Madame Chimaye, waitress in a restaurant, opposite Notre Dame, is so attentive to Ramaswamy because 'poor student that he is, and so far away from his parents . . . such sunshine there', a vegetarian, and so gentle. Raja Rao uses the character—the dear gossip—unobtrusively to offer more insights into our common humanity. Madame Chimaye expresses horror of caging birds, even selling bird-cages as the man opposite the restaurant does. Her ideal is 'Jean the bookseller, her friend for thirty years. He has never grown older always serving good people like you', and refuses to sell sexy novels and nude pictures to the young. To complete the portrait, a word about her husband: her 'good man' never beats her, 'only touch me with a feather' unlike that brute the seller of bird-cages, which now becomes symbolic—how one's calling may condition one's essential attitudes to life and contaminate vital human relationships; and this is not explicit but is left to our inference.

Similarly about England and the English—evoked through Ramaswamy's visit to London at the time of the Coronation of Queen Elizabeth II, and to Cambridge to meet his friend Savithri. The period obviously is 1948, soon after Indian Independence and is sure to occasion a complex of reactions from Indians as

well as the British; chiefly, what they remembered was a sense of wrong, the wrongs one allegedly inflicted on the other—the British by their imperialistic policy and the Indians by the manner in which they made the British quit India. There was thus room for bitterness in both. And can old wounds be healed at all? It is here a writer can play his role—not by propagating, but by pointing to, hinting at, the possibility of regeneration and even strengthening it by trying to heal the tissues of the spirit. The British, it is well known, had in them the virtue of compromise by which they could rise to any occasion to keep the channels of understanding and friendship open. As for Indians there was no end of pride that they could not nurse any bitterness for long and their natural disposition to belong to a centre, to transcend the sordid and the petty—all made easy by the fact that Jawaharlal Nehru was the head of the government soon after the British ties were broken with India. Now they were both on trial and Raja Rao makes the Coronation of the Queen an occasion and a symbol in which both the British and Indians could rejoice. Says Rama,

... there would be good government on earth, and decency and a certain nobility of human behaviour, and all because England was. That I, an Indian who disliked British rule, should feel this only revealed how England was recovering her spiritual destiny, how in anointing her Queen she would anoint herself.

And lest all this should sound sentimental the novelist posits a corrective, and the corrective, coming as it does from a young Englishman, Stephen, a logical positivist, is unusually effective, but such is the subtlety of the art that even the anarchist who shouts at Indians ends up so naturally by drinking to Nehru's health, and the half-casual, half-serious tone of the passage helps to reinforce the valuation of Stephen—itself an expression of the collective emotion of a whole generation.

'I knew Indians were mad, that Gandhi was mad. And now, now I have the proof', said Stephen. 'I'm an old anarchist. I believe that matter is true, that Julietta is true, that I am true, and you also my friend, who stands me drinks, and spends ninepence each time on me and ninepence on Julietta. Now, go and get me another. This time I

don't want a half. I want the whole damn thing, and Long live Pandit Nehru'.

People from the counter turned to look and lifted their glasses to India, to me.

It is at the end of drinks and animated conversation with the intellectually alive young men and women that Ramaswamy's praise of the English pub comes with a naturalness that can hardly be questioned except when taken out of the context:

How wonderful to be in an English pub, I thought. Such humanity you would get in France only amongst the working classes

It is actual pulsating life that has gone into the aphorism and supports it. His enthusiasm for the Coronation of Queen Elizabeth is born as much of his devotion to the feminine principle as the pervasive joy in London and the rest of the world. Here is a sample of the London scene over-flowing with V.I.Ps which Raja Rao has captured:

Time flowed, and on barques and balustrades man stopped a moment and lived in his own presence. Everything: the towers, the trolley-bus tops; the zebra crossings and their orange lights, the horses of vegetable sellers with their short, restless tails; the electric company's cockney meter-reader; the leaves of eager trees brushed aside, the newspaper rags that floated on the air; the curse at the pubs, the songs of the Italians; all showed that there was much drink in the air and much sunshine. Men came from all over the globe: the Abyssinians with their curled hair and their white, long togas; the Zambezi Zulus with their split noses and their large masticating faces; the Pakistanis on their white, slim horses; the humble Hindu in his proud tights; the Japanese lady with her large smile; the Togo-islanders, the Canadians, the hearty loud-spoken Australians; the French with their indiscretions, the Germans with their boasts; yes, even the Soviets came to drink of the beer of England. Fruit came parcelled from all the three corners of the world, from Malaya and from British Honduras; peat from the Falklands, pearls

from many seas. Kings and Pashas came from everywhere, the lost race of a defeated people, who wanted to know, if knowing will want them from wanting; a great many students and professors came; journeymen to beg or sell; and married couples to believe that one can live one's life and find the meaning of connection in round freedom.

It is to climax and clinch the actual that he has presented an account of the invitees in the Miltonic manner of enumerating proper names for effect—only the Indian novelist's feeling for what is behind the words has eschewed from his prose the orotundity of Milton, though with his flair for the literary he quotes the appropriately archaic lines of Elizabethan poetry as a way of connecting ideally, the two queens and the two epochs.

And with them eke, O Goddess heauenly bright
 Mirrour of Grace and Maiestie divine
 Great Lady of the greatest Isle . . .

Notice also the other passage where the prose grows justly lyrical being charged with the remembered emotions of a remarkably sensitive student of English literature, for Marlowe, Spenser and Shakespeare—a splendid testimonial to the impact of English literature on young Indians:

The mist on the Thames is pearly, as if Queen Elizabeth the First had squandered her riches and femininity on ships of gold, and Oberon had played on his pipe, so worlds, gardens, fairies, and grottoes were created, Empires were built and lost, men shouted heroic things to one another and died, but somewhere one woman, golden, round, imperial, always lay by her young man, his hand over her left breast, his lip touching hers in rich recompense. There's holiness in happiness, and Shakespeare was holy because Elizabeth was happy. Would England not see an old holiness again?

It is still in his presentation of Cambridge that Raja Rao's resources are seen at their best, especially in the authenticity of its evocation. It is not by mere mention of names: Petty Cury, Trinity, St John's, and Girton colleges, the Clare Bridge, the Cam, King's Chapel, Copper Kettle, Market Square, Trinity

Tower, Heffer's, the rich and surprising alleyways of Cambridge, with churches, chapels, bookshops, bicycles. He seizes on the essential nerve-centres of Cambridge life to make it alive for us—those that have shaped the great university through the centuries. First to receive the novelist's attention is the University Library and to it he imparts a personal touch: he meets Savithri 'by the staircase' and life radiates from the library to the rest of the town—he and Savithri 'wander along over the sluices and bridges, showing her the spots of silence as in between the two purrings of the Cam, or the broad sheet of space that the sun lit up from Clare Bridge to the tower of St John's.' It is a discerning scholar's observation and not of a vulgar tourist who 'did' Cambridge on a Sunday that has given us this and the rest: 'The Cam seemed never to have grown old, even though the buildings were so aged'. 'The night of Cambridge had an absolute silence, as though paths and roads had stopped suddenly, and time had passed by them, and into Herfordshire.' 'King's Chapel was not made by workmen but by the prayer of pilgrims; colleges were built not by the donations of noblemen and kings but by the leap of light within, by the aura of substantialities within man's blood and becoming, in which God floats a castle, builds a bridge and shapes a tower'.

Such fashionable pastime of men and even young women—who normally couldn't care less for politics—as Savithri lost in 'some dubious and interminable discussion with her Communist comrades' engages the novelist's attention and he captures so faithfully the 'dubious and interminable discussion' of Cambridge undergraduates, Jack Horlington and Michael Swanston, apart from the Indian crowd, Lakshmi, Savithri and Sharifa, with whom Ramaswamy had prolonged conversations on such things as Bogomil dualism or of the Revolution of '48, Soviet accusations against the United States about germ-warfare in Korea—'Swanston had the names, qualifications and findings of everyone on the international committee of inquiry, from Joliot-Curie to some obscure Professor in Australia' with the characteristic Cambridge undergraduate-communist's thoroughness—, the Impersonal principle, the *Ramayana*, Darwinism, marriage of jewesses with counts and princes, Kalidasa, Vedanta and Agra jewelry in the course of which so many other things also came up and in the Cambridge undergraduate's serious, irresponsible,

irreverent way, not excluding the tone of voice and the language, or, is it 'slanguage', what with expressions like 'fiddled away with her bit of lamb or veal' 'the whole damn thing,' 'doodling' on the table with the spoon, or the contemptuous 'Nyaya fiddlesticks'. The novelist even remembers to slip in a quotation in Middle English prose from some huge tome on Cambridge to evoke the antiquity of the place, but more important, to bring out the famous clashes between the town and the gown, the insistence on precedent as conferring right in English law, etc., etc. The present one relates to a bridge across the Cam which was permitted by the authorities, because the monks from Clare Hall had wished to take their horses to graze across the river and the petition begins:

Your petitioners doe humblie begg of your most sacred
Majestie that they be suffered at their own charge to
land a bridge over ye river . . .

Ramaswamy's visits to Benares, Paris, London and Cambridge have helped, on the one hand, to evoke the spirit of each and sharply bring out their identities, while on the other, to lose their identities thanks to the calibre of him who perceives the metaphysical unity behind the bewildering diversities of life's manifestations. 'Paris is not a city, it is an area in oneself'; 'London was no longer a city for me, it was myself'; 'The colleges at Cambridge were not built by the donations of noblemen and Kings but by the leap of light within'—that these are not said for effect but are expressions of what is called a cultural predilection which finds Kashi and the Ganga not on the map but within one's own being, *kasi kshetram sariram tribhuvana janani, vyapini gnanaganga*, has by now become abundantly clear. The man that frowns on French 'calculativeness', or that 'mercantile civilization' which 'drove away what would have been the best King since Henry V', has also the mind which can partake of the best intellectual tradition of France and identify itself with the adoration of the British for their Queen and experience a sense of belonging at Cambridge as though it were his Nalanda or Taxila.

With this attitude deeply ingrained in him he is no stranger anywhere, at any time—or with anyone. When he married Madeleine he knew he was marrying a French woman, five years

older, and a Catholic, too. To have an appreciation of true difference is to seek to bridge it, to make the necessary adjustments: 'to wed a woman', says Ramaswamy, 'is to wed her god'. Not so she. He remarks ruefully later: 'Madeleine had never participated in my superstitions though I had in hers'. He tells her reassuringly 'the gods are neither Hindu, nor Greek being creations of your own mind, they behaved as you made them.'

But why did *she* marry Ramaswamy? Because he represented a country and a cause—he was an Indian and a Brahmin. But consider some of the contradictions of her character: 'Everything good has only come to me from India.' 'There the Hindus are right. Man must lead woman to the altar.' 'In fact I think I hate all religions and would to God man simply lived intelligently'. And she 'a pagan'—professed paganism—who had claimed 'Whatever was not Catholic was sacred and true' to her, but fasted on Friday for, 'Catholicism is in her blood', and she 'preferred mysteries and things ancient in Christianity' as evidenced by her eagerness for the company and conversation of Georges, a 'smelly priest' for all her dislike of men. And yet 'the intellectual brilliance of Buddhism appealed to her', but as Ramaswamy was to remark, her insight into Buddhism is 'more intellectual, psychic than religious'. While for Ramaswamy, a Brahmin against whose religion Buddhism came as a revolt: 'I feel the word *dukkha* almost with the entrails dropping into my hand, whereas for her it is mere sorrow. *Dukka* is the very tragedy of creation, the sorrow of the sorrow that sorrow is'.

Her thoughts were constantly on the Mediterranean, 'the cradle of our civilization', on Ulysses, Achilles, Demeter (was interested in Paul Valéry because he led her to Greece), Nativity, ruins, cathedrals, chapels and the Dominican monasteries, and the Mass which 'deeply affected her'; and was interested in Cathars as a research subject, because she hoped to trace the origins of the Holy Grail. And to her husband: 'You can never understand what it is for a mother, and a French mother, to bear a child. It is the birth of a god in a chalice, the Holy Grail', or, 'you people are sentimental about the invisible, we about the visible'; and wonders whether the Indians can 'love'.

As for Ramaswamy, he called Krishna Pierre Krishna, to 'respect her superstition' for basically his was an attitude of

absorption, assimilation, and generally, one of inclusiveness: When he landed in Naples 'Europe didn't seem so far and alien nor Madeleine's golden hair any the less familiar', 'I was too much of a Brahmin to be unfamiliar with anything' and as though stung by his own consciousness of exclusiveness in the very attempt to be inclusive, he posits a quick corrective: 'Such is the pride of caste and race'. But the pride of race never really came in the way of a civilized participation. Pointing to a chapel in France he could see 'the Mother of God to whom man built a sanctuary, a convocation of stone . . . For it was the Word of God made actual in prayer and fast . . . I might have led a cow to her altar had I been in Benares'. It is the same man who had said earlier, 'The Mediterranean presence has a human richness that no ocean can give.'

Not only about things, but in human relations too. He had endeared himself to Madeleine's family. He is to them 'notre Rama'. Madeleine, too, did everything for him which received his grateful acknowledgement: 'There was nothing I needed which she did not know beforehand and try to do, my medicine after lunch, my handkerchief when I started on a walk, my pencil duly sharpened and laid on my note-book'. It went further to express itself in a profounder way: When once he fell ill Madeleine, like Emperor Babar for Humayun, fasted and prayed to be taken away in her husband's place because 'you are young, you are a man, you have yet to live'.

But she did not participate in his life. In fact they touched each other tangentially evading the deeper levels of being. Just when she was getting nearer to him she seemed 'so far that nearness was further than any smell or touch'. Of Benares all she knew was 'bits of floating human flesh and pyres of the dead'. Compare this with *his*

'All roads in France, I remembered, started from Notre Dame' or

Does he who sets foot on the soil of France know he
treads where Saint Louis trod, walks where Henry IV
rode, goes where the great Mistral walked?

This attitude did not at any time seek to usurp what was legitimately his first love. How well grounded he was in his own culture is borne out by instance after instance. His choice of

the Albigensian heresy for research was prompted as much by his desire to trace the connection to Vedanta as by the 'Albigensian humility' which 'seemed sweeter and more naturally Indian'. Not his research alone but that of his father who 'worshipped' Euler, the Swiss mathematician; his grandfather who on sensing the young man's reservations on a matter of principle, did not demand any allegiance from him to ritual or ceremony in so important a matter as the observance of funeral rites after his father's death but 'leave it to old fogies' like him. Even his illiterate step-mother, on seeing a picture of Madeleine and the child, went into the sanctuary and quietly laid flowers on the *Ramayana*, this unarticulated gesture was a mode of invoking the blessings of the household god on the unseen daughter-in-law. She had exhibited the same generosity in her immediate human relationships. She, a step-mother, without bearing him, was a mother to him and such was her affection that she could say 'Rama has the bearing of a pipal tree, tall and sacred . . . we must go round him to become sacred'. And as for Rama, a most rare and civilized sensibility distinguished him from all. He could say of his step-sister Kapila: 'There was as much in common between us as between jasmine and tamarind'. But he could still add, in the way our country people have always done towards unpleasant step-sisters and cousins: 'Let the tamarind grow and become the village-gate tree'. But the most magnanimous gesture of all is that which comes on the very second page of the novel where he records a remark of grandfather Kittanna that his mother, who had a voice 'like vina playing to itself' reminded him 'of concubine Chandramma. She had the same voice'. A concubine, her very name is taboo in orthodox circles; and that a son on the one hand, and a father on the other, should both not feel inhibited in associating a concubine's name with hers is a compliment to the living culture of inclusiveness side by side, maybe, with the pariah and the suffering poor, but here, we have to distinguish between human misery (for which there is so much compassion) and social practices which have persisted for centuries.

To Rama difference was 'in-born' 'self-created' (note the small 's' in self), and he accepted that Madeleine was 'different'. 'That is why I loved her so, even as I loved Little Mother who was different from my mother'. 'In difference,' Ramaswamy now generalizes, 'there is the acceptance of oneself as reality'. It is

with this texture of cultural equipment that he went to France and it is this that made it possible for him to respond to a stranger like Georges, the young Russian intellectual: 'The simplicity and earnestness' of the Russians is what makes contact with them 'so enriching'.

Had Madeleine continued to be Catholic, instead of being torn by the conflicting demands of Hinduism, Buddhism and her own Christianity, one surmises, there might still have been room for their love to be intact, though it is a moot point as to what really brought about the estrangement between the two. This is true that she had no firm base and was continually drifting and as a result of her increasing absorption in Buddhistic rituals she withdrew from her husband more and more, became an ascetic almost to the extent of being inhuman (the irony is, *she* had, playfully, called Rama an 'unhuman husband' because of his insistence on the impersonal principle) in the frontal attack she hurled at him: 'It's you who have brought me all this'. To which Ramaswamy's reaction was not an elaborate explanation but to beg forgiveness 'for so much betrayal'. The 'betrayal' is not to be confused with Ramaswamy's subsequent attention to Savithri or the earlier affair with Lakshmi in Bombay, of which Madeleine had no knowledge and as for his relation with Savithri, it was in any case not sexual but ritualistic and symbolic. The novel relates no sufficient or immediate cause for the break-down of relationships between Rama and his wife, and the reader can only guess at it. It started with Ramaswamy's return from India as he reflects: 'For once I felt a stranger in France', because of Madeleine's cold behaviour. She confessed to him later that kissing him that day was like 'kissing a serpent or the body of death'. It was *then* that he noticed the difference—Madeleine's not being an Indian—sharply:

Auspicious, so auspicious—with kunkum, coconut, and cholipiece, bangles on the arm, the necklace of blackbeads, —is life.

There was reason for him to have said it returning from the bosom of the family:

Living in the intimacy of my own family—where every gesture, idiosyncrasy, or mole-mark was traced back to some cousin, aunt, or grand-father; where there were

subtle understandings of half-said things, of acts that were respected or condemned according to the degree of stature, age or sex of one another—gave a feeling of complex oneness, from which one could never get out save by death, and even after that one could get into it again in the next life, and so on till the wheel of existence were ended.

It is against this 'complex oneness' that one has to judge the superstitious thought that ran across his mind on the eve of his departure for India. He had felt that if she, the first daughter-in-law of the family went with him, 'father could not die, he would not die'. The schism had started and long separation may have helped to bring to the surface and intensify the difference which had hitherto looked peripheral and been in the sub-conscious. The ugliest expression of it was when she confronted him with the heartless question as he returned from London:

'Why did you come?'

'To see you'.

'You cannot see anything but the eighteen aggregates'.

'But eighteen aggregates can see eighteen aggregates', I said laughing.

'Then it is no business of mine', she said, and started counting her beads.

What follows in the next few paragraphs is a piece of magnificent rhetoric but under the complete control of a master of language and sentiment. When Madeleine resumed the counting of beads impervious to the presence of her husband—this in the name of religion, and a religion like Buddhism, of the Compassionate One, what is Ramaswamy to do? And how natural his feelings are:

There was no word spoken, and all was said. You just see the counting of beads. Then you rise and say to God, even unto the Buddha Himself, many many angry things. 'Lord Buddha, my Lord, O you abode of Compassion, O you who talked even unto the courtesan Ambapalli and partook of the meal of Chunda, the un-touchable, do you hear me?' . . . Must the bead be the ladder of intelligence? Must truth grow fat with fasting? It smells bad, Lord Buddha, it smells very bad, that the Kingdom of earth be shut in with a garden gate . . .

Buddha, Lord Buddha, do not traffic with the Black Virgin; do not sing those Tibetan mantras; do not fast, do not preach, do not count beads; open the door and walk out to the India that is everywhere about, marking the footsteps on the snows.

The river Rhone flows like the Ganges, she flows does Mother Rhone into the seven seas, and she builds herself a chapel, that the gay gipsies might come and sing and worship Sarah in her sanctuary. . . India is wheresoever you see, hear, touch, taste, smell. India is where you dip into yourself, and the eighteen aggregates are dissolved . . . Come . . . Mother, Mother Rhone . . .!

The indignation is not so much with Buddhism but the imperfect understanding of it—its ossification and heartlessness in the follower and the degeneration it has suffered in Tantric worship. And that He who knew that more tears are shed than there are waters in the ocean should be the cause of all this!

The anger is in passing and does not corrode the being. For the train takes him 'to the severe clarity, the austere benignity of Paris', where in his anguish he can still look at 'the twin towers of Notre Dame' for some comfort. 'I say a prayer to the Mother of God, at such times: "*Marie pleine de grace, Mere de Dieu*". And she always knows and she always answers, for the womb of the world is *She*'. He remembers Verlaine who half a century ago 'walked these very streets, drunk, and not knowing how to say his own name'. He adds profoundly:

'It is good to forget one's name, it makes one a saint'. Compare this attitude of Ramaswamy with the ascetic Madeleine's:

She wrote a letter to Catherine, her cousin about Ramaswamy's visit to her: 'It's all like a ghost story',—'Rama, India—and the world'. As though the ghostliness is not enough, she warns Catherine:

By the way, Cathy, before Rama leaves for India, don't you think it would be wise for the legalities to be settled, once and for all? My own future is settled . . . Anyway it all belongs to the family, my properties . . . I will just keep mother's house at Saintongel. Just a spot to call my own, that is all; and that again only as long as I live.

This reference to the 'legalities', 'family', 'properties' 'once and for all' 'just a spot to call my own', by one who had renounced the world, and looked upon herself as the body of 'eighteen aggregates'! And to crown it all, *he* is driven to apply for a divorce. And the law required he had to admit that he did not 'love' his wife. Ramaswamy's crushing comment is 'Law is the death of truth'. At first, his reaction was one of hopeless despair because of what had happened and the manner in which it all had happened:

'To think that everything must end in darkness, even when spring is in the air', but spring meant 'love' and he had known enough to put too much faith by 'love'.

'Had I been less of a Brahmin, I might have known more of "love"' he writes in his diary for those dark days after the divorce. In his wretchedness he thinks of his sister Saroja, Little Mother, a job in India, and concludes finally: 'There is nobody to go to now: no home, no temple, no city, no climate, no age'.

Here now is a most civilized young man from an older culture, caught in the extremity of a crisis which a sequence of circumstances has brought about. Clearly, he has no answer to his questions in terms of the world and it is under such pressure that all his spiritual resourcefulness comes surging up. It is then that he mutters to himself the metaphysical question from the sacred texts of his own country:

'Who are you and whose; whence have you come?' And the answer, he knows, can only be attempted in metaphysical terms; any other will not suffice; it can only be superficial. Hence:

'Wheresoever I am is my country and I weep into my bed'. Was he longing for God? No; 'I cannot long for a round, red thing, that one calls God, and he becomes God'. That is, he has no faith in the anthropocentric view of God. As for that 'the Encyclopaedia has sixty-two pages on God and they do not illuminate my need'.

A diary-entry which appears last, in the last section but one, runs:

No, not a God but a Guru is what I need 'Oh, now My Guru, My Lord'. I cried in the middle of this dreadful winter night: 'It is the gift that Yajnyavalkya made to

Maitreyi, it is the gift of Govinda to Sri Sankara. It is the gift He made to me, My Lord'.

So read, in the sequence, and under the pressure, of actual events that Ramaswamy goes through, the novel with its epic immensity now assumes a tragic dimension. It is a tragedy in which Ramaswamy and Madeleine are not the only ones that are involved; they, it seems, are types of the modern man and woman groping their way, while caught up in the endless flux of life. And this novel shows one way, which is India's way, the essential Indian way, and by the manner of its presentation, a deep and profound one, it acquires a compulsiveness which commends itself to us, for the predicament of these two young people is the predicament of all of us, regardless of the countries we belong to, East or West, or in an encounter of both; for the basic cause of all our suffering and sorrow is traceable to the egocentric predicament of man who must learn to work out his salvation with diligence—and the Indian way commends the mediation of the guru or the spiritual teacher, who alone can see us through the flux of life. A metaphysical quest and a metaphysical solution, but the material out of which the quest and the solution are demonstrated, is man and the world, because it concerns man who belongs here and he has to work out his salvation in and through the world. No earthly institution can involve man in the world to the extent that marriage does. Hence the centrality of marriage in the novel. The novelist has drawn our attention pointedly to the pervasiveness of this social institution in the manner he presents human relationships.

The marriage of Ramaswamy and Madeleine is a failure, so is that of Uncle Charles and Tante Zoubie, the former wife of a minister and now the third wife to Uncle Charles; Ramaswamy's own father married thrice with an orphan of four at home; and when he died, left a young woman younger than his first son and her infant behind; his sister Saroja married Subramanya Sastri whom she 'detested'; Lakshmi and her husband in Bombay had lovely children with no love to hold the parents together; Catherine and Georges cannot be said to be an ideal couple what with the pre-marital relationship of Catherine and Lezo and present intentions of having a good time; Savithri marries stump Pratap in the manner of Saroja and Sastri. But success and failure in marriage

by the world's standards is a very misleading criterion, for neither holds out for long and in any case either has no meaning except in a relativist context. All one can say, as Ramaswamy says so often, is that 'man must wed to belong to the earth' and belong he must. But the earth is not his permanent abode. 'Man is a stranger to the earth, he must go', says the same Ramaswamy. When Tante Zoubie puts it half-humorously, half-seriously, 'Marriage is a grand institution; it prepares you handsomely for the grave' she speaks only part of the truth, inasmuch as she reckons only with the 'brave suffering' man must put up with during his life on earth. What she thinks she misses is the 'song' of life and not the transcendental aspect of marriage or man's life on earth. And that is not offered to us in the novel by Madeleine, much less by any member of her family, Tante Zoubie or Catherine who have a validity only in a moral universe, not a metaphysical one, whose lives therefore constitute but a vegetable existence. Madeleine went as far as a woman of her tradition could go—it was far no doubt, but not in the right direction, despite her seriousness of disposition. She made the mistake of thinking that potentiality for transcendence was not in *her* (what with her 'original sin') but looked for it elsewhere—in India, in Brahminism, in Buddhism—without abiding faith in any one of these; and was convinced that spirituality consisted in mortification of the flesh while what needed to be mortified, transcended that is, was the self in her, the assertion of her ego—so as to pave the way for the self to lose its identity and rejoice in the knowledge of the Absolute. Marriage is a help, can be a help, only when man realizes as Ramaswamy does in his relationship with Savithri: 'There is only one woman, not for one life, but for all lives. Indeed the earth was created that we may seek her'. And the question of seeking does not arise either—for when both have shed the lower self they come together 'as Siva and Parvathi did—the Absolute in union with the Absolute—to be One. There, does not one possess the other.'

The desire to possess is the attribute of the self steeped in ignorance, and all marriages in the novel have amplified the truth of it. The myth of Radha and Krishna has amply reinforced the same. Where there is Knowledge as in Maitreyi there is the disinterested quest for the Absolute the nature of which Yajnyavalkya lovingly expounds to his inquiring wife: 'Not for the husband's sake is the husband dear but for the Self's sake'.

It is thus that marriages as the world understands have no meaning, but men can't perceive the meaning through the veil of ignorance; and they only speak of the success or failure of marriages. But if man understands that the world is a fib, is a city seen in a mirror it matters not whom you marry—Subrahmanya Sastri or stump Pratap for anyone can become the means of achieving the Knowledge. The milkmaids of Brindavan had their husbands, families and children but Krishna was the Supreme Lord to whom they had lost their hearts. Now for Savithri: at one level, the level of the world, Pratap was her lord or ought to have been accepted as such; for that is her *dharma*; at another, higher, Rama was her lord for only he, though only potentially, represented the highest Self, that which she was in quest of, from life to life. But he was still Ramaswamy, not Krishna yet. Hence there could only be a ritualistic or symbolic union of the two in the novel; and the ritual is observed between the two in Rama's London room.

He is imperfect and so is she not because of her smoking 'like a chimney' singing 'jazz' and dancing 'boogie-woogie' but because of the desire still clinging in her to possess Ramaswamy. They must both reach a state when they can say:

I am not one, I am not two, I am neither one nor two,
Aham nirvikalpo nirakara rupo.

As Little Mother truly remarks 'birth and death are illusions of the non-Self'. But now such a state remains an ideal, an aspiration and to its realization both must strive or wait for the gift of the Guru to realize the truth of it and there is a prolonged dialogue spread over half-a-dozen pages expounding the way of self-realization.

Now, is this enacted in the novel form convincingly in the rest of the novel? Yes and No. No, because of so many such scattered expositions throughout the novel. And yes because, Ramaswamy is son, brother, husband, student, friend and in each of these roles he is seen fulfilling his obligations in a manner proper to his *dharma* (its violation, we are told, 'pains' 'the infinite sky') and simultaneously to his higher Self—the former, surely, is a means of realizing the latter. Similarly with Savithri: she is the daughter of a decadent Maharajah; a Cambridge undergraduate with friends to meet and talk to, and her own academic interests

to pursue. When these two meet, the expatriate Ramaswamy, profoundly grounded in the culture of his own land but married to Madeleine who does not participate in his inner life—he sees in Savithri the finest embodiment of his own tradition (despite the veneer of Western life which he thinks he can remove with a babul thorn); her kunkum, chowli, sari, blackbeads lend her an auspiciousness which is reinforced by her knowledge of Bhartruhari and the songs she sings of Mira. We see her so little in flesh and blood and Madeleine clinches the point when, after praising her as the product of three thousand years of civilization, she finds it hard to reconcile herself to seeing Savithri riding in a bus. So insubstantial is she. To the end she remains rather more a symbol than a substance. For, what we know of Savithri is what Mr Raja Rao cares to inform us about through Ramaswamy, almost wholly; that is, we see what Ramaswamy sees and no more. And Ramaswamy does not care to *see* very much. For to him she is earth, ether, light, sound; perception, apprehension, intuition, vision—or, in the inadequate language of the empirical West, she is a dream-picture, and the following remarks thrown in different parts of the novel add to our present view of her:

‘Savithri proved that I could be I.’

‘When Savithri touched my arm the whole world rose into my awareness’.

‘Savithri had such a reverence for things—were she picking up a spoon or holding your pen in how to write an address . . .’ (but the reader would have preferred to *see* it himself rather than hear about it).

‘Savithri was there not in me but as me; not someone far, unreal relegated to a country in rounded space, but as light which seemed never to fade . . . like that constant sound . . . the first vibration . . . the primary sound . . . the pranavam *OM* propounds itself and from which all that is world is created’. ‘Her presence brought peace, perfume and elevation.’

Which it really did in the hospital scene towards the end of the novel. The fever subsided and he felt whole. And her visit is half-vision, half-real; and the whole dialogue would have been perfectly in place had the element of *fact* been eschewed. She

came when the British Queen was expected to come. Thus Savithri and the queen both merge in the Feminine Principle which is after all an expression of the Absolute. The Savithri of the Vedas, of the Mahabharata story, and more recently of Sri Aurobindo's epic of that name,—symbolizes the birth of a new knowledge with which man conquers death or ignorance and gains his release from the flux of life. But the question is: Does the symbol find its corresponding concrete equivalent in the character of the novel, in the way it is presented to us? If not, there is a tacit assumption that either the novel form cannot take in the load of the symbol, or the novelist, because of his intense preoccupation with the symbol, has only been able to pay scant attention to its enactment, a point worth commenting upon considering the tremendous advantage that the symbol, thanks to the rich and complex associations it has amassed for itself from the Vedas to the present day, initially conferred upon the character in the novel. Savithri of the novel is *there*, no one disputes, but she is not fully developed, not even as fully as that wonderful minor character, Little Mother—which is a triumph of the 'creation of character' by the novelist. But, then, have we yet to transcend the conventional categories of judging a novel in terms of 'plot', 'character', 'situation' which the novel today, as the one bright book of life, has of necessity superseded, if not invalidated?

That precisely is what one finds in this novel. There is 'plot', 'character' and 'situation' and abundant 'life'—as it is actually lived in India, in Paris, in Southern France, in London and Cambridge. There are numerous beautiful 'stories' within the central story in the style of the *Mahabharata*,—of Bhagyanagar that was Hyderabad, of Lakpati of Lahore, of Iswara Bhatta and his family; of Radha, Krishna and Durvasa; of Jagannatha Bhatta and Shajehan's daughter; of Tristram and Iseult; of Buddha and Vassita with her dead son in her arms, not to speak of Buddha riding in a chariot to a place of no return, leaving his wife and child behind, their shades hovering for ever in the background; of the poor Brahmin of Benares carrying his own dead child on his shoulder to float in the Ganga; of Kabir and Ramananda; of *Budumekaye* and the Prince, of Yajnyavalkya and Maitreyi—each of the stories delightful, poignant and elevating, but having a value and a significance seen against the main theme of *The Serpent and*

the Rope, itself a popular myth but most artistically elucidated in the course of the novel:

'The world is either unreal or real—the serpent or the rope. There is no in-between-the-two—and all that's in-between is poetry, is sainthood. You might go on saying all the time, 'No, no, it's the rope', and stand in the serpent. And looking at the rope from the serpent is to see paradise, saints, avatars, gods, heroes, universes. For wheresoever you go, you see only with the serpent's eyes. Whether you call it duality or modified duality, you invent a belvedere to heaven, you look at the rope from the posture of the serpent, you feel you are the serpent—you are—the rope is. But in true fact, with whatever eyes you see there is no serpent, there never was a serpent. You gave your own eyes to the falling evening and cried, 'Ayyo! Oh! It's the serpent',! You run and roll and lament, and have compassion for fear of pain, others', or your own. You see the serpent and in fear you feel you are it, the serpent, the saint. One—the Guru—brings you the lantern; the road is seen, the long, white road, going with the statutory stars. 'It's only the rope'. He shows it to you. And you touch your eyes and *know there* never was a serpent. Where was it, where, I ask you? The poet who saw the rope as serpent became the serpent, and so a saint: Now, the saint is shown that his sainthood was identification, not realization. The actual, the real has no name. The rope is no rope to itself'.

Now the metaphysical theme which is the main preoccupation of the novelist is not *always* so successfully delineated as in the foregoing. Quite often it takes the form of an exposition, rather than presentation as in the incessant reflections and introspections recorded in Ramaswamy's diary; or in the dialogues between Ramaswamy and Savithri, Ramaswamy and Savithri's Cambridge friends; Ramaswamy and Madeleine, Ramaswamy and Georges and Lezo, and finally between Ramaswamy and his Professor, in which Ramaswamy is the 'wise man', 'the school-master' in the manner of Prospero to young Miranda, who at least has the benefit of a story, her own past. But here serious, metaphysical truths of Appearance and Reality, Self and non-Self, Possession and

liberation and their meaning or meaninglessness are all expounded in the abstract in the manner of the Upanishadic dialogues, or the Bhagavad Gita. It is true both the Upanishads and the Gita are literature, and great literature, at that. But are we prepared to accept those dialogues in a modern novel? Mr Raja Rao is aware of the difficulty and even the awkwardness of working them into the novel form as can be seen in the constant vigil he maintains, in his perilous journey:

Savithri who is so enthralled by his knowledge of the great truths of life, is at one stage made to remark, 'Wonderful, wonderful. Go on'.

At another stage, with some self-awareness, she startles the reader into recognition:

'Tell me then, wise man, what happens when I hear the Cam purr'. The wise man says . . .

And he throws in a beautiful story too—of Jagannatha Bhatta and Shajehan's daughter to enliven the abstract dialogue. Elsewhere Savithri is seen breathless and unable to catch up with him: 'I am breathless', said Savithri 'You take me too far and too quickly'. But he will not give in:

'May I go on with my Superman', I begged

If it was a friend of Savithri, an iconoclastic Cambridge undergraduate, the novelist would utilize his introspection to put into his mouth a note of disapproval as when Swanston calls Rama's exposition of *Nyaya* 'Nyaya fiddlesticks', or as Madeleine was to tease him 'So you know geography or biography, do you?' It sounds a little unnatural for Ramaswamy and Madeleine to be engaged in dry intellectual discussion when the relationship has already strained between them, as though they cannot part until one difficult knot is untied, and the mystery revealed in the manner of Browning's Grammarian:

'What is it separated us, Rama?'

'India'.

'India? But I am a Buddhist'.

'That is why Buddhism left India. India is *impitoyable*'.

'But one can become a Buddhist?'

'Yes, and a Christian and a Muslim as well'.

'Then?'

'One can never be converted to Hinduism'.

'You mean one can only be born a Brahmin'?

'That is—an Indian', I added, as an explanation of India.

'Your India, then, Rama, is in time and space?'

'No. It is contiguous with time and space, but is anywhere, everywhere'.

'I don't understand'.

'It stands, as it were, vertical to space and time, and is present at all points'.

'This is too mystical even for me'.

'Would you understand if I were to say, "Love is not a feeling, it is, you might say, a stateless state, the whole condition of one-self"?''

'I don't. But suppose I did?'

'Can you understand that all things merge, all thoughts and perceptions, in knowledge. It is in knowledge that you know a thing, not in seeing or hearing'.

'Yes'.

'That is India. Jnanam is India'.

'But that is the place of the Guru—of Buddha?'

'Well, for me India is the Guru of the world, or She is not India. The Sages have no history, no biography—who knows anything about a Yagnyavalkya or a Bharadvaja? Nobody. But some petty King of Bundelkhand has a panegyric addressed to him, and even this is somewhat impersonal. We know more of King Harsha than we do of Sankara. India has, I always repeat, no history. To integrate India into history—is like trying to marry Madeleine. It may be sincere, but it is not history. History, if anything, is the acceptance of human sincerity. But Truth transcends sincerity; Truth is in sincerity and in insincerity—beyond both. And that again is India'.

The entire conversation is meant to illuminate the main theme, but is not organic to the action of the story, does not arise from it inevitably, inexorably, and can therefore be cut out without injury to the main action—which would be very unfortunate considering how important it is. But had it been incorporated into the structure of the novel without letting it stand outside the narrative, its value would have been inestimable.

Elsewhere in a similar dialogue with Madeleine, Ramaswamy's self-awareness expresses itself thus: 'Madeleine sat fascinated. She wondered where I had gathered all this wisdom'. And Ramaswami assumed a modest posture: 'She did not know I had felt the mountain and the mountain was in me and not I on the mountain'.

The metaphysical expositions are dictated often by the central preoccupation of India and his awareness of the Indianness—of the expatriate, that is:

'It is beautiful to live, beautiful and sacred to live and be an Indian in India' and although he protests India is not a geographical entity, but is 'contiguous with time and space, it is anywhere, everywhere'. And that itself generates a fresh bout of feeling in the last pages of the novel when the final estrangement comes and he has thoughts of going back home:

India is not a country like France is, or like England; India is an idea, a metaphysic. Why go there anyhow? I thought; I was born an exile, and I could continue to be one. My India I carried wheresoever I went. But not to see the Ganges, not to dip into her again and again . . . No, the Ganges was an inner truth to me, an assurance, the origin and end of my Brahminic tradition. I would go back to India, for the Ganges and for the deodhars of the Himalayas, and for the deer in the forests, for the keen call of the elephant in the grave ocellate silence of the forests. I would go back to India, for that India was my breath, my only sweetness, gentle and wise; she was my mother. I felt I could still love something: a river, a mountain, the name of a woman. . .

I wished I could be a river, a tree, an aptitude of incumbent silence.

Here is a superb rhapsody of his Indianness. But this is not so disturbing as the over-flowing sentiment of:

India was wonderful to me. It was like a juice that one is supposed to drink to conquer a kingdom or to reach the deathless—juice of rare jasmine. . . .

The understanding reader must learn to read it as the nostalgia of an expatriate and pass on to focus attention on passages where

the same Indianness becomes the source of so much that is exquisite art. One has in mind all those lovely little stories which are recovered for us from the great store-house of India's Ocean of Stories. But watch the poise, the admirable control of sentiment and feeling and the edged economy in the use of language which are the gifts of a mature culture to its writer: Ramaswamy and Catherine, his wife's Cousin go to the *notaire* to seek divorce. He says:

It was the day after that terrible March storm, you remember. The wind had blown away chimney-pots, wireless wires, laundry hangings, and papers out of offices: even children's toys and old chairs had been thrown into back-yards. It howled through garage doors, through school archways, and sang in the chimneys. Through windows and chimneys birds had been blown in, leaves, handkerchiefs. In these back-alleys of the Boulevard Sébastopol they had not cleared up everything.

'It smells of spring', said Catherine, as she parked the car. 'Wrap yourself up, Rama. Nothing is so treacherous, we say, as the winds of March'.

Yes, spring seemed to be in the air. We wandered to and fro. . . . We went up the smelly, dark staircase, and wondered why it was not lit.

'Ah! lá lá', said someone coming down, 'it's not enough to be blown at hot and cold, now the electricity must also give us the go-by. Funny, funny this country. You pay income tax through the nose, and you don't have light to see beyond it'. He held a match against my face, to convince himself I was another man. When he saw Catherine, he thought the world even funnier. 'You never can say what the world will be', he concluded at the bottom of the staircase, 'white or dark. What do you say to that, Pierre?'

Higher up, the afternoon sky gave some visibility through the skylight. Maître Sigon was there.

'The lights have all gone', said his secretary from behind the counter, 'but please sit here, Monsieur et Madame'. And she planted a lit candle behind us, 'Monsieur Sigon has a client at the moment. He will see you immediately'.

We sat for ten miserable minutes, and we did not seem to have anything to say to one another.

'To think that everything must end in darkness, even when spring is in the air', I said, eventually, and added, 'The law is the death of truth. . .'

The wooden door behind me opened. Maître Sigon, a little round man, with a pince-nez and a black ribbon to hold it, called us in. A white round spot of light—a kerosene lamp, . . . lit the green baize Maître Sigon's desk. . .

'Now, you ask for a divorce'.

'No, not I, but Madeleine Roussellin does'.

'Yes, yes,' he said, looking first at the paper in front of him, and then at me, unconvinced. 'We men are so virtuous, Monsieur. It's always the women who cuckold us', and the storm was on me before I knew. I brushed it away with a broomstick.

The sustained metaphor of light and darkness, of spring and the unexpected treachery, is an excellent concretization of the state of Ramaswamy's mind, of the theme of appearance and reality and the poise which summons up the image of the broomstick with which to brush the impending, eclipsing storm, aside. It speaks volumes for the spiritual resourcefulness of this Indian writer who can weather a storm with a broomstick in the fashion of Diogenes, the Greek philosopher.

Not spiritual resourcefulness only, but the amazing range of his interests and the vision which integrates the disparate bits of information and knowledge into a new and unexpected combination of thought and attitude, which is different from underlining one banality with another. Consider the variety of his interests and the unifying sensibility behind them all:

Libraries always speak to me; they reveal me to myself—with their space, and the multiple knowledge that people have of themselves which goes to make a book. For all books are autobiographies, whether they be books on genetics or on the History (in twenty-two volumes) of the Anglican Church. The mechanics of a motor-car or of veterinary science all have a beginning in the man who wrote the book, have absorbed his nights and maybe the nerves of his wife or daughter. They all represent a bit

of oneself, and for those who can read rightly, the whole of oneself. The style of a man—whether he writes on the Aztecs or on pelargonium—the way he weaves word against word, intricates the existence of sentences with the values of *sound*, makes a comma here, puts a dash there: all are signs of his inner movement, the speed of his life, his breath (*prana*), the nature of his thought, the ardour and age of his soul. Short sentences and long sentences, parentheses and points of interrogation, are not only curves in the architecture of thought, but have an intimate, a private relation with your navel, your genitals, the vibrance of your eyesight. Shakespeare, for ought we know, may have had hypertension, Goldsmith stones in the gall-bladder; Dr Johnson may have been oversexed like a horse, just as Maupassant was a hypochondriac and Proust had to lie in bed with asthma, and weave out long sentences like he eked out a long curve of breath. Breath is the solar herdsman of the living, says the Rig Veda, and hence Yoga and all that.

Here it presents a startling view that mechanics, veterinary science, literature and philosophy are all ultimately autobiographical. Certainly, '*Le style est l'homme même*', including the marks of punctuation. And to crystallize so many loose trends in a trenchant generalization, invariably expressing an Indian point of view, and invariably a profound one:

'Breath is the solar herdsman of the living, says the Rig Veda, and hence yoga and all that'

Where in any creative writing on the Indian scene before or after Raja Rao has one witnessed such high cerebration, wide-ranging intellectual interests, the shaping spirit of imagination which integrates the enormous reading, and the ability to bring it in creatively so as to enlarge the sphere of our interests and provide a perspective to our thinking, and in all cases to make a rich, complex response possible to everything? It has been often observed that in *The Serpent and the Rope* for the first time in creative writing in English is India made real to Europeans. I should add, to the Indians as well. The Western Orientalists, some certainly, had romanticized India, the politically motivated sought to blacken her face while a half-involved artist like Kipling

was sympathetic and condescending by turns; and a novelist like E. M. Forster working in the liberal tradition could not penetrate the deeper layers of Indian sensibility. It was embarrassing to have come across, only the other day, a review of *The Serpent and the Rope* by a very gifted British scholar, Mr David McCutcheon, who wrote with a surprising self-assurance that Raja Rao's themes were not new to European literature; and added:

His serpent and rope are Shakespeare's bush and bear. But Shakespeare though fascinated by illusion and reality, never confuses the subject and the object: the point of view may always be identified, and related to a fixed reality (Bottom or the 'cool reason' of Theseus) which is basic and unquestionable. You can always 'find out' if the object is a bush or a bear; sooner or later Malvolio, the Tinker, Orlando will be undeceived.

Now I had not thought Raja Rao's theme of illusion and reality was as simple as the critic makes out to be. It is not merely doing Raja Rao wrong but doing most grievous wrong to Shakespeare as well. For Shakespeare, it is now common knowledge, has treated the theme at a sublime level in plays like *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *King Lear*, *The Tempest* and *The Winter's Tale*, more profoundly in the last two; and that these should not get so much as a mention at the critics's hands, while *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Twelfth Night* receive his attention as though these represent the farthest limit to which Shakespeare could go in his response to the theme of Illusion and Reality. What confusion can there be between subject and object where the 'bush' and the 'bear' are involved? And to speak of bush and bear in the same breath as Serpent and Rope, the central image of Sankara's philosophic thinking is, to say the least, to make any intellectual discussion impossible. And this is the essay that Mr P. Lal has commended to us as the best by any critic of *The Serpent and the Rope*. The point I have been labouring to make is, let me repeat, that *The Serpent and the Rope* ought to make India real not to Europeans only but to Indians as well.

Here is a novel which has begun where E. M. Forster has left —left because he was not equipped to probe deeper. The utmost Mr Forster with all his sympathy (his understanding was unequal to it) could do was to permit stray remarks like the following while

asserting, 'Not yet', 'not there'. 'She (Adela) would see India always as a frieze never as a spirit, and she assumed that it was a spirit of which Mrs Moore had had a glimpse'.

And Mrs Moore herself had not been gifted with any perception to have the glimpse but had a rare native common-sense born of experience of life's ways, and even that sounds trite: 'Too much fuss is made over marriage, centuries of carnal embracement, yet man is no nearer to understanding men'.

Readers of *A Passage to India* know that Mr Forster tried to explore human relationships in a political context and largely on the social plane. Its success is the success of a distinguished novelist but by no standards a great one. It is the nature of the probing that limited the extent of success; and as has been already remarked, he was not equipped to attempt any other kind of probing. It is a success which must be reserved for a writer who has known the depths of degradation and the heights of exaltation of the spirit, and has a rare courage to affirm his conviction. Raja Rao makes his central character say that he felt 'as though at each epoch, with each person, I had left knowledge of myself, and in this affirmation of the presence that I am, I am my brother'. This is not something which can be classed as achievement as the world understands it, it is recognition and this self-recognition is 'pure significance'. At a time when most fiction-writing in Europe and America is preoccupied with alienation of the individual, death and a dead or sick conscience thanks to what is called the absurdity of the human condition and meaninglessness of existence, that a writer should call attention to the potential and positive virtue of contemplating a going out of oneself in human as well as cosmic issues marks the measure of his significance. Ramaswamy says reflectively:

'When one is alone, one always loves. In fact it is because one loves, and one is alone, one does not die'.

It is such a one that thinks of building bridges not, as his French wife thought, on the Thames, the Seine, or the Ganga, but to build unseen bridges 'not of stone or girders for that would prove the permanence of the objective, but like the rope bridges in the Himalayas, you build temporary suspensions over green and gurgling space . . . feel the mountain in your nostrils and . . . alone with silence'.

Mr Raja Rao has demonstrated in very convincing terms, in terms of fiction, that human relationships, no less than man's union with the Absolute, are the result not of bridges on rivers or bridge parties but the 'temporary suspension' over 'gurgling space' and 'alone with silence'. Ironically, these temporary suspensions are the only permanent bridges that man can build—the enactment of its truth is the contribution of Raja Rao to Fiction.

