CHAPTER IV

THE ENGLISH PHASE
Prof. S. Nagarajan in his brief prefatory note to a collection of Ramanujan's poems says something very characteristic of Ramanujan's poetry and his observation should serve as a starting point to the discussion of Ramanujan's English poetry:

"Most of the poems in the new volume, as in the first, have their origin in recollected personal emotion. They deal with the poet's memory of his relations and the ambiguous freedom that life away from them confers."\(^1\)

It is very interesting to note that the three of the most important critics have mentioned the vital relationship of personal memory with the poetry of Ramanujan. Here is Prof. M.K. Naik in his article entitled "A.K. Ramanujan and the Search for Roots".

"It is perhaps his long sojourn abroad (he has been living in the United States for almost two decades now), that explains Ramanujan's persistent obsession with his Indian past—both familial and racial; and it is this obsession that constitutes a major theme in all his poetry."\(^2\)

Even Prof. K. Raghavendra Rao who has made a very important discovery in the poetry of Ramanujan— that of the element
of reverse romanticism - has noticed the relation between Ramanujan's poetry and memory:

"One can go labouring the point that memory serves as the basis of Ramanujan's reverse romanticism in his first collection of poems. But memory can be understood as time framed in a subjective context or time framed in an objective, cultural-historical context. In some poems the one dominates and in some the other".3

I have quoted these three critics in order not to refute what they have said, because the element of memory is so conspicuous in the poetry of Ramanujan, but to avoid the simplification that such an observation would lead to Prof. S. Nagarajan has quoted a beatiful translation of a Tamil poem by Ramanujan, the last three lines of which are as follows:

But living among relations binds the feet.4

The poem depicts the ambiguity of the state of mind of a woman in love - probably a married woman fallen in love with another youngman - and therefore what she says is not wholly true. She simply evaluates the two contradictory states - the state of escape and freedom and the state of bondage caused by living among relations - and does not reveal what is really in her mind. Love against this perspective takes on a different meaning and the poem is interested in depicting just that. It is really
difficult to see the kind of freedom that Ramanujan living away from his people seems to enjoy.

Memory and nostalgia are two words which have a long history of connotation usually associated with the Romantic state of mind. Memory in Wordsworth and nostalgia in Byron play a crucially creative role in the expression of the poetry of these two poets. The function of memory in Wordsworth is interpretative since the contours of remembered experience are clear and the meaning of such experience is manifest. What is important here is the lack of involvement on the part of the experiencer which helps him to understand the meaning of his experience. Byron, on the other hand, feels nostalgic about the past which places the personality of the poet against the glory of the past and the meaning lies in the emotional complex created by the relation of his person and the glory of the past. The throbbing excitement in the description of Waterloo in Byron's Childe Harold is Byron's own which electrifies the language of his verse.

It is difficult to expect this sort of use of memory and nostalgia in the verse of Ramanujan. Memory whether factual or psychological or as subjective or objective as suggested by Prof. K. Raghavendra Rao does not play the usual role in Ramanujan's poetry. Prof. Nagarajan quotes the poem 'Of Mothers, among other things' to bring his point home. He
thinks 'the sense of loss is most powerfully connected with the mother'. The poem, as he thinks, deserves to be quoted fully:

I smell upon this twisted blackbone tree the silk and white petal of my mother's youth. From her ear-rings three diamonds splash a handful of needles, and I see my mother run back from rain to the crying cradles. The rains tack and sew with broken thread the rags of the tree-tasselled light. But her hands are a wet eagle's two black pink-crinkled feet, one talon crippled in a garden-trap set for a mouse. Her sarees do not cling; they hang, loose feather of a one-tine wing.

My cold parchment tongue licks bark in the mouth when I see her four still sensible fingers slowly flex to pick a grain of rice from the kitchen floor.

Prof. Nagarajan thinks that "the stanza that 'works' is the last one; the metaphors in the first two lines emphasise the futility of the poet's language to express the rough, bitter taste of the memory, and the last two lines provide an
irresistible 'objective correlative' of the emotion. I do not think that the poet deliberately intended to illustrate the inadequacy of poetic language, but the fact remains that the simple picture of the last two lines makes the previous imagery of the poem seem laboured and incoherent.\(^7\).

It is impossible to say anything against this excellent analysis. But it is difficult to agree with him when he says that the effect of the last stanza is quite spontaneous and that 'the simple picture of the last two lines makes the previous imagery seem laboured and incoherent'. If we consider the poem as an honest tribute to the poet's mother then what Nagarajan says about the poem must be accepted. But the poem, it seems, is trying to probe into the mystery of the working of two opposite processes, life and death, simultaneously at work. The first three lines of the poem labour very hard to present a precise image of this ambivalent experience. The protagonist is trying to identify his youthful mother in the twisted old mother. The splash of a handful of needles from her diamond ear-rings reveal to him the woman 'run back from rain to the crying cradles'. The image that is most telling is in the second and the third stanza. The hands of the mother compared to a wet eagle's 'two black pink-crinkled feet' are not only the most active limbs of a human being but also they contain the history of human emotion along with the wear and
tired of human life. But the image has something more to say. 'One talon crippled in a garden-trap set for a mouse'. The crippled talon, of course, is equated with the paralysed little finger of the mother. The free eagle soaring in the sky is suddenly caught into a mousetrap and its crippled talon is a sad reminder of its story of freedom and bondage. The twisted tree losing its white petal along with the eagle with its crippled talon and the disintegration of a feather from the body of the bird - these images grow and develop a meaning of the processes of life and death. The poem suggests that death like life is not simply a sudden event but a slow, steady and continuous process like life. The last stanza apart from providing an irresistible objective correlative of the emotion, as suggested by Nagarajan, brings all the forms of organic life - tree, bird and the human being - conveying the imperceptible and inaudible processes of life and death simultaneously working.

The advantage which memory provides then is the leisurely distance between the experienc and the experien suddenly brought back to him by memory. There are poets who indulge in such experiences and there are some who do not, but try to understand the meaning of experience through a study of its form. For poets like Ramanujan form is meaning, as he has expressed in one of his interviews:
"One of my oldest concerns is the form of poetry - not just the rhymes or count of syllables but the way it begins and ends and gathers a certain clarity. Content does not come independently of form. The meaning goes on changing with the form. In fact there is a point where you begin to feel that the form itself is the meaning of the poem."

What is found in his poetry is not the verbal version of his experience but it is experience with a form and what the reader has to understand is this form.

Again, there is as much amnesia in the poetry of Ramanujan as there is memory. His poetry very effectively exploits the situation created by the binary opposition of these two states of consciousness. For example:

Something opened
in the past and I heard something shut
in the future, quietly,
like the heavy door
of my mother's black-pillared, nineteenth century
silent house, given on her marriage day
to my father, for a dowry.

and will not ask, for I know I cannot,
which, if any, in its deadwhite belly
has an uncooked signet ring and a forest
legend of wandering king and waiting
innocent, complete with fawn under tree
and inverse images in the water
of a stream that runs as if it doesn't.
Both these passages do not deal with remembered experiences, but it is interesting to note that both these poems take the help of memory in order to understand an experience. In the first passage a complete image from the poet's Indian experience is juxtaposed against the actual event that happened on the street of Chicago. The poem insists that it is impossible to understand what happens in the minds of the woman and the man - 'Perhaps, they had fought/worse still they had not fought'. It is difficult to formulate this experience because both the alternatives have failed. As against this the remembered Indian experience conveyed through the image of a heavy door of a silent house 'given on her marriage day, for a dowry', is equally inexplicable. The American image has a man and woman, not formally married probably, behaving in a strange way, and this image evokes the Indian image of the heavy door of a black-pillared house. There is some mysterious relation between what happens on a Chicago street and what might have happened behind the heavy door of a Mysore or Madras house. The meaning, it seems, lies behind the juxtaposition of these two images.

In the second poem the protagonist remembers the amnesia of King Dushyanta and his recovering the memory of his wife at the sight of the signet ring in the belly of a fish. The protagonist wonders which of the pomfret in the fish basket
would contain the signet ring. He doesn't ask the question which is fully formulated in his mind. The paradox of remembering the forgetfulness or a king conveys the ambivalence of the relationship between man and woman. The image contains the clear outline of an unrealised story as if the story has to take birth in the uncooked signet ring in the deadwhite belly of a fish. The poem is interested in the pattern of emotion caused by the interplay of amnesia and memory.

The importance of memory in Ramanujan's poetry then is the fact that memory like imagination is esemplastic. The poem has simply to identify and present what memory has already done. In a short poem entitled 'Still Life' there is a telling image which explains this process:

When she left me
after lunch, I read
for a while.
But I suddenly wanted
to look again
and I saw the half-eaten
sandwich,
bread,
lettuce and salami,
all carrying the shape
of her bite.

The piece of sandwich retains the memory of the bite of the woman in a concrete way. Ramanujan's poetry uses
memory in much the same way.

II

Dr. Chirantan Kulashreshtha in his penetrating essay - "The Self in A. K. Ramanujan's Poetry" provides a very useful analysis of the relation of the self with poetry. This thesis since the beginning has maintained that Ramanujan's poetry is not the poetry of self-expression and I believe it is true. But this stance does not offer any satisfactory solution to the problem of self in modern poetry, the characteristic feature of which is an intense self-consciousness. Dr. Kulashreshtha quotes the poem "Self-Portrait" fully and offers his comments:

"This poem is so deceptive in its neat directness that it can be easily supposed to reflect a basically insufficient and uncertain self, susceptible to influence from outside, and, consequently, alien to its own viewer. Another way of reading the poem - a way that seeks to make it seminal to an understanding of Ramanujan's poetry - is to place it in the context of Yeats' statement that, unlike the man of the Renaissance and the Middle Ages who looked at the mask to imitate Christ or some classical hero, the modern man looks at the mirror to discover himself. The attitude he assumes toward himself and Reality are, accordingly, the different identities or points of view that figure in his life."
Yeats' statement is particularly relevant here since Yeats who called himself "the last of the Romanticists", who had a powerful self which assumed all creative powers within itself, was keenly aware of the agonies involved in the poetic expression. It was easy for the ancient poet to look at the mask to imitate Christ or a classical hero because in his cultural context the mask was an archetypal metaphor created by the collective imagination of a people. Modern societies do not provide such metaphors because the relation between the individual self and the society is no more organic. Nevertheless the need of a metaphor for poetic expression is inevitable. T.S. Eliot could achieve impersonality through religious fervour by dedicating the self to a higher and transcendental principle. The saint poets of India could talk about their self in a free and uninhibited manner and yet achieve impersonality precisely for the same reason. A religious soul is, in fact, a soul in a state of continuous evolution, passive to the joys and sorrows of this world, yet active in the pursuit of a higher ideal. The religious self can become an object since it ceases to be a subject. It is easy to turn an object into a metaphor - the metaphor of the human soul as a bride of God with the Veershaiva saints, for example - and then use it in poetry. The anguish of divine love of the Vaishnava and Veerashaiva saint poets is metaphorical and is capable of giving expression to a whole gamut of feelings and emotions. One
need not take help of the elaborate and complex apparatus or poetics or our classical poetry for depersonalising personal emotions.

The problem becomes urgent with the modern poet who is secular and humanitarian in his outlook on life. The modern poet instead of looking at a mask looks into a mirror which reflects his own appearance distorted by his own personal anguish. The reflection of the subject cannot be a metaphor unless the reflected image becomes an object. W.B. Yeats talks about poetry as a piece of magic berylstone which instead of revealing the appearance of the person who looks into it, reveals the design on its surface. It is a luxury to use poetry for the sake of confirming personal identity. It is the mode of lyrical expression which, to a certain extent, is responsible for the situation. The entire poetics of Coleridge with its discovery of imagination as a vital principle of the creative process of poetry, is based on the study of the lyric form emphasising personal feeling and emotion. We find the extreme statement of this viewpoint in the utterance of Edgar Allan Poe who declared that a long poem is an impossibility. To quote his very words:

"I hold that a long poem does not exist. I maintain that the phrase, "a long poem", is simply a flat contradiction in terms."
The poet has to search for moments of intensity. In order to achieve impersonality the poet has to change the form of lyric poetry either by dramatizing it or by introducing the elements of narrative. The tradition of dramatic lyric is well established since the experiments of the Metaphysical poets and by T.S. Eliot in modern times. The form of verse narrative which was lyricised by the Romantics has yet to develop in full significance.

What exactly happens during the process of the poet’s self becoming a metaphor is still a matter of conjecture. The first step, no doubt, is that the self of the poet must be both a subject and an object at the same time. The self must be the observer and the observed without getting involved in the narcissistic affair of self-love. The self must watch itself and this difficult process necessarily leads to a split in the personality. The poem entitled “Elements of Composition” in Second Sight gives a detailed analysis of the poet’s self in the process of self-observation:

I pass through them
as they pass through me
taking and leaving
affections, seeds, skeletons,

.................
a legend half-heard
in a train
of the half-man searching
for an ever-fleeing
other half

......

and even as I add,
I lose, decompose
into my elements,
into other names and forms,
past, and passing, tenses
without time,

caterpillar on a leaf, eating,
being eaten 16.

This is the picture of carnivorous self feeding itself
on many experiences of life, listed in the poem and composing
and decomposing at the same time. This being an involuntary
process, so much unconscious, that the difference between the
experience and the experient is lost. The second verse passage
explains it through a half-heard legend of a half-man 'searching
for an ever-fleeing other half', probably the Yeatsian
antiself. The last passage which is faintly reminiscent of
the self-analysis of James Joyce presents an image of the self
losing its form and assuming several other forms without involv­
ing the process of time. The self becomes 'a caterpillar on
a leaf, eating being eaten'. This telling image of a cater­
pillar reminds the two parts of the human self described by the
Upanishads, 'food' (Anna) and the 'eater' (Frana) or Annada).
It is difficult to say whether doubleness is genuinely inherent in the self itself, because knowledge and experience are not round to be co-instantaneous. Nevertheless, when the self is engaged in this activity of observing its own nature something emerges which can be described as dramatic, a dialogue between the subject and the object.

It seems that Ramanujan's poetry is indebted to the Upanishads and the Vachanas of the Veerashaiva saints for this valuable insight. But at the same time Ramanujan's poetry refuses to any claims of mysticism. This particular poem is replete with images which are drawn from sciences of metallurgy, anthropology, genetics etc.

In his effort to understand the nature of the self Ramanujan arrives at a curious definition of the self. One of the chapters entitled 'Cannibal Memory' in his Kannada work - Mattobhana Atmacheritre (Autobiography of Someone else) Ramanujan says, "The self is a patchwork or many alien elements". Many of his English and Kannada poems voice the same idea through other images.

Chirantan Kulashreshtha neatly sums up the various aspects of the poetic self as described by Ramanujan:
"In Ramanujan's poetry 'passivity' becomes an essential precondition for suggesting the inexhaustible potential of the self. It is a positive state of being which allows the self the necessary freedom and transperence to manipulate subjective and linear time, use personae, bring the equations of one's relationships into a vivid focus, and even observe itself as an object. As a poetic device it helps to design the framework or the "theatre" within which the identities of the self may be presented in their entirety of feeling and complexity."18.

The key word, according to Kulashreshthha, is 'passivity' which gives a correct description of the poetic self. But there are other two words which, I think, are equally important. They are 'potential' and 'theatre'. Both these words alone build up the aesthetics of Ramanujan's poetry. Ramanujan's poetry is not a record of his actual feelings or emotions. These actual feelings and emotions of the person of Ramanujan who is a historical individual and who by a historical accident is the author of all these poems in English and Kannada and the author of many translations from Kannada and Tamil poets. But 'the inexhaustible potential of the self' is what is reflected in his poetry. The poem - "Elements of Composition", has these lines:

add uncle's eleven fingers
making shadow-plays of rajas
The fact that the eleven fingers of the uncle can become rajas and cats and become fingers again, precisely describes the potential of the fingers. Poetry is created by the 'potential' and also appeals to the 'potential' of the self of the reader. What we call craftsmanship is the poet's skill of lending authenticity to the work of this 'potential' through the proper use of language; or to be more precise, to exploit the 'potential' of the language also. The lines quoted above may not be the same in their effect if they are translated into Kannada. There is a description of the same shadowplay in the third chapter of Ramanujan's Kannada work Mattobbana Atmcharitre (Autobiography of Someone else), performed by the same uncle. The symbolism of this description is somewhat different in its effect, because it describes the limited freedom of his uncle who was a henpecked husband.

The second keyword in the passage is 'theatre', which properly describes the poetry of Ramanujan on the level of performance. Many of his poems are dramatic in this sense. His poetry is dramatic not in the sense that the poetry of John Donne's is, but it is dramatic in the use of personae, or mask in the Yeatsian sense. To be exact we can describe as the poetic self playing hide and seek. The poem 'Self-
Portrait* quoted by Kulashreshtha in his essay is an excellent example of this play. This ironical self-portrait symbolises the protean quality of the poet's self which can be studied in accompaniment of a short poem in his second collection of Kannada poems, Mattu Itara Padyagalu (And Other Poems).

It is an earnest prayer to the speechless God to teach him the art of speaking before the speech-act is over. The last lines are as follows:

For a moment, O lord,
show me
the nature of bhava.\textsuperscript{20}

The Sanskrit word 'bhava' here is not feeling or emotion but the existential form of the self. Kalidas has used the word in the same sense in Act V of his Abhijnana Shakuntalam.\textsuperscript{21} The prayer in this poem, of course, is ironical, another pose struck by the poetic self in order to reveal the patchwork of the self.

Ramanujan's poetry is genuinely bothered by the fact that the 'presence' of the self is lost in its 'play' because the concept of presence always denies play. No other poet, at least in India, is as keenly aware of the mysterious relationship between the poetic self and the poetry it creates as Ramanujan. He is also aware of the difference between the kind
of poetry that he writes against the perspective of a poetic art created by the ancient Indian poets. A poem entitled "Difference" in Second Sight fully brings out this difference which is of a vital importance for understanding his poetry.

The poem begins with the description of the art of making icons of gods by the Indian artists. These artisans who have not studied the art of sculpture in any art school continue to make icons out of an acquired instinct and a sense of thrift which only such artists can have. They prepare the mould out of clay, straw and bee's wax and then do the fine work on them with hot needles etc. They pour molten metal through an escape hole in the head. After sometime when they open the mould the gleaming god emerges. The mould though not a part of the icon, is yet essential for the emergence of the icon. The relation between the clay-mould molten metal and the imagination of the artist is mysterious though it manifests itself in an age-worn custom.

Making an icon is the main work of the artist. But he is thrifty and doesn't want to waste his material and therefore makes toys, horses and dancing girls from the left overs. These are the kinds of artefacts that are sold in the market for the consumption of fashionable art-mongers.

The second part of the poem brings out the difference
between the artist and a poet like Ramanujan. The poet refers to himself as 'a community of one' emphasising his loneliness as against the communal nature of the artesan's work, the art of icon-making where women do the rough work and men do the fine work. It is a work of collective imagination which seeing the need of a god creates a god.

But I, a community of one
mould
myself both clay and metal,
body shape and lips; do my dancers first

The difference here is that the main function is making dancers, jet, bombers, toys etc rather than making a god.

But what happens when the poet wants to create a god?

....... But today, out of the blue
when Vishnu
came to mind, the Dark One you know
who began as a dwarf and rose in the world
to measure
heaven and earth with his paces,
I found I'd just enough left to fashion
his big toe.

The poem ends with a note of utter frustration because there is no way of telling the height, the lock on his face or catch the 'rumoured beat of his extra-ordinary heart' by the size of the toe-nail fashioned by the artist.
The poem, consciously or unconsciously, gives expression to the characteristic features of the new art and also its limitations. The characteristic features are its intricate craftsmanship and a kind of secularity of outlook shaped by the new humanism. The limitations, of course, as expressed by the poem, are to give shape to a god. But the most important difference, it seems to me, between the traditional art and the new art is not the change of attitude but the shift from collaborativeness to the individual authorship. Temples, cave-paintings, drama, epics and even traditional dances are specimens of collaborative art and are characterized by the absence of authorship. The culture in which the communal needs, religious as well as secular, are satisfied by communal art is now changed due to many social factors. Art is now either commercial or high-brow.

III

While discussing the methodology of poetic expression in the poetry of Ramanujan Chirantan Kulashreshtha observes:

"his method generally involves the introduction of the specifics of an experience through a plain or meditative statement which grows into an image dramatising as well as recounting an event through visual and auditory details. It is possible to hazard the inference that Ramanujan's adoption of such a method has been influenced by his work on the Tamil poets of the first three centuries A.D. who
sought to poeticize inner experience by exploiting the properties of drama as well as real life."25.

Chirantan Kulashreshtha's statement is not only cogent but also so comprehensive that it can be applied fruitfully while analysing most of Ramanujan's poems. The fact that Ramanujan prefers an image to an idea is obvious and also the craftsmanship of the poet while working on the same image for its complete transformation. Chirantan Kulashreshtha also quotes from Ramanujan's "Afterword" to The Interior Landscape in which Ramanujan says that this strategy helps "depersonalise poetry and turn it into a kind of second language."26.

"the landscapes, the personae, the appropriate moods, all become a language within language. Like a native speaker, he makes 'infinite use or finite means', to say with familiar words what has never been said before; he can say exactly what he wants to, without even being aware of the ground-rules of his grammar."27.

What is important about this statement is that even the content of the poem is transformed into form, or 'a second language'. This is exactly what everyone does even with the primary or ordinary language. Language transforms human experience into an ordered system and it is through this system human experience gets interpreted. It is a matter of philosophical speculation as to whether we can have direct access to reality
as all. Whatever that may be we do approach reality through language. Poetry does it more intensively and with a keener awareness than what every-one does with the ordinary language. In this regard the statement of Roman Jacobson that poetry is a kind of metalanguage is relevant. Poetry has to start with a verbal statement either plain or oblique, or dramatised and set, it seems, the process of transformation into motion through various stages.

The image which is half-object and half-word provides full freedom to the poet to work on it. The poet when he deals with his self can distance himself from the self and view it as an object (a concrete image) and a word. The object which is turned into a word surrenders all its visual and auditory qualities and the poetic word, thus enriched and made alive is ready for expression. This is probably what is meant by the 'secondary language'. One can hazard the statement that the originality of poetry lies in the quality of this secondary language. Chirantan Kulashreshtha mentions the influence of Tamil poets on Ramanujan. Along with the Sangam poets the Veerashaiva saint-poets in Karnataka also have influenced him. The Veerashaiva saint-poets not only used the language spoken by the common people for their expression but also created 'a second language' or 'a language within language' in their vachanas. Here is a vachana by Basavanna which is worth considering:
Look here, dear fellows
I wear these men's clothes
only for you.

Sometimes I am man
sometimes I am woman.

O Lord of the meeting rivers
I'll make wars for you
but I'll be your devotees' bride.

The theme of this short poem is the bisexuality of a bhakta or a devotee, a favourite theme voiced by other poets like Mahadeviakka and Devar Dasimayya. The human soul trying to surrender itself at the feet of God is neither male nor female, because the only relation that is worth having is with God. The soul which is ready to join God uses both male and female metaphors - ("I will make wars for you" or "I'll be your devotees' bride") in order to express its non-identity as the only identity. The paradoxical situation needs not one but a plurality of images. The metaphors used by Basavanna are, of course, appropriate but they have an extra-significance which cannot be overlooked. The 'soldier' and the 'bride' create a typology of images belonging to a world of significance which is the world of language. Metaphors do not die soon after they are used in a poem. They have a tenacity and can live even after the expression.

In the light of the discussion above I would like to
analyse a few poems from the recent collection *Second Sight*. The poems are - "Elements of Composition", "Questions", "Watchers" and "Connect". These poems form a cluster and they are connected with other poems by Ramanujan, sometimes thematically or by significance.

The last poem "Connect" reveals Ramanujan's methodology of poetic expression and also its moral. "Style has a moral quality" says Yeats in one of his essays. The meaning of this awesome statement is further clarified by this poem. The first nine lines of the poem present the poet's impulse to follow the simple way of connecting things which happen in a haphazard way, as if to find the connection between the things and the events is the very purpose of poetry. The things that are sought to be connected are presented in terms that are blurred and they are in one sense generalities. 'Black holes and white noise, elections with four-year shadows, red eclipses and the statistics of rape' and also 'beasts', 'monks', 'slave economies and the golden bough' These images are the products of readymade theories in Psychology, Politics, Religion and Cultural Anthropology. Poetry can set the conclusions for its own use.

But the rest of the poem refuses to do what the first half forces the poet to do.
But my watchers are silent as if they knew my truth is in fragments.
If they could, I guess they would say, only the first thought is clear, the second is dim, the third is ignorant
and it takes a lot of character not to call it mystery, to endure the fog and search the mango grove unfolding leaf and twig for the zebra-striped caterpillar in the middle of it, waiting for a change of season.

The watchers belong to the world of 'the second language', which may be discussed later, and they insist on a way of revelation. The first thought is clear, the second is dim, the third is ignorant. This is a kind of reverse process from knowledge to ignorance, a process which, in the context of this poem, is more fruitful because it is creative than the timehonoured process from ignorance to knowledge. The reverse process which is insisted by the watchers is more austere and more adventurous. "It takes a lot of character not to call it mystery". The poet has to "endure the fog", wait for the final revelation. He has to unlearn whatever he has learnt from other poets and philosophers. The mission of poetry is to "search the mango grove unfolding leaf and twig for the zebra-striped caterpillar.... waiting for a change
of season*. The relation between the mango grove and the caterpillar is neither rational nor is it accidental, it is only natural and creative. A vachana by Allama Prabhu says:

Where was the mango tree,
where the koilbird?
when were they kin?
Mountain gooseberry
and sea salt:
when
were they kin?32

The kinship between the mango grove and the caterpillar is similar to the kinship described in the poem, the kinship between the human soul and God. Ramanujan's poem admonishes us, 'it takes a lot of character not to call it a mystery'. Whatever be the nature of experience what is important is patience to wait for the truth to reveal itself.

The poem- "Elements of Composition" has already been discussed to consider the position of self in Ramanujan's poetry. The poem ably shows how the self of the poet is made and remade by the experiences of the world and how the interanimation of the self and the experiences of the world affect the whole personality of the poet. There is something profoundly curious about the drama of this interanimation, the passive and the active aspects of the self making and remaking the structure of truth. The "Watchers" are, at least it
appears to be, the passive aspects of the self. The poem ends with the image of a "caterpillar on a leaf, eating/being eaten" an image which is further developed in the poem "Connect" where another dimension of meaning is added to it.

The phrase 'Eating, being eaten' is used at the beginning of the poem "Questions". The phrase is both active and passive and presents the double aspect of the 'self' which is supported by a superscription, a verse from Mundaka Upanishad:

Two birds on the selfsame tree:
one of them eats the fruit of the tree,
the other watches without eating.

The allegorical meaning of this verse is quite clear. The eating bird represents the human soul, active in the pursuit of the worldly happiness and the non-eating bird is God. The God and the human soul are identical, take shelter on the same tree, and the wordless dialogue between the two takes the form of tableau. In Ramanujan's poem, however, the identical birds are the two parts of the same self and the theme is the problem of attachment and non-attachment which figures in two or three poems of the previous collections. The questions asked in the first part of the poem were also asked in the previous poems. But in this poem the tone of the questions is serious and all the questions together shed light on the area
of 'the cruelties of earthly light', the predicament of this world. The watchers simply watch 'in the black patience of stone elephants' under 'the grey rains of June'.

The poem "Watchers" takes up all these issues once again. The image of 'watchers' is further developed. They are 'lighter than light, blowing like air through key holes', a detail which adds a sinister touch to the intention of the watch. The watchers 'watch without questions' and 'they watch even the questions'. The other part of the self as usual is active in the mess of haphazard experiences of the world including the senseless cruelty. 'A dog who groaned human in his sleep and barked at spiders' recalls 'a favourite dog eating puppies in the garden' of the poem "Questions".

The second part of the poem describes the 'watchers' in a more detailed way. 'They impose nothing, take no positions', the impartiality being 'the mark of superior beings'. 'They can watch a game of chess silently' - a detail which is interesting because it suggests wisdom without any involvement. But when they watch 'a Chinese wall cemented with the bonemeal of friends and enemies' the picture changes assuming sinister hues. The watchers are 'Unwitting witnesses, impotence their supreme virtue' and lastly 'they move only their eyes, and all things seem to find their form. The watchers are 'mere seers, they make the scene'. We do not know from the poem
whether the watchers although superior, are supernatural beings or not. But watching and waiting are both passive actions and they smack of transcendental qualities. Both watching and waiting need an object and the object is never allowed to change its objectness. Watching a game of chess although seemingly an innocuous action gives the game of chess its form by watching and it can never change its form as long as the watching lasts. Form is the meaning of an object, its only identity. The watchers are 'unwitting witnesses' and their impotence is their supreme virtue. That is why they are 'mere seers', and 'they make the scene'. What is interesting here is the ambiguity of the word 'seers'. The word suggests not only gods and sages but also dictators, murderers and huntsmen because what combines all these persons is the act of watching and waiting. The more impotent the dictators are the more cruel they become. The very superiority of a being can be his cruelty.

The interesting thing in all this discussion is the plurality of meaning which an image can have. The self that experiences can be companion of the self that watches. The very possibility of this division of the self could be disastrous as well as benevolent, or both the categories of disaster and benevolence could be a product of our own interpretation. And the very act of interpretation could be cruel. The act of interpretation, the main purpose of which is a
search of meaning, can use all means of exploitation to
discover meaning. Examined in the light of this connection
the poem "Connect" becomes more significant. The poem pleads
against interpretation. You can connect things and events
that happen in the world and can mistake the picture of the
pieces of a jigsaw puzzle for the image of a complete truth.
But "my watchers are silent as if they knew my truth is in
fragments". This truth which is in fragments has something
to do with multiplicity of meaning and the tentative nature of
truth. The self which is protean must know that the truth
also is relative. The poem gives a full and detailed picture
of the predicament in which the modern poet finds himself. For
the complete understanding of this predicament one should read
the penetrating study of the same by Erich Heller in his essay
"The Hazard of Modern Poetry".

"Another aspect of Ramanujan's poetry", says Chirantan
Kulashreshtha, which deserves to be noticed is his occasional
use of narrative mode to render the nuances of particular
experience". Barring two or three poems in English and
Kannada Ramanujan has not produced any full-fledged narrative
poems. But he does use the narrative mode in his lyrics, as
Chirantan Kulashreshtha has said, "to render the nuances of a
particular experience", as he uses in a short poem entitled
"History". The chief statement of that poem is "History which
usually changes slowly changes sometimes, during a single conversation*. The irony of this statement is quite obvious and the striking wit makes it authentic. But the poem wants to prove it through an event which has the elements of a parable. It is the protagonist who is the chief narrator who realises the truth of this statement. He remembers what his mother once said during a casual conversation. The narrator was an eye witness to the situation which was afterwards narrated to him by his mother. He was an 'unwitting witness', he had seen his little aunt beneath the cot trying to find out something. The narrator had not understood the situation then which he later understood when his mother told him all about that. What the mother told him was that the two daughters or the great aunt had picked the dead body clean of her jewellery.

The truth which was realised by the protagonist alters the history and this sudden change of history allows the protagonist to have a profound insight into the evil of human nature. Two daughters picking the dead body of their mother clean - this situation is disgusting. But what was the little aunt doing beneath the cot? There is no satisfactory answer to this question. The poem has the structure of a parenthesis. The last four lines of the poem complete what the first ten lines state. In between is the event of the past full of confusions caused by the death of an old woman and the
vagaries of human memory. The two daughters, 'one dark one
fair' acquire the stature of the characters of a folk-tale,
a simple symbolic device which becomes complex by the narrative
mode. The narrative codes of this poem are also simple enough.
Picking the body clean is an event which destroys all emotional
value of human relationships. The gold in the teeth of the
dead woman and the silver g-string on which she wore her nap­
kins create disgust in the minds of the orthodox widows who
bathed her body. The cleaning of the dead body acquires a
sinister significance because the body was cleaned twice. The
poem tries to expose the taboos and the wickedness of a social
system. The personal death of a woman exposes the customs,
attitudes of a society and also the savage instincts like
greed and cruelty of the human heart.

This poem cannot be called a narrative poem although
it uses the narrative mode to explore the meaning of history.
The effect of the poem is lyrical in the sense that it deals
with a single idea putting it in an emotional context. The
narrative aspect of the poem is meant for rendering the nuances
of a particular experience as Ramanujan many times has used
it in poems like "Still Another View of Grace" or "A Love
Poem for a "Wife I" etc. The narrative mode, in all such cases,
changes the personal into the impersonal by providing the
context of a story. The narrative mode deals with remembered
experience the contours of which are shaped by memory. It
must be noted that memory could be as creative as imagination. The lyrics of William Wordsworth are brilliant examples of poetry which is born out of remembered experience.

But Ramanujan has written very few poems which can be called narrative verse. The poem "At Forty", from his Second Sight can be examined here. The poem tells the story of a palace wrestler of Mysore, a teacher at a gymkhana. The story is told by one of the five disciples and the story deals with the defeat of the wrestler by another wrestler, 'a nobody from nowhere'. The poem begins with a description of the wrestler, his physical stature and his reputation as an invincible wrestler. Someone in the palace thought that the wrestler was in top form 'our state's very best'. They prepare him for a match in which he was sure to become a champion. One April day they take him out in a procession full of fanfare only to be defeated by 'a nobody from nowhere'. After that 'the teacher at the gym' walked away to the gym and buried himself neck deep in the red soil of the gym. After sometime he left the gym and never came back. We are told that now he works as a 'sulphurous foreman in a matchstick factory'.

The most interesting aspect of this poem is the image of the wrestler and it is the story of this image that becomes significant. The wrestler has all the qualities of a good wrestler - he has yellow moustache, bloodshot eyes etc etc -
and people do believe in his fury. The details of preparing the wrestler for the match are convincing, but they become ironical when we come to know that he is defeated.

They weigh him, measure his chest, his belly, his thigh, and they pat his treasure.  

The last detail - 'they pat his treasure' is surely mischievous, but at the same time it opens up another theme of the narrative poem. Physical strength has something to do with sexual verity and in order to retain that one has to exercise restraint. Consider the advice given by his followers:

No sex, they whisper, for even a look at your wife or that rumoured Muslim mistress will drain your power, loosen your grip.

It is these people who advise him restraint 'pat his treasure'. Perhaps they are satisfied when they see that he is unmoved. But there is no way to know whether it is restraint or impotence. The wrestler has a wife and also 'a rumoured Muslim mistress', but apart from this we do not know anything about his sexual exploits. The title of the poem should now help us to unravel the mystery. The wrestler is forty and he is no more young. The details of the wrestling match are also significant from this point of view. Wrestling becomes a
kind of copulation which is also a kind of wrestling. If the Jatti is the chief image of the narrative, wrestling its chief event. Wrestling at forty is as difficult as sex at forty.

The ending of the poem depicts the decline of the wrestler. A wrestler working as a 'sulphurous foreman in a matchstick factory' is surely ironical. Sulphur reminds his 'yellow moustache' and 'matchstick' is a caricature of the anatomical structure of the wrestler.

What is important about this poem is the fact that the narrative pattern is not used for a lyrical purpose but it functions as a narrative pattern. The constant use of the present tense is not misleading but it suggests that the present tense of the story in stead of being tentative becomes as decisive as the past tense. The story belongs to the past, even the Mysore palace is a thing of the past. The story has a definite beginning and a definite ending so that the pattern becomes meaningful and complete. The very uncertainty of certain details, for example, the description of the champion as 'nobody from nowhere' - is a part of the narrative device to suggest the vulnerability of the wrestler and also to retain the characteristics of hearsay. The plot of the narrative functions as the basic metaphor and therefore it is capable of a multiplicity of meanings. The wrestler who
is an individual with a personal history emerges as an image of physical strength and power and the image is allowed to run its course that is developed into a metaphor. In the beginning the wrestler has cat's eyes and yellow moustache - a symbol of his fury, and at the end eyes become bloodshot and the yellow moustache droops. This change powerfully depicts the loss of confidence and an utter sense of frustration of the person. The definiteness of these details is in contrast with the details of the champion who defeats him.

and sat upon by a nobody from nowhere,

a black hulk with a vulgar tiger's name

strutting in pink satin shorts 48.

The master has no name, he is called only 'Jatti (Wrestler) of Mysore' but his identity is certain. But the champion has 'a vulgar tiger's name'. The adjective 'vulgar' covers two nouns, still describing nothing.

Frustration in sex and defeat in wrestling are both identical, because both are effective in destroying the personal confidence. The wrestler's identity is in tact as long as he does not wrestle. His action does not fulfil what his body promises. This message which is at the heart of the narrative is capable, I believe, of a plurality of meanings.

"At Forty", is sad poem and the sadness although subdued by the comic details, is overwhelming.
"A Minor Sacrifice" another narrative in **Second Sight** is more serious and more intellectually challenging. According to the superscription the poem is written in the memory of My Lai 4. What happened in My Lai was the unnecessary massacre of children by the quarreling political parties. But the poem tells a different story. Shivanna who is a ring-leader of some boys tells them of a grand plan of ridding the world of scorpions by sacrifice. He tells them to collect one hundred live grasshoppers and kill them to appease the twelve-handed god of scorpions. The children agree and get ready to collect grasshoppers. But Shivanna doesn't join them. The children collect the grasshoppers and preserve them in jars where they lie still or are dead. Next day the children come to know about Shivanna's sudden death and the way he died.

This rather long poem is divided into five sections and there are different strands of the same narrative, all linked thematically and metaphorically, or what Ramanujan has said in a different context, by a process of 'metonymous metaphor'. The mythical story of Parikshit, 'the mischievous king in the epic', is told in its bare essentials, without the moral implications of the narrative links of the great epic:

I'd just heard that day
of the mischievous king in the epic
who kills a snake in the forest
and thinks it would be such fun
to garland a sage’s neck
with the cold dead thing,
and so he does,
and promptly earns a curse,
an early death by snakebite.

His son vows vengeance
and performs a sacrifice,
a magic rite
that draws every snake from everywhere,
till snakes of every stripe
begin to fall
through the blazing air
into his altar fires.

Parikshit had killed a snake in sheer wantonness and
earned a curse from a humiliated sage. Parikshit died an
erly death by snakebite. His son Janamejaya vows vengeance
and is determined to rid the earth of snakes; performs a sacri-
fice and all the snakes fall into his altar fire. What emerges
from this bare narration is the pattern of revenge and the use
of magical and religious rite, an equivalent of 'witch craft'.
The snakes are used here by human beings. Parikshit used a
dead snake to humiliate the sage and the sage used another
live snake to destroy Parikshit. Janamejaya in order to take
revenge destroyed all the snakes in a sacrifice. Penance,
curse and sacrifice are religious rites, but their purpose
here seems to be to destroy others. This mythical story told
by the protagonist serves as a prototype of the main event that takes place later in the poem.

Section I presents the Uncle of the protagonist who is totally committed to non-violence.

Then that day, Uncle, of all people, a man who shudders at silk, for he loves the worm, who would never hurt a fly but catch it most gently to look at it eye to eye and let it go.  

This ironical description of a non-violent person reminds us of other poems by Ramanujan like "A Hindoo: he doesn't hurt a Fly, or a Spider either" etc. The same Uncle 'suddenly strikes the first summer scorpion on the wall with the ivory dragon-head of his walking stick'. The image of the ivory dragon-head of the walking stick is filled with suppressed violence, as ivory like silk is a product of human violence. The dragon-head carved out of ivory and attached to a walking stick which is a deadly weapon of the non-violent uncle is another powerful image of violence.

The imagery of this part needs a thorough examination. It would be a simplification to say that these images are not decorative but functional. They are functional, no doubt, but they are something more than functional. Ramanujan in his
"Afterword" to Poems of Love and War describes them as metonymous metaphors. Metonymy, according to Roman Jacobson is based on 'contiguity' and metaphor on 'similarity'. The walking stick of the uncle with an ivory dragonhead is a highly involved image which functions as metonymy, because it is a part of the uncle's person and a symbol or a metaphor because it resembles the physical stature of the uncle. Walking stick is not a killing stick, still you can strike and kill a scorpion with it.

The portrait of the uncle, it seems, is not completely devoid of sympathy. He is aware and also afraid of the 'ripe yellow poison bead behind the sting'. The grandmother tells the children how 'a pregnant scorpion will look for a warm secret place ...... and then will burst her back to let loose in her death a host of baby scorpions'. This is a very popular legend about the scorpion and is a favourite metaphor for many Indian poets to probe into the curious relation of death with birth. But the Grandmother who is afraid of the scorpion myth tut-tuts like a lizard, another insect which has a natural antipathy with the scorpion. The uncle gives a long and detailed description of the development of these baby scorpions. 'They glow like hand carved rubies from Peking, redder than garnet ... and when they grow big they take on the colour of gray China Jade:' This translation of violent scorpions
into stones used for jewellery, in association with the 'ivory dragonhead', suddenly lights up a vast area of human experience - the alienation of man from nature, his shift from nature to culture, his greed for beautiful stones and his hatred of wild animals.

Section I is only the prologue of the narrative which begins at Section II. Shivanna asks the protagonist the basic question - 'wouldn't you like to rid the world of scorpions if you could?' The answer to this question is a positive yes. The problem of the protagonist is how could one do it. Shivanna's answer to this question is very simple, 'witchcraft'. Then he explains

"We can make them come at our bidding when the sun is in scorpio, like guests to a wedding, into the bole of this very tree. And they will burn in a bonfire you and I will light."

Shivanna's speech is as creative and efficacious as the curse of the sage, which is also a form of speech. When the sun is in Scorpio you can call all the scorpions into the bole of the neem tree. The description of the scorpions coming at the bidding of Shivanna reminds us of the description of mice running behind the Pied Piper of Hamelin, the similarity, it seems, is deliberate. Shivanna in his imagination creates the
twelve handed god of scorpions who loves grasshoppers as other gods would love 'goats and rice'. He advises the protagonist to collect one hundred grasshoppers to be sacrificed to the God of Scorpions. Sacrifice is a necessary rite in many religious cults of India even to this day. Even breaking a coconut before the image of a god is a sophisticated version of the ancient human sacrifice.

"One hundred live grasshoppers caught on a newmoon Tuesday.

But remember: no wings on those things.
Catch them next Tuesday,

and I'll show you twigs on this tree
that will drip with scorpion legs."\(^{56}\)

A rite whether religious or magical has its own laws. It is these laws which rationalize the workings of savage instincts. The combination of the newmoon and Tuesday as that of the Sun and the Scorpio is not only auspicious but also helps the sacrificer to be free from the taint of evil. But Shivanna who acts as the highpriest of this sacrifice refuses to go with the children for collecting grasshoppers. He is only an instructor. 'I am busy. Take Gopu with you. You'll need three jars'.\(^{59}\)

Section III describes the hunting of grasshoppers by the children. They steal three pickle jars and go over to the lawn to catch them. They become expert gamesmen by noon. They
learn to distinguish the twigs from the twig-like insects which sham dead. This part of the poem is a simple description of the hunt and the children learning the ways of the insects. The image of the twig-like insects shamming dead is a little amazing because it suggests the defence mechanism of the little creatures at the face of death. The grasshoppers with 'tiny compasses for thighs' and 'movie-star goggles for eyes' can scare the other tiny creatures but they are helpless at the hands of savage children.

By evening we have ninety-nine.
The hardest is the last,
may be because they too are learning.

By the time the children have caught ninety-nine grasshoppers, they are completely exhausted and that is why the last catch is the hardest. Or, perhaps, the creatures have begun to learn. But this detail recalls the performance of one hundred horse-sacrifices by the ancient kings in which the kings found the last sacrifice most difficult. If any king succeeded completing all the hundred sacrifices, surely he would have become Indra. Therefore Indra always put an obstacle either by hiding the sacrificial horse or by using some other trick. This sacrifice performed by adults also involved violence on a large scale.
The children spend the night in anxiety with the jars of grasshoppers under Gopu's bed thinking of 'the savage innocent dreams ... of every punishment in the narrow woodcut columns of the yellowing almanacs of Hindu hells'. Presumably they are all Brahmin children, averse to killing and terribly afraid of the punishment in hell after their death.

The children hear the news of Shivanna being admitted to the hospital next morning. He has taken sick with some strange twitching disease. Shivanna dies.

Uncle says later,
'Did you know, that Shivanna, he clawed and kicked the air all that day, that newmoon Tuesday, like some bug on its back?'

The death of Shivanna who suffered from a strange twitching disease raises many issues. He died like 'a bug on its back', very much like the grasshoppers that were killed in the jar. According to the Hindu theology the punishment in the hell is always the same as the sin committed. The punishment is almost the mirror-image, hundred times more magnified of the form of the sin. For example, if you refuse to give water to a thirsty person, then in the hell you suffer from
unending thirst. This moral law is irrevocable.

When we look closely at the moral of the poem, the form of the poem is recreated. The form is that of a parable - a parable which has an inner moral structure. Again the description of Shivanna's death raises another moral issue. If hunting is sinful then the children who hunted the grasshoppers should have suffered because they were actively involved in the game of hunting. Shivanna had not joined them. The non-involvement of Shivanna becoming a greater sin than the actual hunting brings a more profound aspect of morality into light.

But it is the grasshoppers which died unnecessarily that makes us think. The very morality of sacrifice is being questioned. The snakes in the mythical episode and the grasshoppers become innocent victims for the sake of others. Can this death be regenerative? It is a question that doesn't get a satisfactory answer.

Another important aspect of this poem is its imagery. The poem is full of insects, some of them are poisonous and others are simply innocent. The snake becomes a garland and the scorpions become rubies or China jade. Snakes and grasshoppers are important characters of the parable since they are the victims. But it is the image of man as hunter that is disturbing. They behave worse than the other creatures. The
grandmother tuttuts like a lizard; the uncle shakes his head like a marmoset; Shivanna beams like an ebony turtle and dies like a bug on its back. From this point of view the poem reminds us of another Kannada poem in the second collection, on the world of insects.

The interplay of the insect images in this poem serves the narrative purpose of the poem as we have seen it already. But these images also become what Ramanujan calls, 'language within language'.

"the landscapes, the personae, the appropriate moods, all become a language within a language. Like a native speaker, he makes 'infinite use of finite means', to say with familiar words what has never been said before; he can say exactly what he wants to, without even being aware of the ground rules of his grammar."

The snakes, the scorpions and the grasshoppers belong to a world which is different from the world of men and women. It is said, "A tiger is cruel but not so artistically cruel as man". The ivory dragonhead of the uncle's walkingstick, the mantras, the curses and the pickle jars are symbols of man's artistic cruelty.
I have used many poems for analysis from Ramanujan's *Second Sight* and it has a reason. The poems in this collection display a maturity of thought and expression and a perfectly ordered area of meanings suddenly opens up when we analyse these poems. The poems in the earlier collections also attempted to do the same, but the effort succeeded fully in the third collection. It is possible to select masterpieces from the earlier collections and pay individual attention to each of them. But the poems of *Second Sight* are all interlinked and the whole collection has a unity of thought and purpose. The poetic method of Ramanujan is not that of a Romanticist, of revealing a world of meanings in a sudden flash of imagination. On the other hand the poetic self of Ramanujan uses a tortuous but a sure method of selecting, rejecting, and evaluating each detail of experience and then rearranging them to create another world of meanings.
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