SIMPLICITY AND POWER:
THE POETRY OF SRI CHINMOY

VIDAGDHA MEREDITH BENNETT

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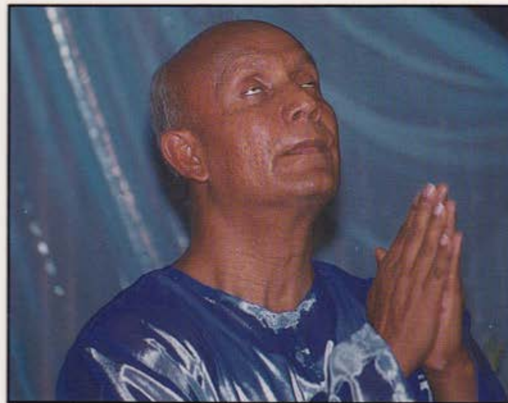

The Poetry of SRI CHINMOY 1971-1981

VIDAGDHA MEREDITH BENNETT, Ph.D.

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1971–1981

Vidagdha Meredith Bennett (Ph.D.)

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Dedication

I humbly dedicate this work to Sri Chinmoy,
whose words have enriched my life beyond all measure.

Acknowledgement

I wish to offer my deepest gratitude to Dr. Sisir Kumar Ghose
of Santiniketan University, West Bengal, India.
A respected authority on the writings of Rabindranath Tagore,
as well as the mystical literature of both East and West,
Dr. Ghose was one of the original examiners of this thesis.[1]

[1] This thesis was undertaken to fulfil the requirements of a Ph.D. in English Literature at the University of Melbourne, Australia. The degree was conferred on December 11th, 1982.

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Introduction

Every age calls forth its poet, someone who is able to express its deepest ideals and aspirations. The critic who first engages in the appraisal of this newly emergent poet is faced with vastly different responsibilities from the critic who deals with writers of an established excellence. Beyond his direct response to this promising new body of literature lies the task of creating a climate of empathy in which the poems may be received by future readers and commentators. The critic cannot fall prey to hesitation at this early stage. He must make a bold case for his choice, one that may move others to turn to the poetry and which may also serve as a point of departure for further critical studies. And, gradually, with the passage of time and the accumulation of diverse viewpoints, a perception of the intrinsic worth of the poet may begin to mature in the public consciousness.

To present the case for a supremely gifted poet of our times and to lay the groundwork for this awakening of public sensibility to his creations are the challenges that I have undertaken to fulfil in this study.

The poet in question is Sri Chinmoy. From 1971 to 1981, thirteen major volumes of his poetry – representing a total of over nine thousand poems – appeared in print in the United States. At the outset, it is obvious that we are dealing with a poet of great abundance and energy. In order to discover the source of this expressiveness, we must look to the poet's theme. Sri Chinmoy is, first and foremost, a poet of man's inner life. It is the richness and diversity of the spirit of man that have captured his imagination and compelled him, in poem after poem, to record the infinite variety of experiences that comprise the spiritual journey. The search for truth and beauty, the struggle to overcome the limitations of the mind, and the communion of the human soul with the Divine – these are the central ideas around which the poems revolve. By drawing his inspiration directly from the soul, Sri Chinmoy touches on its measureless reserves. Indeed, the very abundance of his works confers on them a qualitative significance, for it may be read as the outer sign of an inner profusion of the spirit. The reader of these poems will notice the absence of a strongly held individuality in the poet's persona. In its place, he will encounter a speaking voice that is free from the constraints of personality and ample in its power to contain a wide humanity. Basing his oeuvre on the single, highly compacted stanzaic unit, Sri Chinmoy has explored the full gamut of man's communicative choices, ranging from the dramatically occasioned

modes of lyric, prayer and conversation through to the distilled wisdom of aphorism, definition and pensée. It is a microcosmic form of poetry. Each crystalline strophe is structurally complete and independent of its neighbours. Its appearance on the page – so brief that the reader may take it in at a single glance – permits us to grasp the full meaning of discrete poems in a way that is not always possible with more extended works.

And yet, in spite of their formal independence, Sri Chinmoy's poems do reflect upon one another. As we focus on them in succession, it becomes clear that a more structured patterning would have hindered their true purpose – and that is to unfold a vast, visionary landscape of spiritual experiences and realisations in which the soul stands as the solitary and splendid hero.

The poet's compression of his seer-vision into the miniature world of the stanza creates a unique tension between the brevity of this form and the wide scope of the subject. Where this might have led to a certain enigmatic quality or opaqueness of symbolic texture, however, Sri Chinmoy exercises great control of diction to produce a language of exemplary restraint, poise and clarity. Using the natural spoken and meditative rhythms of the English language and selecting in the main images and metaphors of a universal temper, the poet has produced a chastened form of speech, free from heavy ornamentation and accessible to all readers, regardless of cultural differences. Having little need for the utilitarian words in which the English language abounds, his sole poetic vocabulary is the sparse array of words that it offers for spiritual realities. Moreover, because Sri Chinmoy's mother tongue is Bengali, with its immense spiritual refinement and subtlety, he has further encountered the difficulty of working with an instrument that is far less malleable to his vision, crudely formed in some areas, at times obdurate and blunt. It is hard to fully appreciate the peculiar plight of the spiritual poet who, returning from the heights of mystic vision, feels impelled to share the fruits of his experience with all men. Bringing news of an unknown realm, he casts about him for correspondences from the known world that will make his experience more accessible, he strives for precision among our surface world of names and forms for his invisible but certain reality.

In order to exact a greater accuracy and expressiveness from the English language, Sri Chinmoy has developed a number of creative but hitherto largely unexplored principles inherent in it: the rich and revealing parallel structure, the fusion of nouns into compounds, and the use of rhetorical paradigms together create what might have been thought

impossible in the English language – the effect of word-shrines. These are not born of the poet's struggle with language but of his victorious acceptance of it. If its powers have waned, he wakes them by using key words with utmost dignity; if its images are found to be limited, he confers on them new resonances by calling on them to help him approach the highest summits of spiritual vision; where there is power, he preserves it; where there is energy, he harnesses it. All that was immature and undeveloped in the vocabulary of the inner life has now become mature and fully developed. In Sri Chinmoy's poems, the English language may be said to achieve its true spiritual potential.

Sri Chinmoy's vast mass of poetry is characterised above all by its simplicity and power. Walt Whitman praised simplicity as the highest art:

> The art of art, the glory of expression and the sunshine of the light of letters is simplicity. Nothing is better than simplicity.[2]

In the case of Sri Chinmoy, this simplicity is of two kinds. It is that which lies on the far side of spiritual experience, where the seeker perceives the resolution of all opposites and all the many different approaches to God are merged into the same end. Again, his enlarged understanding of the universe sheds new radiance on the most common images and metaphors. Transcending intellectual and philosophical complexities, the voice of the soul also arrives at an eloquent and powerful simplicity. It is this combination of a high, intuitive spiritual vision and a powerful aesthetic expression that has made Sri Chinmoy's poetry "a triumph of contemplation."[3]

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[2] Preface to "Leaves of Grass" (1855) in *The Portable Walt Whitman,* ed. Mark Van Doren, (Penguin, 1977), pp. 13–14.

[3] This definition of poetry is offered by Benedetto Croce and quoted in Allen Tate, ed. *The Language of Poetry* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1960), p. 105.

Chapter 1

The Poet as Language-Maker

Language in a human mind is not a list of words with their customary meanings attached, but a single interlocking structure, one's total power of expressing oneself.

– Northrop Frye

In studying the poetry of Sri Chinmoy, we encounter a writer who has chosen to produce the bulk of his work in a language that is not his native idiom. Traditionally, this linguistic "unhousedness", as George Steiner refers to it,[4] would have been considered a restricting factor. We are accustomed to think of the newcomer to a language as a hesitant practitioner of standard word usage and phrase structures. What we find in the case of Sri Chinmoy, however, is a poet who, perhaps because of the unspoken pressure of his own Bengali language, has been able to bring to English an energy and a power seldom found in recent literature. In absorbing the English language we see him in a sense recreating it, tracing it back to its original impulses, using single words with a consciousness of their unqualified power and exploring the many patterns made available by rhetoric with a keen awareness that in the form and presentation of words lies their emotive force. Casting aside fashions which have tended to dismiss rhetoric from general currency, which translate aphorism in poetry as didacticism and which consistently treat the abstract as secondary to the concrete, Sri Chinmoy freely elects to use those very elements in his poetry. As a "language-maker" he is influenced only by the immediate value of a particular word or structure in revealing his inner vision.

Intensely alive to the original expressive brilliance of English, Sri Chinmoy has emerged with a poetic style that reflects the purity of this response. With his predilection for the short poem, his frequent use of compound nouns to condense images and his emphasis on tightly controlled linguistic models, he avoids as if by instinct, the surplusage of writers who have been nourished solely within the shell of their own language. The phenomenon that we beheld in the prose of multilinguists Beckett, Borges and Nabokov,

[4] George Steiner, *Extraterritorial: Papers on Literature and the Language Revolution* (London: Faber & Faber, 1972), p. 4.

and in the poetry of Pound, Tagore and St. John Perse is repeated by Sri Chinmoy. Indeed, it is highly conceivable that the writer whose sensibility pivots not on one language but on two or even more may find himself in a privileged position. For him, language does not have a fixed and customary application but is, rather, a collection of pockets of energy by means of which he can unconstrainedly and abundantly achieve a full and profound expression.

We praise Chaucer as the first of English poets, who delighted in words and who would seem to have breathed freshness and simplicity into every page. In the same sense, I have found in Sri Chinmoy an "original" poet of the language, a master of it in every respect and yet one who rejoices in it, as in a new discovery.

The frequency of rhetorical figures of speech in Sri Chinmoy's poetry places the critic in a challenging position, for modern critical idiom commonly equates rhetoric with unnecessary inflations of speech, a movement away from the flexible spoken language towards an artificial stiffening into certain mechanical forms. Rhetoric is seen as the province of the ancients, a highly contrived manner of reasoning, which continued to exist in partial measure in Shakespeare and Donne, through to Pope and Milton, but was finally disengaged from poetry by the Romantics. Even such eminent scholars of rhetoric as C.M. Bowra and Brian Vickers[5] argue for our sympathetic appreciation of a poetic fashion that is understood to be something of a relic from the past.

What then are we to make of a poet such as Sri Chinmoy who turns instinctively to parallelism to add vigour to his emotional expression, who repeatedly uses inversions for effects of grandeur and who moves with ease among ascending and descending lists of qualities and attributes? The rhetorical texture of Sri Chinmoy's verse is everywhere apparent. Moreover, one gains the impression that this is not due to any deliberate attempt on the part of the poet to restore to English poetry the oratorical style of the Greek poets, but that rhetorical expression itself may in fact be the natural utterance of man under certain emotional and spiritual conditions.

In order to establish this theory more fully, it is helpful to consider the heights to which rhetoric rose in classical Greek and Roman poetry. E.R. Curtius writes:

> Rhetoric signifies "the craft of speech"; hence, according to its basic meaning, it

---

[5] C.M. Bowra, *Heroic Poetry* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1966) and Brian Vickers, *Classical Rhetoric in English Poetry* (Edinburgh: Macmillan, 1970).

> teaches how to construct a discourse artistically. In the course of time this seminal idea became a science, an art, an ideal of life, and indeed a pillar of antique culture.[6]

H. I. Marrou in *A History of Education in Antiquity* echoes this view:

> Learning to speak properly meant learning to think properly, and even to live properly: in the eyes of the Ancients eloquence had a truly human value transcending any practical applications that might develop as a result of historical circumstances; it was the one means for handing on everything that made man man, the whole cultural heritage that distinguished civilised men from barbarians. This idea underlies all Greek thought.[7]

In classical times we find rhetoric at the summit of human accomplishment, integrally fused with poetry and philosophy, so that Cicero could specify the threefold aims of oratory as *docere, delectare, movere* – to instruct, to please and to move. Cicero elaborates by saying: "To instruct is of necessity, to please is for interest, to move is for victory.[8]

In order to instruct, please and move, appropriate styles and genres had to be found and the aptness of language to subject matter – the whole area of decorum in poetry assumed paramount importance. This resulted in an extensive elaboration and classification of tropes, figures of speech, levels of style and hierarchies of genre. Despite the criticism that this extreme technicality later evoked, it was based on one implicit and fundamental belief: that the rhetorical process effectively reproduced the patterns of speech basic to man in situations of differing intensity and emotional force.

"*All* literature," writes Steiner, "is language in a condition of special use."[9] Whether this special use required language of praise or anger, joy or despair, classical writers found that the patterned expression of rhetoric could evoke that state. "The emotions of the mind are inflamed by the sparks of speech," wrote Vives in the sixteenth century.[10] Rhetorical

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[6] Quoted by Vickers, p. 15.
[7] *Ibid.*, p. 23.
[8] *Ibid.*, p. 25.
[9] *Op.cit.*, p.126.
[10] Quoted by Vickers, p. 83.

figures provided writers with

> stylisations or records of man's natural emotional behaviour as expressed in language, which when properly applied form the best stylistic means of re-creating the details of human emotion in literature.[11]

Seen in this light, rhetoric is indeed formulaic, holding systems of symmetry and balance essential to the craftsman, but it can never be mere machinery as long as it retains its intimate bond with the natural rhetorical element that exists in any spoken language. The appropriateness of any rhetorical figure, argues Gerald Else,

> is not to be tested so much, therefore, by formal stylistic criteria as by the ear of the spectator or reader, who says to himself, "Yes, this is the way men do talk when they are angry or downcast or full of admiration; I have heard things said just that way many times."[12]

It is in this context, then, that the rhetorical effects of a poet such as Sri Chinmoy may be considered. A single poem will serve at the outset to help us identify the various elements of production in his verse:

> BIRD OF LIGHT
>
> One thought, one tune, one resonance –
> Who calls me ever and anon?
> I know not where I am.
> I know not whither I shall go.
> In dark amnesia,
> Myself I buy, myself I sell.
> All I break; again, all I build.
> All I hope to be mine, mine alone.

[11] *Ibid.*, p. 105.
[12] Else, *Aristotle's Poetics: The Argument* (1963). Quoted by Vickers, p. 95.

Alas, my heart is eclipsed by dark and wild
destruction-night.

O Bird of Light, O Bird of Light,
With your glowing and flowing flames
do enter into my heart once again.
You are calling me to climb up and fly into
the blue.
But how can I?
My heart is in prison in the strangled breath
of a tiny room.
O Bird of Light, O Bird of Light,
O Bird of Light Supreme,
In me, I pray, keep not an iota of gloom.[13]

Like many of Sri Chinmoy's poems, "Bird of Light" celebrates the subjective viewpoint, casting its lot with the directly spoken word rather than with a more formal or literary descriptive mode. The style, therefore, is allied to the natural rhythms of the speaking voice and, more particularly, to the passionate self-interrogation of despair.

The poem begins with a mystifying rhetorical question. The triple repetition, by *anaphora*, of the word "one" identifies to the reader the urgency of the question, while the poet's slightly archaic expression "ever and anon", with its delicate, lingering effect, surrounds the unseen caller with the mysterious vagueness of centuries – the unfathomable note coming to him from afar, an almost Romantic recall to consciousness.

Postponing for the moment his reply to the caller, the poet reflects upon his own inner condition. Suddenly we are plunged into the forlorn and desperate "death-in-life" of modern man, uncertain of his direction, living in a constant state of self-forgetfulness. The poet's utter helplessness is borne by two lines, which parallel each other not only in their structure but also in an exact correspondence of key words, a double rhetorical figure identified by the Greeks as *compar*:

[13] *My Flute*, p. 29.

I know not where I am.
I know not whither I shall go.

The poet is relying here on what Brian Vickers calls "one of the basic laws of rhetoric":

> Repetition of a framework is not only a prime device for emotional stress but that repetition of a framework will give great emphasis to any new elements inserted into it.[14]

In this instance, the repetition of "I know not" serves to develop the full psychological scope and intensity of the poet's state.

The word "amnesia" in this context is striking. Its connotation of loss of memory due to profound shock or repression or illness accurately exposes the psychically damaging effects of society. This is further highlighted in the subsequent lines by the specifically commercial terms used to describe the poet's relation with the world and with himself:

Myself I buy, myself I sell.
All I break; again, all I build.
All I hope to be mine, mine alone.
Alas, my heart is eclipsed by dark and wild
destruction-night.

Even while eschewing explicit biographical reference, the poet is able to evoke his mode of existence with emotional precision, firstly, on the conceptual level, using commercial terms and, secondly, on the rhetorical level, in the antithesis of "buy"/"sell", "break"/"build". We experience the suffering resulting from the play of the various destructive and possessive forces within man's own nature. Again, repetition is one of the prime devices used by the poet to translate this spiritual despair into poetic terms. It provides him with a framework that is strong enough to support the considerable emotional intensity he wishes to infuse into it.

A study of the specific modes of iteration according to traditional classifications

[14] Vickers, p. 162.

would reveal that several different kinds of figures are operating in these lines, varying from the correspondence in length of certain clauses, to an exact word-to-word correspondence, and even to the repetition of the same word with no intervening conjunction, as in "mine, mine alone". The linking of words through repetition is not the only resource open to the poet. It may be seen than the use of the words "break" and "build" in close proximity is a subtle rhetorical device of wordplay or *paranomasia*. Similar in sound but opposite in meaning, these words are interlocked in the taut structure of the verse.

The effect of the many rhetorical devices, even in these few lines, is cumulative. We seem to reach a climax of despair and the closing lament of this first stanza with its heavy rhythmic fall on the final compound noun "destruction-night", dramatically enacts the ebbing of the speaker's life force.

At this point in the poem, the poet's eye moves outwards, beyond his immediate condition to the one who has called him. Without preamble, he addresses the caller directly as a "Bird of Light." The status of this bird is maintained at a consciously ambiguous level. Although we may take it as a metaphor for the soul, the insistent and unvarying repetition of the phrase appears to erase the borderline between the metaphor and the object that it qualifies, so that the bird acquires a reality, albeit supernatural, of its own. It may be that a more strictly accurate term for this device is the "kenning" of Old Germanic prosody, an implied simile in circumlocution for a noun not named – sometimes petrified expressions, but, in the case of the best writers, portmanteau devices with tremendous suggestive associations.[15] Kenningar are appropriate to the language of a spiritual poet, such as Sri Chinmoy, who selects definite analogies for the relationship between man and God. They not only aid the poet in compressing several ideas together, but they function as readily recognisable signs or counters for the reader. The interpretation of "Bird of Light" as the soul is made possible by a significant transferral of meaning from other poems by the same author. In "Revelation", for example, he writes:

Above the toil of life my soul
Is a Bird of Fire winging the Infinite.[16]

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[15] This definition is adapted from the one in the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1972), p. 434.
[16] *My Flute*, p. 47.

In many respects kenningar may be considered to be formulae of expression, intrinsic to the metaphoric landscape of any poet.

The poet invites his soaring and blissful soul-bird to take up its abode once more inside his forlorn heart. With plaintive tenderness, he recognises the power of the bird to transport him to higher realms and responds:

> But how can I?
> My heart is in prison, in the strangled breath
>   of a tiny room.

The wide gulf between the encaged heart and the bird, an emblem of freedom, is a poignant comment on the dissociation between man's soul or psychic capacities and his other faculties. Divorced from his own eternal or visionary self, he is condemned to the narrow confines of what Sri Chinmoy calls his prison and what Hopkins, in "The Caged Skylark", calls his "bone-house, mean house":

>   As a dare-gale skylark scanted in a dull cage
> Man's mounting spirit in his bone-house, mean house,
> dwells—[17]

Sri Chinmoy concludes his poem on a note of hope. In a final supplication, he invokes the bird three times, each successive, identical repetition seeming to gather in intensity yet balanced by the soft, melodious quality of the words themselves. The poet's obvious satisfaction in the sheer repetition of the phrase "Bird of Light" lifts it to the level of song. The words become a garment of lyricism and beauty and he yields before their magic pattern of sounds:

> O Bird of Light, O Bird of Light,
> O Bird of Light Supreme,

[17] *The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, W.H. Gardner and N.H. Mackenzie, eds. (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 70.

In me, I pray, keep not an iota of gloom.

The final addition of the word "Supreme" as the song attains its highest point indicates the poet's ultimate recognition of the bird as a direct embodiment or messenger of the Supreme. It is a gracefully appended disclosure, one whose position in the poem is secured by the half rhymes on the phrase "In me" and on the final word "gloom".

The last line then, emerges not as a solution but as an affirmation, a triumphant restoration to the poet of hope, of faith and of will. Its component elements are dramatically isolated by the initial grammatical inversion or *anastrophe*. The words are deliberate, slow and forceful. They are also formal in a lyrical sense, with the word "iota" acting as a pivotal contrast between the poet's previously encompassing "*all* I break; again, *all* I build" and his new-found urge to banish the merest fraction of despair. The concluding note is, therefore, one of undeniable strength – strength of language, strength of metaphor (which never weakens into vague Romantic fantasy) and strength of theme: the awakening of man to his own aspiring nature, a movement of the human spirit towards wholeness.

That we grasp the poem as a totality must also be seen as a result of the skilful concealment of many rhetorical devices within the structure of the poem – variations in syntax, differing patterns of iteration, systems of balance and antithesis, key rhymes as well as the subtle musicality of pararhymes and assonance – all bring to the poem a heightened quality of expressiveness which we, as readers, readily interpret and to which we instinctively respond.

The "chiefest skill" of eloquence, according to Plutarch, is

> to knowe howe to move the passions and affections thoroughly, which are as stoppes and soundes of the soule, that would be played upon with the fine fingered hand of a conning master.[18]

From the foregoing analysis of "Bird of Light", we have seen a direct connection between the art of speaking artistically and specific emotional effects. We have also established the fact that rhetorical figures are born of the natural patterns of speech when highlighted by special conditions. The dominance of rhetoric in Sri Chinmoy's poetry, however, is more

[18] North's translation. Quoted by Vickers, p. 83.

than an accidental reproduction of these natural patterns. It amounts to a conscious craft. His use of rhetorical figures takes into account not only the emotional value of the figure itself, but also its effect on the distribution of accents and sounds in the poem, its usefulness as an element of composition, its contribution to style and its familiar value to the reader – that is, its combined emotional and aesthetic effects. It is interesting to observe that in selecting his figures, Sri Chinmoy is drawing from a personal storehouse of expression[19] and not from a formal study of the traditional classifications. Needless to say, the accepted Greek terms of prosody, for example, can legitimately be applied to many of the figures that he employs, though it is doubtful whether these terms are still meaningful to the modern reading public. The question of rhetorical terminology has long been thought to confuse the more essential issue of the poetic function of rhetoric. Thus W.S. Howell in his *Logic and Rhetoric in England: 1500-1700* writes:

> It may seem strange that human energy should be applied so diligently to this interminable enumeration of stylistic devices, when the subject of communication offers more philosophic and more humane approaches. [Such an interest is] more concerned with the husks than with the kernel of style.[20]

While a laborious classification of figures may justify Mr. Howell's criticism, I believe that the identification of such devices as they occur within the texture of the poem is fundamental to an appreciation of the artistry of the poems as a whole. If we recognise that a poet has a preferred rhetorical figure for certain situations, does this not become a "formula" of composition? It follows that, given an analogous situation, the poet will intuitively resort to his formula as the most apt vehicle for expression. This is not to suggest that such formulae are rigidly introduced into the poem, but rather that in the crucible of composition, poetic thought and poetic form are somehow inextricably linked. It is a bond that may go far deeper than the level of conscious creation.

Two of the areas in which rhetoric operates virtually as a mode of thought or feeling in Sri Chinmoy's poems are those of parallelism and the compound noun, which I propose to

[19] Sri Chinmoy has re-formulated, within the context of his own life and from his own depth of experience, expressions that were once the subject of strict coding and classification under both Greek and Sanskrit systems of rhetoric.
[20] Quoted by Vickers, p. 90.

examine in depth. As both an inner and an outer structure, parallelism is one of the major formal principles of Sri Chinmoy's poetry, providing him not only with an instrument of balance, unity and coherence but with a supple means of presenting fine gradations of meaning, a patterning of ideas as well as sounds.

I shall examine the various structures of parallelism that operate within representative poems from a single volume of Sri Chinmoy's poetry: *Europe-Blossoms.* This volume of 1,000 poems was composed while the poet was travelling in Europe in 1974. The space of composition in this instance was three weeks – implying a rapidity of execution challenging to our accepted standards. The clue to Sri Chinmoy's poetic creation lies in the term "oral poet" for, in effect, his is an improvised art form. The poems are created whole. They are the expression of the whole man at the moment of composition. By foregoing the practice of working from an "original" version of each poem to a final, perfected form – a practice that is basic to most poets – Sri Chinmoy proclaims himself a member of the oral tradition in poetry. It is a tradition in which the moment of composition coincides with the performance of the poem. Within the bounds of a single act, the creative artist becomes by turns composer and performer.

The demands of improvised poetry are extremely high. A poet must have at his command not only a sufficiency of thematic content, but also an extraordinary collectiveness of mind, a near faultless expression and an intensely active imaginative flame. The fulfilment of these conditions makes the office of the oral poet a truly epic one, for in his creative abundance he aspires to embrace the experience of the age. If successful, he attains the sweeping vision of –

> the man without impediment, who sees and handles that which others dream of, traverses the whole scale of experience, and is representative of man, in virtue of being the largest power to receive and impart.[21]

The emphasis which Emerson gives here to the poet's "power to receive and impart" places utmost importance on the need for expression rather than on the search for originality. Hence, we find the oral poet developing a grammar of poetry, which is characterised above all by its usefulness – useful words, useful phrases, useful patterns. The criteria of

[21] Emerson, "The Poet", *Essays*, p. 206.

"usefulness in composition", Albert Lord affirms,

> carries no implication of opprobrium. Quite the contrary. Without this usefulness the style, and, more important, the whole practice would collapse or would never have been born.[22]

Each oral poet, therefore, tends to develop his own formulaic landscape in accordance with the demands of his subject matter. In the case of Homer, for example, C.M. Bowra writes:

> There is hardly a situation for which Homer has not a formulaic line or passage. He has them for all the machinery of narrative, for speech and answer, morning and evening, sleeping and waking, weapons, ships putting to sea and coming to lands, feasts and sacrifices, greeting and farewell, marriage and death.[23]

Bowra concludes that "the formula remains the foundation of improvised poetry."

In the context of oral or improvised poetry, Sri Chinmoy's work features a number of clearly defined formulaic patterns. Foremost among these are lists or progressions. They may fall into categories of time, of action, of place, of qualities or of men. Frequently the poet arranges them in order of ascending importance (the rhetorical figure *auxesis*) or, conversely, of descending importance. In the following poem, for example, transformation occurs within the tripartite structure on four different levels: subject, action, time and manner.

GLORIOUS IS THE PATH

Adventurous
Is the path of prayer.
My body and I knew it.

Glorious

---

[22] *The Singer of Tales* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971), P. 65.
[23] Bowra, p. 234 and following quotation p. 222.

Is the path of meditation.
My heart and I know it.

Generous
Is the path of surrender.
My life and I shall know it.[24]

The sharpness of the parallel outline in this poem readily yields the sets of related members. Coterminous with the prayer, meditation, surrender sequence is the body, heart, life sequence and the past, present, future sequence. In addition to this organic progression of parts, the poet is intent on specifying the distinguishing quality of each phase. Thus, we have the major innovative sequence of the poem: adventurous, glorious, generous. Tremendous weight is placed upon these adjectives by their physical isolation. At the same time, however, they are caught up into the flow of the poem by the similarity of their sounds and by their identical placements within the architecture of the poem.

These carefully selected key words offer new mappings of the realms of prayer, meditation and surrender. The very lack of additional modifiers in the poem compels us to explore such terms for a far greater precision than our linguistic reflexes would normally require. The various images of courage, searching, excursions into the unknown that are summoned by the single word "adventurous", for example, effectively locate "the path of prayer" in the context of a journey. It follows that the knowledge of prayer is claimed by the body. The glory associated with the attainment of a goal, or journey's end, is next invoked by the poet to correspond to meditation. This is the unfolding knowledge of the heart in the present. Finally, the self-giving quality of generosity captures the essence of surrender, the dream of the future.

It is the reader who must "discover" these principles of succession and the relationships between the various components of the poem. While the exact structural parallelism gives the poem a superficially accessible mien, the manifold associations that are suggested by these related clusters engage an active and complete response on the part of the reader. "The most thorough possible understanding of a poem", writes George

[24] *Europe-Blossoms*, p. 124. For the remainder of this study of parallelism, page references to poems in *Europe-Blossoms* will appear in brackets after the text.

Steiner, “occurs when we re-enact, in the bounds of our own secondary but momentarily heightened, educated consciousness, the creation by the artist.”[25]

To pinpoint the power of this kind of structure to involve the reader it is necessary to examine the convergence of ideational parallelism and structural parallelism. The following two poems, both based on a time progression, exemplify this symmetrical interplay:

YOUR HEART

In the morning
Your heart is spotless white;
Therefore
God embraces you.

In the afternoon
Your heart is limitless blue;
Therefore
God reveals Himself through you.

In the evening
Your heart is deathless red;
Therefore
God fulfils the world through you.

(148)

DAWN LOVES YOU

Dawn loves you;
Therefore
You are purity’s flood.

[25] George Steiner, *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation* (London: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 26.

Noon loves you;
Therefore
You are surety's sky.

Evening loves you;
Therefore
You are tranquility's soul.

(192)

In terms of structure, the elements of parallelism in both poems are maintained with rigorous consistency. Each brief colon finds its exact equivalence in the succeeding stanzas. Equivalence of length, equivalence of syntactical order, a perfect rhyming of ideas – all these factors create a style in which correctness of thought is reflected in the exactness of form. It is a blend of wisdom and eloquence, of a lucid apprehension of ideas and a care for proportion of parts. In the same way that the compactness of a maxim fuses with the general truth of its content to command immediate assent, so in these poems the reader intuitively identifies "wise thinking" with the purity and clarity of the style. We emerge with a view of rhetoric as playing a role that is higher and nobler than that of mere persuasion. Perhaps we begin to see it from the classical perspective, as one of the greatest of human excellences, "the means through which man expresses his wisdom, and without which wisdom is inarticulate and inert."[26] In a statement on poetry, Sri Chinmoy affirms this view:

> The Sanskrit word for the poet is *kavi*; a *kavi* is he who envisions. What does he envision? He envisions the truth, the truth in its seed-form, its potentiality. He envisions the seed-truth in its possibilities and in its inevitabilities.[27]

Walter Pater, in his essay on "Style", upholds this synthesis between poetry and truth:

> All beauty is in the long run only fineness of truth, or what we call expression, the finer accommodation of speech to that vision within.[28]

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[26] Peter Dixon, *Rhetoric* (London: Methuen, 1971), p. 9.
[27] New York, January 15th, 1978. Remarks made at an award evening for spiritual poetry.
[28] Jennifer Uglow, ed., *Walter Pater: Essays on Literature and Art* (London: Dent, 1973), p. 63.

The difficulty of pursuing such a belief in practice may be largely due to the diminishing capacity of language itself to carry the reality of what it depicts directly into the listener's consciousness. This is the theory put forward by George Steiner in *After Babel*:

> In certain civilisations, there come epochs in which syntax stiffens, in which the available resources of live perception and restatement wither. Words seem to go dead under the weight of sanctified usage; the frequence and sclerotic force of clichés, of unexamined similes, of worn tropes increases. Instead of acting as a living membrane, grammar and vocabulary become a barrier to new feeling. A civilisation is imprisoned in a linguistic contour which no longer matches, or matches only at certain ritual, arbitrary points, the changing landscape of fact.[29]

The view I have been developing in my discussion to this point is that Sri Chinmoy's chastened language and astringency of form are born of a deep, underlying faith in the integrity and sanctity of the single word. In the poem "Your Heart", for example, the poet's use of the colour profiles "spotless white", "limitless blue" and "deathless red" to capture the essence of each phase of heart illustrates how the very plainness of the poet's terms elucidates subtle nuances of meaning. The words, on one level, establish the separate presences of morning, afternoon and evening with a brilliant brush stroke. As our visual focus is drawn to the colour, however, we come to realise it as a complexion both of the time of day and of the heart. This movement of the imagination is made possible by the ambiguity of the three qualifying adjectives: spotless, limitless, deathless. These are adjectives that imply, by negation, the absolute qualities of Infinity, Eternity and Immortality. To the extent that man can claim such qualities, the poet seems to say, he approaches the Divine. God then "embraces" him in perfect union. The superficial simplicity of the diction in these two poems does not signify a strictly encoded meaning but is rather a sign of the poet's urge to make universally intelligible the subtle complexities of spiritual experience.

If the decline of rhetoric may be attributed to a growing belief in the private, confessional character of poetry, then perhaps the dominant presence of rhetoric in the work of Sri Chinmoy may likewise be seen as an index of the re-emergence of poetry in its

[29] *Op. cit.*, p. 21.

public role. The orator of classical times combined the offices of philosopher, statesman and poet. That strain survives in the work of Sri Chinmoy, who is at once seer and poet, a point I shall develop further in Chapter Three.

The role of rhetoric in helping the poet to convey ineffable spiritual relationships is fundamental. It provides him with ready-made or stock methods of production. And, like the oral poets of classical times, he uses these formulaic methods without fear of such damaging terms as "cliché" or "stereotype", for in them he has discovered an enabling means of expression. Discussing classical rhetorical formulae in this regard, C.M. Bowra writes:

> These formulae are in the main traditional; for, once a good formula has been found, poets use it freely without considerations of copyright. If formulae prove useful, they may last for centuries, and there is no need to abandon them just because they are familiar. Indeed their familiarity gives them a special dignity and commands respect.[30]

It may be useful to test this assertion of the efficacy of the familiar by considering a third poem from *Europe-Blossoms* based on a dawn/noon/evening time sequence:

MAN THE SAVIOUR SUPREME

Be pure like the golden dawn.
You can and shall easily be
Man the seeker supreme.

Be sure like the dauntless noon.
You can and shall unmistakably be
Man the lover supreme.

Be true like the dutiful earth
And
The dutiful sun.

[30] Bowra, p. 21.

You can and shall eventually be

Man the saviour supreme.

(10)

The first lines of the two opening stanzas echo and repeat connections made explicit in the poems I have already discussed. The pattern is slightly adjusted to accommodate the two adjectival qualifications "golden" and "dauntless" but the meaning is not significantly affected. Having established his familiar terrain, the poet proceeds to extend each stanza with a rhetorical figure in which a "reward" is offered (or defined) upon the fulfilment of the precept given in the first line. If the imperative "Be pure like the golden dawn" is obeyed, then the reader or spiritual aspirant shall become "Man the seeker supreme". This process of transformation is based upon a logic of causative action.

The second stanza reproduces the first in structure and substitutes its own variables (indicated by italics):

Be *sure* like the *dauntless* noon.

You can and shall *unmistakably* be

Man the *lover* supreme.

Within the pattern of expectation he has set up, the poet must satisfy four different areas of simultaneous progression. Not only must he close the dawn/noon sequence but he must also resolve the implied spiritual ascent of the aspirant who, in perfect conformity with the course of the sun, has risen to become the "lover supreme". In an interesting move, the poet chooses to preserve the structural parallelism of the poem in the third stanza while at the same time introducing elements that are new to the progression of ideas:

Be *true* like the *dutiful* earth

And

The *dutiful* sun.

You can and shall *eventually* be

Man the *saviour* supreme.

Here the poet sweeps his dawn/noon progression into an overall vision of the earth and the sun acting out their respective roles in the cosmic play. Each is faithful to what seems a preordained duty. By extension, the seeker, should he accept his own timeless duty-bound role, will at last become "Man the saviour supreme".

The poet reveals in this poem that in pursuing his expressive needs, he is not enslaved by a mere mechanical disposition of formulaic techniques. In this particular instance, the scale of spiritual perfection that he wished to present could not be adequately contained by the dawn/noon/evening pattern of other poems. It necessitated the opening out of the poem into the broader context of "the dutiful earth/And/The dutiful sun". As a direct result of this widening of the poem's frame of reference, the poet is able to select a word such as "saviour", with its specific associations of the Christ, in order to enhance the reader's appreciation and understanding of the heights to which the seeker may aspire. On the one hand, the claim is rhetorically inflated but, on the other hand, the reference is justified by the natural grandeur of the sun and the earth seen in this engaging and universal perspective. The forcefulness of the poem as a whole springs from this very aptness of simile, our ultimate feeling as readers that our spiritual evolution is based on the same kind of inner law as that which prescribes the sun's diurnal course.

The use of parallelism to construct progressions assumes several different forms. One form that recurs frequently consists of sets of images arranged in lists of descending or ascending order. In the following poem, the different elements within man's own nature are incorporated in a descending scale:

VOICES

The voice of my soul
Is always energising.

The voice of my heart
Is always encouraging.

The voice of my mind
Is always discouraging.

The voice of my vital
Is always challenging.

The voice of my body
Is always trembling.

(30)

In each distich there are only two variables – the part of human existence in question and its typifying adjective. Both occur at the end of the line so that these variables are typographically partnered with each other in the eye of the reader. Links between the distich units are provided by the logical “ladder” effect of soul/heart/mind/vital/body and by the similar feminine endings of the adjectives. In addition, the regularity of the parallelism creates an isochronic effect of rhythm, which assists in blending the poem into an harmonious whole. Again, the syntactical spacing of the poem induces the reader to pause between each statement, to consider it as complete and autonomous rather than as subservient to the design of the poem. Each maxim-like unit possesses a sense of closure, a definite impact, which would seem to preclude further statement. When these units are read in sequence, however, they merge as a series of intuitive thrusts at the reader’s unquestioning self-assessment. In the hands of the craftsman, this ladder formula of composition becomes a formidable weapon with which to shock the reader into a reappraisal of himself and of the world. The vantage point of the poet in adopting such a sequence is often distinctive:

DEPENDING WHERE YOU LIVE

Helplessness of ages
You are bound to feel
If you live in the body.

Aggressiveness of ages
You are bound to feel

If you live in the vital.

Blindness of ages
You are bound to feel
If you live in the mind.

Fruitfulness of ages
You are bound to feel
If you live in the heart.

(355)

In this poem, the poet associates a unique world experience with each part of man's being. The poem, in effect, places before the reader a number of options and he must select from them according to the experience he desires. The poet asserts his control over this selection not by personal recommendation but by arranging the choices in such a way as to gradually lead the reader through various unsatisfying alternatives to the only possible choice: the "fruitfulness of ages" that constitutes the experience of the heart.

The rhetorical ladder functions here primarily as a persuasive technique. In other poems, it serves to heighten the reader's awareness of the multifaceted nature of experience and thereby engage his more complete response. In the following poem, for example, the sets of images that cluster around this particular heart/mind/vital/body[31] sequence serve to amplify a central vision of unaspiring human nature:

WHEN?

Heart, my heart,
When are you going to cry?

Mind, my mind,
When are you going to search?

[31] The "vital", as Sri Chinmoy employs it, represents the seat of human emotions. Used in a positive way, it is seen as the source of dynamic energy, while the unlit vital expresses itself through aggressive energy.

Vital, my vital,
When are you going to strive?

Body my body,
When are you going to serve?

(289)

This string of questions, the rhetorical figure *quaesitio*, is uttered without interruption, since no single question admits of an easy reply. Through the questions, we see the poet successively imploring his different faculties to aspire, each in its own way – the body through service, the vital through striving and so on. We are led to the extra-syntactical conclusion that the present condition of these faculties is dormant. If the division of man into such strict areas may be considered too formal, the tone of the poem alone, the gently affectionate "Heart, my heart", accomplishes something of a reconstitution of wholeness. This, in turn, is reinforced by the poet's tight hold on his composition. His precise parallelism does not admit of mere loose accretion but always returns him to the major "signature" of the poem in terms of both rhythm and theme.

The fixed elements in a parallel construction give the poem as a whole a kind of energetic tautness. In the following example, a certain *reductio* of language operates to set in motion a series of inner balances and syncopations relating to the poet's four answering definitions:

ECSTASY

What is Peace?
Fulfilment-ecstasy.

What is Light?
Truth-ecstasy.

What is Delight?

Love-ecstasy.

What is Perfection?
God-ecstasy.

(61)

The extreme compression of each compound forces the reader to take stock of specific spiritual qualities in the context of ecstasy. In discovering the cohesion between ecstasy and these individual qualities, we simultaneously establish a profound relationship between the qualities taken together. All represent a variation of the ecstatic experience.

A further application of this technique is the following poem, in which Sri Chinmoy creates a ring structure to highlight his tone of affirmation. The nucleus of the poem consists of three lines, which are locked together by *anaphora*, or repetition of their initial words:

O PILGRIM OF ETERNITY

O my Soul, O Pilgrim of Eternity,
Do give my earth-life another chance.
This time it will understand your supreme cause.
This time it will glorify your dream.
This time it will offer your nectar-light
To humanity's hungry heart.
O my Soul, O Pilgrim of Eternity,
Do give my earth-life another chance.

(357)

The use of the first two lines, in the manner of a refrain, to envelop the poem is an effect that greatly increases the emotional pressure of the poet's invocation. In the context of his three pledges, these lines of refrain undergo a gradual refinement of tone, so that the loftiness of the poet's initial address is transformed by the close of the poem into a tender appeal. The parallel circuit of the poem, with its song-like return to the beginning, fixes the subject before us, allows us to dwell upon it, yet invites subtle modulations of tone and meaning.

Sri Chinmoy plays upon the parallel structure with unending variety. In some cases, he links the members of a series by means of a rhetorical figure in which the last word of one clause becomes the first word of the next:

THE ONLY WAY

Kneel down!
This is the only way to learn.

Learn!
This is the only way to become.

Become!
This is the only way to offer.

Offer!
This is the only way to be.

(150)

This form of logical invention enhances the vibrancy of the poem, that free and self-delighting spirit which impels the poet into the domain of a seemingly mathematical arrangement. The strength of the poem lies in its pyramid form, whereby each new advance absorbs the previous one. The unit of process in the poem is the verb. Thus, it is through action that force is transferred from one maxim to another.

This particular linking effect is used by George Herbert in a number of poems. In "A Wreath", for example, he artfully imitates the stringing of a garland to lend force to his encomium:

THE WREATH

A wreathed garland of deserved praise,
Of praise deserved, unto thee I give,

I give to thee, who knowest all my wayes,
My crooked winding wayes, wherein I live,
Wherein I die, not live: for life is straight,
Straight as a line, and ever tends to thee,
To thee, who art more farre above deceit,
Than deceit seems above simplicitie.
Give me simplicitie, that I may live,
So live and like, that I may know, thy wayes,
Know them and practise them: then shall I give
For this poor wreath, give thee a crown of praise.[32]

In many ways, this scheme mimes the natural movement of thought through the human mind by representing in a decisive manner the ever-present but often suppressed relations between ideas and images as they present themselves to the imagination. It remains, however, one of the most easily detectable devices and, hence, one which would be substantially weakened by excessive use.

The reductive tendency of Sri Chinmoy's language at time produces a cryptic or riddle-like surface. In a poem entitled "Knowing and Loving" he uses an almost laconic brevity to diagnose the degree to which these two human activities are interdependent:

Knowing all,
I love none.

Knowing everything,
I love nothing.

Knowing God,
I dare to love everyone.

Knowing myself,

[32] Hugh Kenner, ed., *Seventeenth Century Poetry* (New York: Holt, Rhinehart & Winston, 1964), p. 221.

I am compelled to love everything.

(261)

In numerous ways the poem folds back on itself and develops finer gradations of meaning. The constant friction of contraries – all/none/everyone; everything/nothing – gives the poem a dynamic, tensile quality. The term "dialectic of purification", coined by Louis MacNeice[33], is an extraordinarily apt term for these procedural lines. Between the absence and presence of knowledge, between particular love and general love, self-love and Divine love, the essence of the poet's thought moves nimbly and intently. By holding his emotional powers in reserve, the poet infuses his verse with considerable dramatic stress.

At times this tactic of restraint is deployed by Sri Chinmoy to conceal a highly ambiguous tone. In the following poem, for example, his "dialectic of purification" is the powerful expression of an ironic and uncompromising vision:

ANCIENT AND MODERN SPLENDOURS

Three are the splendours
Of the ancient world:
Faith-moon,
Concern-sky,
Sacrifice-sun.

Three are the splendours
Of the modern world:
Indifference-house,
Doubt-walls,
Suspicion-gate.

(87)

Here the poet plays upon the notion of the seven wonders of the ancient world in order to create a biting comment on the modern loss of faith. Using natural emblems of constancy,

[33] Quoted by C. Day Lewis, *The Poetic Image* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1958), p. 71 (note).

vastness and brilliance – the moon, the sky and the sun – the poet is able rapidly to portray a kind of spirituality that is both natural and expansive. In the light of these emblems, we are compelled to read the "splendours" of the second stanza as a severe criticism of the narrowness and finitude of the modern, sophisticated mind, withdrawn behind its barricades of indifference, doubt and suspicion.

The poet makes a lucid distinction between these latter images of closure and impenetrability and the former images of celestial freedom. In this case, antithesis gives added vigour and succinctness to the framework of parallelism. The sets of paired images are, in a sense, irreducible. They are the most radically compacted expression of similitude. In scrupulously observing the demands placed upon him by the parallel structure, Sri Chinmoy has seized the opportunity to pare away excesses of form – the interaction of opposites is revealed in hard, lightning strokes.

From this brief survey of a selection of poems from *Europe Blossoms*, it may be seen that parallelism, syntactical and ideational, is one of the most important single devices in Sri Chinmoy's prosody. He would seem to have an almost electric affinity with this form of rhetoric, such that it occurs to him virtually as a mode of thought itself. Valéry's statement that "a man is a poet if his imagination is stimulated by disciplines"[34] is here reaffirmed anew. And what results is a tremendous structural dignity and power.

Parallelism may be seen not only as the supreme formal principle of Sri Chinmoy's poetry but also as one of the major creative principles. Firstly, it affords the poet a means of approaching a feeling or concept from various angles. With each advance, he is able to extend and clarify his meaning so that the growth of the poem is through a series of approximations of meaning or subtle nuances. In this way, the poet is able to reduce the margin of error involved in translating from his world of inner vision to the outer world. In an age where language is held to be an inadequate vehicle for the expression of man's deepest impulses, this technique may have tremendous practical utility. Indeed, it may ultimately become, as Ruth apRoberts foresees, "a great protector of meaning."[35]

A second major value of parallelism, as Sri Chinmoy uses it, is that it provides him with an opportunity to prolong a particular effect. The impact of a thought or figure is held

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[34] Quoted by Peter Viereck, "Strict Form in Poetry: Would Jacob Wrestle with a Flabby Angel?", *Critical Enquiry*, 5 (Winter, 1978), p. 214.

[35] "Old Testament Poetry: The Translatable Structure", *PMLV*, Vol. 92:5, p. 997. This article refers to several of the points established here.

before the reader's attention, so that it glides imperceptibly into his imagination. One is tempted to make the generalisation that all effects of resonance in poetry draw their life from some principle of repetition, whether it be semantic, phonological or ideational. It is, Barbara H. Smith writes, "the fundamental phenomenon of poetic form."[36]

A third advantage of the parallel technique is its intrinsic resemblance and loyalty to the logical workings of the human mind, so that it is, ultimately, an instrument of coherence and intelligibility. The presence of philosophic logic in poetry need not, as these poems have shown, be a game of cold abstractions. It is rather an element of that search for the most perfect adaptation of words to subject matter, the art of communication, the delicate graces of rhetoric. Rhetoric comprehends both the philosophical mode and the poetical mode, utilising the resources of both as channels of expression.

Finally, in the context of improvised poetry, Sri Chinmoy avails himself of rhetorical parallelism in order to overcome the specialised demands of his subject matter. As Homer reserved certain formulaic phrases and schemes to facilitate the machinery of his narrative, so Sri Chinmoy brings into play a number of outstanding paradigmatic models – such as sequences of time, colour and human attributes – to deal with particular emotional or spiritual conditions. As a craftsman, he is able to absorb these models or formulae into the living texture of his verse, so that the student of his poetry encounters a blend of the familiar and the unexpected. Of this practice, C.M. Bowra writes:

> Most formulae are traditional and familiar, and their very familiarity makes the audience feel at home and know in what world of imagination it is moving . . . the formulae come to be liked for their own sake as old friends . . . [37]

For the oral poet, the primary need is not self-communion but expression, public expression under the stress of rapid composition. To this end, the habitual forms of popular speech become his basic tools.

As an oral poet, as a rhetorical poet and as a spiritual poet, Sri Chinmoy is at once bold and resourceful, sensitive and practical. His gift goes far deeper than the ability to create intelligible structures, for behind this lies the deeper power to organise experience,

[36] *Poetic Closure* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), p. 38.
[37] Bowra, p. 231.

to see the truth from various angles and invite his readers to participate in that experience.

What identity exists between poetic symmetry and universal truth that man's intellect intuitively responds to? What power is contained within a parallel structure that causes it to lie charged with energy, like a coiled spring? In spite of his use of formulae, what elusive grace of style, peculiar to the oral poet, imparts to his songs an air of spontaneity, a feeling of hearing something for the first time? Reading Sri Chinmoy's poetry, such questions impress themselves upon one's mind again and again. One thing is clear, the Age of Rhetoric has not, as de Quincey declared so long ago, "passed among forgotten things."[38]

One of the most distinctive and lively features of Sri Chinmoy's poetry is his use of the hyphenated compound noun. Although not unique to him, having been used with effect by Hopkins, Pound, Emily Dickinson and others, none has used it as extensively or as strenuously. Sri Chinmoy appears to have alighted on this form in response to two differing impulses in his work: the first impulse is reductive – an urge for compression and restraint, a winnowed style. The second, and seemingly opposing impulse, stems from the very nature of his spiritual vision, which would seem to command a movement of amplification, whereby the vision is not merely reproduced but expanded, with new things constantly set into relation with it. J.A. Burrow reminds us that, "Spiritual discourse differs from its everyday counterpart in being radically metaphorical throughout."[39]

Spiritual writing opens outwards, with both an explanative and a transformative purpose, and yet, because of the ineffability of its content, it also inclines to speech modes that are brief and enigmatic. The compound noun is the expression and resolution of these apparently conflicting inner forces.

The telescopic effect of a noun + noun combination may be observed in the following poem from Sri Chinmoy's volume *From the Source to the Source*:

NOW YOU ARE CAUGHT

Man's darkening thought
Has blighted your purity-heart.

[38] Quoted by Vickers, p. 59.

[39] "Fantasy and Language in *The Cloud of Unknowing*", *Essays in Criticism*, 27 (Oct. 1977): 286.

Now you are caught
By ruthless destruction-dart.[40]

The core vision of the poem is one of the spiritual heart assailed by the negative forces around it. Thus the nucleus of the poem is a single word: heart. A noun. Characterise the heart and it becomes “pure heart” or “heart of purity”.

Here the poet must make a lexical choice. The noun head plus the adjective is compact but lacking in the kind of energetic tautness the poet is seeking. The subjective genitive, while making the identification between “heart” and “purity” more explicit, loses strength in the connective “of”. Suppress this connective, rearrange the words so that the object of comparison is subordinated to the subject (heart) and we have “purity-heart”, a powerful fusion or constellation of ideas. By virtue of this identification, the quality of purity is dynamically transferred to the heart.

Around this compound are located two movements of attack: “Man’s darkening thought” and the “ruthless destruction-dart”. The “purity-heart” is “blighted” by one and “caught” by the other. It is a brilliant picture of the heart under siege. Everything in this little poem responds to the poet’s perception of such a happening. Even on a phonemic level the heart is surrounded and trapped by the tightly clipped rhymes and pararhymes: thought/blighted, -heart/ caught/-dart.

The dramatic context of the poem is significantly enhanced by the second compound noun: “destruction-dart”. This form of compound noun operates in the manner of a simile, by establishing a comparative relationship between two objects in terms of a common property or common behaviour. Thus, at a certain point, the poet’s awareness of the experience of destruction recognises its dart-like activity. However, the poet avoids a literal comparison of the two terms that would result from the use of the comparative particle “like”. He wishes to go even further and assert that such a high degree of identification exists between the thing to be compared (destruction) and the agent of comparison (dart) that they have become one: destruction *is* a dart. The very stroke of the action of destruction is realised in this doubling of the subject and fortified by the alliterative effect of the first letter in each word.

This process of intellective specification is manifestly non-literal and yet, as Edwin

[40] *From the Source to the Source*, p. 279.

Gerow points out,[41] the non-literal is a necessary component of poetry that strives for “coherence, unity, and accuracy”:

> The ultimate relevance of such oblique reference is at the heart of the poetic problem. By singling out a thing which is so obviously different the poet, by a type of Platonic definition, and by placing it against his subject, immediately cancels out in the reader’s mind the entire range of literally irrelevant and incomparable aspects and connotations of each term so juxtaposed taken separately, and presents only those two things as manifesting some common aspect, the tertium, which by the force of this being abstracted and displayed alone, as it were, redounds to the descriptive credit of the original subject.

In many instances, it is the reader’s perception of a common aspect between the nouns in a compound that unlocks the meaning of the entire poem. The eye sees the two nouns as a single whole, a continuous happening. Thus, the principle of compounding nouns may be most accurately understood as a way of revealing motion in things, things in motion, rather than as a static formulation of spiritual concepts. Examples of this peculiar energy abound in Sri Chinmoy’s work:

> WISDOM IS REALISATION
>
> For a knowledge-teacher he did not care.
> He had a wisdom-tutor rare.
> Knowledge is preparation, uncertain and slow.
> Wisdom is realisation and perfection-glow.[42]

The nuances are subtle: a teacher transmits information and examines the student; a tutor helps the student and encourages him to make his own decisions, to be, in a sense, his own

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[41] *A Glossary of Indian Figures of Speech* (The Hague: Mouton, 1971). The following quotation may be found on pages 141-142, but I am indebted also to Gerow’s detailed explanations of *upama* (simile) and *rupaka* (metaphor) for an understanding of the development of the compound noun within the Sanskrit language.
[42] *From the Source to the Source*, p. 290.

examiner. Knowledge is data received from without through the public office of the teacher. Wisdom is illumination brought forward from within through the private office of the tutor. Knowledge comes piecemeal, in an "uncertain and slow" fashion. Wisdom grows unmistakably, like the brightening glow of a lamp. As the reader explores these parallel differences, a coherent and ordered pattern of thought unfolds.

The compound nouns in this poem work by bringing into a single, cohesive unit two lines of thought that have an initially unclear relationship to each other. The reader is therefore compelled to provide his own discursive explanation of the connections being made, to "flesh out" the ideograms with his own associations and images.

The allusion to ideogram proves helpful. Ezra Pound supposed the Chinese language to be largely constructed of characters, which were formed by joining two pictographs. Although, according to Hugh Kenner,[43] these forms comprise not more than ten per cent of the written language, Pound's appraisal of the power of the diagrammatic method of composition is acute. They struck him as a core, luminous with meaning. The very luminosity of the compound was a direct result of the brilliant shift of meaning from one word to the other, a shift so swift as to make it seem like a moving picture. In the words of Hugh Kenner, Pound wanted "to make happenings run through words, not to join static categories with copulae."[44] The ideogram enabled him to seize a process, to concentrate it into exactness, and to capture withal a wealth of radiant meaning. Pound took his inspiration from the investigations of Fenollosa. Fenollosa saw the Chinese ideogrammatic method as a key means of extending the language by forming new words from old. Hence, the Chinese adjectival equivalent of the English word "bright" is a construct consisting of two pictographs: "sun" and "moon". The interaction of the two images gives us the "brightness" experience, an advance not only in terms of language but also in terms of man's understanding or awareness.

I believe that Sri Chinmoy's compounds work in a similar manner to create a new form in our language from older, more traditional forms, and that this new form heralds a conceptual advance, a permanent extension of meaning. Consider, for example, the following poem:

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[43] *The Pound Era*, p. 227.
[44] *Ibid*., p. 290.

WHEN MY SONG IS SUNG

Lord, when my song is sung
    What shall I do?
"My child, do not delay.
    Cry for your new dawn-dew."[45]

The "luminous core" of the poem is the compound "dawn-dew". It climaxes the response of the Supreme to the poet's question. Yet how are we to understand these two literal nouns within the context of a spiritual affirmation? The logical performance of the word "dawn" is on a figurative level: the end of night, the end of one song, yields the dawn of a new day, a new song. In the natural sequence of events, there is no final termination. Each ending is but the precursor of a new beginning, another dawn.

What startles in this compound is the co-ordinate noun "dew". We know it to be moisture that gathers during the night, to be dispelled by the warm rays of the morning sun. On a biblical level, perhaps, we remember it as a sign of God's Grace. Traditional associations link it with purity. As these numerous associations accumulate, we are continually brought back to the realisation that the word is tethered to "dawn", its radius of action thereby limited. Taken together, the doubling of dawn and dew has an almost indefinable magic. The primary appeal is kinaesthetic: we experience simultaneously the coolness of the night dew and the first glowing rays of the dawn, as a newly born creature glistens in the sunlight. On a symbolic level, the coming of the dawn releases new energy, new hope, and this is complemented by the inner "dew" of purity and freshness. Finally, in the context of the complete reply, "Cry for your new dawn-dew," the poet establishes a subtle interchange between "cry" and "dawn-dew". We are made to feel that this dew is a metaphor for our tears of aspiration, that aspiration itself signifies a new dawn in our consciousness.

"What do we understand, then, by the poetic image?" C. Day Lewis asks.[46] He answers: "In its simplest terms, it is a picture made out of words."

Dawn + dew: an innovative portmanteau compound that swiftly fetches two spheres

[45] *From the Source to the Source*, p. 267.
[46] *The Poetic Image* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1958), p. 18.

of meaning into immediate relationship with each other. Haloes of meaning, as Hugh Kenner calls them. The haloes blend and a new form emerges, dawn-dew, which does not belong to either sphere and which exists autonomously in its own self-defined terrain.

Coming across this word suddenly, in its lyric medium, we cannot help but experience the thrill that stems from the realisation that we have been made witness to a broadening not only of the language, but of the consciousness of the race. The poet has become, in Emerson's words, the Namer or Language-maker,

> naming things sometimes after their appearance, sometimes after their essence, and giving to every one its own name and not another's, thereby rejoicing the intellect, which delights in attachment or boundary. The poets made all the words . . . though the origin of most of our words is forgotten, each word was at first a stroke of genius, and obtained currency, because for the moment it symbolised the world to the first speaker and to the hearer. The etymologist finds the deadest word to have been once a brilliant picture . . . the poet names the thing because he sees it, or comes one step nearer to it than any other. This expression, or naming, is not art, but a second nature, grown out of the first, as a leaf out of a tree.[47]

As a Language-Maker, Sri Chinmoy's contributions fall mainly within that area of human activity which is governed by the spiritual life: the states, emotions and revelations attendant upon the quest for God. A brief survey of the compounds according to different categories may help us to view the poet's language-making faculty from a more comprehensive vantage point.

Predominantly, we encounter compounds in which conventional spiritual qualities are allied either with other spiritual attributes or with more general aspects of nature: perfection-love, oneness-might, acceptance-joy, aspiration-flame, hope-bud, vastness-shower, beauty-rays. Common, too, are compounds in which emotions are brought into focus by their grammatical subordination to a powerful, concrete noun: terror-rod, frustration-bark, confusion-knot, division-pipe, gratitude-gong. The poet also uses compounds to specify a certain human quality in his relationship with the world or with

[47] *Essays* (London: Dent, 1976), p. 215.

abstract qualities: mother-earth, brother-world, sister-moon, faith-friend, doubt-foe. The poet is especially fond of compound forms to reveal something of the inexpressible nature of God: Saviour-Friend, Maker-Lord, God-Fire, Friend-Love, Silence-God. In another, more ambiguous usage, the poet forges a spiritual meaning from objects that do not have any intrinsic spiritual value: nectar-sea, dream-boat, venom-knife, earth-clay, titan-lance, body-jail, ladder-height, circus-delight, breath-tower.

The poet's resourcefulness is far wider than such a brief survey would indicate. For, essentially, the creation of compound nouns is an analogous device and, like all spiritual poets, he must look to the simplest of physical, chemical, biological and human analogies to carry his meaning. His plenary sense of the world brings to the poems an extraordinary abundance and fertility of images. We find him looking to nature – rain, the ocean, a tiny drop, the mysterious source of rivers; to flowers – the rose and the lotus, the bud and the fruit; to birds – their soaring flight, their return to the nest; to the sun and its rays; to fire and snow; thunder and lightning. We see him drawing upon aspects of the day and of the seasons, upon the cosmic terms and upon terms of measurement and definition. We touch upon a range of man-made objects: gate, tower, palace, chariot, toy, doll – and we contemplate the span of human activity: sigh, smile, frown, dance, embrace, play, run, sing, sleep. All of life would seem to be caught up in an interlocking structure, which is founded upon the miniature world of the compound noun, analogy at its most compact and intense level. The compound noun stands as a recognition of the esemplastic power of the imagination, which awakens the multiform nature of each thought and searches for its most perfect presentation. Since the poet's apprehensions are simultaneous rather than consecutive, he instinctively selects a form that embodies that singleness of vision.

Critics have seen in Hopkins' use of the compound feature "a passionate emotion which seems to try to utter all its words in one":[48]

> Million-fuelèd, nature's bonfire burns on.
> But quench her bonniest, dearest to her, her clearest-selvèd spark
> Man, how fast his firedint, his mark on mind, is gone![49]

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[48] Charles Williams in W.H. Gardner, *Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-1889)*, Vol. I (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 125.

[49] W.H. Gardner, ed., *The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins* (London, Oxford University Press, 1970). "That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire and of the Comfort of the Resurrection", p. 105.

Several different kinds of compound epithet are employed in these few lines: a noun head plus an instrumental verb, as in “million-fuelèd”, adjective and verb in “clearest-selvèd”, and the compound noun of “firedint”. In this last example, Hopkins has unified his compound by omitting the hyphen, a move that disguises, in a daring way, the separate origins of the two words. The two words thus fused are arresting. Both have their roots in Old English, with the more archaic “dint”, meaning force or power, serving to inscape the particular impression of man. Commenting on this word-making process in Hopkins, W.H. Gardner writes:

> The coining of words by a poet like Hopkins is sometimes the expression of primitive consciousness and sensibility and sometimes of a learned sophistication.[50]

Primitive, because the poet is returning to the origins of poetry as a welding of pictures; and sophisticated, because they are used by a poet who is fully conscious of the fact that he is arranging the older elements of expression in such a way as to make them all new.

A striking feature of the pictures fused in this way by compound nouns is that they often assume the appearance of microcosmic universes. Even without being completed by a regular sentence structure, they define an intelligible process or movement.

Let us take Sri Chinmoy’s compound “welkin-rim” as our point of departure. Reading it, we are at once flooded with associations of the slightly curved outer edge of the firmament, dwelling place of the gods. As in the example of “firedint” from Hopkins, both these words are from Old English, although Sri Chinmoy elects to retain the slight degree of separation that a hyphen affords. The consistency of their derivation gives them not only a greater etymological bond, but is itself the source of a deeper level of meaning. “Welkin” originally denoted a cloud, while “rim” stood for a strip of land. Placed in exact juxtaposition, these word pictures create an image of going beyond land (earth) to the upper regions of the sky or heavens. In both readings of the compound, we gain an impression of going beyond, of entering a transcendent and unknown realm. The very use of the compound noun in this instance acts as a kind of tacit acknowledgement that the poet

[50] Gardner, *Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-1889)*, p. 188.

has outleapt even language in his imaginative scope: he admits the reader to the possibility of the beyond. The terms of the poem make this invitation explicit:

BEYOND THE WELKIN-RIM

Are you dying for a dream?
    Then quickly come to me.
Beyond the welkin-rim
    I shall set your vision free.[51]

The gesture contained in this poem is the gesture of every poet – "They are free and they make free," says Emerson.[52] He describes them as "liberating gods", able to grant our imagination wings and show us new scenes and visions. Sri Chinmoy's path, "beyond the welkin-rim", catches this note of both emancipation and exhilaration.

In the case of both Hopkins and Sri Chinmoy, the discipline and tensile strength of the compound form results in a dense poetic medium and this, in turn, demands the active response of the reader. Indeed, in some poems, the effort of comprehension in and of itself would seem to signify a kind of spiritual growth. By way of illustration, we might take the following poem:

TO SERVE MY MAKER-LORD

To serve my Maker-Lord
I saw the light of day.
To love my Beloved Friend
I began our oneness-play.[53]

The surface texture of the poem is at once clear and graceful. The simplicity of the diction might be called transparent. It is only when we begin to follow the movement of thought

[51] *From the Source to the Source*, p. 158.
[52] Emerson, p. 221.
[53] *From the Source to the Source*, p. 67.

through the poem that we become aware of its subtle spiritual complexity.

The poem is constructed on two pivotal actions: to serve and to love. Service the subjective speaking voice renders to his "Maker-Lord"; love he offers to his "Beloved Friend". The capitalisation of these nouns enables us to identify them as epithets of God. The compound "Maker-Lord" reveals the aspect of a father figure – grand, majestic, authoritative, somewhat aloof. The poet responds to this aspect with dutiful obedience. The second aspect is of a "Beloved Friend" – close, personal, equal. The poet responds to this aspect as one child would to another, with loving playfulness.

The challenge of the poem lies in reconciling these two aspects of God in a continuous vision. It is a vision which, when finally grasped, explodes upon our understanding: the soul takes birth with a single mission – to serve the Creator through the creation. On earth, the soul experiences a single desire – to love the creation through the Creator. It is here on earth that the soul feels the breath of its Beloved Friend in everything, and so begins the game of hide-and-seek, the game of the seeker and the Sought, the lover and the Beloved, which encircles the world in its "oneness-play". The poet achieves his result by holding before our vision four different roles – Maker, Lord, Beloved, Friend – and pairing them to clarify two major aspects of God.

A similar use of the compound noun to indicate a development in man's comprehension of God may be observed in "A Time for Everything":

Morning is the time
For my loving heart
To feed my child-God.

Evening is the time
For my loving heart
To dance with my Beloved-God.

Night is the time
For my loving heart
To confide in my partner-God.[54]

[54] *The Goal is Won*, p. 89.

The appropriateness of each aspect of God to the experience offered by the specific hour of day may be viewed in terms of a deepening spiritual maturity on the part of the speaker. He moves from an initial devotion to God, through love for God, to a state of oneness with God in which he claims God as partner. Each advance is forecast, to some extent, by the parallel structure itself.

Aside from Hopkins and, to a lesser extent, Pound and Dickinson, the use of the compound noun in English poetry has hitherto been restricted. Although our language permits compounding, convention has drawn us increasingly away from this constellated form towards more discursive and explanative forms, "the rim of the welkin", for example, rather than "welkin-rim". Edwin Gerow suggests that this movement may be explained in terms of a basic change in the minimal unit of composition. With the advent of prose, he argues, Western literary taste shifted from the stanza to the work or chapter.[55] In the case of Indian literature, however, the late appearance of prose significantly preserved the brevity and tautness of the classical Sanskrit stanzas. Gerow continues:

> The poetry of classical India was microcosmic poetry. The locus of composition was a minimal unit of expression, the stanza, and this is to be understood in a quite radical way as excluding larger units of composition such as the chapter or the work itself.

"The tendency", he adds,

> is toward the expression of one bewilderingly complex but stringently coherent idea or image within the stanzaic unit. The stanza imposes its form on the poetic content, which is delivered compactly as image, as figure.[56]

It is possible that Sri Chinmoy's use of the compound noun has its origins in his attempt to find in English the natural analogue of the Sanskrit and Bengali forms of comparison. Gerow notes that translations from Sanskrit into English "tend to be flabby and prolix precisely

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[55] Gerow, p. 71. And the following quotation.
[56] *Ibid.*, p. 72. And the following quotation.

where the original displays a tense compactness and is most striking in its beauty."

In the case of Sri Chinmoy's own mother tongue, Bengali, this compactness is inherent in the language. The formation of compounds is frequent and, in fact, the grammar of compounds cannot be distinguished from that of phrases. The words "*swapan sathi*", to take an example, may be translated in an interpretative way as "companion of my dream". Literally, however, the words read as "dream-companion", with the two words closely intersecting. In so far as a direct English equivalent may be found for the Bengali words, Sri Chinmoy most commonly elects to keep to the true form of his source language. As a result, he is able to use the compound noun to establish a greater cohesion within the English language itself. The life-principle of poetry, he would seem to affirm, does not lie in any of the norms of grammar and logic but in the interactions of words within the language. Fenollosa explains it succinctly:

> Poetry differs from prose in the concrete colours of its diction. It is not enough for it to furnish a meaning to philosophers. It must appeal to the emotions with the charm of direct impression, flashing through regions where the intellect can only grope.[57]

In a similar vein, de Quincey refers to a distinction between the "literature of power and the literature of knowledge."[58] What we discover in Sri Chinmoy's poetry is that the analogous technique of the compound nouns, that is, the literature of power or imagination, largely precludes the introduction of outer details of geography and personal circumstance. This gives rise to an apparent "scenelessness" in the poetry. The inner shape of a particular emotion or state thus becomes the unseen centre of convergence. In the following poem, we may observe how the poet has created an analogical "scene" to replace outward particulars. The central consciousness is anonymous and universal:

HE HAS BREATHLESSLY DRUNK

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[57] *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry* (New York: Arrow Editions, 1936), p. 25.

[58] Quoted in Walter Pater's "Style", *Walter Pater: Essays on Literature and Art, op. cit.,* p. 62.

He has breathlessly drunk
All the milk of Heaven-sky.
He now gladly drinks
All the venom of earth-sigh.[59]

The poem is composed of two experiences, which are condensed in a time sequence of cause and effect. Initially, the emphasis is literal: the subject "has breathlessly drunk/All the milk" It is the final compound noun of the sentence that discloses the poem's figurative meaning. We realise that the word "milk", read in the context of "Heaven-sky", symbolically captures all the sweetness, fulness and beauty of Heaven. Perhaps we recall the lines from Coleridge's "Kubla Khan":

For he on honey-dew hath fed
And drunk the milk of Paradise.

As a substitute for "Paradise", the compound "Heaven-sky" deftly establishes the remoteness of Heaven, far above the earth scene, and also, by analogy with the sky, something of its vastness. What is most challenging to the reader is the implied conquest of Heaven by the subject of the poem: he has drunk *all* its milk, emptied Heaven, as it were, of its richness. We are led to draw the extra-syntactical conclusion that this subject has now become divinised. Tremendous expectation, therefore, is carried over into the second statement of the poem.

This next statement is revealed from the outset as a paratactic extension of the first. The precise structural reproduction compels us to correlate its member parts with those of the first. Within this framework of juxtaposition we are led to consider pairs of rhyming ideas: has drunk/now drinks; breathlessly/gladly; milk/venom; Heaven-sky/earth-sigh. As milk is selected by the poet to represent Heaven's supreme offering, so venom is put forward as the embodiment of earth. This second metaphor is considerably more difficult to penetrate. The image of a sighing and impure world keenly revives the age-old division between Heaven and earth, light and darkness, God and man. And yet the status of the poem's mysterious subject figure remains puzzling. Here is a man who seems somehow to

[59] *From the Source to the Source*, p. 334.

stand outside of Heaven and earth. He has drunk of them both equally – milk and venom alike he has taken upon himself with undiminished joy and eagerness. We emerge with a complex picture of a man who is at once a child breathlessly tasting heavenly milk and a hero, accepting the burden of the world with serene gladness. It is a unique interpretation of man at the summit of his spiritual evolution.

The double nature of the experience represented in this poem has been condensed into a few, carefully selected stenographic strokes. Not experience, but the essence of experience has been dramatised by the poet in his highly patterned and distinctive style.

Where aphorism becomes definitive, it may be noted that the poet tends to an even greater compression of statement:

> REALITIES
>
> Visiting and dreaming
> Are the realities of the hope-world.
>
> Crying and obtaining
> Are the realities of the prayer-world.
>
> Silencing and becoming
> Are the realities of the meditation-world.[60]

This kind of reductive movement in the poetry places considerable weight on the compound noun to carry the poet's meaning. A remark made about Emily Dickinson's style by her sister-in-law might well apply to the radical economy of these forms:

> Quick as the electric spark in her intuitions and analyses, she seized the kernel instantly, almost impatient of the fewest words, by which she must make her revelation.[61]

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[60] *The Goal is Won*, p. 41.

[61] Quoted in Brita Lindberg-Seyersted, *The Voice of the Poet: Aspects of Style in the Poetry of Emily Dickinson* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1968), p. 18.

The tautness of the parallel structure, the tendency toward the fusion of spiritually complex ideas into compound nouns and the dramatisation of experience by analogy all enable Sri Chinmoy to freely explore many of the creative possibilities of the English language, refining and perfecting new and unfamiliar modes of expression, so that their air of strangeness is gradually replaced by a stable elegance and authenticity. It is perhaps too soon to assess the impact of these forms on modern literature, but we can only applaud the work of a poet who, with a profound sense of the eternal nature of man's quest, is able to express himself in ever-new ways, to speak "according to the echoes which things arouse in his soul."[62]

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[62] Benedetto Croce, *Aesthetic*, trans, Douglas Ainslie (London: Macmillan, 1922), p. 150.

Chapter II

Dark Lyrics and Lyrics of Ecstasy

Intrinsic to the lyric, from its earliest beginnings, is music. The word itself, from the Greek "lyra", meaning "a musical instrument", discloses something of its history as a vehicle for man's spontaneous melodic expression. Lyrics now are rarely composed for musical accompaniment, but they still wear many of the essential features of song in the form of their presentation, in their length and in their span.

In its modern application, the term "lyric" strictly refers to poems in which the speaker, a single distinctive voice, captures a particular emotion or moment. The frame of reference is personal, the scale of time necessarily episodic, and the major characteristic of the content is its unmixed quality. The lyric concerns itself with a moment, abstracted from the flow of time and the dimension of social reality and seen alone, supported only by interior reality, in a light that is at once timeless and mythic. If that same moment were to be examined in the context of a man's life, perceived as the fruit of a thousand subtle influences and as the link between countless future events we would, perforce, be dealing in the epic genre. But the emphasis in lyric is not in the interplay of foreground and background, the history-bound context of an individual life. The lyric poet sings to us of presence, not the presence of personality, a social phenomenon, but the presence of a state of being. And, in exploring the essence of this state, he invariably impresses his own distinct shape upon it. We recognise the Hopkins of the so-called "terrible" sonnets, for example, not because we relate them to the poet's life in Dublin, but because of the poet's intense struggle with self, his vigorous confrontation with God.

The "lyric-I" draws us to it by virtue of its inner depth and range. As readers, we touch upon it in a moment of isolation and yet traditionally our presence is never acknowledged by direct address. Instead, it adopts a reflective pose of self-communion, which we "overhear" by tacit agreement. The oracular lyric voice is meditative, issuing from a static configuration of time and circumstance. These accepted characteristics are significantly affected by those lyrics in which the poet addresses a friend, or apostrophises something in nature, or, more importantly for this study, where he appeals to God. In these poems, the dramatisation of an emotion is framed by an act of communication, and so there is an inner movement of the poem towards something, or away from something – towards,

for example, a higher beauty and away from present imperfection. The very action of these "I-Thou" lyrics releases tremendous possibilities in terms of poetic stance and tone. In the case of the spiritual poet, the "action" of lyrics that mediate between the seeker and God is predicated on the alternating experiences of God's absence and God's presence. The absence of God provokes prayer-cries. The closeness of God inspires prayer-songs. God without is sought for, God within is celebrated; God lost is grieved for, God found is rejoiced over. The "lyric-I" faces the God-consciousness and his poem is the measure of the distance between them.

Dark Lyrics

> Whither, O, whither art thou fled,
> My Lord, My Love?
> My searches are my daily bread;
> Yet never prove.
> – George Herbert

Turning to the poems of Sri Chinmoy, we find that the pain of separation from God manifests itself in what we might call "dark lyrics". The failure to see God, and its attendant feelings of grief and despair, falls into several different orders. As in Christian mystical theology, Sri Chinmoy finds that darkness, with its dominant metaphors of night and desert, can indicate both spiritual barrenness and that condition of emptiness wherein the soul most nearly approaches God. The former state discloses the sorrow of the unfulfilled and restless soul before the dawn of conscious spiritual aspiration; the latter reflects the intense pain arising from the burning aspiration to see God face to face and commune with Him freely. In these lyrics, the very expression of suffering or inner torment can open the way to an infusion of hope and faith and thus transform the lyric into a song of praise or ecstasy.

Among poems of the first order, many of Sri Chinmoy's lyrics capture the mood of bitter frustration that often marks the hiatus between desire and aspiration but is not directly connected with spiritual yearning. In the famous "Between Nothingness and Eternity", for example, he projects the state of one who is out of harmony with himself and the world, wandering aimlessly and yet unaware of the cause of this "world-sorrow":

BETWEEN NOTHINGNESS AND ETERNITY

Barren of events,
Rich in pretensions
My earthly life.

Obscurity
My real name.

Wholly unto myself
I exist.

I wrap no soul
In my embrace.

No mentor worthy
Of my calibre
Have I.

I am all alone
Between failure
And frustration.

I am the red thread
Between Nothingness
And Eternity.[63]

The short, stabbing sentences, the constant downward inflection at the end of each one plunging it into gloom, together with the suppression of any connecting links between them, all mirror the emptiness and desolation of the speaker. Nothing in the poem suggests forward movement, flow, promise. Although the poet does not allow these grammatical

[63] *My Flute*, p. 15.

elements of the poem to suffer a total collapse, we gain the unmistakable impression that it is only with great effort that the poem succeeds as intelligible utterance, so strong are the forces pulling the speaker towards final dissolution and lapse of consciousness. Taken together, these seven statements stand as a mechanical read-out of the psyche, responding to the unspoken standard questions concerning name, kin and place of address. The answers reveal the self, alone, nameless and loveless. It is a condition characterised by unexpected contraries – such as "Barren of events/Rich in pretensions" – and by paradox – "Obscurity/My real name". The speaker's world is wholly self-referential. He inhabits a void, a vivid blood-red thread in an otherwise empty space. A thread, by association, connects something to something. It is from the thread that the fabric is woven. Here the thread bridges Nothingness and Eternity but there is no projection of the tapestry wholeness concomitant with the span of Eternity. The slender thread, like a vein of blood, is suspended alone.

This representation of the self which despair has cast into utter isolation is paralleled in several poems by Emily Dickinson. For her, too, pain suggests itself as something spatial:

> There is a pain—so utter
> It swallows substance up—
> Then covers the Abyss with Trance—[64]

And as something which induces a breakdown of the temporal sense:

> Pain—has an Element of Blank—
> It cannot recollect
> When it begun—or if there were
> A time when it was not—
>
> It has no Future—but itself—
> Its Infinite contain

[64] *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (London: Faber & Faber, 1975), p. 599. Following poem, p. 650.

Its Past—enlightened to perceive
New Periods—of Pain.

In their search for an exact correlative of the pain at the centre of despair, both poets employ the concepts of Blankness and Nothingness to sabotage time. Gone is the sense of time passing, the continuity that results from the succession of moments. These poems would seem almost to consume themselves rather than move towards a conclusion.

This stalling of time reveals itself as one of the lyricist's major strategies. The fixity of the present, without the boundaries of past and future, beginnings and endings, ushers us into a world of eternal present. When this eternal sense is conferred on a feeling such as despair, unqualified despair, the poet is able to create out of his mood something more than personal lament: under the guise of the first person speaking voice we hear the choral voice of man and experience the unchanging emotions of the human heart.

In other poems by Sri Chinmoy, it is the poet's contemplation of nature that arouses and brings to the fore this sense of the isolated and heightened moment:

Sailing the boat of silver light,
The moon-beauty is fast approaching me.
The sky is vibrating with sweet and melodious songs.
The birds are flying beyond the horizon
To an unknown land.
All my hopes are flying without any destination.
Slowly my life's evening sets in.[65]

Initially, the poet's gaze alights on the moon, whose rapid passage across the sky immediately suggests itself as a silver boat hastening in the direction of the poet. The image is a blend of motion and colour. It reveals to us the exquisite perception of one who is extremely sensitive to beauty The poet's next touch is aural – the sound of songs that resonate and vibrate through the air, songs that seem almost to be generated by the sky itself. Our growing impression of fulness and energy within these external details is sustained in the final element of the scene. Here we see a flock of birds traversing the sky

[65] *Illumination-Song and Liberation-Dance*, part 3, p. 21.

and attaining the limits of the horizon, from where they continue "to an unknown land". The poet's vision releases them at the point of leaving his picture.

These three carefully chosen details create a composite pictorial and musical image, one that is tremendously alive, radiant and enchanting. Each aspect of the scene expresses an inner design or purposefulness, which the poet now admits is in stark contrast to his own inner mood. As he observes the birds flying with obvious intent to reach their unknown land, he reflects that his hopes have no such sure destination. While all around him affirms movement and meaning, the poet can find no corresponding impulse in his own life. He concludes with the deliberately plain and candid line, "Slowly my life's evening sets in." The poignant melancholy of this understatement, the quiet sadness from which it springs and the degree of detachment which makes such truthful utterance possible, afford us a sudden inroad into the speaker's consciousness. We see a man with the alert, refined awareness of an artist, but an artist who is alienated from the objects of his perceptions. We feel him, with the resignation of age, observing the slow advance of the final stage of his life. His evening, with its unfulfilled and unspoken hopes and longings, is in striking contrast to this mysterious and beautiful scene. The silent, pervading gloom of his night subsumes the poem's close. The image we retain is of a man with his face turned skywards, itself an image of yearning, who is aesthetically immersed in the beauty of the scene around him, but whose spiritual or psychic response is one of even more acute isolation. It is as if the scene has allowed him to penetrate to a far greater depth of emotion, a depth that manifests itself in and through the very subtlety of his descriptive powers. All other action is suspended or withheld in order that the poet might awaken this inner contemplative depth.

It is this same procedure that distinguishes the Haiku writings of the Japanese tradition. Basho and others succeed in balancing our attention for an instant on that point where outer perception is met by inner response. The Haiku poet commonly sketches the outer situation in a few swift and often symbolic "brushstrokes". The inner response of the reader is sudden and impromptu in character. The result is a lightning fusion of ideas and parts in a single, sharply focussed image. The important feature of Haiku is that this fusion takes place largely in the mind of the reader. The poet supplies the formula for that experience in his selection of quintessential details but he observes what Northrop Frye refers to as "a convention of pure projected detachment, in which an image, a situation, or a

mood is observed with all the imaginative energy thrown outward to it and away from the poet."[66]

It is the reader's imaginative collaboration with the words that must supply the experience and, in so doing, approximate the poet's original moment of realisation. The following three Haiku by Basho illustrate this master principle. It may be noted that all three, in their own way, echo the mood of forlorn melancholy expressed by Sri Chinmoy:

Yamiji kite/naniyara yukashi/sumire-gusa.

Treading the mountain path,
The violets fill my heart
With indefinable longings.

Uki ware o/sabishigara seyo/kankodori.

Overwhelm my melancholy
With the loneliness of your note,
O cuckoo!

Kono aki wa/nande toshiyoru/kumo ni tori.

Why am I aging so
This autumn?
A bird flying into the clouds.[67]

In these diminutive poems, the reader's attention is deflected outwards to a precious, symbolic detail – violets, the cuckoo song, a bird in flight. The same powerful, selective faculty is operating here as in the poem by Sri Chinmoy with its intense concentration on the moon, the songs and the birds. The details themselves are exalted by their extreme concentration so that they become tokens or emblems for an inner condition that is ultimately inexpressible. The vision of the bird flying into the clouds or beyond the horizon

[66] *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1973), p. 297.
[67] Japanese Classics Translation Committee, *Haikai and Haiku* (Tokyo: Nippon Gakujutsu Shinkokai, 1958), pp. 4-10.

"to an unknown land" is tinged with the sadness of transience. Through understatement these poets give play to the expressive punctuation of silence; through economy and omission they invite breadth and intensity.

An interesting comparison in terms of poetic procedure in handling despair or sadness is provided by a poet such as Yeats. In his poem "The Wild Swans at Coole" he, too, uses natural forms, in this instance swans, to summon a complex inner response. As the poem begins, the poet is a passive, dispassionate observer:

> The trees are in their autumn beauty,
> The woodland paths are dry,
> Under the October twilight the water
> Mirrors a still sky;
> Upon the brimming water among the stones
> Are nine-and-fifty swans.[68]

However, as the poet merges his mind in the contemplation of the swans upon the water, the picture becomes filled with the memory of movement and sound:

> I saw, before I had well finished,
> All suddenly mount
> And scatter wheeling in great broken rings
> Upon their clamorous wings.

Each remembered detail of the swans' flight etches itself upon the poet's sensibility with exaggerated force. These details do not simply complement his train of thought – they control and direct it. Through this seizing of his imagination in a whirl of colour and sound, he is led to a pitch of self-awareness in which he measures the progress of his own life beside that of the swans'. As they drift in a timeless moment on the still water, or wheel in an eternal gesture above his head, they seem to partake of an immortal life of youth and love, which he is denied. The poet finds himself suddenly recalled to his own mortality and death. A feeling of deep, illimitable despair-in-quietude washes over the poem's last stanzas:

[68] *Collected Poems* (London: Macmillan, 1971), p. 147.

I have looked upon those brilliant creatures,
And now my heart is sore.
All’s changed since I, hearing at twilight,
The first time on this shore,
The bell-beat of their wings above my head,
Trod with a lighter tread.

Unwearied still, lover by lover,
They paddle in the cold
Companionable streams or climb the air;
Their hearts have not grown old;
Passion or conquest, wander where they will,
Attend upon them still.

But now they drift on the still water,
Mysterious, beautiful;
Among what rushes will they build.
By what lake’s edge or pool
Delight men’s eyes when I awake some day
To find they have flown away?

It may be seen from this poem that Yeats is developing several of the essential lyrical features that we have been discussing: the withdrawal of personality in favour of “presence”; the isolation of the lyric moment in a “timeless” present; the pure presentation of feeling in the service of context rather than history and the symbolic transformation of external detail.

Yeats achieves this last quality, the metamorphosis of the swans into emblems of immortality, through a series of impressionistic suggestions. The swans are continually half-seen, or else seen in terms of some other object. In the sky, for example, they appear "wheeling in great broken rings," a masterful synthesis of visual and musical imagery. On the lake they "drift," two by two, in a frozen tableau. Our view of them is unfocused, an

effect which surrounds them with a mysterious beauty. Compare Basho:

> *Umi kurete/kamo no koe/honokani shiroshi.*
>
> The sea grows dark;
> The voices of wild duck
> Are palely white.[69]

The brilliant fusion of colour and sound in the image of the wild ducks' cries gives this poem immense inner scope. In the compass of a single metaphor he has captured the shrill, disembodied cries pulsating faintly across the dark sea to the poet. Nothing more is necessary to a forlorn sense of something struggling against the vast forces around it – the "palely white" cries of the ducks disperse helplessly in the darkness. It is a detail that we receive with profound signification.

This method of expressing the delicate, indefinable inner sense of life by suggestion informs many of Sri Chinmoy's lyrics. Among the lyrics of despair, one example of the pathetic charm that springs from man's questioning of the unalterable laws of nature is the following:

> The clouds are sailing towards an unknown world
> Adorned with myriad beauty.
> A smiling face accompanies them.
> The clouds are sailing towards an unknown clime.
> O sky, do tell me where the clouds are sailing.
> I ask you with my tearful eyes.
> O sky, will you make my life as bright
>   and beautiful as the clouds?
> O sky, tell me where the clouds are sailing.[70]

Here the beauty of the unattainable has captured the poet's life. It is the child's perspective of ultimate simplicity that he adopts as he pleads with the sky and looks longingly after the

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[69] *Haikai and Haiku*, p. 17.
[70] *Illumination-Song and Liberation-Dance*, part 3, p. 36.

clouds – a child abandoned by its playmates. His is the world of wonder and fantasy, where a radiant face is hidden in the clouds and where the clouds themselves are like his toy boats, sailing out of sight on infinite stretch of blue. The speaker's eyes are wet with tears; at once the tears of a child frustrated by his attempts to recall the clouds and make them answer him, and the soulful tears of the imaginative artist, who sees in the clouds a haunting, ungraspable splendour. The despair of this poem is the despair of innocence and innocent longings. Social relationships and personal circumstances cannot rupture the magic now of clouds passing over our heads.

One of the primary distinguishing features of the lyric form is its representation of time. The wholeness of the lyric mood is closely allied to the single moment of time that encapsulates it. The moment passed, the emotion itself alters, is mixed with other feelings and lost. The lyric's freedom from external time factors is emphasised by Sharon Cameron in her discussion of Emily Dickinson's poems:

> No imaginative fiction is as resistant to the interruption of its interior speech as the lyric. For the lyric, unlike the drama or the novel, does not have to contend with authorial description, explanatory asides, or any other manipulative intrusion of its space. Nor need it weather the periodic interruptions guaranteed by act, scene or chapter divisions. Most important, however, it must attend to no more than one (its own) speaking voice. This fact makes the self in the lyric unitary, and gives it the illusion of alone holding sway over the universe, there being, for all practical purposes, no one else, nothing else, to inhabit it.[71]

This banishing of the social and temporal worlds from the sphere of the lyric does not remove their influence entirely. Indeed, as Cameron again points out, "to stop the succession of moments is . . . to have their inevitable passing firmly, even desperately in mind."[72] And to avoid relation with the social world can serve to increase the pressure of its ties. This area of conflict bordering the lyric moment may at times become a source of

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[71] *Lyric Time: Dickinson and the Limits of Genre* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), p. 119.
[72] *Ibid.*, p. 118.

despair, as in the following poem:

THE BOAT OF TIME SAILS ON

The sky calls me,
The wind calls me,
The moon and stars call me.

The green and the dense groves call me,
The dance of the fountain calls me,
Smiles call me, tears call me,
A faint melody calls me.

The morn, noon and eve call me.
Everyone is searching for a playmate,
Everyone is calling me, "Come, come!"
One voice, one sound, all around.
Alas, the Boat of Time sails on.[73]

The poet stands in the vortex of life. Around him are countless irresistible and compelling attractions – the beauties of nature, the cosmic splendours, human joy and suffering. From each quarter they beckon him – a constant call that merges into "one voice, one sound". But there is no reprieve from time; like a boat it glides by. Social time, objective time, will not stand upon private or subjective time.

A similar preoccupation is illustrated by Ezra Pound in his epigraph to *Lustra*:

And the days are not full enough
And the nights are not full enough
And life slips by like a field-mouse
Not shaking the grass.[74]

[73] *My Flute*, p. 48.
[74] Ezra Pound, *Selected Poems* (London: Faber & Faber, 1971), p. 90.

Even before a tiny field-mouse, emblem of all that seems most small and insignificant, the poet is powerless. The field-mouse passes, its presence hardly noticed, and we know that it is life itself that has slipped by, imperceptibly, never having been raised to its maximum potential.

The use of this contradiction between lyric time and social time as the lyric's generating impulse[75] acquires special overtones in the case of the creative artist, for whom the passage of time frequently suggests the failure of the imagination to achieve full expression. The deepest pangs of the artist are translated into a formal cry of lyric pain:

> How many songs have I sung?
> How many more have I still to sing
>   here on earth?
> Within and without I have been
>   searching for myself through my songs.
> With deep pangs my heart cries;
> My self-form is not visible yet.
> In the vast life-ocean, I am floating all alone.[76]

The supreme goal of art is conveyed with directness and sincerity in this song of self to Self: the seeker-poet strives for the perfect song; the poet-seeker searches for his universal and pervasive Self, the perfect core of all songs. It is an integral process of discovery. The despair of the poet in this poem stems from the failure of his songs to lead him to this true "self-form", the "other" without which he is alone, a divided consciousness. By extension, the poet suggests that the balance, harmony and truthfulness of his art depend upon the extent to which self has blent with Self, singer with Singer. It is a conclusion that is central also to the art of George Herbert:

> The fineness which a hymne or psalme affords,
> Is, when the soul unto the lines accords.[77]

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[75] This point is made by Cameron, p. 120.
[76] *The Garden of Love-Light*, part 2, p. 4.

The "fineness" in this case is contingent upon the poet being at one with what he is saying. In most lyrics, however, we observe that the speaking voice is not the recognisable voice of the poet. It subsists only as "voice", without the constrictions of name or history. As this voice gathers greater and greater resonance, it may surpass the limits of a single voice and gain a choric effect.

Lyrics, then, in which "the soul unto the lines accords", can include lyrics whose claim for personality is, nonetheless, minimal. In such poems, the poet identifies not with personality but with the truth, and this truth may express itself in various forms and through various voices. The poet does not abdicate his personality in order to invent these differing voices; he enlarges it so that they may be reflected within his own consciousness. Emily Dickinson affirms: "When I state myself, as the Representative of the Verse—it does not mean—me—but a supposed person."[78] And Keats concurs:

> As to the Poetic character itself, it is not itself – it has no self, it is everything and nothing. It has no character – it enjoys light and shade; it lives in gusto, be it foul or fair, high or low, rich or poor, mean or elevated . . . What shocks the virtuous philosopher delights the chameleon poet.[79]

The element of fictional projection that is obviously present in many poems does not discount Sri Chinmoy's interpretation of art as the union of the artist with his true self-form, that is, as both an aesthetic and a spiritual condition, for in portraying a particular state, even one which may not have exact autobiographical correspondences with his own life, the poet is concerned to identify with truth. It is in this sense, then, that the goal of self-discovery through art may be understood. Arnold Stein comments:

> All writers learn from their own writing, and it no longer seems difficult to

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[77] From "A True Hymne", *A Choice of George Herbert's Verse*, R.S. Thomas, ed. (London: Faber & Faber, 1972), p. 77.
[78] A letter to Colonel Higginson, July 1862. Quoted in Brita Lindberg-Seyersted, *The Voice of the Poet: Aspects of Style in the Poetry of Emily Dickinson* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1968), p. 24.
[79] Letter to Wood House, October 27th, 1817. Quoted in Robert Gittings, *The Mask of Keats* (London: Heinemann, 1956), p. 59.

> believe that a lyric poet may learn the deepest things about himself during the intensities of composition. If he is the right poet we recognise in the self he discovers both the variety and the oneness of the human condition.[80]

That the ideal of Self-discovery is uppermost for the spiritual poet is echoed in the lyrics of Rabindranath Tagore:

> Ever in my life have I sought thee with my songs. It was they who led me from door to door, and with them have I felt about me, searching and touching my world.
>
> It was my songs that taught me all the lessons I ever learnt; they showed me secret paths, they brought before my sight many a star on the horizon of my heart.
>
> They guided me all the day long to the mysteries of the country of pleasure and pain, and, at last, to what palace gate have they brought me in the evening at the end of my journey?[81]

Again, when this union is not achieved, poetry itself would seem to be beyond his grasp:

> The song that I came to sing remains unsung to this day.
>
> I have spent my days in stringing and in unstringing my instrument.
>
> The time has not come true, the words have not been rightly set; only there is the agony of wishing in my heart.
>
> The blossom has not opened; only the wind is sighing by.
>
> I have not seen his face, nor have I listened to his voice; only I have heard his gentle footsteps from the road before my house.
>
> The livelong day has passed in spreading his seat on the floor; but the lamp has not been lit and I cannot ask him into my house.

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[80] Introduction to *Theodore Roethke: Essays on the Poetry* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1965), p. xiii.

[81] *Collected Poems and Plays of Rabindranath Tagore* (London: Macmillan, 1973), p. 47. "Gitanjali", CI.

I live in the hope of meeting with him; but this meeting is not yet.[82]

Literature is portrayed by Tagore as the field for the meeting of the poet and this "other", be it Self or God. What is received by the poet as song is an inner plenitude that overflows from his intuition of wholeness. One further exposition of the same theme is made by Jorge Luis Borges in the poised and meditative rhythms of "Matthew XXV:30":

From the unseen horizon
And from the very centre of my being,
An infinite voice pronounced these things—
Things, not words. This is my feeble translation,
Time-bound, of what was a single limitless Word:

"Stars, bread, libraries of East and West,
Playing cards, chessboards, galleries, skylights, cellars,
A human body to walk with on the earth,
Fingernails, growing at night-time and in death,
Shadows for forgetting, mirrors busily multiplying,
Cascades in music, gentlest of all time's shapes,
Borders of Brazil, Uruguay, horses and mornings,
A bronze weight, a copy of the Grettir Saga,
Algebra and fire, the charge at Junín in your blood,
Days more crowded than Balzac, scent of the honeysuckle,
Love and the imminence of love and intolerable remembering,
Dreams like buried treasure, generous luck,
And memory itself, where a glance can make men dizzy—
All this was given to you and with it
The ancient nourishment of heroes—
Treachery, defeat, humiliation.
In vain have oceans been squandered on you, in vain
The sun, wonderfully seen through Whitman's eyes.
You have used up the years and they have used up you,

[82] "Gitanjali", XIII, p. 8.

And still, and still, you have not written the poem."[83]

One important feature of the poems so far discussed is that the central feeling of despair remains unqualified by hope or divine promise. There is, in effect, no bridge between these poems and any higher spiritual state. Despair is registered for the sake of despair and not for the sake of converting it into an opposing feeling, such as love. Yet within the severe restrictions placed on the poet by the singleness of this approach awaits the challenge to push deeper and deeper into the feeling itself, to touch on the "terrible crystal"[84] that is despair's extremity:

STRUGGLE'S GLOOM

With a blank sorrow, heavy I am now grown;
Like things eternal, changeless stands my woe.
In vain I try to overcome my foe.
O Lord of Love! Make me more dead than stone.

Thy Grace of silent Smile I never feel;
The forger of evil stamps my nights and days.
His call my sleepless body ever obeys.
My heart I annihilate and try to heal.

The dumb earth-waste now burns a hell to my soul.
I fail to fight with its stupendous doom,
My breath is a slave of that unending gloom.
For Light I pine, but find a tenebrous goal.

Smoke-clouds cover my face of Spirit's fire;
Naked I move in night's ignorance deep and dire.[85]

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[83] Jorge Luis Borges, *Selected Poems 1923-1967*, Norman Thomas di Giovanni intro. (London: Allen Lane, The Penguin Press, 1972), p. 105. Translated by Alastair Reid.
[84] Richard Watson Dixon's description of the temper of Gerard Manley Hopkins' verse in David A. Downes, *Gerard Manley Hopkins: A Study of His Ignatian Spirit* (New York: Bookman Associates, 1959), pp. 121-122.
[85] *My Flute*, p. 12.

Previously Sri Chinmoy has presented despair as a mood of quiet, inexpressible pain. However, in this magnificent graphic picture of naked man moving sleeplessly among the scenery of hell in a smoke-filled night, pain is searing and intolerable. The poet externalises a landscape of grief that has all the traditional attributes of hell – night, fire, smoke. Under the overpowering influence of these retrograde forces he becomes as one of the inhabitants of Dante's first circle of hell – wandering sleeplessly through the night in a heavy stupor, unable to act otherwise, unable also to cease from acting, a slave deprived of both will and dignity. For him to be dead were better than this "stamp" of evil.

A commentary on this pitch of despair is provided by St. Ignatius Loyola in his definition of spiritual desolation:

> I call desolation . . . as darkness and disquiet of soul, an attraction towards low and earthly objects, the disquiet of various agitations and temptations, which move it to diffidence, without hope and without love, when the soul finds itself slothful, tepid, sad, and, as it were, separated from its Creator and Lord.[86]

To understand despair, to pierce its essence, is, from the point of view of the spiritual poet, to see it as the trace of God's lost presence. Pain supplies the gap left by God. It is this recognition that forces Hopkins to cry out:

> No worst, there is none. Pitched past pitch of grief,
> More pangs will, schooled at forepangs, wilder wring.
> Comforter, where, where is your comforting?[87]

When prayer issues from the depths of despair, we begin to hear all the countless subtle changes of the speaking voice. We particularly hear the poet's begging, pleading, assuring, yearning, lamenting, protesting and promising voice. To pray to God, by definition, is to talk. In lyric prayer the intimacy of this speech is at once poetic subject and the source of poetic technique. The emotional life that lyric prayer records is wide-ranging and rich; its style is modelled on the spoken language, moulded, writes Louis Martz,

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[86] Q. by Downes, p. 134.
[87] *The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, W.H. Gardner and N.H. MacKenzie, eds. (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), Poem No. 65, p. 100.

> to express the unique being of an individual who is seeking to learn, through intense mental discipline, how to live his life in the presence of divinity.[88]

Prayers which issue from despair and which become a cry of the soul to God often conform to a dominant rhetorical pattern of strength developing out of weakness. Thus, darkness can be transfigured within the body of the poem by the promise of dawn; lovelessness can give way to an assurance of divine love; hunger and thirst to spiritual nourishment. Sri Chinmoy's imaginative response to despair is more fully engaged by this process of transformation than by the depiction of despair as an unqualified state, for it allows him to explore this condition in relation to an ideal state. In this way, the technique of opposition becomes not only a mode of operation but also a way of seeing and, consequently, a way of transcending experience. An excellent example of this artistic and spiritual resolution is the following invocation:

> O PIERCING RAY
>
> O piercing ray,
> Do pierce this body of clay
> O illumining light,
> Do illumine this life of night.[89]

The dramatisation of darkness and light in order to specify God's transforming power belongs to a well-established tradition. What Sri Chinmoy brings to this tradition is renewed simplicity, vigour and intensity in a brilliantly abbreviated construction. The very focus of the poet's image of light as a single arrow-like ray gives it sharp and distinct contours. The ray is to pierce the speaker. Indeed, he implores it to enter his body. That the poet intends us to associate this action with pain is evidenced by the fact that he chooses to employ the adjective "piercing" again in the second line, this time in its form as a transitive verb. The effect is immediate and compelling. Whereas the initial adjectival form captures the special quiddity of the ray, the imperative form insists that the ray perform the very action which is

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[88] *The Poetry of Meditation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), p. 324.
[89] *From the Source to the Source*, p. 337.

of its essence – to pierce or penetrate. It is a repetition that is carefully designed to transfer the figurative "piercing ray" to a level that can comprehend a concrete and literal meaning. The ray is given a unique actualising power and, by implication, the reality of God's nearness is immeasurably strengthened. To the poet, in fact, the ray would seem to have an even greater reality than his own body, which he gestures towards with ironic detachment as "this body of clay". The reference belies his underlying physical frustration, the clay suggesting something heavy, unformed and dense.

The second address to God prolongs by parallelism the first and, at the same time, amplifies its meaning. Again the epithet pertains to light, but we are introduced to another of its functions – its spreading or illumining nature. The connection between the two epithets, and hence between the two parts of the poem, depends upon a logic of consecutive action. The ray must first enter the speaker and then permeate his being. It is a continuing process of physical and spiritual transformation. The final metaphor, "life of night", gathers this ambiguity of meaning to a climax. The delayed use of the key word "night" to clinch the major confrontation between light and darkness shows both control and tact. It affords the poet a certain amount of leisure in which he is able to uphold and intensify the opposition between the terms not only on a literal level but also on a figurative level (as a conflict of ignorance and knowledge) and on a symbolic level (as the interplay of man and God). This wealth of signification, combining both fixed associations and the full individuality of the poet's prayerful cry, heightens the elected plain style of the poem.

God is appealed to in many forms to alleviate the lyric speaker's despair. Sri Chinmoy invokes Him as Master, Friend, King, Lord, Supreme, Father, Musician, Boatman, Beloved, Mother, the Sun, or, simply, as "You". Since prayer petitions God directly, these varying forms of address modify God's distant, silent pose and convey something of the reciprocal nature of the relationship between God and the seeker. The exchange itself is enlivened and refreshed. In the following poem, for instance, the image of God as Boatman contains manifold possibilities for the poet:

O MY BOATMAN

O my Boat, O my Boatman,
O message of Transcendental Delight,
Carry me. My heart is thirsty and hungry,
And it is fast asleep at the same time.

Carry my heart to the other shore.
The dance of death I see all around.
The thunder of destruction indomitable I hear.
O my Inner Pilot, You are mine,
You are the Ocean of Compassion infinite.
In You I lose myself,
My all in You I lose.[90]

The speaker leans to God to transport him beyond his present suffering, as a boatman ferries passengers to the farther shore. As the poem progresses, however, we notice the speaker's growing realisation that if God is the Boatman, He is also the Boat, the ocean on which it travels and the "other shore" that is the goal. The speaker intuits the presence of God in each aspect of the image.

It is interesting to note that Sri Chinmoy characteristically chooses to leave the figure of the Boatman undelineated by his imagination. God is approached not in a descriptive way but in His role as Boatman. We know Him by His transforming action on the speaker's life rather than by any particularising feature. Tagore, on the other hand, using a parallel image, adopts an approach of greater descriptive specificity:

> The day is no more, the shadow is upon the earth. It time that I go to the stream to fill my pitcher.
>
> The evening air is eager with the sad music of the water.
> Ah, it calls me out into the dusk. In the lonely lane there is no passer-by, the wind is up, the ripples are rampant in the river.
>
> I know not if I shall come back home. I know not whom I shall chance to meet. There at the fording in the little boat the unknown man plays upon his lute.[91]

Although Tagore shrouds his boatman with mystery, one can detect a definite concern on the part of the poet to establish the details of the scene, atmospheric details. It is a dream-like realm into which the poet is drawn unknowingly by the sound of the boatman's lute through the dusk. Their meeting takes place just beyond the borders of the poem, its

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[90] *My Flute*, p. 60.
[91] "Gitanjali", LXXIV, p. 35.

outcome uncertain yet appealing.

For Sri Chinmoy, the figure of the Boatman is created by his imagination to bear the weight of his prayer not, as in the case of Tagore, to amplify a fictional interior. Hence, the status of the Boatman is altogether different. The metaphor never slides into fantasy but remains as the signature of a man who can say simply and with unparalleled urgency "Carry me." We feel the authentic pressure of the speaking voice as he explains, "My heart is thirsty and hungry . . . "[92] Through his unaffected and deliberate style, the poet aspires to an art that can reflect absolute sincerity. This is above all "an art by which he may tell the truth to himself and God. Its major devices are not traditional figures but psychological gestures and movements."[93]

In "O My Boatman" the speaker's longing for spiritual nourishment, along with his fear of death and destruction, are indices to his psychological state. As the poem progresses, we see the changes that are wrought on this state by the very utterance of his prayer-poem. The invocation of God as Boatman heralds a change in his outlook and what begins as a *cri de coeur* is transformed, almost imperceptibly, into a song of praise. Towards the close of the poem, the speaker seems already half-lost in contemplation, absorbed by the "Ocean of Compassion". The final two lines of the poem confirm this impression. While either one may be considered logically sufficient to close the poem, the two lines in conjunction, with their interlocking repetitive structure – a rocking rhythm appropriate to the boat – suggest a completeness and harmony that is no longer prayer but its fruit. A rearrangement of the lines discloses that their message of union or lostness in God subsists in both their horizontal and vertical patterning:

In You	I lose	myself
My all	in You	I lose

The natural end of prayer is frequently this kind of pleonastic motion in which the speaker's statement of his request is simultaneous with God's accession. The spontaneous affirmation from God may at times be so swift as to be incomprehensible to the one who has only

[92] In the Psalms, this theme of spiritual nourishment is a fertile source of symbolism. Psalm 63, for example, begins: "God, you are my God, I will look for you early; my spirit has thirsted for you, my flesh has longed for you in a desert which is weary and without water." *The Psalms*, trans. Peter Levi (Penguin, 1976), p. 92.

[93] Arnold Stein's analysis of the plain style of Herbert in *George Herbert's Lyrics* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1968), p. 27.

managed, with immense difficulty, to bring his prayer to a level of articulation. Herbert acts out this rhythm of prayer and response in the last stanza of "A True Hymne":

> If th' heart be moved,
> Although the verse be somewhat scant,
> God doth supplie the want.
> As when th' heart sayes (sighing to be approved)
> O, could I love!" and stops: God writeth, "Loved".[94]

Arnold Stein notes that in many of Herbert's lyric prayers moods of lament and despair are employed by the poet as strategies of love. "They are a kind of ambiguous 'artillery' which attack in order to provoke counterforces," Stein comments.[95] They are, in fact, declarations of love under the guise of complaint and, therefore, they exploit a fundamental premise of the prayer mode itself:

> The language of complaint enjoys within its body of laws the advantages of special privilege – whether these are derived from a general license of speaking fictionally, or from the great religious precedents which endow man with certain rights when addressing God: complaint permits the demand that one be heard, and in the first person.[96]

Typical of Sri Chinmoy's poems in which complaint forms part of the love-play between lover and Beloved is the small song "Far, Very Far":

> Far, very far,
> Near, very near,
> I hear Your ankle bells.
> Why do I lose my self-form in shyness?
> How long have I to wait for You
> To tie my hands

[94] *A Choice of George Herbert's Verse*, p. 78.
[95] Stein, p. 128.
[96] *Ibid*, p. 133.

With Your love-cord?[97]

The poem exposes a delicate emotional crisis. On the one hand, the speaker longs to be claimed by his Beloved, but on the other hand, the very thought of union causes him to dissolve in shyness. One cannot help but read into the speaker's bashful attitude a sensibility that inclines towards the feminine. The word "shyness" itself reinforces a portrait of feminine timidity and softness. As the Beloved weaves his mysterious game of hide-and-seek, the speaking voice becomes infused with nervousness. The tantalising sound of ankle bells, at times near and at other times far, feigning approach and retreat, creates a state of intense agitation in the speaker and forces this lyric cry into being. "Tis an instant's play./'Tis a fond Ambush—" Emily Dickinson wrote of this play between man and God.[98] Sri Chinmoy's poem is at once a testament of love and an ardent appeal to God as the Beloved. Despair in this instance may be traced not to God's absence but to His tremendous nearness and its effect on the consciousness of the speaker. Our understanding of her complex emotional response is significantly enhanced by the abbreviated image "love-cord". The hands of a slave are bound as he is led away. Here the speaker proffers herself as a willing slave, impatient of the ties of love that will bind her fast. Slavery is neither commanded nor imposed. We see the speaker, in our imagination, standing with hands outstretched begging her reluctant captor to appear. It is the completeness of her surrender, more than anything else, which overwhelms us. The image of a bound slave, one whose freedom has been utterly curtailed, would repel most readers. It is not an image with which we can easily identify on the level of human love, for it signifies an abrogation of personality. The task of translating it on the level of divine love is thus made correspondingly more difficult. And yet, as we struggle to grasp the point of view that would validate the image of "love-cord", something of the poet's conscious design becomes clear. The implicit analogy of the lover and the Beloved engaged in love's sophistries overlaps the experience of the reader and places what might otherwise be a remote mystical experience within reach of our understanding. Having secured a response, the poet now startles the reader into the realisation that divine love differs greatly in its nature from human love – it is a total self-offering, an unconditional gift of love.

At the close of the poem, the poet does not release us from our inner struggle. The

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[97] *Supreme, I Sing Only for You*, p. 81.
[98] *Collected Poems*, No. 338, p. 1895.

identity of the speaker, whether a masculine or feminine voice, remains undisclosed and the occasion of the poem, although highly dramatic, hovers between the real and the imagined. In addition to releasing the poem from the distinctive dyes of his own personality, the poet has released it from time and place. Our only recourse to understanding the poem fully is to probe beneath the surface of the words themselves and identify with one who waits to be seized by love. To do so is to experience the delight of what Coleridge described as "tracing the leading thought thro'out the whole," by means of which "you merge yourself in the author, you *become* He."[99] This "vital participation," emphasises Paul Valéry, "is quite different from a simple understanding of the text. Understanding is, of course, necessary: it is very far from being enough."[100] Commenting on the Spiritual Canticles of St. John of the Cross, Valéry continues:

> The outward appearance of these poems is that of a very tender song, which first of all suggests some ordinary love and a kind of gentle, pastoral adventure lightly sketched by the poet in almost furtive and occasionally mysterious terms. But one must not stop at this initial lucidity: one must, through the gloss, come closer to the text and invest its charm with a depth of supernatural passion and a mystery infinitely more precious than any secret of love dwelling in a human heart.[101]

The applicability of Valéry's observations to the lyrics of Sri Chinmoy may be substantiated by one further example in which the poet compels us to follow the poem's inner movement:

> Whose footsteps do I hear at a distance all day and night?
> For whom is my life?
> For whom is my life all eagerness?
> Ah, I hear now the sound is approaching me.
> My beloved Lord seems to be right beside me.[102]

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[99] Quoted by Stein, p. 43.
[100] Paul Valéry, *The Art of Poetry,* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1958), Denise Folliot, trans., p. 280.
[101] *Ibid*, p. 284.
[102] *Illumination-Song and Liberation-Dance*, part 3, p. 6.

The poet places before us a volley of questions, unadorned, without a locating context. They seem at first to be mere fragments of the inner life. However, if we come closer to the text, as Valéry suggests, we realise that this self-questioning of the poet creates an active and dynamic imaginative world of its own, that the poem does have a perfectly rounded inner and outer form.

Here, as in the previous poem, the poet begins by focussing his entire attention on a single sound – in this case, the sound of distant footsteps. The course of the poem dramatically enacts their advance until, in the last line, they would "seem" to be beside the speaker. This exterior movement of the poem is matched by an inner movement. The speaker is unable to ascribe the footsteps of the first line to any known source. He looks within himself for the answer, examining his life. And, with this successive self-questioning of the second and third lines, some sort of realisation appears to dawn in his mind as to their true identity. The intensity of this gradual discovery is magnificently conveyed in the half-formulated:

> For whom is my life?

and its fully articulated counterpart:

> For whom is my life all eagerness?

At this stage, the approaching nearness of the footsteps themselves intrudes upon the speaker's enquiry and his involuntary cry of "Ah" is a response of mingled surprise and ecstasy. This sudden convergence of inner and outer reality compels the speaker to seize the knowledge he seeks. In a flash, he realises that it is his Beloved Lord who has come so near and the last line of the poem quivers on the point of meeting between them. Indeed, to some extent, it halfway anticipates this meeting and the poem closes with a quiet reversal of status from the actual to the imagined.

Although the statement of the last line is made in the present tense, it carries us to the verge of a future event. As we strain beyond the limits of the poem for a glimpse of that meeting with the Beloved, have we not surpassed the scope of written comprehension and, to a significant degree, *become* the one whose track of feeling we have followed so closely? The interspaces between art and life no longer exist: we claim the experience as our own.

This involvement of the reader in the poetic state is, Valéry writes, the design of all poetry:

> A poet's function – do not be startled by this remark – is not to experience the poetic state: that is a private affair. His function is to create it in others. The poet is recognised – or at least everyone recognises his own poet – by the simple fact that he causes his reader to become "inspired". Positively speaking, inspiration is a graceful attribute with which the reader endows his poet.[103]

Several of Tagore's lyrics comprise complementary studies to "Far, Very Far". Indeed, poems of waiting for God form a significant part of "Gitanjali". Like Sri Chinmoy's song, they too build into the "feeling-present" of despair a sense of portentousness that is founded on an expectant and eager longing for God as the Beloved. The poems dwell on hints of His approach, but press forward to images of His arrival. We seem always to be at the frontier, waiting:

> Art thou abroad on this stormy night on thy journey of love, my friend? The sky groans like one in despair.
>
> I have no sleep to-night. Ever and again I open my door and look out on the darkness, my friend!
>
> I can see nothing before me. I wonder where lies thy path!
>
> By what dim shore of the ink-black river, by what far edge of the frowning forest, through what mazy depth of gloom art thou threading thy course to come to me, my friend?[104]

> Have you not heard his silent steps? He comes, comes, ever comes.
>
> Every moment and every age, every day and every night he comes, comes, ever comes.
>
> Many a song have I sung in many a mood of mind, but all their notes have always proclaimed, "He comes, comes, ever comes."
>
> In the fragrant days of sunny April through the forest path he comes, comes, ever comes.
>
> In the rainy gloom of July nights on the thundering chariot of clouds he

[103] Valéry, p. 60.
[104] "Gitanjali", XXII, p. 12. Nos. XLV, p. 21 and XLVI, pp. 21-22 follow.

comes, comes, ever comes.

In sorrow after sorrow it is his steps that press upon my heart, and it is the golden touch of his feet that makes my joy to shine.

I know not from what distant time thou art ever coming nearer to meet me. Thy sun and stars can never keep thee hidden from me for aye.

In many a morning and eve thy footsteps have been heard and thy messenger has come within my heart and called me in secret.

I know not why to-day my life is all astir, and a feeling of tremulous joy is passing through my heart.

It is as if the time were come to wind up my work, and I feel in the air a faint smell of thy sweet presence.

In these lyrics, Tagore presents the soul as the passive receiver of God, who comes in the form of a wayfarer or traveller. Their meeting is predestined, only the exact hour is uncertain. Hence, the soul must remain alert and vigilant to receive her Beloved as guest. This period of sleepless waiting is given specific concrete colour in the image of the cottage by the side of the river and in the harmony between the speaker and nature. The stormy night setting, where the sky "groans in despair" and the forest is "frowning", is a powerful token of the speaker's emotional turbulence. The path of the Beloved in this context seems perilous and brave.

In the second lyric, the poet uses the simple present form "he comes, comes, ever comes" to frame the eternally recurrent nature of God's approach. The present tense itself, sometimes called "the lyric tense"[105] imparts a timeless dimension to the action. "He comes, comes, ever comes" is not a stage direction for a single happening, but the performance of an eternal act or ceremony. George T. Wright highlights the effect of the present tense upon the lyric with his comment:

> The actions described seem filtered through imagination or memory, or performed under a spell; each scene takes on a visionary quality. No matter how directly the poet speaks, how ordinary his diction, his use of lyric tense declares

[105] George T. Wright, "The Lyric Present: Simple Present Verbs in English," *PMLA*, Vol. 89:3, pp. 563-579.

his poem a public occasion . . .[106]

As Wright indicates, lyrics are often public addresses in disguise. We are reading them, or overhearing them, and this according to the poet's purpose. In the final lyric quoted above, the continuous present tense is suddenly supplanted by the simple present, a move which swiftly fetches the lyric-I into a situation of dramatic immediacy: the speaker senses the fragrance of the Beloved. The elusive and transient impression of fragrance on the senses gives the close of this poem a supreme lightness and delicacy. By heightening our sense perception in this way, Tagore has brought us to the very brink of vision itself.

The quality of despair that we have been considering in these last examples from Sri Chinmoy and Tagore is greatly different from the unalleviated despair expressed in poems such as "Between Nothingness and Eternity" and "Struggle's Gloom". In "O Piercing Ray" and "O My Boatman" pain and suffering are experiences to be borne for the sake of God. We come to know the anguish of the seeker who longs for even a glimpse of God's face; we see the torment and suffering of the one from whom God has temporarily withdrawn. Though originating outside the Christian tradition, this despair approximates that dark night of the soul through which the soul must pass before it can attain the summits of God-union. The mystical experience is of brilliant light concealed within ineffable darkness. In poems that embody this state, God becomes the only thought and God-union the only goal:

I SHALL LISTEN

I shall listen to Your command, I shall.
In Your sky I shall fly, I shall fly.
Eternally You are mine, my very own.
You are my heart's wealth.
For You at night in tears I shall cry,
For you at dawn with light I shall smile.
For You, for You, Beloved, only for You.[107]

Sri Chinmoy's poem stands as a pledge of surrender. Each of the first three lines affirms this

[106] *Ibid.*, p. 569.
[107] *My Flute*, p. 56.

yielding of the spirit. The lines, however, are far from being cold or strictly obedient for, after each major statement, the poet has appended a song-like repetition encoding the speaker's wholehearted and rapturous assent. The echo effect of these musical additions reveals the pressure of the poet's personality and this in turn gives depth to his note of surrender. By means of such phrases ". . . I shall"; "I shall fly"; ". . . my very own" he is able to linger over his pledges, charging them with both strength and sweetness. Thus, he would seem to be talking simultaneously to God and to himself: to God he promises to endure the night of darkness; to himself he promises to uphold his words. The combination of these repetitive effects, simple lyrical diction and intensity of tone places the reader in touch with the living sensibility of a man who finds himself in the "darkness" of faith, poised before the infinite Vast.

The emotional cadence that Sri Chinmoy brings to his lyrics of despair comes from within: he lives in an inner world of consciousness. If there are forests, clouds, trees or colours in this world, then they are the translucent shining forms of imaginative vision. Colour is perceived by an inner sight, music is played upon the inner ear, movement is felt by a bodiless self.

The spiritual poet sees form as expressive of emotion. As he continually reaches beyond himself to the God he cannot see or whom he may see only fleetingly, his moment-to-moment experiences are received almost as images, complete in themselves, requiring no biographical support or explanation. From this study of Sri Chinmoy's lyrics of despair, we have seen that he traverses the range of emotions attendant on this state, yet ever beneath the mask of the anonymous and representative lyric-I. For it is the embracing and universal Self, not the divided and fragmentary self that is caught, enshrined, in his brief, song-like lyrics. We see him as a poet for whom the inner world is more real than the outer world, for whom the abundance and richness of the inner life fill volumes where the outer life fills but pages, and whose "face" is made up of the lines and features that we "read" metaphorically as poems.

LYRICS OF ECSTASY

> [The] heart flutters among the changing things of past and future, and it is still vain. Who will catch hold of it, and make it fast, so that it stands firm for a little while, and for a little while seize the splendour of that ever stable eternity . . . ?

– St. Augustine, *The Confessions*

In this section, I shall be considering lyrics in which the soul that cries for God through prayer and envisions God through praise comes at last to behold Him directly and lose itself in Him. This summit experience is the very flower of mysticism. Again, it is an experience that may be tasted fleetingly before it is attained as a permanent state, and so the title – "Lyrics of Ecstasy" – necessarily encompasses poems of rapture as well as poems of God-union. Because of the lyric's "undiluted attention to feeling and feeling alone,"[108] we find such experiences woven into a medium that does not care to classify or even name them, a medium that seeks only to enact them in the "feeling-present" of the lyric moment. Ultimately, the lyric form goes beyond philosophical concepts by transforming them into the simple elements of intuitive knowledge.

The task of rendering the highest mystical states in poetic terms has commanded a considerable amount of Sri Chinmoy's poetic energies, despite the fact that this area is traditionally one that is fraught with difficulties for poets. The literature of mystical experience has tended to expose the inherent inadequacy of language in communicating that which transcends the world of the senses. "Words were not made to dress such lightning," writes Thomas Merton.[109] The fundamental reason for this abyss between poetry and mysticism is that the mystic experience, being a union with the Infinite, always remains ineffable, beyond both words and thought. "It is," Northrop Frye comments, "by its nature incommunicable to anyone else."[110] At numerous points language simply fails. Consequently, for the mystic poet, the foremost creative effort lies in forging a new language of the spirit to supply these gaps, a language which does not yield to its own poverty of expression but which places the reader in a position of peak accessibility to the highest inner experiences.

Because of the dignity and elevation of their subject matter, some of Sri Chinmoy's poems in this area, while conforming to the dominant patterns of lyrical poetry as discussed under the heading of "Dark Lyrics", overstep the temporal and spatial confines of the lyric mode. They replace transitory feelings with immortal states, personal sentiments with

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[108] Barbara Hardy, *The Advantage of Lyric: Essays on Feeling in Poetry* (University of London: Athlone Press, 1977), p. 2.
[109] From "Two Desert Fathers", *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977), p. 166.
[110] Frye, *Fearful Symmetry: A Study of William Blake* (Princeton University Press, 1947), p. 7.

universal aspirations, and the episodic and isolated moment with an eternal dimension.

Four of Sri Chinmoy's poems in particular exemplify this change of lyrical emphasis and subsequent recasting of the lyric's cardinal points. All are contained within the volume entitled *My Flute*, first published in 1972. The poems are "The Absolute", "Apocalypse", "Immortality" and "Revelation".[111] They are poems in which God ceases to be the subject who is addressed and becomes a tangible experience. Hence, they are poems not of becoming but of being, poems in which the idea of God so fills the consciousness of the poet that the distance between man and God is annihilated. Man is merged in God. The opening poem of the volume, "The Absolute", announces this coronation of the self:

THE ABSOLUTE

No mind, no form, I only exist;
    Now ceased all will and thought,
The final end of Nature's dance,
    I am It whom I have sought.

A realm of Bliss bare, ultimate;
    Beyond both knower and known;
A rest immense I enjoy at last;
    I face the One alone.

I have crossed the secret ways of life,
    I have become the Goal.
The Truth immutable is revealed;
    I am the way, the God-Soul.

My spirit aware of all the heights,
    I am mute in the core of the Sun.
I barter nothing with time and deeds;
    My cosmic play is done.

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[111] Pages 1, 6, 10 and 47 respectively.

Before such a poem, the critic must set aside his tools of analysis and search out a fitting language of celebration, for the poem represents not only a triumph of the spirit, the final end of man's spiritual questing, but also a triumph of expression, expression so certain and majestic as to seem a sure reflection of the central truth of the poem's utterance.

Having selected as his material the supremely "untellable" experience of the mystic, the poet initially adopts a traditional procedure of elucidation by way of negative description:

> No mind, no form, I only exist;
>
> Now ceased all will and thought.

The heavy accentual weight of a double spondee in the first line imbues the poem from the outset with a tremendous gravity. And yet, one wonders, wherein does this "I" consist that retains no vestige of thought, definition or surface consciousness? Can the poet mean to suggest a genuine speaking voice and not simply a semantic construct? The poet responds with a challenging and enigmatic formulation of self-realisation: "I am It whom I have sought." The self is at once the source and the goal of all endeavour. It fills the firmament. There is, in effect, no "not-I". The line pivots on a riddle-like root: what is it that man has never lost but always searches for? The answer, which the poet has built into his presentation, creates an intellectual paradox that not only arrests our attention but causes us ultimately to uncover a new way of seeing and knowing. Through his disguised riddle, the poet invites us to rename the world that the self embraces and, since naming is a product of knowing, his deeper and more urgent invitation is for us to change our way of knowing ourselves.[112] The poet pursues this point in the second stanza where he testifies that the realm he has entered far transcends both the knower and the known.

Unlike many lyrics, with their emphasis on the fleeting and evanescent emotions, Sri Chinmoy is concerned in this poem to capture the eternity of that consciousness which has identified itself with the Absolute. It is a state rather than an emotion; a goal he has realised, rather than a fugitive vision. The nature of the poet's experience compels him to exclude certain fundamental features of the lyric mode itself: its expression of a central feeling, for example, and its location in a fluid moment-to-moment existence.

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[112] Rilke defines the immediate imperative of the greatest art as "Du müsst dein Leben ändern" – You must change your life. Quoted in M.D. Herter Norton, *Translations from the Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1938), p. 180.

This in turn affects the language of the poem. Words suggestive of emotional cadence have been consciously omitted. Bliss itself is pictured as the landscape in which the poet dwells. The language that most adequately fulfils the poet's needs is the language of statement – strong, lucid utterances of fact. From the poet's first major statement ("I only exist") to the last line of the poem ("My cosmic play is done"), we observe no movement or new development in the action of the poem. There is, however, a sustained effort to amplify and locate these core statements by successively re-phrasing them and by casting them in an evolutionary perspective:

> I have crossed the secret ways of life,
>   I have become the Goal.

We gain a sense of spiritual journeying that has led to this ultimate state. It is this impression of epic dimension that finally releases the poem from its lyrical framework into the broad epic stream. Traditional patterns of questing converge in this mystic pilgrimage and the lyric-I is elevated to a figure of heroic proportions, a pathfinder who affirms: "I am the way, the God-Soul." Again, this view of the lyric-I as an heroic projection is modulated by the central tendency of all lyrics to affix no historical context to the speaking voice. As a rule, we know no more about the "I" than its interior development and discoveries. This feature of anonymity is, however, to the poet's advantage, as Barbara Hardy explains:

> The best lyric poems express the individual quality of individual states of feeling and the absence of character and history is a positive strength and a symptom of the poet's concern, his truthfulness and his sense of proportion.[113]

In "The Absolute" this universal quality convinces us that the poem's major statements own a breadth and grandeur, which is the soul's by right and the poet's only in so far as we accept him to be the representative of our own potentialities. Thus, at the last, the poem passes into our consciousness as our own achievement, and our life of becoming and being is tinted with the glow of epic greatness. This is the "upper limit" in literature of which Frye speaks:

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[113] Hardy, p. 13.

> In some religious poetry, for example at the end of the *Paradiso*, we can see that literature has an upper limit, a point at which an imaginative vision of an eternal world becomes an experience of it.[114]

It is evident from "The Absolute" that Sri Chinmoy does not feel the need to qualify or support his imaginative vision with factual argument in order that the reader may be given proof of its authenticity. Like other mystics in his company, he perceives that the language most appropriate to the mystical experience is that of intuition and not of reason. It is intuition alone that can pierce the world's outer forms to the abiding Reality beneath. The ascendance of intuition in mystical poetry, combined with the frequent and related lack of any formal conflict or argument, often results in a kind of poetry in which a plain statement of God-union may be further illumined by an accretion of metaphors – as a gem's brilliance is reflected in each of its separate myriad surfaces. An excellent example of this incremental effect is the poem "Revelation":

REVELATION

No more my heart shall sob or grieve.
My days and nights dissolve in God's own Light.
Above the toil of life my soul
Is a Bird of Fire winging the Infinite.

I have known the One and His secret Play,
And passed beyond the sea of Ignorance-Dream.
In tune with Him, I sport and sing;
I own the golden Eye of the Supreme.

Drunk deep of Immortality,
I am the root and boughs of a teeming vast.
My Form I have known and realised.
The Supreme and I are one; all we outlast.

[114] *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton University Press, 1973), p. 45.

This lyric portrays the melting of the individual soul in God. It is, as Martin Buber[115] describes it, a process in which "I" and "Thou", the human and the Divine, are met in a supreme encounter. Where "The Absolute" insisted on the ultimate identity of the human and the Divine, this poem highlights their unification and, therefore, seems to retain a greater prehension of differentiation. The process is one of the human soul becoming immersed in God, rather than of recognising oneself as the only being. In reading of this experience, we are thrilled by its profound significance for mankind. Although others have expressed the same theme of God-union, it remains one of those great timeless events whose power to move and inspire us is never lessened.

Since the relationship between man and God, especially in man's moments of ecstasy, is the mystic's natural territory, he intuitively finds his richest ground for analogy to be the everyday relations that surround him – relations between living things on the biological level and between human beings on the social level.[116] Each of these ordinary relationships – whether it be of the drop to the ocean, or of the soldier to his captain – reveals something of the eternal relationship between man and God. The primary analogy chosen by Sri Chinmoy in "Revelation" is one of singular beauty:

> Above the toil of life my soul
> Is a Bird of Fire winging the Infinite.

Here the poet has fused two traditional analogies. The most obvious one is that of the bird and the sky: as a bird is in the sky, so the soul is in God. The bird is an emblem of freedom and something of this joyful release is intimated in the exultant tones of "winging the Infinite". This analogy is given a still sharper visual edge and a heightened significance when it is completed by the image "Bird of Fire". This refers back to the phrase "God's own Light" and implicitly asserts that the soul is a portion of God, even as a spark or flame is a portion of boundless light. There is a reciprocal exchange between these two analogies such that each is endowed with a deeper resonance and with the bounty of traditional mystic appeals to the parallel of such great impersonal forces.

As the poet enumerates his experiences further in the second stanza, these

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[115] *I and Thou*, Walter Kaufmann trans. and notes (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1970), pp. 131-132.

[116] These relationships are listed in detail by Mary Anita Ewer in *A Survey of Mystical Symbolism* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1933).

associations are carried forward in a number of ways. The line "In tune with Him, I sport and sing" creates the composite image of the soul as a singing bird, while the mysterious, "I own the golden Eye of the Supreme" imparts to the soul's divine audience, the sun, a dynamic and responsive function. Some lines from Henry Vaughan's "Cock-crowing" offer a special insight into Sri Chinmoy's use of this image:

> Can souls be track'd by any eye
> But his, who gave them wings to flie?
> . . . make no delay,
> But brush me with thy light, that I
> May shine unto a perfect day,
> And warm me at thy glorious Eye![117]

In the final stanza of Sri Chinmoy's poem, the poet replaces the diminutive image of the soul-bird with the image of the soul as an enormous tree: "I am the root and boughs of a teeming vast." The expanse that we know to be God is now filled by the soul from its depths to its heights. The poet has employed this analogy of the tree, I believe, to emphasise the expansive nature of God-union. A perennial symbol of man's spiritual aspiration and his constant growth in the Infinite, the tree has its roots in the earth, but its branches reach upwards to the highest. In another sense, this image evokes the mythological tree of life that grows in paradise.

"The necessary mark of mystical symbolism," writes Mary Anita Ewer, "is found in the consciousness of analogy."[118] Through the cluster of images in this lyric, Sri Chinmoy is able to dramatise the essence of his experience of God-union. The poem receives considerable rhythmic energy from these dramatic elements and this energy gathers to a climax in one final pronouncement: "The Supreme and I are one; all we outlast." As in "The Absolute", the poet celebrates the sovereignty or kingship of the soul that has achieved God-union in terms that outreach the scope of the lyric.

Both "Apocalypse" and "Immortality" also align themselves with this group of "royal" poems, that is, poems that dilate on the experience of God-union. In them, the self that has been engulfed by God attains a world-wideness that is all-inclusive. "Apocalypse", for

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[117] *The Works of Henry Vaughan*, ed. L.C. Martin (Oxford Clarendon press, 1957), p. 488.
[118] Ewer, p. 32.

example, begins:

> Within, without the cosmos wide am I;
> In joyful sweep I loose forth and draw back all.
> A birthless deathless Spirit that moves and is still
> Ever abides within to hear my call.

"Immortality" affirms:

> Though in the world, I am above its woe;
> I dwell in an ocean of supreme release.
> My mind, a core of the One's unmeasured thoughts;
> The star-vast welkin hugs my Spirit's peace.

One is reminded, in some degree, of Emerson's reflections on the universal mind and of his famous paragraph:

> Standing on the bare ground – my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space – all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God.[119]

The prime distinguishing feature of Sri Chinmoy's persona in these poems is its quality of spiritual overlordship. In merging with God, the self is not effaced but enlarged – it encompasses the world and humanity. The final stanza of "Apocalypse" gives us a unique perspective on this extension of the spiritual consciousness in the direction of Pure Being:

> A Consciousness-Bliss I feel in each breath;
> I am the self-amorous child of the Sun.
> At will I break and build my symbol sheath
> And freely enjoy the world's unshadowed fun.

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[119] In *Emerson: A Collection of Critical Essays*, Milton R. Konvitz and Stephen Wichers, eds. (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1962), p. 158.

The "symbol sheath" that the poet adopts is the slender veil behind which he conceals his true form. The varied manifestations of this "symbol sheath" find their natural expression in the lyric medium, which insists on the presence of some kind of speaking voice. Although the personality of the lyric poet may elude us, this is not in itself an anti-lyrical tendency for we come to know the psyche of the poet intimately. Rabindranath Tagore, for instance, acknowledges:

> My particular character must be present in my writings either in a manifest or a hidden form. Whatever I may write, lyrics or anything else, I reveal thereby not merely the mood of my mind; the very truth of my inner being impresses its mark on them.[120]

In the case of the spiritual poet, who writes from the rich profusion of his soul, his particular character may seem to overflow, to appropriate the universe around him. At this time, even though he retains the singular speaking voice, it is a voice that reflects other selves through a wide and generous sympathy. It becomes, in effect, a choric voice. The poet speaks as the representative of men and affirms the typical nature of his experiences. In order to do so, he must cultivate what Thomas Merton referred to as "a holy transparency",[121] a purity of utterance by which the reader can pass directly to the state of being contained in the poem. In the four lyrics under discussion Sri Chinmoy is able to achieve this kind of limpid expression not only by detaching the lyric-I from a personal context but by eschewing signs of technical struggle. We find the "I", for example, frequently placed in the simplest of possible sentence structures:

> I feel in all my limbs His boundless Grace.
>
> "Immortality"

> I veil my face of truth with golden hues.
>
> "Apocalypse"

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[120] Prabas Jiban Chaudury, *Tagore on Literature and Aesthetics* (Calcutta: Rabindra Bharati, 1965), p. 150.
[121] From Merton's monastic diary, *The Sign of Jonas* (London: Hollis & Carter, 1953), p. 227.

I face the One alone.

"The Absolute"

Sri Chinmoy's preference for this simple pronoun and verb structure suggests that he wishes to maintain the lyric-I in isolation and thereby to enhance its dignity and authority. As declarations of belief, the lines carry a stately, massive power; their serene and untroubled countenance is a direct imitation of their inner truth. "Mysticism," Sri Chinmoy has written, "is an aspirant's inner certitude of Truth."[122] It follows then that the I-utterances of the mystics are among the great documents of human wisdom. Martin Buber suggests that these great I-statements resound through the ages:

> . . . how beautiful and legitimate the vivid and emphatic I of Socrates sounds! It is the I of infinite conversation . . .
>
> How beautiful and legitimate the full I of Goethe sounds! It is the I of pure intercourse with nature . . .
>
> And to anticipate and choose an image from the realm of unconditional relation: how powerful, even overpowering, is Jesus' I-saying, and how legitimate to the point of being a matter of course! For it is the I of the unconditional relation in which man calls his You "Father" in such a way that he himself becomes nothing but a son.[123]

Sri Chinmoy augments the fulness of his I-sayings by incorporating them into the lyric medium with its incantatory force, a residual effect of the lyric's melodic origins. This primary emphasis on lyrics as "poems to be chanted" is traced by Northrop Frye:

> The traditional associations of lyric are chiefly with music. The Greeks spoke of lyrics as TA MELE, usually translated as "poems to be sung"; and in the Renaissance, lyric was constantly associated with the lyre and the lute . . . We should remember, however, that when a poem is "sung", at least in the modern musical sense, its rhythmical organisation has been taken over by music . . . We should therefore get a clearer impression of the lyric if we translated TA MELE as

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[122] "The Quintessence of Mysticism", *The Inner Promise* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1974), p. 52.
[123] Buber, pp. 115-166.

> “poems to be chanted”, for chanting, or what Yeats called cantillation, is an emphasis on words as words.[124]

In the four poems by Sri Chinmoy that I have selected for appraisal, the lyrical rhythm is deliberate and measured. It can be said to possess a gravity and a poise that provides an harmonious balance to the state of inner fulfilment and it constantly leaves us with the impression that the poet’s words are taking shape in the silence of that final encounter with God. In the last stanza of “The Absolute”, for example, the quickening tempo of the rhythm is radiant with inexpressible ecstasy:

> My spirit aware of all the heights,
> I am mute in the core of the sun.

The enchantment of this inner musical architecture conveys us to the very limit of words, where they pass into inner song. Incantation creates enchantment[125] and enchantment, as Evelyn Underhill observes, is one of the mystic’s most important resources in overcoming the gulf between his experiences and the experiences of the world:

> His audience must be bewitched as well as addressed, caught up to something of his state, before they can be made to understand.[126]

In other poems of ecstasy, Sri Chinmoy moves still further along the extreme of the musical axis. These are the lyrics composed in Bengali as songs, espoused to a musical notation independent of the words, and thereafter transposed by the poet into English. One such song is the following, chosen from the volume *Supreme, Teach Me How to Surrender.* The transliteration of the Bengali characters highlights their verbal music of rhyme and assonance:

> *Anute renute sakal tanute*

[124] *Anatomy of Criticism*, p. 273.
[125] A point made by Andrew Welsh: “Behind incantation stands enchantment. The basis of any charm is something we might neglect but that its original users would never forget, its magic.” *Roots of Lyric* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1978), p. 144.
[126] Underhill, *Mysticism* (London: Methuen, 17th ed. 1949), p. 76.

Biraje amar pran
Ami madhumoy
Abhoy ajjoi
Shudhu kari madhu pan

In atom and in pollen
And in human frames
My life abides.
All beauty am I,
Immutable am I.
I drink my ambrosia all alone.[127]

Even without knowing the melody the poet gave to this lyric, one can hear that the words still wear the garment of song. In the English version, as in the Bengali, the phrases bypass surface difficulties – they are brief, limpid and natural. There is a sense that the key words have been deepened by the leisurely and meditative rhythm, but there is yet a sense that music alone shall kindle their secret life.

Sri Chinmoy's song-poems from Bengali are generally succinct, to the point of being miniature, and non-particularised. They speak in the general terms of song, the poet consciously omitting the aureate diction of many of his more formal lyrics. The singer of these true lyrics perceives the momentary essence of emotion as single, indivisible and perfect. Sudden transports of ecstasy are expressed by a musician's patterning of significant words and the reader is held in thrall by their magic. This is particularly evidenced in the two lyrics below:

Today, the flood of delight
Inundates me, my all.
All my bondage-shackles
Are smashed and broken.
No more heart-pangs,
No more darkness-life.[128]

[127] *Supreme, Teach Me How to Surrender*, p. 66. All translations of Sri Chinmoy's Bengali poems have been made by the poet himself.

- No, no, no! I no longer exist.
  What exists is only a fragile shadow.
  And that, too, has lost its existence-life
  In a golden lightning spark.

The ecstatic consciousness in these two poems leaves little room for more than the most cursory self-observation. It is the indwelling self, liberated from the constraints of selfhood, which soars behind the words. To call it back from this state of absorption and ask it to account for its altered condition would be to distract it from the ecstatic experience. The lyric medium concentrates on preserving the experience intact:

Beyond speech and mind,
Into the river of ever-effulgent Light
My heart dives.
Today thousands of doors, closed for millennia,
Are opened wide.

- I am the endless emblem
  Of the infinite sky.
  O Absolute Beauty,
  I see You within my heart;
  I see You in the breath of Universal Life.
  Like a child I smile and smile
  And garner Immortality-Fruit.

These *carpe diem* lyrics represent surges of joy: shouts, impulses. At the moment of achieving intelligent articulation, the poet suddenly vanishes, leaving his poem

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[128] *Ibid*., p. 56 and pp. 87, 88 and 64 respectively for the following three poems.

unencumbered, set free from his hand. The compass of these poems seldom extends beyond a single image, a river of light, a lightning spark. More often than not, the image is the poem and anything not incorporable in this image is pared away. The result is a high degree of emotional precision on the contextual level and a fluidity of design and execution on the technical level. Poems such as these provide ample illustration of Barbara Hardy's definition of lyric poetry: "Lyric poetry isolates feeling in small compass and so renders it at its most intense."[129]

Sri Chinmoy's ease of expression, the graceful artlessness of so many of his songs, their lightness and directness, heralds a return to the plain style we associate with religious poets such as Herbert. The dominant feature of this style is its emphatic simplicity. This simplicity of outer expression is held to bear a direct correspondence to the poet's own sincerity and truthfulness. Thus Joseph Summers, in discussing Herbert's verse, comments:

> With Herbert, in contrast with Donne, our final impression is not of the brilliant surface, of the delightful logical gymnastics, or of a powerful personality engaged in dramatising its conflicts and its vitality; it is, rather, an impression of astonishing simplicity.
>
> . . . The simplicity is the simplicity of the spirit; it is the reverse of naiveté. It is the impression left by the few who are most successful in the almost impossible search to know what they are and to recognise unflinchingly what they feel.[130]

The simple eloquence of words that are, in Herbert's phrase, "heart-deep", may be illustrated by the following stanza from Herbert's poem "The Flower":

> And now in age I bud again,
> After so many deaths I live and write;
> I once more smell the dew and rain,
> And relish versing: O my onely light,
> It cannot be
> That I am he

[129] Hardy, p. 1.
[130] *George Herbert: His Religion and Art* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1968), p. 186.

On whom thy tempests fell all night.[131]

The presence of God fills the ageing poet, even as spring advances on the frozen stem. The poet adds impetus to this sense of burgeoning growth with an accumulation of five present tense verbs in the first four lines: I bud/I live and write/I smell . . . and relish. The poet's senses are roused into keenness, his creative faculties are quickened and his delight intensified. He records this inner plenitude in an exuberant but essentially straightforward manner and his unaffected simplicity we receive as proof of the experience and of the divine inspiration that has caused such blossoming. The imagery of this stanza is paralleled in a number of psalms celebrating God's transformation of the desert into a paradise. As the pattern of the psalms highlights the process of transformation itself, so Herbert's spring retains the consciousness of winter darkness – of the spiritual tempests that the poet has endured. Indeed, it is with reference to this same stanza that Arnold Stein says: "When the sense of joy is most moving it seems to emerge from a grief melting away, so barely past as to feel still present."[132]

Herbert concludes his stanza by establishing his newly found joy in terms of the absence, remarkable in itself, of his previous grief. Profoundly mystified by the action of God's grace, he attempts to express that which he does not fully understand.

An interesting comparison in terms of theme and procedure is provided in a small song by Sri Chinmoy:

The dark night has at last ended.
I have now seen You inside the depth of my heart.
I do not know what magic abides inside me.
Around me is the desert,
Yet I am not parched with thirst.[133]

Here, as in the stanza by Herbert, the revelation of God's presence is an event that has occurred outside the domain of the poem. Here, too, the poet speaks from the fulness of an experience as yet new and which, therefore, has a far greater recourse to the lyric's moment-to-moment nature than the four formal lyrics discussed earlier. The paradox of this

[131] *A Choice of George Herbert's Verse*, R.S. Thomas (London: Faber & Faber, 1972), p. 75.
[132] Stein, p. 119.
[133] *Illumination-Song and Liberation-Dance*, part 3, p. 27.

poem, as with the previous one, is that the poet feels that which he cannot fathom and perceives that which he cannot frame in words. The language is one of wonder infused with celebration. Sri Chinmoy captures this note with his reference to the "magic" that is inside him, the word itself signifying a state of inner entrancement in which the normal faculties are suspended. In the final two lines of the song, the poet appeals to traditional desert imagery to assist him in defining his current state of rapture through a negation of the desert's properties. This emphasis on the desert means that the lyric does not have the same degree of scenelessness that the majority of Sri Chinmoy's lyrics demonstrate. The poet portrays himself as encircled by the desert, that is, by spiritual barrenness, yet he himself is not affected by aridity. The magnificent understatement of the last line is quietly powerful. Failure of the understanding to attend on ecstasy is also reflected in the works of other mystical writers. St. John of the Cross, for example, commences one poem with the baffling –

> I entered in, I know not where,
> And I remained, though knowing naught,
> Transcending knowledge with my thought.[134]

The importance of poetic restraint in cultivating a language of wonder is clear. The co-existence of restraint or tact and a seeming spontaneity of expression within a simpler style like that of Sri Chinmoy's songs is elucidated by Stein:

> . . . mastery of the plain style presupposed discipline, a controlled integration of materials and a controlled relationship between the materials and the man giving them expression. The results were marked by naturalness and ease . . . The naturalness and ease were the product somehow of discipline; they were not superimposed and were therefore not detachable; nor could they be explained as a form of illusion: somehow they were really there, intrinsic, through and through.[135]

This quality of ease-in-discipline is at once apparent in the lyrics of Sri Chinmoy. It provides

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[134] From "Verses written after an ecstasy of high exaltation," *Poems of St. John of the Cross*, Roy Campbell trans. (London: Harvill Press, 1976), p. 31.
[135] Stein, pp. xv-xvi.

for the “controlled integration”, according to the demands of theme and purpose, of all the various features of the lyric form: its brevity; its concentration on the curve of emotion; the author’s refusal to supply details of character and history; his careful interpenetration of the universal and the particular, the sacred and the secular. The lyric, and especially the lyric of the plain style, is governed by proportion and moderation. Hence, what emerges as ease-in-discipline is a direct reflection of taste and refinement on the aesthetic level and an inner poise on the personal level. The result is a mode of expression in which even rhetorical figures may be absorbed without stiffness or self-consciousness. Consider, for example, the following poem from *My Flute*:

MY FATHER-SON

O Supreme, my Father-Son,
Now that we two are one
And won by each other, won,
Nothing remains undone.[136]

The poem is astonishing. Its completeness is unassailable. Like a most perfect droplet it quivers before us. We see it at a glance, we read it at a single breath and yet it unfolds the most sublime of experiences: two have become one, man and the Supreme, the son and the Father. Their oneness enables them to reverse their roles: man is the Father, God the son. Theirs is a mutual inhabitation. This subtle exchange is captured in the compound address “Father-Son”. It is further mirrored in the third line by the poet’s use of the word “won” at either end of the central phrase, to envelop it, as the Father and son are enveloped by each other. This repetition of the word “won” is also bound up with the delicate music of the poem. With the fine fingers of a musician, the poet trills upon our heart with his single note – son, one, won, undone. The music holds us at that point of ecstatic merging. The poet chooses not to descant upon this union in descriptive language. However, by dwelling upon it through this combination of rhyme and rhetorical word play, he is able to move us, to thrill our souls and engender a lyrical awareness. The artistic experience of delight that we gain through this coalescence of sounds into the one note gives us an intuition of the self-mergence of mystical ecstasy. What is most striking perhaps is that the poet has

[136] *My Flute*, p. 73.

accomplished this internal mimesis of the ecstatic state through the simplest and most ordinary of words. They become transfigured by their context while preserving a matter-of-factness that more complex or unfamiliar words might have forsaken.

A companion piece to this poem might well be the poem entitled "Our Meeting Place"[137] also from *My Flute*. This poem is also structured on a tightly controlled four-line stanzaic unit, but here the poet dwells on the absence of God:

OUR MEETING PLACE

O Lord, my Master-Love, how far are we,
How far from ecstasy's silence-embrace?
Heavy is my heart with sleepless sighs and pangs:
I know my bleeding core, our meeting place.

The radical of presentation overlaps in the two poems. Each one begins with a naming of God. In the previous poem, the descriptive containment of the compound "Father-Son" transcends the function of epithet by revealing something of the content of the poem. In "Our Meeting Place", however, the speaker's address to God is not an amplification of their relationship but an appeal, a supplication to God as the diadem of love, in itself a testimony of the distance that separates him from God. The mode is one of prayer rather than praise. This is confirmed by the question that follows:

. . . how far are we,
How far from ecstasy's silence-embrace?

The halting and anxious tones of this question betray the urgency of the speaker's petition. Its initial congestion is like a thrusting at language's inert forms. The final phrase of the line, "ecstasy's silence-embrace", is wrung from this conflict between the fulness of the speaker's emotion and the limitations of the words available to him. The phrase is an adumbration of the desired state of union and there is a hint of his future oneness with God in the shared euphonic aspects of the three words, in particular, the predominance of the smooth and gliding "s" sound. On another level, the poet is inviting us to discover a correspondence

[137] *Ibid.*, p. 46.

between the two compound nouns of the poem; in effect, to consider "silence-embrace" as a function of "Master-Love". Silence belongs to the remote and lofty Lord who is Master; embrace belongs to the near and dear Master who is Love. Thus, the speaker envisions the meeting which shall take place in his heart, his "bleeding core", as a simultaneous perception of these twin aspects of God.

Like the previous poem, "Our Meeting Place" possesses that distinct ease-in-discipline that lends it an air of both artlessness and grace. The personal rhythms of the speaking voice that pours itself out to God in prayer, and the careful, intricate music of sound and repetition meet in a subtle alliance that cradles the poet's theme and cannot be easily separated from it.

Much of the totality of the lyric form employed by Sri Chinmoy is due to the brevity of his poems and especially to his frequent use of a single stanza. Northrop Frye suggests that:

> The most natural unit of the lyric is the discontinuous unit of the stanza, and in earlier periods most lyrics tended to be fairly regular strophic patterns.[138]

He concludes that this may be a reflection of the traditional form of lyrical presentation in which the author, as minstrel or bard, performed for a listening audience.

In the literary history of Bengal, songs or "*pads*" have played a major role.[139] The pad is a one-strophied lyrical song of no fixed length, but rarely exceeding a dozen lines. It is a form that flowered in the 16th and early 17th centuries and its popularity has been likened to that of the sonnet in Elizabethan England.[140] The pad was composed as a song. It received its main inspiration from the story of Krishna and Radha, which was taken as an allegory of the merging of the human soul in the Divine. The landscape of these lyrics is most commonly that of a classical pastoral – the forest, its lotus-filled pond and winding paths comprising the standard images of the setting for the many episodes associated with Krishna and Radha. The "*Pad-karttas*", or song-makers, overcame this limitation of subject matter, Ghosh explains, by informing conventional details

> with a poetic beauty, a passionate intensity, and a spiritual meaning all their own . . . The cowherds, the milkmaids, the cattle, the peacocks, and the rest of

[138] Frye, p. 272.
[139] More than 3,000 pads were composed before the 19th century.
[140] Cf. J.C. Ghosh, *Bengali Literature* (London: Curzon Press, 1976), p. 56.

> the conventional machinery of the ancient pastoral idyll are here, but the passionate intensity of the *Pad-karttas* has made them alive and real.[141]

This, then, is the lyric tradition Sri Chinmoy has inherited. Once we are made aware of the atmosphere and theme of the pads, it is possible to discover threads of them inlaid in the tapestry of many of Sri Chinmoy's songs of ecstasy and delight. One of the more obvious pad-influenced songs is the following:

> There goes my Beloved, my sweet Lord,
> the anklets ringing on His Feet.
> I hear the music of His Flute
> vibrating through the horizons.
> If ever my cowherd boy should cast a glance
> behind Him, still He only goes forward.
> Let my eyes follow the track my
> Beloved treads.
> In the twilight hour of the day, with a sweet
> and serene smile,
> Leading the herds of varied light,
> My cowherd boy goes.[142]

Here the speaker steals a glimpse of his Beloved in the forest and, as though in secret conspiracy with the reader, reports to us on what he sees. That the scene should not appear a static or jaded recounting of an age-old legend, the poet plunges us into the very moment of the act, almost as the speaker of one of Browning's monologues abruptly seizes our attention. We are compelled by the opening words to follow the line of the speaker's gaze and to participate in the dramatic event of the Beloved passing by.

As if hidden among the forest growth, our vision obstructed by leaves, we hear rather than see the Beloved approach. It is the ringing of ankle bells that alerts us to his coming. In this tiniest of details the poem receives an unmistakably Indian orientation. The bells are suggestive of traditional portraits of Krishna and their music mingles with the music of his

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[141] *Ibid*., p. 57.
[142] *The Garden of Love-Light*, part 2, p. 1.

flute. "When Krishna plays the flute in these poems," J.C. Ghosh explains,

> it is more than a lover calling his beloved. It is the all-captivating, all-compelling voice of the spirit calling for the renunciation of earthly attachment. Radha, the cowherds, the milkmaids, they all leave their homes and occupations in answer to that peremptory call.[143]

The speaker hears the music of the flute "vibrating through the horizons", borne farther than the notes of ordinary music will carry and sustained, he implies, by a singular energy. Like him, we are drawn to its source. When our eyes finally light upon the figure of the Beloved, however, it is his receding form that we see. In a mere instant he has passed by. With a touch of wistfulness, the speaker half expresses the thought that if his cowherd boy should ever look back then he would surely be seen – but, mirroring in his verse the natural broken rhythms of the mind, the poet leave the thought suspended, its flow interrupted by a caesura. He completes the line with the sighing "still He only goes forward."

In these lines, the speaker has referred to his Beloved for the first time as a cowherd boy, thus identifying him specifically with Krishna and, at the same time, avoiding the obligation to name him directly. From his secret vantage point, he speaker observes his Beloved disappear into the twilight in self-absorbed ecstasy, his face illuminated by that mysterious "sweet and serene" smile. The herds follow and the scene closes.

Although it has taken but an instant for this scene to be enacted, the poet has entered into the very heart of the dramatic movement. He has not chosen one of the classical episodes of Krishna's life as his theme but he has chosen one which, perhaps because of its quietness, its freedom from pre-determined outcome, the reader can easily penetrate. His technique of observing the Beloved from a hiding place is one of the dramatist's most effective tools for heightening the intensity of the action. If the poem is dramatic, however, it is a drama that is enacted in silence, for there is no point of contact between the lover and his Beloved. In the poet's frustration of our dramatic expectations, he is able to imbue the figure of Krishna with the subtle evanescence of one whose actions and responses have transcended the temporal world of the speaker. Even the herds possess this remoteness or other-worldliness.

The true drama of the poem may be identified as the inner drama of the speaker.

[143] Ghosh, p. 58.

The love that he bears for the Beloved, and which may be detected throughout the poem in his fond descriptions of *my* cowherd boy, *my* sweet Lord and so on, is a love that has been sublimated. That this divine love still contains a measure of earthly love is hinted at when the speaker seems to contemplate the possibility of the Beloved seeing him. This trace of human desire for love's return endears us to the speaker and gives him the ring of a living person. In him the poet captures the frailty of human love and the inner strength that ultimately transforms such love into unconditional self-offering.

In this and in other songs by Sri Chinmoy that are drawn from the pad tradition, it is apparent that the poet refrains from dwelling upon details for the sheer sake of introducing natural phenomena. Detail is functional, not ornamental. Many critics have agreed that "excessive description is often fatal to mystical writing."[144] Under the poet's rigorous selectivity, the pad form is chastened, shook free from its tendency to exotic imagery and infused with intensity and immediacy. Paradise itself becomes a state of ecstasy that is almost wholly interiorised:

> Behold, with His Flute in His Hand,
> My Beloved slowly is coming to the bank of
>   my life-river
> In today's morning sweet.
> All my life's hopes,
> All my life's love,
> To Your Power-red Feet divine I offer,
> And to You I bow and bow.[145]

The associations of such lines with their classical model are tenuous. We are filled with the awareness of a divine flute player but this figure remains unspecified and open to our creative interpretation. Similarly, the following poem:

> Yonder who plays once again his flute?
> Who is that God-intoxicated mendicant?
> I shall offer him my life's ignorance-ink.

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[144] Jerzy Peterkiewicz, *The Other Side of Silence* (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 111.

[145] *The Garden of Love-Light*, part 1, p. 29.

Ah, I now see him approaching me
With his inner light.
His smiling face will discover my heart's emptiness.[146]

Sri Chinmoy's debt to the older pad writers may be detected more in the tone of his songs than in their circle of themes and images. At times, the language of ecstatic surrender passes imperceptibly into the language of praise. Such poems would seem almost to sing themselves:

I SING, I SMILE

I sing because You sing,
I smile because You smile.
Because You play on the flute
I have become Your flute.
You play in the depths of my heart.
You are mine, I am Yours:
This is my sole identification.
In one Form
You are my Mother and Father eternal,
And Consciousness-moon, Consciousness-sun
All-pervading.[147]

The felicity and melodiousness of this song, in which phrase answers phrase and one line echoes another, is conditioned by the poet's endeavour to become a perfect instrument of the Divine. He sings not only of God, but for God, with the intention of being heard by Him. In this way praise is mingled with the poet's ecstatic outpouring.

Songs of praise often form the point of departure for prayer; they may equally signal the fruition of prayer, the direct experience of God's presence. That it is frequently difficult to distinguish between these two differing impulses to praise is due to the fact that there is an intuition of ecstasy in all praise. Hence, the very act of praise itself, though it may begin

[146] *Illumination-Song and Liberation-Dance*, part 3, p. 16.
[147] *My Flute*, p. 55.

as a labour, a formal approach to God from a state of despair, can, if it is effective, transform the seeker's inner condition even as it is being formulated:

ONLY ONE HOPE

Break asunder all my hopes.
Only keep one hope,
And that hope is to learn
The language of Your inner Silence
In my utter unconditional surrender.
In Your clear and free sky
I shall be calm and perfect.
The bird of my heart is dancing today
In the festival of supernal Light.[148]

Since praise is essentially an offering, its movement is projected away from the speaker. Consequently, lyrics of this kind tend rather to register the quality of inner changes in the speaker than to analyse them in any detail. The poems simply record the process of change. One typical example is the small poem "Tune Me For Life". Here, the vocabulary of music supplies the dominant imagery of praise:

TUNE ME FOR LIFE

O Master-Musician,
Tune me for life again.
The awakening of new music
    My heart wants to become.
My life is now mingled
    In ecstasy's height.[149]

The poem moves from orison to hope and lastly to a state in which prayer is answered and

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[148] *Ibid.*, p. 64.
[149] *Transcendence-Perfection*, No. 716.

hope is fulfilled. These distinct areas of development are assimilated by the poet into a fluid process. The fruits of prayer are simultaneous with its utterance. The shifting and combining of the various emotions that precede ecstasy and that are associated with it is also evident in this further example from *Illumination-Song and Liberation-Dance*:

> Beloved Supreme,
> Come in silence, come in supreme silence
> You will hide in my dark heart.
> Like the lightning in the sky,
> Someday You will illumine my heart.
> Someday You will truly become
>   my Beloved Supreme
> And my little world will be flooded
>   with Your Infinite Light.[150]

In the hands of Sri Chinmoy, poet of ecstasy, the brief lyric form becomes once more a song of untrammelled sweetness. Within the conventions of a lyric-persona without history, Sri Chinmoy has created a speaking voice that would seem to be the voice of the world-soul itself. Using the lyric or present tense, he has conferred on these ecstatic experiences an eternal *now* and with the language of intuition appropriate to lyric feeling he has penetrated far beyond the everyday emotions of the human heart to what St. Augustine, in the epigraph to this section, referred to as "the splendour of that ever stable eternity."

Paul Valéry has written:

> Poetry is not music; still less is it speech. It is perhaps this ambiguity that makes its delicacy. One might say that it is about to sing, rather than that it sings; and that it is about to speak, rather than that it speaks.[151]

One might add that Sri Chinmoy's poetry seems about to dance, to alight from the page, and about to burst forth in a visible brilliance of colour. Within the supple lyric form, with its fidelity to interior experience, the poet is able to traverse the range of man's spiritual

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[150] Part 3, p. 41.
[151] Valéry, p. 167.

emotions. Avoiding any parade of intellectual difficulty, he has created a medium that is fulsome in its power, yet lucid and transparent. Although the lyrics were conceived as distinct and independent, each takes its place in that eternal and epic journey of man towards the Absolute. For Sri Chinmoy, this theme is the nexus of all progress and achievement, substance and essence, becoming and being:

> Reality Unique! Thou art the ring
>
> Of the lowest chasm and spanless height.
>
> In Thee they feel their haven bright;
>
> In Thee all beings move and wave and wing.[152]

In him, one feels, is an answer to Augustine's great question.

[152] From "Master", *My Flute*, p. 88.

Chapter III

HARBINGER OF TRUTH

> Theoretically, the poetry of thought should be the supreme poetry . . . A poem in which the poet has chosen for his subject a philosophic theme should result in the poem of poems. That the wing of poetry should also be the rushing wing of meaning seems to be an extreme aesthetic good; and so in time and perhaps, in other politics, it may come to be.
>
> – Wallace Stevens

In contrast to Sri Chinmoy's lyrical poems, which are born in the immediacy of moment-to-moment feeling and which express an emotional or psychological state, are his poems of statement: poems that are the fruit of contemplation and realisation. These summit poems conform to what we might call the literature of knowledge, for they issue from that realm of wisdom where a man of vision is able to see at last the true stature of things and can reveal a truth that has far outgrown the particularity of personal experience.

The aesthetic challenge of this literature of knowledge lies in the integration of ideas, concepts, propositions and abstractions – that is, the tools of philosophical expression – into an imaginative mode. Many critics actively hold that such material has a natural incapacity for poetry, that the poet and the philosopher must necessarily remain divorced, with the philosopher unable to fulfil the imaginative prerequisites of the poet.[153] Sri Chinmoy's stand on this matter is unapologetic and unqualified. "A poet," he states, "is he who envisions the ultimate, absolute Truth."[154] His whole effort in these poems, therefore, is to make wisdom articulate.

It is not surprising that the form Sri Chinmoy most frequently selects for this purpose is the aphorism – that compact fragment of truth which has been used from ancient times in its various applications as proverb, maxim, saying, adage, dictum, epigram and pensée. Succinct enough to avail itself of literary elements – such as metaphoric density,

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[153] Gerald Graff's *Poetic Statement and Critical Dogma* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970) contains many examples of this point of view, chief among them being those of Northrop Frye and T.S. Eliot: ". . . the artist uses ideas, but *qua* artist is not otherwise concerned with their truth." Frye, p. 38. ". . . Neither Shakespeare nor Dante did any real thinking – that was not their job." Eliot, p. 40.

[154] From an informal talk on the significance of spirituality in poetry, August 28th, 1975, New York.

rhyme, assonance and parallelism – the aphorism disqualifies itself from reason's lengthy processes. As lyric poetry is founded upon the simple immediacy of feeling, so aphoristic poetry is founded upon intuition, or the spontaneous accession of truth. "Intuition," Benedetto Croce confirms, "is the undifferentiated unity of the perception of the real and of the simple image of the possible."[155]

Such intuition is often the end result of a personal experience which may be deliberately concealed from us by the poet. However, this silent context from which aphorism has sprung and which, in itself, would normally supply the content of much lyrical verse, does not play a significant part in our estimation of the universal truth of the poet's utterance. This fundamental difference between aphoristic poetry and lyric poetry, or between the poetry of statement and the poetry of search, is further explained by Dorothy Sayers:

> There are two kinds of poet: the one writes in order to find out what he feels, the other in order to tell what he knows. Both are concerned with personal experience; but the poetry of Search concentrates on the "gropings", whether or not they succeed in reaching any goal; the poet writes the diary of his journey as he goes along . . . The poetry of Statement on the other hand, is not written till the journey is ended: it maps the true route from tentative beginning to triumphant arrival . . . the poet is concerned with the truth he has discovered about things in general, not merely with the workings of his own mind.[156]

Thus, while aphoristic poetry carries the strength of personal affirmation, it needs must hold itself aloof from the situational details which gave rise to it. The result is a sharpening of outline, an almost sculptural structuring of the processes of experience. This may be clearly seen in the following poem by Sri Chinmoy:

MY TRUTH-DISCOVERIES

I think, therefore I am –
My mind has discovered this truth.

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[155] *Aesthetic* (London: Macmillan, 1971), p. 204.
[156] *The Poetry of Search and the Poetry of Statement* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1963), pp. 8-9.

I pray, therefore I am –
My heart has discovered this truth.

I was, therefore I am –
My soul has discovered this truth.

I shall be, therefore I am –
My life has discovered this truth.[157]

The great discovery of Descartes, *Cogito ergo sum*, has passed into our Western civilisation as one of its most momentous statements. Descartes has done more than give voice to a personal opinion. His statement presumes to define the condition of man: I think, therefore I am. Descartes shows that we can only arrive at this universal premise, this clear, distinct and indubitable knowledge of self, through a consciousness of what our own existence implies – the impossibility of thinking unless we exist. The inference contained within this recognition is the self-evident fact that my thinking necessarily implies my existence. Descartes' vision succeeded to this point: the ultimate discovery of the mind.

Sri Chinmoy repeats Descartes' great formulation in such a way as to preserve its power, while at the same time dilating on its meaning. The qualification he adds to it is challenging. The poet suggests that the truth of Descartes' assertion may only be partial, since it is not the whole man but only one of his faculties, the mind, that has discovered it. In effect, Sri Chinmoy declares that the mind knows itself to exist to the extent that it is able to conceptualise, reason and otherwise perform the operations of the mind.

Using Descartes' quasi-imperative assertion and his own qualification as the model upon which to construct the remaining stanzas of the poem, Sri Chinmoy introduces successive modulations to this idea. He intimates that even as the mind knows itself to exist through fulfilling its nature, so the heart, when used as an instrument of prayer, becomes aware of its own existence.

The poet has begun to establish a movement towards that unity of the human spirit, which embraces more than thought alone. If a man exists, it is by the force of his entire being – the rational, spiritual, historical and metaphysical impulses that together constitute

[157] *The Goal is Won*, p. 110.

evolving man. This wider scope becomes further apparent in the third stanza, where the poet asserts that he exists by virtue of the fact that his soul recognises its own eternal nature, extending far beyond the limits of the present. In Cartesian terms, it is a recognition of the impossibility of existing unless our soul existed previously. Finally, in the last stanza, the poet looks forward to what he shall eventually become and proclaims that he exists because of his life's constant self-transcendence and upward aspiration.

It is of the essence of aphoristic poetry such as this that it confronts us with thought units so abbreviated that they can neither be paraphrased nor reduced. Any commentary on them, therefore, must fall into the category of exposition and, accordingly, risks some slight distortion of the poet's original meaning. Although the purity of contour in "My Truth-Discoveries" does not afford the amplitude of a philosophical treatise on *Cogito ergo sum*, the propositional thrust of the poem is extremely powerful. It stands as a trenchant analysis of the *Cogito* and a natural fulfilment of its movement.

Several features important to aphoristic poetry may be observed from this poem. Perhaps the most obvious is that although abstractions are the currency of the poem, they are not intertwined with complex intellectual argument. Further, they would seem to have come from the wellspring of intuition itself and to still be aglow with that ultimate simplicity of realisation.

A second feature stems from the limitations placed upon aphoristic poetry in terms of length. In order that his short, pithy sentences may carry the point, the poet instinctively turns to devices of emphasis and repetition that are commonly associated with the rhetorical tradition in poetry.

A further characteristic of aphorism, as exemplified by this poem, is its authority of pronouncement, its sense of finality. Aphorism has for so long been accepted as one of the highest vehicles for the revelation of wisdom that we expect of it a certain stability in terms of its truth content. Obviously, the poet's assertions cannot be verified within the context of his own life because he has consciously withheld that information from us. Our acceptance of his statements depends wholly on his power to evoke and sustain an integrated system of beliefs. It is no longer fashionable among contemporary poetic theorists to ask of a poem, "Can we believe this to be generally true?" A poet, according to many, is not concerned with thoughts but with feelings and any pronouncement he may make has only the value of a personal truth. It therefore becomes a pseudo-statement. However, what we observe in the aphorisms of Sri Chinmoy and in other poets such as W.B. Yeats, Emily Dickinson and

Wallace Stevens, who also employ this mode in their poetry, is that at the very outset they assume a community of belief. The very nature of aphorism, as opposed to lyric or confessional poetry, is to suppose an audience. It is poetry that is expansive, public and general. We have only to consider several famous lines by Yeats:

> Too long a sacrifice
> Can make a stone of the heart.[158]

> Things thought too long can be no longer thought.[159]

Poems assertive of a theory cannot be wholly private for the reason that they place utmost importance on establishing conclusions that outreach the scope of a single life and bring the poem into relation with external reality.

Finally, it may be seen from “My Truth-Discoveries” that the very nature of aphorism is to bind, the word itself deriving from the Greek “horos”, meaning boundary, from which we later gained the word “horizon”. Aphorism holds within its finite limits the ineffable dimensions of life’s deepest mysteries and questions. In housing the eternal, it fulfils the role outlined by Rilke:

> We need *eternity*; for only eternity can provide space for our gestures. Yet we know that we live in narrow finiteness. Thus it is our task to create infinity within these boundaries . . .[160]

This interplay of the infinite and the finite is of the essence of aphorism. One aspect realises, the other binds; one carries the breath of the sublime, the other announces the sublime.

In addition to the office of announcing, the poet may seek to enhance the affective value of his expression. Herein, perhaps, lies the secret to aphorism’s affinity with rhetoric, the art of swaying the emotions. Aphorism undoubtedly seeks to compel acceptance of the general truth it asserts. This persuasive power is an intrinsic part of the spontaneity, universality and simplicity of the thought. If rhetorical figures are linked with this emotional

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[158] Yeats, *Collected Poems* (London: Macmillan, 1971), p. 204. “Easter 1916”.
[159] *Ibid*., p. 337. “The Gyres”.
[160] *Tuscan Diary*. Quoted in Erich Keller, *The Disinherited Mind* (New York: Meridian Books, 1967), p. 162.

efficacy, as suggested previously, it is not because the poet is necessarily a student of classical rhetoric but because he has discovered in these figures a natural form for the forceful expression of his intuitive perceptions.

In the following poem, for example, the poet has adopted a rhetorical form of interrogation to increase the cogency of his argument:

WHERE IS THE TRUTH?

O Lord, where is the Truth?
"Where your Beloved is."
Who is my Beloved, Who?
"In Whom your life is peace."[161]

The seeker addresses his timeless questions to God and, in reply, receives answers that are enigmatic, almost to the point of being riddle-like. They suggest that truth is to be found where love abides, but the identity of the Beloved is sheathed in the sense of peace that His presence imparts.

The nature of this encounter between the seeker and God is not as simple as might appear initially from this question and answer format. Within the elemental vestigial situation that this creates, and from the pressure of what remains undisclosed to the questioner, the poet is able to reproduce something of the mystery of God's presence. The rejoinders attributed to God are highly formal and detached, the more so when we contrast them with the pressing and urgent tones of the questioner. If it is God's role to lead and man's to follow, then what Sri Chinmoy presents is a modified picture of God as a guide and man as a chooser. Here God lays no claim on the seeker, issues no imperative command. His is the prompting voice leading the seeker ineluctably to the source but ensuring at every step that the seeker maps his own path. The irony of this poem is that God Himself is the Beloved to whom He refers and the haven of peace for the seeker's heart. This ultimate identification, however, presupposes the end of the seeker's journey and can only be made in the illumination of that final moment.

As if in extension to this poem is a moving and concrete four-line poem by Emily Dickinson in which she recognises God, the Beloved, as the only goal:

[161] *My Flute*, p. 52.

Distance—is not the Realm of Fox
Nor by Relay of Bird
Abated—Distance is
Until thyself, Beloved.[162]

In this poem, Emily Dickinson's actualisation of distance through the metaphors of fox and bird adds the full-bodied resonance of song to her central proposition.

Using different methods to the same end in "Where is the Truth?" Sri Chinmoy is also able to expand the range of aphorism. In his poem, with its elegant balance of question and answer, the human and the Divine, the ordinary and the mysterious, aphorism's lapidary form has blent with song. There is a melting into one of the two antiphonal voices. The poet has transformed the abrupt and closed rhythms of his initial aphoristic thought into ones that are more ample and symmetrically cadenced. The result is a fluid and meaningful dialogue, which, while it does not engage in the human situation directly, powerfully suggests that context.

In certain poems, Sri Chinmoy goes even further in combining aphorism with other modes. At one extreme, he develops the wisdom aspect of aphorism so that the poet speaks in his vatic role – as a seer or visionary. At the other extreme, he discovers a kernel of wisdom in the heart of personal, lyrical experience. One instance of the former is "A Symbol of Promise":

A SYMBOL OF PROMISE

Every life is a rich
    Storehouse
Of experience.
I dare declare:
We live not,
    NOT
In an epoch of

[162] *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, Thomas H. Johnson, ed. (London: Faber, 1975), No. 1155, p. 516.

Chaotic decay.
I plumb the depths
    Of light
At each hush-gap.

Every life
Is a symbol of
    Promise,
Streaming forth from a realm
    Where
No one is a stranger, unwanted
    None,
Where Love blossoms for the One
And Truth for the many.[163]

Here the poet has woven two fundamental aphoristic units into a testament of faith. His strong, affirmative tone is conditioned at the outset by the power of the opening statement:

Every life is a rich
    Storehouse
Of experience.

The statement is formal and complete. Like most aphorisms, it carries a sense of finality, of being the last word. It is bold, unafraid and unequivocal, qualities that recall Emily Dickinson's "The life we have is very great."[164] To continue the poem in a looser and more meditative vein might pose serious problems for the poet in terms of bringing about a disintegration of this powerfully charged opening. He overcomes this weaker option through the sheer force of his speaking voice and the impressiveness of his stand against the prevailing world-view. He adopts an expansive Whitmanesque "I" which "dares" to proclaim a new interpretation of reality and to set personal experience against the foothold of an outmoded philosophy. It is the courage of one who acts upon events in a vigorous and

[163] *The Dance of Life*, part 1, p. 12.
[164] *The Complete Poems*, No. 1162, p. 518.

resourceful way. In essence, what Sri Chinmoy is offering in this poem is not an arid conception of the universe but an image of a passionate, thinking man, a man whose emphatic rebuttal of existential chaos is founded upon direct inner knowledge:

I plumb the depths
    Of light
At each hush-gap.

The silent spaces do not find him footloose in a void. Rather, they provide him with an opportunity to approach the source of creativity, the very source of life itself.

This idea is reinforced by the open-ended aphorism that begins the second stanza. By incorporating aphorism into an overall visionary mode such as this, the poet is able to compose a substantial picture of that ideal state –

Where Love blossoms for the One
And Truth for the many.

It is interesting to note that the movement of this poem is somewhat unusual: the initial idea or proposition leads into an account of personal experience, concluding again with a universal concept. It is a difficult framework for a poet to use well, since proposition often tends to be so removed from personal experience as to bring about a sharp line of demarcation between the personal and impersonal areas of the poem. Sri Chinmoy overcomes this potential problem through the continuity of his tone, which permits no falling off in intensity as the poem moves from one area to another.

Other poems by this poet mirror the more traditional experience-into-cognition arrangement in which a fictive, personal situation is transformed into a general concept and we come to see it as an instance of a universal truth. In "Visions of the Emerald Beyond", for example, the poet begins in a confessional mode:

VISIONS OF THE EMERALD BEYOND

No more am I the foolish customer
Of a dry, sterile, intellectual breeze.

I shall buy only
The weaving visions of the emerald Beyond.
My heart-tapestry
Shall capture the Himalayan Smiles
Of my Pilot Supreme.
In the burial of my sunken mind
Is the revival of my climbing heart.
In the burial of my deceased mind
Is the festival of my all-embracing life.[165]

The poet portrays his dissatisfaction with the life of the mind and asserts his unwillingness to remain any longer a "customer" of its barren harvest. We seem to savour something of T.S. Eliot's "The Hollow Men" in the dryness and flatness of this picture, the "sterile, intellectual breeze" corresponding to their ineffectual voices:

We are the hollow men
We are the stuffed men
Leaning together
Headpiece filled with straw. Alas!
Our dried voices, when
We whisper together
Are quiet and meaningless
As wind in dry grass . . .[166]

We recognise the same pervading numbness at the core of a purely mental existence. It is an option the poet no longer chooses:

I shall buy only
The weaving visions of the emerald Beyond.

This line explodes with colour, life, movement and depth – all that is in direct opposition to

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165 *The Dance of Life*, part 1, p. 22.
166 *The Complete Poems and Plays of T.S. Eliot* (London: Faber & Faber, 1973), p. 83.

the preceding portrait. In contrast to the shifting and colourless "intellectual breeze", Sri Chinmoy presents the rich enamelled colour of vision. Emerald. The incandescent green of creation itself, woven into wholeness by the heart, Sri Chinmoy's preferred nexus of action. And in that fulness of heart, he hopes to win God's Smile of satisfaction.

From this new recourse of action, the poet condenses a set of principles that are appended to the poem in the manner of a coda. In them, he sets down the conditions upon which his new life of the heart shall be founded. They revolve around the "burial" of his mind, which, he intimates, is already long since lifeless. From this burial shall arise the dancing, abundant life of the heart.

Although this coda is stylistically at a variance with the body of the poem, it is not an arbitrary conclusion. It stands as a summary interpretation of the experience of the poem. The critical question is whether this undisguised generalisation has been imposed upon the poem from outside or whether we can accept that, at a certain point, the poet's experience has naturally yielded these principles of action. To deny the place of a coda such as this in a poem is, I believe, to uphold the ultimate incompatibility of art and ideas. Adherents of this view, such as I.A. Richards and Northrop Frye, claim that poetry *is* experience, and not statements *about* experience. Again, this distinction may be symptomatic of a breakdown in belief generally and a centring on the individual flow of consciousness. Critics of this view, such as Gerald Graff and Dorothy Sayers, assert that our interpretation of experience is inherent in the experience itself and cannot be separated from it without destroying the unity of humanistic knowledge. Art itself, because it deals with common signs and symbols, inevitably invites conceptual mediation. Herein lies its value and significance. Graff continues:

> The poet, regardless of what type of poet he is, implicitly reveals some view of experience. He cannot help saying something about the human situation in general, cannot avoid incurring the risks of assertion.[167]

Ideally, perhaps, thought or interpretation should be a meditative act which, though different in nature, conforms to the dominant dramatic action of the poem. In "Visions of the Emerald Beyond", to take an example, the poet's act of self-confession with its especial intimacy allows him to evolve a set of principles and to place them within the scope of a

[167] Graff, p. 25.

continuing act. They cannot be pared from the poem as mere decorations or ornaments.

Personal experience can offer a fresh understanding of an emotion or state – often to the point of necessitating a new name for that experience. Poems in which aphorism takes the form of definitive statement are frequent in the works of Sri Chinmoy. In these poems, the new name or definition is often the most complex component of an aphorism and its most substantial achievement. By formulating a new equation for an experience, the poet is able to adjust its shades of meaning slightly and so correct what might previously have been an imperfect rendering. Consider for example the poem "Ecstasy" cited in Chapter One:

> ECSTASY
>
> What is Peace?
> Fulfilment-ecstasy.
>
> What is Light?
> Truth-ecstasy
>
> What is Delight?
> Love-ecstasy.
>
> What is Perfection?
> God-ecstasy.[168]

Within these four atomised units, the poet explores the precise relationship of four major spiritual qualities to ecstasy. His definitions are designed not so much to reveal the inadequacy of current language as to highlight the unity of experience in the context of mystic ecstasy. Peace, light, delight and perfection, he suggests, are the correct names for the ecstatic experiences of fulfilment, truth, love and God, respectively. Fulfilment alone does not bear peace, nor does ecstasy. But "fulfilment-ecstasy", that melting into one of two states, is synonymous with peace.

These compound nouns sketch with exquisite appositeness the experience invoked by the leading rhetorical questions in the poem. They exist as pure generalisations, seeking

[168] *Europe-Blossoms*, p. 61.

to approach that ultimate state of being in which ecstasy harbours the highest spiritual emotions. It is a reductive kind of poetry, chastened by virtue of the fact that the poet relies upon unadorned definitive expressions to convey the envisioned possible – in this case, mystic ecstasy. Since naming, and especially the formulating of new names, is a function of perfect comprehension, we, as readers, demand the utmost degree of clarity and accuracy from the poet. The poet achieves those standards by making his definitions the focus of the poem and leaving aside the personal situations in which they may have had their genesis. The definitions thus gain a wider, social character and become representative of an experience that is universally accessible.

A similar technique is common in the poetry of Emily Dickinson, where a number of poems begin with definitive aphorisms based on the simple formula of a predicative nominative sentence:

> Faith—is the Pierless Bridge[169]
>
> Remorse—is Memory—awake—
>
> The Heart is the Capital of the Mind—

As in the poem by Sri Chinmoy, it is obvious that these definitions have emerged from a new awareness Emily Dickinson has brought to certain concepts and feelings. In an article discussing Dickinson's poems of definition, Sharon Cameron enlarges upon this process:

> Names specify relationships that have been lost, forgotten, or hitherto unperceived. Dickinson knew, moreover, that the power of names was in part a consequence of their ability to effect a reconciliation between a self and that aspect of it which had been rendered alien.[170]

The reconciliation of different qualities, states and functions through definitive aphorisms lends itself to the geometric juxtapositioning of certain established series – the body, mind, heart and soul series, for example, or morning, afternoon and evening. Using a similar model

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[169] Dickinson, p. 431, No. 915; p. 365, No. 744; and p. 585, No. 1354.
[170] "Naming as History: Dickinson's Poems of Definition", *Critical Enquiry* 5 (Winter, 1978), p. 226.

in the following poem, Sri Chinmoy defines the position of imagination, inspiration and aspiration in relation to man:

> THE RAPTURE-REALISATION OF THE SOUL
>
> Imagination
> Is the rapture-realisation
> Of the mind.
>
> Inspiration
> Is the rapture-realisation
> Of the heart.
>
> Aspiration
> Is the rapture-realisation
> Of the soul.[171]

The qualities and the human faculties to which they are linked naturally respond to this ordered progression. Although each stanza appears in virtual isolation, the poet's evolving thought creates an impression of movement between them. Patricia Topliss analyses a similar tendency in the works of Pascal, himself a master of brilliant aphoristic expression:

> [Pascal's] attention – not surprisingly, perhaps, in so skilled a geometer – goes far more readily to shapes and outlines, and he excels not so much in painting minute details as in sketching salient features: the reader's imagination is not shackled by an excess of precision, it is encouraged to stretch itself freely. It is not the visual effect of Pascal's images that is most striking: it is their suggestive power.[172]

In another poem by Sri Chinmoy, there is a simultaneous suggestion of spiritual and artistic evolution:

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[171] *Europe-Blossoms*, p. 173.
[172] *The Rhetoric of Pascal* (Leicester University Press, 1966), pp. 258-9.

THE DANCE OF LIFE

Doubt
Is the prose of the mind.

Faith
Is the poetry of the heart.

Aspiration
Is the song of the soul.

Realisation
Is the dance of life.[173]

These four bounded definitions are located in a valued progression, which is rigorously maintained in each of its three major elements. The lines are stark in their simplicity, economic to the point of being laconic, yet never cryptic or convoluted. The density of the poet's thought does not affect the perspicuity of his argument or the correctness and classical balance of his presentation. Each colon is uniquely detachable from the whole and could subsist independently as a maxim or pensée, in the manner of Blake's "Proverbs of Hell".[174] To a degree, the completeness of this form of expression is so satisfying that it can even anticipate comprehension. The closure of each aphorism fulfils the pattern of expectations that the poet has created through his paratactic structure, while at the same time opening outwards towards the possibility of another member in the series. This cumulative effect gives the final phrase of the poem – "the dance of life" – maximum impact. It represents the highest peak of man's artistic and spiritual evolution and, retrospectively, confirms the location of each of the previous steps in a single universe of being.

A somewhat different approach to doubt and faith is exhibited in the poem "An Old Disease" in which Sri Chinmoy personifies negative and positive spiritual qualities using the dramatic scenario of a sick patient:

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[173] *Europe-Blossoms*, p. 174.
[174] *The Poetical Works of William Blake*, J. Sampson, ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1914). "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell", pp. 250-252.

AN OLD DISEASE

Doubt is an old disease.
Faith is an old medicine.
Compassion is an old doctor.
Concern is an old nurse.[175]

The affliction, the cure, the administrator and the aide are witty substitutes for doubt and its opposing virtues. Each successive aphorism prolongs the poet's ironic appraisal of the situation and firmly implants in our minds the image of doubt as an unnatural and unhealthy condition in which to dwell but one that can be easily transformed through the agency of faith, compassion and concern. The metaphors themselves are not wholly original. Indeed, the poet's insistence on the word "old" alerts us to the timeworn nature of this realisation. Nonetheless, the "disease" persists, the poet asserts, and man must resort to ancient cures if he sincerely wishes to overcome it.

Like many aphorisms that border on the maxim, the wisdom contained in this poem is more homely than metaphysical, more striking for its aptness than for its freshness. It is wisdom that we know to be verifiably true from personal experience. The poet's lively and sharp reiteration of these commonplaces is calculated to persuade the reader of the existence of doubt and of the imperative need for its transformation.

The dramatic resources of aphorism are explored somewhat differently in the poem "Sweet, Sweeter, Sweetest":

SWEET, SWEETER, SWEETEST

Sweet is my Lord.
Him I have realised as the Eternal Truth.

Sweeter is my Lord.
Him I have realised as the only Doer.

[175] *Transcendence-Perfection*, No. 430.

Sweetest is my Lord.

Him I have realised as the Enjoyer Supreme.[176]

By using the superlative form of a common adjective, Sri Chinmoy is able to suggest a developing and animated contact with God. Each stanza discloses an increasingly comprehensive understanding of God's nature until, at the last, the poet sees God as the One who is having the life experience through His innumerable human children.

The aphorisms in sequence comprise a compendium of God's virtues. As a formal encomium, the poem uses language that is lofty and grand, in accordance with its task. The result is to elevate both singer and listener to the selfsame level of realisation.

This poetry springs from a devotional impulse that is clearly unselfconscious, in spite of the modern Western reluctance to accept literature that is prompted by a fundamentally spiritual urge. We hesitate to concede that a poet may be inspired by a greater power than the forces of his own subconscious. The great basin of Indian culture, however, and it is this tradition which has nurtured Sri Chinmoy, cares more for wisdom in its universal aspect than for the hidden psychological processes that lead to the realisation of a personal truth. This distinction is further illumined by J.A.B. van Buiteman in *The Literatures of India*:

> Edification is far more agreeable to the Indian, and perhaps always has been, than it is to modern Western man. Wisdom of any kind is, and has been, loved. The Indian has enjoyed hearing endlessly about his God, whether that God is formless and transcendent, or wears a cobra, or plays a flute. Edification, wisdom, moral lessons have a pleasurable quality that an earlier age in the West enjoyed in homiletics. And on the other hand, the Indian has never been pleasurably attracted, as Western man has been, by psychological variety, individualistic introspection, and moral ambiguity.[177]

The importance that Sri Chinmoy attributes to the wisdom aspect of experience also significantly affects the way in which details of nature are incorporated into his poems. This

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[176] *My Flute*, p. 2.

[177] *The Literatures of India: An Introduction*. Eds. Edward C. Dimmock, Edwin Gerow, C.M. Naim, A.K. Ramanujan, Gordon Roadarmel, J.A.B. van Buiteman. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), pp. 44-45.

is exemplified by the following poem; again, one that is based on a series of connected aphorisms:

SONG-OFFERINGS

The song of the mountain
Gives me peace.

The song of the sea
Gives me bliss.

The song of my heart
Gives me love.

The song of my soul
Gives me life.

The song of my earth-gratitude
Brings God to me.

The song of God's Heaven-plenitude
Carries me to God.[178]

What we notice most forcibly about this poem is that even here, where the poet specifically evokes the mountain and the sea, he is not concerned with the "thingness" of nature but with the corresponding emotion it calls forth from within himself. The song of the mountain imparts peace, becomes a symbol of that immense silence of the summit, and yet this perception is embedded neither in localised circumstances nor in action. It is perception itself, alone and unqualified, which is celebrated as a means of self-discovery and self-knowledge.

From the fruit of his experience, the seer-poet intuitively seizes an inner truth. This truth he beholds, shapes and, finally, announces. His expression – the attempt to make

[178] *The Goal is Won*, p. 209.

articulate an inexplicable inspiration – cannot avoid a personal source for the words. And yet, it is literature that has been freed from selfhood. The world that this poetry seeks to bind within the compact precincts of aphorism is neither one at the tip of the senses nor one that is wholly objective. It aspires to be literature of the complete man – that is, man at the pinnacle of his spiritual evolution, who is both wise and simple, who recognises an obligation to speak the truth but not of connected reasoning towards a conclusion and whose ideas and beliefs exist as fragments of a world view that is universally shared. The Chinmoyan idea of this spiritually mature personality is a person of supreme poise who has entered the calm and serene heights of oneness with God and with the divinity within himself. Thus, the literature of the seer-poet is most clearly seen as an act of contemplation. It is poetry which, one feels, the poet has been irresistibly commanded to write and, therefore, it is also poetry in which the love of God subordinates linguistic to other values. It is for this reason that the poetry of aphorism is, above all, a functional mode of writing.

Discussing the works of Pascal, Patricia Topliss draws particular attention to this functional aspect:

> Pascal's style has indeed a strange, compelling beauty of its own; but it was not fashioned with aesthetic intent. Its *raison d'être* – to express his convictions and impose them on his readers – was situated outside literature. It was a natural style because it was a functional style: it used words as tools or weapons, and restored to figures of rhetoric that had long been thought of as ornaments, their original function as instruments of persuasion.[179]

This style of aphorism, based on conviction and dependent upon the rhetorical effects of repetition, hyperbole and interrogation to increase its emotional efficacy, epitomises the boldness and forthrightness of Sri Chinmoy's poetry of statement. He does not endeavour to overwhelm the reader with an over-extensive cognitive content but rather by the sheer power and intensity of his thought. There is, one must admit, a kind of imperiousness in the way he is able to capture the reader's imagination with the mere mention of an abstract noun, such as heart or soul, and sweep it out into the infinity of space, the realm of the ever-known.

Perhaps these poems of statement will be charged with a degree of didacticism. On

[179] Topliss, p. 321.

the other hand, we tend to forget that much of what we now mislabel as didactic poetry was born of a need to address the community at large, to speak for all men. Rare is the poet who dares, as Emerson put it, to "chaunt our own times."[180] Much of our modern poetry is anti-propositional, dominated by the search for purely emotive or psychological truth. And yet many critics perceive the need for a return to the breadth and expansiveness of poetry that reaches beyond this personal domain. Donald Davie, for example, stresses that the need has arisen once more for "a poetry of urbane and momentous statement."[181] One sees in his appeal a lingering belief in the Shelleyan idea of the poet as "the unacknowledged legislator of mankind." Sri Chinmoy's words, with their subtle, dignified generality, their candour and clear wisdom, aspire to fulfil that ideal. They are enlightening, penetrative and, as in the following poem, often prophetic:

THE ANCIENT MAN

The ancient man,
Needed God's Grace.

The modern man
Needs God's Face.

The future man
Will need God's Embrace.[182]

This poem is a perfect illustration of poetic composure housing the keenest intuition. It stands as an interpretation, in outline, of man's spiritual progress. Each age signals a moving nearer to God-Union: the action of His Grace, the sight of His Face and the touch of His Embrace symbolise mankind's deepening need for God. This tripartite division, corresponding to the three ages of man, shapes the poem into distinct aphoristic units.

In other poems, the poet allows the rhythm of perception to shape his thoughts. Such poems present themselves as pure proposition and subsist as poetry by virtue of their inner metaphoric density:

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[180] From "The Poet", *Essays*, p. 224.
[181] Quoted in Dorothy Sayers, p. 11.
[182] *Transcendence-Perfection*, No. 54.

MAN FIRST CAME TO KNOW OF GOD

Man first came to know of God
When religion-flames arose
From humanity's crying
    And tearing heart.[183]

Here the poet records a psychic fact in mankind's inner history: the birth of religion, he declares, arose spontaneously from struggle, even as the first few flames of a fire are produced by rubbing two sticks together vigorously. Humanity's heart discovered its urgent need for God in the depths of its own torments and conflicts. It is an astute perception and one which although removed from the immediately observable, is convincingly realised in the metaphoric compound noun "religion-flames".

The use of metaphor to shape the irregular rhythms of perception is also a feature of the following poem:

IMAGINATION AND REASON

Imagination does not
Care for reason.

Reason does not
Care for imagination.

The poet in me cries
For imagination-wings.

The philosopher in me cries
For reason-sword.[184]

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[183] *Ten Thousand Flower-Flames*, part 5, No. 453.
[184] *Transcendence-Perfection*, No. 811.

The poet's two quasi-axiomatic opening statements testify to the mutual incompatibility of reason and imagination. There is a subtle hint of personification in the use of the verb "does not care for", which suggests that it is through choice that reason and imagination remain aloof from each other. In the third and fourth stanzas, the poet reveals that he is not concerned to establish the inherent superiority of either one or the other. He encompasses them both easily, defying the contract of an unhappy marriage by allowing both imagination and reason complete self-sufficiency in their specified roles. The wings of imagination are the means by which the poet is borne aloft into that visionary realm beyond the finite dimensions of the mind. The keen-edged sword of reason is the cutting edge of the mind, the tool by which he may conceptualise the great issues of philosophy. Although imagination and reason declare their independence, the poet needs both of them in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of the meaning of existence.

Perhaps this poem, more than any other discussed to date, offers us the clue to Sri Chinmoy's fusion of poetry and thought. At times in this aphoristic genre, the controlling thought is presented completely formed, as an epiphany or revelation. We accept it as a sudden intuition and the brief, compacted form of the aphorism is an apt means of accommodating it. At other times, the thought process contains a clear and logical development spun out of the centre of the subject and allied to the philosophical mode of reasoning. The more the reader becomes familiar with Sri Chinmoy's poems of statement, the more he comes to realise that aphorism utilises both imaginative and conceptual language to put forward a total understanding of life.

D.H. Lawrence, Franz Kafka, Samuel Beckett, T.S. Eliot and other writers earlier this century identified the prevailing spirit of their times as one of a deep, underlying spiritual despair. According to these writers, man had been dispossessed of spiritual certainties, of general truth, and could only fall back on individual or psychological truth. Sri Chinmoy, however, strongly upholds the existence of universal truth and strives to transcend the *zeitgeist* that afflicted these writers. Writing only of the soul and of the various states pertaining to it, his words seek out a deep note of concord in the hearts of his readers. What might be regarded by some as broad generalisation in the poetry is born of a fundamental confidence or optimism with regard to the spiritual destiny of mankind as a whole, for where there is harmony between a poet's thought and that of his reader, it is possible for the poet to speak with utmost simplicity, using the language of intuition to convey the full measure of his realisation. If the powerful impact of Sri Chinmoy's poetry is due to the

dimensions of his vision, then the immense simplicity of his utterance may be seen as the most precious fruit of this peace between the substance of his vision and the aspiration of his age. The poet has become the harbinger of truth.

Chapter IV

NATURE: PROTOTYPE OF THE DIVINE

> In happy hours nature appears to us one with art; art perfected, – the work of genius.
>
> – Ralph Waldo Emerson

> Nature is art for man.
> Man is art through nature.
>
> – Sri Chinmoy

A man walks alone through a grove of trees. He is surrounded at every side by things which he has not made and which have a life and beauty of their own: birds, plants, streams, clouds and hills. These things together contribute to an idea, which he calls nature. He receives them with his senses and is flooded with manifold perceptions of colour, fragrance, touch, taste, and sound. It is more than a sensory experience, however, for he comes to read in these forms of nature his own inner self. The dark, brooding clouds would seem to correspond to his moods of despair, the unfolding petals of the lotus in the pond describe the fulness of his heart and the soaring flight of the bird reflects the sudden inrush of inspiration in his own being. In every ambience of nature he recreates himself and discovers the secret principles of his life. Conversing with nature in this profound and intimate way, he seems to breathe as one with it and the simple objects and forms around him grow to mean much more than they mean in themselves. They become resonant with significance and symbolic depth.

Throughout the ages, nature has restored to man his peace and tranquility, his sense of vastness and immensity, his love of the eternal, the infinite and the immortal. And as each man in his own soul arrives at this awareness, so may he simultaneously perceive what Wordsworth defined as

> A presence that disturbs me with the joy
> Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
> Of something far more deeply interfused,
> Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,

> And the round ocean and the living air,
> And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:
> A motion and a spirit, that impels
> All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
> And rolls through all things.[185]

It is the immanence of God in nature that is thus felt and for the man who has come to this revelation, nature appears translucent. It is seen as the vesture of God. In his study of nature in art, Kenneth Clark writes:

> As soon as men look with pleasure at the actual details of nature, the symbolising habit of mind gives to their regard an unusual intensity; for they look at flowers and trees not only as delightful objects, but as prototypes of the divine.[186]

It is this belief which characterised the nature mysticism of 19th century Romantic literature and which later influenced the American transcendentalists. Wordsworth's "natural piety", for example, corresponds with Whitman's mood in his poem "The Mystic Trumpeter":

> A holy calm descends like dew upon me,
> I walk in cool refreshing night the walks of Paradise . . .[187]

The importance these poets place upon nature as the mediator between man and God finds its parallel in the poems of Sri Chinmoy. Like them, he does not subordinate nature to a mere decorative role, but insists on her great function as the index of man's inner progress. Nature, according to his view, is symbolic of an underlying fixed reality and it is this essence that he is concerned to portray and not all the endless variations and details of natural forms. Consequently, we shall not draw from the poems a wealth of information regarding surface appearances, as we would with poets such as Hopkins and

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[185] From "Tintern Abbey", *Romantic Poets: Blake to Poe*, W.H. Auden and Norman Holmes Pearson, eds. (Penguin, 1977), p. 195.
[186] *Landscape into Art* (London: John Murray, 1976), p. 6.
[187] *The Portable Walt Whitman*, Martin Van Doren, ed. (Penguin, 1977), p. 285.

Roethke. What we do uncover are the essential qualities and typical features of the most basic and universal of natural forms – the animals, the colours, the general components of landscape, the cosmic symbols and the broad phases of the day. These are the age-old symbols that man has used from primitive times and, in each culture, the names he has evolved for them have been among the first words of the language. Within the English language, words such as bird, cow, tree, dawn, light, earth and fire, for example, are Middle English words that have come down to us from Old English. They comprise the original core words of our language. Commenting upon language as an "archive of history", Emerson writes:

> Though the origin of most of our words is forgotten, each word was at first a stroke of genius, and obtained currency, because for the moment it symbolised the world to the first speaker and to the hearer. The etymologist finds the deadest word to have been once a brilliant picture. Language is fossil poetry.[188]

To a poet, the first words of a language contain in themselves the most sublime poetry because they were coined by man in his moments of inspiration, when he beheld the universe with uncluttered eyes.

Clearly, Sri Chinmoy does not consider these Old English derivatives to have lost their language power and this fact becomes more evident when we observe that he often uses such words with stark simplicity – unadorned by adjectives, isolated in self-sufficiency.

The symbol of the bird serves as an instructive starting point. The following three poems are typical of Sri Chinmoy's use of this word:

> The blue bird says, Come, come.
> Time is passing by.
> I salute him who has tasted
> The wine of pleasure.
> Rest assured that in him, around him
> Is nothing but the darkness of pleasure-night.[189]

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[188] "The Poet", *Emerson's Essays*, Sherman Paul, ed. (London: Everyman, 1976), p. 215.
[189] *Supreme, Teach Me How to Cry*, p. 92 and p. 52 for the following poem.

•

O bird of my heart,
Fly on, fly on.
Look not behind.
Whatever the world gives
Is meaningless, useless
And utterly false.

•

O blue bird of my mind-forest,
I close my eyes and draw your beauty.
Inside the finite
Your vision cries for the Infinite.
Your aspiration builds a bridge
Between earth and Heaven.
At the end of my life's journey
I shall know who you truly are
And at that time
Your victory and my victory,
Our joint victory,
Will have no parallel.[190]

It is manifest that the poet recognises no fences between the separate realms of experience – physical, psychic and spiritual. The "blue bird" of the first poem, for example, is not located in any particular physical environment. The poet, rather, directs our attention to the message of the bird and we learn that he reads in its flight an invitation to leave behind the fleeting pleasures of the world and pursue a more lofty vision. The poet uses these two words – "blue bird" – to carry the full weight of the alternative to man's present desire-bound condition. He sets the blue of the bird against the darkness of "pleasure-night"; he sets our imagined picture of the bird's eternal flight across the sky against the short-lived

[190] *Pole-Star Promise-Light*, part 2, p. 31.

moments of enjoyment below. In this way, he engages the heavenly associations of the symbol to add depth to his play of contrasts. We find ourselves intuitively placing our faith in the bird as being inherently more beautiful, more enchanting, than the world of darkness that closes in on one who has elected a life of pleasure.

The second poem, unlike the first, is an address to the bird by the poet. In it he emphatically affirms the illusory nature of the world and implies that the bird does not belong to this order of things. By referring to it as the "bird of my heart", he specifically identifies the bird as a symbol for his innermost self. He urges this self to detach itself utterly from the world and to proceed with one-pointed determination. Used in this fashion, as a symbol for the poet's inner life, the bird conveys a sense of dynamic motion, while still retaining the slightly ethereal and mysterious overtones of one that inhabits realms beyond man's comprehension.

It is this subtle evanescent quality that is captured in the third poem quoted above. The poet becomes aware of the bird's presence in his mind but finds that he cannot pierce its true identity. Although it dwells within the finite dimensions of the "mind-forest", he knows that it has the larger vision, that it reaches for Heaven's perfection. The poet concludes that the bird's identity must necessarily remain veiled until "the end of my life's journey" when he returns to the source, that unnameable essence of which the bird is a small portion.

In these three poems, we see the symbol of the bird acquiring slightly differing modulations according to the poet's emphasis. Although its meaning is consistently that of an emissary from the Heavenly sphere, a part of the eternal life of the spirit, this is maintained at a level of suggestiveness which prevents the symbol from becoming either too rigid or too fixed. It allows the poet more freedom in his application of the symbol, a freedom which he utilises in the following examples by connecting the bird with varying abstract nouns:

MORE THAN READY

You are now more than ready
Because your aspiration-bird
Is flying high above your mind's
Binding and blinding

Confusion-clouds.[191]

•

MORNING AND EVENING LOVE

In the morning
I love the heavenward wings
Of my prayer-bird.

In the evening
I love my meditation's
Life-perfecting
And earth-transforming
Silence.[192]

Set in apposition to the word "bird", the nouns "prayer" and "aspiration" are given a tangible form. To isolate aspiration proper from the welter of imaginings, concepts and emotions that constantly flood the inner life of a human being is a matter of careful discrimination. Indeed, for the seeker, the greater part of aspiration consists in recognising its presence and its absence. Therefore, if we think of it as a bird soaring ever upwards within us, free from the snare of worldly attachments, this image in itself can serve to increase the power of aspiration. Similarly, the phrase "prayer-bird" encourages us to visualise the act of prayer as something that ascends towards God, while meditation is something that invites God to descend. It is plain that the poet uses such connective phrases not to illustrate concepts, but to *enact* them in such a way that we are compelled to visualise them in our own mind. This very imaginary power, which the poet evokes in his readers, is the precursor of inspiration, aspiration and, ultimately, the realisation of the Self.

While the word "bird" is a broad generic noun that admits of countless different associations, there are a number of poems in which the poet does become more specific and links a certain type of bird with an appropriate feeling:

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[191] *Ten Thousand Flower-Flames*, No. 304.
[192] *Europe-Blossoms*, p. 262.

WHY DO I CRY?

Why do I cry?
Why do I sigh?
My Lord I love,
I am His dove.[193]

•

YOURS IS THE VICTORY SUPREME

Yours is the victory supreme,
For you have already started flying
Soulfully and unconditionally,
Phoenix-like,
From the dead ashes of repentance-torture.[194]

The first poem, with its firmness of closure and Blakean simplicity of language, contains the poet's response to his own sorrowful questionings. What he does, he reassures himself, is love God; what he is, is God's dove. This is his entire world of being and becoming, powerfully and convincingly abbreviated. If we focus on the picture of the seeker as God's dove, we recognise that it is a most apt symbol on every level: man longs most of all for peace. When he reaches out to God in love, so his life becomes the embodiment of peace. Like the biblical dove of peace, he announces that ideal harmony between Heaven and earth. There is a characteristic lightness and sweetness about this song of rapture that stems partially from the emotional cadence of the poem – at once pensive and tender – and partially from the poet's vision of man and God in intimate kinship. He has succeeded in coadunating symbol and reality to such a degree that the dove and man are realised as one entity.

In the second poem, the central metaphor is that of the phoenix arising from the

[193] *From the Source to the Source*, p. 146.
[194] *Ten Thousand Flower-Flames*, No. 304.

ashes. Only after we have fully identified ourselves with this beautiful, legendary bird, does the poet disclose that the ashes from which it has risen are not in fact those of a pyre but the self-torturings of conscience. It is a startling reversal of expectation, for repentance is an act that we associate with spiritual progress rather than with a cessation of progress. By pointedly positioning the image of this magical bird gliding soulfully upwards against the lifeless and colourless picture of the dead ashes, the poet is able to jolt our awareness of the constricting nature of repentance. He sees repentance as prolonging the sorrow of past mistakes and thus delaying any forward movement. To escape from this narrow world is, he believes, a great victory, for only then can one show God a face unclouded by the past, "soulfully and unconditionally" set towards the golden future.

In some poems, we find that the inter-relation of the seeker and the bird is implied (rather than overtly stated) through wonderful word pictures that encourage us to compose the image of the bird in our own mind:

ECSTASY'S UNPLUMBED SKIES

If you have an aspiration-flight,
In the long run
You are bound to reach
Ecstasy's unplumbed skies.[195]

Conversely, when aspiration fails, the poet portrays its loss in terms of a lame or injured bird whose flight is curtailed:

A BROKEN WING

Aspiration-cry I have totally lost.
    And now
Each fleeting breath of mine
    Is a broken wing
    In destruction-night.

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[195] *Ibid*., No. 258 and 1008 for the following poem.

One further image that springs from Sri Chinmoy's use of the bird as symbol is the nest. By extension, he transforms this protected shelter of maternal warmth into his eternal Home in God:

THY LOVE IS MY NEST

O, Thy Love is my nest,
  Thy Smile is my rest,
  Thy Grace is my goal.[196]

Even as the bird returns to the nest, so the seeker finds his ultimate haven in God's Love, His Smile and His Grace. Prefaced by the rhapsodic "O", which is suspended outside the triple affirmation of the poem, this testament of faith acquires a subtle, lyrical contour. Statement is elevated into song. The most striking feature of this song is its perfection in every part. The careful balancing of each line leads us easily from one idea to another, so that they are paired in our understanding. Thus, "nest" is readily transformed into "rest" and this, in turn, becomes submerged in "goal". The three nouns blend into one composite image of man's life in God. Like many of Sri Chinmoy's miniature songs of bliss, this poem succeeds through the transparency and radiance of its language, the simplicity of the poet's expression and the sublime nature of his thought.

From this brief glance at the various ways in which Sri Chinmoy employs the symbol of the bird, several indications emerge: the first, most obviously, is that the poet perceives a great web of analogies existing between the outer nature and man's inner nature, which impels him to draw parallels between sensory experiences and spiritual experiences, between physical processes and spiritual processes. A second aspect of this technique of eliciting correspondences from nature is that the understanding it imparts to the reader is intensive rather than extensive – the symbol of the bird may deepen our wisdom but it does not increase our knowledge. This is emphasised by the fact that for Sri Chinmoy the word "bird" itself is often sufficient to carry the full weight of his meaning. He does not use the symbol in such a way as to force it on our senses, but to kindle our imagination and our inspiration. Sri Chinmoy never becomes absorbed in the bird of his contemplation. Indeed, he would seem to view it with his senses in abeyance, with his sympathetic inner vision

[196] *Transcendence-Perfection*, No. 568.

rather than his outer perceptual faculties. Consequently, there is a feeling of going beyond the bird and penetrating beneath its surface appearance to its essence. Despite being only a single fact in nature, there is a powerful sense that the bird is representative of nature as a whole, that nature itself has become the symbol which the poet is using to certify the spiritual. This great role of nature is further defined by Emerson:

> Man is fallen; nature is erect, and serves as a differential thermometer, detecting the presence or absence of the divine sentiment in man.[197]

Perennial symbols and typical features serve Sri Chinmoy best in translating this function into poetic terms.

One of the richest symbolic areas for the poet is that of the solar cycle, with its interchange of day and night, sunrise and sunset. Like the Vedic seers who wrote hymns dedicated to Usha, goddess of dawn, Sri Chinmoy makes reference to that tradition which sees nature as anthropomorphic. It is a tradition that was evolved by men who worshipped God through the splendour of nature and who befriended nature by perceiving in each of its phases the action of a divine personality. Although Sri Chinmoy writes with a far greater maturity of belief, he is able to capture this glow of original faith in the following poem:

> The golden door of light
> Opens up,
> And my life dances
> With the ecstasy of the Beyond.
> The dawn-goddess has arrived,
> Sailing the boat of light.
> It has touched my life of somnolence
> And awakened me to the heights of light.[198]

We feel that it is the poet's own image-seeking faculty, rather than any debt to tradition, that has alighted upon the word "goddess" as an appropriate description for the beauty of the dawn. The poet's purity of vision is accompanied by a clearing of the senses, which allows

[197] "Nature", *Essays, op. cit.,* p.299.
[198] *Supreme, Teach Me How to Cry*, p. 72.

him to immerse himself in the inner light of consciousness in the same way that the light of dawn saturates the earth. This delicate interpenetration of inner and outer light suggests that every chiaroscuro of nature raises a corresponding vibration in the human soul.

The dance of light through each living thing is one of Sri Chinmoy's most frequent themes. This light – the light of the illumined consciousness – forms the golden link between the inner and the outer worlds and, in many respects, it is the key to Sri Chinmoy's poems of nature, as we may observe in the following poem:

IN MY HEART-DAWN AND SOUL-SUN

I loved my life's morning walks.
Hope-beauty led my eyes and guided my steps.
I love my life's midday runs.
Reality's naked life
Has sent uncertainty into destruction-exile.
I shall love my life's evening stumblings.
Life divine shall embrace the abyss of science.
Evening does not mark the end.
Evening is the precursor of a purer
Dawn and a brighter sun.
In my Heart-Dawn, my preparation shall begin.
In my Soul-Sun, my perfection shall bloom.[199]

The phases of the sun furnish the framework for this poem. The poet condenses the course of his life into the vivid and striking outlines of a single day. His morning began with hope's measured steps and accelerated into certainty's speed at midday. The evening ahead shall conclude with stumblings but not, the poet declares, with the despair of death. Although the body may falter, inside the heart a new hope is forming and a new perfection is waiting. This last section confirms the poet's independence from the natural implications of darkness as an archetype for dissolution and death.[200] The poet's departure from these customary

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[199] *The Dance of Life*, part 1, p. 20.
[200] See in particular Northrop Frye, *Fables of Identity: Studies in Poetic Mythology* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1963), p. 16. Frye tables the phases systematically as 1: The dawn,

meanings is seen in its spiritual context in other poems on this topic:

MY MORNING-SOUL

My morning-soul
Is beautiful and soulful.

My midday-soul
Is hungry and fiery.

My evening-soul
Is successful and cheerful.

My night-soul
Is terrestrial and celestial.[201]

Again we notice that the sleep and death aspect of night is subordinated to an emphasis on the abundant life of the soul, which communes with both Heaven and earth in the time between sunset and sunrise.

As the day describes a complete circle, so the poet is awakened to subtle changes in his relationship with God:

A TIME FOR EVERYTHING

Morning is the time
For my loving heart
To feed my child-God.

Evening is the time
For my loving heart
To dance with my Beloved-God.

---

spring and birth phase; 2: The zenith, summer and marriage or triumph phase; 3: The sunset, autumn and death phase; and 4: The darkness, winter and dissolution phase.

[201] *Europe-Blossoms*, p. 205.

Night is the time
For my loving heart
To confide in my partner-God.[202]

The seeker's evolving concept of God mirrors his own growth in intimacy with God. The summit of this development occurs in the night phase, when they stand together as equals and share in the cosmic game.

There are a considerable number of poems, however, which do represent the darkness of night as inconsistent with the inner light. Indeed, when all is fully illumined, night is banished from the scene and there is a suggestion of perpetual day. In the following ode to nature as Earth-Mother, for example, darkness is excluded entirely:

EARTH-MOTHER

Earth-Mother, your smile
Is a perpetual dawn.

Earth-Mother, your love
Is a perpetual noon.

Earth-Mother, your blessing
Is a perpetual day.[203]

In other poems, the contrast between darkness and light is made concrete through a spatial metaphor: darkness is distance from God, while light indicates a lostness in God:

To place myself at Your
Eternity's Compassion-Feet,
I have come from a very far land.
You have already taken away

[202] *The Goal is Won*, p. 89.
[203] *Europe-Blossoms*, p. 82.

My heart's excruciating pangs.
I see no more darkness-night.
I see only the liberation-dawn
Under the canopy of the blissful sky.[204]

Sri Chinmoy's recurrent use of symbolism associated with the solar cycle does not generally extend into the seasonal cycle of spring, summer, autumn and winter. Although these are also universal symbols, each culture calls them by a different name and in each land they are accompanied by diverse manifestations. The cultural orientation of, say, Keats in his "Ode to Autumn" may be unfamiliar to readers from other backgrounds. Similarly, the Indian seasons that are so prominent in the works of Tagore and so poignant to his Eastern readers tend to lock the poems into a specific locality. His images, though enchanting, do not chime with the very roots of our being, as Western readers, a fact that becomes more evident when we read a poem such as the following:

> Years ago it was a day of breezy March when the murmur of the spring was languorous, and mango blossoms were dropping on the dust.
>
> The rippling water leapt and licked the brass vessel that stood on the landing-step.
>
> I think of that day of breezy March, I do not know why.[205]

The Indian monsoons, the dry heat and northern winds – these also belong to the scenes of Sri Chinmoy's childhood and youth. However, because his accent is on a wider cosmopolitan outlook rather than on autobiographical details, he tends to avoid the kind of exclusive language and imagery that would impede a sympathetic reading of his poems by a Western audience.

In conformity with this universality of outlook, Sri Chinmoy's landscape images are, in the main, stylised, almost classical, in their perspective. They fulfil a distinct role but are seldom realised with any degree of specificity. The poet gestures towards them briefly and then passes beyond them. They are the touchstones for his inner fields of consciousness. There is an all-encompassing feeling about many of Sri Chinmoy's poems, as though in his

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[204] *Pole-Star Promise-Light*, part 1, p. 2.
[205] From "The Gardener", *Collected Poems and Plays of Rabindranath Tagore, op. cit.,* pp. 101-102.

wideness of heart he is able to contain the world about him:

> In the depth of my heart the blue bird
> smiles and the blue bird plays.
> The festival of lustre-form and
> celestial delight is inviting everyone.
> The sun, the moon, the mountains
> and the ocean all have come.
> Today we shall listen to the call of
> Infinity.
> We shall run toward Infinity.
> Right in front of us is the ladder of Light.
> Our hearts have become the flower of
> Light Divine.
> We are the hope of our Lord Supreme.
> The world-creator is none other than our love.[206]

•

> My consciousness dances
> With boundless sky and air.
> It also sports with the waves of the sea.
> And I am on the top of the mountain peak.
> No place there is on earth
> Where my consciousness is not.
> I am offering my self-form
> To the service of the Absolute Supreme.[207]

One is reminded of the absorptive note Whitman catches in his "Song of Myself":

> My ties and ballasts leave me . . . I travel . . . I sail . . .

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[206] *The Garden of Love-Light*, part 1, p. 5.
[207] *Supreme, I Sing Only for You*, p. 9.

my elbows rest in the sea-gaps,

I skirt the sierras . . . my palms cover continents,

I am afoot with my vision.[208]

Filled with an inner illumination, the speaker in Sri Chinmoy's poems sees that everything around him is composed of light, that creation itself is a play of light through different shapes and forms, which seem to tremble on the point of dissolving back into light. This evanescent effect enables the poet to suggest that the light within him is also around him. Union with God is realised as a blending of light:

In the garden of Love-Light,

In silence-dream,

O Beauty Eternal!

This heart of mine is in Your embrace.[209]

The poet's choice of a garden as a spatial metaphor for "Love-Light" seems to refer directly to Paradise – a Persian word that originally meant "enclosed garden". Sri Chinmoy invokes this paradisal context to add an extra dimension to his portrayal of a present state of rapture. Yet, he does not allow it to take control of the poem and recast it as a *recherche du temps perdu*. The paradise of which he speaks is the inner paradise of union with God in the "silence-dream" of Beauty.

Significantly, when this union with God is sundered, or when the seeker momentarily loses sight of his goal, nature assumes a hostile and even malevolent guise in direct reflection of his inner prehension of an aloof and indifferent God. In the following poems, for example, the poet furnishes us with dramatic illustration of Wallace Stevens' statement: "The world about us would be desolate except for the world within us."[210]

If You do not come nearer and clasp my hand

How will I walk along the road?

How will You bear it if I am carried away

By the flood coursing through the

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[208] *The Portable Walt Whitman, op. cit.*, p. 66.

[209] *The Garden of Love-Light*, part 1, p. 5.

[210] Quoted by Stephen Spender, *The Struggle of the Modern* (London: Methuen, 1965), p. 39.

impenetrable mountain?
I know, I know Your heart
Suffers my pangs.
If not, no concern have I
For my own life.[211]

•

In the dark and dense night,
You cast Your benign Eyes upon me.
Take me and make me Your very own,
Offering Your Compassion.
I am Your innocent child.
Alone do I walk on a thick, dense path.
With Your two Arms, embrace me.
Allow me not to be drowned and washed away
By the turbulent currents of life.[212]

The lover and the Beloved, the child and the Father, sport together through the created universe. Their game of hide-and-seek alternately yields experiences of loss and gain, joy and sorrow, union and separation. The seeker lives in the hope of meeting with his Beloved but the thrill of the game itself brings him intense delight:

Hope-river flows, hope-river flows.
In the lap of the unknown is the river of smile.
At every moment I cry and weep with hope;
Again, it is I who dance with my Lord
In the swing of delight.[213]

In the course of their game, the seeker pursues his Beloved through all the various realms of nature and in each new environment he comes to know God in a fresh and often surprising

[211] *Supreme, I Sing Only for You*, p. 14.
[212] *The Garden of Love-Light*, part 1, p. 21.
[213] *Supreme, Teach Me How to Cry*, p. 1.

way:

I SAW IN THE SILENCE

In the desert-silence
I saw God the Warrior.

In the forest-silence
I saw God the Lover.

In the mountain-silence
I saw God the Dreamer.

In the ocean-silence
I saw God the Awakener.

In the sky-silence
I saw God the Liberator.[214]

Here the poet condenses the infinite variety of natural landscapes into a series of single pictorial ideas – code words that release a wealth of accumulated associations. These code words become the mediators of man's changing perception of God and, hence, it follows that their adequacy in the poem is dependent upon their powerful trigger-like effect in the reader's imagination.

A similar strategy operates in "What has Punctured Your Joy"[215] where the poet uses potent, explosive nouns drawn from features of nature in combination with negative qualities in order to dramatise the strength of such qualities:

WHAT HAS PUNCTURED YOUR JOY

What has punctured your joy?

---

[214] *Europe-Blossoms*, p. 250.
[215] *Ten Thousand Flower-Flames*, No. 101.

Not your volcano-anger,
Not your venom-doubt,
Not your mountain-pride,
But your insecurity-ant.

The poem carefully constructs an exaggerated image of the immensity of anger, doubt and pride. This serves to heighten the ironic effect of the last line, for here the poet discloses that it is the tiny, nagging feeling of insecurity, more than any of these previous overpowering forces, which in the long run wreaks the greatest damage and under-mines joy.

Nature's forms often invite a comparison based on scale. This method of procedure is used frequently by Sri Chinmoy, as it is with other mystic poets, to convey something of God's vastness and man's relative smallness. A factual observation about the relationship of a drop to the ocean, for example, can act as a point of departure for a series of analogies concerning man and God:

A FEEBLE CRY, A SWEET SMILE

A little ripple
Wakes the sea.

A tiny thought
Shakes the world.

A feeble cry
Brings the Supreme.

A sweet smile
Fulfils the Supreme.[216]

Other poems dilate on this same spatial contrast between man's infinitesimal quantity of self-giving and God's abundant response:

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[216] *The Wings of Light*, part 8, p. 16.

HOW LITTLE I KNOW

How little I know
Of man's gratitude-drop!

How little I know
Of God's Forgiveness-Sea![217]

This play of contrasts springs from Sri Chinmoy's spontaneous patterning of experience. He enjoys combining several selected details from nature into an expressive pattern. These patterns allow him to illustrate single principles and they also afford him the opportunity to convey a larger sense by implication. In the following poem, for instance, the poet employs two striking images from nature to make concrete the role of an ideal man in both his earthly and Heavenly domains:

WHEN HE LIVES ON EARTH

When he lives on earth
He shapes his rainbow-sky
  In Heaven.

When he lives in Heaven
He sows his promise-seed
  On earth.[218]

One symbol that particularly lends itself to this kind of expressive patterning is that of the flower. Sri Chinmoy frequently analyses the growth of the seed through to flower in order to distinguish the successive phases of an aspirant's life:

THE BLISS OF LIFE

[217] *Ten Thousand Flower-Flames*, No. 136.
[218] *Europe-Blossoms*, p. 453.

The bliss of my past life:
A secret truth-seed.

The bliss of my present life:
A sacred love-tree.

The bliss of my future life:
A surrendered perfection-flower.[219]

•

HOPE-BUDS ARE WIDE AWAKE

Hope-buds are
Eternally wide awake
Inside my aspiration-heart.

Fulfilment-flowers are
Preternaturally fast asleep
Inside earth's indifference-reign.[220]

The flower is one of the most recurrent symbols in Sri Chinmoy's poetic canon and, to him, it is clearly one of nature's most outstandingly beautiful features: the precise perfection of every part, the slow unfolding from bud to blossom, the opening of the petals in wonderful symmetry – all these betoken the essential divinity of man gradually coming to the fore. As an individual makes spiritual progress, so he beholds his "heart-flower" begin to blossom, petal by petal:

THE ANSWER

Wait and see.

[219] *Ibid*., p. 149.
[220] *Ten Thousand Flower-Flames*, No. 724.

The temporary emptiness
Of not discovering
The answers of life
Cannot last,
For the Answer itself
Is blossoming
    Petal by petal
        For you.[221]

In the same way that the poet saw the flight of the bird in an eternal dimension, so this subtle unfolding of the divinity within man is portrayed as a continuing act that is forever caught in a balance of motion and stillness. Explaining this capacity of art to freeze motion and yet to still communicate it, Tagore writes:

> In perfect rhythm, the art form becomes like the stars which in their seeming stillness are never still, like a motionless flame that is nothing but movement. A great picture is always speaking . . .[222]

The following poem exhibits this very quality. Using the lotus, that mysteriously beautiful flower of the East, Sri Chinmoy paints an image of the flower in its first moment of opening:

To You I bow, O Lord of my worship.
Like a white lotus of purity
I place myself at Your feet
And bloom with all seekers of the spirit.
This is my sole longing this morning.[223]

The corresponding flower of the West is the rose. Its fragrance and perfection have, over the centuries, provided Western man with a constant source of inspiration. This tradition of symbolic usage undoubtedly influences the poet to use the rose in a ceremonial rather than in a phenomenological sense:

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[221] *Ibid*., No. 922.
[222] From "The Religion of an Artist", in *A Tagore Reader, op. cit.*, p. 234.
[223] *Supreme, I Sing Only for You*, p. 19.

I AM BUT A PETAL

I am but a petal
Of the morning rose.
I see the morning sky.
For me the morning sun glows,
In me God's Hope-Light grows,
With me Infinity's Beauty-Smile flows.[224]

•

AN IOTA OF GRATITUDE

The seeker's offering
Of an iota of gratitude to God
Is as beautiful as a rose
Held by God in His own Hand.[225]

Other flowers that appear frequently in Sri Chinmoy's poems are the sprays of white jasmine (symbols of purity), the red hibiscus (which is identified with the rising sun) and the lily (which hides its secret beauty in the moonlight, to be seen by God's Eye alone):

By whose touch the lily smiles
And opens its beauty-bud?
Whose beauty's moonlight
Do I see in the lily?
Who is the Eye of my eye?
Who is the Heart of my heart?
Alas, why do I not see Him,
His Face of transcendental Beauty,

[224] *Transcendence-Perfection*, No. 779.
[225] *Ten Thousand Flower-Flames*, No. 678.

Even in my dreams?[226]

Sri Chinmoy's poetry modulates from description to meditative analogy without disjunction, holding the inner and the outer nature in balance with countless shades of ambiguity. He freely employs pathetic fallacy (for example, "hope-buds are eternally wide awake") in order to shift a precise, descriptive word into the realm of *paysage intérieur.* Consequently, there is a continual sliding away from the literal meaning of an expression towards its symbolic meaning. In the example quoted above, the literal identity of "bud" is realised in conjunction with the abstract meaning of "hope", thereby forming a compound that invites us to conceive of hope as something tangible, with its own particular identity and verifiable reality.

The basis of this process in which the meditative mind makes the transition from one mode – description – to another, deeper kind of thinking, is intuition. The intuitive mind does not formulate analogy with a preconceived intellectual purpose. Rather, it operates by spontaneously assimilating and reducing certain strategic aspects of nature. Intuition enlists their properties of light, dimension and characteristic movement in order to construct a locus for the spiritual element in the poems:

A MAP OF SILENCE

What do I see in my
Heaven-free mind?
I see a map
Of midnight-silence
With a stupendous
Satisfaction-smile.[227]

•

WHILE WALKING

[226] *Supreme, Teach Me How to Cry*, p. 32.
[227] *Ten Thousand Flower-Flames*, Nos. 801 and 802 following.

While walking along
The avenue of my aspiration-heart,
    What do I do?
I harvest my heart's sunlight.
    How?
Slowly, steadily and selflessly.

The poet becomes a true participant in nature, for the landscape that he perceives is an echo of his own inner nature.

No study of Sri Chinmoy's nature symbolism would be complete without reference to the sun. If light is the nexus of unity in the poems, then the sun, as the supreme symbol of light, is at the heart of that unity. The sun within, more luminous and more effulgent than the outer sun, is at once the source and goal of man's aspiring soul:

GOLDEN MYSTIC SUN

The descending fire descends;
The ascending fire ascends.
The smile of Light
Watches their tasks divine
From across the empty space
Where the hands of ether
Salute the golden mystic sun.[228]

As a symbol for God, the sun not only observes the communion of Heaven and earth but also irradiates both spheres with its boundless light. In other poems, the point at which the soul attains oneness with God is seen as a merging in the sun, as the following extracts show:

My spirit aware of all the heights,
    I am mute in the core of the Sun.
I barter nothing with time and deeds;
    My cosmic play is done.[229]

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[228] *The Wings of Light*, part 12, p. 5.

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I am the self-amorous child of the Sun.

-

I shall win at last the Noonward Race,
    Plunge in the Nectar-Sea.

The sun unites the aspiration-flames of the seeker and the wisdom-fire of God. Significantly, in the first stanza of a poem addressed to God as "Master" the poet writes:

O Lord of Nature, sovereign Sun of all!
    Who, if not Thou, will speak of Thee?
    Thy smile of Grace through Eternity
Frees all aspiring souls from night's dumb call.[230]

Additional cosmic symbols, such as the moon and the stars, assist in opening out the whole landscape of Sri Chinmoy's poems so that it appears to extend endlessly on every side. We see the speaker of the poems engaged in a dual life: at times, he appears to live as a part of nature, a member of its community, while at other times, it is he who contains nature and everything in it. The spirit of man offers its generous invitation to the whole of the created universe and houses it all in the amplitude of oneness. We come to form an image of a man without finite boundaries, a man who can partake of the infinity, eternity and immortality of the symbols he employs because of their inseparable bond with his inner nature:

A clear, bright sky and a clear, bright air
And a tranquil earth-heart I feel within me.
Alone I am roaming in the cosmos wide
With my eternity's partner-heart.[231]

---

[229] From "The Absolute", *My Flute*, p. 1. "Apocalypse", p. 6 and "Hope", p. 26 for the following extracts.
[230] *Ibid*., p. 88.

In sum, the greatest attribute of Sri Chinmoy's symbols from nature is that they speak a universal language. They do not depend on any specialised knowledge in order that the reader may grasp their significance. The focus of the poet is consistently on the perennial features of nature – the creatures, the flora, the colours, the cosmos and all the common forms of rivers, mountains, deserts and so on. They are the age-old symbols, which man once worshipped as the forerunners of established religion. That Sri Chinmoy has entrusted them with such a great role in his poetry constitutes a significant departure from the practice of many contemporary poets who have turned to other less fatigued symbols in order to convey their visions.

To Sri Chinmoy, however, nature's fruitfulness as a source of symbolic meaning can never be exhausted, for he sees it as being integrally connected with the soul's evolution. As a result, when he forges an analogy between the physical and the spiritual worlds, we do not feel that nature is introduced as a mere mirror of the self, but that it has an inherent sanctity of its own, which contributes to the poet's composite image of our inner nature in a most powerful way. Although the poet rarely supplies the reader with more than the most minimal details of natural features, they are able to uphold the deeper signification with which he imbues them. Nature emerges from the poems as a dignified and responsive companion to man in his spiritual journey.

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[231] *Supreme, I Sing Only for You*, p. 53.

Chapter V

WORDS FOR GOD

> Days come and ages pass, and it is ever he who moves my heart in many a name, in many a guise, in many a rapture of joy and of sorrow.
>
> – Rabindranath Tagore

> The major poetic idea in the world is and always has been the idea of God.
>
> – Wallace Stevens

Throughout the ages, in every culture and in all the innumerable forms of life, man has sought for his God. Among all the things that he has desired, it is God whom he has desired most and without whom he must forever remain unfulfilled. That which, in ordinary circumstances, man cannot see, cannot touch and cannot know, becomes his all-consuming goal and his life assumes the shape of a journey or quest for Something that is unnameable.

However, the testimony of mystics over the centuries has proven that even as man searches for God, so God searches for the man who can receive Him and who will, ultimately, realise Him. In many different forms and hues God reveals Himself to the awakened soul and leads it ever forwards towards the summits of God-union. That same God who was first perceived as a vague, impersonal Force becomes near, living and personal – a beloved Companion to the soul of man, a Guide showing him the path to the Infinite.

To one soul God will appear as Friend, to another as King, or Guest, the Creator or the Beyond. The poet who would speak of God, therefore, finds himself compelled to use both a vocabulary of ultimates – the Supreme, the Infinite, the Absolute and so on – and a vocabulary of symbols drawn from the physical world, symbols that express a relationship which is seen by the poet as harbouring a divine analogy. Inorganic, biological and social relationships all contribute to mystical symbolism because they point to God and thus approach Him more closely than conceptual language. This symbolism does more than signpost a larger, untellable meaning. By opening up a level of meaning and being which otherwise we could not reach, each symbol actually participates in that which it unfolds. It carries us into the very presence of the Divine. It is for this reason that the words for God

are accepted as sacred utterances and not merely as non-literal expressions or approximations.[232]

Although each "minstrel of God", as Saint Francis termed the mystic poets, forges his own language from the depth of his personal encounter with a perceived aspect of the Godhead, we find a general concordance between the different mystic writers, both Eastern and Western, with respect to their use of such symbols. The focus on love as a basis of most mystical experiences, for example, has led to the establishment of words such as Bridegroom and Beloved as fundamentals of mystical literature. The unique power of this literature, however, stems from the emphasis it places on firsthand experience of God and it is in this context that Sri Chinmoy's range and freshness of symbolic expression may be best appreciated, for he has not adopted wholesale the traditional words for God but has uncovered them anew in the depths of his own being, has improved them and amended them according to his personal understanding and woven them into his poetry in such a manner as to reveal an infinitude of hitherto hidden meanings and correspondences. As a poet and as a lover of God, Sri Chinmoy's aim is not simply to record his experiences. Rather, his constant effort is to transmit the Divine-human encounter in a creative way and so make this experience the province not only of the mystic but of every man.

This chapter presents a survey of Sri Chinmoy's words for God. Because of the nature of the subject, it is neither evaluative nor analytical. Were I a mystic, I could discuss the accuracy with which such symbols convey the mystic vision. As it is, these pages investigate the degree to which Sri Chinmoy's poems act as an inlet for the ordinary reader to that "unspeakable" meeting between man and God.

One of the most frequent modes in which God is apprehended is that of a human being. Swedenborg writes: "In all the Heavens there is no other Idea of God than that of a Man" and Blake follows with his annotation: "Man can have no idea of anything greater than Man, as a cup cannot contain more than its capaciousness."[233] We think of God as a human being because the idea is easily accessible to our understanding, that form is closer to us and more endearing than God's vastness and immensity. By representing God in different human roles, the mystic is able to explore the diverse social ties, which these roles imply.

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[232]The general characteristics of religious symbols are discussed by Paul Tillich in "Theology and Symbolism", included in a collection of essays entitled *Religious Symbolism* (New York: Institute for Religious & Social Studies, 1955), F. Ernest Johnson, ed., pp. 107-117.

[233] "Annotations to Swedenborg's Wisdom of Angels concerning Divine Love and Divine Wisdom", *The Complete Writings of William Blake* (London: Oxford University Press), p. 60. Edited by Geoffrey Keynes.

Since God embodies the highest, it is natural that symbols of human authority should be appropriated by the mystic to communicate God's sovereignty. God is commonly portrayed as King or Emperor, the topmost point in an ascending social scale:

O yet I feel Thy kingly Grace
    With my feeble mortality.[234]

affirms Sri Chinmoy in one poem.

King of Glorie, King of Peace,
    I will love thee.[235]

echoes George Herbert in another. God's regal office is here conveyed in a symbol that is universally meaningful. Again, it is one that proves particularly fruitful for the poet because of the range of subsidiary images implied by the notion of sovereignty:

FORWARD, UPWARD, INWARD

Forward to the shore!
God will offer you
    His silver Throne.

Upward to the stars!
God will offer you
    His golden Crown.

Inward to the source!
God will offer you
    His diamond Heart.[236]

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[234] From "Hope", *My Flute*, p. 26.
[235] From "Praise (11)", *The English Poems of George Herbert* (London: Dent, 1974), C.A. Patrides, ed., p. 155.
[236] *The Goal is Won*, p. 101.

In this poem, Sri Chinmoy urges the seeker to win for himself the rights to kingship or that theopathetic state which signifies the completion of the mystical life. Several things are accomplished in the poem: firstly, it offers the seeker three directions in which to make progress – forward, upward and inward. Secondly, it describes his threefold destination – the shore, the stars and the source. Thirdly, it reassures the seeker that God awaits his arrival at the end of all three roads. Finally, it measures the seeker's achievement in terms of the gift he acquires from God – God's silver Throne, golden Crown and diamond Heart. A steadily increasing mineral wealth transforms this series into a valued progression and enables us to see the gifts in their order of ascending importance: to win God's Throne suggests that the seeker has gained the whole of God's kingdom. To win God's crown may be taken as attaining God's role or position. But to win God's Heart can only mean that the seeker has won God Himself and that this is the most precious gift of all.

One feature of an authority figure such as King is that it implies a relationship of obedience and, often, of social subordination on the part of the soul. Although Sri Chinmoy places the fully enlightened soul on an equal footing with God, he constantly emphasises that the path to this deified state is one of implicit surrender to God:

DRUNK WITH SURRENDER

Drunk with power
I came to my Lord.
He ignored my power.

Drunk with beauty
I came to my Lord.
He ignored my beauty

Drunk with surrender
I came to my Lord.
He offered me His Throne of Light,
His Crown of Delight,
His Palace of Truth,

His Kingdom of Love.[237]

Here, kingship along with its attendant cluster of associations, gives substance to the final end of spiritual questing. Other poems infer that the "royal road" leading to God is paved with divine love:

LOVE-WIND BLOWS

Love-wind blows
In all directions,
Cheerfully, speedily
And
Fruitfully.
Who divinely follows?
Emperor-Calm
Of Eternity's Height.[238]

In the compound metaphor that closes this poem, Sri Chinmoy fuses both personal and impersonal aspects of God. The word "Emperor" acts as a gateway to our understanding of the profound peace of God, for it supports in a symbolic way the implications of height, loftiness and pervasive influence that are released by the three abstract nouns following it. Although "Emperor" stands out as the only word with a specifically human application, its position in the poem is secured by its participation in the magnificent closural effect of a double choriamb.

/ x x /
Emperor-Calm

x x:/ x x /
Of Eternity's Height.

A further approach to God based on His authority is embodied in the Middle English word "Lord". Although it carries a strong sense of the dignity and power of the office of

[237] *Europe-Blossoms*, p. 387.
[238] *The Goal is Won*, p. 218.

ruler, in conformity with its original meaning, the more austere and aloof overtones of this word have been modified by centuries of petitions and prayers to God in this mode. With the attrition of the feudal system, from which Lord derived, the symbolic level of meaning has come to supersede the word's primary meaning. The suggestiveness of the word as symbol nevertheless remains undiminished. The best symbols free themselves of time and space and exist in a dimension of perpetual significance, for as long as men continue to experience the states that they describe these symbols will receive new relevance and new energy. In his poem "Jerusalem", Blake offers a poetical explanation of the unchanging nature of interior experiences:

> As the Pilgrim passes while the Country permanent remains
> So Men pass on; but the States remain permanent for ever.[239]

The essence of the mystic state is experience, the direct and intimate experience of God. In these truly great moments, reality emerges in its most lucid form and man arrives at a state of knowledge in which he recognises both God and himself as one. The poet expresses his longing for this state of union or self-loss in God:

> LORD, TAKE ME
>
> Lord, take my heart
>   To be Your Pleasure.
>
> Lord, take my love
>   To be Your Treasure.
>
> Lord, let my life
>   Be claimed entirely by You,
>   Only by You.[240]

This turning away from oneself towards the Divine is an act of supreme self-offering – not

[239] Underhill, p. 202.
[240] *The Goal is Won*, p. 241.

of a subordinate to a superior, but of the portion to the whole, the smaller to the greater. In surrender as pure and whole-hearted as this, there is no sense of compulsion but only of sweetness and love.

Sri Chinmoy exploits the vast difference between the love of power and the power of love in the following poem through the striking image of his Lord's Footprints:

I CAN ETERNALLY BECOME YOURS

My sweet Lord,
Your Footprints
On the tablet of my heart
Make me feel that
I can not only become great and good,
But I can become Yours,
    Only Yours.[241]

The visual picture we construct is of a ruler or vanquisher standing triumphant, with one foot placed on the chest of the opponent he has conquered. It is a classic pose of victory. However, Sri Chinmoy refutes the traditional implications of this image by making the physical pose symbolic of God's inner blessing. The Feet of God symbolise compassion. As they touch the seeker's heart, they bring him new hope and new aspiration. It is his reprieve, not his defeat, unless the defeat of one's life by God be automatically understood.

As the serf renders service to his manor Lord, even so the seeker performs acts of service for his Lord Supreme. He becomes the agent for world transformation. The dual role of the seeker, who is active in the world-sphere and passive before his God, is highlighted by Sri Chinmoy in the following poignant composition:

THE HERO MARCHES ALONG

He who has loved this world
Has only got excruciating pangs.
The world has thrown on him

---

[241] *Transcendence-Perfection*, No. 127.

All ugliness, filth, dirt and impurity.
Yet the hero marches along,
Carrying the burden of the entire world.
At the end of his teeming struggles
He will go and stand at the Feet
of the Lord Supreme.[242]

The relationship of the seeker to God as Lord Supreme is characterised by this attitude of profound reverential awe. Built into Sri Chinmoy's use of the phrase is a concept of man's distance from God – the Lord who silently hears the prayers of the seeker is not always felt to be responsive. Since the very choice of nomenclature for God is conditioned by the seeker's own temperament, it is significant that in those moments when the seeker feels most removed from God, Sri Chinmoy causes him to address God as Lord:

Who has given me this restless vital,
Dark unrest and endless suffering?
In the prison cell of attachment
And in the ocean of fear,
I hear the wild laughter of inconscience.
Will I ever discover You, O Lord?
To me You are nothing but a stone-hearted God
Who never descends
And who always remains in the ecstasy-life
Of Heaven.[243]

Again, the poet counterbalances such usage by reversing his previous criticism and representing his Lord as intimate and adorable:

IT HURTS ME

It hurts me a little,

[242] *My Flute*, p. 23.
[243] *Pole-Star Promise-Light*, part 1, p. 5.

Lord, when the world speaks ill of You.
But it hurts me a lot, Lord, when I speak ill of You;
For You are so beautiful to look at,
You are so delicious to eat,
You are so precious to possess
That I really do not know what to do.
I am not only useless but helpless.[244]

In this poem we encounter one of the central paradoxes of mystical writing: although the knowledge of God takes place at a level far beyond the senses, indeed, when the senses are withdrawn, mystic writers often fall back upon the language of the senses in order to shed light on the completeness of God-union. Sri Chinmoy's line "You are so delicious to eat" is paralleled in the poetry of George Herbert:

You must sit down, sayes Love, and taste my meat:
So I did sit and eat.[245]

And of St. John of the Cross:

Deep-cellared is the cavern
Of my love's heart, I drank of him alive.[246]

The concept of God as the food and drink of the soul is favoured by mystics because of the universal meaningfulness of hunger and thirst. The keenness of these physical needs and the joy of their satisfaction is a paradigm of man's yearning for God and the ecstasy of God-union. When such biological symbolism is introduced, especially when it is used with simplicity and vigour, it impresses us with the fact that in order to approach God-union, the seeker must claim God, must seize Him, in the most direct way possible.

A significant number of poems addressed to God as Lord are colloquies in which the soul petitions Him, pleads, accuses, listens for a divine answer or waits, sometimes in vain,

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[244] *Transcendence-Perfection,* No. 127.
[245] From "Love (111)", Herbert, p. 192.
[246] From "Songs between the soul and the bridegroom", *The Poems of St. John of the Cross* (London: Harvill Press, 1976), trans. Roy Campbell, p. 21.

for a response. It is the natural speaking voice of man that is hereby recorded. This is particularly evident in the following poem, where the seeker, in a charming reversal of roles, shares with God his own illumining "wisdom":

STAY WITH ME

My sweet Lord,
Don't withdraw
If You want me to live.
Stay with me.
Satisfaction grows
On patience-tree.[247]

The fulfilment of union has conferred upon the seeker a childlike dependency He has entered into a new life and cannot bear to be abandoned by his Lord. If the voice with which he speaks is unaffected, then perhaps we may read into this artless simplicity something of that innocence which lies on the far side of experience.

The poet does not always apprehend God in a single form, such as Lord. Hence, it is not uncommon to find him combining several perceptions in order to create a rich and allusive portrait of God's many-sided mysteries. Alternating epithets with proper names or replacing divine names with explicative or illustrative epithets gives the poet an opportunity to introduce variation or to express, for the sake of emphasis, more or less parallel thoughts. This tissue of attributive words for God is an outstanding feature of the following longer poem, which I quote in full:

THE PILGRIMS OF THE LORD SUPREME

We are the Pilgrims of the Lord Supreme
On the Path of Infinity.
At this time we have broken asunder
Obstruction's door.
We have broken asunder the night

[247] *Transcendence-Perfection*, No. 49.

Of tenebrous darkness, inconscience
And the eternal, indomitable fear of death.
The Boat of the supernal Light's Dawn
    Is beckoning us,
And the World-Pilot
Of the hallowed bond of Love Divine
    Is beckoning us.
The Liberator's Hands are drawing us
To the Ocean of the great Unknown.
Having conquered the life-breath
Of the Land of Immortality,
And carrying aloft the Banner
    Of the Lord Supreme,
We shall return:
We, the drops and flames
    Of Transformation-Light.[248]

Let us consider the elements of formulaic diction in this poem. Initially, Sri Chinmoy establishes the image of the pilgrims journeying towards Infinity, or God in His transcendental aspect. The pilgrims belong to their Lord Supreme and He is their Guide homewards. As the poem progresses, the poet multiplies these images of journeying. The Lord Supreme is transformed into a Boat that will carry the seekers to the Dawn; He is a Pilot co-ordinating an harmonious universe; He is a Liberator who will set the pilgrims free into the Unknown; and it is by Him that the Land of Immortality is finally won and the finite is reunited with the Infinite. In truth, the pilgrims have returned to where the poem began for, having passed through death, they must start nature's game anew, must separate themselves for a while from that infinite expanse of Light, and become as drops and flames, emissaries from the Source. The nexus of the poem is the image of a journey in which God is at once the Goal and the Leader.

Sri Chinmoy's multiplicity of epithets and proper names adds a distinct elegance of style to this poem. As it proceeds, the poem gathers tremendous incantatory resonance, which rises to a pitch during the closing lines:

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[248] *My Flute*, p. 72.

We shall return:
We, the drops and flames
Of Transformation-Light.

These lines seem to announce rather than prefigure the attainment of the pilgrims. They are commemorative statements, statements that strengthen and replenish the inner conviction of the seekers. They are the celebration of the seekers' life and of their life purpose.

From this poem, it is clear that many instances of praise for God double as reminders of God's tasks or functions. There is, in effect, no strict line of demarcation between the two, for to refer to God as the "World-Pilot", for example, is to adore Him and to specify His role at the same time. Sri Chinmoy's gift for compounding nouns enables him to assimilate a number of images into the poem without necessarily embarking on a long string of descriptive phrases.

To cite a further example, the following poem places before us a myriad of images and yet, because of its brilliant economy of expression it leaves us with an overriding impression of action and not abstraction:

TO SERVE MY MAKER-LORD

To serve my Maker-Lord
I saw the light of day,
To love my Beloved Friend
I began our oneness-play.[249]

Each compound acquires a life of its own and seeks to communicate to the reader a state of insight that can never be plumbed by the discursive intellect. Normally, a noun-adjective combination tends to loosen the texture of a poem and enable the poet and reader to dwell at greater length on familiar images. However, Sri Chinmoy's use of the double noun technique has the effect of tightening the poem, for although the words and concepts are familiar the usage is not and we must take time to unlock their new compounded meaning.

Returning to the various social ties that have given birth to words for God, it is

[249] *From the Source to the Source*, p. 67.

interesting to notice a subtle difference between the more authoritative terms – such as King, Emperor and Lord – and the terms relating to assistance and guidance.[250] At the outset, we discover a closer interdependence and fellowship between man and God in the latter:

From country to country we roam,
Carrying the flame of Love Divine,
Smiling and smiling.
The secret thought of each country
    And the yearning of each life
Here become one.
On the road of Infinity,
In the embrace of the covenant
    Of the Light Supreme,
O Boatman of our Heart-Boat,
By loving You, we do all this.[251]

Of all the images of questing that have captured the imagination of spiritual seekers through the centuries, the one that most appeals to Sri Chinmoy, is the image of the Supreme as a Boatman ferrying the seeker-passengers across the ocean to the golden shore of the Beyond. This ocean symbolises the forces of ignorance, which must be overcome in order to reach God. The Boatman is He who knows where the Goal is and how to get there:

O MY BOATMAN

O my Boat, O my Boatman,
O message of Transcendental Delight,
Carry me. My heart is thirsty and hungry,
And it is fast asleep at the same time.
Carry my heart to the other shore.

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[250] This division of terms is based on the approach of Mary Anita Ewer, *A Survey of Mystical Symbolism* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1933). Especially pp. 163-179.
[251] *My Flute*, p. 72.

The dance of death I see all around.
The thunder of destruction indomitable I hear.
O my Inner Pilot, You are mine.
You are the Ocean of Compassion infinite.
In You I lose myself.
My all in You I lose.[252]

When Sri Chinmoy invokes the archetypal myths of quest and pilgrimage in this and other poems, it is not simply the deeper memories of our race that he is calling forth, but an urge that is basic to all men and that urge is to pursue a vision of truth and beauty. In certain poems, Sri Chinmoy suggests that this journey unites the spheres of becoming and being – that ultimate satisfaction stems from the journey itself and not from any definite arrival. He postulates an endless journeying, a constant self-transcendence:

THERE WAS A TIME

There was a time when I stumbled and stumbled,
But now I only climb and climb beyond
And far beyond my Goal's endless Beyond,
And yet my Captain commands: "Go on, go on!"[253]

Here the seeker ascends past all his preconceptions, all his imaginings. The results he has already gained become as landmarks for his ceaseless journey. However, there is no final attainment of a fixed goal – nothing is static, nothing ever completely finished. The stirring command of the Captain to proceed even further rings out at the end of the poem, echoing in the depths of our own being. No words follow it. It is at once imperative and thrilling.

One recurring form of address that denotes these same qualities of leadership and guidance is "Master". It is a word that embodies more of God's greatness and perfection, perhaps, than Boatman, Pilot or Captain. What God has is the greatness of perfect Perfection, hence, unsurpassable mastery. In one particularly memorable poem, Sri Chinmoy fuses the concept of mastery with the idea of God as a Musician playing His music

[252] *Ibid.*, p. 60.
[253] *Ibid*., p. 49.

on the strings of the seeker's heart:

> TUNE ME FOR LIFE
>
> O Master-Musician,
> Tune me for life again.
> The awakening of new music
> My heart wants to become.
> My life is now mingled
> In ecstasy's height.[254]

The poet longs to be re-born into a higher world, a world that is filled with the plenitude of God's music. In India, it is common for novice musicians to be apprenticed to a master of sitar, sarangi, vina, esraj or some other instrument. Sri Chinmoy's address to his "Master-Musician" implicitly captures something of this teacher/student relationship. The element of cultural conditioning that informs his choice of image may be appreciated by comparing this poem with several extracts from Tagore's English "Gitanjali":

> I know not how thou singest, my master! I ever listen in silent amazement.
>
> The light of thy music illumines the world. The life-breath of thy music runs from sky to sky. The holy stream of thy music breaks through all stony obstacles and rushes on.
>
> My heart longs to join in thy song, but vainly struggles for a voice. I would speak, but speech breaks not into song, and I cry out baffled. Ah, thou hast made my heart captive in the endless meshes of thy music, my master![255]

> . . . O master poet, I have sat down at thy feet. Only let me make my life simple and straight, like a flute of reed for thee to fill with music.[256]

Although the term "Master" is an accurate description of God's governing role, it shades into

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[254] *Transcendence-Perfection*, No. 716.
[255] *Collected Poems and Plays*, p. 4.
[256] *Ibid*., p. 5.

the metaphorical in these poems by virtue of the fact that it is linked with the image of God as the Supreme Musician.

In other poems, especially where the poet wishes to express a consciousness of God's power and grandeur while still retaining a personal vision of Him, he looks to this word as possessing the greatest capacity to evoke a wide spread of emotions – affection, admiration and gratitude:

WHEN I TAKE SHELTER

When I take shelter
In my Master's eye
I see star-twinkling sky.
When I take shelter
In my Master's heart,
I devour death-dart.
When I take shelter
At my Master's feet
Ignorance-dream I quit.[257]

Again, when the poet wishes to acknowledge a debt to God, or where the accent is on surrender, the word Master can act as a matrix for his inner movement of the soul:

MY HEART'S SORE NEED

My heart's sore need:
Delight, only delight,
Inside purity-height
To feed my Master, feed.[258]

Like most words for God, Master is one whose meaning cannot be stabilised in any diagrammatic fashion. At times, it edges towards the Infinite, while at other times the poet

[257] *From the Source to the Source*, p. 123.
[258] *Ibid*., p. 155.

transforms it into the most endearing expression possible.

When the seeker feels that there is no gulf between himself and God, then God becomes his eternal Playmate, his Master and Comrade in one form:

MY COMRADE ETERNAL

I do not doubt;
    Therefore
My Master is my Comrade eternal.

I do not fear;
    Therefore
My Master and my boat
Easily take me to the shores
    Of the ever-transcending Beyond.[259]

The idea of God as a Friend and Comrade emerges in this poem. This particular social tie makes an important contribution to Sri Chinmoy's poetry, for it signifies a bond of intimacy and love:

You are my only Friend,
You are my life.
Like a divine mendicant,
From one country to another
May I sing a song of You
With all my love.
May I sing the Song of Your Victory
    all my life.[260]

The idea of God as Friend is equally conveyed by the word "Companion", as in the following poem:

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[259] *Transcendence-Perfection*, No. 288.
[260] *The Garden of Love-Light*, part 1, p. 28.

Tell me only once that You are mine
and I am Yours.
Your Smile of Love-Nectar is the
companion of my life and the light of my death.
In Heaven and on earth, tell me only once
that my heart is Your Beloved Supreme.[261]

These two poems highlight the greater responsiveness that is sought from God as Friend. One may claim Him as Lord or Master from the distance of prayer, but to claim Him as Friend involves some sort of reassurance from God, some confirmation that even as the seeker has approached Him, so He is willing to approach the seeker on the selfsame level – as an equal, as a Friend and Playmate after His own Heart. At the pinnacle stage of this development, the nature of the bond between man and God is immeasurably strengthened and man becomes God's conscious partner in the cosmic game:

I AM CAUGHT

I am caught by an animal.
Therefore
I am ruthlessly commanded to surrender.

I am caught by man.
Therefore
I am unconditionally forced to offer.

I am caught by God.
Therefore
I am lovingly asked to love.
Why?
Because God wants me to become
Another God.

[261] *Ibid*., Part 2, p. 27.

Why?
Because He wants me to be
His main partner
In His cosmic Game.[262]

This is the crown of the mystic way – where man becomes, as it were, another God. If he were wholly merged in God, the "Game" would not continue, as such. Thus, in union man retains his distinctness and the delightful play of man and God then becomes a pageant that is spread across the length and breadth of the universe.

One extension of the bonds of fellowship that is popular with mystical writers is the symbol of God as a Guest, the soul of man being His host. As long as God dwells within man, He is felt to have accepted the seeker's invitation:

I AWAIT THE GUEST

My life fearfully awaits
The unwanted guest:
Death.

My mind reluctantly awaits
The unexpected guest:
Man.

My heart devotedly awaits
The ever-expected guest:
God.[263]

Because of the dramatic premise of the seeker's invitation, this symbol lends itself to enacted dialogue between man and God:

YOUR AGELONG HUNGER

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[262] *Europe-Blossoms*, p. 689.
[263] *Ibid*., p. 307.

Lord, today You are
My most distinguished guest.
Alas, how can I offer You my food,
    My ignorance-night?
"Son, I am terribly hungry;
Just give Me what you have.
My cosmic hunger cares not for taste;
    It cares only for food.
Soon I shall invite you to be My guest.
I shall give you My food, Nectar-flood.
Like Me, you too must not care for taste,
    But for the satisfaction
    Of your agelong hunger."[264]

In symbolic terms, the poet amplifies the encounter between man and God as a meal that is shared by host and Guest. Since God has come into the seeker's "house", His meal must be made from the seeker's stores of ignorance. The seeker's offering of his own limited possession – "ignorance-night" – is seen as a necessary prelude to his eventual share of God's feast of light. Knowing this, the seeker keeps open house for God:

MY HEART'S ETERNAL GUEST

Lord,
I am with You always
And I love You always.
I drink Your Beauty always.
I smile at Your Eternity's Beauty always.
You are my heart's eternal Guest.
In You I see the centre of all excellence.
Lord Supreme, You are my heart-life
And my soul-light.

[264] *Ibid*., p. 9.

You are my Eternity's All.[265]

The mutual inhabitation of the seeker and God, which is reflected in this poem, also finds expression in the poems of Emily Dickinson:

The Soul that hath a Guest
Doth seldom go abroad—
Diviner Crowd at Home—
Obliterate the need—

And Courtesy forbid
A Host's departure when
Upon Himself be visiting
The Emperor of Men—[266]

Similarly, in the Eastern tradition, the fifteenth century mystic Kabir writes:

This day is dear to me above all other days, for today the Beloved Lord is a guest in my house;
My chamber and my courtyard are beautiful with His presence.[267]

The fact that these poets turn to such a homely metaphor to carry their vision of God is seen as a characteristic feature of mystics. Evelyn Underhill, for example, writes in reference to Kabir:

His feet are firmly planted upon earth, his lofty and passionate apprehensions are perpetually controlled by the activity of a sane and vigorous intellect, by the alert common sense so often found in persons of real mystical genius.[268]

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[265] *Transcendence-Perfection*, No. 711.
[266] *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, p. 335, No. 674.
[267] *One Hundred Poems of Kabir* (Madras: Macmillan, 1972), trans. Rabindranath Tagore, assisted by Evelyn Underhill. No. LXXXVIII, p. 78.
[268] *Ibid*., Introduction by Evelyn Underhill, p. 14.

So far we have considered Sri Chinmoy's words for God in terms of a deepening of the love bond. Moving from authoritative figures to relationships of assistance and leadership or guidance and from thence to the intimacy of friendship, we now arrive at one of the most deep seated of all human bonds, that of blood kinship. Poems that I shall discuss in this section approach God as Father, Mother or Beloved.

The effect of Father symbolism in counterbalancing words such as King and Master is evidenced in this brief quotation from the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins:

> God, lover of souls, swaying considerate scales,
> Complete thy creature dear O where it fails,
>   Being mighty a master, being a father and fond.[269]

The Father aspect softens the awe-inspiring nature of Master. It also summons the corresponding relationship of the seeker as a child. Filled with trust, the seeker-child sheds all fears, doubts and sorrows and rests secure in the love of his divine Father:

> MY SWEET FATHER-LORD
>
> My sweet Father-Lord,
> I forgot the taste of tears
> When I slept inside Your Heart.
>
> My sweet Father-Lord,
> I forgot the taste of fears
> When I sat at Your Feet.
>
> My sweet Father-Lord,
> I forgot the taste of doubts
> When I drank the beauty of Your Eyes.[270]

The picture of the child who is not afraid to sit on his father's lap, no matter how great his

[269] Hopkins, "In the Valley of the Elwy", *Collected Poems*, p. 68.
[270] *Europe-Blossoms*, p. 473.

father may be in the eyes of other men, graces this poem with innocence.

In connection with this Father symbolism, Sri Chinmoy is particularly fond of conversational poems that present the double viewpoint of both the Father and His son or daughter:

WHAT YOU ARE TO ME

Father: Compassion-Perfection,
This is what You are to me.

"Daughter: satisfaction-dedication,
This is what you are to me."[271]

In other poems of this kind, Father and daughter/son enter into a quick repartee of words which occasions a subtle correction or modification of the opinion of one party:

FATHER AND DAUGHTER

"Daughter, I always scold you for nothing."
    Father, You always love me for nothing.
"Daughter, I cannot manage without you."
    Father, I cannot live without You.
"Daughter, I shall do everything for you."
    Father, You already have done everything for me.[272]

The seeker-daughter lovingly revises God's estimate of His influence on her life. Through these imaginary conversations, we see truth operating on both a divine and a human level.

Having been nurtured in the Hindu religion, which includes in its worship the various aspects of God in a feminine form, some of Sri Chinmoy's most beautiful lyrics are those in which he realises God in this way:

[271] *Ibid*., p. 545.
[272] *Ibid*., p. 213.

THE MESSAGE OF SURRENDER

Today You have given me
The message of surrender.
I have offered to You
My very flower-heart.
In the dark night with tears,
In the unknown prison-cell of illusion,
In the house of the finite,
No longer shall I abide.
I know You are mine.
I have known this, Mother,
O Queen of the Eternal.[273]

It is obvious that Sri Chinmoy is not striving for any unusual effect in such a poem. Indeed, it closely parallels his usage of Father and King and the quiet sincerity of his tone, which does not run to excess or ornamentation, augments the effectiveness of the symbolism.

That the Mother form of God may be initially unfamiliar to many Western readers need not hinder an appreciation of this approach and of its many enchanting elements. Poems that dwell on God in a feminine form, as Mother or Queen, figure particularly in Sri Chinmoy's songs from the Bengali. In translation, we can see the poet striving to catch the native accent of his devotion in the less pliant forms of the English language. The results are frequently poems of rare tenderness and delicacy:

MOTHER, IF I LOSE TO YOU

Mother, if I lose to You,
That is my only Victory.
Whatever I have given into Your Hands
Is my only savings.
To me the rest is of no value,
A mere waste,

[273] *My Flute*, p. 89.

And it only tortures me and
Stands as a burden on my way
I cannot put it to use.
When I lose to You,
After I have achieved
My full realisation,
I know my greatest reward I shall receive.[274]

In some poems, the poet undertakes to express what is even more difficult: a simultaneous realisation of God both as Father and Mother. One of the inherent pitfalls in this approach is that of excessive abstraction. It is avoided by the poet's lucid vision and easy assurance of style. By representing these two aspects as complementary parts of God's consciousness, even as the sun and moon co-exist in the solar system, Sri Chinmoy is able to concentrate on the attitude of the seeker in the presence of a divine Entity:

I SING, I SMILE

I sing because You sing,
I smile because You smile.
Because You play on the flute
I have become Your flute.
You play in the depths of my heart.
You are mine, I am Yours:
This is my sole identification.
In one Form
You are my Mother and Father eternal
And Consciousness-moon, Consciousness-sun,
All-pervading.[275]

This alternation of seemingly different and opposite faces of God seems to stem from events that have taken place on a deeper soul's level, where consciousness is one and indivisible,

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[274] *Ibid*., p. 70.
[275] *Ibid*., p. 55.

the substance of pure, undifferentiated Being. Julian of Norwich writes, for example:

> I saw and understood . . . the property of the Fatherhood, the property of the Motherhood, and the property of the Lordhood, in one God.[276]

From the testimony of these and other mystics, it appears that to realise God in one of His aspects need not exclude the seeker from realising Him in countless others for, having arrived at the place where God is, one then sees Him in all His myriad forms. When Sri Chinmoy introduces a spray of images in his poems to denote these forms he invites the reader to enter into that fulness in which God is approached on all levels:

> O SAVIOUR
>
> O Saviour dear,
> You are so near.
> O Lover kind,
> Bind my heart, bind.
> O Father pure,
> I am all Yours, sure.[277]

The flawless harmony of this poem, its synthesis between speech and substance, proclaims that God is a living experience. What we perceive when we read it is an unveiled intuition of God, an intuition that has come to us still bathed in that first light of ecstasy. The love bond that is so much the core of this poem brings us to that group of poems in which God is portrayed as the Lover or its more lyrical extension, the Beloved. Mary Anita Ewer comments:

> Along all the roads that mystics follow there are signposts pointing to the mystic marriage. It is difficult to discuss any phase of mystic symbolism without bringing in the subject of a Divine love-union.[278]

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[276] Ewer, p. 165.
[277] *From the Source to the Source*, p. 271.
[278] Ewer, p. 168 and the following quotation by Thomas Aquinas.

Thomas Aquinas explains further:

> The soul in the preceding degrees, loves and is loved in return . . . but in this, in an admirable and ineffable way . . . she holds and is herself held; she clasps and she is closely embraced, and by the bond of love she unites herself with God, one with one, alone with Him.

Around the concept of God as the Beloved, Sri Chinmoy accumulates an entire language and atmosphere of love, so that we come to recognise the presence of the Beloved even in those poems where He is not explicitly named:

> Who passes by, who passes by,
> Blossoming the lotus
> With the touch of His magic Feet?
> Behold, He illumines my inner world
> And inspires me in silence supreme
> To dive within.[279]

Sri Chinmoy's use of the pronoun "He" makes the central figure in this poem appear mysterious and nebulous. As the realisation gradually dawns upon us that it is God who has passed so near, the flowers beneath His Feet opening in adoration at His touch, we cannot help but be struck by the fact that it is we, and not the poet, who have answered the poem's opening question. In that swift onrush of recognition, something of the magic of a direct encounter with God is imparted to us, for although the personal aspect of God is reduced to a minimum, we seem to catch the fragrance of His presence.

In other poems of this kind, it is again the reader's own discovery, beyond the borders of the poem, that proves to be the poet's aim and for this reason the poems seem to be pregnant with secret expectation:

> Whose beautiful Eye at every moment
> Sends me a thrill of delight?
> Is it You who have given me

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[279] *Supreme, Teach Me How to Surrender*, p. 80.

The infinite Love of Your inner Light?
I do not know who I am.
You and I secretly meet
And exchange our hearts' divine ideas and ideals,
Visions and mission,
Nobody else knows save and except we two.[280]

Poems such as this – tenuous, full of nuance and of perceptions we can scarcely define – exploit a subtle confusion between the human and the Divine levels of experience.

In the poem below, to take a further example, the figure of God acts and moves in a manner suggestive of an ordinary human being. The only proof of our conviction that this is, indeed, God is the feeling we carry in our hearts. Even his normally telling use of initial capitalisation for "You" is missing:

Who has come into my broken home
    on this dark night
With a lamp in his hand?
O, I know not.
Don't you know that this place is only
    a forest of thorns?
What kind of temptation-life
Have you created for me?
With what hope have you come to me?
What have you received from my heart-room?[281]

In a uniquely compelling way, with searching questions and a mysterious Tagore-like touch to his images, Sri Chinmoy forces the reader to plumb the depths of his intuitive faith in order to meet the basic aesthetic demands of the poem. Poems of this kind awaken in us a new sensibility and this in itself constitutes a new understanding of God.

Inevitably, the link between God and the unknown figure in these poems is always made correctly, for the poet has knit into his verse significant emotional pointers. At the

[280] *Illumination-Song and Liberation-Dance*, part 3, p. 25.
[281] *Ibid*., p. 15.

same time, he steers clear of the more sensual language that has on occasions emerged in the divine poetry of both East and West. Sri Chinmoy's words shine with a purity that could never, even in the most unsympathetic reading, be interpreted as outpourings of profane love:

> My Beloved, I love you.
> For you I have brought
> A few beautiful flowers
> That I have collected early in the morning.
> I wish to adore you with these flowers.
> Ah, you are smiling at me because you know
> That these flowers actually belong to you.
> I am decorating you with your own gifts.[282]

Where Sri Chinmoy's language becomes most loving and most tender, it is still characterised by a reverence for God, a soulful quality that irradiates both language and scene. Man's true dignity, he infers, consists in being the focus of God's boundless love:

> I SHALL LISTEN
>
> I shall listen to Your command, I shall.
> In Your sky I shall fly, I shall fly.
> Eternally You are mine, my very own.
> You are my heart's wealth.
> For You at night in tears I shall cry,
> For You at dawn with light I shall smile
> For You, for You, Beloved, only for You.[283]

The poems I have discussed to this point span a wide range of human experiences and relationships, which the poet has taken as tokens of the "play" between man and God. At the opposite extreme from this area of symbolism is that set of transcendental terms which

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[282] *Pole-Star Promise-Light*, part 3, p. 2.
[283] *My Flute*, p. 56.

seeks to convey the more impersonal aspects of God. Evelyn Underhill writes that in the context of the theory of immanence,

> the quest of the Absolute is no long journey, but a realisation of something which is implicit in the self and in the universe: an opening of the eyes of the soul upon the Reality in which it is bathed.[284]

It is a discovery that one's own soul houses the Infinite and the Eternal. In essence, these two approaches to God are not as different as they might appear, for the final end of the seeker's journeying towards a personal God is also this kind of enlightenment. Nor does a personal approach to God exclude a worship of His impersonal attributes. In the case of Sri Chinmoy, he may be classed among that group of mystics whom Evelyn Underhill refers to as having achieved a "synthetic vision of God":[285]

> These [Kabir, Ruysbroeck and the Sufi poet, Rumi] have resolved the perpetual opposition between the personal and impersonal, the transcendent and immanent, static and dynamic aspects of the Divine Nature; between the Absolute of philosophy and the "sure true Friend" of devotional religion. They have done this, not by taking these apparently incompatible concepts one after the other; but by ascending to a height of spiritual intuition at which they are, as Ruysbroeck said, "melted and merged in the Unity," and perceived as the completing opposites of a perfect Whole.

Sri Chinmoy's synthesis of these differing poles is illustrated by the following poem:

> My world is for Your Feet.
> My life is for Your Dream.
> O Silence of Infinity,
> O Immortality of Heaven,
> Come, come, come.

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[284] *Mysticism*, p. 118.
[285] Introduction to *One Hundred Poems of Kabir*, p. 9. Also the following quotation.

This heart remains awake.[286]

Set comfortably alongside the “Feet” and “Dream” of the personal God are transcendent symbols, such as “Silence of Infinity” and “Immortality of Heaven”. When used exclusively, abstract words such as the Beyond, the One, the Unknown, the Source, the Eternal and so on create an image of a Deity who is boundless, formless and non-manifest:

I SAW MY SOURCE

With ecstasy pure
I saw my Source,
With surrender sure
I shall take His course.[287]

•

THE ETERNAL WATCHES

The Eternal watches time
And
Sees how long the seeker
Remains in the bosom of night.[288]

•

O Hope-River,
Carry me to the ultimate Beyond
Of Infinity Unknown.[289]

These three short poems exhibit the unfailing tact with which Sri Chinmoy introduces the

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[286] *The Garden of Love-Light*, part 2, p. 21.
[287] *From the Source to the Source,* p. 66.
[288] *Transcendence-Perfection*, No. 642.
[289] *The Garden of Love-Light*, part 1, p. 4.

language of ultimates. He does not overwhelm the reader with philosophical explanations of these terms. Rather, he treats such terms according to their original function as images, images which derive from the spatial and temporal thinking that is fundamental to human experience, but which obliquely suggest That which passes beyond both time and space. Other poets also allude to an Absolute God in this way:

> I saw Eternity the other night
> Like a great Ring of pure and endless light
> All calm, as it was bright.
>
> – Vaughan[290]

> To see a World in a grain of sand,
> And a Heaven in a wild flower,
> Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand,
> And Eternity in an hour.
>
> – Blake[291]

Sometimes the poet combines the language of ultimates with a particular quality, such as beauty, compassion or love, in order to create a new epithet for God:

> WHAT WAS AND WHAT IS
>
> What was, still is:
> My heart's inner cry
> For Infinity's Truth.
>
> What is, shall remain so:
> My surrender-life
> To Eternity's Love.[292]

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[290] From "The World", *The Faber Book of Religious Verse*, p. 175.
[291] From "Auguries of Innocence", *The Poems of William Blake*, W.H. Stevenson, ed. (London: Longmans, 1971), p. 585.
[292] *Europe-Blossoms*, p. 43.

SWEET, SWEETER, SWEETEST

Sweet is my Lord,
Him I have realised as the Eternal Truth.

Sweeter is my Lord,
Him I have realised as the only Doer.

Sweetest is my Lord,
Him I have realised as the Enjoyer Supreme.[293]

Symbols that are drawn from the great impersonal forces – the sun and the ocean – add a definite visual impact to this sphere of ultimate terms. We see man immersed in God, as a drop in the ocean or a ray in the sun:

O Life Infinite, give me the eternal hunger,
aspiration-cry.
The tiniest drop will lose its raison d'être
In the heart of the boundless ocean.
In fire and air Your Life of Spirit I behold.
O Beauty, O Beauty's Gold,
O Light of the Supreme![294]

Although these poems, because of the nature of their subject, are more difficult to penetrate than poems relating to the personal God, they do reach further than philosophy or discourse in presenting God as an actuality, not an abstraction. At a certain point, the language of symbolism necessarily takes over from the language of concepts in expressing the totality of God for the reason that symbols are infinitely suggestive. Their meaning cannot ever be finally limited or fixed. Consequently, many of these poems, even when they are imperfectly understood, are intense and moving by virtue of the concrete imaginative experience that

[293] *My Flute*, p. 2.
[294] From "O Light of the Supreme", *My Flute*, p. 25.

we, as readers, are offered.

In studying the firmament of Sri Chinmoy's words for God, one can certainly detect the existence of separate categories of symbols, according to the manner in which God is apprehended. However, the number of poems which balance a delightful and ambrosial vision of God against great surging poetic generalisations would seem to indicate that for the one who is having the direct experience of God, no such clear categories exist. The characteristic attitude of the mystic is of boundless receptivity. He opens himself to the experience, whether it be one of intimate love or fathomless peace or incomprehensible light.

When the transfigured soul, who is also a poet or writer, wishes to convey a little of his experience through the medium of language, then certain images and symbols suggest themselves as being more readily appropriate than others. Yet even this selection may have been made by God for the poet. Yeats suggests that the symbol the poet elects to use "is indeed the only possible expression of some invisible essence, a transparent lamp about a spiritual flame."[295]

After closely reading the works of Sri Chinmoy, I am convinced that what we accept as symbols in many cases – Beloved, Boatman, Sun, Master and Father, to name a few – are, in fact, more than symbols. I believe they must constitute the original elements of the mystic vision of God. Who can say whether the figure of the Boatman is a formulation of the imagination or a fact of the interior life? Who can perceive where plain statement ends and metaphorical expression begins? Mystic poets do not generally have a vast storehouse of literary symbols on hand. They speak simply, of what they know and of what they have felt. To what then can we attribute the fecundity of images in such a one as Sri Chinmoy? The answer lies somewhere on the heights of silence where the lustre of God's myriad forms is first perceived by the aspiring human soul.

[295] W.B. Yeats, *Selected Criticism* (London: Pan, 1970), p. 22.

Chapter VI

1971-1981: Inspiration-Flow

> The supreme Art is to know the Supreme Artist intimately, within and without. This knowledge, well-established, cannot but guide all our movements on artistic lines. And this knowledge will be the basis of a perfectly beautiful life within and without. Art in the most effective sense of the term is a sublime truth that draws our soul from within towards the Infinite Vast.
>
> – Sri Chinmoy

As a spiritual poet, Sri Chinmoy's poetry, and indeed all his artistic creations, spring from a profound experience of God. In God he finds the Source of beauty, delight and wisdom and, as he drinks deeply of these qualities, so he moulds his existence that it may reflect them more fully. He becomes an artist whose raw material is his own life, whose every song, brushstroke or word is borne on the wings of divine love and carries the message of oneness with the Infinite.

In this chapter, I shall try to assemble Sri Chinmoy's expressions of his artistic purpose and show how he assimilated them into his artistic productions during the decade 1971-1981. Although the chapter will follow a broad chronological outline, the reader will find these ten years replete with such a wealth of artistic works that weeks or even days separate certain major undertakings, so that they appear to merge as part of a single uninterrupted and immense act. In these ten years, Sri Chinmoy published close to 10,000 poems, painted over 135,000 paintings and composed some 3,000 songs in English and Bengali. It is a composite achievement of a scale which, I believe, is without parallel in our times and perhaps also in times past. It signifies a quest for perfection, an endless growth and expansion, that has led Sri Chinmoy into many and varied fields of artistic manifestation and impelled him to express himself abundantly within each one.

These few details suggest that for Sri Chinmoy spirituality and spiritual poetry do not constitute a specialised mode of living and writing but are based on a wide perception of life and include the whole range of man's activities and emotions in their sphere. Spirituality, as Sri Chinmoy understands it, accepts life as it is because it sees that life harbours the truth and beauty of the Supreme Artist. The realisation of this fact transforms

man's existence within and without, as the following prose poem, published in 1971, depicts:

WHERE IS GOD

Where is God?

Where is the limit of beauty?

O All-Beauty, where art Thou?

If Thou art all-where why then do my eyes fail to see Thee?

Why is my core not flooded and thrilled with Thy sweet and celestial Smile?

Where art Thou, my Lord, where?

I take great pains and leave no stone unturned to find out even the most trivial thing when it is lost. But, alas, for millennia Thou hast been away from me. To my wide surprise, I feel no pang within me to vision Thee.

Why is it so?

Boundless is my sorrow, not because our union is severed, but because I have not cried for Thee with a snow-white heart even for a brief second.

My Lord, the face of Truth is at last revealed:
Thou art everywhere when I say
'Yes',
Thou art nowhere when I say
'No'.[296]

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[296] *Man and God*, pp. 7-10.

In his beautifully cadenced prose, Sri Chinmoy conveys the pangs of the heart that fails to have the vision of God. The seeker's inner illumination, occurring at the poem's close, stems from his embrace of life – his universal "yes" – for, in his acquiescence, he discovers God. This all-absorbing quality supplied the keynote of Sri Chinmoy's approach to life and art in the decade that followed.

The year 1971, the year of composition of this poem, saw the commencement of publication in book form of Sri Chinmoy's writings since his arrival in America in 1964. Several of these initial volumes, including *My Flute* and *My First Friendship with the Muse*, also contained poems that had been written during the poet's formative years in India. The poems of these volumes are particularly notable for their strict stanzaic forms and careful internal structure of rhyme and rhythm:

A LITTLE

A little joy have I of ceaseless joy,
    A little day of timeless day
Yet knows no bound this empty show of mine;
    I march along a goalless way

O Love! A desert within me ever pines.
    Do turn it into a song of dawn.
I know not in what hour of evil night
    Thou art, my Lord, from me withdrawn.

Life now must reach Thy Breath of Bliss supreme,
    Make Thee the one and only Guide.
Thou art the Bridge between my death and birth;
    O let my longings in Thee abide.[297]

The style of this poem is representative of the poems of this period: the diction is formal and elevated, the rhythm measured and even; there is a technician's care for balance and harmony of parts and a remarkable strength of presence in the speaking voice.

[297] *My Flute*, p. 11.

Sri Chinmoy affirmed his commitment to art at this time in a poem entitled "O Imagination", which begins:

> Imagination, O Imagination!
> You are my life's adoration.
> You I shall not keep afar.
> Imagination, O Imagination![298]

This dedication to imagination is based on Sri Chinmoy's belief that:

> Inside imagination, reality is taking form and shape. Inside imagination a reality is being created which is not yet visible to our naked human eyes. There imagination is becoming creation. What we call imagination is actually the precursor of creation.[299]

In a similar vein, Wallace Stevens confirms: "the imagination is the next greatest power to faith."[300]

In another previously cited poem from *My Flute*, Sri Chinmoy implies that imagination is not all self-effort, that it may in fact be founded on an inner apprehension of God's nature and that man's desire to create declares his wish to be like God:

> I SING, I SMILE
>
> I sing because You sing,
> I smile because You smile.
> Because You play on the flute
> I have become our flute.
> You play in the depths of my heart.
> You are mine, I am Yours:
> This is my sole identification.

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[298] *Ibid*., p. 68.
[299] *Jharna-Kala Art Quarterly*, 2 (Jan-Feb-Mar 1978), p. 7.
[300] A.K. Morris, *Wallace Stevens: Imagination and Faith* (New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1974), p. 4.

In one Form
You are my Mother and Father eternal,
And Consciousness-moon, Consciousness-sun,
All-pervading.[301]

And so the poet sang. Richly. Ceaselessly. In ever-new ways. In March 1973, Sri Chinmoy embarked on *The Dance of Life*, a series of one thousand poems. Unlike other poems that had been composed as single units, this extensive work was the result of a sustained impulse. With up to fifty poems a day streaming from his pen, the poet did not appear to wait upon inspiration. Some years later, he was to comment:

> The value of my achievement does not depend on how much time I have. It depends only on my oneness with the Will of the Supreme.[302]

The poet endeavoured to become a pure limbeck through which his inner world of vision could achieve a concrete and tangible form. Spirituality to him was an experience of plenitude. In one poem from this series he announced:

Every minute inspires me
    To attempt.
Every hour perfects me
    To ascend.
Every day illumines me
    To reach.[303]

He saw the creative arts as the offspring of spirituality, interpenetrated with it – even as the wave rises up from the sea and yet is not separate from it:

> Spirituality is the sea; art is a wave. Spirituality is the sea of God's all-transcending Universal Beauty Art is a wave of God's all-revealing Universal

[301] *My Flute*, p. 55.
[302] *Jharna-Kala Art Quarterly, 1* (Oct-Nov-Dec 1977), p. 32.
[303] *The Dance of Life*, part 1, p. 17.

Beauty. Spirituality embodies; art reveals.[304]

The poet's unbridled creative inspiration of 1973 also resulted in the publication of eight major spiritual plays and a number of musical compositions. In October, he commenced writing *The Wings of Light*, a second series of one thousand poems. Working round the clock, Sri Chinmoy completed this series within nine weeks. Although he had laid his soul bare in these diverse poems, we cannot help but be touched by the poignant lament of one of his songs from the same period:

How many songs have I sung?
How many more have I still to sing
here on earth?
Within and without I have been
searching for myself through my songs.
With deep pangs my heart cries;
My self-form is not visible yet.
In the vast life-ocean, I am floating all alone.[305]

In his book *Poetry and Experience*, Archibald Macleish quotes some aphorisms by Lu Chi, a 4th Century Chinese poet who expresses this lifelong struggle of the poet to give meaningful shape to his heart's wealth:

We poets struggle with Non-being to force it to yield Being;
We knock upon silence for an answering music.

We enclose boundless space in a square foot of paper;
We pour out deluge from the inch space of the heart.[306]

Both Sri Chinmoy and Lu Chi aver that the knowledge poetry imparts to the poet is that of self-discovery; the skill of poetry consists in trapping this self in a finite form.

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[304] *Jharna-Kala Art Quarterly, 2* (Jan-Feb-Mar 1978), p. 1. From a lecture delivered at the Ponce Art Museum, Puerto Rico, June 1975.
[305] *The Garden of Love-Light*, part 2, p. 4.
[306] *Poetry and Experience* (London: Bodley Head, 1960), p. 8.

Compelled from within to continue with unabated speed and intensity, Sri Chinmoy greeted the dawn of the new year 1974, with a third series of a thousand poems. This series, named *The Golden Boat*, reveals the true character of Sri Chinmoy's poetic spirit: it is his love of self-transcendence, the urge to outreach himself, that lies at the base of these "adventures" in creative expression. In self-transcendence one does not seek to compete with others but only to improve oneself. In the case of Sri Chinmoy, it meant transcending his own previous capacities in the field of poetry. Hence, by the time he came to write *The Golden Boat*, he was able to apply himself to the task not at the rate of fifty poems a day, or even 150 a day, but more. It is recorded that on February 2nd, 1974, Sri Chinmoy composed 208 poems in a twenty-four hour period. On April 28th of the same year, he completed a total of 360 poems in the same time span. The April poems were published as a separate volume under the title *The Goal is Won*.

These worlds of poetry that Sri Chinmoy was able to bring forth with such boundless inspiration can only be comprehended in terms of the soul's response to the call of God. Tagore, for example, viewed art as a surplus of the communion of the soul with the real:

> The voice that is just enough can speak and cry to the extent needed for everyday use, but that which is abundant sings, and in it we find our joy. Art reveals man's wealth of life.[307]

Sri Chinmoy adds to this conception with his statement: "The soul itself is an artist and its capacity is boundless."[308]

As one becomes aware of this soul-force in Sri Chinmoy's works, one can feel him drawing on its immense power and fecundity. Eliot's perception of the extinction of personality in art is given a far greater dimension in this context for, in the extinction of the smaller self, we come to be aware of the vastness of the soul or larger Self.

In one song, Sri Chinmoy intimates that even his praise of God in the poems may be understood as the self-praise of God who is both Doer and Enjoyer, with the poet acting as the vehicle of this enjoyment:

> You are nothing but beauty, eternal beauty,

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[307] From "The Religion of an Artist" in *A Tagore Reader*, Amiya Chakravarty ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966), p. 231.
[308] *Art's Life and the Soul's Light*, p. 20.

Wherever I turn my eyes.
Do You always drink the nectar of Your
    self-form
Residing in my eyes?
The waves of tune and sweet and melodious
    songs
That create heart-elevating resonance,
O Beloved, do You hear them
By using my ears?[309]

The concept of the creative artist as an instrument of God proves a constant theme in Sri Chinmoy's work.

From June 10th to June 13th, 1974 Sri Chinmoy composed *365 Father's Day Prayers*. While all the poems in this volume do not take the form of prayer, there are a number that exhibit prayer's precatory quality. In the following poem, for instance, the poet invokes God's inspiration and realisation – both of which he needs to sustain his creative endeavour:

LORD, GIVE ME

Lord, do give me the inspiration to speak.
    Needless to say,
I shall speak only about You.

Lord, do give me the realisation to write.
    Needless to say,
I shall write only about you.[310]

Later that month, Sri Chinmoy began a lecture tour of Europe. He employed every spare minute in the writing of *Europe-Blossoms*, a fourth series of one thousand poems. We see him absorbed in the core of silence while engaged in multifarious outer activities. He explains the need for the spiritual poet to plumb the depths of silence in a poem from the

[309] "The Singers of Eternity's Patience-Pride", (pamphlet, 1973), p. 6.
[310] *365 Father's Day Prayers*, p. 159.

series:

IN SILENCE

In silence
My heart-life
Prepares my lectures.

In silence
My soul-light
Composes my songs.

In silence
My God-love
Perfects my life.[311]

Silence penetrates to the inmost sanctuary of the poet's being and we see the creative faculty in him distributing the fruits of this silence in and through his various expressions. In an earlier prose poem from *Songs of the Soul*, Sri Chinmoy offered a glowing tribute to man's inner silence:

MY SILENCE

My silence bridges the gulf between my life's success and my life's failure. My silence does not magnify my defects. Nor does it connive at them. My silence transforms my defects into strength indomitable.

My silence is a climbing flame that warms my world of despair. My silence is my inner light. No problem of mine can defy solution. My silence is a selfless distributor of joy to ever-widening horizons.

In my silence I become a man of sterling character, a prolific writer, a voracious reader, a divine lover, a profound inspirer and a triumphant liberator. In my deep silence I never become a victim to ignorance, the greatest calamity

[311] *Europe-Blossoms*, p. 476.

> that can befall any human being. In my growing silence I am convinced that even as a man on this earth I shall be able to reach heights, transcendental, divine.
>
> My glowing silence alone can accelerate my Godward march.
>
> My spreading silence makes me see, feel and possess satisfaction, unalloyed satisfaction. No more have I to let loose a tirade of tenebrous dissatisfaction.
>
> In activity and vitality I proudly and wrongly feel that I shall have to take care of the whole world. In the heart of silence I humbly and unmistakably realise that it is the Divinity within the world that took care, takes care and shall forever take care of the entire world.
>
> Silence is my unceasing petition. Silence is my unreserved preparation. Silence is my unlimited realisation. Silence is the unfathomable fount of my life here on earth, there in Heaven.
>
> What God's Silence is . . . is the Eternal Truth. What God's Silence serves is the Eternal Purpose. What God's Silence becomes is the inevitable Fulfilment.[312]

For the spiritual poet, as for the spiritual man, it is silence and not worldly experience that can communicate wisdom. And this wisdom can only ever be partially conveyed in the forms of language. T.S. Eliot affirms that

> wisdom is greater than any sum of wise sayings . . . The wisdom of a human being resides as much in silence as in speech . . . Wisdom is a native gift of intuition, ripened and given application by experience, for understanding the nature of things, certainly of living things, most certainly of the human heart. In some men it may appear fitfully and occasionally, or once in a lifetime, in the rapture of a single experience beatific or awful: in a man like Goethe it appears to have been constant, steady and serene. But the wise man, in contrast to the mere worldly wise on the one hand and the man of some intense vision of the heights or the depths on the other, is one whose wisdom springs from spiritual sources . . .[313]

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[312] *Songs of the Soul*, pp. 33-34.
[313] From "Goethe as the Sage", in *On Poetry and Poets* (London: Faber & Faber, 1965), p. 221.

Because all creativity, as Sri Chinmoy understands it, posits self-discovery as its ultimate goal, it offers man a means of drawing nearer to this inner spiritual source. In a song from the volume *Supreme, I Sing Only for You*, also published in 1974, Sri Chinmoy describes this process:

> O my poem you are the lotus
> Of my heart.
> You bring into my heart
> Nectar-light from Heaven.
> When my life flows
> With the river of sorrow with its countless
> waves,
> May your magic touch
> Hide me in the waters of liberation-sea.[314]

Towards the end of 1974, on November 19th, Sri Chinmoy launched into a new field of creative activity: painting. With his total literary output standing at two hundred books of poems, plays, short stories, essays and lectures, Sri Chinmoy now applied the goals of self-discovery and life-perfection to the medium of art. Calling this art *Jharna-Kala*, a term which he translated from the Bengali as "Fountain-Art", Sri Chinmoy aspired to produce paintings that stemmed from the source, from the fount of creation. As in his poetry, he proclaimed that in order to accomplish this lofty goal, he needs must become a clear and perfect instrument of the Self within. This is not a studied mental process. Rather, it is a process of expansion so that one may become wide enough to accommodate the new thoughts, new visions, new ideals and new forms that flow directly from the Source.

To become an instrument in Sri Chinmoy's sense does not mean that the poet or artist is an amanuensis, simply transcribing his inner experiences in a mechanical or automatic way. Sri Chinmoy relates:

> Everything is in seed-form in the inner world first, and then only can it become

[314] *Supreme, I Sing Only for You*, p. 26.

> manifested in the outer world.[315]

In giving expression to this seed-form, the artist or poet confers a delightful form upon it at the same time. He is both a seer and an artist or poet. The tradition of the seer-poet is one that is firmly implanted in Indian culture and dates from Vedic times. In his study of the Vedas, J. Gonda writes:

> The ancients were well aware of the resemblance between, and in many cases practical identity of, poets and visionary sages, the rather extensive terminology in this field often admitting of both translations. A Vedic poet is a seer . . . a gifted man who with his inner or spiritual eye sees things divine and transcendental, and who through the power of his vision brings the past into the present.[316]

The seer-poet is one in whom truth and beauty are fulfilled simultaneously, whose life may be expected to be the perfect reflex of his inner illumination and whose lucid "beholding" of the truth has evoked a full measure of creative capacity in the form of inspired speech.

The concept of the seer-poet is not unfamiliar to Western writers also. It is implicit in Shelley's famous line: "A poem is the very image of life expressed in its eternal truth,"[317] in Wordsworth's "Poetry is the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge"[318] and in the following extract from Browning's essay on Shelley:

> [The Poet] is rather a seer . . . than a fashioner, and what he produces will be less a work than an effluence. That effluence cannot easily be considered in abstraction from his personality, – being indeed the very radiance and aroma of his personality, projected from it but not separated.[319]

For Sri Chinmoy, it is quite possible that a man can both envision the truth and grow into

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[315] *Art's Life and the Soul's Light*, p. 68.
[316] *Vedic Literature,* The History of Indian Literature Series (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1975), Vol. 1: No. 1, p. 65.
[317] *Defense of Poetry*, ed. H.F.B. Brett-Smith (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1967), p. 30.
[318] Preface to "Lyrical Ballads", in R. Brimley Johnson ed., *Poetry and the Poets* (London: Faber & Gwyer, 1926), p. 208.
[319] *An Essay on Percy Bysshe Shelley* in Brett-Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 66.

the truth; that he can sing abundantly and live completely, thereby becoming "the whole man". With cogent argument, the Indian savant Nolini Kanta Gupta also argues this point:

> If the aim of spirituality is to know the Self, then the aim of art too is the same. If the seer of the spiritual truth can see the Spirit everywhere, without excluding the body or any part of it, then why should the artist not be able to manifest the glory of the Spirit through colour, sound, word and stone and thus play the role of a truly spiritual man?[320]

In obeying both his spiritual and creative impulses, it is possible for the artist to fuse his life and his art into one harmonious whole.

On December 10th, 1974 Sri Chinmoy completed his first one thousand paintings- astonishing both for their subtlety and beauty. By February 26th, 1975 the number stood at ten thousand and by October 3rd that same year, it had grown to one hundred thousand. The paintings ranged in size from smaller canvasses to canvasses that were several metres long. All of these paintings were created with the sole purpose of offering inspiration, delight and upliftment to the viewer. In art, as in poetry, Sri Chinmoy urges an appreciation based on the heart's feeling of oneness with the creative work. He writes:

> If you enjoy art with your heart's love, then automatically you are getting inspiration from it. But if you enjoy it with your mind, then you are stuck there. You are only measuring the art, judging it. At that time, even if you enjoy it, still the art does not come as an inspiration. But if you enjoy it with your heart, you are identifying yourself with the work. Your heart receives the inspiration from the art because oneness is there.[321]

The term "suspension of disbelief", which has become a commonplace in Western literary criticism, points in a similar direction. By suspending our disbeliefs, doubts, even our intellectual curiosity – all of which bind us to ourselves – we open the way to a more complete identification with the art form before us. We merge in it, we become one with it and this oneness in itself is a most precious experience for it signifies an expansion of our

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[320] From "Spirituality in Art", trans. from the Bengali by Sri Chinmoy, in *Jharna-Kala Art Quarterly*, 2 (Apr-May-Jun 1978): p. 31.
[321] *Art's Life and the Soul's Light,* p. 46.

ordinary selves that we may encompass another. At its pinnacle, we claim the work as our own creation, the child of our own imagination.

With poetic beauty, Sri Chinmoy reveals:

Art is not meant
For man's understanding.
It is meant
For man's blending
With the inner life's inner ecstasy.[322]

On November 1st, 1975, towards the close of a most remarkable year, Sri Chinmoy spontaneously wrote 843 poems in the space of twenty-four hours. These poems were published under the title *Transcendence-Perfection*. While highlighting many aspects of the spiritual life, they also included a number of illumining comments about the role of the poet:

EACH SONG IS A FLAME

Each soulful song is a flame
In the aspiring heart.
Where is that heart?
It is in the supreme art
    Of constant self-giving.[323]

The self-giving referred to by the poet in this poem is that of the finite to the Infinite. It is the "art of the heart" that the poem signals.

In another poem, Sri Chinmoy declares that his songs are his outbursts of joy at living in the Supreme:

I HAVE FOUND YOUR NEST

O Lord,

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[322] From "Fountain-Fuara", a series of poems on art in *Jharna-Kala Art Quarterly*, 2 (July-Aug-Sept 1978): 21.
[323] *Transcendence-Perfection*, no. 146.

In Your Eyes of Beauty
I have found Your Nest.
Delight is my name
    When I live in Your Nest.
The heart of a singing bird
My life becomes
    In song's world of silence.[324]

And he dedicates his life to ushering forth songs "from Eternity's Songbook":

O BEAUTY'S PEACE

Sleep, sleep, O Beauty's peace,
    Sleep within me.
I shall give you a song from Eternity's Songbook,
Sleep, sleep within me.[325]

At the close of 1975, halfway through the decade under review, we observe that the poet's artistic purpose and theory have remained consistent. The field of his creative outpourings may have diversified, the sheer volume in each sphere – that is, in poetry, painting and music – may have increased beyond all expectation, but the basic proposition is still the same: to do each of these things only with the view of becoming a more perfect instrument of the Supreme. In Sri Chinmoy's own words:

> I have written considerably, I have spoken considerably, I have sung considerably and also I have composed considerably. Each of these activities I try to do as a devoted instrument of my Inner Pilot. I clearly see that I am a mere instrument and I devotedly try to listen to His inner command. My Inner Pilot executes His Will in and through me according to my power of receptivity.[326]

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[324] *Ibid*., no. 714.
[325] *Ibid*., no 810.
[326] *Jharna-Kala Art Quarterly*, 2 (Apr-May-June 1978): 26.

In the years that are covered by this study, I do not believe it is possible to trace any ripening or maturing of Sri Chinmoy's vision itself. However, this vision is constantly touched by newness in the way that Sri Chinmoy applies it to each new field that he enters. In art, poetry and music he finds different ways of unfolding his inner experiences and any advances he has made within these various modes of expression derive from an inner urge to transcend the limitations of each respective field. It is significant to note that changes of style or technique in Sri Chinmoy's works are not precipitated by influences from outside but appear to be the natural outcome of his extensive explorations in the arts. In the field of poetry, for example, although Sri Chinmoy was an early admirer of the Romantic poets – Keats and Shelley, in particular – the changes he has wrought in the English language and the additions he has brought to it (such as the compound noun discussed in chapter one) are uniquely his own. He stands alone among the modern poets for although he is representative of man's deepest spiritual aspirations, he is unrepresentative of the modern poetic tradition by virtue of the fact that he is absorbed in the beauty of the inner life, in the soul-fact, and it is upon this fact that all his artistic creations are based. The words of Emerson seem particularly applicable to Sri Chinmoy:

> The poet has a new thought: he has a whole new experience to unfold; he will tell us how it was with him, and all men will be the richer in his fortune. The experience of each new age requires a new confession, and the world seems always waiting for its poet.[327]

The one who would try to say something new or to use language in a new way has to forge his own path. It is no little thing, Yeats writes,

> to achieve anything in any art, to stand alone perhaps for many years, to go a path no other man has gone, to accept one's own thought when the thought of others has the authority of the world behind it . . . to give one's life as well as one's words which are so much nearer to one's soul to the criticism of the world.[328]

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[327] "The Poet". *Essays*, p. 208.

[328] Quoted in Richard Ellman, *Yeats: The Man and the Masks* (London: Faber & Faber, 1961), p. 5.

That Sri Chinmoy is conscious of his artistic isolation is glimpsed in the following poem:

> I shall collect flower-poems
> From the garden of Light;
> Therefore, I am flying in the sky
> With the southern wind.
> I have no one with me.
> All alone, endlessly I am flying,
> And I am all lost in the beauty of teeming clouds.[329]

The poet who heralds something new – in the case of Sri Chinmoy, it is the liberation of spiritual poetry from its commonly accepted position as "a variety of minor poetry"[330] and its return to the status of major poetry – must, as both Wordsworth and Emerson confirmed, himself create the taste by which he is to be enjoyed. In the words of Wordsworth,

> Every author, as far as he is great and at the same time *original*, has had the task of *creating* the taste by which he is to be enjoyed: so has it been, so will it continue to be.[331]

One of the most powerful ways in which Sri Chinmoy creates this taste is by multiplying the examples of particular points of view and expressions. He has created not works but "worlds" of poetry, painting, music and the like, and his opus as a whole has assumed tremendous proportions. The reader cannot help but be attracted by the effulgence of Sri Chinmoy's spiritual personality. In a letter addressed to the poet, composer Leonard Bernstein wrote:

> It is my pleasure and honour to write you these words of admiration for your astonishing achievements.
>
> You are a miraculous model of the abundance in the creative life that we

[329] *Pole-Star Promise-Light*, part 4, p. 1.
[330] T.S. Eliot, "Religion and Literature", *Selected Essays* (London: Faber & Faber, 1972): p. 390. Eliot argues for a more general awareness to be operative in religious poetry.
[331] "An Essay, Supplementary to the Preface to the 'Poems' of 1815" in Brimley Johnson, p. 250.

> lesser mortals seek, and I can only hope that I can some day meet you and perhaps participate in that cosmic fountain of stillness and profound energy which you inhabit.[332]

Similarly, the poet Archibald MacLeish, writing to an acquaintance, enthused about Sri Chinmoy's painting:

> . . . I share your admiration and wonder – admiration for the flood of painting suddenly produced in so short a time – wonder that he could endure so great a gift.[333]

These two letters were written in 1977. The previous year had been a year of music for Sri Chinmoy. In addition to giving countless concerts, where he performed on flute, violin, cello, esraj and other instruments, he composed many songs in Bengali and provided English translations. In their transparency and delicacy, these lyrics seem to partake of the softness of their Bengali counterparts. Even in translation, they would seem to have something of the pure musical note still clinging to them and this gives renewed meaningfulness to their diction, style and length. For the most part, these lyrics portray transient moods: undefined yearnings, a tenderness that is at once loving and plaintive, a sense of pain or a rush of joy The tone of these lyrics is frequently ambiguous, shading from one emotion into another almost imperceptibly In the following typical song, for example, the speaker appears helplessly caught amidst life's opposing forces but in the poem's final line he resolves this conflict and is infused with the hope of eventual blossoming:

> The wave subsides and the wave rises.
> The flower withers and the flower blossoms.
> There is no end to human wants
> And human achievements.
> Nothing is permanent and nothing is fleeting.
> Then for whom shall we cry,
> For what shall we cry?

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[332] Private letter, October 3rd, 1977. Published in *Among the Great,* (New York: Agni Press, 1978), p. 125.
[333] Private letter, November 15th, 1977. Excerpts published in *Among the Great*, p. 126.

Whom shall we invoke
With a new thought and new form?
Everything eventually blossoms.[334]

It is as if the poet, in these lyrics, is articulating a mood, a passing vibration from the world around. This mood need not necessarily be his own – it may be one that he has absorbed on the strength of his identification with another person. Consequently, there are many lyrics that express states or feelings which cannot be attributed to the poet directly This detachment of the writer from his work need not affect the integrity of his writing, for it is the business of the poet to perceive a particular truth-essence and transform it into the material of his poetry. This truth may or may not be inherent in his own life. Sri Chinmoy explains further:

> It is said that a poet has no character of his own. Now I wish to say, why should a poet have a character of his own? A poet identifies with truth. If he has to express anger through his poem, then naturally he will identify himself with the anger-consciousness. If he has to express love, then he will have to identify himself with love-consciousness. On the strength of his identification with the reality he has envisioned, he reveals to the world his inspiration and aspiration.
>
> A poet sees the truth from various angles. He is not obligated to see the truth always from one angle. A poet can speak of one particular subject in various ways. This moment he may praise and invoke death and the next moment he may criticise death. That does not mean that the poet is a man of no principles. Far from it! When he stays in a particular plane of consciousness, according to the capacity and receptivity that he has at that time, he sees death in one form. When he stays in another plane of consciousness, he may see death in a different way, with a different aspect.[335]

This expansion or enlargement of the self through identification and oneness cannot occur when the ego is ascendant for it is a process that is based on a supreme form of empathy, antipathetic to the domain of ego.

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[334] *Illumination-Song and Liberation-Dance*, part 5, p. 9.
[335] August 28th, 1975, an address by the poet at a poetry reading in Manhattan, New York, published in *Aum Magazine*, (August, 1975), p. 49.

Placing Sri Chinmoy's English poems alongside his translations from the Bengali songs, one can discern two distinctive and complementary forces at play. One might almost refer to them as a classical and a romantic strain. While there is a degree of overlapping between the two areas, it is instructive to broadly classify the English poems as poetry of statement and the song translations as poetry of search.

The English poems tend to express truth-messages in an extremely compressed and sculptured manner. Sharing many of the qualities of aphorism, they reveal the most profound wisdom within their narrow compass. The words of these poems emit a certain leonine fire, which charges their content with vigour and brilliance.

The songs, by contrast, are more lyrical than aphoristic. They generally express transient moods rather than eternal truths. Their outer form has a slender grace, the words are limpid and transparent. Like a flight of birds, they pass across the vast backdrop of realisation expressed by the poet in his poems of statement.

The bird and the lion, the search and the arrival, becoming and being – between these poles the poetry moves, encompassing man's spiritual journey in its entirety.

In 1977 Sri Chinmoy was engaged in writing a series of short rhyming poems in English. The result was *A Soulful Cry Versus a Fruitful Smile*, a volume of 630 poems varying in length from two to eighteen lines.

The following year, Sri Chinmoy completed *From the Source to the Source*, a book containing 401 rhyming poems also of comparative length. Through these two volumes, Sri Chinmoy hoped to surmount the difficulties raised by the English language with respect to rhyme. Accustomed to the Bengali language, with its natural propensity for rhyme, Sri Chinmoy brought to this new endeavour an unselfconscious and self-delighting spirit; which is captured in the following couplet:

I PLAY

In beauty's sunshine-flames
I play my myriad games.[336]

As with previous volumes of Sri Chinmoy's poetry, the unity of these two major series of

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[336] *A Soulful Cry Versus a Fruitful Smile*, p. 151.

poems does not lie in any precise thematic arrangement but in the poet's soul-power, the pervading consciousness that brought forth and housed these various expressions.

On October 13th, 1978 Sri Chinmoy commenced writing a series of inspirational pieces on art, which he entitled "Fountain-Fuara", "*fuara*" being a Bengali equivalent for "fountain". In these aphorisms, Sri Chinmoy recorded his insights and convictions on the relationship between spirituality and art. When assessed within the perspective of Sri Chinmoy's own poems and paintings, they function as an important measure of his achievement. A brief selection emphasises their role as a central reference for his artistic expressions in all fields:

> Divine art
> Is the crown of the heart
> And the flower of the soul.
>
> Human art represents
> The measured steps of the mind.
> Divine art embodies
> The unfathomable dance of the soul.
>
> Art is Deity's self-giving
> To Beauty's divinity.
>
> Man discovered in art,
> God fulfilled in man.
>
> Art is a secret inspiration
> And sacred mouthpiece
> For the Supreme Artist.[337]

Through these soul-stirring words, Sri Chinmoy encourages artists not to remain with the little satisfaction they derive from their creation but to seek infinite satisfaction in a glimpse of God, the Source. On another occasion he wrote:

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[337] *Jharna-Kala Art Quarterly*, 2 (July-Aug-Sept 1978): pp. 19-21.

> The sooner you can see the Source, the happier you will be. Always we have to try to see the reality in its pristine form. If we see the Source, then naturally we will get infinite joy and infinite satisfaction. Before that, we will get a little satisfaction, and this little satisfaction will remind us of the infinite Satisfaction. But that infinite Satisfaction is found only in the Author of all – God the Artist Supreme, the Painter Supreme, the Singer Supreme, the Musician Supreme, who is the Source of everything.[338]

This re-orientation of art towards a spiritual goal does not lead to a peremptory dismissal of technique. On the contrary, Sri Chinmoy upholds the ideal of excellent technique provided that it is united with genuine artistic inspiration:

> Technique and art are both very important and very closely connected to one another. In art, technique is the body and artistic inspiration in art is the soul. In life, if you have the body's perfection and the soul's revelation that is best. But of the two the soul is more important. Technique helps the soul of art to manifest itself but without the spark of inspiration, art is hollow. If it is just technique, art is nothing. If you don't have technique now, in ten years you can learn technique. But if you don't have the soul, it is and will remain in you a barren desert. This is the trouble with many artists. They have technique but their artistic vision is lacking.[339]

Wassily Kandinsky demonstrates a corresponding belief:

> The artist must have something to say, for mastery over form is not his goal but rather the adapting of form to its inner meaning. That is beautiful which is produced by the inner need, which springs from the soul.[340]

Although Sri Chinmoy had, by 1978, completed his fourteenth year in America (as a resident of New York City), his outlook had been shaped by his early years in India. As a

[338] *Ibid*., 3 (July-Aug-Sept 1980): p. 15.
[339] *Ibid*., 1 (July-Aug-Sept 1977): p. 31.
[340] Quoted by George Wingfield Digby in "Content and Communication in the Visual Arts," L.C. Knights and B. Cottle, editors, *Metaphor and Symbol* (London: Butterworths Scientific Publications, 1960), p. 41.

consequence, he brings to his art and poetry an Eastern reverence for spiritual things over and above the material and marries it with the dynamism and intensity of the West. In his striving for perfection of both the inner and the outer man, the complete harmony of body, mind and soul in every phase of life, we see the combination of Eastern and Western values: the East, with its fundamental perception of vastness and universality; the West, with its abundant concern for proportion and exactitude. The East, with its inner poise and serenity; the West, with its intellectual acumen and reasoning capacity. This synthesis of East and West is seen by the poet as a most necessary advance for the modern world and it is an ideal that he has tried to realise in his writings and in his life. He writes:

> The awakened consciousness of man is visibly tending towards the Divine. This is a most hopeful streak of light amidst the surrounding obscurities of today. This is a moment, not merely of joining hands, but of joining minds, hearts and souls. Across all physical and mental barriers between East and West, high above national standards, above even individual standards, will fly the supreme banner of Divine Oneness.[341]

In October 1979 Sri Chinmoy embarked on what has since proven to be his major poetic work: *Ten Thousand Flower-Flames*. In the year and a half that has elapsed since the dawn of this project, thirteen volumes in the series have appeared, each containing one hundred poems. The genesis of this enormous undertaking, the range of themes and styles that the poems span and the poet's plenary power to give utterance to his realisation, are discussed in the final chapter of this thesis. When completed, this series of ten thousand poems taken alone will be greater than the sum of all Sri Chinmoy's previous poems. *Ten Thousand Flower-Flames* is Sri Chinmoy's consummate art form and its informing vision might well be called epic. Treading the ancient path of the seer-poet, he would seem to draw all his creative powers together – the formal metrics of his early poems; the colour and visual impact of the paintings; the haunting quality of his melodies; the fragrance and subtlety of the lyrics; the looser, contemplative rhythms of the prose poems and the brief, compacted form of the aphorism – all blend in the fires of wisdom to create words of matchless power and simplicity.

Ultimately, these two words – power and simplicity – are the keys to Sri Chinmoy's

[341] *Yoga and the Spiritual Life*, p. 178.

poetry. Wordsworth indicates our theme:

> In the higher poetry, an enlightened Critic chiefly looks for a reflection of the wisdom of the heart and the grandeur of the imagination. Wherever these appear, simplicity accompanies them.[342]

Simplicity itself is power: the power of a lucid vision of the truth, the power of clear and decisive utterance, the power of definite purpose and of a pure love that reaches out in oneness to humanity. It is by virtue of their power and simplicity that Sri Chinmoy's flower-gatherings of poetry across the span of these ten years have been able to unfold in ample measure the life of the soul and it is through them that spiritual perceptions are once again lifted into the great themes of poetry.

It seems appropriate to end with a quotation from the poet himself. When a small child ventured the question "Do you like to be an artist?" he responded:

> Yes, I like being an artist, but I wish to be an artist who not only paints a piece of canvas but who also wants to paint his life with constant love for mankind and constant surrender to God's Will.[343]

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[342] R. Brimley Johnson, *op. cit.,* p. 228.
[343] *Jharna-Kala Art Quarterly*, 1 (Oct-Nov-Dec 1977): p. 24.

CHAPTER VII

A WORK IN PROGRESS

> There is no loftier mission than to approach the Divinity nearer than other men, and to disseminate the divine rays among mankind.
>
> – Ludwig van Beethoven

On October 21st, 1979, at the age of forty-eight, Sri Chinmoy competed in the New York City Marathon. The following day he boarded a plane for Japan, where he was scheduled to give university talks in Tokyo and Osaka. This flight saw the birth of a poetry project that was to span not only the poet's period of absence from New York, but many months to come. Indeed, at the time of writing this chapter, the project still fully absorbs Sri Chinmoy's poetic energies.

Sri Chinmoy's inspiration was to create a series of ten thousand poems. The abundance of his creative gift now appeared set to manifest itself in tidal proportions.

Although Sri Chinmoy's autobiographical references in his poems are generally minimal, we can gain some idea of the forces that assisted in moulding and shaping this immense vision by studying the first poem in the series. It is an atypical poem for Sri Chinmoy by virtue of the fact that it offers a narrative account of his marathon experience. From it, we are led to draw the conclusion that the poet's physical expression of dynamism and perseverance in the marathon, which he completed despite considerable pain, motivated him to offer the same marathon spirit to the inner worlds of creativity:

NEW MARATHON

Who am I?
A completely long-lost tornado-speed.
Yesterday my supremely uncooperative body
Ran the New York Marathon.
The lightning-arrows of anxieties
And worries did not attack me.
I must say, they have
    Always

Been very kind to me.
They do not knock at my heart's door.
No, not even by mistake!
    But cramps,
My unfailing friends, came and
Shook hands with me gently
Even before I had covered eleven miles.
Usually they come to befriend me
At the eighteenth mile.
But this time, after fifteen miles,
They desired to lavish
    Infinitely more affection on me.
So they embraced me most avidly
    And most powerfully.
Alas, alas!
From fifteen miles on,
I dragged my ill-fated body,
At times with my compassion-smiles,
At times with my frustration-cries.
To my great joy and sublime relief,
The worst possible nightmare
Finally ended
At the end of twenty-six miles.

One marathon-world
Leads me into another marathon-world.
To satisfy this new marathon-world,
Or to be satisfied by this new one, will be
Infinitely – I really mean it –
More difficult.
For here it is not just twenty-six miles
    and 385 yards to run,

But to sow the seeds
Of ten thousand flaming flower-poems
Which at long last I shall place
Devotedly, unreservedly and unconditionally
At the Compassion-Feet
Of my Beloved Supreme.

What far-flung vision impelled Sri Chinmoy to select the number ten thousand as his goal? In what sense would they be “flaming flower-poems”? Into what vast pattern would they arrange themselves? These are the questions to which I shall address myself in the following pages. If my conclusions seem tentative, or if, given the hindsight of time, they seem to neglect certain areas and favour others, it may be that any commentary upon a work in progress, such as this, is necessarily an imperfect understanding of the whole. My study of *Ten Thousand Flower-Flames*, the title of the series, is drawn entirely from the first thirteen volumes or 1,300 poems. As I write, new volumes appear and, long after I have finished, the poet will still be engaged in his Olympian task. I find myself in the midst of a creative act, watching it grow like a huge chain of mountains, closer to the original impulses of the work than a critic is normally privileged to be and, because of this nearness, somehow bound up in the work itself, not standing apart from it.

In this chapter I do not seek to assess a finished work but to portray an act, a movement, a process of evolution. Before me lie the first few richly coloured strands of an immense oeuvre. Within it things are taking shape – thoughts, ideas and feelings that the poet will return to again and again before he is done. And still there are other areas which remain as yet undisclosed, containing insights and revelations beyond the scope of our imaginings. Who can say where the poet will lead us and what he will unfurl? I write of my response to the material that has appeared to date with a full consciousness that mine is merely a partial glimpse of what may well prove to be one of the most profound and significant poetical works of this century

It is illumining to reflect upon the one-pointedness and dedication that Sri Chinmoy brought to his creative marathon endeavour. Fortunately, the first five hundred poems contain a time chart, which allows us to plot their growth. In that initial onrush of inspiration, we see the poet’s energies rapidly and powerfully at work: by the time his plane

touched down in Tokyo, on October 22nd, he had completed seventy poems. The next ten days witnessed a spate of activity, both inner and outer. For four days, the poet travelled in Japan, giving lectures on spiritual themes and meeting with various officials. On October 27th, he took a series of connecting flights to India, arriving in Pondicherry, South India, on the 29th. The poems then numbered 375. By October 31st, the poet was on the move again, this time catching the numerous linking flights that would take him back to New York. On November 1st, the poet arrived home, having been abroad eleven days. The total of poems stood at a staggering five hundred.

After this date, it appears that the project was temporarily set aside. New poems were composed but not with the tremendous speed of the October poems. Late in 1980, however, with the anniversary of the commencement of the project, the poet resumed work on it once more. Writing with renewed intensity and purposefulness, the next eight volumes, each containing one hundred poems, were produced at the rate of approximately one per week, taking us into the first few weeks of January, 1981 – the limit of this study.

Eventually one hundred volumes will be needed to hold the entire ten thousand poems. It is a conception so overpowering in its dimensions and yet, even at this stage with thirteen complete volumes, so exact in its proportions, that the reader intuitively becomes aware of an underlying source for the words, a fundamental organising element that is continuously mindful of the completed whole.

What has been written to this point is considerable. What is still to be written is unimaginable. Not since the Vedas of ancient times has a vision of such magnitude prevailed.

Composed in the millennium before Christ, the Vedas are India's ancient scriptures. Of these books Sri Chinmoy has written:

> The Vedas house the earliest poetry and prose literature of the searching, striving and aspiring human soul.[344]

The four books of the Vedas have been attributed to a number of different seer-poets, chief among them being the seven holy "rishis", or sages, who are themselves the subject of several verses:

[344] *The Vedas: Immortality's First Call*, p. 9.

> United in their praise-songs, united in holy chants,
>
> united in lustre, divinely elected,
>
> the Seven Sages, God-like, serene,
>
> following the path of the fore-fathers,
>
> took up the reins in succession
>
> like one seated on a chariot.[345]

The main Vedic text is that of the Rig Veda, which consists of some 10,552 stanzas – a number that may have influenced Sri Chinmoy's choice of 10,000 as his goal for *Flower-Flames.* The Rig Veda is a huge concordance of lofty utterances, hymns, songs and mantras. "Poetry and philosophy run abreast in the Vedas," Sri Chinmoy affirms.[346] These seer-poets of the Vedas were held to be not only word-builders but world-builders.[347] As the self-chosen representatives of humanity, they spoke on behalf of all men in their praise of the gods. "It would be wise to realise," writes J. Gonda in *The Vision of the Vedic Poets*,

> that there was in those ancient times no hard and fast line between 'religion' and 'poetics', between a 'prophet', a poet, a divine man, and a 'philosopher'.[348]

It was the custom for such poets to sit in worship before a fire altar dedicated to Agni, the Indian god of fire, from whom they received the inspiration for noble thought and the creation of verses. Intellectually powerful and endowed with spiritual knowledge, the Vedic poets were conscious of a force residing within them, a radiant godliness or lustre. They did not speak words of their own inventing, but became as mouthpieces through which this force manifested itself. Because of this widely accepted divine origin, the words of the Vedic poets were considered to have a potency beyond that of ordinary speech. The remarkable history of the Vedas, passed down for centuries through flawless oral transmission, testifies

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[345] *Yajurveda*, verse 34 in Abinash Chandra Bose, *Hymns from the Vedas* (London: Asia Publishing House, 1966), p. 79.
[346] *The Vedas: Immortality's First Call*, p. 14.
[347] Cf. Bose, p. 6. The Vedic poets were addressed by numerous terms, including *karin* (maker); *karu* (artist in words) and *vipra* (the inspired one). These terms suggest a multiplicity of roles.
[348] *The Vision of the Vedic Poets* (The Hague: Mouton, 1963), p. 14.

to the value they have been accorded by the Indian people, who refer to the verses as "mantras", that is, incantations or word groups which are a dynamic revelation of truth. Verses selected from the Vedas are committed to memory by the seekers, who claim them as personal prayers.

Sri Chinmoy's title *Ten Thousand Flower-Flames* bridges the gap between this great tradition and our times. It has its genesis in the opening poem where the poet declares his ambition

> to sow the seeds
> of ten thousand flaming-flower poems

The inner psychic world of the poet houses the seeds of his ten thousand poems. There, beyond the empirical level of experience with all its limitations of form, the greater portion of his design rests inert, its immense power as yet unmanifested. Sri Chinmoy infers that each poet has this silent creative source and, if he but touches on it, he would perceive the seed-forms of the imagination. A true poet is he who, having a deep and recondite realisation of the soul, is able to draw from the wellsprings of the imagination essential insights and shape them into meaningful expressions. He awakens the depths with his subtle transforming power. He gathers together his seed-ideas and sows them in his poems, where they attain their final blossomed perfection. This process may be seen as a transfer of energy, for the poet is actually sowing inside the hearts of his readers the seeds of action, inner action, the basic power that will transform and uplift the human consciousness.

The poems of *Ten Thousand Flower-Flames* are, the poet implies, a garland-like offering to God. At the same time, Sri Chinmoy describes the poems as "flaming". From the ancient Vedic fires – symbolic of wisdom – truth was believed to emerge in all its brilliance and purity. The poet who could capture this truth in its original power and simplicity was able to impart something of its burning quality to his utterance and his words could thus penetrate men's hearts directly, like a searing flame. It is in this light, as flames won from the wisdom-fire, that Sri Chinmoy invites us to consider his poems.

Poems as flowers; poems as flames – the images fuse into "flower-flames", a forceful concentration of the multiple beauty and lambent energy of these creations.

In several of the poems under review, Sri Chinmoy would seem to offer an illustration

of these two major images. He compares the relationship of the flame to the fire and of the seed to the flower to the eternal relationship of the finite to the Infinite:

A MOMENT OF INSPIRATION

A moment of inspiration
Powerfully feeds my aspiration-flames.
A moment of aspiration
Unmistakably expedites my realisation-sun.

(no. 364)

In many ways, the poet's vast storehouse of wisdom is seen as waiting, its reserves of power checked until the moment of creation:

A LITTLE MORE TIME

O my imprisoned aspiration-flames,
I shall set you free.
Do give me a little more time.
I shall unmistakably
And
Permanently
Set you free.

(no. 266)

At every point, Sri Chinmoy reminds us of his governing ideal – to bring forth ten thousand flower-flames from his realisation-amplitude.

As with all the major writings in the history of mankind, there are no more than a handful of themes at the core of *Ten Thousand Flower-Flames*. These are the perennial themes of man's evolution, in particular, the evolution of consciousness. Traditionally, these themes present themselves in the form of questions. When man looks around him at the universe, the created world, he becomes aware of himself as something distinct and unique.

He asks, "Who am I?" and all the world silently breathes the answer, "That thou art." He then becomes sensible of a greater power than himself, a power which dwells both within him and outside him, and he frames the question, "Who is That?" Again he receives the answer, "That thou art." Finally, from the depth of love that springs forward from his soul, he pleads with this other, "What is the path by which I may obtain Thee?" His life then becomes the record of his journey towards God and of his eventual attainment of the goal of God-union.

A number of Sri Chinmoy's poems reflect this essential questioning of the nature of man and God:

WHERE, O WHERE, IS GOD?

Where, O where, is God?
    Is He inside my fondness-hope?
Where, O where, is God?
    Is He inside my oneness-scope?

(no. 205)

THE INNER PROBLEM

All the world's dire problems
Can be solved only when
The inner problem is solved.
What is the inner problem?
The inner problem is:
    Who am I?

(no. 770)

MY SOUL-FIRE

My soul-fire,
Where can I find you, where?
My ignorance-mire,

When can I transform you, when?

(no. 584)

Poems composed of such ultimate questions are interspersed throughout the volumes. They are lyric cries, heart-cries, at once searching and timeless. Within the overall design, they serve to usher in the major portion of the poems, for the greater number of poems in *Ten Thousand Flower-Flames* stand as answers to the fundamental queries of man concerning the meaning of existence. Through his words, Sri Chinmoy seeks to offer truth-messages to his readers. Like the Vedas of yore, these poems are truth-contours, their poet the truth-bringer.

The path of Sri Chinmoy's words is curvilinear – they address our souls directly. Though their source is mystical, the preoccupation of the poet is strenuously practical. The poems not only portray spiritual states but carry messages, teach principles and spiritual laws. The puissance and intensity of the poet's language is derived from what Sri Aurobindo referred to as "the stress of the soul-vision behind the word."[349] In many cases, the reader's attention is engaged at the outset by a powerful kind of open letter or address:

YOU HAVE LOST

You have lost
Your beloved Satisfaction-God
Because
You have overfed
Your insistent ambition-horse.

(no. 28)

LET HOPE ONCE MORE REFRESH YOU

Let hope once more
Refresh you.

[349] Sri Aurobindo Ghose, *Sri Aurobindo Birth Centenary Library*, Vol. IX, *The Future Poetry* (Pondicherry, 1971), p. 16.

Let faith once more

  Guide you.

Let surrender once more

  Fulfil you.

(no. 215)

Some of these poems carry the force and conviction of imperative commands: commands issuing not from the judgement of the poet as an individual but rather from a concerned and watchful consciousness that is in harmony with those ideals which are the ground and essence of all existence. Consequently, these imperative poems may be seen as signposts for the spiritual journey – jets of concentrated thought:

NOURISH YOUR SEARCHING MIND

Nourish your searching mind.

  You will be happy

Nourish your serving heart.

  You will be more happy.

Nourish your loving soul.

  You will be most happy.

(No. 505)

UNLEARN AND LEARN

Anything that binds you,

  Unlearn it.

Anything that blinds you,

  Unlearn it.

Anything that limits you,

  Unlearn it.

Anything that awakens you,

Learn it.
Anything that liberates you,
Learn it.
Anything that fulfils you,
Learn it.

(no. 1203)

With the unfailing tact of the poet, however, Sri Chinmoy places such imperatives side by side with lyric cries, aphorisms, observations, appeals and dialogues – seeming to uncover fresh delight in the diversity of expression. Once familiar with Sri Chinmoy's mode of thought, his "soul-view" of man's spiritual evolution, one would expect to find a measure of sameness and predictability in his approach to this compass of themes. He is, after all, retelling an ancient story – the story of the transformation of desire, the dawn of aspiration, the battles and victories of the seeker on the path of truth – yet he uses language, tone and imagery to stretch our souls, not that he may erect a barrier between us and the poem, but in order that we may be compelled to grasp his vision with determination and resolve.

The poet would seem to adhere to an inarticulated belief that personal, self-referential facts in poetry often limit and deflect the reader's appraisal of his theme. Even when the poems are composed under changing and stimulating conditions, they do not make the slightest gesture towards the time-bound world of personal history and context.[350] The poet seizes the quintessence of experience and casts aside all the accidental and irrelevant personal details.

This discarding of an outer husk is of the very nature of spiritual knowledge for, as J. Gonda explains,

> In contradistinction to human knowledge the so-called divine knowledge is considered to be infinite, unlimited, eternal, free from errors and imperfections, unconditioned, unequalled and above the limitations or time and space. It is neither inferential, nor analogical, nor verbal, but only perceptual in

[350] The only exception to date of this statement is the first poem of the series. The remaining 499 poems that were composed during the poet's travels in Japan bear no trace of their context.

character.[351]

The character of this knowledge may be observed particularly in those poems which take in a wide perspective of time, poems which look backward to the remote past and forward to the distant future, encircling the spheres of time and space:

EACH SERVICE-HEART

Each service-heart
Sculptures the perfection-beauty
Of tomorrow's self-transcending
New world.

(no. 1272)

I CAME FROM GOD

I came from God
The Eternal Dreamer.
I am heading towards God
The Immortal Lover.

(no. 734)

MAN FIRST CAME TO KNOW OF GOD

Man first came to know of God
When religion-flames arose
From humanity's crying
And tearing heart.

(no. 453)

As the spiritual possibilities of future years open themselves to the poet's gaze, his voice

[351] *The Vision of the Vedic Poets,* pp. 19-20.

often assumes prophetic overtones:

TODAY AND TOMORROW

What you are today
May be a concealed frustration,
But tomorrow you will definitely be
A revealed satisfaction.

(no. 956)

AN UNFINISHED CREATION

Man, because of your merciless ambition,
You will forever remain
An unfinished creation.

(no. 1128)

Other poems expand on humanity's current spiritual condition:

WE LONG FOR PEACE

We long for peace,
But unrest is on the upswing.
We long for satisfaction,
But dissatisfaction
Is the order of the day.

(no. 1085)

Of the poems that are written with this consciousness of time, however, by far the greatest number record the stages of development in a single, representative individual – often using spare, almost formulaic outlines, such as the past/present/future and yesterday/today/tomorrow sequences discussed in chapter one:

GOD'S LION POWER

Yesterday, I desired to be
God's Lion-Power.

Today, I desire to be
God's Deer-Speed.

Tomorrow, I shall desire to be
God's Lamb-Fondness.

(no. 152)

WHAT SHALL I SEE TOMORROW?

What did I see yesterday?
God's Compassion-Feet.
What do I see today?
God's Forgiveness-Heart.
What shall I see tomorrow?
God's Vision-Promise
In me and for me.

(no. 666)

Juxtaposed against poems which structure experience in this general way are those which focus on the finer details of the spiritual life. Each of these manifold variations of a larger theme is like a single strand that we weave into wholeness through our sympathetic reading of the poems in their entirety. Sri Chinmoy uses these core themes in much the same manner that a musician utilises leitmotifs as a point of return for his composition.

One of the dominant themes of *Ten Thousand Flower-Flames*, for example, is that of the mind and the heart. Sri Chinmoy often uses these two words as suggestive instruments, sufficient in themselves to convey all that we are to understand by his reference. They are

key words, neither ambulating nor decorative but intrinsic to the poet's meaning. Rabindranath Tagore comments that a poet is dependent upon such code expressions to reveal much that is ineffable and beyond the scope of language:

> Suggestion can neither have fixed rules of grammar nor the rigid definition of the lexicon so easily available to the scholar. Suggestion has its analysable code, which finds its depth of explanation in the living hearts of the people who use it. Code words philologically treated appear childish, and one must know that all those experiences which are not realised through the path of reason, but immediately through an inner vision, must use some kind of code word for their expression.[352]

In the case of the mind and heart poems, we find that as the poet accumulates more individual poems on this theme, so the two words gather meaning and resonance, an ongoing conversation is heard in which the separate voices of the poems reflect and comment upon each other. The characteristic stamp of these poems is their message of the necessity for the mind's transformation in order that the illumination of the heart may be brought to the fore:

MY MIND'S GAME

My mind's game
Has imprisoned me,
        My entire life.
My heart's flame
Is liberating me,
        My all.

(no. 622)

WHAT YOU NEED

[352] Appendix A in S. Radhakrishnan, *The Principal Upanisads* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1969), p. 939.

What You need
Is a flower-like heart;
    And
A child-like prayer
To free yourself
From the narrow path
Of your blighting and blighted mind.

(no. 462)

WE LOVE OUR DOUBTFUL MINDS

We love our doubtful minds
Infinitely more
Than we care to cure them
With our faithful, soulful
And powerful hearts.

(no. 1198)

O MY MIND-SONG

O my mind-song,
I have sung you many, many times.
I am now bored.
I now want to unlearn you.

O my heart-song,
I have not sung you even once.
I am now all eagerness.
I am now crying and dying to learn you.

(no. 507)

By scattering these poems throughout the series, as opposed to confining them to a particular volume based on thematic organisation, the poet is able to establish the impression of a commingling of elements. Like the dancing, flickering movement of a fire, we see now one theme, now another; at times the goal seems nearer, at times infinitely removed.

If we search in Sri Chinmoy's poems for an ordered spiritual progression or diary of man's journey to God, then we shall not find it. We cannot consult the poems in any measured sequence, as we would an almanac, for that is not the way of the artist. What is said once can never be finished or exhausted for, if that were so, we should need no rejuvenating elixir for our deepest spiritual beliefs. "The wise poets with their words shape the One Being in many ways," affirms the Rig Vedic poet.[353]

Sri Chinmoy has instinctively selected the beauteous images of poetry to embody his soul-vision. His luminous perception of man's inner life has spontaneously expanded into 1,300 branches. Endless are the variations he brings to our understanding of the mind and the heart, desire and aspiration, bondage and freedom, love, devotion and surrender to God. And, even as his response is mobile, so the poems acquire a dynamic charge – nothing is static, no feeling jaded or time-worn. Again, although the poet establishes a clear kinship with the Vedic tradition, there is no sense that he is weighted down by the conventions or achievements of this former age. A genuine poet, he is always faithful to personal inspiration and always in search of truth:

THE REAL WISDOM-LIGHT

What is the real wisdom-light?
The real wisdom-light
Is to help Truth regain
Its lost throne.

(no. 862)

The body of Sri Chinmoy's *Ten Thousand Flower-Flames* in print may be considered against this backdrop of truth-seeking and truth-revelation. In these poems we hear an echo of that

[353] Quoted in Bose, p. 19.

lofty Vedic utterance, "Truth alone triumphs, not falsehood."[354]

Reading *Ten Thousand Flower-Flames*, one is immediately struck by the physical appearance of the poems – often extending to no more than a stanza – by their compact and virile language and by their exalted spiritual vision. Like flames that melt into a vast fire of realisation, or flowers strung into a garland for worship, the poems are powerful in their mass and exceedingly beautiful in each part. It is obvious that Sri Chinmoy experiences his seer-vision as a formative power of great amplitude and this enables him to conceal the lustre of his realisation within the diverse styles and language of poetry, As the movements of an athlete are clean, graceful and full of inner beauty, so these poems strive for a supreme perfection of movement, thought and language. The poet's physical marathon, which provided the catalyst for this major poetic endeavour, demonstrated the self-transcending urge of the spirit, despite the natural limitations of the body. In the inner worlds of poetry, however, the poet runs swiftly and easily – his strides are his poems and they trace the map for the eternal travelling.

The summary features of *Ten Thousand Flower-Flames* are abundance, wisdom, wholeness and inspiration. Significantly, these are the traditional attributes of greatness according to the Indian literary critics.[355] Contrary to the tenets of Western literary theory, abundance does not denote a predominantly quantitative interest. Rather, the range of an artist's works is held to indicate the depth of his creative genius. Victor Hugo also recognised this largeness of the poetic spirit when he wrote: "Real poetry, the acme of poetical art, is characterised by immensity alone."[356]

He whose inner vision embraces both temporary and spiritual worlds, who is ever climbing to new heights, discovers that this very vision is instinct with the impulsion to create. As poems continue to pour from Sri Chinmoy's pen, it is clear that the dimensions of his work force us to revise our genre-based definition of the epic mode. Thomas Greene is one critic who writes with an enlarged understanding of the epic:

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[354] Quoted in Sri Chinmoy, *The Vedas: Immortality's First Call*, p. 3.

[355] In particular, Niharranjan Ray, *An Artist in Life: A Commentary on the Life & Works of Rabindranath Tagore* (Trivandrum: University of Kerala, 1967), pp. 3-6.

[356] Quoted by Nolini Kanta Gupta, "World Literature," *Lotus-Petals from Nolini.* A collection of essays translated from the original Bengali by Sri Chinmoy, p. 96.

> The first quality of the epic imagination is expansiveness, the impulse to extend its own luminosity in ever-widening circles.[357]

The epic universe created by Sri Chinmoy is comprised of small poetical units rather than of a single narrative tale. It is an efflorescence of the imagination which has scaled the heights of mystical experience.

A second feature of these poems – wisdom – is again one that a Western critic might not value to the degree of an Indian writer or critic, for our poets lean more to expressions of feeling than of thought, more to the personal epiphany than to impersonal or absolute truth. In the context of Indian literature, however, wisdom is cultivated at all levels and is the mark of a fully integrated person. As a man grows through experience, so his wisdom deepens and he comes to subscribe to a total view of life. In early youth, Sri Chinmoy announced his devotion to "wisdom literature" in a poem that began:

> Arise, awake, O friend of my dream.
> Arise, awake, O breath of my life.
> Arise, awake, O light of my eyes.
> O seer-poet in me,
> Do manifest yourself in me and through me.[358]

Ten Thousand Flower-Flames is the ultimate fulfilment of this invocation. Here the poet's plenary sense of what he would say has yielded words of force and fire.

Sri Chinmoy's clear understanding and interpretation of his own inner experiences is reflected in the wholeness of his production. Watching the unfolding of this work is like seeing a thing in nature responding to its own inner laws of evolution. Spontaneity is there, but it is contained by the overriding unity of organic growth, which imparts to the greatest creations their essential integrality. Only a sustained inspiration could be responsible for the ceaseless flow of Sri Chinmoy's imagination.

Filled with God, like the Vedic poets of old, he sings of the most sublime mystical

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[357] "The Norms of Epic", in James L. Calderwood and Harold E. Toliver, editors, *Perspectives on Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press), p. 195.
[358] *My Flute*, p. 30.

experiences with such radiant simplicity that they become near and living; he addresses the spiritual doubts of our age with confidence and assurance; he transforms the private occasion of poetry into a public event and places the poetic spirit once more on an equal footing with the sage, the visionary and the prophet.

Conclusion

The poems of Sri Chinmoy follow an age that has become known for its intellectual curiosity and spiritual disillusion. They implicitly assert that man is now experiencing a quickening of the spiritual urge, that there are certain sublime truths which are universally shared. On the basis of such a belief, Sri Chinmoy's poems speak to us boldly, in the accents of our own times, revealing the mysteries of the inner life and pointing to the ultimate goal of God-union.

Taken in their entirety, Sri Chinmoy's poems compose a portrait of man in his spiritual greatness, and the purity that characterises his use of the poetic medium stems from a refusal to use it to give conveyance to any other material. For Sri Chinmoy, nothing is as important or as fulfilling as the soul-fact, nothing so satisfying as man's spontaneous love for God and nothing so delightful as that never-ending game of hide-and-seek which is enjoyed by the Creator and His creation.

Sri Chinmoy's recovery of spiritual values is not accomplished by forsaking the achievements of our modern age but by reconciling our current level of material progress with an inner perfection. Now, at last, his words seem to say, we can afford the power of simplicity.

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APPENDICES:

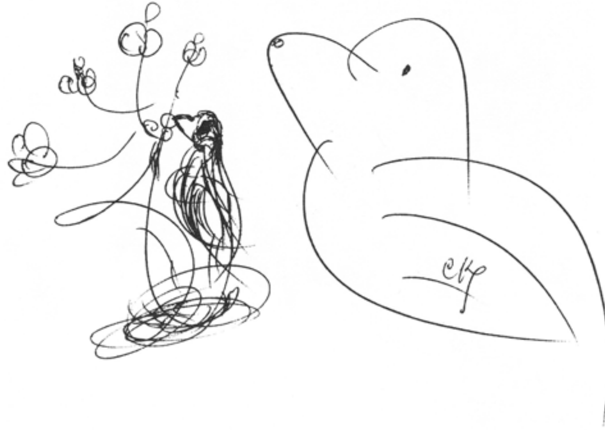
ORIGINAL BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE (1981)

Sri Chinmoy was born in 1931 in a small village outside Chittagong in what was formerly East Bengal. At the age of twelve, having lost both parents, he joined his sisters and brothers in a spiritual community in South India. He remained there for the next twenty years, completing his schooling and participating in the spiritual, literary and athletic activities that the community afforded. At this time, he also spent many hours each day in prayer and meditation, undergoing countless mystical experiences. He filled notebook after notebook with songs, poems and reflections, striving to accommodate the different forms of Bengali, English and French to his inner perceptions.

In 1964, at the age of thirty-two, Sri Chinmoy journeyed to the West in response to a prompting from within. Upon arriving in New York, he took a position with the Indian Consulate as an administrative assistant. He held this post for three years, writing poems and essays in his spare time, as well as giving lectures on spiritual themes at universities throughout New York and neighbouring states. From 1971, these writings were published in book form and soon became available to a wider reading public.

In the decade 1971 to 1981, Sri Chinmoy's literary urge expressed itself in a variety of forms. He completed over 9,000 poems, several major plays, and volumes of stories and essays. His inspiration could not be contained within the realm of literature but overflowed into art and music, where he revealed the same kind of creative abundance. At the time of the present publication, Sri Chinmoy continues to reside in New York, where his work for world peace as well as his contributions to literature, music and art have gained international respect.

SRI CHINMOY'S ORIGINAL FRONTISPIECE



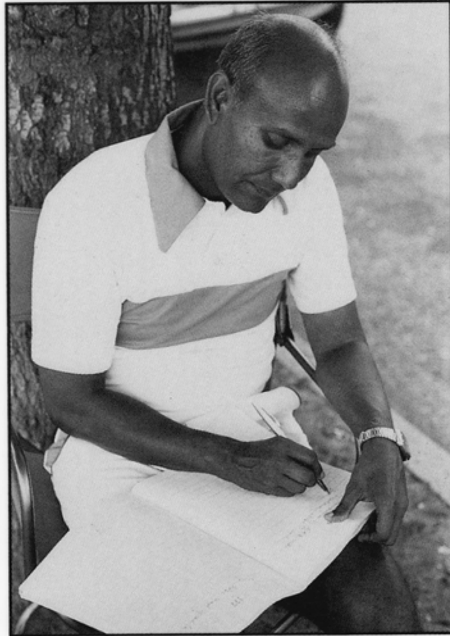
Dr. Vidagdha Bennett is an authority *par excellence* on my poetry, literature and philosophy. She is at once a radiating illumination-mind and an enriching aspiration-heart. She is the pioneer-researcher to draw the world-attention to my heart's poetry-fountain-service.

The seer-poet in me is blessingfully and unreservedly grateful to Dr. Bennett for using my life-river's poetry-philosophy-boat lovingly and devotedly for the satisfaction-delight of Truth-seeking, God-loving, oneness-cultivating, peace-planting and fulfilment-blossoming humanity.

Sri Chinmoy

Sri Chinmoy
August 27, 1991

ORIGINAL BACK COVER OF *"SIMPLICITY AND POWER"*



"Filled with God, like the Vedic poets of old, Sri Chinmoy sings of the most sublime mystical experiences with such radiant simplicity that they become near and living; he addresses the spiritual doubts of our age with confidence and assurance; he transforms the private occasion of poetry into a public event and places the poetic spirit once more on an equal footing with the sage, the visionary and the prophet."

Vidagdha Meredith Bennett, Ph.D.