

Sri Chinmoy's

“Ten Thousand Flower-Flames”

A Commentary

by

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## INTRODUCTION

On Sunday, July 3rd, 1983, Sri Chinmoy completed the final poem – poem number 10,000 – of his monumental series entitled *Ten Thousand Flower-Flames*. It is not often that we are given the opportunity to celebrate a poetic “event”. Both as readers and critics, we are seldom in touch with the immediacy of creation and though a poem should become immortal in after-ages, something of that original impact, akin to a new discovery, is lost with the lengthening passage of time.

But if a poet should pour forth his writings from our midst, then we may rise to greet him, wakened by a living impulse. The poet’s creation is imperative, it demands a response, and, rejoicing in the singular freedom of having hearts, minds and souls uncluttered by the accumulated critical views of many years, we may discover within ourselves an answering intensity of experience.

Such is the case with contemporary poet Sri Chinmoy. His poetic venture spanned the months from October 22nd, 1979 to July 3rd, 1983. As the bards of ancient times chaunted a living history, so Sri Chinmoy, assuming the office of the bard of the soul, records the episodes of man’s inner life. The colour and richness of battles, defeats and victories tinge this world, too. Here there are journeys and sacred goals, mysteries and revelations, yet all these are projected from the poet’s inner vision. For it is the interior life, the life of the soul, that these poems announce in such splendid tones and as they progress, we come to learn that we ourselves are their heroes and heroines. Indeed, *Ten Thousand Flower-Flames* is not only for us but of us, for therein is contained the full circuit of man’s soul – whence it has come and whither it is returning.

To sing this modern epic, two fundamental capacities are required of the poet: the power of continuous vision and the power of ample expression. With his overlordship or sovereign grasp of spiritual realms, Sri Chinmoy’s vision is utterly comprehensive. Here is to be found the measure of man’s subtle experiences in all their diversity and grandeur. Again, the epic of the soul cannot be contained in fragments but seeks out, of its own accord, a corresponding immensity of production. Indeed, the very abundance of Sri Chinmoy’s works confers on them a qualitative significance, for it is the outer sign of an inner profusion of the spirit.

I hold the emergence of *Ten Thousand Flower-Flames* to be without parallel in this century. No other work of such scope has dared to posit the soul's journey as its theme and to suggest that it comprises the true modern epic. Nor, in this age of highly personalised utterance and opinion, is it fashionable to write public poetry of the kind that any person may read and comprehend with facility. *Ten Thousand Flower-Flames* represents the advent of a new and direct form of poetic address. It enkindles our souls and infuses us with longings for a higher perfection. At a time when poetic response has considerably atrophied, *Ten Thousand Flower-Flames* moves people. No other testimony could be as indicative of its worth.

Reading the steady stream of poems that appeared during the three and a half year period of composition, I have found myself challenged by Sri Chinmoy's constant departures from the norms of poetic speech and theme. What kind of visionary insight can forge its own utterance and thus speak out to man with such transparent clarity? Why does this "beholding" not struggle against itself to establish its precise nature? I offer the following commentary with the hope that it may adequately serve not only as an introduction to *Ten Thousand Flower-Flames* but as an adumbration of its spiritual essence and an exploration of its language and design.

When we consider *Ten Thousand Flower-Flames* as a whole, undoubtedly the first thing that strikes us is the scale of the work. It signifies a level of inspiration with which we are unfamiliar. Inspiration as most people know it, however profound, is a fleeting experience. When a man is filled with the inspiration to create, his life becomes in that instant altogether transformed. He would seem to dwell on the sublime heights of mystic vision and to breathe in an air far more refined and subtle than any he had previously known. As long as inspiration lasts, he remains transported in this manner, but the moment his sacred muse departs he is returned to the world of ordinary thoughts and actions. Thus, although a man may scale the summits of human experience in his visions, his outer life generally reveals a dichotomy between the two.

In some rare poets, however, we perceive an essential harmony between their life and their art. Life itself is revered as an art – the art of self-discovery and self-perfection. Sri Chinmoy is a poet of this calibre. In him we encounter the unusual phenomenon of a man whose inner realisations have entirely permeated his outer activities, to the extent

that his life as whole may be regarded as the unfoldment of an inner divinity. Sri Chinmoy explains this unity in the following terms:

The Supreme Art is to know the Supreme Artist intimately, within and without. This knowledge, well-established, cannot but guide all our movements on artistic lines. And this knowledge will be the basis of a perfectly beautiful life within and without. Art in the most effective sense of the term is a sublime truth that draws our soul from within towards the Infinite Vast.

For Sri Chinmoy this knowledge is instinct with the creative urge. New vistas of human endeavour have opened before him, leading him to create not merely individual works but entire worlds of poetry, music and painting. His is not the fugitive glimpse of the artist upon whom inspiration descends but fleetingly. His is the unfailing vision of the seer whose life is lived in the light of a vast and all-encompassing realisation.

Reading the poems, one gradually becomes aware that this realisation is far more than a philosophy of life. It is a total world view, so potent and comprehensive that it touches every aspect of human activity. No thought or feeling, however subtle its nuances, passes through the human consciousness but that it makes its appearance here. It is one of the outstanding characteristics of this work, as of Indian writing as a whole, that a knowledge of the soul or unseen Reality is the ground and essence of all existence, empirical and absolute. Further, that man may have a direct experience of the soul and through it enter into a state of oneness with the universal and ultimate Self, is regarded as the highest knowledge. "The Beautiful-Winged, though He is one, the wise poets shape with manifold songs," says the Rig Vedic poet of ancient India and, emphasising this convergence of all things in God, Sri Chinmoy writes:

#### A MAN OF WISDOM-DELIGHT

If you are a man of knowledge-light,  
You will know what the world has.  
If you are a man of wisdom-delight,

You will know who God is  
And where God is.

(2940)<sup>1</sup>

As the human mind progresses from wisdom to greater wisdom, it comes to possess the highest spiritual truths. Throughout the centuries man has believed that truth is eternal, having neither beginning nor end. With his intuitive seeking man may realise truth, but whether he does or not, the universe remains the same. Truth manifests itself in law: the laws of nature, the physical laws, the mental laws, the spiritual laws. It is the revelation of these laws that constitutes the great sacred texts through the ages. From them alone radiates all harmony and order in the universe.

However, there are chapters in the history of civilisation when man's aspiration for truth becomes less pronounced, when standards dissolve and the highest goals become clouded. At such times the eternal laws are held in abeyance until they may be revealed in a new form, according to the needs and conditions of the times. This is the lofty aim that Sri Chinmoy proposes and which he attempts to fulfil through the poems of *Ten Thousand Flower-Flames*:

#### THE REAL WISDOM-LIGHT

What is the real wisdom-light?  
The real wisdom-light  
Is to help Truth regain  
Its lost throne.

(862)

*Ten Thousand Flower-Flames* is a huge concordance of aphorisms, hymns, prayers, lyrics and songs which are woven together into a single whole by the profound seer-vision which underlies them. During the past twenty-six years that he has lived in the West, Sri Chinmoy's creative output has been prodigious: he has published more than

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<sup>1</sup> The numbers in brackets after each poem indicate their numerical placement in the series.

750 books of poetry, drama, short stories and essays; he has painted over 135,000 mystical paintings and composed some 8,000 songs in English and his native language Bengali. *Ten Thousand Flower-Flames* represents the crown of these composite achievements and, even as the Upanishads have been called the “milk” or quintessence of the Vedas, so this work is perhaps the most concentrated expression of Sri Chinmoy’s inner wealth.

A few gleanings from the poems themselves may serve to introduce the variety to be found in this immense ocean of spiritual expression:

#### THE INNER PROBLEM

All the world’s problems  
Can be solved only when  
The inner problem is solved.  
What is the inner problem?  
The inner problem is:  
Who am I?

(770)

#### YOUR HOLY STEPS

Your holy steps  
Have saved my fettered life.  
Your holy steps  
Have released my encaged soul.

(466)

#### MY HEART

O heart, my heart,  
You are sovereignty ancient,  
You are beauty imperishable.

(754)

It is at once evident that although these poems have come to us fiery molten from the poet's consciousness, they are not weighted down by the trammels of personality. There is a great public power in the poems which opens outwards to the reader – at times addressing him directly, at other times reflecting his inner states, as in an unsullied mirror. They are poems that invite our participation. In numerous ways they stretch our souls. Shall we accompany the poet on his soaring flight? Shall we, too, gaze through the windows of the universal soul? Like men who know not that they are thirsty till they pass by a clear lake, we drink of this immortal ambrosia.

Looking back over the literature of this century, we shall perhaps see that *Ten Thousand Flower-Flames* has emerged at a time when the tide of spirituality is at a low ebb. For many years our literature has been barren of any soul-force and we have waited for a new messenger of the soul – a singer, an ecstatic, a truth-finder to awaken us out of unconsciousness and carry us beyond the fixed domain of the mind to new heights. There has been a sense that we have been preparing for a new surge of creativity and that our current modes of criticism will not keep pace with it. Everything points to a new openness and expansiveness. We hear in the air the stirrings of a new beginning. The ascent of the soul is once more to the fore. The new Poetry of the New Age has come. Let us give it ample reception!

## I. VEDIC PARALLELS

It is an illuminating exercise to examine the genesis of *Ten Thousand Flower-Flames* for it discloses a great deal of Sri Chinmoy's spontaneous method of composition. On October 21st, 1979 Sri Chinmoy competed in the New York City Marathon, a distance of 26 miles 385 yards. From the early stages, he was forced to overcome severe cramps. As a result, the race evolved into a kind of odyssey for him, a metaphoric journey towards a distant goal. When he at last completed the race, he remained under the sway of this marathon spirit and resolved to embark on a comparable adventure in another field. In his own words, he became inspired –

... to sow the seeds  
Of ten thousand flaming flower-poems  
Which at long last I shall place  
Devotedly, unreservedly and unconditionally  
At the Compassion-Feet  
Of my Beloved-Supreme.

(1)

Although this calling began as a journey or a quest, it soon assumed far greater proportions than the poet's outer marathon. It began on the following day, October 22nd, when the poet boarded a plane from New York to Japan. The first seventy poems of the series were composed on this flight.

However, the absence of any gulf of time between the poet's marathon and his commencement of *Ten Thousand Flower-Flames* suggests that the poems cannot easily be extracted from the context of Sri Chinmoy's life. Carried forward on the crest of boundless inspiration, he moves from one field of expression to the next in a smooth transition. Over the past twenty-six years, he has brought the worlds of poetry, drama, art, music and athletics successively into focus, exploring each one to the fullest, modulating existing forms according to the soul's emphasis and contributing his own

innovative ideas where he found they were wanting. At the pinnacle of this creative abundance is *Ten Thousand Flower-Flames*, a work in which Sri Chinmoy's remarkable gifts combine to produce a massive compendium of spiritual truths.

The more one reads these poems, the more one comes to realise that they touch on a core of wisdom which is greater than the sum of one man's beliefs. There is a powerful uplifting force that rolls through the words and, down the reaches of time, memories revive within us of how the ancient Vedic scriptures were also the fruit of such endless, illumined energy and of how they, too, were great in their mass.

Since the nineteenth century, when the German scholars – pre-eminently Max Müller – began to unlock the secret code of the Vedas and make them accessible to the West, the impact of these works as scriptures or spiritual laws has been more clearly assessed. The difficulties of the highly formalised and polished Sanskrit language, together with the opaqueness of the many symbols in the work had, over the centuries, lessened their connection with the currents of everyday life. Because these ancient poets wrote figuratively, in order to conceal their knowledge from the uninitiated, they were accused of myth-making and their invocations to the gods were classed as mere nature worship. In effect, meaning had been dislocated from language with the result that language itself stiffened into unnatural and artificial forms. By his assiduous study of the Vedic texts, Professor Müller was able to show that they are works of knowledge and revelation that set forth eternal truths and codes of life. He declared that they are among the most important documents from the dawn of civilisation to every man

who has once felt the charm of tracing that mighty stream of human thought on which we ourselves are floating onward, back to its distant mountain sources . . . to every student of mankind in the fullest sense of that full and weighty word.

The authors of the Vedas were seven sages who were variously called "*rishi*" (seer), "*kavi*" (poet), "*vipra*" (the inspired one), "*jaritri*" (singer) and "*karu*" (the carpenter or artist in words). Vedic society recognised no difference between these many functions. If a man became inspired or filled with God, then it seemed that he simultaneously gained

the gift of sacred speech. Intuitive knowledge was expressive knowledge. Thus, the highest goal of the rishis was to be used as instruments of God, enunciating to all men and for all time the supreme truths – free from errors and imperfections, above the limitations of time and space. One poet says:

O God, sharpen my mind, like the edge of iron. Whatever I now may utter,  
longing for Thee, do Thou accept it; make me possessed of God!

The poet ventured no interpolation of self; he simply became the mouthpiece of God. Although he did not seek to please his hearers with beauteous forms of speech, the poet found that the voice of intuitive knowledge was intrinsically poetic. No matter how dense the poems may be with philosophical concepts, we inevitably discover that the lustre of this thought is clad in words of purest and most sublime poetry:

Lead me from the unreal to the Real.  
Lead me from darkness to Light.  
Lead me from death to Immortality.

(Rig Veda)

In their magniloquence, the Vedic seers combined poetry and philosophy into a powerful literary expression. Through centuries of oral transmission, each word of the Vedas has been respected and preserved with utmost fidelity.

Because of the wide perspective of the Vedas, the seven sages became the great shapers or architects of Vedic society – not only “word-builders” but “world-builders”, articulating laws and formulae essential for maintaining order in the universe and for hastening the evolution of the soul. In a world where the sum of beliefs was held in common, these sages were representative of man’s universal aspiration.

Parallels between the Vedas and *Ten Thousand Flower-Flames* can be drawn on many levels. Although many centuries apart, both works revolve around the same central theme: the soul’s march on the path of Truth. “Truth alone triumphs, not falsehood proclaims the Vedic poet, while Sri Chinmoy declares:

## THE DEFEAT OF MY LIFE

There is a defeat  
That is more glorious  
Than victory.  
And that defeat  
Is the defeat  
Of my entire life  
By Truth.

(904)

Sri Chinmoy uses the notion of defeat as a fine paradox, for by rejoicing in his own defeat he is also celebrating the victory of Truth. He has added a special poignancy to this contrast by electing to relate the poem to a personal context. Not “one’s entire life” but “my entire life” is highlighted as the stage of defeat.

It is possible, even from this preliminary example, to see how Sri Chinmoy’s poem grows out of the earlier model, encompasses it, and then presses forward to a new revelation: the necessity of surrender to Truth. In a similar way, *Ten Thousand Flower-Flames* as a whole may be said to be born of the Vedic line of thought.

Chief among the four Vedas is the Rig Veda, which comprises 10,055 stanzas. Although Sri Chinmoy’s 10,000 poems immediately suggest a broad correspondence with that work in terms of contour, he has adapted his form and language to the modern age. The entire Vedic landscape and cosmogony have been removed to pave the way for a style that is unerringly direct and simple. Using the natural spoken forms of the English language and selecting in the main its central words, Sri Chinmoy has produced a chastened form of speech, free from heavy ornamentation and applicable to all men regardless of cultural differences. The simple-appearing crystalline strophe, coloured only by an inner frame of reference, is a hallmark of these poems:

## GOD’S FORGIVENESS-LIGHT

If you are bathed  
In God’s Forgiveness-Light,

Then no dust of earth  
Will be able to cling to you.

(6606)

The transparent clarity of this language is the carrier of a new mode of spirituality. Although Sri Chinmoy largely maintains the stanzaic integrity and mantric quality of the Vedic poetry, he continually strives to conquer its opacity of expression by creating a style that is lucid, graceful and dignified. Having disencumbered himself of the thick fabric of a fixed symbolic language, the poet's only remaining mystery or secret is that most splendid mystery of all – the transformation of the human soul. "Self is the Lord of all things, Self is the King of all things," say the Vedas and Sri Chinmoy writes:

#### A REALITY OUT OF DATE

Unless you dare to be  
    Your real and transcendental Self,  
No matter what you do,  
No matter what you say,  
No matter what you become,  
You will still remain  
    A reality completely out of date.

(5008)

#### ONE STEP

From the quick magic  
    Of my heart's surrender  
To the abiding magic  
    Of my life's transformation  
Is but one step.

(4847)

In other modern spiritual poets, such as Gerard Manley Hopkins, T.S. Eliot and Theodore

Roethke, the richness and complexity of the poetic language stems in part from the fact that the texture of the poet's ideas is shifting and uncertain. This state of flux in the soul of the poet is translated outwardly into a wrestle with the different forms of language in order to produce a precise equivalent for the state or emotion that is being experienced. Sri Chinmoy's choice of language, by contrast, is significantly affected by the constancy of his vision. His words carry a strength of conviction and authority, which is consistent with their origin, for they derive not from the intellectual or imaginative activity but from intuition, the direct and luminous knowledge that rises up from one's soul. There have been many kinds of spiritual voices but none has just that firmness and just that purity. The calm, majestic countenance of the poet becomes almost visible behind the poems.

Even though Sri Chinmoy's philosophical framework is constructed of unchanging ideas and beliefs, there is nothing static in his creation itself. As he applies these eternal truths to slightly varying conditions, he highlights countless subtle nuances and distinctions. For any given theme, Sri Chinmoy offers numerous expansions or examples. We become conscious of the fact that although truth is single, it must be wrought and achieved in many thousands of lives and under a multitude of circumstances. As the poet multiplies his expressions of this truth, so he comes closer to the roots of our existence.

The poet's title – "Flower-Flames" – reveals from the outset this infinite play of variety. Like so many flames, these poems shall be ignited in the heart of aspiring humanity. The metaphoric fires of wisdom, from whence the Vedic seers drew their inspiration, shall once more be set ablaze. The poet avers:

#### THE IDEA-FLAMES

Everything started,  
Starts  
And will start  
With the idea-flames  
For life-perfection  
And self-transcendence.

(1516)

From another perspective, these inner flames are also flowers blossoming forth in many different hues. Each one signifies the unfolding of a new perfection, which is gathered up by the poet into his song-garland:

#### I LOVE THE PRISTINE BEAUTY

I love the pristine beauty

Of a flower-flame.

I love the pristine purity

Of a flower-lamp.

I love the pristine reality

Of a flower-life.

(2623)

*Ten Thousand Flower-Flames* is not a medley of heterogeneous elements. Ultimately, like the Rig Veda, its general character is homogenous: the many blend into the one and we see before us a vast visionary universe wherein all the stages of the soul are faithfully enacted.

This concordance of spiritual truths is guaranteed a sure place in our literature by virtue of the fact that it is consonant with man's deepest and most enduring beliefs. The era has passed when it was popular to disclaim the value of general truth and to hold personal or psychological truth as our only valid touchstone. Now, once more, we are beginning to perceive the essential harmony of all great religions and systems of thought. We have had our private epiphanies, our separate experiences, but as mankind as a whole progressively returns to the idea of the soul, so its universal aspirations are unveiled:

#### HAPPINESS WILL FOLLOW YOU

Happiness will follow you

If you follow the footsteps

Of the purity-sages

Who sing sleeplessly  
For your heart's illumination  
And your life's perfection.  
Where do they sing?  
They sing inside the silence-haunted heart  
Of your unconscious universality.

(5362)

The individual is still paramount, for it is he alone who must seek out the divinity within himself, but the road along which he is travelling accommodates many other such pilgrims.

Precious to us is the poet who, with a simplicity of heart, may stand among us as representative and express through the medium of language all that he beholds; who may relate to us his own questing in the context of the universal and bring nearer our comprehension all the mysteries of being. For in him, as in the Vedic poets of another age, resides that great power which has the capacity to shape a civilisation and impart to it a sacred dignity and grandeur that it might not otherwise have known.

Despite its strong philosophical content *Ten Thousand Flower-Flames* is not a textbook of a new philosophy. Having arisen from the same intuitive wellspring as the Vedas, it inclines to subordinate intellect to intuition. It is not ratiocinative, as in Western philosophical systems, but is rather the expression of deep spiritual yearnings.

Thousands of years ago, the Vedic seers tackled the ultimate questions of the soul and God. These questions remain still and will remain for all time the foremost concerns of man. From the answers that the Vedic seers saw with their intuitive vision there radiated sufficient divine energy to sustain the Indian culture for thousands of years. And yet, powerful as they once were, the Vedas are now almost wholly the province of scholars. A fresh cycle has begun and a new collection of spiritual truths has emerged as its primary document. *Ten Thousand Flower-Flames* is an efflorescence of Vedic knowledge ripened by a mature poet into a major literary work of the modern age. Where the Vedas embody the vigour and freshness of the morning of mankind, *Ten Thousand Flower-Flames* is incandescent with the light of mankind's meridian.

## II.

### DESIGN AND SCOPE

As the wealth of *Ten Thousand Flower-Flames* lies before us in all its massed power, one of the primary critical questions that we are compelled to ask is whether the poems constitute a unity or whether they are simply an aggregate of equipollent parts. In the previous section, I have asserted that the poems have a strong internal coherence based on a stability of intuitive vision. However, this coherence does not extend to a symmetrical arrangement of the poems. The disposition of the poems is largely determined by their chronological order of appearance.

The poems have been published in 100 volumes, each containing 100 poems. The first 500 poems, written during the eleven days that the poet was in India and Japan in 1979, are accompanied by precise dates. Thus, we learn, for example, that on October 27th en route from Osaka to Calcutta the poet composed 155 poems. After Volume 5, the order of publication of the poems is not wholly accurate as a guide to chronology. Sometimes the poet would retain certain poems for final consideration or for a special purpose. Volume 50, for example, is comprised mainly of the poet's own favourite selections.

From January 1983, the month of publication has been printed in each book and this has helped considerably in establishing a broad chronological outline. It may be possible to construct a more detailed time chart by examining Sri Chinmoy's notebooks but, in truth, there is such a short time lapse between compositions that the value of a chronological key is almost entirely obviated. If the poet should fill his notebook with poems in the course of a morning, it is of little use to say that such a one precedes another. We are dealing with a poet whose apprehensions are not consecutive but simultaneous. The countless subtle influences and changes to which the soul is subject are immediately present to him but he is obliged by the sequential nature of words themselves to communicate them individually.

Again, in order to achieve some more closely binding unity, the poet might have chosen to sift through the elements of his vision and arrange them by theme – beginning, say, with the soul's night of tears and tracing its journey through to the

heights of realisation. But that kind of procedure would introduce the conceptual approach of the intellectual mind. This, in turn, would result in a shift away from the spontaneity of the poet's intuitive vision. "It is not enough," writes Ernest Fenollosa,

for [poetry] to furnish a meaning to philosophers. It must appeal to the emotions with the charm of direct impression, flashing through regions where the intellect can only grope.

Sri Chinmoy's solution is to bring forth a vast constellation of poems in which numerous themes and forms commingle freely. We are continually uncovering fresh viewpoints and, at the same time, each new poem on a particular theme implicitly refers back to those that have preceded it. Consider a group of poems on the mind in Volume 66. Early in the volume, we are given an unremitting picture of the power of impure thoughts to destroy the mind's possibilities:

#### EACH UNCOMELY THOUGHT

Each uncomely thought  
Eventually throws the mind  
Into a chasm of bleeding despair.

(6514)

The force and originality of the final image is a direct result of the poet's passionate repudiation of "uncomely" thoughts. Its effect is heightened by a fine interplay of literal and figurative words. Ultimately the concrete/figurative connotations of "throw", "chasm" and "bleeding" overthrow the abstract nouns of the poem to create a vivid and realistic picture. The focus of composition here, the three-lined stanza, is a favourite of the poet's and is frequently used to project a strong sense of closure. This poem is made doubly powerful by its compaction and by the strength of its definitive statement. It precludes all qualifications and amendments.

It is interesting, however, to note that within the same volume of poems we encounter the following:

#### TODAY'S PURE THOUGHTS

Today's pure thoughts  
Are resources  
For tomorrow's inner emergencies.

(6537)

Now the poet highlights the power of good or "comely" thoughts to prevail against emergency situations of which the previous poem is a type. Drawing from the vocabulary commonly applied to energy conservation, the poet allies his thought with the powerful thrust of modern progress. The resources of the future, he asserts with a faint touch of irony, are the wealth that man has consciously shored up in his inner being. The positive affirmation of this poem provides the perfect counterpoint for the negative movement of "Each Uncomely Thought".

Finally, still in Volume 66, we find a poignant and compassionate address to the mind:

#### I FULLY SYMPATHISE WITH YOU

My poor, tiny mind,  
I fully sympathise with you.  
How can you brave  
The ruthless and sleepless onslaughts  
Of a multitude of uncomely thoughts?

(6588)

Once lord of his being, the mind has been reduced to a helpless state. It is unable to withstand the buffets of thought and we are led to the extra-syntactical conclusion that for this reason it cannot be held wholly responsible for such thoughts.

This cluster of mind poems occurring in fairly close proximity typifies the kind of thematic interweaving that pervades *Ten Thousand Flower-Flames*. We cannot help but read each new appearance of this theme in the light of those poems that have preceded

it. Thus, we can begin to sense the very considerable cumulative power that reigns over the poems. As individual and autonomous creations, they have an integrity that is stringently maintained by the poet but, seen in the context of the work as a whole, they would seem to gather a special resonance: poems on the heart comment on those on the mind; poems on weakness anticipate poems on aspiration; poems on journeying prefigure man's ultimate goal. Because the larger overspreading theme, that of the soul's ascent, is single, these various strands tend to merge into a single universe of discourse, even as a multitude of flickering, dancing flames forms a great conflagration.

Having established that the poems are spontaneous formations springing from the inmost soul of the poet, we may begin to examine in detail the fixed notions on which the poems pivot. Foremost among these is the poet's conviction that the true worth of man lies in his inner life, the degree to which he has realised his true nature and the amount of effort that is directed towards achieving self-perfection. The poet assesses these questions on both a universal and an individual scale:

#### CENTURIES HAVE ROLLED AWAY

Centuries have rolled away,  
And still the outer man does not know  
Where the inner man  
    Unmistakably is.  
And the inner man does not know  
What the outer man  
    Actually wants.

(1436)

In other poems, the poet adopts the first person speaking voice to supplant this general aimlessness of purpose. The tone of these personal poems is clear and unfaltering:

#### MY IMAGE OF LIFE-PERFECTION

I shall always maintain  
My image of life-perfection

For the full Satisfaction  
Of my Beloved Supreme.

(2904)

In spite of any signs of prevailing spiritual barrenness in the modern world, *Ten Thousand Flower-Flames* as a whole is infused with the conviction that each man shall one day be awakened to his soul's purpose:

#### IT WAS GOD'S PLAN

It was God's Plan  
Right from the beginning of time  
To give our soulful faith  
A splendid victory.

(3204)

In these poems, as in many mystical writings, the path that leads to the soul's awakening is seen in terms of a great journey, fraught with difficulties and pitfalls. It may be a journey by sea or by road, a climbing upwards or a mysterious flight, aimed always at an inexpressible "Beyond":

#### BEYOND THE SUNRISE-SKY

Sail  
Beyond the sunrise-sky.  
Reach  
The Pinnacle-Goal  
Before the sunset-cry.

(516)

The distant goal of the other shore seems to lie just beyond the edge of the horizon in this poem. The poet urges us to set forth on a voyage of discovery, like the seafarers of earlier centuries who sailed the oceans of the world in the faith that they would discover

new lands.

In other poems, Sri Chinmoy assures the pilgrim seeker that he shall attain his ultimate goal:

#### ECSTASY'S UNPLUMBED SKIES

If you have an aspiration-flight,  
In the long run  
You are bound to reach  
Ecstasy's unplumbed skies.

(358)

In addition to poems where the speaking voice is broad and expansive are those pure lyrics in which the poet dramatises a particular state of consciousness. It might be a passing mood of sorrow, or of frustration or yet again of rapture. Such poems are not embedded in specific external details of time and place. They are solely interior dramas, projected out of time:

#### SOMEHOW I HAVE LOST MY WAY

Somehow I have lost my way.  
Alas, I now see the road ahead  
Constantly lengthening,  
Bewildering and frightening me.

(6603)

Here the poet is enacting a single phase of the journey: a moment of doubt and confusion. Note the tremulous effect of the last two lines with their careful variation on a dactylic metrical scheme. The accumulation of feminine endings reinforces this impression with their suggestion of a half-suppressed cry. The overall effect is to create the unmistakable impression of a lost child whimpering to itself. We need no further details of outer circumstances in order to be wholly absorbed by the poet's representation. Indeed, these few words seem to open up a vast unexpressed region of

sorrow deep inside us. The pressure of the realisation that we, too, may be lost is almost unbearable.

Although these poems revolve around a stable idea – the journey towards God – they illustrate the many-hued beauty of *Ten Thousand Flower-Flames*. These slanted or partial truths capture all the countless life experiences that compose a general or abstract truth. Sri Chinmoy explains:

It is said that a poet has no character of his own. Now I wish to say, why should a poet have a character of his own? A poet identifies with truth. If he has to express anger through his poem, then naturally he will identify himself with the anger-consciousness. If he has to express love, then he will have to identify himself with the love-consciousness. On the strength of his identification with the reality he has envisioned, he reveals to the world his inspiration and aspiration.

A poet sees the truth from various angles. He is not obligated to see the truth always from one angle. A poet can speak of one particular subject in various ways. This moment he may praise and invoke death and the next moment he may criticise death. That does not mean that the poet is a man of no principles. Far from it! When he stays in a particular plane of consciousness, according to the capacity and receptivity that he has at that time, he sees death in one form. When he stays in another plane of consciousness, he may see death in a different way, with a different aspect.

The poet's manifold energies seek out the fluctuating moods and states of the spiritual seeker and mirror each one in essence. This imparts to the design of the poems as a whole a fluid and amorphous quality. Although the underlying themes and ideas are constant, nothing appears static or fixed. There is a continual air of freshness, of having heard something expressed in just this manner for the first time. The truths contained in these poems may be eternal but what strikes us is that the poet has realised them anew – he has, in a sense, remade them. Within his own consciousness, he recognises the perpetual interaction of the personal and the impersonal, the immanent and the

transcendent, the knower and the known. The poet's lofty seer-vision is the resolution of all opposites. In it, they become melted and merged into a single unity.

As we become acquainted with the universality of the poet's vision, it becomes increasingly clear that *Ten Thousand Flower-Flames*, vast almost beyond human capacity, is exactly proportioned to Sri Chinmoy's powers. The poet's plenary insight into the soul of man and his self-delighting spirit have yielded an expression which is inexhaustible in its power to nourish the countless readers who will partake of the bounty of this epic work.

### III.

#### THE ROLE OF NATURE

A spiritual man withdraws his senses from the world and turns them inward upon himself in order to comprehend the tastes, sounds and sights that rise from within. He ceases to be absorbed in the beauties that surround him and immerses himself in the splendour of the soul. And yet the same man invariably finds that nature has mysteriously entered into the very substance of his visions and dreams. Details of nature, lifted out of and above the immediately perceptible sensuous sphere, may precipitate a sudden inlet of spiritual understanding. The path between nature and the human soul is laid bare and every aspect of nature is seen to reflect a deeper spiritual significance.

The poems of Sri Chinmoy illustrate this clearing of the physical senses. To him, nothing is wonderful but the soul and so we never discover in him that entranced contemplation of nature for its own sake. What we do find, however, is a constant interpenetration of man and nature. The sun, the moon and the stars, light and darkness, the creatures, the birds and the plants, all these things not only reflect something of the divine Nature of God but also disclose features of the relationship between the soul and God.

The poems of *Ten Thousand Flower-Flames* assimilate certain aspects of nature into a wide spiritual vision. Nature provides the poet with a necessary locus against which to balance his inner experience and he is able to enlist her properties – such as light, space, stillness, permanence and motion – to suggest corresponding qualities of the contemplative life.

Undoubtedly, the most pervasive natural image in the poems is that of light and its antithesis, the absence of light. To the poet, the outer light and the inner light of consciousness are interchangeable. Light is evanescent – it dances over the surface of the world so that everything appears to be constantly on the point of dissolving into light. In this process, man returns ultimately to the effulgence of light, which is God:

#### AT LAST MY LIFE IS READY

I have drunk deeply and greedily  
The very depths of darkness-night.  
At last my life is ready  
For the beauty of mystic light.

(4386)

Darkness is used here as a metaphor for ignorance. It immediately suggests its own opposite, which is light or knowledge. The poem brings these two poles of experience into focus in order to enhance the radiant beauty of the inner light.

Even as the transformation of man's nature is seen in the above poem as a movement from darkness to light, so his continued advance in spirituality is pictured as a growth or expansion from light to greater light:

#### MAY MY HEART'S PURITY RADIATE

May my mind's sincerity  
Spread like a silver dawn.  
May my heart's purity  
Radiate like a golden morn.

(5200)

The morning has two distinct phases which glide into one another with magical effect. It is an event that we can verify from the field of our own outer experience. However, the poet is not concerned to record the minute variations in this outer play of light. On the contrary, he is seeing them under a timeless guise of perpetual becoming or unfolding: the silver dawn and golden morn are caught by the poet and fixed forever at the moment of their characteristic action.

It is evident that the poet's aim is not imitation or exactitude but essence. He omits all but a few carefully selected details and imparts to these details a mysterious vibration or significance so that they dilate with meaning and expressiveness:

## GOD'S MORNING BREATH

When my heart's climbing cry  
Ascended far beyond the realms of clouds,  
God smilingly granted me  
His own morning Breath to breathe.

(4905)

This poem, with its exquisite *paysage intérieur*, achieves a delicate balance between perception and imagination. The "realms of clouds" and the morning sunlight confer a unique actualising power on the heart's cry. We would seem to trace its flight beyond the mind and into God's Infinity.

In the poem above, nature is used to portray a spiritual experience. However, when several details from nature are combined into an expressive pattern, they may be used to convey the idea of spiritual process. In the case of light, this pattern may revolve around the solar cycle – night/day; sunrise/sunset; morning/midday/afternoon and evening. In the following poem, for example, the changeover from night to day suggests to the poet the process whereby the mind is eventually subsumed by the spiritual heart:

## MAY MY MIND BECOME THE PRECURSOR

As night is the precursor  
Of a beautiful and fruitful dawn,  
May my mind become the precursor  
Of a prayerful and soulful heart.

(6235)

The natural sequence is used as a type of the spiritual sequence. This concentration on the value of the type frees the poet from the necessity to individuate nature. The poet crystallises his central images into clear and vivid outlines that allow him to pass more easily from a physical to a psychic perception. He never falls prey to a hazy romanticism. Always there is the sense of overriding utility – to make nature's forms articulate his inner spiritual intuitions.

The symbols that Sri Chinmoy most commonly selects may best be described as cosmic symbols. They are universally intelligible, being drawn directly from the world about us rather than from any realm of fantasy. They are eternally familiar and simple: the forests and mountains, the land, the sky and the sea, together with all their inhabitants. These are not small themes and yet, of themselves they no longer convey the impression of a translucent universe; man no longer sees in them an intimate connection with the Creator. However, Sri Chinmoy returns to such symbols with a new freshness and energy. Used in their generic form, with utmost clarity and consistency, they become for the moment self-sufficing. No further adornment by the poet is needed to secure our response, for the meditative thought of the poem carries us swiftly beyond surfaces to the underlying spiritual reality.

Sri Chinmoy's use of these cosmic symbols is entirely consistent. He does not aim to excite the emotions of the reader but to impart a calm grandeur and a noble simplicity to various inner experiences and states:

#### A WHITE BIRD

I am praying  
To have a white bird  
Flooded with purity  
To fly in my heart's blue sky.

(6401)

The poet's use of the generic terms "bird" and "sky" has the effect of restoring to them something of their original purity and dignity. He seems to be conscious of an inherent sanctity in the words themselves, which enables him to overcome any falling off of meaning due to overuse. These are the basic word-pictures that form the very roots of our language. They are unambiguous, clean and bright. There is a genuine quality of translucence about the cosmic symbols, which makes them far more revealing than bare literal statement. Compare, for example, the above poem with a statement such as "I am praying for inner purity." In essence, this statement contains the poet's message, but it has none of the powerful emotional cadence of the poem. At best, the statement can

offer us an abstract approach to purity, whereas the poem pierces directly to the experience of purity: it is a white bird etched against the inner vastness of the heart.

The key to the poet's use of these cosmic symbols is his great simplicity of vision. In a further poem this outlook is described as "crystal-clear":

#### A GLIMPSE OF REALITY

A crystal-clear glimpse of reality  
Has shown him that each heart  
Is a green plant of hope  
And each life  
Is a blue tree of promise.

(6481)

As we read the poem, we seem to enter into that same simplicity of vision and behold the world with fresh, uncluttered eyes. Spiritual happenings and physical happenings seem to share a secret life:

#### FROM TOMORROW ON

From tomorrow on  
    My morning meditation  
Will be as beautiful as the dawn,  
    My midday meditation,  
As powerful as the sun  
    And my evening meditation,  
As peaceful as the sky.

(4189)

Every aspect of nature raises a corresponding vibration in the human soul. In Sri Chinmoy's world there are no fences between these two separate realms of experience. Together they form a perfect whole. This synthesis allows him to move from a descriptive mode to a meditative mode without disjunction.

## THE GOLDEN MORNING IS BLOSSOMING

Be not afraid  
Of the pre-dawn darkness.  
The golden morning  
    With its rainbow-dance  
Is blossoming faster  
    Than you can imagine.

(6586)

Initially, we read this poem on a purely literal level to mean that the hour is darkest before the dawn breaks. At a certain point in the poem, however, and without any obvious structural articulation, we make the transition to an inner context where we discover the poet's splendid assurance to the seeker that the light of spiritual understanding shall soon dawn inside him. The resultant effect is that both the inner and the outer are held in delicate balance.

Another universally intelligible symbol, which is used widely throughout *Ten Thousand Flower-Flames*, is that of plant life. The beauty and unfolding perfection of a flower are a perfect metaphor for the spiritual heart:

## SELF-MASTERY MEANS

Self-mastery means  
The joy of the heart's  
Blossoming rose-petals.

(5941)

This haiku-like poem, with its intuition of identity between the rose and the heart, is a flawless triumph of expression. No words can account for the peculiar thrill that stems from our subtle sensation of the rose-petals opening one by one. It is the life-principle of the rose and not any detail of its appearance that is enshrined in this miniature poem.

The unopened heart is pictured by the poet as a plant in which the life-energy is

fading:

#### YOUR HEART-PLANT IS WITHERING

Because of your suspicion-mind,  
Your poor heart-plant is withering  
Before it can burst into flower.

(5906)

In the last days of winter, each branch becomes laden with tiny buds. They swell with the promise of spring. Everything gathers in readiness for a sudden and radiant blossoming. The heart, too, knows its springtime when all its secret possibilities are revealed. To have prepared for such a moment and then to experience its loss is the feeling of this poem. The perishing of the heart is presented with a deceptive simplicity, using the fewest of words. And yet these brief touches awaken an immediate and full response. We are filled in the first instance with a deep sadness and then with an imperative urge to reverse this process and instil new life into the heart-plant.

Much of the power of this use of symbolism comes from Sri Chinmoy's innate tactfulness and restraint. Using single words with extreme delicacy he unveils layer upon layer of meaning. Nothing in his verse runs to excess. Where there is least, there is most:

#### LIKE THE SLEEPING FLOWERS

Like the sleeping flowers  
Of the silence-evening,  
My snow-heart shall rest  
In the ever-blossoming Dawn.

(273)

The heart is enfolded in God. The poet's wordless unity with the "sleeping flowers" has shown him the path to that state. By pathetic fallacy he invests the flowers with the peacefulness of human slumber. It is an eternally moving expression of serenity.

In many poems this restraint operates so keenly that the poet concentrates his entire meaning into a single token word:

#### YOU CAN REMAIN UNCHANGEABLE

You can remain  
Not only unchanged  
But also unchangeable  
In this world of cataclysmic changes  
If you can make your life  
Into a soulful flower-offering.

(6276)

Here, the word “flower” is the open door through which the poet beckons our understanding. If you have grasped the essence of a flower, he is saying, then you will know what is required of your life: unconditional and total self-offering. The entire weight of the poem’s meaning rests upon the degree to which we enter into this word and become one with it. Similarly, in the poem below, the very nature of God’s Heart is captured in the single word “garden”:

#### A BORN DREAMER

Because you are a born dreamer,  
You have a special place  
In God’s Heart-Garden.

(5923)

Since these are perennial symbols they contain no hidden allusions. Nor do they require additional explanation. They are self-evident and complete. What we encounter in the poems of Sri Chinmoy is a delight in the simple and the familiar over and above the unusual. He does not cultivate the particular, the novel or the ostentatious, but rather places before us the eternal fact clothed in the transparent raiment of a universal

language.

The scope of the poet's cosmic landscape of symbols is increased by his use of natural features: the mountains, forests, rivers and oceans. Within it he sets deer, horses, elephants, tigers and lambs, each in their universal or typical form. They become archetypes of underlying spiritual realities:

#### ONLY ONE CAVE

There is only one cave,  
And that cave is my heart.  
There is only one cave-dweller,  
And that cave-dweller is  
    The self-transcending man  
        Inside my heart.

(4887)

The essential loneliness of man's inner self is captured in the image of the cave and reinforced by the poet's repetition of this word throughout the poem. Again, although the symbolic core of such images is already largely defined, Sri Chinmoy's use of them is in no way binding. Thus the heart, for example, may be represented equally as a cave or a flower or a grove without any reflection on the truth-value of each symbol. The harmony between the inner and the outer nature is inclusive and not exclusive. Each application of a symbol tends to convey a new and enlarged significance to its spiritual counterpart.

The poet's prayer is to make a new song out of ancient truths:

#### I HAVE ONE REQUEST

My Lord,  
I have one request:  
May my heart sing the song  
    Of universal oneness.  
My Lord,

I have one more request:  
May my life sing the song  
Of transcendental newness.

(5001)

It is an index of the scope of the poet's vision that it never loses touch with diurnal existence, it never lodges in a purely ethereal realm and remains forgetful of the common life. But through a greater and greater capaciousness, the poet assimilates all the forms of life into his spiritual vision.

## IV.

### THE GOAL OF GOALS

Even as Sri Chinmoy's synthetic vision incorporates both the inner and the outer nature, so it also has the effect of resolving all the many formulations of God. The realisation of God carries man far beyond any firm belief in a particular manifestation of the Divine. The God that was personal is also known as impersonal; the God that was far becomes near, He is both finite and infinite, transcendent and immanent. *Ten Thousand Flower-Flames* is an endless contemplation of God in all His myriad aspects. Scarcely a poem appears in which God is not invoked. He is the all-pervading Reality towards which the soul is constantly moving.

"The major poetic idea in the world is and always has been the idea of God," writes Wallace Stevens. For Sri Chinmoy, the actual experience of God's presence and the stages by which the soul ascends to that state are the highest concerns of literature. All other thoughts and movements are subsumed by this effort to attain the goal of goals.

The greatness of Sri Chinmoy as a poet is particularly evident in the way in which he handles this most difficult subject area. Poems that point to God or that depend in some degree on God's participation revolve around the central paradox that we cannot give a conceptual explanation of God, for God transcends all our intellectual powers of understanding. To the mind, the idea of a God who is both personal and impersonal, knowable and unknowable, is totally incongruous. To the seer-poet, however, there is no contradiction. With his intuitive understanding he soars to a height where all opposites are merged into the One.

The language of intuition is poetry with its vast array of symbols and signs. Poetry is the expression of the Divine through the material of everyday life. This becomes clearer when we examine the appellations of God in *Ten Thousand Flower-Flames*. Absolutes dominate the language of the impersonal God for He is apprehended as transcending all levels of reality:

### UNLESS YOU BELIEVE

Unless you believe in the unknown,  
How can you eventually  
Successfully grow into the unknowable?

(3661)

What begins as an inner mystic faith, the poet asserts, eventually becomes an inner certitude of truth. It is a certitude that is based on direct revelation. Through “ardent submissiveness”, the poet suggests in another poem, one may arrive at the place where God is:

### AN ARDENT SUBMISSIVENESS

To arrive at the core of everything  
What you need is an ardent submissiveness  
To Eternity’s infinite Source.

(3036)

### MY IMMORTALITY’S REALITY-SHORE

My Lord Supreme,  
I do not know where You are,  
I do not know who You are,  
But I know for certain  
That I am Your Eternity’s Dream-Boat  
And You are my Immortality’s Reality-Shore.

(2948)

What these absolute terms have in common is a reaching out beyond the finite. We come to know God through the sheer power of negatives: He is unknown, unnameable, unlimited. The experience of Him is one of supreme Nothingness, which harbours the greatest fulness:

## DO DISSOLVE ME

O Lord Supreme,  
Do dissolve me  
Into Your Infinity's ecstasy.

O Lord Supreme,  
Do dissolve me  
Into Your Eternity's nothingness.

(292)

Although our understanding of these terms is necessarily imperfect, since we may not have entered into the theopathic life which they express, they are nonetheless deeply moving expressions of God's utter transcendence. Sri Chinmoy's language of absolutes seems to draw on a power which personal language could not convey.

This approach to God's static aspects is balanced by an apprehension of Him as no longer remote and unchanging but near, loving and responsive to man's yearnings. God is conceived as a living person fulfilling the many different roles that we encounter in our human relations. He is the Friend and Lover of the soul; He is its Lord and Master, its Guide and Boatman, its Father and King. Once again, as in the poet's use of nature symbols, we find ourselves returned to the world of the immediately familiar and graspable:

## GOD WILL ALWAYS COME FIRST

If God is what you want,  
Then He can never come second.  
    He will always come first.  
He will come  
    As your Confidant.  
He will come  
    As your Advisor supreme.  
He will come

As your only Friend.

(2427)

The various bonds of companionship that are represented in this poem reveal an intimacy that is lacking in the more impersonal metaphors for God. As these bonds are tightened even further, God becomes the Father who answers the cravings of man's heart with His immortal assurance:

A SEEKER'S ACHING HEART

As a child's streaming tears  
Are dried by his earthly mother,  
Even so a seeker's aching heart  
Is soothed by his Heavenly Father.

(4589)

When the love between man and God is at its most intense, God appears as the Beloved and the course of man's life is pictured as a growth in love:

SWEET IS MY LORD

Sweet is my Lord  
Because He is knowable.  
Sweeter is my Lord,  
Because He is known.  
Sweetest is my Lord  
Because He invites me  
To play hide-and-seek with Him  
Every day.

(1948)

To the God-lover the world is an eternal play, a never-ending seeking and finding. Rabindranath Tagore writes in the same vein:

The great pageant of thee and me has overspread the sky. With the tune of thee and me all the air is vibrant, and all ages pass with the hiding and seeking of thee and me.<sup>2</sup>

The experience of God so fills the consciousness of the seeker that he is oblivious to all else. His surface personality is annihilated and he becomes immersed in God. The final goal of man's inner, mystic journey is a complete and inseparable oneness with God:

I TRY

I try to visualise

God the Beautiful One.

I try to seek

God the Powerful One.

I try to merge into

God the Bountiful One.

(3919)

One of the greatest single contributions that *Ten Thousand Flower-Flames* makes to the thought and life of our times is to reaffirm the possibility not merely of envisioning God but of knowing Him through direct experience. In Sri Chinmoy's own life this oneness with God is a state of being that irradiates all his thoughts and actions. Since *Ten Thousand Flower-Flames* is not written in the autobiographical mode, however, Sri Chinmoy does not dwell among these faraway heights. His greater concern is to prepare the seeker for God-realisation by specifying the eternal principles of truth and law. Thus the major role of the poems is educative: they direct man to God; they find him when he is lost and encourage him when he is doubtful; they echo the joy of the inner life and the pain of its absence. Finally, they speak to God – questioning Him, thanking Him, praising Him.

In the main, Sri Chinmoy uses a language for God that has been defined by spiritual poets before him. It is inevitable that mystics should turn to relationships from

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<sup>2</sup> "Gitanjali", LXXI.

everyday life to exemplify their transcendent experiences. They adapt the most traditional material to their own use; they pour their nectar into many and varied vessels, in order to share the secrets of the inner life with others. Sri Chinmoy has gathered the entire range of names for God into his vast work and made them function not as ornaments but as fundamental perceptions of the seeker's evolving consciousness.

## V.

### THE POEMS AS MANTRAS

When a poet, such as Sri Chinmoy, elects to use language for a sacred purpose, he immediately places it in a condition of special use. The words that he chooses to fulfil his purpose must be lifted from the flow of our common speech and used in a manner in keeping with divine utterance. This appropriation of profane words to a spiritual purpose has been undertaken throughout the ages by poets of both East and West. Each poet searches for the unique word or phrase that is absolutely proper to his vision and that will carry the reality of this vision directly to the consciousness of the reader. Seer-poets of the East have tended, in addition, to look for those words which have a mysterious inner resonance. According to their perception, certain words are invested with an autonomous power or soul-force. It is impossible to articulate them without invoking a portion of the quality they describe. These words and phrases are called mantras.

“A mantra is a syllable divinely surcharged with power,” Sri Chinmoy has written. It may be the power of wisdom or peace or truth or any one of a host of spiritual qualities. Let us examine the power of the English word “delight” as a specific example. Ordinarily, it is not a word to which we would ascribe vast spiritual overtones. However, Sri Chinmoy abstracts this word from any personal or historical context and places it in a key position in his poem:

DELIGHT IS AN UNLIMITED CAPACITY

Delight is an unlimited capacity  
Which our heart has  
And our soul eternally is.

(3621)

Suddenly the poet compels us to examine delight in a new context – as the highest manifestation of the soul. In effect, by transferring the entire burden of the poem’s meaning to this single word, the poet wakens its secret inner potency. The deeper our

level of penetration, the more the word itself begins to reverberate with a new and enlarged meaningfulness. The poem as a whole becomes a powerful spiritual current.

It is interesting to compare this poem with the following mantric verse from the Vedas:

From Delight we came into existence.

In Delight we grow.

At the end of our journey's close, into Delight we retire.

Not only does the same enduring wisdom pervade both poems, but also there are strong stylistic parallels. Each poem articulates a general truth in a voice that is spontaneous and authentic. The poems resist all attempts at paraphrase. They are, in a sense, indivisible wholes, unveiled intuitions of truth.

Mantras belong to what we may call the literature of wisdom. The greatest repository of mantras in the Indian tradition are the Vedas, which are held to be the revealed word of God. Consequently, Indian seekers from earliest times unto the present have exhibited a scrupulous respect for the exact wording of the Vedic slokas: no syllable was lost and none interpolated, even though over two thousand years passed before they were secured in a written form. How to account for such perfect transmission? The answer is that the Vedic mantras were recited over and over until they echoed and re-echoed in the depths of men's hearts.

Steeped in Vedic lore and language, Sri Chinmoy has continued this tradition by transforming English into a vehicle capable of expressing powerful, mantric thought. In so doing, he implicitly asserts that the latent power of words to release a divine energy is not peculiar to the ancient Sanskrit language. This power resides within the words of any language when such words are used to convey the highest truths:

#### FRUITFUL ECHOES

Speak soulful words.

Immediately you are bound to hear

Fruitful echoes.

In this poem the poet captures the essence of mantras: the presentation of truth in its most dynamic form. When truth is endowed with this dynamic life-force, the listener cannot remain quiescent. He must respond to the echoes that are rising within his own soul. It is a measure of the fusion of language and thought in this poem that its internal structure mimes that very echo effect in the feminine rhymes of “soulful” and “fruitful”.

Mantras such as these proceed on the premise that the vision of the seer-poet holds true for all men in all ages. These are not relative truths, confined by individual circumstances or a specific location. They are seminal truths, which have neither beginning nor end. They can never be discovered, for they exist above man, but they may be realised and revealed. “A poet,” writes Sri Chinmoy, “is he who envisions the ultimate, absolute Truth.”

In order to use mantras effectively the poet must extend beyond all time and place, transcending the bounds of identity in order to enter into that universal spirit which sees into the hearts of all men. His speaking voice must be naked, unbounded, able to assume multiple forms and, through all these, to speak always in the native accents of the soul:

I CAME FROM GOD

I came from God

The Eternal Dreamer.

I am heading towards God

The Immortal Lover.

The sovereign sweep of this poem encompasses the journey of the soul from its source to its final goal. What is most striking about the poem is its conceptual clarity, in spite of the wealth of thought that is compressed into it. It is an epic in miniature. To penetrate its many layers of meaning what is required is an act of contemplation that somehow goes far beyond mere comprehension.

On a surface level, Sri Chinmoy does not present anything that might hinder our comprehension of the poems. In spite of their extreme brevity, they never become cryptic or convoluted. The greatest economy goes hand in hand with the greatest simplicity:

#### INFINITY'S ABODE

God's Compassion-Eye  
Is God's  
Infinity's Abode.

(1829)

The beauty of this poem is the beauty of correct and flawless expression. It exhibits the ancient poetic virtues of proportion and symmetry: the statement divides into two perfectly matched phrases linked by the passive copula "is". These phrases or thought-units are challenging to us because together they comprise a new name for an abstract concept.

The naming of a particular experience or state of being is frequently the focal point of the poem:

#### TRY THE SURRENDER-KEY

If all the other keys have failed,  
Then try the soulful surrender-key.  
It will easily open God's Door.

(4277)

In this poem, the poet uses the image of a key to give a new concreteness to the concept of surrender. It is the same principle that prompted him to employ the highly visual images of God's Eye and God's Abode in the previous poem. The poet does not qualify his assertion or attempt to explain why surrender is ultimately the most successful way of reaching God; he simply expresses the truth in the most precise terms. The lack of elaboration or logical argument places utmost emphasis on the few words that he does

use in order to call forth their original mantric power and communicate their essential truth.

#### AN ASPIRATION-TREE

What is an aspiration-tree?

A giant

Among the dwarf desire-plants.

(2470)

Immediately we read this poem we are impressed by the contrast in scale between aspiration and desire. The poet's question and answer are bold and trenchant. Even to the eye, the single aspiration-tree stands isolated in the second line, a giant towering over the "dwarf desire-plants" that lie below it in the final line. This single pictorial image, strengthened by the syntactical arrangement of the poem, intensifies the poet's meaning, whereas a more logical development of the theme would have diffused it.

Mantras are possible only for those poets who are not afraid to risk exposure, who can deliver the substance of their vision intact without seeking refuge in self-qualification. Frequently this yields a type of poetry that is akin to commandment:

#### NOURISH LEARNING

Nourish learning,

Cherish unlearning.

Lo, your perfection-cry

And your satisfaction-smile

Are flourishing.

(1555)

Because the poet himself is commanded from within to speak out, his words borrow something of that same urgent, imperial tone. It is not the poet's own voice but the voice of an inner wisdom that is made articulate in this way. Indeed, at times the reader may not even recognise that this voice issues from a context outside his own person, for it

seems to be the voice of the inner man.

Even when the poet's commandments appear most final, they still contain elements of sublime poetry:

#### GOD IS WAITING FOR YOU

God is waiting for you.

You will arrive Home.

Just keep your eyes

On the beautiful

And soulful flames

Ahead.

(753)

This is at once poetry of momentous statement and poetry of brilliant expression. The imagination is encouraged to stretch itself freely. The poem above, for example, is left open-ended, enticing us to draw nearer to the flames with an inner movement of our understanding. Other mystic poets, such as St. John of the Cross, have represented God as a Fire which consumes the seeker. Here the same image is given an exquisite delicacy.

Similarly, in the following poem, the truth-vision of the poet discovers its own loveliness without losing any of its mantric compression and power:

#### YOU CAN BE TRULY HAPPY

You can be truly happy

Only when your life-tree

Touches the vaulted skies

While standing deeply rooted

Inside the heart

Of the lowly earth.

(1443)

This is an especially precise evocation of man's dual nature. He belongs to both Heaven

and earth and each is needed to fulfil the other. A wealth of meaning is condensed into the two images of “the vaulted skies” and “the lowly earth”. The concept of the dome of Heaven stirs memories within us of the two-dimensional religious paintings of the European Renaissance. Against this background of gold, man stands in all his spiritual dignity and nobility. His humility ties him to earth while his aspiration makes him a dweller of the Heavenly spheres.

It is not possible to study these mantras with the intellect alone for their priceless treasure must be seized intuitively. We cannot separate the poet’s spiritual and aesthetic perceptions, nor can we abstract the content of the poem from its form. The poems strike us with a single effect that is irreducible. The poet wields his lightening vision and men retires, leaving us with raw energy barely sheathed in words:

#### MY SUPREME MOMENT

This is my day;  
    I love it.  
This is my morning God-Hour,  
    I need it.  
This is my supreme moment;  
    And I am it.

(4401)

This is an outburst of sheer delight, an affirmation of life, a celebration of the Self and the eternal Now in which it lives. The thrill that we experience from reading it comes from our contact with this heightened energy of being. It is the first moment of Self-Realisation when the portals of the soul are flung wide and a burst of inner sunlight floods man’s entire nature.

In another mantra the poet amplifies this theme using words of subtle, dignified generality:

#### EVERY DAY IS THE RIGHT DAY

Every day is the right day  
For the right person,  
And that person  
Is the unconditional God-lover.

(4102)

The meditative rhythms of this poem, with its freely cadenced long sentence, incline to a more philosophical presentation of the experience of awareness. Here we find concept mingled with intuition. This mixture of philosophy and poetry does not affect the overall poetic impact of the mantra, for when concepts are blended with intuitions they cease to be abstract and independent. They lose their identity as autonomous thoughts and emerge as the simple elements of intuition.

#### IF YOU HAVE STOPPED

If you have stopped  
At the boundary of knowledge,  
How will you be able to enter into  
The kingdom of wisdom?

(3717)

The concept that knowledge is limited and wisdom is unlimited is given a dramatic inner form by the poet's question. He invites us to approach the concept spatially by seeing the outermost limits of knowledge as a boundary line which one must cross in order to enter into the kingdom beyond that is the domain of wisdom. Notwithstanding the conceptual content of the poem, its total effect is an undifferentiated intuition.

The mantras of Sri Chinmoy are impregnated with concepts which belong to a realm of pure, abstract thought. In striving for the poetic expression of the immutable soul-facts, he has had to create a new thought-mould, a new way of envisioning reality. As a result, the poems have a greater conceptual content than if the poet had been nourished within a society in which spiritual values already flourished. Sri Chinmoy's

greatest task has been to express or make manifest a spiritual reality which has never been made fully articulate either in our times or in our language. The seers of ancient India repeated:

The Face of Truth is covered with a brilliant golden orb.  
Remove it, O Sun, so that I who am devoted to the Truth  
may behold the truth.

Across the centuries, the Truth-finder replies:

I SHALL TELL YOU WHERE GOD IS

I shall tell you where God is  
Only when you dare to believe wholeheartedly  
That God is eagerly waiting for you.

I shall tell you who God is  
Only when you dare to imagine  
That you have never loved  
Anyone else but God,  
Your other Self,  
Your highest Self,  
Your true Self.

(3766)

## VI.

### THE FORM OF THE POEMS

In order to carry his mantric utterances home to the soul, Sri Chinmoy has explored most of the poetic forms that exist in English literature. Basing his oeuvre on the single, highly compacted stanzaic unit, he spans the full gamut of man's communicative choices: prayer, question, lyric, hymn, invocation, equation, definition, conversation, aphorism, commandment and riddle. Beneath this multiplicity of forms we find him speaking always with the bare and powerful simplicity that characterises the native voice of intuition.

It is a microcosmic form of poetry. Each unit is structurally complete and independent of its neighbours. Its appearance on the page – so brief that the reader may take it in at a single glance – permits us to grasp the totality of individual poems in a way that is not possible with more extended works.

And yet, in spite of their formal independence, Sri Chinmoy's poems do reflect upon one another. As we focus on them in succession, we are filled with the conviction that a more structured patterning would have hindered their true purpose – and that is to keep pace with the way in which a man's perceptions move: one moment he may be overcome by despair, the next he may be inundated with hope; he may dream of realisation, strive for it and even win it but his experiences themselves are constantly shifting, combining, casting new shades of meaning on those that preceded them.

The poems of *Ten Thousand Flower-Flames* mirror this spontaneous growth towards perfection. The same themes recur again and again in cyclical form so that their angle of presentation varies with the spiritual maturity of the fictional speaking voice. A single theme will help us to follow the trajectory of the poet's thought through these many different outer forms. Let us take the theme of aspiration and consider some of its enumerations within the series as a whole. I believe it is helpful to see the various forms arranged along an axis where one extreme is the lyric with its pure, subjective utterance of feeling, and the other extreme is the aphorism with its broad, objective generality of statement. The former registers the central feelings of an individual; the latter expresses his seer-vision.

In the lyric poem a single emotion or state of being is dramatised. This emotion exists in the moment; it does not stand in need of supporting details or a locating context. It is itself, alone and without history:

#### A BROKEN WING

Aspiration-cry I have totally lost.

And now

Each fleeting breath of mine

Is a broken wing

In destruction-night.

(1008)

This poignant poem of despair is typical of the lyric in its exclusive attention to the condition of the speaker. It creates an entire world of suffering within its narrow confines. The poet's image of a wounded bird renders this feeling at its most intense, suggesting a deep inner hurt. The picture of a bird that can no longer fly implicitly calls before us the opposing picture of its naturally soaring flight. By way of negative definition, the poet suggests that this is the true nature of aspiration. The poet clarifies this upward movement of aspiration in another poem:

#### WHAT EACH KNOWS

My imagination knows

How to run fast.

My aspiration knows

How to fly high.

My realisation knows

How to become soon.

(1033)

As he affirms the essence of imagination, aspiration and realisation, the poet also discovers and analyses their differences. While this poem does not exhibit the same

emotional curve as the previous poem, it does present a concentrated patterning of experience by the individual speaker. Because it edges towards the kind of understanding which transcends emotion, the speaker is less clearly visible.

We can often recognise the lyrical mode by this presence of an individual speaker. Lyrics, by convention, “overhear” a speaker in his private self-communion. He does not acknowledge our presence or attempt to explain the fragments that fall to our ears. It is a sealed discourse, originating and ending in the self:

#### AT LONG LAST

At long last  
My unaspiring mind  
Has discovered the supreme truth  
That my life is full  
Of wasted opportunities.

(2237)

Because of the lyric’s isolation, however, it speaks in a pure, lucid voice. It is a voice that is not encumbered by personality. In the poem above, for example, the many wasted opportunities to which the speaker refers are deliberately excluded. This allows the “supreme truth” that he has found to be presented in solitary splendour.

It can be seen that although the lyric exhibits a high degree of privacy, it gains considerable generalising power by appearing out of context. While it does not address the reader directly, and indeed often seems to turn its back to him, the lyric may speak for him, articulating a state with which he can easily identify:

#### EACH TIME MY ASPIRATION ASCENDS

Each time my aspiration ascends  
I clearly see two things:  
The assurance of my inner revolution  
And the confidence of my outer resolution.

(6283)

In these poems, the audience remains concealed but the speaking voice itself, the lyric “I” that is the source of the poem, attains to a wider and wider universality. The poet is subsumed by the soul of humanity and the distinctness of his vision is caught up into this eternal life. Although these poems are engendered by a lyrical awareness, they cannot be contained within the individual consciousness. The “I” that brings them into being constantly dissolves into the many:

#### ONE CODE OF LIFE

There is but one philosophy:

God can be seen

With my aspiration-cry.

There is but one religion:

My life’s sunrise begins

With God’s Compassion-Beauty.

There is but one code of life:

I live to love God.

God lives to purify me and perfect me,

So that He can hoist His Victory-Banner

In the battlefield of my life.

(599)

The poet lifts us on the strong wing of his lyric hymn to the summits of awareness. He declares that his clear seeing is ours also. He endows us with vision.

At times, the universal soul sings through the poet reminding us of the lyric’s intimate connection with music:

#### A MOMENT OF INSPIRATION

A moment of inspiration

Powerfully feeds my aspiration-flames.

A moment of aspiration

Unmistakably expedites my realisation-sun.

(364)

Poems such as this one have an indefinable lightness of form and phrasing, an inner musical urge that imparts to the words an air of artless simplicity. The poet is transformed into minstrel and we, the listening audience, would seem to be spread at his feet entranced by his tales of the soul.

At times it is a rapturous or ecstatic mood that wells up in the sweetness of song:

#### THE SHRINE OF MY HEART

Not fear,

Not worry,

Not doubt,

But aspiration-flames

Will today adorn

The shrine of my heart.

(3201)

The poet's song surges up out of an inward gladness. The promise of "aspiration-flames" has given him abundant spiritual joy. The natural fulfilment of this joy is when the soul is engulfed by God:

#### MY CHOICE

Aspiration is my choice.

Dedication is my choice.

Perfection is my choice.

Therefore

God has allowed me

To hear His Voice

Here, there, all-where.

The poet's song celebrates his oneness with God. It is a response to the call of God's Voice. In this experience, the consciousness of I-hood is suspended and the poet's exalted state becomes ours also, by virtue of our identification with his liberated speaking voice.

The degree to which a writer may enlarge his personality in order to attain this very comprehensive humanity is frequently considered to be the mark of a great writer, especially in Indian literature. Rabindranath Tagore explains:

What then is revealed through literature? It is our wealth, our plenitude, that part of our being which overflows in excess of our actual needs, which has not been exhausted in the process of practical life. In such excess is humanity truly expressed. That man hungers is true, but that he is brave is still more true. The superman, the ideal toward which man is progressing, is being evolved by his literature, and such permanent ideal is being accumulated therein as a guide for each succeeding generation.

The great writer assimilates into his nature the thoughts and feelings of others and then reflects them in his work. At times, this may even lead to the illusion, as it has in the case of Shakespeare, that there is no unified "personality" of the writer behind his words. Sri Chinmoy, too, enjoys a multitude of different voices and forms but is confined by none of them. His personality, as such, ever eludes our grasp because it has been totally encompassed by the universal Self.

As readers and as seekers of the highest truth, we are bound to find ourselves mirrored in many of the poems. This is especially so at the lyric extreme of the axis, for the lyric most aptly expresses man's searching and struggling. Among the many kinds of lyric, none is so poignant as prayer – the solitary human voice reaching out to the Infinite, hoping for a response:

#### LET ME LIVE ON EARTH A LITTLE MORE

O my Boatman,  
Let me live on earth a little more.  
Let me succeed in bringing to the fore  
My long-lost aspiration-flames  
From the teeming clouds of years.

(573)

Prayer introduces a dramatic occasion for the poem and lends itself to a greater immediacy. The speaker is no longer avoiding direct communication and, even though the Boatman who is addressed remains invisible, there is a movement of the poem outwards and away from the self. Sri Chinmoy is particularly fond of extending this lyric form of address to abstract qualities, such as hope or faith, and to the fundamental divisions of man – body, vital, mind, heart and soul. The following two poems are representative of these invocations:

#### O COME BACK

O come back,  
My childhood faith-flowers.  
O come back,  
My adolescent aspiration-flames.

(2152)

This rhetorical address to the abstract qualities of faith and aspiration appears both graceful and natural in the poem. It uniquely conveys the passionate longing of the speaker for a revival of his spiritual life. A similar rhetorical device in the next poem allows the speaker to enrich and clarify his sense:

## TWO BEAUTIFUL GIFTS

O my mind's  
Thoughtless and speechless clouds,  
Two beautiful gifts  
Have I for you:  
    A secret imagination-smile  
        And  
    A sacred aspiration-cry.

(2105)

The poet is able to delineate the poverty of the mind without forsaking the spontaneity of direct speech. It is clear that in these examples the poet is moving away from the purely self-referential terms of the lyric. As the poet withdraws his projection of the "I", so the necessity of creating any fictional occasion for the poem is also removed. What remains is a greater directness of address to the reader, culminating in the aphoristic extreme at the far end of the axis:

## EVERY ASPIRATION-DAY

Every aspiration-day  
Begins with new possibilities.

Every aspiration-day  
Ends with new achievements.

(391)

Here we do not think of the poet at all. Nothing impedes our perfect communion with the words of the poem. Truth is expressed in its quintessence and we must somehow rise up to it.

In certain poems Sri Chinmoy provokes this imaginative and intuitive collaboration by structuring his poem as a gradually deepening meditation:

#### FOUR ELEVATORS

Doubt-elevator never works.

Fear-elevator seldom works.

Confidence-elevator occasionally works.

Aspiration-elevator sleeplessly works.

(527)

Through progressive contrast, the poem arrives at an understanding of the ceaseless power of aspiration. The pressure of the undisclosed final answer acts like a riddle to increase the sense of discovery that is implicit in the last line. It is interesting to note the construction of riddles such as this. The poet establishes a pattern in which a spiritual quality is described in terms of a fixed metaphor: an elevator. Re-arranged, the riddle would read: What is the elevator that always works? Each sentence within the poem poses a similar question in connection with the steady improvement of the "elevator". Although the answer to each question is coterminous with the actual posing of the question itself, each line forecasts the next, creating a flow of meaning. The ultimate "answer" resolves the riddle of the poem. In other poems the reader's active participation is engaged by a formal question and answer format:

#### A CAGED SUCCESS

What does a desire-life get?

A caged success.

What does an aspiration-life become?

An uncaged progress.

(350)

The poet dovetails his two answers together to show the interrelationship of desire and aspiration. A master of economy, he is able to indicate the strong contrast between the outer life of success and the inner life of progress using only the single pictorial image of a cage.

At times the poet angles his questions specifically towards the reader, “blocking” their inevitable answers so that they may be supplied by the reader from within the context of his own experience:

#### HOW CAN YOU SUCCEED?

How can you succeed  
With your heart's superficial  
Aspiration-flames?  
How can you?

How can you proceed  
With your life's artificial  
Dedication-drops?  
How can you?

(3579)

These are powerful warnings disguised as questions. Mere answers are not enough; what is required is a complete renewal of the spiritual life. If the reader admits the relevancy of the questions, then he must also admit the necessity for change. The poem strikes home when it becomes the agent of transformation.

There are also instances when the poet pointedly alerts the reader to the possible dangers or pitfalls of the spiritual life:

#### THE MIND-WALL

As long as you keep the mind-wall  
Of doubt and disbelief  
In your aspiration-life,  
You will always be carrying with you  
A heap of useless ashes.

(6170)

The crux of the poem is the vivid metaphor of doubt and disbelief as ashes. This metaphor heightens the impact of the poet's argument and makes it particularly memorable. In our mind's eye we see the wall, which had once upon a time been our fortress, begin to crumble into nothingness.

Alternatively, the poet may utilise this direct, penetrating speech to encourage the seeker and infuse him with a new will to persevere. These poems also precipitate an inner change in the reader:

#### DO NOT GIVE UP

Even if your aspiration-heart  
Needs constant repair,  
Do not give up.  
You will, without fail,  
Someday realise God.

Even if your dedication-life  
Needs constant repair,  
Do not give up.  
You will, without fail,  
Someday manifest God.

(4906)

The transfer of strength from poet to reader is almost tangible. There is a boundless assurance in these lines, which will act as a solace for many readers, both now and in years to come. The poet's immense poise and stability of faith are a magnet to wavering human thoughts and feelings. Attracted by the possibility of a personal experience of God countless souls will discover in the poems of *Ten Thousand Flower-Flames* a way to self-perfection that is not a collection of oft-heard truths but a coherent body of laws that comes fiery molten from the poet's own realisation. It is the force of original vision that gives these poems their tremendous impact

When the poet expresses his vision in its ultimately abstract form it emerges as aphorism. In aphorism, utmost purity, restraint and decorum combine to fuse wisdom

and eloquence. The few words that the poet selects are sanctified by their role as the carriers of his truth-message. It is an abbreviated, almost crystalline form of expression:

#### ASPIRATION LIVES

Aspiration lives  
In the vast land  
Of hero-promise.

(1874)

By casting aspiration as the central figure in an heroic context, the poet reveals its true stature. The poem turns on a radical simplicity in which there appear to be no “means”, for the poem itself is nothing but meaning. The exquisite appositeness of the poet’s words eliminates any verbosity. Among the range of Sri Chinmoy’s poems that concern themselves with aspiration, I believe the highest expression to be the following definitive aphorism:

#### THE ART OF AWAKENING

The art of awakening  
Is the aspiring man’s  
Eternal pilgrimage.

(1936)

Man’s quest for self-knowledge is enshrined in this single, one-lined strophe. Using only ten words or nineteen syllables the poet’s visionary sweep has encompassed the eternity of mankind’s spiritual evolution. Each soul advances towards the same supreme goal, the highest art of self-awakening. As we contemplate this ascent of humanity, the poem appears to open out on all sides, endless vistas of meaning unfold before us and we are caught up into the firmament of being and becoming.

All these things inhere in the poet. His is the seer-vision that realises all the stages of the universal soul in their eternal perspective and fixes them forever in the many-motioned, phosphorescent forms of *Ten Thousand Flower-Flames*.

## VII.

### FORGING A NEW LANGUAGE

Sri Chinmoy's chosen medium of expression is the English language. We are inclined to think of this language as an instrument of great richness and flexibility, having absorbed the influences of other languages and cultures for thousands of years. Yet if we enquire more closely into the nature of words that were progressively assimilated in this way, we shall find that they were in the main words of practical utility, words pertaining to commerce, manufacture, building and agriculture. The capacity of a language is judged by its power of expression and, since commercial interests have continued to remain paramount, the English language has proven to be a powerful communicative vehicle in this field.

The capacity of the English language to reveal the inner life of man, however, has never attained the same maturity. It is possible that this deficiency is due to the lack of any great spiritual text at its source. Where other languages, for example, distinguish between self-love, human love and ecstatic love for the Divine, English is unhappily forced to strain the one word to its limits; we speak of Heaven and hell, but the numerous higher and lower worlds that are adumbrated in the scriptures of India have received no attention – at best we refer to the first, second and third circles of hell; the physical mind, the intellectual mind and the intuitive mind are not differentiated and countless central spiritual qualities – such as purity, light and wisdom – are dependent upon single, much-used words to convey their entire meaning.

As a result of the absence of fine spiritual nuances in the language, there has arisen a relatively small class of visionary writers (including Shakespeare, Keats, Hopkins and Emily Dickinson) who, not content with the language as they find it, have tended in varying degrees to create their own medium of expression: Shakespeare speaks of “self-affairs” and “self-breath” while Hopkins, using a similar process, fused nouns, adjectives and verbs together to form unusual combinations, such as “heart-fleshed”, “clearest-served” and “hung-heavenward”.

In our present day, undoubtedly the greatest innovator in the language is Sri

Chinmoy. Having little need for the utilitarian words in which English abounds, his sole poetic material is the sparse array that it offers of words for spiritual essences. Moreover, because Sri Chinmoy's mother tongue is Bengali, with its immense spiritual refinement and subtlety, he has further encountered the difficulty of working with an instrument that is far less malleable to his vision, crudely formed in some areas, at times obdurate and blunt. It is hard to fully appreciate the peculiar plight of the spiritual poet who, returning from the heights of mystic vision, feels impelled to share the fruits of his experience with all men. Bringing news of an unknown realm he casts about him for correspondences from the known world that will make his experience more accessible, he strives for precision among the half-world of names and forms for his invisible but certain reality.

In order to exact a greater accuracy and expressiveness from the English language, Sri Chinmoy has developed a number of creative, but hitherto largely unexplored principles inherent in it. The first and foremost of these is the principal of compression. It emerges in the poetry as a technique both of style and of form.

Although, by the sum of its individual parts, *Ten Thousand Flower-Flames* may be considered an epic of the soul, it is fundamental to the poet's intuitive method that this vast body of wisdom be presented in fragments – as gleams, shafts of light, flames. We cannot seize so great a vision all at once but we can approach it by degrees, through myriads of separate illumining moments, until we have absorbed the whole of it and find ourselves in the presence of a powerful and wordless "seeing". The major activity of compression in the first instance, therefore, is to enclose his infinite vision within the bounds of numerous finite forms. Sri Chinmoy does this by telescoping inner experience into its major outlines and divesting it of any claim to individuality:

#### AGAINST MY HEART'S CLIMBING CRY

Against my heart's climbing cry  
No opposition can dare  
To have any permanency.

(4409)

This poem exists as a pure declaration of resolve, removed from the supportive context of personal history. This very act of penetration to the core of experience constitutes the poet's first act of reduction. Using only the barest components he establishes the positive upward movement of the aspiring heart and then sets into relation with it his refusal to admit any disruptive movement. What force exists in this negation! The choice of the verb "to dare" seems to quell even the faintest suggestion of any uprising of the negative forces. And because great energy is required to annihilate, this repudiation works retrospectively to confirm the solid strength of the heart. The poet's rearrangement of syntax so that "permanency" falls as the final word of the poem sustains this energy to the close and binds the first and third lines together with a slanted rhyme.

The poet's compression of his message into the miniature world of the stanza creates a tension between the extreme brevity of this form and the wide scope of this subject. Where this might have led to a certain enigmatic quality, however, the poet exercises perfect control of diction to produce a language of exemplary clarity. Even when the poems are replete with suggestions of mystery and wonder, there is no crowding of elements:

#### THE SUPERNAL MYSTERIES

If you can weather danger-clouds,  
Then the supernal mysteries  
That lie behind the terrestrial vagaries  
Will all be yours.

(3219)

In spite of the mystic vastness behind these sets of terms, they are neither tenuous nor obscure. Within the deliberately plain style of the poet's long reflective sentence they appear as part of a natural sequence.

In the same way that the poet invites us to follow the track of his meditative thought in the above poem, he frequently uses the stanzaic form to incarnate a spiritual process. In these poems the technique of compression is evident in the poet's careful patterning of words and phrases, his use of parallelism and internal linkings. The reader

is gradually led from one perception to another so that, at the close of the poem, he sees a blended succession of truths. It is an aesthetic of glimpses that resolves into an act of beholding:

#### EACH OPPORTUNITY

Intense longing creates opportunity.

Each opportunity

Is more than a blessing.

Indeed,

It is a miniature goal itself.

(147)

The poem opens with a thought-unit or aphorism. Existing as a fully formed and self-complete assertion it has no need of dialectic. It is a proposition about life which holds that the very emotion of longing generates a special force for change. The sudden delivery of this thought, its boldness of generalisation and strict economy of expression make it seem alive. It enters into us, provoking a reaction and urging us to verify its general terms from our own particularised experience. Its posture is candid and unapologetic. There is an engaging willingness on the part of the poet to set his realisation before the reader as lucidly as possible. In consequence, he is not afraid to risk exposure or criticism and he refuses to take refuge in any protective mediation of the bluntness of his expression. Rather, he intensifies and enriches it even further by building a second prepositional thrust onto the foundation of the first. In this second statement, the poet examines the nature of opportunity. It is a meditative act or a deepening inwardness and the syntax of the remainder of the poem mirrors this movement by a successive redefinition of the word "opportunity", first as a blessing and then as a goal unto itself. The poem folds back on itself because the seeds of this goal are contained in the "intense longing" with which the poem began.

The meditative procedure of this poem is not founded upon reasoned argument. It is not an intellectual investigation of the implications of any single word. Rather the poet so totally identifies with the feeling of intense longing that each new expansion of

meaning comes to him as an intuitive discovery.

The meditative poem is a progressive clearing of vision. It is not a stumbling or groping movement but a leaping and sparkling play. It is a “showing forth” of meaning. An insight into the action of the heart will invariably be followed by an insight into the action of the mind; conclusions about man are fused with conclusions about God; earth is complemented by Heaven, surrender by gratitude. The examples multiply interminably. In this world of vision no one element can ever be finally isolated. Each separate illumination spontaneously summons a host of others. Everything interrelates to form a single cohesive universe:

#### HIS ILLUMINATION-MIND

His illumination-mind

Soothes the four corners

Of the world

With the beauty

Of Eternity's moon.

His perfection-heart

Illumines the four corners

Of the world

With the power

Of Immortality's sun.

(5112)

The poet's meditation on the mind is amplified by a corresponding meditation on the heart. The original syntactical pattern of the first stanza carries over into the second and has the effect of creating isochronic units that operate, as in music, to prolong the effect of something within the subject reaching out to the four corners of the world.

Through parallelism the poet is able to hold a particular thought or figure before the reader's attention while he expands its entire frame of reference. In the following poem, for example, the poet presents four parallel meditations on beauty:

## BEAUTY

Tenderness lives with beauty.

Kindness lives in beauty.

Soulfulness houses beauty.

Oneness feeds beauty.

(288)

These four aphorisms map the poet's approach to beauty. He begins with the quality that co-exists with beauty and arrives at the quality that sustains beauty. The famous maxim "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder" is known to all, but in this poem the realisation of its truth comes as a fresh discovery. The extreme abbreviation of the poem has resulted in an ellipsis of all connectives, participles and adjectives. It is sufficient, not decorative. The life of the poem and its nexus of meaning are to be found in the fine distinctions between the verbs. Since the four aphorisms are presented in a way that highlights this verbal substitution, we immediately look to them to unlock the poem's meaning. Though these verbs are in no way complex, it is at once evident that their application is unusual for they belong ordinarily to the world of human society. By positioning them between various abstract qualities the poet calls on them to perform the subtle task of personifying these qualities. Beauty has its "society", he infers, wherein each member stands in a different relation to it. In this way the whole picture takes on a concrete colour.

The parallel technique is one of Sri Chinmoy's chief means of highlighting fine gradations of meaning. Through a series of approximations or variations he is able to reveal the inclusiveness of his vision:

## MY STEADY MIND

My steady mind sits and dreams

At the foot of my Lord's Perfection-Tree.

My ready heart climbs up and devours

My Lord's Satisfaction-Fruits.

(6608)

There is music in this intricate little poem which is a music not of sounds but of ideas. It is a music in which each note finds its answering pair, like two antiphonal voices rising in a song. The first couplet is the voice of the mind, the second that of the heart. The mind-song introduces the rhythm, the heart-song takes it up and fulfils it. In the mind-song, Sri Chinmoy vividly pictures the mind that has grown calm and steady through inward turning as a seeker meditating at the foot of a tree. Since the seeker who is plunged in contemplation withdraws his senses, he becomes in effect pure mind. The reality of the mind overrides everything else.

In the second couplet, the poet removes point for point the attributes of the mind and replaces them with those of the ready heart. Though the mind dreams of the highest perfection, it is the heart, he suggests, which shall win it: the mind touches the foot of the tree, then the heart scales the tree; the mind carries us into the presence of God but it is the heart which claims Him; the mind has the vision, the heart has the realisation. Here the supple parallel form enables the poet to present this movement as a continuous growth or expansion.

The parallel technique is used extensively by the poet to join two or more lines of thought. The poem becomes a centre of convergence for a number of perceptions. A further development of this linking technique may be found in Sri Chinmoy's use of compounds. Where the English language cannot supply names for spiritual experiences, or where these names have become lifeless, Sri Chinmoy draws two nouns together into a compound to form a new name. This is an especially effective method of overcoming the limitations of the language. Although this creative option is recognised within English, writers have not adopted it on a large scale. Indeed, the compounds forged by writers such as Gerard Manley Hopkins and Emily Dickinson have remained as their own idiosyncratic stamp and, although time may have lessened their air of strangeness, few have passed into the language as acceptable additions.

Sri Chinmoy's fusion of nouns into compounds, on the other hand, occurs so naturally and frequently that it is more a mode of thought than a conscious device. He seeks no unusual effect but simply a more adequate formulation of truth. In him we see the intently focused seer-vision impatient of the fewest words by which it must reveal

itself. He gathers his handful of key words and welds them together so that they become incandescent through compaction. The looser connectives are left aside and a new, dynamic energy pulsates between the two words thus combined:

YOU ARE INSEPARABLE

O my mind,  
You and cloud-clusters ,  
Are inseparable.

O my heart,  
You and moon-lustre  
Are inseparable.

O my soul,  
You and sun-rapture  
Are inseparable.

(1599)

This lyric address to the mind, heart and soul highlights the essence of each one. Again the parallel structure provides the poet with a framework which allows him to arrange his perceptions in an ascending scale. Within each colon there are only two variables: the object of the poet's address and its definitive compound. The choice of words for each compound is governed by the poem's own internal set of rules which require that each part of the poet's being is linked with a natural symbolic feature. In accordance with this pattern, the poet relates the mind to clouds, the heart to the moon and the soul to the sun. The symbolism in each case is traditional and unambiguous. It is with a sense of aptness and familiarity that we marry clouds with the mind for they capture the confusion of the mental sphere. Similarly, the moon signifies the beauty of the heart, while the sun stands for the wisdom of the soul. It is in the second half of each compound that the poet's language becomes most poignant and original. These descriptive nouns disclose the special quiddity of each symbol. In addition, their delicate rhyme gives the poem a rare beauty. The soft, feminine endings of "cluster", "lustre" and

“rapture” elevate the poem as a whole to the level of song. Elegantly spaced by the three separate stanzas, these compounds do not fail to thrill the reader.

Sri Chinmoy employs compounds of many different kinds. They are particularly effective in drawing out the actualising power of certain abstract concepts:

#### KILL THE DOUBT-SNAKE

Slowly and steadily  
Kill the doubt-snake  
That has encircled your searching mind  
And enveloped your crying heart.  
(5549)

The poem is a dramatic attempt to arouse the seeker to an awareness of the peril of succumbing to doubt. The strong element of danger to the seeker’s aspiration is met with an equivalent strength of diction and imagery. The unexpressed centre of the poem is a powerful concern on the part of the poet which manifests itself in the spontaneous figurative association of the “doubt-snake”. This taut compound, like a single spondaic foot inserted into the poem, is made conspicuous not only by its accentual gravity but also by the poet’s use of graphic supporting verbs. He counters the danger with deliberate violence, urging the seeker to “kill” the snake that twists and twines around his mind and heart. The emotional force of this picture is absolutely proper to the degree of danger that is represented.

It may be seen that the compound noun acts as a kind of syntactic shorthand. In the longer and more discursive forms of simile and metaphor (for example, “the snake of doubt” or “doubtlike snake”), one noun is made subordinate to the other, resulting in only a partial identification between the two. The compound form, however, yokes together two nuclei of equal status. The “doubt” subject is thus specifically characterised as a snake. It is an immediate doubling of the subject.

One of the greatest contributions made by compounds in these poems is in approaching God – His “Compassion-Flood”, “Justice-Height”, “Vision-Light” and so on. Rather than attempting to fix the nature of God, this doubling effect creates a fluidity of

meaning, a tacit accretion of whole new areas of reference. It is a form of expression which is in its very grain poetic:

EACH TIME I THINK OF HIM

Each time I think of Him,  
I become His Beauty's  
Perfection-Bird  
And His Duty's  
Satisfaction-Wings.

(6635)

This is an exquisite expression of the transfigured personality. Far from causing the poem to become monolithic, the two compounds tend to increase its impulse to soar. They infuse the reader with a subtle understanding of God as an infinite sky across which the bird of the soul sports freely. The compounds are not only illuminative but they cause the poem to sparkle with freshness. The simplest of words begins to glow with a new grandeur and sanctity.

The presence of compounds in the poems, the rich and revealing parallel structure and the compression of vision and expression within the microcosmic stanzaic form together create what might have been thought impossible in the English language – the effect of word-shrines. These are not born of the poet's struggle with language but of his victorious acceptance of it. If its powers have waned, he wakes them by using them with a greater dignity than they had previously known; if its words are limited, he gives them new resonance by calling on them to help him approach the highest summits of spiritual vision; where there is power, he preserves it; where there is energy, he harnesses it. All that was immature and undeveloped in the vocabulary of the inner life has now become mature and fully developed. In the poems of *Ten Thousand Flower-Flames* the English language achieves at last its true spiritual potential.

## VIII.

### EPIC OF THE SOUL

It is almost beyond words to describe the experience of reading these poems as they rushed from the poet's pen over the three and a half year period of their composition. First a handful of poems appeared, then hundreds and thousands, until finally a great ocean of spiritual wisdom lay before us. As we followed the soul in all its journeyings, it seemed that gradually all the world was being translated into words. They entered into us, reverberating in the stillness of our being and setting us afire with aspiration. What need did we have of other writers? In this one man we had uncovered the universe, we had discovered the modern epic of the soul.

In our times the word epic is often used in a loose sense simply to describe a longer poem, its opposite being the lyric or shorter poem. A true epic, however, is characterised not by its length but by the expansiveness of its vision. The epic imagination overflows the bounds of the lyric and seeks to fulfil itself in the larger rhythms of a work or book.

From the succession of moments in a man's life the lyric poet isolates an instant. His concern is to focus his undiluted attention on a particular emotion and he must realise it in words before it subsides back into the flow of moments. Even though the poet may leave aside details of history or circumstance, the distinctness of his vision is emphasised by the projection of a lyric "I" or fictional speaking voice. By convention, the lyric "I" does not address the reader directly. However, it may be so spacious and universal a voice that it reflects the universal soul. The lyrics of Sri Chinmoy express this width of sympathy. In them we see the individual human spirit mingling with the pervasive universal spirit:

I MUST NOT DELAY!

I must not delay!

My Lord Supreme Himself

Is eagerly waiting for me.

I must not fear!

My Lord Supreme Himself  
Is running speedily  
To my immediate rescue.  
I shall quench His earth-bound Thirst  
And He will feed my Heaven-free hunger.

(4447)

The poet has enlarged his personality to encompass a state of being in which the seeker eagerly anticipates his union with God.

The natural unit of lyric expression is the stanza. Within this brief form the writer may exhaust all the potentialities of the single moment. The lyric impression is transient and though it creates its own complete and autonomous world, there is ever the feeling that other states of being hover just beyond the confines of the poem. We cannot read a poem of desolation, for example, without immediately calling to mind its opposite:

#### I AM WAITING

What am I waiting for?  
I am waiting for  
A soulful smile from my heart  
To save my hopeless  
And goalless life.

(2243)

The seeds of the state that is to come are sown into the poem. Already we begin to envisage the changes that “a soulful smile from my heart” will bring and, at the close of the poem, we have already moved forward beyond the present moment.

The epic poet, by contrast, absorbs this multitude of separate moments into a vast and sweeping vision. He is concerned more to articulate the secret wellsprings of human nature than the perspective of the isolated individual. The epic poet is seized by the inspiration to go beyond himself in order to reveal the great currents of knowledge and thought that are latent in society at large. Where the lyric poet is the key actor in his own private drama, the epic poet is the invisible spokesman of the greater public life.

Lyrics are composed for the moment, whereas epics are written for eras.

In the light of this distinction, Sri Chinmoy's poetry is especially interesting for it seems not to belong wholly to either mode but to partake of the qualities of both and at the same time to rise above them. Clearly, the poet has a lyric disposition. Many of his poems are bound up with a musical or song-like urge, which finds its most natural voice in an artless simplicity of language and an elusive, meditative rhythm:

#### A MAP OF SILENCE

What do I see in my  
Heaven-free mind?  
I see a map  
Of midnight-silence  
With a stupendous  
Satisfaction-smile.

(801)

The life of a lyric poem is often an image or metaphor – in this case the “map of midnight silence” – which, like a doorway held ajar, hints at an infinite extension of meaning.

Sri Chinmoy's affinity with the lyric immediacy of presentation has led him to establish the short poem as his major literary vehicle. He rarely departs from this consecrated form. The succinctness of the poems increases their air of decorum and restraint while intuitively avoiding the excesses of a Romantic outpouring of sentiment. Sri Chinmoy's lyric voice is pure, lucid and intense; the lyric emotion itself is cleansed and free:

#### WHERE, O WHERE, IS GOD?

Where, O where, is God?  
Is He inside my fondness-hope?  
Where, O where, is God?  
Is He inside my oneness-scope?

(205)

There is no specific locating source for the poet's questions. He allows them to get unobstructed hold of the reader, to echo and re-echo within the reader's consciousness.

And yet one can easily see how such fundamental questioning might give birth to the epic, for it shows the first stirrings of man's awareness of the Divine. It is the starting point of conscious spiritual evolution, the great quest of man for truth and knowledge. To transform this lyric mode into an epic, the poet could extend the level of fictional projection and create a vast and colourful tableau of characters as a backdrop to the strivings of the epic hero. This is the nature of the *Odyssey*. It is a carefully detailed history of one representative human being whose large heroic actions reflect the constant alternation of divine potential and human limitation. To an extent, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* of India also fall into this category, for though they are written as accounts of the lives of two of India's major spiritual figures, their many stories have, with the passing of centuries, gained a legendary mythic character. In them the hero becomes a divinised human being.

Neither of these forms of epic corresponds to Sri Chinmoy's work. There is a direct correspondence, however, in the scale on which these ancient epics operate, in the power of the imagination to expand into multiple forms and create a total, coherent body of vision. The grandeur of conception which sustains the epic is Sri Chinmoy's also. The impulse of this vision is to fulfil itself through an extended pattern. It is here that the works of Sri Chinmoy depart from the traditional epic ideal for he has based his epic, *Ten Thousand Flower-Flames*, on the essentially discontinuous and self-complete unit of the stanza. In former times, the epic has developed out of the shorter episodic modes, such as lyric, aphorism and commandment. In *Ten Thousand Flower-Flames*, as in the *Vedas* of India, these shorter autonomous forms are the very instruments through which the poet reveals his epic vision.

The *Odyssey* and the *Iliad* are epics of journey; the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* are epics of vision, while the *Vedas* and *Ten Thousand Flower-Flames* are epics of revelation. In the first the soul searches, in the second the soul sees and in the last the soul becomes. Here, in the epic of revelation, we ourselves are that hero of great proportions, and the many hues of the poems relate all that has come and all that is still

to pass in the life of the soul. Shelley describes this epic role:

Poets, according to the circumstances of the age and nation in which they appeared, were called, in the earlier epochs of the world, legislators or prophets: a poet essentially comprises and unites both these characters. For he not only beholds intensely the present as it is, and discovers those laws according to which present things ought to be ordered, but he beholds the future in the present, and his thoughts are the germs of the flower and fruit of latest time.

Sri Chinmoy is at once the seer and the poet, studying the spiritual advances of mankind through the richness of his multi-faceted creation:

#### THE TRANSCENDENTAL CURE

Ignorance-mire is  
The universal sickness of humanity.  
When our heart starts singing  
    A new song,  
The song of aspiration-cry,  
Then the universal sickness  
Will be transformed into  
The transcendental cure.

(2795)

Here we witness the synthesis of the poet's visionary powers and his great shaping powers. Like the Vedic poets of ancient India, he has found that to study the perfection of man is to be always conscious of the highest ideals towards which man aspires. The seer-poet perceives clearly what is necessary to that perfection. It is not enough that he conveys this knowledge through his writings. We demand of the highest art that it shall change our lives by setting before us the path which we must follow in order to attain the goal:

#### EACH SERVICE-HEART

Each service-heart  
Sculptures the perfection-beauty  
Of tomorrow's self-transcending  
New world.

(1272)

The poet is the architect of this new world, establishing the pillars on which it shall be built, articulating its laws and codes. Men find in his works a solace and a refuge for their deepest beliefs and, above and beyond this inspiration, they discover a profound inspiration to strive for perfection in their own life. Mankind celebrates the advent of the seer-poet because of the promise that he bears, the promise of human fulfilment and divine satisfaction:

#### THE HARVEST OF SILENCE-DELIGHT

When the holy sages sing,  
My heart's mounting cry  
Collects the harvest of silence-delight.

(4921)

These are poems which we must reach up to with an inner movement of our understanding and, when we do so, their wisdom becomes our own; we "harvest" the bounty of the poet's spiritual plenitude. In an essay on "The Future Poetry", Sri Aurobindo amplifies this wordless interpenetration of the poet's nature with our own:

Neither the intelligence, the imagination nor the ear are the true recipients of the poetic delight, even as they are not its true creators; they are only its channel and instruments: the true creator, the true hearer is the soul. The more rapidly and transparently the rest do their work of transmission, the less they make of their separate claim to satisfaction, the more directly the

word reaches and sinks deep into the soul, the greater the poetry.

In such perfect identification of matter and form, the end is not distinct from the means. The beauty and grace inherent in the poetic expression are in absolute accordance with the wisdom they articulate. The perfection of diction and style come entirely as the spontaneous form of the poet's soul-view. Sri Chinmoy affirms the nature and the form of his creative vision in the following aphorisms:

#### GOD-DISCOVERY

Art

Is God-discovery.

God-discovery

Is life-mastery.

(1857)

#### IMITATION IS NOT ART

Imitation

Is not art.

Newness in fulness

Is art.

(1858)

Sri Chinmoy's vision of the progress of the soul is wholly original not because he is the first poet to deal with a spiritual theme but because it is shaped out of the force and fire of his own inner experience. Again and again as we read the poems we find ourselves in awe of this man who binds the universe together with his intuitive seeing. His epic vision is not a fixed and static formulation of truth, nor is it a carefully structured philosophy. It is an endless growth and expansion, a self-transcending motion which continually takes into itself new ideas, new states of being, new feelings. Each poem takes its place between what came before and what shall come after and, as we find ourselves in the poems, we are filled with the sense of having been somehow formed by

the same power which is manifesting itself through the words. The vision of the poet is akin to the original vision of the Creator – it dreams through us of mankind's perfect Perfection.

## IX.

### THE IMPACT OF THE WORK

Sri Chinmoy entered the New Year of 1983 midway through this great project. Over 5,000 poems had been completed in a period of 38 months. It was projected that he would finish the poems sometime in 1986. Sri Chinmoy surprised his readers, however, by forecasting that he would reach his goal by his birthday on August 27th, 1983 – just eight months hence. Sri Chinmoy made this announcement while travelling in Japan where originally, in 1979, the work may be said to have had its beginnings. This most recent visit by the poet seemed to cause an acceleration or resurgence of his creative impulse. In the three weeks from December 18th to January 7th, he composed 1500 poems for the series. Returning home to New York, he found that this tremendous surge of inspiration continued to motivate him. It was a seemingly inexhaustible fountain that knew no aridity or poverty of vision. Poems literally seemed to flow from his pen over the next few months.

By the end of June, with the goal in sight, Sri Chinmoy increased his poetic output to around fifty poems per day and it was calculated that he would finish by July 13th, fully six weeks ahead of his own deadline. Working far beyond all expectation, however, the poet declared on July 2nd that only ten more poems were remaining to bring *Ten Thousand Flower-Flames* to a close. The following day, on July 3rd, he revealed that he had written these final ten during the night, the last being composed at 2:19 a.m. This ultimate poem stands as a supreme tribute to the divine power of inspiration that descended and acted in and through the poet:

#### TEN THOUSAND FLOWER-FLAMES

O my sound-life!  
I love you  
Because you are  
Powerful.

O my silence-life!  
I need you  
Because you are  
Beautiful.

O my Beloved Supreme!  
I at once love You  
And need You  
Because Your Eye is my  
Dream-Boat,  
Your Life is my  
Silver Journey  
And Your Heart is my  
Golden Shore.

O my Beloved Supreme Absolute!  
In me is Your Eternity's Transcendental Cry,  
For me is Your Infinity's Immortal Smile.

(10,000)

The journey's marathon was complete. The garland of "flaming flower-poems" had been strung together and now the poet was laying it at the Feet of the Supreme in the same spirit of humble and dedicated service with which he had commenced the work. Poem number 10,000 is a hymn of love for the One who as the Doer had written these words through him and who as the Enjoyer was now receiving them back. It is a song of praise, sung at the point of departure, when the words of the poet are winging beyond speech and sound to their eternal silence-home. It is the mergence of the self in God: the poet has returned from across the vast sea of human life to the Golden Shore of the Supreme. In his poems he has played the role of the seeker, whose cry for self-knowledge is his constant companion, and of the Supreme who smilingly offers man the immortal wisdom-fruits. He has grasped the formless within the bounds of form, the infinite in the finite, the universal in the particular. Above all, he has communicated the full measure of his intuitive realisation. The great vision that was within him, so immense that it seemed

scarcely possible one man could contain it, has come forth. How shall men receive it? What shall be the extent of its impact in our time and in after ages?

We belong to the first generation of readers of *Ten Thousand Flower-Flames*. There is no comfortable distance between us and the poems, as in the case of the classics. Sri Chinmoy's place in English literature is not yet an accomplished fact. No criteria of taste have been established to provide a context with which to evaluate the poems. It is a rare and challenging position to find ourselves suddenly engulfed by the great tidal flow of a new work, having only our immediate impressions to guide us. We can enjoy the unique freedom of being able to commune with the poems directly. Moreover, because we live at the same period of history as the poet, it is possible to appreciate more keenly this efflorescence of the soul without recourse to an intermediary.

Firstly, let us consider the times which have given rise to this work. As the loss of spiritual faith became more widespread in the early part of our century, it provoked a profound reaction. Creative writers made an art of despair, negativity and disillusion. They formulated wholly interiorised private worlds of feeling. These worlds were entirely discrete, containing nothing which might bind them to other men or hint at any so-called community of belief. In consequence, language became more and more dislocated, mirroring the irregular rhythms of consciousness.

As the century has progressed, however, this despair, which was in fact another form of man's searching, has no longer occasioned the same reaction. Over a period of time, the loss of spiritual faith has virtually become a mode of living. It has ceased even to be a cause of despair. The fact that the great spiritual texts, which were in former times the hearthstone of life, have gradually slipped from common currency, has passed almost without notice. To many modern readers they seem to represent ancient thought modes couched in ancient terms and having no bearing on the pulse of everyday life.

If we look at this decline in spirituality from a vaster perspective, we might say that one cycle has reached its nadir. It has been nearly completely withdrawn. Scriptures have been reduced to words, words have faded into ideas and ideas have dissolved back into formlessness. Everything is in suspension. Outwardly modern man continues his round of life but the great spiritual forces in the universe have receded and are dormant. The cycle must be unwound again. Unconsciously mankind waits for

the spiritual laws to impress themselves once more on the life plane of humanity, for those laws to be shaped into words and elevated to sacred speech. In whom shall this new flowering of inspired speech be felt? Which man may own sufficient power of vision to stand apart in the certainty of his faith and reveal the universal truths that unite all men?

I believe that man to be Sri Chinmoy. In him we shall find a seer-poet able to encompass all that the Vedic sages of the past strove to utter, a man whose vision is ample enough to capture the rich and varied inner life, a poet to capture the ascent of the soul and its consummation in God and a prophet to say how it shall be for all men hereafter. Such is Sri Chinmoy – the timely man, the reconciler, the master spiritual poet of our age.

It is impossible to imagine a spirit better prepared in advance for this great office than Sri Chinmoy. For the past twenty-six years, through his poetry, his music and his art, he has been speaking to the soul of man in a voice of direction and authority. In each field he has attained the classic heights of purest revelation. Nothing in him is bound by culture, time or place. He has untied the knot of the senses, of the personality and of the intellect, of all that is limited and finite and has realised the eternal life of the soul. In each form of artistic expression this realisation has been linked with a powerful and abundant expression. In the field of art, Sri Chinmoy has created over 135,000 mystical paintings. These are images from the inner world of consciousness whose lambent energy bypasses our intellectual appreciation in order to touch our souls directly. In a similar way, Sri Chinmoy has composed musical pieces that seem to capture the elusive harmonies of the soul. Finally, in over seven hundred and fifty books of varying literary forms such as poetry, drama and short story, the poet has endeavoured to unveil the quintessence of truth in all things.

*Ten Thousand Flower-Flames* is the crown of these creative manifestations. It is Sri Chinmoy's most comprehensive revelation of truth and his most sustained work. It is a work, which maybe aptly described as "world literature". No narrowness, limitation or distortion cling to it. Here the banner of the soul is once more raised aloft. It flies freely before the eyes of the world – all may see it, all may know it, all may own it:

## TWO SUPREME COMMITMENTS

Two supreme commitments

I have made:

I shall carry my heart to Heaven

To spread humanity's cry of helplessness.

I shall bring down my soul to earth

To spread divinity's light of fulness.

(5098)

This world literature has carved for itself an appropriate universal language that is characterised above all else by its simplicity and power. The simplicity is that which lies on the far side of spiritual experience when each word is suffused with new meaning and freshness; the power is the poet's ability to confer upon these words the full measure of his vision and thereby elevate them into the realm of sacred speech or mantra. The voice that emerges is the spontaneous voice of the inner being:

## MY SOUL SINGS

To unfold the heart-flower

Of my life,

Every day my soul sings

A sun-song to my Beloved Supreme.

(5651)

The "sun-songs" of *Ten Thousand Flower-Flames* make their appeal not to our ears only, nor merely to our imagination. They steer a course directly to our soul. The more rapidly they can do this, the more they become what Sri Aurobindo referred to as "a scarcely felt vaulting board for a leap into the infinite." Unlike many other modern poets, Sri Chinmoy will not be halted at the level of perfect technique. Nor does he fasten our attention exclusively on the object or idea. Beyond these lies the great soul-vision and through countless tiny motions – flower upon flower, flame upon flame – we draw near to it and realise it in all its mystery:

### TO SEE YOUR GOAL

To see your goal  
Far in advance,  
You must devotedly sit  
    On the wings  
Of your vision-soul.

(1478)

The vision of the poet inspirits man; it awakens the eternal hunger in the depth of each human heart; like Indra's thunderbolt, it shakes the very roots of ignorance-tree, dispelling darkness and upholding truth:

### IN JUST A TWINKLING

In just a twinkling of its vision-eye,  
The world-soul has made  
The world-body beautiful.

(5066)

The world-soul operating through the poet paints the universe in ever-new and ever-bright colours. It is the richness of the inner vision that makes the outer world glow. When the whole of society is permeated by the soul-vision, then shall it reach the acme of perfection-the perfect flowering of the human spirit:

### THE SONG OF PERFECTION

If your heart really loves  
The mount of vision,  
Then your life can easily,  
Soulfully and satisfactorily  
Sing the song of perfection.

(6282)

Sri Chinmoy places this perfection in an inner condition. It is the soul's endless growth in perfection that provides the epic substance for *Ten Thousand Flower-Flames*.

Earlier this century, in his essay entitled "The Future Poetry", Sri Aurobindo hailed the coming of the new age of the spirit:

Greatest of all is the promise of the age that is coming, if it fulfils its possibilities; for it is an age in which all the worlds are beginning to open to man's gaze and invite his experience, and in all he is near to the revelation of the Spirit of which they are, as we choose, the veils, the significant forms and symbols or else the transparent raiment.

The spirit of intellectual enquiry that reigned in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries may be seen as a necessary prelude to this wider cosmic sense of the universe for, having pursued the capacity of the intellect to its limit, man is now poised before a new and significant advance. He is faced with the option of going beyond the bounds of the mind to be nourished by the revelations of intuition. Sri Aurobindo felt that this exceeding of the mind would be given its greatest impetus by the genius of a single poet who, containing within himself the largest vision of man and God, would appear among us as the seer-poet, the fiery giver of the word.

As we contemplate the poems of *Ten Thousand Flower-Flames*, memories of that prediction revive within us, for this great mass of poems has suddenly arrived among us, fully-formed, bearing on its breast the message of the soul. The personality of the poet is nowhere to be found and the only reference to things external to the soul is contained in the initial poem, which describes the genesis of the work. Rather it is in the consciousness that is diffused throughout the poems that we find our seer-poet, in his enlarged understanding of the universe and in the radiance this vision sheds on all forms of language and thought that he adopts as instrument.

*Ten Thousand Flower-Flames* is simplicity. It is a quality not only of clear and lucid expression but also of vision. There is a genuine lack of complexity in Sri Chinmoy's soul-view. He is that rare combination of the man who is both wise and

simple.

*Ten Thousand Flower-Flames* is abundance. The creation of manifold forms is an index of the profound nature of the poet's vision. It operates on the largest possible scale to establish the universe of the soul.

*Ten Thousand Flower-Flames* is universality. The poet expands his personality so that it may house the universal soul. Each subtle spiritual experience of this universal soul raises a corresponding vibration in the hearts of all men.

*Ten Thousand Flower-Flames* is revelation. For the poet, his creation is a means of expressing an inner wisdom, which exists independently of the poem. *Satya* and *Rita*, eternal Truth and eternal Law, realisation and revelation, are as important to Sri Chinmoy's work as they were to the Vedas of ancient India. It is revelation, or the fertilisation of the soul, which necessitates art.

*Ten Thousand Flower-Flames* is mantra. It is the highest form of poetry, the spontaneous voice of the soul. It transforms words into sacred vehicles capable of kindling the spark of aspiration in man. It is *Sruti*, the divine Word that came vibrating out of the Infinite to the one who could receive it. The poet is but an instrument of the Divine. For himself he claims nothing, for his Beloved Supreme Absolute he claims everything:

In me is Your Eternity's Transcendental Cry,  
For me is Your Infinity's Immortal Smile.

*Ten Thousand Flower-Flames* fulfils in amplitude the promise of the future poetry. Through this monumental epic work, the poet has gone further than any other poet in articulating the song of the soul:

#### THE SONG OF BEAUTY

The future poets  
Shall sing only one song:  
The song of beauty  
Inside the simplicity-heart

Of a profundity-soul.

(4622)

Our world has thirsted for its poet. Men love not the muse of poetry as before, the suggestive power of many words has been exhausted and the greatest themes all but forgotten. But the rarest combination of high intuitive spiritual vision and a powerful expressiveness has appeared in our times to offer man a new vision of himself. Thus, it is with the joy of a herald that I proclaim Sri Chinmoy the master poet of our age.

