

## CHAPTER-VIII

### **IMAGINATION : RABINTRANATH TAGORE II**

As the Eye - such the Object

*The Poetry and prose of William Blake*

ed. David Erdman, 1970, p.634.

Tagore is a continuator and enhancer of the aesthetics of Romanticism. He develops a theory of imagination that accounts equally for the production of art and also human perception. His philosophical ideas were part of a comprehensive intellectual tendency which manifested itself in philosophy as well as in poetry. His theory of art involves a philosophy of mind. In point of fact the philosophical interest of the aesthetics of Romanticism lies in the ontological and the epistemological issues it raises.

As a romantic thinker, Tagore's philosophical ideas evince an increased regard for man's creative capacities, in particular a new concept of the human imagination as leading to an autonomous realm of transcendent value. Imagination is to incite and to support the infinite. A consequence of Tagore's increased regard for the imagination is a growing subjectivity in art, an increasingly deliberate turn within the mind of man.

Romanticism set a high value on imaginative power, imagination or creative imagination came to be almost synonymous with artistic power. It was, for the romantics, the means of transcending the limitations of individual experience. From Blake to Baudelaire, and from Ruskin to Walter Pater, imagination was the first emanation of divinity. It conveyed the most tremendous insights into the human condition. It is where reason falls short that imagination, and poetic which is a form of imagination, provide an apprehension of intimation of truths. As a Shakespeare character in *A Mid Summer Night's Dream* puts the case : 'imagination bodies forth / The form of things unknown'.

It should be possible to systematize Tagore's philosophical ideas in terms of a philosophical existence woven round the concept of man as an angel of

surplus.

Tagore's anthropology is a search and a discovery of man's creative self. This notion of self may be appreciated in the following manner.

(a) No predicate or a set of predicates can exhaust the descriptive content of the human self or person. A phenomenological confirmation of this matter can be had in our constant refusal to be identified completely with the import of any statement that may be true of ourselves. There is always a residue, something left over by whatever might have been spoken of the self. Man accepts a set of predicates, descriptively true of him, and yet he refuses to take the set of the descriptive statements as constituting his identity. There is a feeling of mystery of existence, an awareness of the finite man's unboundedness, almost a rebellious conviction that the human person cannot be adequately described. Man, rather each man, is unique, hence indescribable. Tagore's idea of uniqueness of the human person corresponds to the romantic's notion of intensity by way of emphasizing upon personal feeling. In arts that which is common to a group is not important' (R.M. 68). Primacy of the person is one of Tagore's aesthetic faith.

(b) Transcending descriptions, man enters the zone of freedom. The free self alone is the creative self. Here lies the ontology of human aspirations and possibilities. And if Tagore intends the surplus in man as the place of nascent meanings and categories, then it is none other than man's imagination. It is his spring of thoughts and actions, of all the projective functions of mind.

(c) The anthropological character of Tagore's ontology becomes evident when he says that the imagination is not only luminous and creative (R.M. 11-15) but something special to man as well. It also offers him the vision of wholeness, the might be's and may be's of man's dimension onto the infinite. Shelley wrote translating Spinoza's tract 'On Prophecy'. 'None ever apprehended the revelations of God without the assistance of imagination, that is of words or forms imaged forth in the mind ...'. The point is that imagination, for Tagore too, is the source of our idea of God.



Tagore's thesis that human ontology is imaginative is part of a non-reductionist, non-utilitarian theory of man. And in propounding the thesis he could be said to have aligned himself to a respectable tradition of thought in which imagination had been the organ or tool of philosophy. In the *Ion*, *Apology* and *Meno*, Plato hinted at a faculty in men which could not be reduced to rule and measure, something that could be called inspiration, imagination or even aspiration.

The philosophers of Kashmir Saivism considered *pratibha* as legitimate a method as that of reason. Anandavardhana assimilated imagination to philosophical intellect. It was acclaimed as a *drasti*, a way of looking at the universe so far the interpretation of life's experiences were concerned. Even Mahima Bhatta, a thinker of *Nyaya* persuasion concurred, on this issue, with Anandavardhana and his commentator, Abhinavagupta. The term *pratibha*, which I propose to take as the Sanskrit synonym for the English *imagination*, occurs in Indian philosophical literature to stand for immediacy and freshness of vision, the properties of experience the romantics had endeared to themselves. Aesthetic perception, for Tagore, liberates us from modes of habit and considerations of utility, and thereby makes us look at the world *yathabhuta*, as it were. Imagination redeems the human mind. One may venture also to suggest that Tagore's idea of aesthetic perception is a creative analogue of the Buddhist notion of *pratyaksa* as apprehension of a *svarlaksana*. Art experience was likened by Coomaraswamy to *samvega* or emotional shock involving an artistic reorganisation of the everyday environment with repudiation of the usual and common place. Imagination renovates forms of thought and experience through the transformation of perception. In Tagore's significant language, this is what he calls the 'transformation of facts into human imagery' (RM 83).



'We must realize not only the reasoning mind, but also the creative

imagination' (RM 11). In saying this Tagore's intentions appears to be similar to that of Kierkegaard, that is, the task being not to exalt the one at the expense of the other, but to give them an equal status, to unify them in simultaneity. In other words, Tagore is seeking an epistemological unity of thought and imagination. Perhaps both enjoy their birth in terms of consciousness. All this may sound Kantian, and one may be reminded of Heidegger's Kant interpretation in this context; that imagination is more than root of intuition and theoretical reason, and that it is root as well of man's freedom. It is the latter case that Tagore emphasizes most. The freedom of imagination is crucial, its freedom from the slavery to concepts of the understanding.

Tagore's notion of 'creative unity' may help us understand his ideas concerning the role of imagination in its aesthetic role. Imagination is a shaping power (*Einbildungskraft*), the power that forms the many into one. Coleridge was impressed by the word used for imagination by Kant, and coined the word 'esemplastic' to which he ascribed the meaning 'shaping into one'. Now the shaping power of imagination has the function of reducing the chaos of sensation to order. In music says Tagore, is man revealed, not in noise. This is the miracle of creation.

The poet, Kant says, 'transgressing the limits of experience, attempts with the aid of imagination to body forth the rational ideas to sense, with a completeness of which nature affords no parallel' (*Critique of Judgement*, 314). The point of significance in the passage is that an aesthetic idea is a counterpart of an idea of reason. Ideas of reason stand as limits to human thought. They are regulative ideas. An aesthetic idea is expressed for us by imagination in creative art. Language is inadequate to rational ideas. But imagination, in its aesthetic function, can present it to us in symbolic form. Tagore's idea that the vision of the truth of Man is realised by imagination, and created by mind should strike one as Kantian. The sense of the infinite, the feeling that man is truly represented in that which exceeds him is freedom through imagination. It may be called the depth-producing function of imagination. We catch glimpse of truth by means of imagination. But the truths which we glimpse are not truths

about the world. If they can be said to be about anything, Tagore says, it must be about ourselves. It means that there are general truths which are not scientific, and that imagination alone can have the privileged access to them. It will also be seen that from an account of creative imagination Tagore glides into a philosophy of life. And his account of imagination may be taken to connect three points : that imagination conjures up an image of man's as yet unrealized possibilities, or his infinite perspective; to make us see the image as universally significant, and to induce in us deep feelings in the presence of the image. Imagination is the means of man's self - exceeding.

#### IV

The image conjured up by imagination, touched as it is with emotion, is the reality. '*Reality*, says Tagore, 'reveals itself in the emotional and imaginative background of our mind' (RM 81). This notion of *reality* has a special significance for art, and Tagore uses it to answer such questions as 'what is art'? By saying that 'it is the response of man's creative soul to the call of the Real' (RM 89). What he means is that creative expressions are attained by modulating emotions. Imagination operates from emotional content by relating widely to all that stands on one's conscious horizon. Such emotions are transitive and emotional, and their range of feeling is widened.

Tagore's understanding of the comprehensiveness of emotions is faced on an imaginative system of relations. In such a system there obtains a depersonalized condition of the self, a modality of consciousness so that an inversion or a universalization of emotion occurs. This possibility could be taken as Tagore's account of the emergence of the phenomenon of *rasa*. For him, *rasa* is a principle of aesthetic organisation beyond particularity, a consciousness liberated from the bounds of individual separateness. Such an experience is at once moral and aesthetic. Imagination is an instrument of the good as well. It extends the self, transcends it, and possibly envisions a new self.

It may be recalled that both Hume and Kant had maintained that there is a close connexion between our imagination and our feelings. For Hume the

connection rested on his view that imagination converts an idea to an impression. And passions', that is, the entire domain of emotional states are impressions. In short, it is an idea which gives rise to a passion or emotion' (See *Treatise*, Part III, section 6 of the second book). Kant appears to suggest that our pleasure in beauty is a pleasure in order, a satisfaction in our power to regulate chaos. This may be one of the senses of his concept of *finality*. At another stage of development of his thesis Kant says that aesthetic judgements arise out of, and express, a particular kind of pleasure. We expect, and to some extent demand, that if we judge an object to be beautiful, other people shall agree with us. There is a kind of universalization, or objectivity, implied in our use of the word 'beautiful', which entails the existence of pleasure in ourselves.