

EUROPEAN INFLUENCES ON MODERN TAMIL POETRY— BHARATHI AND THE EUROPEAN POETS *

K. KAILASAPATHY

In dealing with European influences on Modern Tamil Poetry, with particular reference to Bharathi, I shall in this paper consider and concentrate on the Romantic movement, which probably, has been the most important influence to come from the West. My overall approach is both theoretical and documentary. I shall not try to cover all the ground. The main features of the influence and the manner in which the Romantic elements inspired many Tamil writers to reach out for artistic fulfilment will be indicated. The various parts of the general movement will be delineated and traced to their sources of inspiration. The remarkable endurance of the Romantic elements in Tamil culture, often unrecognized and unquestioned but nonetheless germane to much of the literary effusion, is in itself proof of the relevance of these elements to our modern movement. Every so often, there occur in the arts certain major eruptions which seem to affect all their products and radically change their temper. European Romanticism is a convenient illustration.

The origin of the word Romantic is too well known to need restatement. However, since there is no indigenous Tamil word synonymous with it, and as I have just said, the impact of Romanticism has resulted in the marking off much of modern Tamil literature from the literature of the previous period, a general explanation of the original meaning of the word and its semantic extensions will be useful. It is interesting to contemplate on the fact that while appropriate terms have been coined in our language for Classicism, Realism, Naturalism and such other technical ex-

* A revised version of a paper read at the Evelyn Rutnam Institute, Jaffna, on March 3, 1982, commemorating the Birth Centenary of Subramania Bharathi.

pressions, a satisfactory and acceptable word coextensive in sense for Romanticism is yet to be found. I am sure the implications of this merit some thought. But I should not tarry too much at this point. And I do not wish to give the impression that in saying this I know the reasons. Perhaps one difficulty is that Romanticism means not one but many things. That will, I hope, become clear in the course of my discussion.

Romanticism as a movement flourished in Europe in the Nineteenth Century although its beginnings were in the last quarter of the preceding century. As often happens different people prefer different dates. Ernst Fischer for instance argues that Romanticism was the dominant attitude of European Art and literature from Rousseau's *Discourses* until *The Communist Manifesto* of Marx and Engels.¹ From Europe the movement spread to America. As a result it was a European and American movement broadly pervading through the literary and artistic effort of more than a century—if we take into account its prelude and the aftermath of the main achievements. Being a pan-continental and trans-continental movement its efflorescence varied from country to country both in time and degree. But everywhere it manifested a strong reaction to existing cultural and artistic norms and values. Generally speaking Romanticism as a European phenomenon lasted from about 1780 and 1850. By mid Nineteenth Century the major figures associated with the movement were dead: Byron, Shelley, Blake, Keats, Scott, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Hazlitt, Pushkin, Lermontov, Goya, Buchner, Chateaubriand, Beethoven, Chopin, Schubert, Bellini, Balzac, Stendhal, Goethe, Schiller, Kleist, Novalis, and Wackenroder.²

What is to be borne in mind is that hardly any creative endeavour was left untouched by these Romantics: literature, painting, sculpture and music of course benefited most. As has been pointed out by Jacques Barzun, all the forms, ideas perceptions, tendencies, *genres* and critical principles had been put forward which the rest of the nineteenth century was to make use of in its further development.³ In terms of their attitudes and actions the following may be recapitulated: in poetry the Romantics chose to admit all words in contrast to what may be called a specialized poetical diction. By 'all words' was meant the 'language such as men do use'; in mythology a departure was made from the sole reliance on the Classical, that is, Graeco-Roman, to Celtic and Germanic; in drama they reacted to the strict adherence to the classical "rules" of the unities and exercised great freedom in handling observable diversities; (it is to the lasting credit of the Romantic generation that it admired Shakespeare and extolled his artistic greatness); in painting they rejected the prescription of the Academy which restricted them to antique subjects and took in a new range of subjects and new artistic methods; in music defying the rules prohibiting "the use of certain chords, tonalities, and modulations" they exploited the sound of instruments in order to achieve musical effects; (the secularization of sacred music was to a large extent accomplished by Romantics); in their attitude to the past, they repudiated the prevalent assumption that nothing

worthy had taken place after the fall of the Roman Civilization; they rediscovered the Middle Ages and drew sustenance from them. The novels of Walter Scott (1771-1832) particularly the historical novels, which he practically invented exemplify this aspect of the Romantics' interest. In fact one of the salient aspects of the Romantic movement was its serious concern with history. The reverence for the past shown by some of the Romantics is really remarkable. In their response to cities and urban centres the Romantics shared certain common features. They travelled to far off lands and continents and gave a new dimension and literary respectability to the word "exotic"; (it is a well-known fact that German Romantics like Schelling, Schleiermacher, Goethe, Schiller, Novalis, Schlegel and others responded to the discovery of Indian Culture with cries of ecstasy); their inclusiveness in accommodating folk arts that were despised by the earlier period gave an impetus to the flowering of new art forms enriched by the influx of folk literature and folk music. When we come to religion and politics too the Romantics were unorthodox in many ways. Not all of them were conformists and some of them were non-believers.

While these were the chief characteristics and positive contributions of the Romantic movement it must also be remembered that it was at the same time basically the result of a conscious revolt against the rigid but impotent conventions and rules of Neo-Classicism. This deliberate revolt against dead habit and decadent tradition gave the Romantics a sense of struggle or as Goethe put it, a feeling of strife meaning resistance, opposition and eventual success or failure. Although many Romantics suffered from a deep feeling of melancholy and were often pessimistic, there were others who were imbued with voluntarism, which was a characteristic feature of romantic art. Byron's poetry reverberates with it.

Throughout the 19th Century educational horizons were widening in India. Beginning from the days of Macaulay's reforms in 1835 all higher education in India had been conducted in English. The aim of the British rulers was to bring up a class of men who would be "Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinion, in morals and in intellect". For this purpose and as a result of a conscious policy of discouraging too much of "scientific" education for the natives, a classical type of curriculum was encouraged by the Britishers. "Right away, this new educational system was weighted down by an almost exclusive emphasis on literary pursuits, as distinct from scientific and technical instruction".⁴ Everything was well set for the Europeanization of India's elite. In 1854 every province had seen the creation of a Department of Public Instruction which tried to help schools run on Western models. Thus in the 1850s the study of the English language and its great literature by the Tamil elite became a matter of course. And through the English language a contact was established with the literatures of Europe. It is true that although the Tamil elite felt attracted to the English language and studied with avidity, they never became Anglicized to the extent that some Bengalis were swept off their feet. But there was sufficient necessity to study English since it was coming to the forefront under the British administration.

So when the study of English was taken up earnestly by Tamils, who like all others under British rule, thought it held the key to the power and prestige of the British people in India, it was mainly the literature of the Romantic period that was immediately available to them. Of course the literature of the previous ages were no doubt there, and were eagerly studied, but the past itself was rediscovered and selected and presented by the Romantics. What Buddha Deva Bose (1908-1974) says in connection with Bengali literature may *mutatis mutandis* be said of the Tamil context:

This predisposition, as we might call it, was nowhere more manifest than in literature; it was the literature of Europe, rather than its physical or social sciences which, for the Bengali mind, had extraordinary, elixir-like qualities. Indeed, the elixir was at first used as an intoxicant, for it was really Shelley and Shakespeare that our ancestors got drunk on, sherry and champagne being merely pretexts. Shakespeare, Shelley and Blake, the literature of the English tongue, this from the beginning, is what England has meant to certain sections of Bengalis, and in the politically disanglicized future, will mean to increasingly larger numbers. This has been an inspiration in the literal sense: our literature was in-spirited and renescent.⁶

While the new educational system generated a strong inclination towards English certain other things were also happening, the most important of which was the discovery of the ancient Tamil grammatical and literary works. The *Sangam* corpus, *Tolkappiyam* and most of the post - *Sangam* works in particular were almost lost to the Tamil literary world by the Eighteenth Century which was on the whole a period of darkness and desolation for the Tamils.⁷ In this situation of degeneration and paralysis the discovery of the ancient texts came forth as a ray of light and hope. The modern movement was paradoxically enough partially fecundated by the springs of the ancient past. In many ways one can see an analogy between the European Renaissance and the Tamil awakening. It will be recalled that the influx of fugitive scholars from the Eastern Roman Empire bringing valuable manuscripts with them, contributed to the rediscovery of Latin writers like Catullus, Lucretius and the main body of Greek literature which led to a revival of classical studies and humanistic pursuits. Of course there were also other important factors that stimulated and assisted the Renaissance. But the impact of the rediscovered writings of classical antiquity and the revival of learning cannot be undervalued. They determined to a large measure the forms in which the Renaissance manifested itself. For instance the structural rigidity of the classical tragedy in Europe resulted from the influences of the early plays.

The rediscovery of *Tolkappiyam* and the *Sangam* poems gave a fillip to the notion of classicism among the Tamil scholars who at once equated it with the classicism of which their English mentors took such pride. As much as the Renaissance and post-Renaissance writers and artists in Europe fell under the spell of the

works and norms of classical antiquity, the Tamil scholars too, thought it fit to be governed by the prescriptions of the earliest works. In the minds of many Tamil scholars a sort of parity had been established between European and Tamil classicism.

It has been observed in the European context that Classicism was a movement aiming at uniformity. It was also elitist in attitude. Tolkappiyar's aphorism *ulakam enpatu uyarntor mette*, 'the term world denotes the noble ones' must have satisfied the ego of several English educated Tamil scholars who were privileged to have had that education and the attendant benefits. In imitating the early authors and adhering to the ancient grammars the neo-classicists of our recent past were seeking a stability within known limits. Given their social status they preferred certainty and stability in literary endeavour which gave them scope, high honours and satisfaction. That is one reason why many of the neo-Classicalists had a penchant for poetry than prose. Prose was still in the making and had no classical models to go by. Steeped as they were in a convention of bookish culture, they chose the metres for the several *genres* on the basis of similarity with ancient usage. Likewise their subjects too were generally didactic in character. They emphasized the efficacy of the rules or to put it in another way insisted on the priority of rule over meaning.

It was under these circumstances that the European Romantic movement began to attract the minds of many Tamil writers. They gravitated towards Romantic faith as a result of the failure of neo-Classicism to satisfy their felt needs. But more important was the immense upheavals that were taking place in the society and consequently in the minds of men. The longing for freedom—both physical and psychological—was tormenting many sensitive persons. As the Romantic Shelley himself said of his time, many were moved by "a passionate desire to transform the world." Boris Suchkov has described the essence of the artistic leap from Classicism to Romanticism.

Romanticism was extremely sensitive to the mobility and pulse of history and, breaking with the canons of Classicism, the static form of Classical works, and with the objective form of realist works, it made subjective freedom of expression its banner, regarding only the free soaring fantasy of the writer, not subject to any laws or prescriptions, as being capable of presenting the dynamics of life. Indeed, the works of romanticists reveal a free treatment of composition, liberties taken with the order of narration, and a free choice of place and time for the action. The authors' presence is felt throughout, and many romantic works are really protracted monologues. The feelings in romantic poetry are intensified and exaggerated, and on the whole romanticism concentrates on man's inner world looking on life and history as the theatre in which people's passions and ideas are realised, determining by their fortuitous play and flux, the flux of life.

By now it would have become clear how much of modern Tamil literature answers these descriptions. There are two ways by which we can hope to see the dynamics of an artistic movement: the manner in which it affects the lives of the artists and the extent to which it permeates their creativity. By Romantic life we generally mean a person's deep concern with ideas and things and a passion for realising his aspirations in action—by changing the world or the self. This passion and energy for action can be seen in the Artist's chosen means—studies, researches, involvements, sacrifices and political options. Partly resulting from this passion for involvement and action was the proverbial unhappiness of the Romantic, often due to unhappy love, invalidity, opiate addiction, poverty or persecution. This suffering in turn induces self-pity and egocentric display. The crux of the matter is that the Romantics felt it impossible to go on writing almost entirely in conventions that were already well accepted, and felt that new conventions were urgently needed and had to be created. These remarks, obvious as they may seem, are meant to serve as a convenient framework to what follows. For I wish to discuss Bharathi who may be described as generally representative of the Romantic movement.

Now, Bharathi very deliberately turning his back on what our neo-Classicists of the late Nineteenth Century found "poetic", tried to create his own idiom, although it must be remembered that certain poets within the confines of the religious tradition—like Gopalakrishna Bharathi (c. 1785-1875) and Ramalinga Swami (1823-1874)—were intuitively tending towards it.

Bharathi's verse, finding the prevailing forms and metres inadequate to cope with his new creative impulses, breaks through the rigidity of convention and reaches out to the common man. Bharathi analysed the causes of decay of poetry in Tamil. In an article titled *Punarjanmam*, 'Rebirth', in the sense of Renaissance, he wrote as follows:

Books of ancient times were written in the language then in vogue. As times change, language too changes, old words became obsolete yielding place to new ones. Poets should adopt words that will be clearly understood by the people of their age. Different epochs require different expressions. Good poetry is that which conveys exquisite inner visions in easy and elegant style. When poetry becomes obscure or ornate it ceases to be enjoyable and will repel the populace.

Elsewhere he said, certainly referring to the neo-Classical verses, "sincerity disappeared giving place to mere verbal embellishments. But the great Kamban thought differently when he compared the bright, clear cool flow of the Godavari to great poetry". His most lucid proposition on the language of poetry was made in the Preface to *Panchalisabatham*, 'Vow of Panchali' (1910):

He who produces an epic in simple style and diction, easily understandable metres and popular tunes will be infusing a new life into our language.

The meaning must be crystal clear even to the neo-literates; at the same time, the poem must not be wanting in the graces and refinements that are expected of an epic.

This was a new poetic manifesto—the manifesto of Tamil poetry of the 20th Century. I don't need to point out that Bharathi was consciously appealing to a general reading public away from the exclusive elite that chiefly read poetry when he began to write. He was describing a style simple to follow and to understand. Needless to say Bharathi's proclamation is reminiscent of the "advertisement" prefixed by Wordsworth to the volume of *Lyrical Ballads* that he published with Coleridge in 1798. What was most provocative in Wordsworth's definition was his intent to choose modest and familiar themes, subjects drawn from "humble and rustic life" expressed in "the real language of men". I don't want to make too much of the resemblance between the theory of poetry of Wordsworth and Bharathi, but the similarity is striking and relevant. What is significant is the recognition that poetic modes reflect the degree of the poet's self-awareness and self-knowledge. Bharathi belongs to an overall reawakening of consciousness and self-conscious modernization that took place in India. Poets in other Indian languages shared this trend, proclaiming a "new sensibility, a new meaning, a new abundance" in poetics.

"This intellectual awakening was bound, sooner or later, to percolate down into the world of action and politics", for, "all the great movements of our century, in India as elsewhere in Asia, are all inclusive movements, grounded at first on a blind revolt against the forcible imposition of a western culture that is finally rejected, and then on a search for a new world outlook in which ethics, economics, social structures, politics and religion are all bound together".⁸ It is not surprising therefore, that Bharathi too had this all inclusive 'weltanschauung'. Patriotism in his poetry is metamorphosed into a new religion. The poem 'To Liberty' illustrates this. Politics pervaded his entire being. Even in his most subjective personal moments his imagination is firmly rooted in the mundane realities of the world around him—a world of nationalist aspirations, political persecution and subterfuge. Bharathi maintains fluid lines between his personal and public experiences. For instance, while writing of his adolescent love in 'Autobiography', a poem that shows him in one of his intense lyrical moments, he compares his avid anticipation of his loved one, with that of the British spies waiting in stealth for freedom fighters to pass. The intensity of his longing transcends mere adolescent nostalgia and transforms itself into a mature realistic experience. Likewise, in *Ka man Pattu*, 'The Song of Krishna', while dwelling on the image of Lord Krishna as the father, he cannot help but bring vignettes of contemporary political life—of baton charges and prison life. Bharathi's poetic imagination with its simultaneous response to the ethereal and the earthly takes politics in its stride. For he could sing fiery lyrics of resurgent nationalism in the same breath as he sings poems of mysticism. Now if we turn to the Western Romantics, especially the English Romantics we see them as active agents in the spreading of political doctrines. Crane Brinton in *The Political Ideas of the English Romantics* makes the following statement:

In the first place, romanticism as a way of thought is a part of that vast change in men and things, the Revolution, and as such has many links with the political changes of the Revolution . . . Almost to a man, the English romanticists were actively interested in politics. It is just here that the political opinion of men of letters become especially valuable.

Although Bharathi was, unique in this, among his Indian contemporaries, yet he can easily be assimilated into the world tradition of romantic poetry. Ernst Fischer says, "Romanticism meant rebellion pure and simple, a trumpet call to the people to rise against foreign and homebred oppressors, an appeal to national consciousness, a struggle against feudalism, absolutism and foreign rule. Thus Byron responded to the distant struggle for Greek independence. Shelley felt for the underdog in Ireland, Greece and other parts of the world. He had a passion for reforming the world, to purge the world of exploiters and oppressors

"Kings, priests and statesmen blast the human flower
Even in its tender bud; their influence darts
Like subtle poison through the bloodless veins
of desolate society"

His *Queen Mab* was sweeping in its condemnation of kings, nobles, priests and judges. Like Shelley, Bharathi too was imbued with the spirit of freedom and was equally ecstatic of people in other lands fighting against brute force and tyranny. Bharathi's poem 'New Russia' seems to have been considerably influenced by Shelley's *Ode to Liberty* and Byron's *Ode to Napoleon Bonaparte*. The poetic recapturing of scenes of the past in *Isles of Greece*—Don Juan—is present in Bharathi's poem *Endaiyum Thayum*. When Bharathi says, "It was on this land, our mothers as maidens spent moonlit nights in dance and frolic" one finds distinct echoes of the following lines in *Isles of Greece*.

The Isles of Greece, the isles of Greece
where burning Sappho loved and sung,
where grew the arts of war and peace
where Delos rose, and Phoebus sprung
Eternal summer gilds them yet . . .

Speaking of Byron it may be worthwhile to note that of all the English romanticists he was the one to be held in high esteem in Europe and elsewhere. The German Goethe acclaimed without any reservations that Byron's *Don Juan* was a "work of boundless genius". And Mazzini, himself a man of vision and action, said "Byron gave a European role to English poetry. He led the genius of England on a pilgrimage through Europe". There is no doubt that Byron who was one of the great emancipatory forces of Nineteenth Century Europe, was during the latter part of the Century and even at the beginning of the present Century giving its mood and colour to Indian literature. Perhaps he exerted the widest influence throughout India more than any English poet except Shakespeare. Arabin

Poddar's graphic account of Byron's influence on Bengali writers is applicable to other parts of India as well. In "Lord Byron and the Literary Renaissance in Bengal" he points out that besides H.L.D. Derozio (1809-1831), the poet leader of 'young Bengal', such outstanding poets and dramatists as Madhusudan Datta, Rangalal Bandyopadhyay, Hemchandra Bandyopdhyay, Nabinchandra Sen and D.L. Roy were deeply indebted to Byron.⁹

Bharathi's aestheticism drew sustenance from the English Nature Poets, especially John Keats. In *Kuyil Pattu*, 'The Song of Kuyil' (Cuckoo) there are definite traces of his acquaintance with Keats' 'Endymion' and 'Ode to a Nightingale'. On this I would like to mention Dr. V. Satchithanandan's perceptive article "Keats, Shakespeare and Bharathi's *Kuyil Pattu*" published in *Essays on Bharathi* (1962).

Bharathi expounds the lines of Keats—"Beauty is truth, truth, beauty" in one of his essays. This is not to maintain that Bharathi's appreciation of beauty was derived from external sources. During the dark period, Indian poets, owing to dire poverty, servitude and ignorance had almost forgotten the concept of beauty. In these circumstances the English romantic poets provided the impetus necessary for Bharathi to re-establish aestheticism in the mainstream of Tamil poetry. Thus in his passionate defence of freedom in all its forms—emancipation of the oppressed, the women, and the underdog, Bharathi's thoughts were penetrated by the same philosophy of expansion and democracy that inspired many European Romanticists. For instance, Shelley, whom as we all know, Bharathi admired and in some ways emulated, expected a great deal from women; not the women of his environment and time, but the new woman like Cythna who was also in Shelley's view the natural woman. Once woman is liberated she would become the most precious of allies. Shelley held that emancipated woman will help reconstruct the glorious new world. It has been pointed out by some scholars that Bharathi's *Puthumai Penni* is an amalgam of Shelley's new woman and the concept of *Shakthi* in the Indian tradition. On the whole it is generally agreed by students of comparative studies that in the pervading lyricism and aestheticism of his poems Bharathi had much in common with the English Romantic poets. Of course it must be remembered that they were not the only ones who enlivened and enlarged his vision.

Besides his voluntarism and the impelling hunger for freedom which were essentially in the realms of feeling and action, Bharathi also imbibed certain modes of literary expression from the Romantic poets, the most productive of them being the lyric. It is a commonplace of aesthetic criticism that lyricism was inseparably connected to European Romantic faith. Hegel in his *Aesthetics* accurately defined its essence:

Lyricism is a kind of basic element of romantic art, the tone in which the epos and drama also speak, and which pervades, like some universal aroma of the soul, even works of the plastic arts¹⁰.

Bharathi is essentially a lyrical poet. It is his lyrics that afford ample evidence of his greatness as a poet. Walter Pater considered lyric poetry to be "artistically the highest and most complete form of poetry" which is "precise because in it we are least able to detach the matter from the form, without a deduction of something from the matter itself". He felt that the very perfection of such poetry often appears to depend, in part, on a certain suppression or vagueness of mere subject, so that the meaning reaches us through ways not distinctly traceable by the understanding.¹¹ In his lyrics Bharathi achieved the immediate communication of a dominant emotion; "A stray word or gesture set his imagination afire, and out of the confrontation and explosion emerged a lyric perpetually alive in an orbit of its own". In one of his brilliant lyrical poems, 'Moonlight, stars and the wind' he speaks of poetic inspiration.

Here he comes, the angel of the wind, bringing to my ears the thousand and one sounds of men's life on earth. There is the voice of a bell swinging towards me, a dog barks, a beggar cries piteously for a handful of rice, somebody slams the street door, from the east floats the wailing of a conch, men talk and argue and quarrel, a child weeps—ah, who can count the notes that the wind brings? I sit and weave them all joyously into songs".

These are the concluding lines of a poem that begins with the poet urging his mind-bird to freely float in the sky, to reach out to the far star-cluster, and to speed across space in joyous frenzy. And then almost abruptly the poet listens to "the thousand and one sounds of men's life on earth". In a poem like this we see Bharathi making a voyage of the outer and of the inner world. The noteworthy fact about him is that his feet are firmly planted on the earth and his mind is often "voyaging through strange seas of thought alone". A perfect blend of the two voyages is to be found in his *Gnanaratham*, an allegorical work in prose that combines utopia and reality, bringing into full play the poet's descriptive powers. Here we have the source and strength of his poetry: the unique counterpoint of tumult and peace, of sublimity and mundane, the ethereal flight of the abstracting mind and the physiological responses that constitute the basic substance of the poet's imagination and impulse.

So much for the most salient features of romantic strains in Bharathi's life and poetry. But these and some other features are to be found, naturally enough, in the works of others too. Take for instance the lyric. Although the lyric found its first and best response in Bharathi, a few before him had already begun to prepare the ground. V. G. Suriyanarayana Sastry (1870-1903) had published two volumes of poems in 1901 and 1902. In spite of the very favourable opinion expressed by G. U. Pope who translated the forty-one 'short poems' in the first volume into English, there was little sign of its influence upon the mainstream of poetry in Tamil. The post-Bharathi generation has almost neglected it. The new poetic mood and taste found no place for Sastry. It is true that he broke some new ground in introducing the sonnet—a form eminently suited for lyricism. In fact

in his Preface the author spoke with adoration of Spenser, Milton and Shakespeare as great English poets who had enriched the sonnet adapted from Italian. However as the English translator himself candidly admitted, "these short poems could hardly with propriety be called sonnets". Besides the prosodical and other 'technical' factors which, in the eyes of the translator vitiated the quality of the poems, there wasn't the intense depth of feeling and the free play of imagination leading to special insight or intuitive perception. The interplay of insight and imagination is the predominant feature of Romantic poetry. However Sastriar's second volume showed certain changes. There is in these poems the note of veritable experience. Although the metre and the diction were conventional there was something personal that he was trying to express. The provenance of all the poems were actual experiences: death of his teachers, eminent personages, and close friends: walk on a beach; an evening near the lake; in memory of his mentor; and walk through the city. These had personal reference and meaning to him and did give some "indication of a new departure in Tamil poetry"; but he could never throw off the neo-classical influence upon him. His long rhymed lines were chaste and correct and at time quite expressive of certain moods, but compared to the short lyric measures of Bharathi one feels the absence of a higher musical quality. The value of his work remains chiefly academic and historical.

It is appropriate at this point, to say something of the nature poetry that abounds in Tamil in the modern period and which undoubtedly owes its main inspiration to the English Romanticists. As I mentioned a moment ago we already notice in Sastriar's poetry descriptive pieces that have no precedent for them. I need not dwell on the treatment and interpretation of nature in *Sangam* poetry. Scholars like T. P. Meenakshisundaram, Rev. X. S. Thaninayagam and M. Varadarajan have dealt with it. Clearly, the emphasis of nature in *Sangam* poems is as the necessary and sympathetic background or 'situation' for the human act. Nature has no independent existence on its own merit for its own sake. As Father Thaninayagam has aptly said, "the scenery was changed to keep in harmony with the human sentiments that were dramatized."¹² There was no indulging in nature description nor extolling of nature-rapture. It was as though the luxuriant tropical nature had to be kept under careful control by the human beings. Nature finds an insignificant place and role in the manifestly didactic works of the post-*Sangam* period. It finds an incidental role in the devotional hymns of Sambandhar in whom 'divine' nature generated the poetic spark and brought about the instant incandescence. But generally speaking the *bhakti* poets were animated by Puranic mythology rather than by natural scenery. The place of natural scenery in the epics is purely functional and in late medieval literature nature virtually disappears. Therefore the appearance of nature poetry in twentieth century Tamil is almost entirely due to the Western impact. And in this the influence of the Romanticists was of cardinal importance.

At about the time when Suriyanarayana Sastriar published his 'short poems' *Poets' Feast* (1902)—Subramania Bharathi began writing his first poems: *Thanimai irakkam* 'Sorrow in Loneliness', *Yan 'I'* and *Chandrihai*, 'Moonlight'. These, too, were sonnets. At first sight, these poems appear to be no different from those of Sastriar. Here is late Nineteenth Century elitist subject-matter, bookish and literary. The familiar features of scholastic style and form—archaisms of Vocabulary and syntax, conventional epithets, stock allusions and metrical patterns—that were to be seen in current works. For instance, the poem *Chandrihai* begins with the word '*yanar*' meaning freshness, goodness, fertility and new income. It is part of the *Sangam* diction. Young Bharathi himself must have given some thought about its usage. For in a footnote he has given a gloss; *yanar* means beauty. The Wordsworthian inspiration is evident. And yet a second glance at these early specimens gives an inkling of Bharathi's poetic craft. We get the impression that a more subtle process than the mere reproduction or worse, imitation of certain models is involved in his art. As Periyasami Thooran observed, already we can see Bharathi's poetic fire sparkling in these poems. Considering the totality of his work it is quite clear that Bharathi did not engage himself in pure descriptive poetry. Both in his lyrics and in the longer poems like *Kuyil Pattu* and *Panchali Sabatham* are interspersed exquisite passages exhibiting great power. And in these passages, the mature poet absorbs and re-creates some imageries and descriptions of English nature poets. I shall limit myself to one single illustration. Towards the end of the first canto in *Panchali Sabatham* the Pandavas are on their way to Hastinapura at the invitation of Dryodana. During the journey while resting, Arjuna takes Draupadi for an evening walk. Under the pretext of adhering to the epical requirement of describing the sun set, Bharathi allows Arjuna describe with the minuteness of a painter, "the modifications of effect as the sun goes down and the lights change." The passage shows Bharathi in one of his inspired moments. Not satisfied with his poetic portraiture he has added a prose description in the notes. While reading this glorious passage one is suddenly reminded of "An Evening Walk". The corresponding passage in Wordsworth's poem runs as follows:

How pleasant, as the sun declines, to view
 The spacious landscape change in form and hue!
 Here, vanish, as in mist, before a flood
 Of bright obscurity, hill, lawn, and wood;
 There, objects by the searching beams betrayed
 Come forth, and here retire in purple shade;
 Even the white stems of birch, the cottage white,
 Soften their glare before the mellow light;
 The skiffs, at anchor where with umbrage wide
 Yon chestnuts half the latticed boat-house hide,
 Shed from their sides, that face the sun's slant beam,
 Strong flakes of radiance on the tremulous stream.

To a careful observer Bharathi's evocatory passage will be oddly reminiscent but not all an echo of Wordsworth's poem. After Bharathi, nature poems have become regular subjects. Indeed hardly any volume of poetry comes out without containing a section 'on nature'. Such is the insistence on landscape as a subject—an important subject—for our poets that one has to remind oneself that the idea should be traced back to the English nature poets. In passing it may be noted, that the English nature poets had an original advantage which our moderns lack. Wordsworth and his contemporaries had a tradition of nature poetry before them and what is more crucial, were able to draw from the landscape painting of their day. The parallel that comes to my mind in the Tamil literary tradition, is one of an earlier time and belonging to a different context—the poetry of the *Bhakthi* poets whose descriptions of feminine figures were matched by the temple sculptures of their time.

Besides the Romantic poems on nature there were also other influences at work. The American poet Walt Whitman (1819-1892) wielded a considerable influence on the poetry of Bharathi. Bharathi was probably among the first of the Indian poets to experiment with *vers libre*. He says in his essay on Whitman¹³ "What is novel about the poetry of Walt Whitman is that it resembles prose in style. It is devoid of rhyme, alliteration and such poetic devices. Many poetical works belonging to the great languages of the world are in blank verse. Free verse is rare. Whitman believed that the meaning of poetry was in words, not in rhyme and therefore he wrote free verse, retaining only the rhythmic beauty of the language. In Europe he is considered equal to such great poets as Shakespeare, Milton, Dante and Goethe. Europeans treat him as one of the prophets of democracy. He is a *Mahan*, most distinguished seer, who fearlessly preaches the great truth that all are equal—men, women, and children." Sri Aurobindo was equally, if not more, laudatory in his remarks about Whitman. Here again we see the close resemblance in views between Bharathi and Aurobindo. In his "The Future Poetry" Aurobindo refers to Whitman several times in connexion with new trends in European and American poetry.

"Whitman's aim is consciously, clearly, professedly to make a great revolution in the whole method of poetry and if anybody could have succeeded it ought to have been this giant of poetic thought with his energy of diction, this spiritual crowned athlete and vital prophet of democracy, liberty and soul of man and Nature and all humanity. He is a great poet, one of the greatest in the power of his substance, the energy of his vision, the force of his style, the largeness at once of his personality and his universality."¹⁴

Rarely has Aurobindo lavished such praise on any one. Like Bharathi he too calls him a prophet of democracy and one of the greatest poets.

But while Whitman rejected metre as the vestige of feudalism, Bharathi never abandoned metre consciously. Metre was never regarded by him as a restraint on his poetic genius. On the contrary, Bharathi infused new vigour into traditional

metres and used them to suit his intention. However, Bharathi experimented with folk metres such as *Sindhu* and *Kanni*, thereby capturing in his verse the vibrancy and earthiness of the folk tradition. He extolled the elements of democracy, freedom and equality of the sexes found in Whitman's poetry. The pan-American vision of Whitman inspired in Bharathi a pan-Indian vision. *Bharatha Desam*: 'The Indian Nation' reminds a reader of Whitman's "Starting from Paumanak". Bharathi spans the length and breadth of India—from the snowy Himalayas to Cape Comorin—from Bengal to Indus in the same manner as Whitman covers the expansive United States. Likewise in *Thayin Manikkodi*, 'Flag of Motherland' one can see the influence of Whitman's "Song of the Banner at Daybreak".

Industry and manual labour are given pride of place by Bharathi. His several pieces on industry and labour can be paralleled with the Labor Songs of Whitman and the poems of the Belgian poet Verhaeren. Emile Verhaeren (1855-1916) foremost Belgian poet and art critic seems to have inspired Bharathi. It is almost likely that he had read him in French, a language he knew. For at that time Verhaeren was not translated into English and consequently was not widely known in the British colonies, let alone in Britain itself. In one of his essays Bharathi summarised Verhaeren's view thus: "Strength is beauty, beauty strength—the machine, the factory, the steam engine, the steamship, the air plane, the large cannon—everything is beautiful. Beauty is not determined by the external shape and form of things; Machines are powerful and hence there is inherent beauty in them". It is interesting to speculate as to what drew him toward the Belgian poet.¹⁶ Judging by his comments on Whitman (and despite certain difference in expression, there is remarkably close spiritual resemblance between Whitman and Verhaeren) it is probably that he liked his spirit of democracy. There were other aspects too that would have appealed to Bharathi. "Verhaeren accepted the poet's 'mission' as a personal responsibility and used his art to prove that he possessed the urgent sympathies, the partialities and convictions that belong to the critic and reformer of society. . . . Verhaeren arrives at an aesthetic appreciation of energy in the fullness and variety of its contemporary manifestations. His vision of Energy as the divine afflatus and characteristic beauty of the modern world, had for him the value of a redemptive illumination. . . . Energy is the regnant fact of today, the pregnant formula for to-morrow. Primary and most extensive of the eternal ideas, it is apparent on all sides, here disseminated in hands, arms, torsos, there unified in a serene and dominant brain. . . . For good or evil it is the driving power of all human effort. And beyond mankind, it vibrates throughout the material universe from the atom to the star".¹⁶

Verhaeren's originality was in the discovery of a "new beauty" in the industrial, urban world: strength, speed, size, fervour, will, ugliness, in short all the attributes of cities attracted him and constituted the substance of his poetry. To Bharathi who was striving to formulate a new aesthetic, Verhaeren's ideas must have been exhilarating. Bharathi says that men's conception of beauty is subject to evolution

DUPLICATE

and varies greatly at different epochs. European poets had erred in shunning the new reality of contemporary life. Bharathi was, in spite of the squalor and degradation of his country, an optimist. His optimism was born out of his deep religiosity and the Vedantic vision of the eternal harmony of the soul. Consequently when most of his contemporaries grew "ever more lifeless and languid, evermore secluded and disheartened, his voice grew ever more resonant and vigorous, like and organ indeed, full of reverence and the mystical power of sublime prayer".¹⁷

Bharathi's attraction for industry goes beyond a mere aesthetic appreciation of strength. It is interesting to note that in Tamil "*Shakti*" denotes not only the mother Goddess whom Bharathi worshipped but power as well. Bharathi saw *Shakti*—the moving force behind the universe—personified in the power of the machines. Since he saw in *Kali* not only the destructive force, but the creative and life-sustaining force as well, it was easy for him to identify with machines—the symbol of power on earth—positive values of growth and development. He foresaw industry creating a new society, giving birth to a new epoch. In his characteristic manner, he links this idea with the main-stream of Indian myths and symbols and elevates the workers to the status of creators *par excellence*, the counterparts of Brahma the Creator, the "living gods" on earth. Whatever his philosophical inclinations were and they were very important for him, his response was basically lyrical. "Lyricism is a kind of basic element of romantic art"¹⁸ and Bharathi is essentially a lyrical poet.

Once again one is reminded of Verhaeren. The sweep of the various sights and impressions kaleidoscopic in character was a technique Verhaeren used very effectively. Zweig's observation on Verhaeren is apt, "The poem surrenders itself to every feeling, every rhythm, every melody; it adapts itself, distends; with its foaming voluptuous joy it can fold in its embrace the ilimitable length and breadth of cities, can contract to pick up the loveliness of one fallen blossom, can imitate the thundering voice of the street, the hammering of the machines, and the whispering of lovers in a garden of spring. The poem can now speak in all languages of feeling, with all the voices of men; for the tortured moaning cry of an individual has become the voice of the universe. Only such a pantheistic feeling could create this intimate relationship between the world of self and the world surrounding self, the relationship which subsequently ends in an unparalleled identity".¹⁹

After examining the conditions under which he lived, suffered and worked, we come to the interesting problem of literary judgement; what is the relation between a writer's own personal sympathies and his literary achievement. In other words, how do we judge a writer? Is there an easy equation between his beliefs and his creations? The problem is a perennial one and is full of significance to our own times. I think Bharathi too poses this question. Although he was a Brahmin by birth, a staunch believer in God and religion, an idealist in philosophy, a pacifist in nature, and an individualist to the core, he has sung poems repudiating

every one of these. His subjective inclinations did not prevent him from perceiving the actual conditions around him and portraying them with accuracy and authenticity. In other words, in the case of Bharathi his realistic vision triumphed over his inert beliefs. My own feeling is that Bharathi's grasp of the essence of real historical process and social dynamics is the result of his artistic sincerity; they have found a place in his poems in spite of his conscious views.

Perhaps we should also consider the milieu in which he lived. He was particularly lucky in his times. While the impact of British rule was increasingly being felt and a pale imitative middle-class was emerging, there was still much of the old traditions that were sufficient to nourish a person who could get to their core. Bharathi was deeply rooted in the mores of his people and was never remote from them; and yet as a result of his self-acquired education (he never completed any formal examinations) could see his society and himself objectively. He could compose the most intricate forms of traditional—oral—poetry and at the same time maintain a 'journal' and write personal notes. Neither his education nor his knowledge of foreign languages distorted his personality. He shared with the readers and listeners of his poetry the mythologies, historical references, literary allusions and folk-motifs that gave a consensus between him and them. In one sense he was with them and in another without. As a result of this unique combination he displays a brilliance, energy and variety surpassing all other contemporaries. George Steiner's remarks on Shakespeare seem applicable here, "Thus Shakespeare could draw at will on medieval and modern, on the intricate weave of tradition and the forward motion of intellect. Many of his primary devices and conventions rely on this simultaneity of impulse".²⁰ By a similar process Bharathi succeeded in altering the landscape of our awareness by presenting the ancient and modern as if these had been lurking just under the smooth surface. His achievement ushered in Tamil literature into the mainstream of world writing. In being essentially national he transcended nationalistic boundaries and evolved as a truly universal poet.²¹

Notes

1. *The Necessity of Art* (Pelican Books) London, 1963. p. 53.
2. Jacques Barzun, *Classic, Romantic and Modern*, New York, 1961, p. 98.
3. *Ibid.* p. 99.
4. Amaury De Riencourt, *The Soul of India*, London, 1961. p. 290.
5. Buddhadeva Bose *An Acre of Green Grass*, Calcutta, 1948. pp. 60-61.
6. The pathetic state of traditional Tamil scholarship during the 18th and 19th Centuries is vividly described in an article in the *Siddhanta Deepika* (Nov. 1897). "Within our own times we know of a whole class of Pandits who neither knew nor heard of any of these Idylls except the first Tirumurugaruppadai, which, as part of the XL Book of Saiva lore, has even been popular,

though not well learnt and understood by all. When *Maturaikkanchi* was first introduced as a text for the B.A. Examination of 1894, we know of even Pandits of first grade Colleges who were grumbling and murmuring against it. We know also of some cases in which some Pandits, who owned stray copies (Mss.) of some of these Idyls, gave up in despair all hopes of deciphering what the nature of their contents were. Even in print now, these are only bitter cups in the hands of some of the otherwise able scholars”.

7. *A History of Realism*, Moscow, 1973. pp. 75-7.
8. Riencourt, op.cit. pp. 296-298.
9. *Indian Literature* (Proceedings of a Seminar) ed. Arabinda Poddar, Simla, 1972. pp. 116-124.
10. Quoted by Suchkov, op. cit. p. 76.
11. Walter Pater, “The School of Giorgione” in *The Renaissance* (Modern Library Edition) pp. 110-111.
12. Xavier S. Thani Nayagam, *Landscape and Poetry*, (2nd edn.) Bombay, 1966. p. 139.
13. Quoted by V. Satchithanandan in *Tamil Culture*, Vol. IX. No. 4 p. 350.
14. *Sri Aurobindo Birth Centenary Library*, Vol. 9. p. 149.
15. P. Mansell Jones, *Emile Verhaeren — A Study in the Development of his Art and Ideas*, London, 1926. pp. 93-97.
16. Ibid.,
17. Stefan Zweig, *Emile Verhaeren*, London, 1915. pp. 74-77.
18. Boris Suchkov, op. cit., p. 76
19. Stefan Zweig, op. cit., p. 77.
20. *Language and Silence*, New York, 1967. p. 202.
21. A somewhat similar assessment of Hu Shih by an American scholar seems interesting. “Born in 1891 in a small village in Anhwei province in eastern China, it was still not too late for him to have a traditional upbringing and education. Unlike many Chinese intellectuals of later generations it could never be said of him that he was ignorant of or alienated from his own cultural heritage. He was, thus, never at a disadvantage in academic jousts with even the most conservative Confucian scholars; he was ever prepared to match quotations from the Classics and the commentaries with the most crude of pundits. He was at ease in the realm of Western history, literature, and thought. These two cultural traditions, the Chinese and the Western, did not constitute separate and distinct sectors of his mind but were rather integrated into a philosophical whole. It becomes immediately apparent to the reader of his works that he never suffers from cultural parochialism or strident nationalism”. Hyman Kublin in Introduction to the Second Edition of Hu Shih’s *The Chinese Renaissance*. New York, 1963.