

## Chapter III

### Incantation

Primitive song, worship and ritual, have as one of the integral components, the technique of Incantation. Since poetry also grew out of ancient song, it too is not without this element. Before we discuss the use of Incantation in the psalms, it would be relevant to define the term so as to isolate its significance in the context of these holy poems.

"Incantation" the word, stirs up many associations. Imagination may turn to focus on medieval legends of knights in shiny armour and beautiful damsels in distress with wizards and witches mouthing incantatory spells. Imagination may lead us to the jungles of Africa where the tribal thumps his tom-tom while his brave compatriots chant as they tread an endless war-dance. Imagination may take us to <sup>V</sup>vedic times where the brahmin meditates before the "agni" (fire), chanting a "mantra" (chant), such as the "OM" and thus

chanting, he is lifted up to a higher plane of spiritual awareness.

Whatever the case may be, two factors are to be noted in Incantation:

(a) that it is a kind of a charm with great potency:

"[use of] magical formula; spell, charm."<sup>1</sup>

(b) that it makes use of rhythmic repetition.

In ritualistic worship, incantation takes the form of constant repetition of words or sentences. The priest intones the main prayer while the congregation joins in, in the refrain. In songs too, incantation could take the form of a refrain or chorus. In poetry, especially with the simpler forms, incantatory effect can be produced by the repetition of single words, phrases or sentences.

The following could serve as examples:

(a) What was he doing, the great god Pan, (emphasis added),  
Down in the reeds by the river ?

.....

He tore out a reed, the great god Pan, (emphasis added),  
From the deep cool bed of the river:

.....

High on the shore sat the great god Pan, (emphasis added)  
While turbidly flow'd the river;

(Browning, E. B. A Musical Instrument . verses 1-3)

(b) This is the weather the cuckoo likes,

And so do I; (emphasis added.)

. . . . .

This is the weather the shepherd shuns,

And so do I; (emphasis added.).

(Hardy, Thomas. Weathers . lines 1 - 2;  
10 - 11).

(c) And the silent isle imbowers

The Lady of Shalott (emphasis added.)

. . . . .

Or is she known in all the land,

The Lady of Shalott . (emphasis added.)

(Tennyson. The Lady of Shalott . verses 2 and 3)

In many poems, incantation assumes greater proportions of a refrain as in The Stolen Child by W. B. Yeats, where the verse-repetition has a lilting, haunting, hypnotic tune:

Come away, O human child !  
To the waters and the wild  
With a faery, hand in hand,  
For the world's more full of weeping than  
you can understand.

This explicit form of incantation diminishes and becomes merged subtly with the rhythm, or, totally absent, in many modern poems.

When we look at the poetry of the psalms, we do not always discern a simple, single formula that is incantation. There is no constant intoning of a "mantra" - like charm that grasps the mind into an enchanted spell. It is not as though the psalmist utters a simple charm like the magical, "abracadabra" and "hey presto !", we are all spell-bound. Incantation, in these treasured songs of Israel, takes on a deeper and a more ingenious tone.

It would be well to consider here, Lascelles Abercrombie's definition of incantation. Incantation, he says, is, ". . . the power of using words so as to produce in us a sort of enchantment: This power not merely charms and delights but kindles our minds into unusual vitality . . . ". He goes on to explain the fact that this vitality helps the mind to be in a state of enchantment, making it "exquisitely aware both of things and of the connections of things." But of this experience of being enchanted, Abercrombie says, ". . . we do not require an absolute enchantment in every phrase we read,

even in the finest poetry. The poets have an art of making us expect the magical phrase; and when it comes, it casts its enchantment over the whole surrounding . . . " <sup>2</sup> (p. 18)

The poet, through incantation, does not merely recount a fact. More than its description, he is, with this device, able to re-create the experience of the fact so that we are able to live the experience.

One reason why incantation is important to the psalmist is that the "Psalms were made to be repeated by heart, not read."<sup>3</sup>

Having emerged from ancient Israel's public worship, these poems, as a form of prayer were, oral in form. This form of prayer is common to most religions of the east. "Most of the psalms were sung and prayed along before being written down.. They were first committed to writing in the process of the growth of the whole collection . . . when we say that the psalms were formed in Israel's worship, we mean a worship which at that time was the heartbeat of the whole community. Israel could no more exist without worship

than worship could exist without Israel. The function of this worship can best be understood as like the veins which link the heart with the whole body, conveying the life-force, which went out from worship into the people's ordinary life . . . ".<sup>4</sup> Thus the participation of the lay people in ritualistic prayer may of necessity have demanded an expression that was facile and easy to grasp. The incantatory method made the psalms not only easier to remember and recite but also simpler to comprehend when ideas are emphasised through balance of sentences (parallelism). We are told that " . . . the proper pronunciation of Hebrew is simply unknown . . ." and that ". . . the discovery and description of this verse system is a task beyond human ability."<sup>5</sup> We will, therefore ask, how incantation is still discernable in the translated versions. We are aware that in translations and vernacular renditions, many elements of the poetry of the psalms are lost - like assonance, alliteration and metre, for instance. But the incantatory effect of the psalms do not rest with these only. A major part of the effect is produced by the method of repetition - repetition not only of

sounds, single words and phrases but also of whole verse-structures generally called, "parallelismus membrorum" or "parallelism".<sup>6</sup> Parallelism is to Hebrew poetry, what rhyme and meter are for traditional English poetry.

The Hebrews, we are told, were fond of repetition.<sup>7</sup> They believed that anything worth telling was worth telling again and again. This is true, not only of the Hebrews but of all simple, basic, human, people with simple, basic, human sensibilities. As Marjorie Boulton in The Anatomy of Poetry,<sup>8</sup> says, we have a tendency to repeat ourselves when we are very happy or angry or distressed. The psalmist too goes through all these rhythmic upheavals of joy and sorrow. Sometimes, in the fullness of joy, he praises the name of God again and again:

Bless the Lord, O my soul;  
and all that is within me,  
bless his holy name !  
Bless the Lord, O my soul,  
and forget not all his benefits,  
who forgives all your iniquity,  
who heals all your diseases,  
who redeems your life from the Pit,

who crowns you with steadfast love  
 and mercy,  
 who satisfies you with good as long as  
 you live  
 so that your youth is renewed like  
 the eagle's. (ps. 103:1-5, Bible . RSV, 531).

At othertimes, the psalmist suffers in anger and shouts out to

God:

Thou hast made us turn back from  
 the foe;  
 and our enemies have gotten spoil.  
Thou hast made us like sheep for  
 slaughter,  
 and hast scattered us among the  
 nations.  
Thou hast sold thy people for a trifle,  
 demanding no high price for them. (emphasis added)  
 (ps. 44:10-12. Bible . RSV. 497)

The litany goes on along this line with the constant repetition  
 of "Thou hast . . . ". This psalm illustrates the idea of how the  
 poet produces an incantatory vibration that resounds past the  
 physical to the realms of the spiritual so that the Soul eventually

picks up the harmonious resonance. In this particular psalm, unit 1 is repeated in unit 2. This is what we know as synonymous parallelism. In the subsequent units, this idea about the goodness of God is expanded and illustrated to form the synthetic or complementary parallelism. There is also a third type of parallelism. When the thoughts of the first part is reversed, the structure is normally termed, the antithetic parallelism.<sup>9</sup> An example of the latter is found in psalm 37:21-22:

The wicked borrows, and cannot pay  
                   back,  
 but the righteous is generous and  
                   gives;  
 for those blessed by the Lord shall  
                   possess the land,  
 but those cursed by him shall be  
                   cut off.           ( Bible . RSV. 493 )

Here, the contrast-balance of ideas helps to emphasise the point on the necessity of being righteous.

Besides the repeating of verse-structures, the psalmist very

often repeats a word, a phrase or a sentence. For example:

Let Israel say,

"His steadfast love endures for  
ever."

Let the house of Aaron say,

"His steadfast love endures for  
ever."

Let those who fear the Lord say,

"His steadfast love endures for  
ever." (ps. 118:2-4. Bible . RSV. 541.).

The repetition of the same word or words at the beginning of successive verses is termed, "anaphora" while "epiphora" is the repetition of the same word or words at the end of successive verses.<sup>10</sup>

To explain in detail the device of parallelism, is to tread well-worn paths as scholars have already done much spade work on this. Claus Westermann talks about the "parallelism of members" and compares this to the "runners of a rocking chair."<sup>11</sup> Edward J. Kissane, explains parallelism in terms of "clause" - verses, each containing two, three or four "tonic accents".<sup>12</sup> These clauses,

he explains, are "sense divisions" where each verse is interconnected to form a group which develops a certain phase of the poet's thoughts. In The Psalms: Songs of Tragedy, Hope and Justice, David Pleins identifies the different types of parallelism as "bicola" (couplets), "colon" (the balancing line in the couplet), "tricola" (3 colons) and "quartrains".<sup>13</sup> Norman Snaith, in The Hymns of the Temple, discusses the poetry of the psalms with a reference to T. H. Robinson's, Poetry and the Poets of the Old Testament. (1947, pp 11-46) [the title of Robinson's work is recorded thus.] Borrowing a remark of Robinson's, Snaith writes:

"Every verse must consist of at least two "members",

the second of which must, more or less completely,

satisfy the expectation raised by the first."<sup>14</sup> (p. 21).

A similar idea, according to Clyde S. Kilby, in Poetry and Life: An Introduction to Poetry, is expressed by Professor Richard Mouton, who felt ". . . that in Hebrew poetry of the highest rhythmic beauty the effect depends neither of rhyme nor on meter, but, "Like the swing

of a pendulum to and fro, like the tramp of an army marching in step, the versification of the Bible moves with a rhythm of parallel lines."<sup>15</sup> In all, we get a fairly clear picture of what parallelism is all about. The aim of this study is not to define it further but to analyse how this device is a form of incantation in the holy psalms and to what purpose this technique is used. Thus we leave the technical aspect of these repetitions to dwell more intensively on the magical power released by these repetitive chants.

Any form of repetition, simple or sophisticated, plays a significant role in existence: the rotation and revolution of the earth, the moon and the planets, the patterned change of seasons and time, the evolution of life from birth, growth and death, the surging in and out of ocean tides, the harmonic law in all creation, the rhythmic flow of joy and grief. The progress of life depends on this rhythm of harmony. From the very infancy, Man has responded to this rhythm of repetition as when he was rocked to sleep in his mother's arms, or when he first identified his parents as, "da-da", "pa-pa", and "ma-ma", "am-ma", his furry pet as "bow-wow", and his

miniature train as "chug-chug" or "puff-puff". Thus the rhythmic and incantatory ritual of prayer, of communication, should not dull or disrupt. Its effect is the opposite.

The practice of chanting is often considered a "primitive" practice. We tend to think of "primitive" in somewhat a derogatory sense - the ignorant, the unilluminated. It would be more relevant to consider this: that in the primitive condition of being is a greater awareness of all things in creation. The psalmist, in this way was not oblivious of cosmic time as well as the cosmic spirit and by the incantation of his verses, he strove to reawaken his brethren's Souls and tune it to a greater Harmony.

Israel's many hymns, according to Sigmund Mowinckel, belong to the cultic festivals.<sup>16</sup> In this form of congregational worship, those assembled together could experience and never forget God's presence through repetitive recounting of His great deeds.

"... the mainly brief psalms so easily impress themselves on the worshippers' minds that, with regular recital, they take root of

themselves in the memory and do not need to be learned, as we say, 'by heart'. In this manner they were able to be transmitted from generation to generation."<sup>17</sup>

In the repetitive chanting of the psalms, the following needs were addressed and fulfilled:

1. The need to establish God as aliving , acting and a mighty Presence, through constant emphasis on His wondrous works.
2. The need to re-create the psalmist's experience of the Holy in his life, so that we, too, can live in and be witness to that experience.
3. The need to participate together in worship (as cultic performances.).
4. The need to exercise our primal, human sensibilities- love, justice, compassion, gratitude, joy - which would

otherwise fall into a state of atrophy. [An idea, parallel to this, is contained in Thomas De Quincey's essay, on the functions of Literature: "Were it not that human sensibilities are ventilated and continually called out into exercise by the great phenomena of infancy ..... or of literature as it recombines these elements in the mimicries of poetry, romance, etc., it is certain that, like any animal power or muscular energy falling into disuse, all such sensibilities would gradually drop and dwindle." <sup>18</sup> ]

And then, we have the final and perhaps the most important need:

5. the need to sometimes transcend the worldly - with all its mundane trivialities - to rise above all else and be at peace with oneself and all the rest. The music of incantation is able to do this: to lift the soul up to the tune of Harmony.

Incantation, therefore, has a magical and hypnotic effect. It makes use of repetition to release a power within. Saying the rosary

with continuous appeals off, "Hail Mary", or turning the prayer-wheel, or chanting the "Gayatri Mantra", or the singing of "bhajans", are all akin to the psalmist's mode off chanting thus:

O give thanks to the Lord,  
for he is good,  
for his steadfast love endures for  
ever.

O give thanks to the God of gods,  
for his steadfast love endures for  
ever.

O give thanks to Lord of lords,  
for his steadfast love endures for  
ever; . . . (ps. 136:1-3. Bible . RSV. 551.).

"The repetitive and intensifying style of Hebrew poetry surrounds and continually immerses the hearer or singer in the issues of the text, as Bonhoeffer notes:

“This form . . . encourages us not to allow the prayer to be cut off prematurely, and it invites us to pray together with one another. That which seems to be unnecessary repetition to us, who are inclined to pray too hurriedly, is actually proper

immersion and concentration in prayer. It is at the same time the sign that many, indeed all believers, pray with different words yet with one and the same word. . . . ' " .<sup>19</sup>

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We have dwelt much on repetition as a main form of incantation. This is not all. To recall Abercrombie's phrase, incantation is, and I would say, the other aspect of it, is, ". . . the power of using words . . ." (or phrase or concepts), ". . . so as to produce in us a sort of enchantment . . ." <sup>20</sup> With regard to the psalms, it is not the power of "words" alone, but of phrases and sentences that together communicate a thought, a fact, an experience that lend the magical lustre of enchantment to the whole texture of the poem. To dwell on single words is not the motive here, as these poems have been subject to various translations and though the meaning remains more or less the same, the impact of one word may vary in degree from the impact of its synonym.

There may be various occasions for the poet's incantation but

the purpose is always the same - to produce a state of enchantment. It may be a moment of sensation only, or a moment compact with feeling, sensation, emotion amalgamated, but always, it is an individual, unique and exquisite moment of truth.

The glow of such magical moments has its source in the emotive use of phrases and sentences often bearing significant and valuable contextual meaning. At this point, it seems necessary to recall V. K. Chari's essay, "The Language of poetry", where an attempt is made to inquire into the differentia of poetic language and the function of language in poetry. In this context, he writes: "Sanskrit poetics have grappled with the question of what is the soul or essence of poetry (kavyātmā), and offered diverse definitions that the poetic essence consists in Rasa or relish, in Alankāra (ornaments or poetic figures), in Riti or Style understood as a special arrangement or combination of words, in Vakrokti or a striking mode of speech based on 'double entendre', in Dhvani or suggestiveness. Nearly all these theories assume that there is a special poetic use of language, and that poetic language possesses certain distinct virtues . . . . In spite of their varying emphases,

the Sanskrit poetics, on the whole, are agreed on the point that suggestion is the chief element in the arousal of the peculiar poetic delight." (pp. 14-15).<sup>21</sup>

In the psalms, this poetic delight springs from the conceptual use of language. "A lot of good poetry everywhere has contained large generalizations on life; delight in the contemplation of universals, has been an important element in the poetry of all ages."<sup>22</sup> Such statements, whether direct and simple or referential, have had that potent power to bring about a state of enchantment. When, for instance, the psalmist utters in thankful realisation, "This is the day which the Lord has made;/Let us rejoice and be glad in it" (ps. 118:24. Bible . RSV. 542.), we are swept into a revelation of a Universal truth that gets lost often times in this hectic world of ours. This is the power which prods us to faith and belief. This is that magnetic utterance which acquires an intensity of expression which is more than informative. It comes with the same directness and intensity as a line from Milton, for instance: "The mind is its own place and in itself/ can make a Heaven of Hell and a Hell of Heaven." ( Paradise Lost. 1. lines 254-5.)

Another powerful instance is born in the following:

"Be still before the Lord, and wait  
patiently for him;" (ps.37:7. Bible . RSV.492.

emphasis added)

and in,

"But the meek shall possess the  
land," (ps. 37:11. Bible . RSV. 492.).

The concept of being "still" in the first line is highly evocative and heightens our awareness of all that is around us. The imperative statement commands us to listen, a thing we rarely do because it is the negation of the ego, the "I". The second line with the impact of "meek" and "possess", the paradoxical content re-emphasises the importance of humility and selflessness.

In psalm 9:18, the music of hope and confidence rings out in the idea of :

For the needy shall not always be  
forgotten,  
and the hope of the poor shall not  
perish for ever. ( Bible . RSV. 476.)

and in moments of aching and stumbling, the psalmist tells us as he did hundreds of years ago, to "cast your [our] burden on the Lord/

and he will sustain you." (ps. 55:22.Bible . RSV. 503.) These are powerful statements that reassure, potent elixirs that lift up. Even out of context, most of them do not lose their charm. A few more instances may be considered here:

Psalm 111:10 - "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom;" (Bible . RSV. 539.)

Psalm 12:6 - The promises of the Lord are promises that are pure, silver refined in a furnace on the ground, purified seven times. (Bible .RSV. 478.).

Psalm 42:1 - As a hart longs for flowing streams, so longs my soul for thee, O God. (Bible .RSV. 496.).

Psalm 57:1 - in the shadow of thy wings I will take refuge, till the storms of destruction pass by. (Bible .RSV. 504.).

Psalm 50:11 - "I know all the birds of the air, and all that moves in the field is mine," (Bible .RSV. 500.)

Psalm 50:23 - "He who brings thanks giving as his sacrifice honours me;" (Bible .RSV. 501.)

Psalm 51:17 - The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit;" (Bible .RSV. 501.)

These sayings, despite their seemingly simple character, become more powerfully stimulating once taken in the context of the whole poem. With life's ups and down that we go through, it is not too difficult to identify with the experience of the psalmist. When this happens, these lines become all the more potent. They draw us into a moment, compact with truth.

"The poet uses words not merely to make declarations, statements of fact. This is usually the last thing that concerns him. He seeks above all to put words together in such a way that they exercise a mysterious and vital reactivity among themselves, and so release their secret content of associations to produce in the reader an experience that enriches the depths of his spirit in a manner quite unique."<sup>23</sup>

Thus we see that Incantation is one element of poetry that has

an effective role to play in the psalms of the Old Testament. We have noted how it is based on, first, the use of repetition and second, on the uses of words as an emotive and conceptual power. These words are "value-words", (Emphasis added.) words which represent ". . . concepts and feelings universally regarded as valuable,"<sup>24</sup>

Like most good poetry, the psalms cannot do without this power of incantation - the power to hold us spellbound in universal truths. Through the incantation of the verses, the voice of these ancient poet-singers, is kept alive so that it may be heard again and again, ever more audibly.

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