CHAPTER - VIII

AESTHETIC MYSTICISM

In spite of the wide ranging eclectic inheritance, Rabindranath's thinking is more or less his own. After all, originality is judicious imitation. His "path of Vedic ancestors" led him along a life long "way faring to the Endless Further."¹ The Tagorean faith expresses what one man has done with his solitariness rather than what one does in society. Tagore's faith is uniquely his own which is "the lengthened shadow of his personality."² In The Religion of Man, a rather mature retrospective statement of his spiritual odyssey Tagore affirms, "My religious life has followed the same mysterious line of growth as has my poetical life."³

Tagore's religion outlined in Gitanjali has at least four unequal components: Nature, Man, Deity and

¹ Ghose 83.
² Ghose 84.
³ Religion of Man 58.
Civilization. The link that connects these, the force that makes the components cohere, is aesthetics, especially the aesthetics of longing, infinite longing (aseem vyakulata). Tagore was constantly haunted by the nostalgic fancies of an exile. Nurtured on the Upanishads and the Vaishnava Bhakti movement and having a rapport with the Baul poets the 'progressive' Tagore was not exactly orthodox. Religion as dogma or ritual, or church-oriented organization or establishment did not matter much to him. From the Upanishads to the Bauls, Tagore has taken other influences in his stride, that included the romantic as well as the modern. But the refrain was ever the same: "Not here, not here, but in the bosom of the far away." It could be called a religion of flight or nostalgia. Here is transcendence embracing Utopia. What matters to him in Gitanjali is a sensitiveness to the beyond, a verbal paradise of perfected relationships. Investing sensitivity with the

4 Qtd. in Ghose 86.
5 Qtd. in Ghose 85.
6 Ghose 85.
qualities of the sacred, Tagore's mystical experience in *Gitanjali* peaks his borderland existence. Such an aesthetic odyssey, moving through stormy seas and magic isles, could not but be solo.

Right from the beginning of *Gitanjali* we find the poetic expression of the mystical longing of the poet. He is tired of the world and its activity, and longs for a moment of solitary contemplation and meditation. His yearning for the divine is so acute that he is restless, and knows not a moment of peace. His work appears to him to be a constant, never-ending drudgery. To quote the exact words, "Away from thy face, my heart knows no rest nor respite, and my work becomes an endless toil in a shoreless sea of toil" (*V*, 4).

In the very next poem, right at the beginning, the poet insists upon his Maker "to pluck this little flower and take it" lest it should droop and drop into the dust (*VI*, 4).

The thirteenth poem of *Gitanjali* also suggests

7 Ghose 85.
the longing of the poet for reunion with the Divine. He is so sad that the Divine yet remains to him just a pessery by. He is not yet a living presence and an immediate reality to the poet. The poet complains, "The blossom has not opened, only the wind is sighing by." Again "I have not seen his face, nor have I listened to his voice; only I have heard his gentle footsteps from the road before my house" (XII, 8).

Lyric no.22 also expresses the poet's yearning for reunion with the Absolute. The poet requests earnestly, "Oh my friend, my best beloved, the gates are open in my house -- do not pass by like a dream" (XXII, 13). The poet's heart is restless. He has no sleep. Every now and then he opens his door and looks on the darkness. And he asks God, "By what dim shore . . . by what edge of the frowning forest, . . . art thou threading thy course to come to me, my friend?" (XXII, 14). God, the poet's bosom friend, is still far away, but he is looking to the possible way he might come to him. At one stage the poet's heart repeats endlessly, "I want thee, only thee" (XXVIII, 22). His "heart is hard and parched up." So he wants his
God to come upon him with the "shower of mercy" (XXXIX, 22). Again, the poet confesses, "The rain has held back for days and days, my God, in my arid heart. The horizon is fiercely naked -- not the thinnest cover of a soft cloud, not the vaguest hint of a distant cool shower" (XL, 23). This is a beautiful pen-picture of a "heart in hiding", stirring "for a bird", thirsting for God. He asks in anguish, "Where dost thou stand behind them all my lover, hiding thyself in the shadows?" (XLI, 23). He also conveys to him the fact that he has been waiting "weary hours spreading my offerings for thee" (XLI, 23).

In poem no.80 the poet expresses his intense yearning for re-union with the Divine in highly poetic and figurative language. He compares himself to the "remnant of a cloud of autumn, uselessly roaming in the sky" (LXXX, 53-54). He is just a wandering cloud under the bright and glorious sky flooded with the light of the morning Sun. The poet laments, "Thy touch has not

yet melted my vapour, making me one with thy light" (LXXX, 54). The poet yearns to be united with the Divine. He wants the Divine Sun to melt him, the cloud, to dissolve him, to put an end to his earthly being, so that his liberated soul might become one with the Infinite. Without ever losing the mystical optimism, the poet concludes the poem, "When it shall be thy wish to end this play at night, I shall melt and vanish away in the dark, or it may be in a smile of the white morning, in a coolness of a purity transparent." The poet insists that, at least when God is satisfied with playing with the poet, then He should merge the latter's soul in His own. But, he does not mind whether the cloud, the soul of the poet, vanishes in the darkness of the night or dissolves in the clear, transparent light of the morning.

In *Gitanjali* the poet's quest for the Infinite takes the form of the quest for beauty. To Tagore, to bathe in the beauty of creations is to be blessed with the blessings of the All-Beautiful. An incomparable worshipper of beauty all through his life, Rabindranath seeks beauty not extrinsically but essentially and
introspectively in the poems of Gitanjali. In these poems beauty emerges as a living, dynamic force. As the source of beauty is the heart, Tagore's quest for beauty is primarily in the heart's paradise.

The Infinite needs the poet's love as much as the poet needs His. That is why He takes joy in the creation of glorious and beautiful forms of life. For the same reason Tagore enjoys the beautiful forms of the objects of nature and life. He has constant promptings of the divine presence too. The poet sings quite optimistically: "Every moment and every age, every day and every night He comes" (X&Y 27). And the poet, by sharing the joy of the Ananda in His creation enhances His joy through His creation, His poetry. The beauty and splendour of nature are the decorations in which the Divine Lover decorates Himself in order to captivate the poet and thus to win his love.

Tagore ecstatically declares, "And for this, thou who art the King of kings hast decked thyself in beauty to captivate my heart. And for this thy love loses itself in the love of thy lover, and there art thou
seen in the perfect union of two" (LVI, 37). Thus the love of the poet mingles with divine love, engendering the highest perfection of love, and Tagore's God of _Gitanjali_ yearns for it as much as he does. In the beauty of the mortal as in their love, the poet finds the touch of the Immortal.

Light is sweet and glorious. It fills the world with joy and beauty. The butterflies dancing in the light and the flowers blooming in all their glory symbolise the joy of the Sublime in creation, especially the creation of the poet. It also signifies His sacramental presence in the beautiful objects of nature. The following passage presents an aesthetic-mystical experience of the poet in communion with God the Light. "The butterflies spread their sails on the sea of light. Lilies and Jasmines surge upon the crest of the waves of light. The light is shattered into gold on every cloud . . . and it scatters gems in profusion" (LVII, 38).

God enjoys the beauty of creation as much as the poet does and consequently the poet's joy is doubled.
This is an important point in the aesthetic mysticism of Tagore. The whole creation is beautiful because God took joy in the act of creation. Because of God's joy, again, the clouds are bathed in golden light, and beauty is scattered everywhere over the sky and over the earth.

Right from the beginning of *Gitanjali* Tagore shows his extraordinary power of unveiling the beauties of nature in superb poetic images. To him these are ways in which God manifests to him His glory. In poem no. 5 he writes, "Today the summer has come at my window with its sighs and murmurs, and the bees are plying their minstrelsy at the court of the flowering grove. Now it is time to sit quiet, face to face with thee, and to sing dedication of life in this silent and overflowing leisure" (V, 4).

The poem also emphasizes how the poet yearns for union with his God. It is because of this infinite yearning that the poet asks God's permission to stop his worldly activities for a while and to spend that time in the contemplation of the Divine. His yearning
for the Divine is so acute that he is restless and knows not a moment of rest. The night is nearly spent in waiting for him in vain. But very soon the poet is consoled and he sings, "You came down from your throne and stood at my cottage door" (XLIX, 30). Herein we have the aesthetic reconciliation of the tension between the 'not yet' and the 'already' of the mystical experience in the mind of the poet.

The romantic discovery of the beauty of the rose and the beauty of the Infinite in Gitanjali takes the reader to a serene land of artistic beauty. We have a poetic presentation of it in poem no. 22. The poet begins, "In the deep shadows of the rainy July, with secret steps, thou walkest silent as night, eluding all watchers" (XXII, 13). The poem as a whole presents the yearning of the poet for reunion with the Divine as well. The poet enjoys the whole panorama in an ecstatic continuum -- the rainy month of July, the sky overcast with clouds, the stormy and dark night and above all the sight of the Divine Lover walking through the streets secretly, eluding all watchers, like a young man going to meet his beloved secretly.
To borrow a term from Hopkins here is an 'inescape' of the aesthetic enjoyment the poet has of the personal presence of God in his poetic consciousness. And the poet acknowledges, "The woodlands have hushed their songs, and doors are all shut at every house. Thou art the solitary wayfarer in this deserted street. O my only friend, my best beloved the gates are open in my house—do not pass by like a dream" (XXII, 13). While all others kept their doors shut, the poet has kept the door of his heart open and he entreats the Divine not to pass by his door like a dream. Rather He should come in and accept the poet who keeps vigil for Him.

Side by side with the romantic quest for love and beauty, the poet makes a realistic appeal that unnerves the memory with the melancholy mood of sorrow. This is evidenced in poem no.87, which he has translated from his only elegy Smeren which Tagore wrote immediately after the death of his dear wife. He laments, "In desperate hope, I go and search for her in all the corners of my room, I find her not" (LXXXVII, 57). But soon he recovers and develops a mystical attitude
to the rude shock of the death of his dearest wife. He sings, "infinite is thy mansion, my lord, and seeking her I have come to thy door. I stand under the golden canopy of thine evening sky and I lift my eager eyes to thy face" (LXXXVII, 58). Therefore the poet prays, "... dip my emptied life into that ocean, plunge it into the deepest fullness. Let me for once feel that lost sweet touch in the allness of the universe" (LXXXVII, 58). The soliloquy here rings through the innermost core of the poet's heart and reveals the mystical attitude even to the 'beauty' of death.

The quest for the beauty of death in creative force appears in a new pattern of poetic consciousness in some of the last poems of Gitanjali. In poem no.91 the poet asserts, "Day after day have I kept watch for thee; for thee have I borne the joys and pangs of life. All that I am, that I have, ever flowed towards thee in depth of secrecy. One final glance from thine eyes and my life will ever be thine own" (XCI, 60). And when the poet thinks of this end of his moments,
his death, the barrier of the moment breaks and he sees, by the light of death, the eternal world with its "careless treasures" (XCII, 61). "Rare is its lowliest seat, rare is its meanest of lives" (XCII, 61). The poet again confesses, "The sky is flushed with the dawn and my path lies beautiful" (XCIV, 62). The thought of imminent death only prompts him to put on his "wedding garland".

In his preface to his Prabhat Sangit Tagore presents a very profitable self-revelation. He writes:

Looking within my heart, an idea awoke within me that everything good and evil of my every moment, my all experiences of joy and sorrow of day to day life are taking an endless image of creation ceaselessly. The real nature of creativity is the eternal ups and downs of this expression and non-expression. Thinking over this, I asked myself: What, then, is the meaning of death? Somehow the reply was that life retains everything while death leads [me to the knowledge that] I am
dying at every moment and through this
death I am marching ahead towards the
avenue of life. It is as if the work
of sowing is going on within me -- the
past, present and future are being sown.⁹

The passage is an honest, revealing confession of
a poetic mind. It reveals the aesthetic growth of the
poetic-mystic's mind. All the experiences of joy and
sorrow of his day to day life have been presenting an
endless image of a ceaseless creation. The real nature
of that creativity is to be found in the eternal ups
and downs in the attitude of the poet.

The quest for the beauty of the infinite's love
that adorns every object of nature goes on quite
convincingly and the poet presents an unforgettable
experience in his seeing and enjoying the beautiful
objects of the universe. In poem no.68 the poet writes,
"The sunbeam comes upon this earth of mine with arms

out-stretched and stands at my door the livelong day
to carry back to thy feet clouds made of my tears
and sighs and songs" (LXVIII, 46). Out of love, the
Infinite sends his sun beams to the earth, which come
with their outstretched arms to caress the poet. The
words the poet uses for his description open out a new
horizon of beauty. This further emphasizes the fact
that the poet has an 'inward eye' which sees beauty
in its diverse dimensions.

In the poet of Gitanjali one finds a penchant for
the exploration of the beauty of love. The poetic
process results in the creative manifestation in his
heart of the mellow atmosphere of love. One of the
finest images of love is revealed in the erotic poem
beginning with, "I am only waiting for love to give
myself up at last into his hands" (XVII, 10). There
is ineffable beauty in the experience of love. The
poet is prepared to wait for any length of time. He
confesses "... on this dark lonely day it is only
for thee that I hope" (XVII, 11). Again the poet asks,
"Art thou abroad on this stormy night on thy journey
of love, my friend?" (XXIII, 14).
The poet's quest for beauty is reflected in and associated with the delicate poignance in the following words. "In sorrow after sorrow it is his steps that press upon my heart, and it is the golden touch of his feet that makes my joy to shine" (XLV, 27). He feels that it is the feet of the Divine that relentlessly pursue him and press upon his heart in sorrow after sorrow. The advent of the Infinite into his grief-stricken soul satisfies his eternal longing and the poet experiences the beauty of pain, the joy of pain. Of course, as he confesses in poem no.52, it does hurt him when he presses it to his bosom. But he agrees, "yet shall I bear in my heart this honour of the burden of pain, this gift of thine" (VII, 34).

In the poet's quest for beauty nature personified finds a novel expression in the exposition of love that flows from romanticism to mysticism. This quest for beauty in nature is set forth in many a poem in Gitanjali. To cite one example: "The morning sea of silence broke into ripples of bird songs, and the flowers were all merry by the roadside, and the wealth of gold was scattered through the rift of the clouds while we busily went
on our way and paid no heed" (XLVIII, 29). At a further stage of the poem the poet writes, "The sun rose to the mid sky and doves cooed in the shade. Withered leaves danced and whirled in the hot air of noon. The shepherd boy droweed and dreamed in the shadow of the banyan tree" (XLVIII, 29).

At this beautiful sight the poet lay down by the water and stretched his tired limbs on the grass. When he woke from his slumber and opened his eyes, he saw his Divine Friend standing by him. All the time He was flooding the poet's sleep with His simile. Here we have a graphic presentation of a beautiful aesthetic mystical experience at the sight of natural beauty.

The poet of Gitanjali seeks the mystery of beauty in the play of little children. The poet becomes ecstatic when he writes repeatedly in poem no.60, "On the seashore of endless worlds children meet, with shouts and dances" (LX, 39). Here, there is something autobiographical about Tagore. He was very fond of little children and he would go into mystical raptures in their presence enjoying their innocent beauty and
love.

He writes, "They build their houses with sand and they play with empty shells. With withered leaves they weave their boats and smilingly float them on the vast deep. Children have their play on the seashore of worlds" (LX, 39).