

*"I send you this poem": The optic and the codes of exchange in
Chaudhuri's poems*

I send you this poem. (*St Cyril Road and Other Poems*, 18; italics mine)

Chaudhuri's "self-discovery as a writer", in what he notices, retrospectively, as the move from Malabar Hill and Nariman Point (where he had "grown up, somewhat unhappily, in the corporate world his father worked in") to "the discovery of the lane and Bandra during my holidays was a discovery of a secret city within a city" (*St Cyril Road and Other Poems*, ix) is similar to Monet's discovery of his special garden at Giverny, or Cezanne's of the Gardanne houses and the provincial life of Aix; or what Robert Lowell, in *Life Studies*, called the "breakthrough back into life".¹⁵⁷ I mention these artists in the same breath because all of them are bound, in ways big and small, to Chaudhuri's aesthetic in his poetry. In his poems, one is aware, though never transparently, of the happy coexistence of traditions, the European modernists, and their contemporaries in Bengal, Rabindranath Tagore, Jamini Roy, among others. This awareness comes primarily through the optic: his poems reveal battles of resistance and surrender to these different traditions and, at the same time, a process of exchange which brings the 'new' into being.

I will begin with a poem in which the notion of this 'exchange', this business between cultures, is codified.

The first poem of the collection makes evident the poet's focus on the visual:

¹⁵⁷ See James Longenbach, *Modern poetry after Modernism*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 5.

And my father was a student back in the Fifties,
in London (*picture* in overcoat and tie
and casual umbrella) ... (“The Village”, *St Cyril Road and Other Poems*, 3; italics mine)

This is the first of a series of ‘pictures’, the opening ‘shot’ of what could be a short film; this village, however, is not a Rayesque Nischindipur, but “Hampstead Heath”, a ‘picture’ of which Chaudhuri, like the “friend’s mother”, ‘paints attently’. The ‘colouring’ words which follow are like insubstantial (in the sense of lacking material substance) water colours – “foggy” paradise, the “grey, washed London lanes”.

What is important to an understanding of the poem – besides the exposition of different routes taken by things of colour, both people and paintings – are the twin acts of painting that are unravelled before the reader’s eyes: by the “Swiss lady” and Chaudhuri. Are their techniques similar? And is Chaudhuri’s “picture” (“I can picture ...” *St Cyril Road and Other Poems*, 4) a ‘true’ copy of the Swiss woman’s painting?

The Swiss lady looks at Hampstead Heath in front of her and paints it in, what can be deduced from the poet’s description as, an impressionistic style. The movement of her work, then, is from the “uncreated” on the canvas to “something grew complete” (Chaudhuri uses these words in a different context in the poem, to talk about the poetic persona’s mental “picture” of his parents). Chaudhuri’s ‘picturising’ process moves in the reverse direction, from the sum to an analysis of its parts, from the painting “hanging upon the wall inside my room” to the “ochre background” and the “two white, two grey” clouds and then, to “the Heath”, first moving backwards, temporally, and then from top to bottom, from the clouds to the ground.

It hangs upon the wall inside my room ...
It’s painted on an ochre background. Two white, two grey
afterthoughts are clouds or a mass of clouds.
Below this, there’s the Heath, but to those people
who *haven’t seen* the Heath (as once I hadn’t),
it *looks* like a village, the kind of village Rip

Van Winkle must have returned to when he woke. (*St Cyril Road and Other Poems*, 3; italics mine)

It is not just the backward movement from painted canvas to easel, or “finished” product to raw material, but the other journeys, from the “wall inside my room” to “the Heath”, and more importantly, from sight or sighting (on “the wall inside my room”) to a noted absence of another perspective (“who haven’t seen the Heath”). It is, as if, the painting is, by itself, incomplete unless annotated by an awareness of the ‘real’ Heath (“the real thing”) and this sets up a binary in the reading of the poem, and the painting. This is, for me, the most important opposition in the poem, one among the many (is-was; painting-Heath; “uncreated”-“complete”; “walking”-“painting”; even the father & mother-I) that create the architectonics of the poem: it is the ‘difference’ between someone who looks at the painting through this poem and one who has seen both, the painting and its inspiration (where the poetic persona has the privilege of greater knowledge). And in this opposition lies a slippage – the reader has possibly seen neither, the painting or the heath (even if s/he lives near Hampstead Heath), and this leads to a sense of the poem being merely a trace of the painting, which might have been the motive of the poet.

Does the poem, then, merely mean to “show”? This is a question that the poem begs, for metaphors of ‘seeing’ punctuate the gradual process of revelation in the poem – “picture” (two times), “imagine” (to imagine is, of course, to see), “painted” (two times), “seen”, “looks”, “defined”, “visible”, “clarity”, “enframed”, “see”.

“The English delight in landscape is a delight in escape,” says Lawrence.¹⁵⁸ Chaudhuri’s poem is only partly about the young “boy’s” delight in escape (the mention of “Rip Van Winkle” adds to the sense of flight from the humdrum); it is more about the process of creation, not just its aesthetics but also its politics, about what Elizabeth Bishop called the “perpetually changing integration of what has been written with what is being written”.¹⁵⁹ The poem is about this constantly changing process of representation, where the painting (“what has been written”) and Chaudhuri’s poem (“what is being written”) engage in

¹⁵⁸ D.H. Lawrence, *Selected Essays*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd, 1969), 319.

¹⁵⁹ James Longenbach, *Modern poetry after Modernism*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 24.

fluid interplay, so that the painting becomes not just a finished object hanging on a wall but a work of art whose character changes with the words in the poem.

The impulse to be a part of this process of composition and represent it at the same time produces an absence (the important in Chaudhuri's works, most often, lives as an absence) – this is the absence of any viewer besides the “I” at the moment of composition of the poem, a fact that is thrown into relief by the presence of the parents during the painting of the heath. This very cleverly throws up the question of audience – whom did the European woman paint for? (It was a gift given to the parents “on an eventless day in the Fifties”.) And who is this poem being written for? The painting was gifted to two people who had “seen” the Heath (“the real thing”) while the poem is for people who neither know the painting nor, possibly, the Heath. This is not an answer to the tired question of ‘intended reader/viewer’ but something more important, a post-colonial writer’s refashioning and remaking of traditions.

Neither the poet nor the poetic persona (they might be one and the same person) lays claim on the Heath; their claim is not on the land but on the painting, a tradition (European tradition here, represented by the “Swiss lady”). This painting is, very importantly, a “gift”, a gift made available and possible because of a journey, from the colony to the “centre” (I use this word in the sense Eliot used it in “What is a Classic?”). This physical journey by two people from India spurred on another journey – the journey of the painting, the canvas, from England to India, where it hangs on a wall. It is these two journeys which have produced this poem which, in turn, has become a site of the interaction of two traditions: the post-colonial poet’s commentary on this piece of European art to produce a new work of art belongs, obliquely, to the same tradition as Coetzee’s *Foe* and Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the rich equation where the ‘foreigner’ claims something old, an island, a house, a name or a tradition, to produce something new, but only as new as newly grown hair that sprouts from the same root (In the poem “The Steamer”, there are two journeys as well: King George V and Queen Mary have made their journey from England to Bombay, the coloniser’s journey; seventy five years later, “we” make their journey, not to England, but into the sea, returning from

which they remember, but cannot see, this piece of history in stone, a perfect trope for post-colonial encounters in which traces of others survive, but not necessarily, as Chaudhuri has claimed time and again, as otherness.) In Chaudhuri, this is the claim to a tradition, to a particular strain of British modernism while, at the same time, remaining in the ambit of a parent culture (“back to India”; “As a boy, that scene, enframed, / was, for me, England. In a way, it still is.” *St Cyril Road and Other Poems*, 3, 4; italics mine). And such claim, as always, is imbued with quarrels: Lawrence, writing about the tradition of English landscape painting wrote, “It is not confronted with any living, procreative body”;¹⁶⁰ Chaudhuri moves from the painting of the landscape to “the warm, freckled hands” that painted it and this movement backwards in time becomes a move away from the British tradition that Lawrence was writing about, so that it becomes an inner struggle as full of possibility as the tussle between the optics to resolve whether the subject of the painting is a heath or a village (“the Heath ... looks like a village”).

There is something else in the poem that links it to an early European modernist tradition and it is the similarity with the aesthetic of Cezanne, the father of European modernist painting. I will show, during the course of the chapter, how Cezanne’s evolution as a painter is mirrored by the evolution of the optic in Chaudhuri’s poetry. Here I would like to point out one of the characteristics of Cezanne’s aesthetic operational in the first poem of the collection: it is the recurrence of the rhetoric of absence.

A few lines into the poem and the reader is aware of the sense of an absence, an “uncreated”, and then the memory of an absence (“as once I hadn’t”), a loss (“a lost church”). These are followed by a sense of emptiness that the gap between the probable and the possible creates, the silence between ‘this or that or ...’: “This could be a day in autumn ... or a day in summer ... or a brightish day in winter”; and then a mild certainty, denoted by a negative, “It’s *not* spring”, ending with, again, an absence, an “*unstruck* church bell” (italics mine). This strain is again visible, later, in “St Cyril Road Sequence” (*St Cyril Road and Other Poems*, 9-13) – “I *can’t* see them”, says the “I”, of the “workmen delving the road”, and immediately proceeds to imagine (“I think of their silhouettes”) in metaphors of light (“silhouettes”). And, once again, as in Cezanne, the

¹⁶⁰ D.H. Lawrence, *Selected Essays*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd, 1969), 319.

rhetoric of loss, the sense of something that could have been – “each wakeful image ... is a constant *loss* of itself”; “a dark *centreless* well”; even “the lonely road crumbles before my eyes” (for crumbling is loss, at least a loss of structure); “the vanished divisions of a shut fan”;

In “St. Cyril Road, Bombay”, the next poem in the collection, the dominant tone is anthropological – “minority”, “barbarians”, “larger faith”, “Asians”, “Englishman”, “Christian minority”, “cosmopolitan”, “rootless”, “dismembered”, “branches of faith”, “Hindu”, “Portuguese” – something that is quite uncharacteristic of Chaudhuri. And yet it is not the sociological tropes that create the scaffolding of the poem, but the optic. Sets of binaries are created, through the repetition of the presence-absence pair of light-no light (not always equated with darkness):

noon is a charged battery, and evening’s a visionary gloom;

and

streets ogling with fat lights ... the sun-forgotten darkness.

It has often been said that the Impressionists discovered light. The second poem of this chronologically arranged collection shows Chaudhuri’s early affinities with this strain of modernism. “Evening’s a visionary gloom” would be a perfect description of Manet’s *Boulogne Harbour by Moonlight* (1869). And Chaudhuri, like Cezanne, began his career as an impressionist. But both, the painter and the poet, soon learned that light could not be all. After Impressionism had taught Cezanne that light is the chief generator of colour, he discovered that light is likewise the main basis for balance and harmony in a painting, which was something the Impressionists, who squandered their energies on analysis of the motif and the breakdown of local tones, were never able to achieve.

“The Bandra Medical Store” (*St Cyril Road and Other Poems*, 7-8) begins with Cezannean absences: “I had *no idea* whatsoever/ where the Bandra Medical Store really was”; “... to a place I *hadn’t seen*”; “Two roads followed each other/ like long *absences*”; “The air smelled of something *not there*” (italics mine). This is Lawrence on

This section, it is obvious, is, following the Impressionists, a composition in light, like Manet's *The Harbour at Bordeaux* (1871). But what is of greater interest are the words employed to construct this optic – “faint as a yellow route of light”; “wheeling intersections”; “lights shudder”; “fluorescence”; “dissolve”; “imprecise, unlit shadows”; “the levelling of shadows into shadows”. In the following sections, “sundry shadows and gestures marry”, there is “a mimicry of shadows”, Christians are “dedicated to the cause of being obscure”, “the stars blinked ... a surface of melting glass”. All of these are or could be the semiotic to denote Impressionism, the moving world, the mutable world captured for a moment, where the object and its shadow are almost indiscernible from each other, as in Monet's *The Fourteenth of July, Bastille Day*, (1877).

The same tendency continues in the next section of the poem, “Sunday”, where the “mist ripples back”, “the slow-flowering steam wavers” from the coffee-cup, “the *fine, too-delicate crumbs* rain on the earth”, almost immediately, recalls Monet's *Bathers at La Grenouillere* (1869) where the entire scene is constructed by “delicate crumbs” of paint, the Monet of whom Cezanne is supposed to have said, “Monet is the strongest of us. He's only an eye, but, my God, what an eye!”¹⁶²

But, at the same time, the poem marks the beginning of the appearance of planes:

the houses look like rows of slender barley from the pilot's
window, row pursuing row, held in a milieu of
whiteness, unswayed by a clean, flowing wind?

In the first poem, “The Village”, “Trees are smudges – like green, dark green thumbprints on paper”, even “the village is a smudge”; in the third poem, the smudges, the “thumbprints”, have become “rows”, “row pursuing row”, the first transition, reminiscent of Cezanne, again, moving from explorations with “smudges”, dry colour (mixed with very little or almost no medium) to the construction of planes. In this transition, is the

¹⁶² See Frank Elgar, *Cezanne*, (London: Book Club Associates, 1975), 49.

whole history of awareness of space, the idea of conveying the illusion of depth by means of concentric cubes or movement by curves.

Planar constructions are visible, again, in the next poem, “St Cyril Road Sequence (i)”: “the gardener cuts and *piles* up grass”; “impermanent *blankets* of dust”; “the tangent *outline* of a dragonfly against a leaf”; “the vanished divisions of a fan” (the word “division” indicates the beginning of planarity); the crows “pre-*arranged* on the boughs”; “*bunched* houses”; “*lining* the lane at systematic *intervals*”; “a *mass* of tall coloured buildings”; “neat *rectangular* gardens”; “sleek, glowing *channels*”; “faint, *circular* ticking”; in other words, what Cezanne saw, the geometry in nature. “To see in nature the cylinder, the sphere, the cone, the whole being set into perspective so that each side of an object or plane converges on a central point. Lines running parallel to the horizon create distance ... The lines perpendicular to that horizon create depth,” wrote Cezanne in his famous letter to Emile Bernard on the 15th of April 1904.¹⁶³

The poem is interesting because it shows two traditions wrestling with one other in the poet, as they did in the early Cezanne, the Impressionists, trying to find a means to denote the mutable and Cezanne trying to find a means to denote the permanence of change, to find a spatial synthesis in which the vehicle and all it contained, stability and instability, the concrete and the imaginary, became one.

What is, also, interesting in “St. Cyril Road Sequence” is Chaudhuri’s gradual adoption of what he, in talking of Lawrence’s poetry, termed the “bricolage model”, so that the inanimate, even something like light, takes on an anthropological character. “The cars swim like red or silver fish past the junctions”; “the mist ripples back to the unexpected roofs like a flock of endless, white gulls”; “the leaves a parrot green”; “the bruised bungalows squat with a wild beard of grass”; “houses come down on all fours”; “a swift badge of flame open and shut like a hot mouth”. In “The Gold Rush”, “a small man ... changes into a chicken” (*St Cyril Road and Other Poems*, 50). Just as the similarity with

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 104.

Cezanne is, in all likelihood, unconscious, this tendency to assign a living character to things that do not breathe links him to the tradition of the Surrealists, especially Dali.

There is also, in “St Cyril Road Sequence”, the appearance of another optic, one that is characteristic of Chaudhuri’s fiction and some of his later verse.

I scan the lettering on those gates

– Helen Villa, Rose Cottage ... (*St Cyril Road and Other Poems*, 12)

“Scan the lettering”: Just as the Bengali alphabets are “scanned” by a Bengali-illiterate Sandeep in *A Strange and Sublime Address*; or “Cornflakes, toast, milk” are “scanned” to reveal “the shape of these words/ on my plate” (in the poem “Education”, *St Cyril Road and Other Poems*, 71); “chiselled and clear-cut letters, in near-perfect pentameter: ‘ERECTED TO COMMEMORATE THE LANDING IN INDIA OF THEIR IMPERIAL MAJESTIES KING GEORGE V AND QUEEN MARY ON THE SECOND OF DECEMBER MCXI’ (“The Steamer”, *St Cyril Road and Other Poems*, 14-16); “Shelf mark 821 GUNN/ near Larkin, Pound, Basil Bunting, Roy Campbell, Peter Porter, U. A. Fanthorpe, T. S. Eliot” (“Memorabilia”, *St Cyril Road and Other Poems*, 56); “OK-TATA/ OK-TATA/ HORN PLEASE”, the message – INDIA IS GREAT – dissolves” (“Shards: A Narrative”, *St Cyril Road and Other Poems*, 65); “bearing the message ... A Joke Every Day is Good for Your Health” (“The Plot for the New Novel”, *St Cyril Road and Other Poems*, 76). This might be read not just as Chaudhuri’s take on the concept of mimesis but also as his link, however mediated, with a tradition of realism.

“The Steamer”, again, shows the same struggle, to find an aesthetic that could be a compromise between Impressionism and one that Cezanne was trying to develop. So, while water grows “like a *different sensibility*, dark and extraneous ... like a troubled cushion”, words which are like an Impressionist’s brushstrokes, like Monet’s *The Boats: Regatta at Argenteuil* (1874), the island is “an impressive clump of stones, euphoniously called ‘the battery’/ – a defence outpost, altered to *resemble* a clump of stones”, the “clump of stones” recalling Cezanne’s geometry and architecture; and then, “we

discerned a gun/ in a turret, *looking like* a gun in a turret”, which, of course, belongs to neither of these traditions (all italics mine), but a realist school. “Different sensibility”, “Resemble” and “Looking like”: three traditions coming together to form a new aesthetic.

“We were spies,

directed to see patterns the sea hid from us.

We did not belong here.” (*St Cyril Road and Other Poems*, 14)

Trying to look for “patterns” in hiding is the task of the viewer of an Impressionist painting. Then the “patterns” give way to “golden pods”, a Cezannean shape, until it comes to rest, again, at the end of the sentence on “the horizon’s extremity, a stain on a brow”, a “stain”, an Impressionist’s last brush-stroke. This is followed by a similar impression, “afterglow”, until geometry lays its claim – the horizon, which was a “stain”, is now “tilted”, implying, immediately its existence in and through a plane. This is like the early Cezanne at work, the irresolvability of opposites, for “tilted” is followed by “the blurred ocean bed” (as in Monet, *Storm: Rocks at Belle-Ile*, 1886) and “wrinkled web”, “transparent hand”, again to be claimed by Cezanne’s geometry, “creases of water”.¹⁶⁴ These opposite claims continue throughout the poem – the Impressionist “damask broodingness of evening” trailed by, what can be seen as optical representations of these different traditions, the sun “half-way down” and the clear moon appearing together, like “two eyes dividing a single face” (“dividing” is a common Cezanne semiotic). And then the absence – “And on the other side/ of the Gateway, the side we couldn’t see...”. “The Steamer” might seem a strange name but the importance of the optic is underscored by the fact that all that is described is viewed from the steamer. It is, after all, the steamer’s “perspective” (*St Cyril Road and Other Poems*, 15) which makes the landscape become simply a symphony of moving shapes, leading the spectator by slow stages to the heart of the geological drama, the geology in the sea and the geology of the stone inscription.

¹⁶⁴ This reminds us of one of his paintings, *Still-life with Curtain*, 1895-1900, where the strokes used to paint the “creases” of the table cloth are exactly the same used to paint *Rocks and Trees at Bibemus*, 1900-4.

In “Letter from the Hills” (*St Cyril Road and Other Poems*, 17-18), the primary impulse is still impressionist – “headlights streaming in the morning-mist’s dragnet”; “the leaves peer out, shivering”; “delicate as flecks of dried paint on a wet, just-begun painting”; “a speck of dust hanging in a vertical wall of light”; “halos of steam and cold vapour”; “tremulous dewdrop”. At the same time, however, there is a trace of the appearance of planes on the canvas – “Vertical”; “escarpment”; “gorge”; and an absence (“its patch of nothingness”). In “Convalescence” (*St Cyril Road and Other Poems*, 19), the same trope, used differently, reveals two schools of painting: the impressionist strain in “watching the minute dust falling like a shy, delicate mist”; and Cezanne’s, whose quest was to find an aesthetic for the permanently changing nature of things, in “as motionless as the dust lies on the tables and chairs”. In “Words for Music” (*St Cyril Road and Other Poems*, 20-21), the lake is “like a bowl tipping with light”, the life beneath the boulder roams “like shadows in a cathedral”, as if on an Impressionist’s canvas, until in the end, the “you” “arc(s) away in an immaculate orbit, as the spinning earth veers its face from the sun, hides behind darkness”, and the “orbit” and the “spinning earth” arrive to lay the claims of geometry, as they did in Cezanne. The many movements apparent in these lines of the poem are like the lines in Cezanne’s landscapes which, in spite of the definite geometric lines, do not suggest a motionless world. Rather, they show a world which moves and expands, bursting with energy, sensitive and subjective, searching for a spatial synthesis in which the vehicle and all it contained, stability and instability, the concrete and the imaginary, became one.

In the poem “Afternoon Raag” (*St Cyril Road and Other Poems*, 22-24), “light and rain revolve the landscape in a shifting treadmill of shadow”, the “clear, cool space flowing in and out of a listlessness, is something liquid and grieving”, something “that cannot tolerate its own shimmering presence”, “it melts away from itself all the time”, the singing teacher is a “shadow against the sofa”, which seems almost a transliteration of *The Absinthe Drinker* (1858-9) by Monet.

The poems in Part Two are sparing in tone and the tendency to rely on impressionistic touches to fill the canvas is rarely seen, though it has not yet completely disappeared (“I

saw a faint glitter on the lake,” he says in “Winter Poem, 1990”). In “Song” (*St Cyril Road and Other Poems*, 32), the “window” is “a square of light”, and “shadows and sleep” are buried “deep below the earth”. Like Cezanne who created mass and depth by using contrasts between cold and warm tones, carrying them to their highest degree of saturation, Chaudhuri contrasts the warm “square of light” in the window with the cold “shadows and sleep” buried “deep below the earth”.

In “Dusk in the Veranda” (*St Cyril Road and Other Poems*, 34), “light (is) contained in a glass of water”, the curtains are parted, in our minds at least, into long triangles, and dusk is, first, seen on the “veranda”, a rectangular structure and, then, through “a window”, another rectangular frame. In “Frost on a Mercedes-Benz” (*St Cyril Road and Other Poems*, 35), too, it is geometry that defines the optic – “silvery, polished, million-starry-eyed”; and there is, once again, absence – “the road, ordinary; ourselves, absent”. “Martin Building, Oxford” (*St Cyril Road and Other Poems*, 36), which brings some of Cezanne’s series on Jas de Bouffan paintings (1876-77) to mind, employs the technique of “Poussinesque”: “The sunlight lies upon the polished table on the grass” (table, a rectangular plane); “The sun makes space, in which that bird, unseen, lives” (unseen, the absent, the recurring trope).

In spite of the “mid-morning light on the houses” in “After Rain” (*St Cyril Road and Other Poems*, 41), what remains “impressed” on the mind are the “dark tyre-tracks impressed on the wet/ and lengthening road”. This, the thick marks of the tyre, in the second-last poem in Part Two, marks the beginning of Chaudhuri’s search for a new form, something that would let him accommodate his affinities with the two strains of European modernism, as represented by the Impressionists and Cezanne and his followers, and yet allow him to ‘paint’ a landscape (in all senses of the word) in a form (and technique) that was closer home, close to the subjects of his poetry.

As one moves through the poems in Part Three, one is aware of a gradual fading out of an Impressionist’s dabs of colour, the lines are sparse, (like the poems); the tendency to see things in terms of geometrical structures remain, but that is, often, qualified by the need

to see things in their essence, through minimalist strokes. This is similar to the late Cezanne, the Cezanne of the water-colours, where the eye is allowed to move freely, where the paintings, like Chaudhuri's poems, are a mixture of elisions, ellipses, pauses and repetitions, where fullness is achieved through emptiness, balance through imbalance, continuity through discontinuity, where the laxity of the Impressionists have been transformed into the conciseness of Japanese art in Cezanne, and of the bold, minimalist strokes of Jamini Roy in Chaudhuri.

In "Lethe" (*St Cyril Road and Other Poems*, 47), the "full circle", the only optic in the poem, making its appearance in the last line almost as an afterthought, the "circle" is both Cezanne's and Roy's. In "Cordless" (*St Cyril Road and Other Poems*, 48), the "small polished object", again the only real visual, is offered as the only description of the "cordless" phone; it is, as if, all other ornamentation except a small rectangle of shining black would be redundant. In "Residential", Chaudhuri's visual vocabulary is, once again, muted – there is "the pleasure of glimpsing other people's lives/ in their rectangles opening out onto light" (*St Cyril Road and Other Poems*, 51); this is the only visual trope in the poem and it is like re-visiting Cezanne, the "rectangles opening out into light" almost literally recalling Cezanne's *Road at Chantilly* (1888).

In "Morola Fry", however, the alignment with Cezanne is more pronounced. It is necessary to quote the short poem in its entirety to make my point clear.

These small freshwater fish
that are eaten whole – head, tail,
backbone, not to speak of the flesh,
are fried in hot oil,
four or five held together
in a binding of chopped onions and flour
which apparently sews them together into islands
from which their crowded eyes stare like jewels. (*St Cyril Road and Other Poems*, 55)

The poem is, it is worth noting, one long sentence; not one long stroke, however, filling a canvas, but as always, in Chaudhuri (and Cezanne; and later the pointillists, who developed this after Cezanne, with whom Chaudhuri, especially in his fiction, shows similarities in technique), broken lines and planes, adding to the sense of a whole. The two “which”, in the last two lines of the poem, set up, what has been called in Cezanne, as “binocular vision”. The “islands”, as they are seen from above the wok, and the “stare” of the “crowded eyes” inside the wok.

In “‘He Is the Man of Your Heart’ Rabindranath Tagore” (*St Cyril Road and Other Poems*, 59), Chaudhuri asks, “Why do you keep him waiting at the eye’s doorway?”, as if almost asking himself. For “the eye’s doorway” is a necessary and important commentary of the style of painting that Tagore himself developed. Chaudhuri, therefore, shows a shift in his adoption of a style (and a discourse) that was closer to the subject-matter that he was dealing with. “After Sun” (*St Cyril Road and Other Poems*, 60), a poem which is expected to be a study in light, employs no visual. One would expect it to be a companion piece to “Dusk in the Veranda” (Part Two) but that it is not. It is, as if, the optic is gradually becoming unnecessary to Chaudhuri’s semiotic. In “‘Sometimes the Postman’” (*St Cyril Road and Other Poems*, 68), also, there is no exercise of the eye. Though the poem succeeds in creating a sense of place, visually, it is born out of something else, of the affection for the distant: it is catalogued without word-pictures, making it both, the siren’s song and the “I’s” personal, often seasonal, battles, of resistance and surrender. The letter is a very important trope in Chaudhuri (*Afternoon Raag*); “‘Sometimes the Postman’” is an ode, not just to the anonymous carrier of news (as in the Bengali poem, “Runner”) and its allied charm of possibilities but an ode to distance, the distance that is portrayed, as often in Cezanne, by blank parts in a canvas.

The next poem in this section, “Cloudburst” (*St Cyril Road and Other Poems*, 69), has a hybrid muse – while “the film of sweat on your throat”, the “street lights in a lane”, and the “electric light in a porch” are reminiscent of the Impressionists, the “inky movement of palm leaves” recalls artists from Bengal in the early and middle twentieth century, like Nandalal Bose, for example. “Histories of Stone” (*St Cyril Road and Other Poems*, 73),

however, recalls, almost completely, Cezanne: Diana's "one long leg crossed over the other" is similar to Cezanne's famous series on Madame Cezanne. Although Cezanne abandoned verisimilitude, he did not move away from the truth. In his paintings of Madame Cezanne (1890-4), the lines are no longer vertical, the shapes bend, the model seems unsteady, and the arms are elongated out of all proportion and meet at the bottom of the canvas. The model, in Cezanne, is no longer placed in the enclosed space as in Renaissance paintings, but in an open space, as is Diana in Chaudhuri's poem, against the background of the Taj Mahal; only the crossed hand, made almost abnormally long, to replicate the spectator's experience, is replaced, in Chaudhuri's poem, with the crossed leg. "The minarets", also "stand in symmetry" while "Mumtaz Mahal's dome hovers above our heads", the minarets and the dome, again, becoming cylinders and circles, Cezanne's semiotic. In the next poem, "A Brooklyn Jew in Gaza" (*St Cyril Road and Other Poems*, 74), the only visual is a piece of geometric construction, "the long promontory of Manhattan".

"Shards: A Narrative" (*St Cyril Road and Other Poems*, 61-67) resembles what Elizabeth Bishop, writing about the kind of novel she had wanted to write, called "something like a bramble bush"¹⁶⁵ for these are poems that seem to be in motion, poems able to accommodate a jumble of observations.¹⁶⁶ As in the poem, "A Bust" (*St Cyril Road and Other Poems*, 75) –

I saw it while drifting off to sleep:
not a figurine, but a bust –
the shoulders covered by a barber's white cloth,
the chair on which he sat in a saloon
in a strangely typical small town
a head of wavy, greying hair, but the face
quite young, not unkind or brusque,
the eyes unfrontational, undemanding,
probably viewing (without impatience) the present

¹⁶⁵ James Longenbach, *Modern poetry after Modernism*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 24.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 25.

or even himself in the mirror

– Bishop’s parable, equating the poet and his poem with a marksman and his target, seems to apply.

The poet is set on bringing down onto the paper his poem, which occurs to him not as a sudden fixed apparition of a poem, but as a moving, changing idea or a series of ideas ... [T]he target is a moving target and the marksman is also moving.¹⁶⁷

For in both the poems, “Shards: A Narrative” and “A Bust”, “not only is the stuff of the poem in motion, so is the process by which that stuff is apprehended and then given the illusion of closure and coherence”. The word “narrative” is telling: the self-revisionist process of a mind thinking is evident in both the poems for the different narratives in “Shards” and the succeeding lines in “A Bust” adding and correcting the impression of the “bust” are described, optically, as things in motion, in flux where uncertainty of ‘exact’ knowledge risks their position as one more prone to mutability.

The last section of the poem, with the room seen through the perspective of the lizard, could well have been written by Cezanne:

All the dimensions of a room are different for a lizard;
a wall’s a floor; down is up;
even space is altered.
Sometimes I wonder if it’s the same room.
There it is, disregarding
the law of gravity
and, stuck to the ceiling,
outwaiting its long journey of hunger. (*St Cyril Road and Other Poems*, 67; italics mine)

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 25.

Space in Cezanne's work excludes the notions of distance, emptiness or fullness, of metric measurement or depth. Forms which in nature are spread out horizontally are here rearranged on a single vertical plane by a mind whose concern is to gauge purely abstract dimensional relationships. This 'pictorial' space, as in the extract from the poem above, becomes, as in Cezanne, a plastic element of his own invention.

Like the modernist painters, (Matisse and Picasso, for example, who quoted each other's work, a sculpture or a part of a painting, in their paintings), Chaudhuri often quotes extracts from paintings and films, either quoting them ad verbatim or paraphrasing them. "The Village" is, itself, about a painting of a heath confused, optically, as a village; "Bombay, (is) like Manhattan painted on a jar" ("The Steamer", *St Cyril Road and Other Poems*, 15); "I once saw, on film, reindeer migrating past/ a cold tract of land. Their swarming eyes kindled/ into torches. Their bodies formed a galloping mist/ that shrouded the earth." ("Letter from the Hills", *St Cyril Road and Other Poems*, 17); "five identical screens, repeating/ the image of a man coming up to bowl/ while another man swings a bat by floodlight" ("Shards: A Narrative", *St Cyril Road and Other Poems*, 62); "And Chaplin sitting on a stool/ his head resting upon his cane/ the folds of his crumpled suit/ all clear and involved; his face/ under his hat unusually calm/ and serious; how it becomes/ the still point in the confusion,/ this figure sitting in the traffic" ("Shards: A Narrative", *St Cyril Road and Other Poems*, 65)

Chaudhuri, like Cezanne, faithfully reproduces a particular colour in a particular place, but never allows it to be fragmented, as the Impressionists did, by the action of the sun's rays. For Cezanne, and this is obvious in Chaudhuri's poems as well, light is born of colour ("Like a film of dust that's absorbed the seven colours," *St Cyril Road and Other Poems*, 10), as is form. Colour, formerly enclosed by the outline, now overflows it and links up with the adjacent colours, thus replacing the atmosphere of the *tenebrosi* and the luminists by another atmosphere composed of subtle interchanges, of chromatic affinities, of gradations and contrasts. Like Cezanne, Chaudhuri uses colour to draw and paint at the same time. In "The Village", the colours used are "ochre", "white", "grey", "green"; "black" in "The Bandra Medical Store"); "like a film of dust/ that's absorbed the seven

colours”, “swim like red or silver fish past the junctions”, “white gulls”, “the leaves a parrot green” (“St Cyril Road Sequence”); “black-and-yellow beetles” (“Letter from the Hills”); “gauze of green from our too-human eyes”, “a green badge” (“Words for Music”). In “Going for a Drive”, “Leaves – wrinkled, yellow tongues – pastiche/ the driveway by habit”. “For him,” says Frank Elgar of Cezanne, “light was orange, shade was blue”.¹⁶⁸ In “Winter Poem, 1990”, “evening had a light – ash-grey or blue” (*St Cyril Road and Other Poems*, 33); the cheeks are “clean-shaven, heavenly, deep unearthly green” (“Old Spice”); “Some girl” wears “blue denim jeans and t-shirt...” (“Autobiography”). Although Cezanne discovered the merits of geometrical simplification, he also invented a light within the painting which is subjective and haphazard, and as different from natural light as mind is from matter. “Light,” he was later to say, “is something that cannot be reproduced. It must be represented by something else, by colour for instance.”¹⁶⁹ That is why the “wasp ...(is) body tea-coloured”; the “collected works of Sharat Chandra, (have) gold lettering on the spine” (“A Wasp”); “And the mud-like stain on the toilet/ paper I’d scrape my backside with/ and consult daily: dark yellow,/ unlike the pale shit I’d seen left/ in the toilets by the English boys” (“Education”); “Apples ... pale pink in crates” (“Apples Still Come from Kashmir”); “Eleven men in indigo and blue/ as colourful as the fox in the fable” (“Shards: A Narrative”). “In 1904, he (Cezanne) said to Emile Bernard: ‘Nature, for us, is more depth than surface, and hence the need to bring into our light vibrations, which are represented by reds and yellows, a sufficient quantity of bluishness to make the air felt’.”¹⁷⁰

The first poem of the collection, “The Village”, showed how the idea of travel was linked to the birth of a ‘new’ kind of art; by the time the reader comes to the second last poem of the collection, “The Bidet” (*St Cyril Road and Other Poems*, 77), there has been another journey, by two other Indians, not the writer’s parents but his “uncle and aunt”, not to England but to another continent, North America. And another kind of sighting: this is

¹⁶⁸ Frank Elgar, *Cezanne*, (London: Book Club Associates, 1975), 242.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 133.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 242.

neither the “real” Heath nor the painting that depicted it but something else, something completely unrecognisable. The locations where these sightings are made are also different: Hampstead Heath and the wall in the “I’s” room in India have given way to the toilet in “my cousin’s mansion in California”. In “The Village”, the viewer was confused whether the subject of the painting was a Heath or a village; in this poem, the two toilet-tourists are ignorant:

At first, they didn’t know what it was –
neither basin nor commode
neither bowl nor bathtub
they circled round it anxiously
and silently.
Could it be a drinking-water fountain?

The repetition of “neither-nor” is, here, not just a Cezannean absence. It is a commentary on loss, on how travel is no longer charged with the potential to create newness. For the “new” is only a discovery (“Later, when they knew ...”) these days, not an invention as it was “in the Fifties” and even later, when the young “boy” could imagine “England” through that painting. What this strange thing in the toilet is, is mentioned nowhere in the poem, not in the dense tissue of non-descriptions, nowhere except in the title. It’s a “bidet”, incapable of creating newness, only the initial sense of surprise (“it surprised their secret regions”). Chaudhuri is not just criticising the existential disorder of modern day travel; he seems to be saying that in this globalised world, where the ‘outside’ has been almost completely killed, the possibility of the creation of new art and new forms through the encounter and interaction between cultures has also been killed. The openness of the Heath has been replaced by the enclosed space of the toilet. That age, when cultures were catalysts in the creation of art forms, is no more. But all is not lost. For the “bidet” may be the result of ‘art’ (the “bidet” is art in scare quotes) in the age of mechanical reproduction, but this poem is also the result of that journey. For Chaudhuri is one of the few poets writing today, whose appropriations, affinities and oppositional poetics continue to produce, to quote from one of his poems, “Second Cousins” (*St Cyril Road and Other Poems*, 49), “something wholly and unexpectedly new”.