Man's Body in Relation to The Rest of Creation

by Jyoti Sahi

Modern man seems to have lost his faith in nature. This is part of a more complicated loss of faith in himself. For the artist, anyway, nature is largely only an extension of himself, and it is primarily the artist who finds nature has become a sort of enemy. In outlining a possible new theory of our relationship with nature, we are attempting to integrate in our own work that nature which we too, as modern men, find antipathetic to our consciousness. I would like to explain more exactly what I mean by nature. This is not the nature which is looked for in empirical experience, but rather that *a priori* intuition of creation which we experience because of our subjective sense of our ontological contingency. A scientist, viewing what he calls facts, apprehends the causality of things, but cannot from that deduce an eternal source from which all things emanate, a source essentially different from its own emanations. For the artist, on the other hand, everything has its still centre, a centre which is somehow the very voiding of all that he perceives, an inner principle, one might say, of naughting, which is yet the most cogent affirmation which he knows of all that he sensually experiences. So we see at the very crux of our concept of nature there is a paradox, a paradox which leads the artist to distrust his own empiricism, because for him nature can never be wholly revealed. The most essential part of nature lies hidden in that which is beyond concept, and only enters into the artist's own concepts as a certain mystery, a certain secret, or 'shakti', which accepts his own works as a temple for its presence, through an ineffable condescension beyond the power of the artist to understand

If our first point of contact with nature is the *a priori* intuition of the whole creation, our second point of contact is what the scholastics might call the operation of nature, which, they claimed, art resembles. Coomaraswamy was fond of quoting this phrase: 'Art resembles nature not in appearance but in her manner of operation.' Nature too has its techniques. Ultimately our techniques are valid only in so far as they participate in the operation of Nature. In other words, art is itself a part of nature in that it is the habitation of a divine will to form. Without this will art would never be manifested, it would not even enter into the imagination of man. The artist, perhaps like all men, perceives nature in so far as he himself contributes to its creation. He contributes not actively, for the will is not his own, but as a vessel in which creation is, as it were, poured.

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In a sense, everything that is made, is made in man. Hence perhaps the meaning of that rather strange passage in Genesis, when it is said that all living things were made subject to him. Man is not separate from the rest of creation, but is its final culmination, so that, for example, everything which a tree is, finds its completion in what man is. Even the heavenly bodies, especially, for example, the moon, move in man, causing cycles in his biological life and receiving themselves a certain dignity from his body.

And it is in art that we see the practical influence of such an inner relationship with nature. The Chinese thought of landscape in terms of the body. They spoke of hills and rocks as being the flesh and bones of a greater, world-body. The streams and pools were its blood, and the vegetation its hair. This approach to nature is, I feel, fundamental to their art, so that their landscapes have a significance for man in that they open his consciousness of his own body to something greater, so that just as natural things attain a certain dignity in relation to man, man also is dignified through relationship to great and abiding forms. In India we see the reverse process. In an art which was obsessed by the human body in its limited carnal sense, the body was related to nature in that in its own form it was seen as a sort of composite mirror of natural phenomena. For example the leg was compared to the trunk of an elephant, and the artist distorted, as a result, its actual anatomical shape to confirm this analogy. The distinctive beauty of man was, for the Indian, his organic nature. The ideal man had the chest of a lion, the ideal woman had the quality of a clinging creeper whose breasts were fruit. We find as a result that Abanindranath Tagore, when condemning modern trends in art, condemned its inorganic nature. In a short essay, defending the paintings of Rabindranath Tagore, he writes: 'His art was nothing new. When everybody else said it was something novel, I still maintained my position because I am sure of my ground. I knew that "newness" in creation meant anarchy, and his art, whatever it was else, was not anarchical. Cubism was something new. I allow that, but then Cubism brought anarchy in its train. . . . His pictures were certainly not cubistic, nor was there any element of novelty in it. You do not find in his pictures anything which is not already there in nature. His colours are scattered through nature, his designs are spread along fields and rivers. He only gathered them from all these sources.' In this passage, I feel, we hear the authentic voice of Indian art-theory speaking. We notice that he connects anarchy with forms which do not relate to organic nature.

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It seems to me that there are two distinct approaches in man's consciousness of his own body. One of them is abstracted and intellectualized: man thinks of his body as the vessel of his individuality, for we are separate from other consciousnesses in so far as our particular consciousness is housed in a body. This particular

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approach one could call the conscious approach. The other approach to the body is related primarily to the senses. Here the body is thought of as being our point of contact with the rest of the world, in fact the rest of the world becomes real to us in so far as our body is able to open its door to it. This approach is not necessarily conscious. The former approach to the body tends to be anarchical in so far as it stresses man's separateness. We become observers of nature, as the scientist is an observer of empirical phenomena. We do not feel, like the Chinese artist, that nature works through our brush. According to Indian theory this approach is the approach of the heart in which *chit* or consciousness resides. This *chit* is the 'I' principle also, and we notice that in modern art, which is largely analytical, the stress on individuality is predominant. The second approach to the body relies primarily on moods, on the subtle influences of external phenomena, working through the senses, on the consciousness of man. Here the consciousness is receptive, but not active, the art poetical, but not scientific.

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As I have already mentioned when dealing with Chinese art, man tends to project his human body on to the plane of non-human creation. So we see in mediaeval times the earlier beginnings of landscape painting which was in its inception symbolic. We often see in miniatures of the period an enclosed garden symbolic of Paradise and the innocent wholeness of man before the Fall. Generally the figure in the centre of the garden is Mary, the new Eve and the Child Jesus, the new Adam. A convention had arisen in the middle ages that the garden should satisfy all the senses, once again symbolizing the wholeness of man. Thus there should be music (figures playing instruments) for the ear, fruits and sweet water for the taste, flowers for the eye, and aromatic shrubs symbolizing scent. This embryonic form of landscape later developed into the work of the great European landscapists which satisfied, though perhaps on a completely unconscious level, man's intuitive need for sensual wholeness and the union of his bodily and psychic being with the rest of creation.

Modern man, returning to a more analytical approach to nature, has lost the intuition of its wholeness which he had so long as he relied merely on the senses. I feel that one of the main causes of modern man's alienation from nature is his loss of sensuality. In view of the increased trend in modern culture towards an a-moral attitude to life this may seem a curious statement, but sensibility is in inverse proportion to passion. This is shown in those works which, whilst concentrating on powerful human instincts, return to a stage similar to that of primitive man, where the relationship of humanity to the rest of creation becomes obscure. Modern Literature, as also modern painting, seems once again singularly blind to that nature around us which, with so much effort and pain, man had unveiled

to his consciousness in the long period from the beginning of our era and culminating in the great Western landscape painters, and the powerful intuitions of nature in such writers as Hardy and D. H. Lawrence.

The Greeks thought of the ideal body as composed of ideal limbs abstracted from different bodies and united in a new synthesis. In fact, no individual could possibly have an ideal body. Their art of the human body was thus, implicitly, the acceptance of the imperfection of the individual. So, alongside an increased sense of individuality was the sense of the loss of a perfect whole. If the pagan Greek concept of man's ideal body had implicit in it the sense of the loss of a perfect whole, this anarchical element, which lay dormant during the Christian centuries which followed, has now reappeared in the wake of a new idea. The Greek ideal body was conceived as architectonic, in so far, for example, as the Greek building was said to follow the ideal proportions of the human body. This concept has now been replaced by a mechanistic view of man, as seen, for example, in the Dadaists. The emphasis now is not on the organic *potency* in man, the *mood* in its intimate union with nature, but on his mechanistic *operation*, so to speak, seen in isolation from the deeper intuition of his unity with nature. This is seen in modern literature where sex is no longer treated as a creative potency suffusing the depths of nature and influencing man as a mood colouring his particular acts with a deeper sense of his unity with nature, but rather as a particular act in itself, a limited, wholly human problem within the social milieu.

Creation is, in a deeply inituitive sense, a mirror in which man sees himself. He can never fully realize his own sensibilities except by observing them reflected off nature. For example, the fullness of a man's love for a particular girl is only realized in him (though perhaps modern man may no longer be aware of this) when in a conscious emotional state he reacts with a mood to a natural milieu. Man, for example, is more romantic when the moon is shining—not that the moon causes his romantic mood, but that nature is the reflector which enhances and brings to his consciousness the deeper levels of his psychic potency.

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I began this essay hoping to discover some possible way in which our alienation from nature could be resolved in our art. The nineteenth-century painter said, 'Go to nature and imitate it'. This resulted, in the academicians, in an inevitable triviality. Reacting against this, the modern artist has divorced himself from nature, creating a purely artificial art. The fallacy, I feel, in both these approaches is that nature is thought of as something distinct from man, to be either sought for or rejected. But man *is* nature, nature *is* man. Both the objectivity of the scientist, and the subjectivity of the automatist, are the stumbling efforts of consciousness to realize

itself in nature. They crystallize into fallacies when they lose awareness of that wholeness towards which they strive. What we need in art if it is not to fossilize into an academicism of abstraction as lifeless as the nineteenth-century academicism of the imitation of nature, is a return to the simple awareness of our own psychosomatic presence in creation. In other words, our consciousness must become a somatic intentionality which in the phenomenological plane discards all concepts of subject and object in the intuition of our psychic communion with all the principalities of being, in that stillness of non-being which is at the heart of all our experience. It is an experience ultimately of the immanence of all that, in the totality of creation, our limited body incarnates. For what we are as a limited individual person is never completely manifested in this particular body; we always retain in part a certain indefinable silence whose totality our intuitional nature apprehends in the silent totality of creation around us.

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