

Presented at the Mid-Atlantic Regional Meeting of the American Academy of Religion, Panel on Religion and Literature, March 1985.

WORLD-STORY AND SOUL-STORY:

NARRATIVE IN THE ENGLISH POETRY OF SRI CHINMOY

The "Hindu renaissance" of nineteenth and twentieth-century Bengal has given rise to a number of notable literary figures writing in both Bengali and English. Among these are the novelist and essayist Bankim Chandra Chatterji (1838-1894), Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), Nobel Laureate in 1913, and the yogin, theologian and poet Sri Aurobindo (1872-1950). Religious themes are prominent in much of their work. Bankim's novel Ānandamath fanned the flames of Hindu nationalism. Rabindranath's poem-cycle Gitāñjali is pervaded by the ethos and imagery of earlier Bengali poetry in the tradition of Krishna bhakti or devotion. Sri Aurobindo's epic Savitri, based on a story from the Mahābhārata, is his spiritual autobiography. This essay interprets the English poetry of Sri Chinmoy (1931-) as a vehicle of religious statement emerging from the Bengal tradition of Neo-Vedānta, with special concern for his use of narrative as a mode of poetic expression which plays a special role in making that statement.

The importance of narrative in religious discourse is widely recognized among Christian theologians, who have paid enough attention to it in the last fifteen years or

so to make the discussion an industry in the academy. Some scholars have used the tools of literary criticism to more

successfully interpret Scriptural narrative, once a keener awareness of the extraordinary importance of stories in the Bible, and in religion in general, had taken hold. Others, doing constructive work and engaged in more philosophically oriented considerations, have argued that only narrative can satisfactorily display (if anything can) the meaning of religious life -- which must be "a life," lived through time, that is to say, a biography. In ethics, theologians such as Stanley Hauerwas have concluded that narrative is indispensable to give an adequate explanation on intentional action, and to provide the ways we need of talking about our own lives and the life of Jesus or other exemplary figures.

The literature on the subject is very extensive and it is no part of my plan to survey it here. What I would like to do is to utilize what I have learned from colleagues who are Christian theologians in the application of the resources of narrative theology to a subject from another great tradition. If what they are saying about stories is true, then this experiment should work, although the texts I will interpret do not fall easily into any of the established genres of 'narrative' such as biography, autobiography, parable, chronicle, or myth.

But what, after all, is 'narrative'? To 'narrate', my dictionary says, is "to tell a story." 'Narration' is the act or process of the telling, and a 'narrative' is then a told-story -- not just 'story' as such or abstractly, but one which in fact is or has been told in some particular

way or other, on some particular occasion or other.

This definition enables us to make use of the analysis of the 'narrative' in terms of its 'what' and its 'how.' The 'what' is the 'story'. The 'story' may be exhibited by taking the events in the narrative and placing them in chronological order. If we then ask "What is 'story'?" we could answer that it is an account of events, and events are happenings in time. A story embraces a number of events and integrates them into a significant unity. The story is the heart of the narrative; without it, no narrative can be, no narration can take place. One story may be told at different times and in different ways; the story is manifested in and through individual narratives.

The how of the narrative is the way the story is presented: the basic elements of story, which are plot, protagonist and setting, are constituted through the use of some of the many possible devices and techniques of narrative discourse and construction, such as "point of view", rhetoric, character development, conflict resolution, pace, and so on.

Narrative, then, is important because stories are important, and stories are events-in-time brought together into a meaningful whole. Some have contended that the essential form of human experience is itself narrative, or temporally sequential, and that stories may be the most basic ways of creating structures of meaning by which we live.

Certain stories have a special metaphysical function: they depict a world in terms of which individual events must occur and individual stories must be told. In an article widely regarded as a classic on this subject, Stephen Crites calls this kind of story 'sacred.' As he puts it, certain narratives delineate

...that world, that phenomenological mundus, which defines the objective horizon of a particular form of consciousness. In order to be told, a story must be set within a world...We speak of a universe of discourse, and this too has its limiting firmament above and below, beyond which nothing can be conceived to happen. [Sacred story] forms the very consciousness that projects a total world horizon, and therefore forms the intentions by which actions are projected into that world...the story itself creates a world² of consciousness and a self that is oriented to it.

Crites adds that "the meaning of happiness and horror is derived...from our very conception of the story itself,"³ that is, values are implied by the very nature of "the way things in sheer actuality are," in Clifford Geertz's phrase. The way human beings should live is a way of being appropriate to the nature of the world, as a community's most fundamental stories show it to be.⁴ In this essay I will try to show how this close relationship between values and world view takes shape in the poetry of Sri Chinmoy.

The sacred story which delimits his universe of meaning is India's primordial story of the world's creation from the being of God, and the long progress of the person through many lifetimes to a goal of final perfection. The origins of this cosmic and personal story lie well back in the first millenium B.C.E., if not even earlier. The

story informs the vast body of Indian literature, both Sanskrit and vernacular, throughout its variety of genres. Modern Indian writers calling upon this ancient account of world and self assert a self-conscious continuity of Hindu tradition, and their commitment to its renewal through affirmation of the teachings of its roots scriptures. For Bengal Neo-Vedānta, these are primarily the Upaniṣads, the Bhagavad Gītā, and the two great epics, the Mahābhārata and the Ramāyāna.

In Sri Chinmoy's writings, the cosmology which is the objective background of personal experience, or serves as the stage for any individual drama, is hierarchical and also dynamic or evolving.⁵ Its 'levels' of existence range from the most unconscious and inert to the most conscious and active, and are both macrocosmic and personal. The levels are 'body' or matter, 'vital' or life energy, including emotion, 'mind' or rationality, 'heart' or the faculty⁶ of compassion and 'oneness,' and 'soul,' the core being called in Samskrit the jīvātman or embodied self, which both represents and participates in the reality of God. As the entire cosmos progresses, individual souls pass through a series of different forms in successive lifetimes (thus personal history is greatly expanded, even becoming coextensive with cosmic history). The soul is the continuing experiencer in this long passage, while the other parts of the person change from birth to birth. As the 'lower' parts accept the transforming influence of the

'higher,' the soul will more and more assume its proper role as the leader of the personality's different members, which will then cooperate in the 'manifestation' of the soul's innate divinity. This soul-story is part of the world-story in which a temporal process metamorphosizes relations within the cosmological structure.

The regnant norm of this world view is progress. More fully, it is progress as development through time towards perfection, which is defined as a plenitude of positive or 'divine' qualities: beauty, love, joy, peace, freedom, power, and others. God both has and is an unlimited fulness of all such attributes. In such a scheme, it is almost impossible to understand value without narrative. Looking to greater good, given the story, means looking to the future. The person strives for greater good in going 'forward,' as the universe itself is changing, going forward to a more complete manifestation of the divine nature of its creator. "Happiness" is progress; "horror" is regress.

The poetry in which Sri Chinmoy expresses this world view requires some introduction.⁷ It is distinctive in its combination of aphorism and lyric; the "poetry of statement," as Vidagdha Meredith Bennett calls it, and expressions of intense inner experience by an "anonymous lyric-I" through which the poet speaks as a universalized subject without the specifics of personal history found in poetry of a more confessional style. It is beyond the scope of

this study to discuss the poet's particular ways of using language, for example, the role of metaphor in his creation of his own religious and poetic vocabulary, but perhaps some sense of this may be derived from the poems cited in what follows. Sri Chinmoy's English poems, all short, number in the thousands, and are almost all part of collections of several hundred, one thousand or more poems.⁸ The great number of individual poems is accounted for by the fact that his poetry is essentially an oral, improvised art. As Bennett says, "The poems are created whole. They are the expressions of the whole man at the moment of composition...the moment of composition coincides with the performance of the poem."⁹ Bennett adds that this poetic form, while freeing the poet from the labor of revisions, makes its own considerable demands. Among these is the repetition of composition/performance for the mastery of technique and development of themes. It is this repetition which produces poems in such large numbers.

While no individual poem, group of poems or prose work exposes in systematic or treatise-like fashion the content of Sri Chinmoy's vision, the majority of the poems are best understood through contextualization in the overall cosmic and personal story which can be drawn out from the entire work. Poems are often mini-narratives, relating a sub-story which constitutes some part of the great story delineated above.

We might look to begin with at poems dealing with the first event in the central story of the soul's journey: its descent from its own world, or 'heaven,' and its entry into this world, the "earth-arena." For example, this song:

Into the world of beauty's flame,
Into the world of offering's game,
Into the world of lustre-flood
I came, I came, my existence came.¹⁰

The conceptual weight of the poem is carried mostly by the line "Into the world of offering's game," which conveys the idea of "entry" into a specific realm or world, here a world of beauty and blissful play, but also a world of gain and loss, of sacrifice -- "offering's game." The song expresses the delight of the newborn soul and also hints at the strivings which lie ahead. It recalls the ecstatic lines of Thomas Traherne, "How like an angel I came down! How bright are all things here!"¹¹ or those of Blake:

"I have no name:
I am but two days old."
What shall I call thee?
"I happy am,
Joy is my name."
Sweet joy befall thee!¹¹

In an entirely different mood the poet says:

Nothing really exciting happened
When I fell down from Heaven.
I just fell down.

Nothing really exciting happened
When I climbed up to the skies.
I just climbed up.

Nothing really exciting happened
When I starved with darkness.
I just starved.

Nothing really exciting happened
When I dined with Light.
I just dined. 13

Initial entry into the world, struggle and the achievement of transformation, compassionated identification with "darkness," and the enjoyment of "light" in the repossession of "Heaven" are a series of episodes all synopsized here in a compact and comprehensive single narrative.

Temporal sequence is stressed here by the reiteration of "when" within a larger, more important device frequently used by Sri Chinmoy for a number of puposes. This is the repetition of sentences of parallel form, with sequential changes of important words at certain key positions. Often the device functions as a narrative technique, with the repeated whole units as "chapters" which unfold the story.

Sometimes in narrative the poet instead makes a simple contrast between a past state and a present one by saying, "There was a time...but now..." For example, "There was a time when I stumbled and stumbled,/But now I only climb beyond,"¹⁴ or "There was a time when I loved/The fantastic fabrics of the mind.../But now a lucid illumination steals inot my heart."¹⁵ Occasionally the poet abandons these more measured presentations, and offers us the story of pilgrim as hero, with headlong momentum:

Yes, I was deported
To a distant
Land uncharted
By the eyeless hunger of ignorance-sea.
A wait-and-see attitude
Failed
To breathe within my

Reality's throes.
Burning with impatience-noon
My dauntless vital-horse
Freed me from the sea
Of ignorance unplumbed...¹⁶

The story of the soul's journey climaxes with the meeting between the soul and God. Sri Chinmoy's poem's on this subject would provide ample material for a separate essay. In connection with narrative, one might observe that poems on the soul's consummating encounter with the divine may describe only the experience itself, or may lead up to the final fulfilment by a series of steps. Parallel repetitions are likely to be used in the second kind of account. For example:

When I sat at God's Feet,
What happened?
He blessed me with His Infinite
Compassion-Light.

When I shook hands with God,
What happened?
He gave me His infinite Love
Freely to use.

When I embraced God,
What happened?
I totally forgot
That I was a lump of clay.¹⁷

The parallel pattern is strictly maintained until the last two lines, where the poet (as he often does) breaks it. Through the first two lines of the third verse the pattern is held, in the three increasingly intimate contacts with God. But on the third occasion, God does not once more give a gift. Something quite different happens. But just what? The need to ponder the answer to the story-

teller's final question is underscored by the change in the last unit of the narrative sequence.

A second example of a poem on God-union describes the experience without any preliminary stages. Here again parallelism is used, but there is no aphorism-like brevity to the verses. The structure is still one of precise correspondence, but elaborate and spacious. The rhythm is not one of ascending steps, or forward march, but one of the "dancing" the poem mentions.

Centuries of my totally
Forgotten hopes
Are reborn.
Therefore
I am smiling
Today.
My God is the witness;
My despair is the witness.

Centuries of my unconsciously
Sealed inner treasures
Are unsealed.
Therefore
I am dancing
Today.
My God is the witness;
My inner penury is the witness.¹⁸

It is sometimes held that in "mystical experience," time is transcended. Mircea Eliade has remarked that Indian spirituality seeks "a road that issues upon a transhistorical and a temporal plane."¹⁹ But in this ecstasy, the temporality of experience is intrinsic. The wasteland of past centuries is surveyed from within the joy of today. Hopes that were forgotten are now remembered, and despair which has been transcended is also recalled.

The parallel repetition pattern makes possible a combination of formal stability and strong, measured rhythm with an orderly explication of meaning. Not only is it an important narrative device, as we have seen, but it has another special affinity with the content of the poems and the world view they assume. The parallel repetitions mirror the hierarchical nature of reality, and provide a convenient format for talking about it. Sri Chinmoy has written numerous poems (as much as one-tenth of certain collections) on the 'levels' or states of existence. These poems often combine an enumeration of parts of the person -- body, vital, mind, heart, soul -- with a dramatic temporal sequence which associates enumeration and narration in a story of transformation. For example:

When the vital retires,
The mind rises.

When the mind retires,
The heart rises.

When the heart aspires,
The soul rises.

When the body aspires,
God rises. 20

In spite of its brevity, this poem is conceptually complex. The sequence begins not with "body," but with the "vital," the second member of the list, or second 'level' in the hierarchy. The four parallel units are divided into two symmetrical pairs by the use of two first verbs, "retires" and "aspires." The poet is stating that in the process

of transformation, the relationships vital-mind and mind-heart work differently from heart-soul and body-God. But the last unit of the poem, by bringing God into the picture, breaks the logical pattern (if not the verbal one) of the progression a second time, and much more radically. A trap is sprung on the reader who expected to hear more about the parts of the person, but is instead left to consider the connection of "the body aspires" and "God rises," to say nothing of the meaning of these two phrases in themselves. The poem illustrates the great flexibility of the parallel repetition form. We have here the already familiar repetition of "When," and the "chapter" format, but also see how in the last step of the succession the poet makes a substantial change in the pattern he has defined, and in this surprise drives his point home.

In spite of the importance of hierarchy, Sri Chinmoy very often makes use instead of a bi-polar ontological picture, in which the terms of the dyad are, generally speaking, the divine/transcendent/unmanifest and the human/universal/manifest. These two poles are represented by a number of favorite paired terms, such as "heaven-earth," "silence-sound," beauty-duty," "vision-reality," or "God-man." Divine reality 'descends' into earthly or human reality and is concealed. 'Earth' and 'man' then work to draw out this immanent 'higher' reality, expediting both general and individual evolution towards perfection.

The following poem gives a highly condensed account of the poet's ontology in terms of bipolarity and progress. In this case the progress is cosmic rather than personal.

Sound is the universality
Of the created universe.

Silence is the universality
Of the unborn universe.

Love is the universality
Of the progressive universe.

Delight is the universality
Of the deathless universe. 21

The first two verse require no gloss if the dyadic ontological pattern is known. The third verse states that love impels all evolution. The fourth refers implicitly to the idea that the direction of transformation is towards deathlessness or 'immortality,' and connects this state with 'delight.' This calls for some explanation. The relation between 'delight' and 'immortality' is occasionally found in Sri Chinmoy's writings, and has to do with his triadic description of God's nature as "infinity, eternity and immortality." This formulation is equivalent to the Vedāntic one of "reality, consciousness and bliss" (Sanskrit sat-cit-ānanda, in traditional order). In the equivalence, 'eternity' is associated with 'reality' (sat), 'infinity' with 'consciousness' (cit), and 'immortality' with 'delight' (ānanda). The statement of ontological and theological principles contained in these four aphorisms would have to be unpacked at some length to do justice to its richness. Sri Chinmoy's

use of this form of expression for this kind of statement is deliberately reminiscent of the sūtra-s or aphorisms of classical Indian philosophy, used to make abbreviated exposition of the tenets of a doctrinal system.

This last example has served as a reminder that the "progressive universe" is that "total world horizon" in terms of which the consciousness and actions of finite subjects must be formed. Each of the poems discussed reflects the basic norm of progress and embodies narrative qualities without which this fundamental value cannot be displayed as a way of understanding and intending life in the world. The kind of narrative found in these poems does not place them in a common narrative genre, but could perhaps best be characterized as a kind of autobiographical record which, while intensely personal, is not historically individualized by external detail, but rather universalized through interiorization and essentialization. It is a tale told by Everyman, or every-soul, who assumes the voice and point of view of the struggling aspirant or the sage or seer, as appropriate to the part(s) of the journey a poem represents and the insight to be imparted. Aphoristic or "statement" dimensions of the poems communicate a sense of how things are objectively ordered within the projected world, and in this world the first-person story of the "anonymous lyric-I" is then situated. The poetic medium

is here uniquely contrived for the sacred narration of world-story and soul-story.

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Notes

1. See, for example, Michael Goldberg, Theology and Narrative: A Critical Introduction (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1982), and George Stroup, "Narrative Theology: A Bibliographical Critique," Theology Today, Volume 33 (July 1975), pp. 133-143.
2. Stephen Crites, "The Narrative Quality of Experience," Journal of The American Academy of Religion, Volume 39 (September 1971), pp. 291-311.
3. Crites. p. 307.
4. For this phrase and a discussion of the relation between world view and value as "ethos," see Clifford Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," and "Ethos, World View, and The Analysis of Sacred Symbols," in The Interpretation of Cultures (New York: Basic Books, 1973).
5. The major systematic presentation of this Neo-Vedāntic cosmology is found in the works of Sri Aurobindo, especially The Life Divine (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1977). The summary of Sri Chinmoy's account is based on a survey of his prose writings. The cosmology is in general philosophically informal and related to traditional language found as early as the Upaniṣads (cf. Taittirīya Upaniṣad 2.1-9). No attempt is made here to "cash out" this vision or construe it in contemporary philosophical terms.
6. The word 'faculty' is used reluctantly here, as a misleading reification of what is meant by "heart" is not intended. The word 'mode' or some other term might be as good or better.

Notes (continued)

7. I am indebted in my interpretation of the poetry to Meredith Bennett, Simplicity and Power: The Poetry of Sri Chinmoy, doctoral dissertation, University of Melbourne, 1981.

8. The major collections are, in chronological order:

The Dance of Life, Parts 1-20 (1,000 poems), 1973.

The Wings of Light, Parts 1-20 (1,000 poems), 1974.

The Goal Is Won, (360 poems), 1974.

The Golden Boat, Parts 1-20 (1,000 poems), 1974.

Europe-Blossoms (1,000 poems), 1974.

Transcendence-Perfection (843 poems), 1975.

A Soulful Cry Versus A Fruitful Smile (630 poems), 1977.

From The Source To The Source (401 poems), 1978.

Ten Thousand Flower-Flames, Parts 1-100, 1979-1983.

Twenty-Seven Thousand Aspiration-Plants, (in progress),
Parts 1-90, 1983 - .

All works published by Aum Publications, Jamaica, New York.

9. Bennett, p. 9.

10. A Seeker's Universe (Jamaica, New York: Aum Publications, 1972), p. 16.

11. "Wonder," Poems of Felicity.

12. "Infant Joy," Songs of Innocence.

13. "Nothing Happened," The Dance of Life 5:38.

14. A Seeker's Universe, p. 42.

15. "It Steals Into My Heart," The Dance of Life 2:19.

16. "In the Core of Silence," The Dance of Life 1:38.

17. "What Happened?" The Wings of Light 18:10.

18. "I Am Smiling Today," The dance of Life 11:17.

19. Yoga:Immortality and Freedom (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969 - Bollingen series 56), pp. xviii-xix.

20. "They Rise," The Dance of Life 10:14.

21. "Universality," The Wings of Light 11:44.