Professor Tarapada Mukherji

Professor Tarapada Mukherji, who died at the age of 86 on October 31, 1987, belonged to a generation of teachers who were dedicated to their vocation and thoroughly identified themselves with the institution which enjoyed the fruits of their labour. It was a mark of his greatness that though Professor Mukherji was totally involved in his commitment as a teacher, he could gently withdraw into a long life of self-effacing retirement without a trace of regret or bitterness.

The secret of Professor Mukherji's popularity lay in the immediate appeal of his presence; his quiet dignity, mellow charm and unruffled serenity. All this provided an enduring base for his impassioned, eloquent, albeit closely analytical reading of his favourite authors. The sudden hush that fell on bent heads, the glow on rapt faces in the crowded Pass and Intermediate classes in those days offered a living proof of his far-reaching influence in a literal sense : how far, in a deeper sense, may be seen in the fact that among those who passed out were many who retained the fondest memories of these afternoon classes : men who joined professions like law or medicine, public undertakings, civil and police administration. The congregation on the evening of his farewell early in 1963 was a massive demonstration of their affection and gratitude.

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Poetry and drama, needless to say, were his natural spheres. To his reading of poetry he brought a depth of feeling and insight that opened up a new world for young learners fresh from school, feeling somewhat lost in the vast Intermediate classes. They became spell-bound, rather like the Wedding Guest, as they listened to Professor Mukherji's reading of The Ancient Mariner, that condensed saga of the human spirit. For many of them a poem was no longer an array of words on the printed page, but a living experience to be treasured for years to come. Likewise in his lectures on Shakespearean drama, Professor Mukherji displayed his gift for entering into the souls of the characters, inhabiting the inmost recesses of their thoughts and feelings. He conveyed his insights with a felicity of phrasing that was enviable and a most sensitive ear for verse rhythm.

Though, by temperament, impassioned in his approach to poetry, Professor Mukherji was distinguished alike in his way of life, his conversation and his evaluation of poets and people for his fine sense of measure and proportion. He had in fact a cold disdain for the immoderate, though he was always responsive, in a gay, almost infectiously humorous manner, to the enthusiasm of the young. He had a way of putting them at ease and was very skilful indeed in bringing out their latent promise with his good humoured tolerance and genuine concern without fuss or ostentation.

I have room here for a bare glance at a few of the many gems he scattered on his path as he took us on along those journeys that spanned the meagre 40 minutes or so in the soft gloom of Room No. 23 which by the end of the lecture would be strangely illuminated and palpitate with passions and presences evoked, as we became aware of the shadowy world to which they belonged. To give an adequate idea

of the way Professor Mukherji could transform the classroom into a scene of authentic imaginative-experience would be beyond the scope of this brief tribute. I would dwell rather on a few relatively minor points of interest. I would recall as an example of his power of revealing the unsounded depths of mute poignancy his fine analysis of the nature of Desdemona's love. While doing the Brothel Scene (IV. *ii*) he would compare her earlier bold stand, when she justified her love for the noble Moor before the Senate, with her resigned silence, her drooping meekness in the later scene, pointing out that its psychology was the same as in the Nunnery Scene in Hamlet, only raised to a higher pitch.

Poetry, especially of the 19th century, was his second passion. Browning was one of his favourite poets. With what fine understanding he would explore and uncover the pathos of life in the midst of the gorgeous pageant of nature in the roman Campagna ! *Two in the Campagna* is a fine poem, he would tell us, because it is an exact transcript of the elusive thought running in the poet's mind, the tantalizing thought "for rhymes / To catch at and let go". His voice would linger over the pause before the final stanza to bring out the final tone of baffled endurance in the recognition of the infinity of passion and "the pain/Of finite hearts that yearn".

His fine ear never missed the melody of Browning's verse, as in the first thirteen lines of *De Gustibus*, contrasting with the more typical harshness and discord of the middle, lending an added dimension to the life of the image of the "gash of the wind-grieved-Apennine" and "the baked cicala" dying of "drouth", and rounded off with a return at the end to the tender mood of the beginning : an instance of the perfect matching of the cycles of mood and rhythm.

Turning to a relatively minor poet, I recall his perceptive comment on the varying line lengths in Coventry Patmore's *St. Valentine's Day.* He suggested a historical perspective for viewing the use of free verse, i.e., freedom in distributing the accent within the foot and freedom in arranging the lines. A line of continuity could be traced from Browning through Rossetti, Patmore and Hopkins till we come to the moderns. He was careful to point out, however, that freedom in verse-pattern must be related to the individual thought pattern. In Patmore's poem, technicalities apart, there is distinctive originality of perception : in the quaint image, for example, of "Baby Spring", the praevernal power. An admixture of joy and sorrow attends the first stirrings of love in the virgin heart. The very power of the thrill comes from the oath of virginity, and adds intensity to both joy and sorrow. It is "sweeter than delight" and "sadder than sorrow". Had it been mere joy or mere sorrow, the feeling would have been less rich. Throughout he noted the beauty of paradoxical combinations like "peaceful poignancy", and fitted into the thought-pattern the sharply observed details of the landscape, like the Blackbird sitting apart suddenly becoming tumultuous and the "heavenly-minded thrush", that cannot escape the warm breath of the season, talking "In evening's hush."

Finally I would recall a single line, the opening line of Tennyson's well-known poem *Crossing the Bar*, a line that could stand by itself and command interest for its distinctive thought-value : "Sunset and evening star". Professor Mukherji brought out the force of that "and" by saying that it implied "without any intervention of the twilight of dubiety". One would like to think that there was a touch of this immediacy of transition to a greater life about his own farewell to this life. The end came so suddenly and death was so swift.

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