Tarak Nath Sen (1909-1971)

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It is as a teacher that Professor T N Sen made a deep impact on the academic life of Bengal, and it is as a teacher that he will be most fondly remembered by his pupils and pupils' pupils. He was a complete teacher, and I have often fancied that, as is said of a greater man, if he had never existed, we should have to invent him. Here I should like to elaborate what I have already said about his relations with his pupils, and I shall compare him with two of the greatest teachers of English seen

A group of former students and admirers of Tarak Nath Sen assembled in the Arts library of Presidency College on 9th July 2009 to celebrate his birth centenary. The present department of English of the college along with some students, teachers and some members of the alumni were present to pay their tributes to Prof. Sen for his scholarship and superior teaching ability. Prof. Sen served in this department for 32 years between 1934 and 1969. Principal Sanjib Ghosh garlanded a portrait of Prof. Sen. This was followed by reminiscences, chanting of Acharya Vandana, addresses by the present Head of the Department and by some students and teachers. A commemorative volume was published in the evening session of the memorial meeting in ICCR with Prof. Amlan Dutta as the President and Prof. Sukanta Chaudhuri and Prof. Ashok Mukherjee as the speakers. Principal Ghosh proposed that on 9th July every year a memorial lecture be arranged in honour of Prof Sen.

in Calcutta—H M Percival and P C Ghosh. Without meaning any disrespect, I pass by other distinguished teachers of English—the semi-legendary D L Richardson, the polymath C H Tawney, the 'divine John Mann', Manmohan Ghose whom Harinath De called Apollo, and that consum-

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mate analyst of romantic poetry, Srikumar Banerjee. Taraknath Sen definitely belonged to a tradition established by Percival and P C Ghosh and enriched by him.

H M Percival lived for his pupils but maintained a studied, one might almost say, a grim aloofness from them. He kept a Register where their performances and his own impressions were carefully recorded, but he never dulled his palm with entertainment of them and refused to answer non-academic questions or requests from them. When the brilliant Amiya Ray (later Mrs R C Bonnerjee), the first girl student of Presidency College, saw him for an autograph, he looked daggers at her, and passed on. I have seen the first letter he wrote to his favourite pupil P C Ghosh; it started with 'Dear Sir' and ended with 'Yours faithfully'! I have heard that when students would call on him, when he was living in retirement in England, he would first open the Register, locate his visitor there, and then open the conversation.

Percival's mantle fell on his old pupil P C Ghosh, a different sort of person. Ghosh mixed uninhibitedly with his pupils as if he were one of their chums; he visited the Eden Hindu Hostel frequently, sometimes daily, and his house was a pilgrimage for his pupils, old and new. He was voluble, volatile, often volcanic, and, changing the metaphor, he would shower upon his pupils a cascade of anecdote, allusion, ebullient sentiment and also trenchant satire of folly and pomposity. The listeners, big and small, would generally keep mum, if only to hide their ignorance. The result was that the nearer he came to his pupils, the wider became the gulf that separated him from them. They were excited, enthralled—but also overwhelmed.

That was not T N Sen's way. Reserved but not taciturn, communicative but not loquacious, he knew as much of his pupils and they knew as much of him as was necessary for the establishment of an affinity of spirit. He knew their tastes, aptitudes and capacities and they loved him for his versatile, unobtrusive and inexhaustible scholarship, for the new visions of beauty he daily unrolled before them, and for his sane and humane attitude to life and literature. What was equally important was that being without Percival's super-mundane aloofness and P C Ghosh's magical personality, he would not dwarf his pupils but would just allow them to grow beneath his vigilant eyes. It is said that he did not even correct their tutorial exercises, he only helped them to see their mistakes and develop their own judgement and style.

The three great teachers whose work in the classroom I am trying to visualize had, besides competent scholarship, two traits in common; indeed, it may be said that Percival passed them on to P C Ghosh and P C Ghosh to T N Sen. The first is a realization of literature as life, or, in T N Sen's own words, as 'the expression of Life on a non-material plane of reality.' I admit that this is not a new idea, but few Western scholars have realized it with the intensity which gave so much

vitality to the lectures of these Indian scholars. Though for all three of them the beauty of literature lay in its liveliness and vivacity, there was a noticeable difference in their attitudes. H M Percival, a philosopher and a moralist, was inclined to interpret literature in terms of life. For P C Ghosh it *was* life, and it is the intensity of this realization that made his lectures appeal like an overwhelming experience of life.

T N Sen, who was more of an artist than either of his distinguished predecessors, looked upon literature as a higher form of reality, and he also enriched his teaching of literature with citations of parallel developments in painting, sculpture, architecture, music and even dancing. A master of many languages, he showed a keener awareness of ancient literatures in his interpretation of English than Percival and P C Ghosh. Indeed, even his unwillingness to delve into the philosophical implications of aesthetic problems was part of his greatness as an interpreter of literature *qua* literature. It is his vision of the world of art as an autonomous whole that made him pay so much attention to the craft of literature, the constructional aspect of a work of art, its design, rhythm and technique. This interest in the minutae of craftsmanship he succeeded in passing on to his pupils. There were occasions when I had to discuss with some of them details of Shakespearean versification—lineation, distribution of syllables and accents—and was amazed at their virtuosity.

Another quality which distinguished these three teachers was their concentration on the meaning of a literary work, their exceptional capacity for wringing out the import of words, of line-divisions in drama, and of the significance of commas, semi-colons and dashes. Our teacher Charuchandra Bhattacharya, who was a pupil of Percival about seventy years ago, told me that while attending Percival's lectures, he, a student of science, seemed to feel that Shakespeare had consulted the Professor at every step in the choice of words and phrases! Percival never avoided a crux and always delved below the surface of generalities. Once P C Ghosh wrote to Frederic Harrison about the meaning of a passage in Ruskin and received a long letter from that eminent authority, on how Ruskin should be approached and what kind of English Indians should read. The letter only incidentally mentioned the passage that had been referred to him. When Percival saw this letter, he commented with a wry smile, 'A four-paged lecture, because he has not understood the passage!' Here we have the secret of Percival's success as a teacher. One can see this if only one compares his books—his *Faerie Queene I, Samson Agonistes* and his *Antony and Cleopatra,* for example—with other annotated editions of these classics.

The principal effect of P C Ghosh's teaching was vividness; in his lectures the worlds of Chaucer and Shakespeare came to life in all their richness, vivacity, intensity and variety. And the principal instrument in this act of re-creation was his mastery of detail, which coupled with his dramatic sense and unrivalled knowledge of Medieval and Elizabethan history and literature en-

abled him to enter into the mimic world of poetry and drama. As I recall the unique experience of those days, I wonder if Shakespeare would have caricatured Bottom's penchant for acting Pyramus, Thisby and the Lion in a single scene if he could have had an opportunity of attending P C Ghosh's lectures on *Othello,* where the Professor would rave with Othello, weep with Desdemona, spill venom with Iago and drivel like Roderigo—and all at the same time!

T N Sen's ways were similar to and yet different from the ways of these masters. Less intellectual than Percival and less forceful and vivacious than P C Ghosh, he had a finer sense of beauty than they. He dilated on Oscar Wilde's opinion that truth in art is entirely and absolutely a matter of style, and it was this preoccupation with style that made him so perceptive of the beauty of detailed workmanship. And yet he had this great advantage over other teachers of literature that his interest in details was sustained by a firm command of critical principles.

I have not space enough for reproducing his elucidation of individual poems and dramas, though the copious notes supplied to me by his pupils—which, I hope, will be published by them—contain many refreshing examples of critical analyses. I shall confine myself to his exploration of two words in the Poetics— 'catharsis' and 'mimesis'—over which more ink has been spilt than over any other word or concept in literary criticism. Various writers have investigated the meaning of catharsis by collecting illustrations from ancient Greek literature, philosophy and science, especially the writings of Plato and Aristotle, and the two meanings generally sponsored are 'purification' and 'purgation'. The majority favour the latter meaning as does T N Sen too, and so far there is nothing original in his view. What is original is the way in which he traces the interrelations of the various usages and connects Plato with Aristotle—for example, Plato's reference to pharmaceutical catharsis as an irritant in the *Timaeus* with Aristotle's employment of it in the sense of working off in the *Poetics.* Such interrelating others have attempted, but none has achieved it with so much subtlety as T N Sen. Incidentally, he puts forward two other arguments which give the concept of catharsis a larger dimension than will be found in the discussions of other critics. A believer in the autonomy of art and poetry, he emphasizes, through his elucidation of the theory of purgation, Aristotle's freedom from moral bias, and a discussion of music in the *Politics* reminds him of the close integration of life and art in ancient Greece. He then works slowly to an expansive vision of Catharsis as a striving for reconciliation and resignation and affiliates it to the impression of repose produced by Greek art, notably Greek sculpture, and the serenity of the Mediterranean regions.

Mimesis is not an obscure word like Catharsis; its meaning is plain enough. It is in its application to the creative process of literature and art that it becomes ambiguous. T N Sen's interpretation, which is basically idealistic, is not original in its outlines, but the array of arguments, illustra-

tions, interrelations and comparisons makes it exceptionally illuminating and persuasive. And that is the only kind of originality we can expect here. After making a searching analysis, he relates mimesis to Sidney's concept of the golden world of poetry, the soaring speculations of the romantic critics, notably Keats, and then identifies it with Croce's expression; I also detect echoes of Indian masters like Sankuka and Abhinavagupta, although he does not mention them by name. More striking is the way in which Aristotle's well-known reflections on plot and character, on catharsis, on the difference between poetry and history, on the probable and the possible, and the comparison in the *Metaphysics* of an incoherent universe to a bad tragedy, are made to converge on this interpretation of mimesis. Quite characteristically, after elucidating his meaning T N Sen proceeds to other modes of imitation and illustrates his conclusion most pointedly with reference to architecture—the Parthenon and the Cathedral of Chartres. Titbits of T N Sen's arguments may be found in other places, but such close, subtle analysis and such expansiveness I have seen nowhere else.