

Chapter II

Imagination - The Hand of Mnemosyne

"The Imagination . . . is the mind's ambassador to infinitude."¹

In the above statement, Lascelles Ambercrombie was making a specific reference to William Wordsworth, but what was true of the Romantic proponent, is also true of the singers of Israel, whose poetry sprung from the inner wells of a sensibility that was in contact with the Divine Force.

This sensibility fashioned the Romantic expression, as with Blake who felt that Imagination had a divine source. A similar sensibility seems to be existant in the Old Testament poets who strove for, in their inner soul-visions, the Divine Harmony. Imagination, as a creative process therefore, and as the interpret^{er}ator of this soul-vision was to a great extent based on that "brooding source"², Mnemosyne (Memory), from whence all poetry flowed.

Many of the psalmists who were priests and prophets seemed to have felt the imperative need to tell the Israelites that God was very much alive. Not that people were without faith. But History tells us that many times, faith in a living God wavered. This experience is easy to comprehend even more today.

According to E. W. Heaton, the reason for this once in a way loss of faith, was that before the Israelite Conquest, the religion of the Canaanites was well established in Palestine. Canaanite religion was based on the worship of Nature - very much like the early Vedic ritual of worshipping Nature Gods. The religion established by Moses, on the other hand, originate ". . . not from man's desire to be comfortable in and exploit the natural order, but from an act in which God had revealed his nature and sought man's response to his purpose. It rested, that is to say, on the authority of historical revelation."³ Hence, these men of God who were writers of the psalms, were led by a missionary zeal to continually establish the authenticity of the one true God. Their poetic imagination was coloured by the memory of the past when God revealed Himself through

various events. In a way, this may be termed, "the collective memory" of a people - in this case, the Jews. On the other hand, this "collective memory" has a catholicity of its own and on a broader scale can be called the collective memory of mankind. The spiritual History of man is the factual story of his trial, fall and salvation.

In its universality can be discerned the personal note. Each individual is an "accumulated self"^A He is borne of the Past. When a poet seeks expression in poetry, he does so with borrowings of past experiences, language and style and when the psalmist thus sings his song, he brings to bear upon the present, his personal experiences along with the great experiences of the by-gone years of his community. The poetry of the psalms emerges from this memory.

What experiences did Mnemosyne, the Goddess of Memory, hold up for the poets of the Old Testament? On a personal level, it was the times when God made them to suffer in the hands of enemies, or poverty or affliction and then led them out of this realm of suffering, to give them shelter and refuge. First then, is the cry from the mire of suffering:

O Lord, my God, I call for
 help by day;
 I cry out in the night before thee,
 Let my prayer come before thee.
 incline thy ear to my cry!

For my soul is full of troubles,
 and my life draws near to Sheol.
 I am reckoned among those who go
 down to the Pit;
 I am a man who has no strength,
 like one foresaken among the dead,
 like the slain that lie in the grave,
 like those whom thou dost remember
 no more,
 for they are cut off from thy hand. (ps. 88:1-5.
Bible . RSV. p. 523)

Then the song of praise and thanksgiving -

Make a joyful noise to God,
 all the earth;
 sing the glory of his name;
 give to him glorious praise!
 Say to God, "How terrible are thy
 deeds!
 So great is thy power that thy
 enemies cringe before thee.
 All the earth worships thee;

they sing praises to thee,
sing praises to thy name." (ps.66:1-4Bible .RSV.508).

Many times, it is the sheer ecstatic joy of wonderment at God's creation and an outburst of gratitude and thanksgiving. These personal upheavals and joyous experiences bring the psalmist closer to the Lord and when it become^s necessary to proclaim to all, the might and power of the Omnipresent, Memory leads one back to the great and wonderⁿful deeds of the Lord, all witnessed by the forefathers from the time of Abraham. The poet invites one to walk down memory lane, not only alone but together as children of God:

Come and see what God has done;
he is terrible in his deeds among
men.

He turned the sea into dry land;
men passed through the river on
foot.

.....

For thou, O God, hast tested us;
thou hast tried us as silver is
tried.

Thou dist^d bring us into the net;
^

thou didst lay affliction on our
loins;
thou didst let men ride over our heads;
we went through fire and through
water;
yet thou hast brought us forth to a
spacious place. (ps. 66: 5, 10-12. Bible. RSV. 508).

God's mighty acts are the very foundation of Israel's history. It was natural, therefore, that the psalmist's imaginative sensibilities be built on these foundations.

The poems in the Psalter show how much poetry is present in the voices of the people of Israel. What the poets have to report, grows out of a world of experience shared with people of all conditions, people whose inward sense of life is of the same order as our own.

"When a man feels keenly about an event it is natural that he should talk about it in verse."⁵ Thus, the miraculous events of the past became the touchstones of the lives of the people, indelible and not easy to forget. "As in Ps. 80, the event in which the community of God has experienced an earlier act of deliverance is an event set within the context of the 'primordial history' of

Israel, i.e., that series of events by which Israel first became a people. They are the events surrounding the Exodus and the settlement of the Promised Land: liberation from Egypt, deliverance from the Reed [sic] Sea, guidance and preservation in the wilderness, territorial expansion in the Promised Land, victory over enemies who endangered their new existence - in fact the exact same series of events included in the imagery of Ps. 80."⁶

Memory is crucial to these poems of the Old Testament for the following reasons:

1. to re-present History so as to reinstate faith in a living God. Thanksgiving, praise, awe and admonishment are involved in this process.
2. to bring into order, intense, profound experience, recollected and made into the experience of the Now with greater depth of meaning and significance.
3. to fulfil the hunger of curiosity through narration.
4. to keep memory alive as a sustaining reality so as not

to lose identity of a race and an individual.

1. The recollection of History includes the highlighting of dramatic moments when God has worked actively in the lives of men. Psalm 105, for example, uses a history of the promise to Abraham and the story of God's protection through the exodus:

Remember the wonderful works that
 he has done,
his miracles, and the judgments he
 uttered,
O offspring of Abraham his servant,
 sons of Jacob, his chosen ones!
He is the Lord our God;
 his judgments are in all the earth.
He is mindful of his covenant for
 ever,
 of the word that he commanded,
 for a thousand generations,
the covenant which he made with
 Abraham,
his sworn promise to Isaac,
which he confirmed to Jacob as a
 statute,
to Israel as an everlasting covenant,
saying, "To you I will give the land

of Canaan
 as your portion for an inheritance." (ps. 105:5-11.
Bible . RSV. 533).

The psalm continues to affirm the fact that the people have inherited the land for a purpose - to have a home where they can continue to adhere to the Divine Laws.

In psalm 136, the poet sings of the exodus, the wanderings in the desert, the taking over of Canaan and more importantly, of the beginnings. With constant emphasis on, ". . . his steadfast love endures for ever;" (RSV.551), the psalmist expresses the depths of Divine love grounded in the creation of the earth, the sky, the sun and the moon.

Claus Westermann says that in the book, Die Geschichtsmotive in den Alttestamentlichen Psalmen, the author, A. Lauha asks a question (which many of us do too): "Why do the psalms constantly return to the Mosaic period, and when doing so, why do they always lift up the same motifs while completely ignoring other events so heavily emphasized in the historical books?" (p. 133)." To this

query, Lauha himself offers an answer with the help of the stance taken by Anton Jirkus in Die alteste Geschichte Israels in Rahman lehrhafter Darstellungen, (1917): " ' in Israel there existed a doctrinal statement incorporating historical events, i.e., a schema involving doctrine and preaching had been formulated in which the same historical material was continually repeated and which was used as a catechism' (Lauha, p. 133)." ⁸

Thus we realise that the psalms in contemporary usage were to a certain extent didactic. They never failed to teach and prove to the children of Israel, the working power of God. Taken in the modern context too (as discussed in Chapter I), the psalms, invariably and with equal force, lay emphasis on the saving and healing power of the most High. The wanderings in the wilderness, reflect the frustrations and hopelessness of the human soul deep in misery and suffering leading to or resulting from complete loss of faith - ("because they had no faith in God, / and did not trust his saving power.". ps. 78:22. Bible . RSV. p. 517). But the miracle of manna ("Yet he commanded the skies above, / and opened the doors of heaven; /

and he rained down upon them / manna to eat, / and gave them the grain of heaven." . Bible . RSV. p. 517), is one of the many miracles whereby the Omnipotent intervenes to save and redeem his child.

In spite of all this, Man forgets:

They made a calf in Horeb
and worshipped a molten-image.
They exchanged the glory of God
for the image of an ox that eats
grass.

They forgot God, their Saviour,
who had done great things in
Egypt, (ps. 106:19-21. Bible . RSV. 535).

Mnemosyne, once again, lifts up her hand to lead the erring Human to his Creator:

Our fathers, when they were in
Egypt,
did not consider thy wonderful
works;
They did not remember the abundance of thy steadfast love,
but rebelled against the Most

High at the Red Sea.
 Yet he saved them for his name's
 sake,
 that he might make known his
 mighty power. (ps. 106:7-8. Bible . RSV. 535).

The psalmists, with reiterated descriptions of the past, thus attempt to bring hope to all those who will but listen to his song of God who is "the hope of all the ends of the earth," (ps. 65:5. Bible . RSV. 508).

2. Memory organises the experiences of the past and brings them forward as profound experiences of the Now. The past is reinstated in order to bring about a future of hope. Only then can this ". . . history of divine care . . . guide us into new paths of liberation."⁹ Memory has arrested from the "nunc flow" of time, moments, and through its poetry has made them eternal moments of today. This is why we are able to plunge into the experiences of the religious poets. The essence of their experience is the same for all ages to come. The relationship between God and Man determines spiritual values and such values know not definitions and

boundaries of time, cast or creed.

In the essay, "Social Experiences of the Saint-Poets"¹⁰, R. C. Mishra discusses the Nirguna School of Hindi Poetry, (12th A. D. to 19th A. D.). While focussing on the various Saint-Poets of the time, he makes the following comment, which goes to show how spiritual values are universal and topical. The Saint-Poets echo the sentiments of the Israelite singer-poet:

'He who exists in every pore of the body is the real Rama, the real life, Immanent as he is, he has revealed to me the totality of my own consciousness.'
(Saint poet Dedu Dayal. 1544-1603 A. D.)

or,

'In the presence of this divine-consciousness there is no room left for untruth, ignorance or narrowness, because there can be no darkness where the sun shines.' (Saint Sundera Das. 1596-1689 A. D.).

R. C. Mishra goes on further to state that "The poetic utterances which emanated from these ordinary personalities were extraordinary. They steered clear of the restrictions of time and space, country and creed. They upheld and promoted values which

nourished and revitalized the social ethos." (p. 41).

These experiences take on a new light when we consider a point - that " the past forces itself into the present precisely in its contrast to the present. What has happened is heard as the antithesis of what is happening . . . The contrast cannot be so described, for properly speaking it is a contrast between what God has done earlier and is now doing. We need to be aware of why the concept 'history' neither appears nor could appear in the Bible. It is simply that the consciousness of the One who is active in what is happening is still too strong. God is confronted with former deeds in order to persuade him to do now, not what he is doing but what by contrast he had done earlier."¹¹ Not only men but God too is reminded of His own great deeds so that He might "recollect them", as it were and come to man's aid while he seeks for the exodus out of suffering, for the parting of the sea of obstacles, for the deliverance from the wilderness of trials and tribulations and for the coming into the promised land of peace and hope.

3. When the psalmists probe their memories to look into the past, their poetic mission becomes not just the recalling to us of familiar thoughts and scenes, but also the telling of strange and splendid things and the creation of new worlds. . . Stories of the Divine, of their ancestors and of miraculous events, fulfilled the imagination of those who sang or heard the psalms.

Curiosity, a process of development, also led men to probe into the past. Their discoveries made them narrate stories about the beginnings, about creation and the Creator. Like many instinctive likings, story-telling and listening is a taste Mankind will never lose. It is strongest with the young and the primitive, for they still live in conditions where there is ample scope for the feeding of one's imagination with factual stories of the past. Almost always, the "imagination rejects the vague and whimsical but is readily fired by (in fiction or out) by facts . . .".¹²

On these facts, Imagination creates new worlds of experience and sometimes new creations of this sort are more arresting as,

"Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard
 Are sweeter:" (Keats, Ode on a Grecian Urn
 lines. 12-13.).

When the psalmist, therefore, narrates the stories of God and
 His people, we are bound to listen with a keen curiosity for,

"It is in my heart that grown men are but
 as children in the matter of tales, and the
 oldest tale is the most beloved."⁴³

Let us consider psalm 135 and imagine the poet reciting to a
 circle of simple, rural audience, whose upbringing has been with
 Nature:

Whatever the Lord pleases he does,
 in heaven and on earth,
 in the seas and all deeps.
 He it is who makes the clouds rise at
 the end of the earth,
 who makes lightnings for the
 rain
 and brings forth the wind from his
 storehouses. (ps. 135:6-7. Bible . RSV. 550).

The story becomes more interesting when he begins to talk about God's intervention in the lives of the Israelites:

He it was who smote the first-born of
 Egypt,
 both of man and of beast;
 who in thy midst, O Egypt,
 sent signs and wonders
 against Pharaoh and all his servants;
 who smote many nations
 and slew mighty kings,
 Sihon, king of the Amorites,
 and Og, king of Bashan,
 and all the kingdoms of Canaan,
 and gave their land as a heritage,
 a heritage to his people Israel. (ps. 135:8-12 Bible
 RSV. 550).

Whenever God intervenes, (as did Krishna in The Mahabharata), the course of events take on a more colourful tone and the inexplicable factor in this context is that men are drawn by some magnetic power to appreciate such phenomenon. The practical minded may scoff at this idea. "People with more caution than faith sometimes comfort themselves with the saying, 'Seeing is Believing' -

meaning that it is wrong to believe anything you cannot see. This is a doctrine of despair."¹⁴ They seem to be those whose Imagination has seen atrophy. Imagination is a potent weapon in the hands of men like the psalmists. With this weapon they brought to bear upon their songs, the "poetry of interpretation"¹⁵, reflecting life as it is, even with all its disharmonious shades. Life in its totality finds a refuge in the minds and hearts of the psalmists and its story is kept safe and alive in the memories of these men.

4. Memory, in the psalms, is constantly kept alive through the exercise of Imagination. This is the sustaining reality of a people and a person. The poets keep rummaging the Mnemosynic closet, not only for reasons given earlier but also because the question of identity is at stake. To understand this, we take a look at ancient Israel. "Two principal kinds of religion competed for the allegiance of the ancient Israelites. . . . First there is the religion of the Canaanites, well-established in Palestine before the Israelite Conquest, elaborate in its ritual and thoroughly identified with the

interests and pursuits of an agricultural population. Secondly, there is the religion of Moses and the semi-nomads who came out of Egypt and settled in Palestine. This was the very antithesis of the religion they found on their arrival - austere, simply organised, cradled in a desert rather than a settled society, and, therefore, not in the least geared to the everyday life of men who tilled the soil."¹⁶ As an aftermath of this, therefore, prophets and priests worked hard towards preserving the religion of Moses amidst the culture and tradition of Canaan.¹⁷ The religious leaders made every effort to re-establish, first, the identity of the one, true God and second, the identity of His people. Heaton asserts that, "no less than a third of the population practised some form of Canaanite religion."¹⁸ More than one alien form of worship was existant even in the Temple at Jerusalem. It is said that the prophet Ezekiel was "aghast" at the sun worship there.¹⁹

The psalmists, many of whom were religious teachers reinforced their songs with narrations of the Divine Love in action, God's guidance and protection so that their people may know

themselves. In spite of all foreign influence, an official religion was kept alive in Israel. This religion insisted on the worship of the one God and the psalms were, many of them, born of this worship. As long as Memory kept God alive, "Israel never ceased to be a distinctive people."²⁰

In their universal scope, the psalms lend identification not only to a race of people, the Jews, but also to Mankind. Memory, as the mother of poetry, touches the life of each individual and the history of Israel becomes one's own when accepted in the sense that the past is a mirror of a relationship \neq between God and Man and between Man and his brethren. About two thousand five hundred years ago, the psalmist asked:

"What is man, that thou art mindful of
him, ? (ps. 8:4, Bible . RSV. 476).

The very same question is asked even today and in the answer is established the bond between the Creator and His Creation. This sort of relationship based on the unconditional love of the great King

and the selfish love of the mere mortal, is well expressed by Rabindranath Tagore in, Gitanjali where the beggar, (representative of Man) realises how miserly he has been and ultimately weeps wishing that he had “. . . had the heart to give thee [God] my all.” Gitanjali. [No. 50.] lines 21-22.

A breakdown in this relationship becomes a cause for despair and frustration. When Memory no longer serves to identify the Self, Man begins to lose his bearings, his identity.

Taken from the level of psychology, M. L. Rosenthal states that Memory has the power to recover the past which has a life of its own and the psychological life is by and large “a matter of accumulating a sense of oneself over the years, against which we balance a sense of the present state of our awareness and the flashes of memory that recall to us who and where we have been in the past.”²¹

The “accumulated self”, (to borrow again a phrase of Rosenthal), can very often receive a “jolt” as it were, when Memory fails. This would lead to depression and disorders of the mind and spirit. “No malaise is more common than depression, whether in so

extreme a form or in the milder form . . . where the distress comes from a momentary disordering of the relation of present to past.²²"

If the psalms, therefore were not to continuously establish the identity of Man in relation to God, if memory could not recollect the past, Man would then lose meaning in existence. Many times, in the psalms of lament and suffering, the poet has cried out, forlorn and forsaken:

"I am weary with my moaning;" (ps. 6:6.Bible . RSV. 475)

or,

"O Lord, heal me, for my bones are
troubled.

My soul also is sorely troubled." (ps.6:2-4.Bible .
RSV.474.)

But when he remembers God as, "the helper of the fatherless" (ps. 10:14. RSV. 477) and the fact that the Divine Father made Man in His image, he is filled with great joy and a sense of belonging:

Yet thou hast made him little less
than God,
and dost crown him with glory and
honour.

Thou hast given him dominion over
 the works of thy hands;
 thou has put all things under his
 feet,
 all sheep and oxen,
 and also the beasts of the field,
 the birds of the air, and the fish of the
 sea,
 whatever passes along the paths of
 the sea. (ps. 8:5-8. Bible . RSV. 476).

Good and bad experiences become a force that reveals when Memory
 knocks. We become a part of what we once were:

"I am a part of all that I have met;

 . . . that which we are, we are;" (Tennyson. Ulysses.
 lines 18-67).

In the psalms, there is a sharing of memories which brings about
 a "kindred revelation".²³ It evokes a situation where there is
 sympathy with the poet who remembers. Thus Memory becomes another
 instrument for communion. She brings the hearers of these "songs",
 into ^Msympathy with the poets thus revealing their experiences. In
 the process we have also "remembered" and "seen" how God kept his

covenant with His children and how involved He is in the build-up of their lives.

Very often, the re-experiencing of a past state achieves a colouring of the realm of dreams. The intoning of these verses vibrate the subconscious part of Memory and thus the composers of these poems were perhaps, many times, prompted to fall into a reverie-like condition where they had visions of mystical content. "In all of us there lives a man who is visited by dreams, who has been intensely inspired by idealism, be it momentary, whose attention suddenly wavers at the remembrance of a former life, who is intoxicated by the vision of future. Some have him badly, some in a lesser degree. One of the functions of stimulating literature is to satisfy this dreamer in all of us."²⁴ The only point of difference here would be that "remembrance of a former life", would not detract in the case of the psalmist. It would be the starting point of a vision of hope.

For the Israelites, therefore, preserving the past, is crucial to their finding themselves as God's chosen people and to their

growth as a nation. In his essay, "What is Nation-Soul?" Sri Aurobindo asseverates that "the primal law and purpose" of an individual and a nation is to seek at "self-formulation, - to find itself," "because it is "a living power of the Eternal Truth, a self-manifesting spirit."²⁵ This may be true of the ancient Hebrew poets.

The pressure of memory is, thus most powerfully felt in the poetic imagination of the psalmists of Israel and its relevance cannot be underscored.

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