

Professor Tarapada Mukherji †

Professor Tarapada Mukherji, who taught at Presidency College continuously for several decades, was one of those great teachers who gave dignity and grace to the profession. A worthy pupil of Prafulla Chandra Ghosh and Srikumar Banerjee, and an equally worthy colleague of Subodh Chandra Sen Gupta and Taraknath Sen, he brought to his task a spirit of enquiry and a discerning enthusiasm that inspired generations of students of English literature. What distinguished him was a visual imagination combined with an empathic insight that made his teaching a living experience. His sensibility shrank from the abstract : an old pupil still recalls how, as Professor Mukherji read in half-whisper a line of Rossetti's *Blessed Damozel*, the leaves of autumn rustled, as it were, through the class-room, spinning to the floor under the table in a spiral of yellow. To listen to his lectures on Shakespeare —especially on Shakespearian tragedy — was an inestimable privilege; but while his rendering of Shakespeare showed one kind of excellence, his analysis of Pater's aestheticism brought out another aspect of his capacious intelligence, a discriminating taste, philosophical perspicacity and analytical rigour that wrenched back all that was meretricious, sentimental and sloppy in our responses, assumptions and generalizations. It is true that the explication of drama — particularly of Shakespeare — drew out his supreme gift as a teacher. But at the heart of this teacher there was a love of poetry and a sensitivity that we meet but seldom in academics, and his delighted response even the daily ritual in the class-room could not diminish or bedim. He had an instinctive sympathy with Romantic and Victorian poetry, with the kind of poetry that has rich emotive

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appeal, and perhaps this explains his strident censure of what he considered the arid and unwholesome cerebration in modern poetry. His younger colleagues often contended with vehemence; but while no amount of argumentation could shake him, his unfailing courtesy in debate was disarming.

In the practice of living, Professor Tarapada Mukherji was, in many ways, a traditionalist and belonged, in more than one sense, to another world than ours. Attentive to the proprieties, professorial in bearing and dress, measured in speech, urbane and distant; but his close friends and pupils never ceased to feel the radiation of a warm humanity, a gracious kindness that informed even his minutest gestures. Recently a leading article in a well-known newspaper described the Indian teaching community as 'pampered and irresponsible'; Professor Mukherji's integrity as a human being and as a teacher would be a fitting rebuke to such puerile effrontery. He represented a model that it would be impossible to emulate; but his devotion (that only scrupulous scholarship and a high order of sensibility could give) would inspire and sustain those who have chosen this rather unenviable profession in this unfortunate land where so much of our energy is spent in the quarrel with bad taste. And it is perhaps appropriate that this tribute should end with the lines that he loved to quote himself :

*His life was gentle; and the elements
So mix'd in him that Nature might stand up
And say to all the world 'This was a man !'*

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