

## AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL:

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I have been asked by the Editor to contribute “an autobiographical sketch” of my ‘scholarly activities and associations’, and referred for guidance to the way Prof. Wellek had spoken on the occasion of his 75th birthday and Prof. Sen Gupta has written about his “life and work” in an earlier issue of the Journal. While it is a rare honour to be named along with them (as also, by implication, with Ananda Coomaraswamy, in whose memory the inaugural Summer 1978 number was issued), I am duly sensible of my limitations and comparative insignificance, and I deem this a fortuitous conjunction rather than an earned distinction.

Dr. Ananda Coomaraswamy was a polymath among scholars, a brave and intrepid pioneering spirit, a child of the Orient who carried the Light of India to the West, and a hard-headed student who mobilised the analytical high seriousness of the West to make his own marvellous revaluations of Indian art and culture. He strikes us today as a product of two cultures, including in his sensibility the best of both, and transcending them too and pointing towards a possible future exemplifying the quintessential culture of universal man. Ananda Coomaraswamy is verily one of the gods of our idolatry, and I can only offer my homage, as I did when Sahitya Akademi organised his birth centenary celebrations in Madras in 1977.

Prof. Rene Wellek is a scholar whose range of reading and fecundity in writing almost out-Staubsbury Staubsbury. With his roots in Europe, Wellek has spread his foliage in America, and he is at home in many literatures and critical

disciplines. Scholarship, research, literary history and criticism, poetics, aesthetics, stylistics—he takes them all in his easy stride. The bibliography of his writings is so Gargantuan that the only reaction can be ‘Prodigious.’ There is in his writing a sense of power and poise, an uncanny sureness of direction, and here and there an understandable heaviness as well. He is exhilarating, he can also be occasionally exasperating ; but he is always rewarding. Like Einstein devoting his Princeton years to the formulation of the unified field theory, Wellek too is apparently striving towards a philosophy of universal literature including and exceeding both national and general literature.

As for Prof. Sen Gupta, I have followed his career as scholar and critic since the publication of his first book, *The Art of Bernard Shaw*, over forty years ago. His series of volumes on Shakespeare entitle him to be hailed as our most dedicated and distinguished Shakespearian. His excursion into aesthetic theory, *Towards a Theory of the Imagination* (1959), broke fresh ground and encouraged others to follow his lead. I think we had some correspondence about Mark Hunter’s lecture on ‘The Substance of Shakespearian Comedy’, but to my regret we have had no occasion to meet in person.

Now what have I to say about myself that can even remotely justify my being linked with these scholars and critics of international standing? For one thing, we have all been wanderers between two (or several) worlds, ever seeking a base of enriched understanding. Like Sen Gupta, I too have been a student and teacher of Shakespeare, and my *Shakespeare : His World and His Art* was the fruit of decades of such absorption. Like Wellek (in collaboration with Austin Warren), I have also (in collaboration with my daughter, Prema Nandakumar) published a book of literary theory, *An Introduction to the Study of English Literature* (1966). I can thus claim a certain distant fellowship with these savants in an abiding faith in literary values.

Even so. I feel uneasy to embark on this ‘autobiographical’ exercise. I recall a similar embarrassing-moment 30 years ago when C. R. Mandy, then Editor of the *Illustrated Weekly*, asked me to contribute my ‘self-obituary’. It was to be one of a series (Mulk Raj Anand and R. K. Narayan were among the others), and mine was the 4th and appeared on 2 July 1950. Unhappily, the ‘self-obituary’ drove some readers to a wrong conclusion, and they started commiserating and making anxious inquiries. However, at the staff club in Andhra University, there was agreeable banter across the table, and the Vice-Chancellor and my other senior colleagues joined in the game.

In my school days, I cultivated Tamil, Sanskrit and English, but felt specially attracted (or so I thought) to Chemistry. Among my school teachers, I remember with gratitude G. Srinivasa Ayyar, who taught us Shakespeare (Mark Antony's oration), Goldsmith ('The Deserted Village') and Byron ('The Prisoner of Chillon'). While reading 'Hamlet' as rendered by Charles Lamb, Ayyar augmented it by reading and elucidating long passages from the play itself. Since I couldn't proceed to Madras to do Chemistry, I pursued my college education at Tirunelveli and Palamcottah, and graduated in Mathematics. Among my teachers of English were M. V. N. Subba Rao, K.T. Krishnaswami and N. Balakrishnan (Hindu College) and P. L. Stephen and the Rev. A. Leleau and Jerome d' Souza (St. Xavier's). It was an odd thing for a Tamil boy to learn to love English, but somehow this happened. While I owed much to these and other teachers, Fr. Jerome d' Souza was to be a continuing inspiration and a life-long mentor, and I felt fulfilled when he graciously contributed a Foreword to my *Gerard Manley Hopkins*, published by O.U.P. in 1948.

After graduation, I spent a few years in North Ceylon as a teacher of English and Mathematics. My students were to appear for the Cambridge Senior Certificate examination, and the course included plays by Shakespeare. During those years of my nonage, I taught *Henry V*, *Julius Caesar*, *Much Ado*, *Twelfth Night* and *The Tempest*. Strangely enough, this was the time I read Ibsen, and Prof. Jayagopal Bennerjee of Calcutta University was generous enough to publish my series of 7 articles on the Norwegian dramatist in the *Calcutta Review* (1930-1). It was also during my 'Sri Lanka' interlude that I became an inveterate reviewer of new literature. One of the earliest books I reviewed was Lytton Strachey's *Elizabeth and Essex* (1928), and Strachey — after reading my review — sent me an autographed copy of the American edition of the book, a price less possession with me.

Returning to India, I took my M.A. in English as a 'private' candidate, and presently joined the new college at Belgaum as 'Assistant Professor'. I spoke Tamil at home and taught English to Marathi and Kannada students. My classes were packed with about 150 students, sometimes sullen and restive, and at other times eager and responsive. I had to be a teacher doubled with a police sergeant, and I mastered early the art of propitiating the gods and goddesses of the gallery.

Aside from discharging my normal duties, I found time to read and write, both journalistically (I did a weekly literary causerie for years in papers like the *Federated India*, the *Mahratta* and the *Social Welfare*), and often with a more sustained

attention. My papers on Pater, Hardy, Marlowe, Milton and Wordsworth appeared duly in the Madras and Bombay University Journals. And my 'critical study' of Lytton Strachey was presently sponsored by Allied Publishers in India, Chatto and Windus in U.K. and Harcourt Brace in U.S.A. Desmond MacCarthy and Raymond Mortimer reviewed the book in leading literary articles in the *Sunday Times* and the *New Statesman* respectively, and there were other appreciative notices as well. Bouquets like "an accomplished critic of life and letters..." and "a very gifted critic of English literature..." were more than what even the vainest young author could have hoped for. Besides, the book secured for me, in 1939, the D. Litt. of Madras, my referees being Profs. Lascelles Abercrombie, Nichol Smith and George Gordon of the Oxford University.

My addiction to Strachey and interest in the art of biography were to persist, and it was especially satisfying that I should receive the Sahitya Akademi award in English for 1980 for my *On the Mother*, although it is a biographical homage in a very different cast and orientation from the Stracheyan exemplum of irreverent astringency.

Like my admiration for Strachey, my interest in Indo-Anglian literature goes back to the late nineteen-twenties. First I was drawn to the work of K. S. Venkataramani, whose book *The Next Rung* I reviewed in 1928 in the *Times of Ceylon*. When I came to Madras in 1931, I met him and other young writers like M. Chalapathi Rau, Manjeri Isvaran, K. Chandrasekharan, A. D. Mani and K. Ramakotiswara Rao (who was then Editor of *Triveni*). I wrote about the work of P. Seshadri, G. K. Chettur, Humayun Kabir and others, and 'Indo-Anglian' slowly acquired a currency of its own. My first monograph on the subject, *Indo-Anglian Literature*, came out in 1943 with an Introduction by C. R. Reddy, the book being sponsored by the P.E.N. All-India Centre. This was followed by the rather larger volume, *The Indian Contribution to English Literature* (1945). I seized opportunities as they came to bring this body of writing to the notice of scholar and 'common reader' alike. Then came my stint as Visiting Professor of Indo-Anglian literature at the University of Leeds (1959), and my lectures there were later published as *Indian Writing in English* (1962, 2nd enlarged edition 1974). My enthusiasm for this 'freak' literature was to cause amusement, if not embarrassment, to some Professors of English in India, but now at long last 'Indian Writing in English' is an accepted orthodoxy in our Groves of Academe. The *Illustrated Weekly* published, in its issue of 4 January 1970, George John's series of verses on 'Indo-Anglian luminaries', and this was the bit about me :

Professor Iyengar :  
Indian Writing in English  
Is his favourite dish.  
And he prefers *The Life Divine*  
To the best English line

(The others mentioned were R.K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand, Nirad Chaudhuri, B. Rajan and Khushwant Singh.)

More recently, on my receiving the Sahitya Akademi award, the *Sunday Statesman* (5 April 1981) carried an article by D. Anjaneyulu with the facetious heading (supplied presumably by the Editor) "India's Mister English!" No doubt, for half-a-century and more I have pleaded for a recognition of the significant and truly meritorious work, creative and critical, done by so many gifted Indians through the English medium. But I am by no means 'Mister English'. After all these years, I am uneasy still with English. I talk Tamil whenever I can, and always I feel more at home in Tamil than in English. And yet most of my writing has been in English. A paradox, if you like !

The war years were a hectic and pretty agonising period, but for me they meant a decisive change of direction in my life. Earlier I knew Sri Aurobindo as a poet and patriot of the 'Bandemataram' days, but since 1942, he (along with the Mother of Sri Aurobindo Ashram) has been for me the prophet of *The Life Divine*, the exponent of integral Yoga, the symbolistic and epic poet of *Savitri* and the pathfinder to 'Next Future'. My biography of Sri Aurobindo appeared in 1945 (the revised and enlarged 3rd edition in 1972) and my *On the Mother* came out in 1952 (the greatly expanded two-volume 2nd edition in 1978). I had in the meantime moved from Belgaum to Bagalkot in 1944, and from Bagalkot to Andhra University, Waltair, in 1947.

My more than two decades (1947-68) in Andhra University saw the publication of *Gerard Manley Hopkins* (1948), *The Mind and Heart of Britain* (1955), *The Adventure of Criticism* (1962), *Francois Mauriac : Novelist and Moralist* (1963) and *Shakespeare : His World and His Art* (1964). I attended the Shakespeare Quatercentenary Conference at Stratford-upon-Avon, and I was happy that my book on Shakespeare had come out in time. It had a good press in U.K. and in India, and Prof. A. Closs of Bristol, reviewing it in the *Aryan Path*, remarked that the 700-page volume "will, for a long time, remain a most memorable and important homage to one of the world's greatest literary geniuses". The reviewer in the *Year's Work in English Studies* (Vol. 45) called my book a "substantial study" and added:

“Iyengar’s early chapters give a clear and sensible account of Shakespeare’s life, of the textual and bibliographical problems relating to his writings, and of theatrical conditions in his day. The bulk of the book, however, apart from a chapter on the poems, is concerned with the plays .. Iyengar has read very widely in Shakespearian critical literature of all kinds, and is himself a critic of penetration and judgement; his book is one of the soundest and most thorough general works on Shakespeare to have appeared in recent years”.

The edition sold out within six months, and hasn’t been reissued since. I have not lost hope that some publisher will one day give it a new lease of life.

Immediately after the Shakespeare Conference, I attended the first Commonwealth Literature Conference at the University of Leeds. Next year I went to Leeds and London again, and helped to usher into existence the Association of Commonwealth Language and Literature Studies, with Prof. A. N. Jeffares as Chairman. I also attended the 2nd Commonwealth Literature Conference at Brisbane and spoke on ‘Commonwealth Literature : Themes and Variations’. Some of my papers and talks on Commonwealth Literature were collected in *Two Cheers for the Commonwealth* (1969). During my fairly long innings as Head of the English Department of Andhra University, I reorganised postgraduate teaching so as to find a place for American Literature, Indian Writing in English and Commonwealth Literature, with facilities for research also in these areas. During the last decade, several universities in India have likewise extended the base of English studies so as to give them almost a global coverage.

After 19 years as Head of the English Department, I served as Vice-Chancellor of Andhra University for about 30 months (1966-68). It was a period of excitement and tension when I had to live with campus crises most of the time. At last I resigned the Vice-Chancellorship, and found a heaven of peace at Sri Aurobindo Ashram, New Delhi, and the Mother named me the ‘adhishthatha’ of the place. Soon after, I was unanimously elected Vice-President of Sahitya Akademi (National Academy of Letters), and re-elected for another term in 1973 and I also acted as President towards the end for about 8 months. During this unexpected phase of my active life (1969-78), I was privileged to meet many eminent writers in the several living languages of India (including Sanskrit and English), and it was one of my constant preoccupations to underline the unifying ‘Indianness’ behind the opulent manifoldness of Indian literature. The symposium, *Indian Literature since Independence*, appeared in 1973 with my 50-page Introduction insinuating my thesis and affirming my faith, and I was also involved in the Akademi’s launching the ambitious project, *Encyclopaedia of Indian Literature*,

which is expected to come out in due course in 3 large volumes. It was both enlightening and exhausting to participate in literary seminars convened by the Akademi at different centres, and I felt more and more clearly the unity of Indian literature and culture from the Vedic Age to the present day. It was a matter of unique satisfaction to me that I could take an active part in organising the several Sri Aurobindo Birth Centenary Seminars during 1972, and I also edited the seminar papers in the comprehensive volume, *Sri Aurobindo : A Centenary Tribute (1947)*.

I should add that my membership since 1938 of the P.E.N. All-India Centre (founded by my esteemed friend, Shrimati Sophia Wadia) has also brought me into contact with writers in India and abroad. I attended the Jaipur, Annamalainagar and Baroda sessions of the All-India Writers' Conference, as also of the P.E.N. Congress at Tokyo-Kyoto in 1957. At the PEN-UNESCO Symposium at Tokyo, I was privileged to represent India— Angus Wilson, Alberto Moravia and John Steinbeck representing U.K., Italy and U.S.A. respectively. I spoke at one of the plenary sessions on 'The Meeting of East and West and the Promise of a New Hope for Life and Literature', with the international President, M. Andre Chamson, in the chair. Some years earlier, I had visited the United Kingdom during the 'Festival of Britain' months, and met most of the University Professors of English, including Dover Wilson, Peter Alexander, C.L. Wrenn, Lord David Cecil, Geoffrey Bullough, Una Ellis-Fermor, D. G. James, Basil Willey, Bonamy Dobree, H. B. Charlton, John Butt, Simeon Potter and E.M.W. Tillyard. I spent an evening with E. M. Forster whom I had earlier met at Jaipur, and quite a few Dons took a lively interest in me as the author of the critical study of Lytton Strachey. Likewise, at Oxford I received a ready welcome on account of my book on Hopkins. A partial record of my reactions appeared serially in the *Hindustan Times* and was later issued as *The Mind and Heart of Britain*. But the day-to-day diary I maintained during the tour has so far remained unpublished.

During my subsequent visits to Britain in 1959, 1964, 1965 and 1973, I renewed many old friendships and made new friends like Vivian de Sola Pinto, T. J. B. Spencer, A. N. Jeffares, G. Wilson Knight, Douglas Jefferson, Arnold Kettle and H. O. White. I attended as sole Indian delegate the International Congress of Literary Critics at Rheims in 1972, and the Annual Congress of the International Union of Academies in London in 1973. As Vice-Chancellor, I attended the Commonwealth Universities Congress at Melbourne and Sydney (1968), and as an Aurobindonian, I took part in the 2nd World Congress of Religion and Peace at Leuven in 1974. And, of course, while still an active Professor,

I did my turn as President of the All-India English Teacher's Conference at Jaipur in 1963.

I must confess, however, that with my temperament and food habits I don't quite enter into the spirit of conferences and congresses. At the same time, I cannot deny that the ambience of such meetings has usually a tonic effect upon me. And chance encounters have developed into deeper associations and life-long friendships. In the course of an academic career that began over half-a-century ago in February 1928, I have known many a scholar and teacher of eminence in India, and I remember them with affection and gratitude. Of the seniors, I recall with particular emotion the late N. K. Sidhanta, V. K. Ayappan Pillai, S. C. Deb and J. R. Macphail ; of those happily with us still, K. Swaminathan ; of my nearer contemporaries, V. K. Gokak, G. C. Bannerjee and V. Y. Katak ; and of those much younger in age, Ramesh Mohan, C. D. Narasimhaiah and M. K. Naik. It is certainly most gratifying that my students have distinguished themselves as Ministers and as Vice-Chancellors, but nothing can give me greater pleasure or pride than the fact that several of my students are themselves University Professors, seasoned teachers and organisers of teaching and research, carving out names for themselves. A still larger number of my students are in professions other than teaching and they too extend the same affection towards me when chance brings us together. They don't usually remember (nor do I) what exactly I tried to teach them in my time, but the human ties remain, defying the vicissitudes of time and age ; and the cleansing and transforming power of this love is an unfading and invaluable blessing which can only be a gift of Grace.

As for my credo, I may say that I too, like Prof. Wellek, believe that what matters most in literary study is "the great work which must have moved us and spoken to us before we ever engaged in the professional study of literature". *Sahridayatvam*, first ; and only then, the 'business of criticism', in Helen Gardner's phrase. Thus at different times I have been knocked down by classics like the *Ramayana* or the *Odyssey*, *Antigone* or *Medea*, the *Divine Comedy* or *Paradise Lost*, *Hamlet* or *The Tempest*... and, coming to later times, masterpieces like *Anna Karenina*, *The Brothers Karamazov*, *A Doll's House*, *Moby Dick*, *Madame Bovary*, *The Cherry Orchard*... and, in our own time, *Gitanjali*, *Savitri*, Mauriac's *Therese* or Wole Soyinka's *Madmen and Specialists* ; and, of course, since the ways in which one's pulses respond to different writers and their artistic creations must differ considerably, and we don't have all the facts and hence cannot easily pluck the heart of the creative mystery, there is need for abundant caution and humility in formulating



our conclusions and assessments. Only Christ is the best or true critic, Hopkins wrote to his fellow-poet, Dixon ; and this has been a salutary warning to me in my profession as a literary critic.

In retrospect, I feel that I have been a desultory rather than a wise reader ; and I have written more than I need have. I seem to have read with no pre-conceived plan, and mixed recklessly in my daily diet metaphysics and mystical poetry and sociology and detective fiction. I have done all my 'typing and most of my proof-reading. I have avoided the usual 'enemies of promise' — social life, politics, the lure of 'power' — and I haven't been assailed and enfeebled by too much success. If I have been able to serve literature with diligence and devotion, much of the credit goes to my wife who has been a silent and unfailing help. Perhaps the itch for writing is in the family. And lately my son and my daughter have both graduated as writers, my son as an economist and my daughter as a translator, critic and practitioner of the art of the short story. Rare blessings these, and I feel thankful that my unflagging commitment to literature and the teaching of literature has, at the least, kept me out of the insane rat-race without and the hucksterings of the market-place ; and at its best — however few the occasions and far between — given me almost a sense of sacerdocy, as the Mother has described the teacher's function. To have been enabled to find entry into the elected world of a Shakespeare at one end, and of a Sri Aurobindo at the end, and all the realms between, and just now to be able to lose myself in the Sundara Kanda of the *Ramayana* of Valmiki : where can I find words adequate enough to convey this ineffable Delight of Existence ? As one grows older, problems seem to multiply. Truth seems an elusive mystery. Motives mix, intentions miscarry, the glitter of so-called achievements only gathers rust, and the murmur of frustration tries to ruin the evolving harmony. But *Kāvyañubhava* cannot fail us, and this is the Faith that endures, and — whatever the hazards of age — I hope this Faith will sustain me still.

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