

Aphorisms of Sri Chinmoy

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I. Introduction

Every once in a while, there comes a writer who makes a staggering contribution in a hitherto little-known genre and places his stamp upon it to such a degree that his works become a major point of reference for all others. The very parameters by which we define that mode of writing are enlarged and the genre itself is imbued with new weight and significance.

In English literature, a seismic shift of this nature has been building in response to the poetic aphorisms of Sri Chinmoy. I believe the time has now arrived when critics must examine his contribution, adjust their terminology if necessary and accept his immense oeuvre as one of the greatest creative outpourings in literary history.

The challenge of reviewing Sri Chinmoy's aphorisms depends on the way in which we resolve the question of the poet's role. That Sri Chinmoy is a poet in the inmost depths of his being is at once manifest. The simple eloquence of his diction, his gift for forging nouns into compounds, the stark beauty of his images and his ability to distil spiritual experiences and complex concepts into phrases that seem to glide effortlessly into our memory all reveal his innate poetic genius.

Yet he is also a philosopher, a sage, someone who, having searched for wisdom, now embodies it on some level which we may not fully understand. We are comfortable with writers who share their struggles and joys with us in equal measure, whose words are filtered through the lens of experiences that are highly personal, even when they are projected onto fictional characters. What we find in the writings of Sri Chinmoy, however, is a universal perspective, a voice that is public, not private. He does not confide in us; he addresses us – and his words act as signposts, reminders, clarifications, assurances and, above all, inspirations.

A writer who combines poetry with the highest wisdom has been called a 'seer-poet' by Shelley. He referred to them as 'the unacknowledged legislators of the world.' In Walt Whitman's Preface to *Leaves of Grass*, he concurs. '[The poet] is a seer,' he writes. If the term has been used reservedly since the time of the Romantics and the Transcendentalists, it is due perhaps more to the lack of writers to whom it can be applied than to any other reason.

Arthur Rimbaud recognised the difficulty of fulfilling the ideal of a seer-poet when he stated, "I want to be a poet, and I am working to make myself a seer." He viewed this twofold

quest as being of prime importance for a poet. “The first study of the man who wants to be a poet is the knowledge of himself, complete. He looks for his soul . . .”

The concept of the seer-poet is not a new one, especially in the East where the ancient sages expressed their visions and revelations in the inspired language of poetry. In the sacred Vedas and Upanishads of India, for example, we find universal truths expressed in *slokas* that have resonated down the centuries.

To the seer-poet, the experience of the Divine does not occur on an abstract level. It is direct and vivid. The urgency of his expression, therefore, comes from his wish to convey this experience as clearly, concisely and concretely as possible. It is not, as some might imagine, an urge to explain or analyse that experience in philosophic terms.

Lengthy descriptive passages, complexity, scene, shade and atmosphere are seen by the seer-poet as peripheral and non-essential. If he omits them, it is not because he is less of a poet, but because he feels that they would not enhance his poem. Rather they would diminish the largeness of his vision. In striving to approximate his realisations in words, the seer-poet tends to pare away the specifics of time and place.

It is for this reason that the natural choice of seer-poets over the centuries has been the aphorism (also known as the maxim, saying, adage, pensée or apothegm). It seems paradoxical that those who seek to express the truth in all its vastness should choose this, the most condensed of all literary genres, as their vehicle. And yet the aphorism, in the hands of a seer-poet, becomes a universe in miniature.

True, aphorisms are interspersed throughout the works of many prose writers and dramatists. Tolstoy, Shakespeare, Thomas Jefferson, Churchill, Nietzsche, Oscar Wilde and others may lay fair claim to the term. Again, there are poets, such as Blake, Keats and Emily Dickinson, who have incorporated the aphorism into their verse and compelled us to recognise its intrinsic poetic qualities.

Sri Chinmoy has gone even further in this direction. He isolates the aphorism from any surrounding narrative, commentary or lyricism, sets it out on the page as a poem and infuses it with a rich poetic texture. As a result, his aphorisms have a pristine power, undiluted by anything superfluous or extraneous.

The word ‘aphorism’ exists with very little variation in most of the European languages – Italian, French, Spanish, German, Russian, Czech, Slovak, Swedish, Finnish and so forth. It derives from the Greek root ‘aphorismos’, meaning ‘to define’. In the natural world, an horizon marks the boundaries of what we can see. Similarly, the aphorism – which comes from the same root – encompasses within its boundaries, and defines, what the poet ‘sees’ inwardly.

By virtue of its brevity, the aphorism is complete unto itself. By virtue of its wisdom, it is universal. By virtue of its authority, it has the air of being the final word. By virtue of its resonance, it is mantric. And in the poetry of Sri Chinmoy, the sheer accumulation of so many thousands of aphorisms, and the subtle interweaving of themes which occurs as a result, create what can only be described as a spiritual epic of vast and enduring significance.

II.

Compressed Power

Much wisdom often goes with brevity of speech.

— Sophocles

One of the essential attributes of the aphorism is brevity. The seer-poet must possess the ability to compress his wisdom into the fewest and most telling words possible. Adjectives most commonly used to describe aphorisms are ‘pithy’, ‘succinct’, ‘terse’, ‘concise’, ‘curt’ and ‘telling’.

This requirement of brevity – one might even say extreme brevity – poses an enormous challenge for writers. After all, writers communicate through the medium of language, through words on a page, not blank space. Most writers would chafe under the severe restrictions imposed by the conventions of aphorism.

Sri Chinmoy does not. If anything, he is more at home with silence than with sound, and so the words that issue from this silence tend to be spare – fragments of a vision too tremendous to be verbalised at great length. His aphorisms can number as few as four words, though most fall between ten and fifteen. Set out as poems on a page, they generally run from two to four short lines, rarely longer. Visually, they may be taken in by the reader at a single glance. This, in itself, is an important aspect of Sri Chinmoy’s aphorisms and a key factor in rendering them memorable.

Again, the ability to telescope truths and realisations into a handful of inspired words demands a heightened sensitivity on the part of the poet towards language, for it is only to be expected that the wisest thoughts, when expressed in a pedestrian way, lack the fundamental power to move us. Of course, it may also be argued that truth and the inspired word find each other as a matter of course, that this very lack of struggle with language is one of the hallmarks of a true seer-poet. And, indeed, in every era and from every culture, it may be noted that true works of wisdom engage us; there is a sense that the right word has been found to express the vast dimensions of the seer-poet’s vision.

Even when meaning and sound coalesce into a creation that seems perfect and whole, however, Sri Chinmoy reminds us that the expression always falls short of the realisation:

Words fail;
Silence prevails.

This four-word aphorism succeeds because of its compressed power. Everything about it is controlled, deliberate and precise. The poet is in full control of language, selecting only two nouns and two verbs for his purpose. He needs neither adjectives nor articles. Even the two halves of the couplet may be seen as self-sufficient. They do not depend on each other, or on anything external to the poem. But, taken together, they can be seen as complementary aspects of the poet’s vision.

In fact, each bare statement of fact approaches the level of oxymoron because of the contradiction embedded in it. It is expected, for instance, that words bridge the gulf between individuals, while silence only serves to prolong and magnify misunderstandings. Sri Chinmoy takes the diametrically opposite view. According to him, it is words that fail to communicate. Interestingly, the word ‘prevail’ suggests that silence is ever-present, that words arise from it and return to it. It is the source of all expression.

The poet is absolute in each of his statements. There is no hesitation in the poem, no qualification, no philosophical dithering or stuttering – in effect, no weakness. And yet, the

poem does not strike us as unnaturally foreshortened. The poet has expressed himself fully and also poetically. The linking of each idea by means of rhyme, the parallel structure of the two halves of the couplet, the juxtaposition of opposites – all reflect a basic premise of aphorisms: that brevity comes from precision, precision of ideas and linguistic precision. One of Sri Chinmoy's five-word aphorisms is the following:

Enlightenment comes
From self-effacement.

Once again, the poet has omitted all articles, adjectives, adverbs – anything that would limit or somehow qualify his assertion. He uses internal rhyme to strengthen the ties between 'enlightenment' and 'self-effacement', so that he creates a patterning not only of sounds but of ideas.

As with the previous example, the simplicity of this aphorism is deceptive. If once we start to attempt an explanation of it, or add our own embellishment, we realise that the meaning of the poem eludes our easy capture. We penetrate one level of meaning only to find that another unfolds before us. It is a kind of deepening meditation. The more we immerse ourselves in the meaning of the aphorism, the more we examine the nature of self-effacement, the more we feel compelled to enact it in our own lives, as it were. So aphorisms of this kind have a unique actualising power. It is not enough to read them on a mental or literary level. In order to fully understand them, they must be lived.

This is perhaps a precondition of all seer-poetry. Ultimately, its meaning is fully accessible only to the aspirant who is prepared to let the poem resonate in the depths of his being. Sri Chinmoy has made this process as simple as possible for his readers, especially when we reflect that many of the ancient texts of wisdom literature withheld their hidden knowledge from the vast majority of readers. Moreover, we have the added advantage of being able to read Sri Chinmoy's words directly and not in translation from ancient Sanskrit or Chinese. They are aphorisms for the modern ear, even though their wisdom is age-old.

A very important function of the aphorism is to identify, define and delineate. This hearkens back to the roots of the word. The process of defining is not merely a dictionary exercise. The seer-poet has to define our human experiences and feelings in such a way as to cast new light on them. In one example, Sri Chinmoy writes:

Disappointment
Is
An energy-robber.

Here he proposes that the vivid and dramatic compound noun 'energy-robber' can be interchanged with 'disappointment'. How much more effective and immediate is Sri Chinmoy's expression than the lame alternative, 'Disappointment robs our energy.' In his version, the robber has intruded himself on the scene and suddenly the threat has become tangible and imminent. This kind of metonymy not only enlarges our understanding of the meaning of disappointment, but makes us conscious of the need for a shift in our own state of being. By personifying disappointment, Sri Chinmoy has somehow made it loom large in our imaginations as something to be barred or cast out, as we would do with an ordinary robber.

Another example of aphorisms that define abstract qualities or states is this philosophical reflection:

An unsolved problem
Is nothing other than
A revolving door.

Here again, the poet uses internal rhymes to give his concept an almost incantatory power. 'Unsolved' merges in 'revolving', and then turns on itself, as if the door were revolving before us. It is a uniquely modern image, but one which encapsulates all the frustration and helplessness attendant upon lingering problems.

In Orhan Pamuk's novel, *The Black Book*, one of the characters says, "Do not speak in epigraphs – it kills the mystery of the thing." Some might make a similar case against aphorisms. By condensing the rich tapestry of life into one or two sentences, could we not also say that seer-poets kill the very mystery of human existence? By distilling personal life experiences into universal statements and conclusions, do they not somehow codify our lives and render them uniform?

Surely it entirely depends on what one wants to derive from literature. One poet, let us take Rabindranath Tagore, might compose an exquisite and enchanting portrait of the boatman waiting at twilight to ferry his passenger to the other side. He might recreate the very fragrance of the evening, the haunting song the boatman sings, the fulsomeness of nature's response. Sri Chinmoy, on the other hand, will simply prefer to say:

For each and every seeker,
The Destination is the same:
The Golden Shore of the Beyond.

The journey is implicit; the details of the journey bear no consequence. For Sri Chinmoy, the only important thing is the seeker's attainment of his ultimate goal, which he has articulated in the sublimely poetic phrase 'The Golden Shore of the Beyond.'

Has the mystery disappeared from our quest because the poet has given it a name? I would say, rather, that the poet deepens the mystery by directing our focus away from outer details and circumstances to the central core of the mystery – the very purpose of life's journey.

Descriptive poems, replete with images and atmosphere, wind themselves around a truth and often create an aura of knowing, of wisdom. Aphorisms, on the other hand, capture the quintessence of truth in a few poetic words. Because of their brevity, they force our wandering minds to focus with greater intensity on universal truths and they make us conscious of the immense forces that lie behind the surface reality of life. In addition, as a seer-poet, Sri Chinmoy imbues this wideness of understanding with a beauty of expression that is uniquely his own.

III.

A Universal Perspective

. . . the reason why he can say one thing well, is because his vision extends to the sight of all things, and so he describes each as one who knows many and all.

— Emerson

Another central attribute of the aphorism is universality. It transcends personal opinion or observation. The universality of the seer-poet's utterance, however, is contingent upon our shared conviction that there must exist higher truths which shed meaning and purpose upon our common human existence. The role of the seer-poet is to reveal these truths, to name them, to somehow make accessible to us a wider vision in the light of which we can evolve socially, morally and spiritually.

Implicit in our reverence for the seer-poet, therefore, is our acknowledgement that he embodies a degree of wisdom to which we aspire. That is why in most cultures, especially those of the East, aphorisms are synonymous with the sayings of the sages – Lao Tzu, Confucius, Marcus Aurelius, the seven Vedic sages and so forth.

Ralph Waldo Emerson issued a soul-stirring challenge to his time and country to 'write in a higher spirit, and a wider knowledge, and with a grander practical aim, than ever yet guided the pen of poet.' Sri Chinmoy has responded to that call with lofty aphorisms, such as the following:

Nothing divine can ever decay.

Nothing divine can even fade.

In this couplet, the second pronouncement acts as an echo of the first, mirroring its pattern exactly until the substitution of the final two words. The haunting lilt of these parallel sentences, with their final slant rhyme, leads us to discover in their culminating verbs the full weight of the poet's meaning. What decays? That which is organic, living. What fades? That which has colour – be it earthly or in our memories. By invoking tangible and vibrant associations of dissolution and, by extension, death, the poet is able to summon the opposite reality, to suggest that the divine is beyond the things of this earth. It is imperishable. It suffers no loss of form, not even the slightest loss of lustre.

Sri Chinmoy's technique of employing a double negative anaphora to introduce his thought is reminiscent of the Upanishadic approach. "*Neti, neti*" – "Not this, not this," says the sage Yajnavalkya. Negative theology is not, in fact, a denial, for when we eliminate everything that is not, we are left with the enduring reality of what is. Negative theology is rather an admission of man's incapacity to express the transcendent.

Sri Chinmoy proceeds similarly. After we eliminate all that decays, all that fades – literally, all the things of this earth – we are left with the celestial realities. He does not need to specify those things that decay or fade. Indeed, he deliberately chooses not to introduce such detailed references. It seems that he does not want to link the image with anything that can be closely identified with a particular region or culture. So he leaves it to the imagination of the reader to supply the content of the image.

In addition to aphorisms like this example, which have two parts with the same grammatical structure, Sri Chinmoy is fond of consecutive aphorisms that share the same characteristics – repeated words or phrases, linked ideas and a fusion of sounds. On January 15th, 2007, he wrote the following pair of aphorisms:

War takes birth
In the mind-factory.

Peace takes birth
In the heart-sea.

There is an authority inherent in each of these aphorisms, a sure sense of truth that gives them the feeling of being final pronouncements or utterances. Typically, however, the touch of the master-poet is also there. In the first aphorism, he sets up the first element in what will emerge as a cluster of opposites – war/peace, mind/heart, factory/sea. In the second aphorism, he makes the substitutions and thereby fulfils some longing in us for answers, for closure. If there is war among men, where can we find peace? The poet does not speak in the future tense. He assures us that both realities have the potential to be ushered forth at the same time, though from vastly different sources.

His compound noun ‘mind-factory’ aptly conjures up the image of the dry mind mechanically churning out endless animosities, rationales for conflict, schemes and endless debates. It recalls the famous aphorism by United Nations Secretary-General U Thant: “Wars begin in the mind of man.”

Additionally, this very dense compound noun cannot but evoke images of factories producing weapons of war. There is a kind of baseness and facelessness to the image, a greyness, which simulates the factory conditions.

This most desolate of images is then complemented by Sri Chinmoy’s second aphorism, which depicts the birth of peace. Here he distances peace from the realm of the mind. It takes birth, he avers, ‘In the heart-sea.’ Immediately, we have the impression of the fathomless depths of the sea, its serenity, its vastness – above all, the sea is not of mankind’s manufacture. Unlike a mere factory, it existed, it exists and shall continue to exist. We hear in the rhyming scheme the play of opposites – factory/sea – and suddenly the poet has cleared the path ahead for us; he has simplified our choice between war and peace by guiding us ineluctably towards the ‘heart-sea’.

Sri Chinmoy’s twin aphorisms are applicable to all ages, and he gives us no indication as to what set of circumstances has called forth this response from him. But one only has to look up the state of the world as of January 15th, 2007 to see that his words have a most urgent message for our times.

Many other aphorisms by this seer-poet reflect on the destructive qualities of the mind as opposed to the peaceful and loving qualities of the heart:

The mind does not know,
And does not want to know,
That it is shrouded in darkness.

Sri Chinmoy suggests that the mind stubbornly clings to its own limitations and imperfections, that it does not want light to penetrate it. In another aphorism on this theme, he bluntly states:

To be happy
With the mind

Is to enjoy
A withered flower.

Again we notice that the poet tends to concentrate the entire focus of the poem on a single word (in this case 'withered') or compound noun. The unfoldment of the poem's meaning relies on our ability to give full value to this image. In many ways, this stark isolation of various nouns or verbs or adjectives reawakens us to the power of words themselves. The poet dwells on single words, he coins compounds, renames things according to his own inner discoveries. We cannot help but feel something of the freshness or luminosity of a new discovery irradiating the poem.

Perhaps that is one of the positive advantages of coming to English as a second language. Although he is a native speaker of Bengali, one of the great poetic languages of the world, Sri Chinmoy has lived in America since 1964 and written in English since long before that time. Nevertheless, he retains a delight in the language that prompts him to continually expand its possibilities.

The compound noun, in particular, allows him to yoke together two words that are entirely dissimilar in such a way that one casts new light upon the other:

Compromise-food
Is empty of taste.

Surely no other poet in the world would liken 'compromise' to 'food', even more, to insist that it actually is a kind of food. And yet the image brilliantly conveys the poet's disdain for compromise. We think of compromise as being a yielding, a magnanimous concession. We believe in something, but we feel compelled to modify our stand and accept a lesser option. Sri Chinmoy forcibly reminds us that we also have to live with this option, we have to eat it, as it were. The result, we come to discover, is something entirely unsatisfactory.

In actual fact, compound nouns of this kind incorporate an element of witticism on the part of the poet and move such aphorisms further along the axis towards the epigram. Coleridge defines the epigram thus:

What is an Epigram?
A dwarfish whole;
Its body brevity, and wit its soul.

It is telling in a poet-seer such as Sri Chinmoy that wit or a certain wry humour can co-exist with high seriousness. While many of his aphorisms are on an elevated spiritual plane, there are others which have a punch line, or involve a play on words, or offer practical advice that displays a rare astuteness. This breadth in the poet's work is a testimony also to his ability to communicate on many differing levels.

Let us consider two oft-quoted non-poetic epigrams by Oscar Wilde: "I can resist everything except temptation" and "The only way to get rid of temptation is to yield to it." Sri Chinmoy further adds to this dialogue with his epigram:

Temptation
Does not come to us

Uninvited.

Suddenly he has swept the whole context of the debate into a spiritual perspective by asserting that weakness precedes temptation and not vice versa. One can almost imagine the participants engaging in this verbal joust and then Sri Chinmoy capping the argument with his wry and extremely perspicacious retort. There is a similar underlying keenness in examples such as:

Life means
An eternal test,
And not an eternal rest!

God loves
Only the needy
And never the greedy.

In both cases, the thrust of the poem comes from the poet's discernment of the crucial differences between two rhyming opposites. Such poems expose our human weaknesses and, at the same time, offer positive choices. Sri Chinmoy does not see his role as one of criticism, but of inspiration, encouragement and support. His astringent observations notwithstanding, he accepts human mistakes, follies and imperfections without judgement or condemnation, as evinced in the following:

Everybody gets lost
At least once
Along the highways and byways
Of life.

God will embrace you
Only after
You have forgiven yourself.

In some aphorisms, he even goes to the extent of placing two alternatives before the reader and allowing him to choose the answer for himself:

Who has disowned whom?
God, the unconditional Lover,
Or man, the endless beggar?

In another poem, he asks a similar rhetorical question, except that here God and man have reversed their roles:

Who is calling whom?
God the Beggar
Or man the wanderer?

The poet maintains his aesthetic and spiritual distance while subtly guiding us to find the inescapable answer in the depths of our heart. Emerson once said, “The great never hinder us.” Sri Chinmoy proves this to be true time and again. His greatness is such that he leads us beyond the surface realities towards an experience of the Infinite, of the Divine, and there he leaves us, at the very threshold, as it were. It is we who have to take that final step.

IV.

Aesthetic Distance

A man may say I, and never refer to himself as an individual.

— Emerson

It would seem natural to draw the conclusion that the use of the first person speaking voice somehow limits the universality of the aphorism by making it subjective rather than objective. Surely, if the poet refers to himself as the subject and relates an experience that is highly personal to him, the reader automatically becomes a trespasser on a private domain.

And yet, it is not so. There are poets and writers who, by the force of their character or the depth of their own empathy, identify themselves with the experiences of others to such an extent that the manifold voices of countless human beings merge as one – and this collective voice becomes the persona of the poet. Thus the poet is able to retain his objectivity. Think of the immortal statement by Descartes, which has since become one of the cornerstones of Western philosophy: “I think, therefore I am.”

There is a breadth in Sri Chinmoy’s use of the personal pronoun which indicates the same aesthetic distance:

I see and feel
The Breath of God
Enshrined in the heart
Of every human being.

Here the poet has become an omniscient narrator, expressing an ideal vision of the intermingling of the human and the Divine. His poem is not a mere assertion, empty of personal validation, but a foreseeing of the sacred potential of humankind – to view each and every person as a portion of the Divine, to see each person without exception as a living embodiment of the very ‘Breath of God.’

The poet deliberately chooses not to cast the poem in a vatic mode – “I shall come to see and feel” – or even a prayerful mode – “May I see and feel.” Instead, he offers a simple statement of fact – “I see and feel.” When we read the aphorism, or repeat it aloud, this emphatic use of the present tense confers an enabling power upon the seer-poet’s vision. It becomes not merely a faint and insubstantial future wish, but an existing and even abiding reality.

The use of the first person pronoun, even when it represents this wider viewpoint, creates the impression of a greater degree of emotional involvement on the part of the poet. Somehow, it seems to humanise his lofty thoughts. This is the case with the following epigrammatic couplet:

When I do not think,
Ecstasy I drink.

This would appear to be a commentary on the axiom of Descartes, and a rebuttal of his central argument – in other words, a spiritual repartée. On the ordinary, human level, we consider a person who does not think to be a dullard, an unconscious human being. The functioning of the intelligence is, we are led to believe, what distinguishes man from other life forms.

The conundrum introduced by Sri Chinmoy is that thinking obstructs inner experience. He goes so far as to posit non-thinking as a precondition to achieving inner ecstasy. Ecstasy in this context is used in the mystical sense of communion with the Divine.

As in previous poems that centred on the contrast between the mind and the heart, Sri Chinmoy deliberately uses tactile words to reinforce his expression. Thus the verb ‘drink’ suggests that his thirst for higher inner experiences is slaked only when thought ceases.

In the following consecutive and complementary aphorisms he uses two atmospheric adjectives to dramatise the difference between the region of the mind and that of the heart:

My mind lives
In the land
Of darkening evening.

My heart lives
In the land
Of clearing dawn.

Sri Chinmoy normally uses adjectives of scene with great restraint. He is not someone to take up words by the bushel, as it were. When such a poet uses descriptive words for a symbolic purpose, as in the two aphorisms above, they have an extremely powerful effect. He recreates the brooding melancholy of night closing in and then infuses this darkness with the rays of hope that come with the dawn. In its simple, dignified outlines, it is an exquisitely beautiful composite word-painting.

Another kind of persona that Sri Chinmoy frequently uses is that of the collective ‘we’. In these aphorisms, he speaks on behalf of humanity and humbly counts himself as one of those struggling for higher illumination:

We are mistaken.
Death does not and cannot
Unshackle us.

Emerson has said that, “The great always introduce us to facts; small men introduce us always to themselves. The great man, even whilst he relates a private fact personal to him, is really leading us away from himself to an universal experience.”

In this poem, Sri Chinmoy is stating a foregone conclusion: “We are mistaken.” It is a bold and dramatic opening line for any poem, but one that is far more acceptable to the human ego than the accusatory “You are mistaken” or even the emotionally neutral

“Mankind is mistaken.” The poet’s self-inclusion in this shared mistake is appealing. We appreciate the basic humanity and lack of egotism that prompts such an admission. It disarms us, one might venture to say, and creates in us an inner preparedness for what follows. Now the poet is able to tackle the entire question of our attitude towards death.

It is a widely held belief that death liberates us, that it ‘unshackles’ us, to use the poet’s dramatic expression. The poet exposes this way of thinking as illusory. If we are truly bound, then the release of the body does not secure freedom. The poet compels us to examine the nature of the shackles binding us, shackles that can accompany us even beyond this life. The more we immerse ourselves in this question, the more we come to realise that we are bound by the results of our own thoughts and actions; there is no escape from the laws of karma. Another aphorism, which might be said to be a continuation of the same probing question is:

We cannot hide
Either from God
Or from time.

Aphorisms such as this, shorn of all extra words and infused with vast meaning, reverberate with a tremendous power. We feel as if the voice of the poet is emanating from the conscience of humanity itself. The omniscient narrator has become ever-present.

The uplifting effect of Sri Chinmoy’s aphorisms is exemplified in this further example:

Grace from Above
Profusely descends
Only when we are ready
To embrace the whole world.

Here he prescribes the essential condition that has to be met before God’s Grace can descend: mankind’s readiness ‘To embrace the whole world.’ Interestingly, Sri Chinmoy uses the word ‘embrace’ instead of ‘love’. We can love one another from afar, but the verb ‘embrace’ invokes a dynamic aspect of love. One is reminded of the story of St. Francis and the leper. If one is prepared to love the entire world, then one must also be prepared to embrace each and every human being, of whatever race or religion. Those individuals who have put this philosophy into practice are extremely rare, and yet the solution Sri Chinmoy has offered is perhaps the only solution which will eventually solve the tragic differences that currently divide mankind. Within the boundaries of his aphorism, the seer-poet invokes the myriad unspoken transformations which will occur as a result of the abundant descent of God’s Grace.

In this context, I believe it is possible to say that a single aphorism, expressing an entire universe of meaning and significance, especially as it relates to a specific era, is sufficient to initiate profound change within the consciousness of human beings. We do not need an abundance of books or speeches. A mere fifteen words from someone who has attained a vision of the true nature of human existence and its underlying divine nature can affect the course of history.

V.

Words of Wisdom

. . . the poet is truly the thief of fire.

— Rimbaud

From the seer-poet, we expect timeless gifts of wisdom, of inner sight. In ages past, his revelations would have been sung, chanted or intoned, passed down by word of mouth from generation to generation. Nowadays, it is more likely that we will read his creations flat on a page. Is it still possible to experience the great soul-power behind our modern literature of wisdom?

The broad appeal of Sri Chinmoy's aphorisms suggests that he has succeeded in making his wisdom come alive in our imaginative vision. He has achieved a height of simple, bare and direct expression which carries us to an expanded level of awareness. "Simplicity," he has written, "has nothing to hide." On the contrary, in simplicity he has found the words of the greatest intensity and power.

Emerson wrote of poets, ". . . we sing as we are bid." In the same way, Sri Chinmoy's choice of language and image often seems not only inspired but also inevitable. He has found the self-revealing words to frame his vision and, what is equally true, they have found him. Thus, there is a feeling that comes with his poems that he is the instrument by which they are written.

A sprinkling of examples of Sri Chinmoy's aphorisms only serves to reinforce our conviction that a vast wisdom encircles all the various themes of which he writes. There is here an intensity of vision and a depth of compassion for humankind which transfigure ordinary speech.

God expects his worshippers
To heal this broken world.

If we do not aspire,
Then we are definitely
Living in exile on earth.

Self-giving
Is
The miracle of miracles.

To be God's partner,
You have to be God's
Lover and server first.

God's Eye beckons.
God's Heart feeds.

Heaven watches us.
Earth instructs us.

Prayer starts
With a question.
Meditation concludes
With the Answer.

God shall remain
Infinitely more beautiful
Than mankind shall ever imagine.

Each life, indeed,
Is a masterpiece
Of the Supreme.

These few aphorisms, selected from just 2,000 or Sri Chinmoy's more than 100,000 such creations, are sacred utterances to live by. They offer strength, consolation, courage, confidence and inspiration. To read them is to realise that they invite repetition, even incantation. They are mantras for our modern age, resonant sound-forms of abiding truths.

VI. Conclusion

Aphorism and poetry have hitherto been largely regarded as separate genres. By the sheer force of his thousands of aphoristic creations, Sri Chinmoy has brought the aphorism within the broad spectrum of poetry, as intrinsic to the genre as the lyric, sonnet, ode, elegy and so forth. And he will undoubtedly be recognised as one of its foremost exponents. The inclusion of aphorism completes the sweep of poetry and may well be seen as Sri Chinmoy's greatest contribution to literature, for it adds to it the dimension of pure wisdom – at once locates it, defines it, exemplifies it and confirms its place among man's highest creative expressions.

Indeed, Sri Chinmoy is a truly original seer-poet. Lacking the poetic equivalent in English of the Sanskrit *slokas* of the Vedas and Upanishads, or the ancient Chinese Sayings of Confucius and Lao Tzu, he has made the aphorism his own, setting his unique stamp upon it. What occurred, therefore, as an occasional feature in the works of earlier poets has been isolated by Sri Chinmoy and given its own poetic integrity and dignity. Moreover, he has given us not just a handful of creations, but quite literally thousands.

Collections of aphorisms do not appear in all eras, for this kind of writing must be invoked by a very specific and collective need — to make some sense of the universe in which we live, to offer illuminations and revelations about our human condition. Nor is it given to any writer to speak in aphorisms. On the literary level, it requires an extraordinary degree of clarity and self-control. On the inner level, it requires much more than the homespun wisdom of a casual philosopher. The seer-poet is not a thinker or a dialectician. He has not come to decipher the world. He does not care to explain the unknown. What then is his role? To receive and communicate a vision of man or God or nature or life. In the words of the great yogi Sri Aurobindo, who was himself a seer-poet, "He sees beyond the sight of the surface mind and finds the revealing word . . ."

In our age, an age distinguished by the uprising of the soul, that seer-poet is Sri Chinmoy and he has given us a fountain of aphorisms in the light of which the eternal realities stand revealed.