INTERVIEW WITH SHANTA ACHARYA
By William Oxley

'One thing alone makes a poet: Imagination, the Divine Vision.' This was William Blake, quoted by Kathleen Raine in her book India Seen Afar. *As an Indian would you say that it is 'Imagination, the Divine Vision' which makes a poet? Or are there other factors involved?*

William Blake rightly emphasized 'Imagination, the Divine Vision' as being essential to a poet. The primacy of imagination over other forms of knowing has also been acknowledged by scientists. Einstein said: "Imagination is more important than knowledge. For knowledge is limited…" Blake and Raine are of course speaking of 'Imagination, the Divine Vision.'

The Universe, some Hindus believe, is an expression of the Divine Vision or the Supreme Imagination. The flaws in our perception according to such a view result from Maya. Ralph Waldo Emerson refers to it as 'Illusion'. Maya, illusion, lack of understanding arises when Man sees himself as separate from other beings, including the Divine. As long as the 'self' is an integral part of the 'Self,' (Universal Consciousness, God) then 'Know Thyself' liberates the self. It helps define the self. Poetic self consciousness is also defined via negatives, not unlike the attributes of the Divine which in Sanskrit is '*neti, neti*', or '*not this, not this*'. For Keats a poet needed 'Negative Capability' – "when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason."

Imagination is essential to all creative endeavours; it is not just the domain of poets. From astrophysicists to jazz musicians, painters and sculptors to engineers designing bridges and buildings, from scientists in search of new discoveries to historians who interpret the past – imagination forms an essential aspect of all creative pursuits. 'Imagination', though absolutely essential, is not enough to make a poet. The struggle to find the right words in the right order is an inalienable aspect of being a poet. The poets' skill is to be an effective medium for 'Imagination' to flow through words; it is far from a passive process.

The greatest poems are the best examples of the perfect balance between the expression of our highest thoughts and the manner of their expression. Then there are other factors such as communication, inspiration, pleasure or enjoyment; some emphasize the 'giving of pleasure' in poetry as being its primary objective. In his Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth reminds us: "The Poet writes under one restriction only, namely, that of the necessity of giving pleasure to a human Being possessed of that information which may be expected from him, not as a lawyer, a physician, a mariner, an astronomer or a natural philosopher, but as a Man."

A poet does many things upon instinct. In poetry, the emphasis is not always on understanding, but on pleasure, mystery, the chemistry of words. As Frost said, 'to be a poet is a condition, not a profession'. What a poem means is as much what it means to others as what it means to the author; so communication is critical to a poet. To have someone discover themselves in your poem is the ultimate act of creation. Poetic creation thus involves the imagination using words in the evolution of a consciousness that transcends the personal.

How and when did you discover you were a poet?

It was a gradual process of self-discovery, self-consciousness. I never thought of myself as a 'poet' partly because poetry was so much a part of our life – initially in the oral tradition of the Sanskrit *slokas* or prayers one heard at home and learnt to chant as a child. Even the national anthem was a song by Rabindranath Tagore. My poems were first published in the

Ravenshaw College journal, edited by the poet Jayanta Mahapatra. By the time I left for Oxford in 1979, my poems had been widely published in India. It was in Oxford where others saw me as a poet and scholar that I became more conscious of being a poet.

The reason it took so long to think of oneself consciously as a poet was partly because of the culture one was brought up in. Poetry was simply a way of life. And what attracted me to writing poetry is its indirectness, its suggestiveness, its ability to be interpreted severally. It is like a secret code that only the initiate understands. If you wish to say something without drawing attention then write a poem, not drawing attention to one self was terribly important. Was it not Thomas Hardy who said, "If Galileo had said in verse that the world moved, the Inquisition might have let him alone"?

You have written books on international finance. Did you find this compatible with being a poet?

I cannot recall it being incompatible. I could easily switch from one kind of writing to the other, especially from finance to poetry, and found it quite a relief to be able to do so. Being a poet, or having the qualities that make me a poet, help me as an investor. The world of investments and finance also contribute to my poetry – certainly by paying the bills and providing me with a level of 'vulnerability' that has enriched my understanding of the world. I see it as being a good thing though I am conscious in this country of a general distrust of people engaged in doing more than one thing.

One of the things that strikes a visitor to India – especially a wordsmith – is how every notice, road direction, shop sign, etc., is in English alongside the local language, of course. In your first book of poetry, Not This, Not That*, published in English by Rupa in New Delhi, the blurb speaks of 'Writing in her adoptive mother tongue'. What were the languages you grew up speaking and how did you deal in writing with their inevitable differences?*

I come from a family of academics, and grew up learning several Indian languages. English was considered an Indian language, not the language of rulers or oppressors. It was not uncommon to grow up learning English along side the mother tongue, which in my case was Oriya. In addition, at school we were taught Hindi, which aspired to be the national language. Even children from relatively poor and uneducated backgrounds spoke at least two, if not three, languages. I can read, write and speak Oriya and Hindi. I could read and speak Bengali, but have now lost the ability to read Bengali. I learnt Russian in college, but my mastery of the language was never good enough to read the literature in original. I understand most north Indian languages. South Indian languages are as impenetrable to me as they are to anyone who does not know the languages.

English has been my first language, the language I write creatively in, for as long as I can remember. As I grew up with several languages, I was perhaps more accepting of their differences as children are. What I may not have appreciated was why one should 'make hay while the sun shines' when in India the sun shone most days. As I grew older I became more aware of the limitations of English. But I also knew it had more to do with the philosophical and cultural basis of the language. The difficulty of translating poetry from Indian languages confirmed that. But, English has enriched itself by keeping an 'open' house. The number of words in English whose origin is Indian is a simple testimony to that fact.

While we were taught RP (Received Pronunciation) and the Queen's English, there was a thriving 'Indian English' in India. It had features that were recognisable – but it was not a definable language or even a dialect as people from different parts of India spoke it differently. It is that element of individuality of self-expression that is also reflected in the

street signs, shop signs and notices one comes across in India, from the spelling to the pronunciation. Having lived in London since 1985, I continue to hear the varied use of English by people from different parts of the world.

In the first collection, I found the style terse and, at times, tending to the hermetic: fragmentary statement embedded in imagery. But as one proceeds through the book there is a noticeable change: a loosening up of both prosody and meaning. Poems like 'The Poster Sticker', 'Busride To Char Minar', 'Night In Bombay' or 'Dussehra In Cuttack' are poems this reader finds it easier to move about in. Do you think there is a stylistic alteration as Not This, Not That *progresses?*

The simple answer is yes. But a more complete answer would point to three different things – first, the poems you cite above have a more public setting compared to other poems in the book. In these poems the protagonist inhabits a public space – travelling in a rickshaw, a bus or being at a festival. The thoughts are more accessible, and the thought finds the words. The other explanation is that some of the poems you refer to as being 'easier to move around in' were perhaps written later, after I arrived in Oxford. The style may have changed as the poems were also written at a different stage of my poetic life. And last but not least, due to my publication history, with books appearing at considerably long intervals, each of my poetry collections include poems with a thematic connection, but they also include poems that were written over very long periods – stretching over two to three decades sometimes. Stylistic alteration over such a length of time is inevitable.

In your first volume I would like to pick out a couple of poems that particularly appealed to me. The first if 'Faith', which is a poem of perfect simplicity – that greatest of artistic gifts, the true sign of genius according to Tolstoy – and a beautiful example like a Greek play's thesis, antithesis and resolution. I also was especially taken with 'Busride To Char Minar' for its intense evocation of the cramped conditions in which so many Indians move and have their being:

'I feel the soft, wrinkled skin
of an old Hyderabadi begum
leaning to the window for fresh air,
gasping curses on Allah for her plight.'

To me your poetry springs from the collision between a religious-philosophical inwardness and the real world which, in India, is especially basic-real. Would you agree, or not?

Yes, because for me they are both 'real' – the spiritual as much as the real. I see the inner and outer as being two sides of the same reality. Poetry like life is a form of knowledge, but it is also timeless. The best poetry, whether it is *The Mahabharata*, *Ramayana*, *Odyssey*, *Iliad*, *Divine Comedy*, *Paradise Lost*, *The Prelude* etc., deal with the fundamental question of responsibility, they all explore how human beings should behave when faced with social and moral dilemmas, the choices they make and their consequences. So, poetry is very much at the heart of life and human identity, and simplicity is at the heart of great poetry. I write about a wide range of issues and the themes demand a range of styles. I have written poems that are comic, witty, ironic and satirical. But they are no less real than those centered in a spiritual-philosophical basis. Both reflect the world we live in.

As between Not This, Not That*, and your next collection* Numbering Our Days' Illusions *(Rockingham Press, 1995), there is a similarity in poems like, for example, 'The Self-Absorbed' and 'City Slickers', of the oscillation between hermeticism coupled with abstraction, and the more openness of narrative observation. How do you feel about this view?*

This is an extension to what I said before, in answer to question number five. The two poems you refer to here have different individual histories and cover a span of several years. If I recall correctly, 'The Self-Absorbed' was written in Oxford in the early 1980s and 'City Slickers' about a decade later. Not only do these poems reflect different sets of experiences, they also refer to different kinds of reality which can be interpreted as oscillating between abstraction and narrative. As Rilke said, 'poetry is about everything'. It is natural to write in more abstract terms at certain times and come across as more concrete, realistic etc at other times. They explore different facets of reality, which by itself is limitless.

In Numbering Our Days' Illusions *there is some really beautiful writing:*

'After this long journey together
the moment chastely shared
like spangles of sunlight
suffuse eternity.'

And where I see another development. Real passion has turned the clustered imagery and dense language into an ever-clearer articulacy. There is a steady movement, too, in this book away from your Indian roots, wouldn't you say?

Numbering Our Days' Illusions includes poems written over a span of twenty years or more – including poems written in India and in Oxford. The poem you refer to, "Parting", was written in India. However, if the poem suggests a move away from my 'Indian roots', I see that as a real poetic achievement. The theme about the struggle between passion and unrealized love is universal. The scene described in the poem could have happened anywhere – does not have to be India or England. The experience is universal. When you read a poem it should speak to you directly, from one human being to another – that's all one can strive for.

In the latter half of this collection, poems like 'Daughters and Lovers', 'A Kind of Going Home', 'The Seagull', draw in metrically a steady rhythm, and are among your most accomplished poems, don't you think?

I find writing poetry imposes tremendous discipline. It is like doing yoga, and you feel the better for it. The theme drives the style, rhythm etc. While sometimes the poem arrives perfect, most of the time one has to chisel away until you reach a state of completion, if not perfection. As far as poetic accomplishment is concerned having done one's best, one has to leave the final judgement to the reader. It is thus good to know you think of those poems as being accomplished.

In Numbering Our Days' Illusions *there are many fine poems exploring love: they show a deep understanding of love in all its forms. How much do they spring from experience? How much are theory? For it is interesting you can write, 'Loving is about waiting,/ sometimes for a very long time,/ without demanding anything,/ not even an explanation.' Yet, in a way, your love poems are an explanation.*

Many of my poems, including those in *Numbering*, spring from a mix of experience and imagination. The experience need not be personal, but all experience is ultimately personal. Other people's experiences can trigger a deep personal response. Even complete strangers can arouse in you a surprisingly deep level of sympathy. I think that is what Keats called 'Negative Capability'. Poetry begins in experience and ends in imagination. As Frost said, a "poem begins as a lump in the throat, a sense of wrong, a homesickness, a lovesickness." And then it finds the thought and the thought finds the words.

I think Numbering Our Days' Illusions *shows you to have developed into something of a confessional poet, but not one tinged with much self-indulgence. You make confession into a profounder art than most poets achieve. What do you think?*

In life, I think it helps to be detached, to develop the ability to look at things, including one self, with relative objectivity. It may have something to do with the ideas that shaped me. The notion of I, the self, in Hinduism is inextricably linked to the Self. This Self can be society, the world, the universe, something beyond us, God. You become your self by being aware of the world around you – realisation of the connection between the self and life beyond the self is essential to an 'enlightened' individual. Nirvana is nothing else than such consciousness. It helps you to find your place in the world. Emerson called it 'establishing an original relation with the universe'. When I write about myself, it is not me I write about, the Self contains multitudes. It reminds me of Whitman's *Song of Myself*.

This detachment also demands a linguistic discipline. If you can think clearly you tend to speak and write with clarity. The best writing emerges from experiences deeply felt, lived. One begins with a personal experience, but in the process of writing it is transformed into something beyond the self, into something universal – for the reader to be able to step into your world as if it was their own. When I first read Louise Glück's, *The Wild Iris*, many of the poems in it struck a cord as if I was reading my own thoughts expressed in a language which explored my own astonishment. "Poetry … should strike the reader as a wording of his own highest thoughts, and appear almost a remembrance," said Keats. Most of my poems are meditations, conversations, sometimes with my self. Yeats said, "out of the quarrel with others we make rhetoric; out of the quarrel with ourselves we make poetry." There is no escaping the self – we must celebrate it so it speaks for the 'Other' as much as for one self.

The Bhagavad Gita *and the* Upanishads *are among the great scriptural documents of the world – dictated by the Divine Presence to the* rishis*, holy men in the distant past. Do you think these Vedic writings have shaped you and your poetry?*

It was the thoughts and ideals expressed in such literature that influenced me, not that one needed too much shaping. I was probably born with such a view of the world, such a *samskara*. The simplest way of explaining this notion is that every human being is unique, special, different – born with a certain 'character', a way of seeing the world. It is shaped by our life experiences, but the way we see things is essentially innate.

You can say we are born to find out who we are; hence the relevance of 'Know Thyself'. The key to our understanding the world is the self. The path our lives take is determined by such factors, whether we turn out to be poets, teachers, preachers, healers, leaders, inventors etc. Even if you try to shape character by providing the right environment etc, we still cannot explain why people make the kind of choices they do. And that is the black-box Hindus call fate, *bhagya*, *samskara* or accumulated life experience spanning several lives, beyond memory, beyond rationalization.

Indian thought is perhaps as integral to my work as Christianity is to Eliot, Hopkins or Beckett. However, I am fairly eclectic in my thinking, building on ideas freely. This is not unique to me, every writer and thinker borrows, steals – we see better standing on the shoulders of giants. If I delve into Hindu philosophy, it is because I find its open-minded, large-hearted approach refreshing. Hinduism is not a religion but a way of life. The great scriptural documents, the rishis and holy men of the past, all struggled with fundamental questions of life, birth, death, the nature of Divinity etc. These are also the kind of questions that most of us struggle with – who am I? Why am I here?

In the Sanskrit tradition, the poet was not only a seer (*risi*), the poet was also regarded as one who 'sees' – the poet was both actor and spectator. Poetry was recognized as a form of knowledge (*vidyā*), in addition to its significance as an art (*kalā*), *alamkāra*, ornamentation, *shringara*, style or *vakrokti*, indirect or "crooked" speech. One is reminded of Emily Dickinson: "Tell all the Truth but tell it slant –/ Success in Circuit lies/ Too bright for our infirm Delight/ The Truth's superb surprise".

What English poets, past or present, have most appealed to you?

I assume your question relates to poets who write in English or are you referring to English poets specifically? I have been equally eclectic in my reading – so find the work of a wide range of poets, past and present, appealing – the list is long and diverse – ranging from Rumi, Rilke, Ritsos and Tagore to Akhamatova, Cavafy, Szymborska and Milosz. If we are talking of English poets, then it has to include Donne, Herbert, Milton, Marvell, Blake, Burns, Wordsworth, Shelley, Keats, Browning, Lawrence, Hopkins, Auden, Larkin, Ted Hughes, R. S. Thomas. I would also include Emily Dickinson, Whitman, Yeats, Eliot, Wallace Stevens, Plath, Elizabeth Bishop and Elizabeth Jennings among others. Shakespeare has perennial appeal. So has Emerson, his essays. I also admire Samuel Beckett. And we have not even mentioned the great novelists and essayists etc. If I find one poem that truly appeals to me, it is enough for me. I do not feel the need to admire a poet's collected works. I can get hooked on a single image, thought or line.

I'd like to work on through your later volumes, but that would take this interview to too great a length. So I'll finish with a question on reputation or, rather, the making of it. Have you found it more or less difficult breaking into the Indian or the British poetry world?

It is tempting to say it is too early to tell. My poems have appeared fairly regularly in various Indian publications since the mid-1970s. Getting published in the UK (I came to Oxford in October 1979) was like living the curse of Sisyphus. Nothing happened till the early 1990s. I stopped sending my poems to journals in the UK for several years. Luckily, my poems were published in the US and in India. *Acumen* published my work in 1992. Things have changed in the UK since, but it is still a struggle to receive critical attention and name recognition one may expect after five full-length collections. As far as publishing poetry books is concerned, I think the outlook in general is worse in India today than it is here.

Talking of poetic reputation, it is based on arbitrary, random factors – such as having a publisher who actually promotes you so your poem or book wins prizes, gets reviewed in established publications, national newspapers, you get invited to read at literary festivals, and participate in radio and TV programmes. Having a powerful agent who facilitates your way up the literary ladder is vital. All of this also seems to happen to the same people, a small charmed circle. Perhaps, it can be explained in the words of John Maynard Keynes: "Worldly wisdom teaches that it is better for the reputation to fail conventionally than to succeed unconventionally." True risk-taking, independent thinking, creativity and entrepreneurship

are anathema these days to bankers as much as to publishers. Sources of information have grown exponentially, but our ability to think originally has not.

The assumption that fame or reputation is somehow a true reflection of intrinsic value or quality is also a fallacy. If Emily Dickinson's poems had never been published, and that was a distinct possibility, would her poetry be less worthy?

As I don't have an agent or even a publisher to promote my work, the best I can do is to get on with my writing and not worry about "seeking the bubble reputation" or selling "my reputation for a song". I hope my readers continue to grow as they grow to appreciate my work more and more. Dom Marquis said: "Publishing a volume of verse is like dropping a rose petal down the Grand Canyon and waiting for the echo." I have already dropped five petals and am holding another without waiting for echoes! Yet every poem that gets published in a journal, anthology, etc. is like winning a prize and hearing a cheering echo.

Published in *Acumen*, Issue 74, September 2012