

## The Nature of God in the *Gitanjali* of Rabindranath Tagore

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**Abstract:** This article offers a broad discussion of the nature of God in the *Gitanjali* of Rabindranath Tagore. Its principal focus is to outline in all its contours the nature of God as an entity from which all things are generated and as a gravitational centre to which all things are drawn, always underpinned by a personal experience of faith in and understanding of God expressed by Tagore, philosophically and poetically. An elaboration of the question of God forces us unavoidably to confront issues that are in one way or another connected with God, including the philosophy of religion, an investigation of the acceptability of God as Infinite Being in Infinite Existence, the absoluteness of God, his omnipresence, life as an aspect of existence and death as a transition from the physical to the metaphysical, the problem of the union between God and man, and so on. This constellation of issues will be explored through a distinctive prism, and will assist in uncovering and understanding the nature of God in Tagore's masterpiece.

**Keywords:** Rabindranath Tagore, *Gitanjali*, God as afferent centre, God as Absolute, spiritual union

### INTRODUCTION

Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), a man of many parts, is greatly esteemed for his multi-faceted output as poet, novelist, dramatist, essayist, philosopher, artist and musician. *Gitanjali* is undoubtedly the work with which his name will always be linked, both because of the wide acclaim which it earned him - extending to the Nobel Prize for Literature - and because it is considered his most artistically mature creation. As is generally understood, *Gitanjali* was first published in India in 1910, and then two years later, in 1912, Tagore selected a range of verses from that volume and a range from other earlier poetry collections of his, translated them from the original Bengali into

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English and published them in London in 1913, now as a work of poetical prose entitled *Gitanjali (Song Offerings)*. This volume comprised 103 pieces of poetical prose which, from first to last, are offerings dedicated to God. God, then, is the macrotheme of *Gitanjali*, the axis around which turn all its microthemes - including freedom, love, simplicity, devotion, life and death. God is consistently represented as a centre to which is drawn humanity and everything else that broadly characterizes it. Tagore wove his verse offerings for God, expressing the greatest devotion, and in so doing he established a vertical channel of communication: from low to high. Thus we have Tagore addressing and God addressed or, in other words, the poet as addresser and God as addressed; the first offering and the second accepted what is offered, albeit as a silent interlocutor, for such is the dictate of his mysterious and transfinite nature, which the human mind, "created for a finite universe" (Barone 1996, 29), may not deeply penetrate. These offerings are words from the soul, wrapped in the philosophy of life and death and everything that exists between them. The works of Rabindranath Tagore - admired by icons of poetry such as André Gide, Romain Rolland, Juan Ramon Jimenez, Paul Valéry, Ezra Pound and W. B. Yeats - has persistently provoked the curiosity of critics to study it from different perspectives. This was chiefly because his output, as well as being voluminous, was rich in substantive content and always left room for further study. Inspired in this way, the analysis offers a broad discussion of the nature of God in the *Gitanjali* of Rabindranath Tagore. The existential question that raises its head in this context is the way in which God is conceived in this anthology of poetical prose, and from this follow other issues such as: the philosophy of Tagore's poetry, his religious philosophy, the perception of the presence of God in the life of man, union with God as an aim of life, the manifestation of the character of God as an axial theme within the thematic universe of a literary work where love, death, freedom and devotion - all conceived philosophically - are connected around this central axis and all of them understood more clearly in relationship to it. In this way, the attention is automatically drawn to the revelation of the nature of God, since everything that is discussed in the work has God as its start-point and end-point. Thus love springs from God and returns to him, spiritual freedom triumphs fully only in the knowledge of God, simplicity is the key to the knowing of God, devotion is humility and an explicit affirmation of God as Absolute, and so on. Taken together, all of these enable us to

see *Gitanjali* as a journey from life to death, or more precisely as a path of life that begins in God and ends in God. Accordingly, the road from God to God is the road to the Absolute, the road to love, the road to freedom, to devotion and to simplicity - for God is synonymous with all of them. Based on this premise, God emerges as the centre around which are guided and gravitate all things that make up the constellation called life.

#### OBSERVATIONS ON THE PHILOSOPHY OF TAGORE'S POETRY

There has been much discussion of the philosophical aspects of Rabindranath Tagore's poetry. To those critics who have contested how genuine it is because it is so steeped in mysticism and metaphysics, S. Radhakrishnan - one of those most familiar with Tagore's philosophy - declares that Tagore "is essentially a poet and not a philosopher, though it is possible for us to gather his philosophical views from his poetry" (Radhakrishnan 1919, 121). Radhakrishnan assesses that poetry should embody within itself a "philosophical vision", which imparts other ideas by means of poetry. This is impossible unless poetry is imbued with philosophy. Believing that these two domains are in close communication and that one is not possible without the other, he comes to the conclusion that "a true poet will be a philosopher, and a true philosopher a poet" (Ibid, 165). In Tagore he always sees the poet's instinct triumphant rather than the philosopher's, reasoning that if Tagore "has touched Indian hearts, it is because he is first and foremost a poet and not a philosopher" (Ibid, 169). In truth, when we read Tagore we are left savouring a marvellous amalgamation of poetry and philosophy: the former conveys the latter and the latter completes the former, to the point where, for a reader attuned and acculturated to the deeper nuances of both, a wholly natural and most attractive exchange is established.

In the foreword which the acclaimed Irish writer and Nobel laureate William Butler Yeats wrote for the English publication of *Gitanjali*, we are told that the verses of Rabindranath Tagore were learned by heart by his compatriots, who whispered them at particular moments in life in order thereby to signify that they were identifying with and embodying them. We are not accordingly surprised to hear that, besides being his people's most important poet, he is seen foremost as a kind of prophet for them. Nevertheless, the influence of his work - and especially *Gitanjali* - has transcended national borders and spread

almost as powerfully through other countries. For instance, in England “*Gitanjali* was seen as ‘psalmic’” (Rayapati 2010, 9), something that hints at his reception not merely as a poet, but as a philosopher in his own right. This status, by which Tagore is more than a poet and takes on almost mystic dimensions, is undoubtedly a direct result of the fact that he speaks to his readers not only through his verse but also through a philosophy which they are obliged to penetrate in order to discover the marvellous world presented there.

Tagore himself expounded the question of the nature of true poetry. He believes that in order to bring a good poem to life it is necessary to detach the individual idea utterly from its mundane context and to give it a transcendental nature, at which point a connection between it and philosophy is automatically created: “To detach the individual idea from its confinement of everyday facts and to give its soaring wings the freedom of the universal: this is the function of poetry” (Tagore 1922a, 13). Tagore sees the process of creating poetry and other forms of art as a journey by which man expresses the truth of his existence, something which obliges him to perceive the presence of the divine within himself, thereby elevating himself to the metaphysical:

Poetry and the arts cherish in them the profound faith of man in the unity of his being with all existence, the final truth of which is the truth of personality. It is a religion directly apprehended, and not a system of metaphysics to be analysed and argued. We know in our personal experience what our creations are and we instinctively know through it what creation around us means (Tagore 1922a, 6).

Thus, for Tagore, poetry is something more than a text which expresses feelings and conveys a particular message to the reader. In the fullest sense of the word, he was a philosophical poet. The mysticism and metaphysics articulated in *Gitanjali* take the reader to distant lands and the mind on a journey that the physical world does not know. This work of poetry speaks to the reader in a philosophical language, addressing particular problems relating to the philosophy of life, death and everything that exists between them. In essence, *Gitanjali* elaborates the philosophy of the presence of God in the life of man, conveying the idea that the world is a product of God and that all things are drawn to him.

THE RELIGIOUS PHILOSOPHY OF TAGORE: *THE RELIGION OF THE POET*

There have been many discussions about Tagore's religion, and a substantial majority of those that deal with this important, if not fundamental, aspect of the author's poetry agree on at least one point: his religious philosophy cannot be tied to just one religion. The fact that this has been so clearly shown makes us curious to read more closely those of Tagore's works with a philosophical character in which he expresses his convictions about religion. When we read his *The Religion of Man*, we see fully delineated his beliefs regarding religion as philosophy and as existential practice. There we learn that he was raised in a family which, at the time of his birth, belonged to a monotheistic religion based on the ancient philosophy of the *Upanishads*. Apart from this, Tagore was in no way influenced by the experiences of his family, but chose to follow his own path towards an understanding of God, refusing to follow religious teachings blindly simply because the people around him believed them to be true without questioning a single element. It was precisely here that Tagore's path diverged from that of his forebears; here was the source of his notion of spiritual freedom and autonomy in the context of religion as a philosophy. He did not deny that he had inherited something, if only unconsciously, from the path of his Vedic ancestors. The religion of Tagore is not that of a believer, but *the religion of a poet*, founded upon the notion of freedom. In defining the religion of a poet, Tagore confronted dogmatic religion and drew the following comparison:

In dogmatic religion all questions are definitely answered, all doubts are finally laid to rest. But the poet's religion is fluid, like the atmosphere round the earth where lights and shadows play hide-and-seek, and the wind like a shepherd boy plays upon its reeds among flocks of clouds. It never undertakes to lead anybody anywhere to any solid conclusion; yet it reveals endless spheres of light, because it has no walls round itself (Tagore 1922a, 7).

In every case Tagore sets himself against the dogmas of faith, because he believes that a person's world-view should be shaped by convictions freely-reached rather than inherited. He resists systems and constraints that inflate the individual and shut off their mental horizon, and accordingly he believes that where all questions have just one final answer there is no room for free mental activity. For Tagore, there is no incontrovertible truth, no truth that does not alter in the face of

historical currents of time and affairs. For him, the only unalterable truth and the only question with a certain answer is God. He reaches this conclusion from a daily and protracted contemplation of God, conducted in nature and under the tropical sky of his upbringing, and through which he expresses his adoration and devotion. Tagore describes this process, for him a ritual in itself, thus:

Our daily worship of God is not really the process of gradual acquisition of him, but the daily process of surrendering ourselves, removing all obstacles to union and extending our consciousness of him in devotion and service, in goodness and in love (Tagore 1915, 82).

### THE PHILOSOPHY OF GOD ACCORDING TO TAGORE

Ad litteram, God is the epicentre of the *Gitanjali*. From whatever angle the work is seen, God remains the fundamental constant and in thematic terms enjoys absolute rule. God is the thematic root which then branches out in diverse motifs all explicitly linked to God, the immovable mover and the seed from which every living thing springs. *Gitanjali* can be read as Tagore's attempt to find and know God himself, a search conducted through song, in an age silent and mystical and yet also full of colour: "Ever in my life have I sought thee with my songs. It was they who led me from door to door, and with them have I felt about me, searching and touching my world" (Tagore 1920, 64); the work is wholly permeated by a complete portrait of God, who remains for the poet the greatest of mysteries: "I put my tales of you into lasting songs. The secret gushes out from my heart" (Ibid, 65). The path towards knowledge of God is long, but attaining him is the highest and most noble idea for a poet: "My eyes strayed far and wide before I shut them and said 'Here art thou!'" (Ibid, 20) As W. B. Yeats tells us, everything in the *Gitanjali* exemplifies God:

Flowers and rivers, the blowing of conch shells, the heavy rain of the Indian July, or the parching heat, are images of the moods of that heart in union or in separation; and a man sitting in a boat upon a river playing upon a lute, like one of those figures full of mysterious meaning in a Chinese picture, is God Himself (W. B. Yeats 1920, 11).

Tagore's world-view regarding God has its basis in the philosophy of the Vedas, and in particular the ancient knowledge of the *Upanishads* and the *Bhagavad Gita*. Like the *Upanishads*, Tagore insists on the immanence and transcendence of the Supreme One, perceiving it as omnipresent, radiant, pure and absolute. The existence of God in the

*Upanishads* is consistent with the existence of God as depicted by Tagore: “It moves and it moves not. It is far and it is near. It is within all this and it is also outside all this.” (*Isa Upanishad* 1943, 9) It is this omnipotent creator, this eternal and omniscient creator, who the *Upanishads* represents as a *motive force* and *absolute and without form*, the Supreme Personality, the creator and the God of all beings, God of Gods and God of the universe. The names used to personify God in the *Bhagavad Gita* include: The Supreme Divine Personality, The Supreme Abode, The Supreme Purifier, The Eternal God, The Primal Being, The Unborn, and The Greatest. Likewise in Tagore God manifests his existence by means of diverse names, identical to those above, and this speaks to the clear influence on him of these ancient sacred scriptures. God is everywhere apparent in the *Bhagavad Gita*: “I am seated in the heart of all living entities. I am the beginning, middle, and end of all beings” (*Bhagavad Gita* 2012, 10:20); and he has the same nature in the *Gitanjali*. God is concealed in the heart of all things and in the depths of human beings:

Hidden in the heart of things thou art nourishing seeds into sprouts,  
buds into blossoms, and ripening flowers into fruitfulness. I was tired  
and sleeping on my idle bed and imagined all work had ceased. In the  
morning I woke up and found my garden full with wonders of flowers.  
(Tagore 1920, 55)

As well as being omniscient and omnipotent, the God of the *Gitanjali* is omnipresent. He is to be found everywhere: he is in heaven and earth, he is the power that governs the universe and the dearest friend of humanity: “...and call thee friend who art my lord” (Tagore 1920, 15). In *Gitanjali*, Tagore brings God down from the metaphysical heights and installs him in terrestrial domains: this God is among people, made one with their misfortunes. He is not confined to temples, shut up in his own sanctity, and nor does wait to hear prayers or receive offerings or love; he is beside people as they labour, as they suffer and as they rejoice. On this level, as well as pantheistic philosophy, Tagore appears to have been influenced by Kabir, the mystic poet to whom he translated a substantial body of verses. In his own poetry Kabir teaches that God is within us and breathes through us – “God is the breath of all breath” (Kabir 1915, 1) - and that it is accordingly futile to seek him somewhere outside our deepest self: “O servant, where dost thou seek Me? / Lo! I am beside thee. / I am neither in temple nor in mosque: / I am neither in Kaaba nor in

Kailash” (Ibid). Tagore does not ask where God is; rather he answers: God is among those who dwell on the margins of society, among the poor and the humble and the lost, and bound to them eternally:

Here is thy footstool and there rest thy feet where live the poorest, and lowliest, and lost. When I try to bow to thee, my obeisance cannot reach down to the depth where thy feet rest among the poorest, and lowliest, and lost... (Tagore 1920, 19)

He is among those who acknowledge him and who need him, the man wearied by toil, the farmer ploughing the dry earth and the labourer breaking rocks:

Leave this chanting and singing and telling of beads! Whom dost thou worship in this lonely dark corner of a temple with doors all shut? Open thine eyes and see thy God is not before thee! He is there where the tiller is tilling the hard ground and where the path-maker is breaking stones. He is with them in sun and in shower, and his garment is covered with dust. (Tagore 1920, 20)

Tagore was also influenced by the Bengali tradition of the wandering village minstrels, the Bauls, whose songs are remarkable for their simplicity and the power they impart to the hearer/receiver. Likewise for Tagore, ornamentation is excess and his songs are free from all embellishments: “My song has put off her adornments... Ornaments would mar our union; they would come between thee and me; their jingling would drown thy whispers” (Tagore 1920, 17). Simplicity is the key that opens many doors, above all that of union with God. Through their songs, the Bauls teach us that the path to seek and to know God begins in the self and should end in the self. They do not have temples where they worship God, because they see them as obstacles between people and God. When he speaks of the philosophy of the poetics of their songs, Tagore writes: “Bauls have no temple or image for their worship, and this utter simplicity is needful for men whose one subject is to realise the innermost nearness of God” (Tagore 1922a, 24).

The tradition from which Tagore emerged perceives many convergences between religion and poetry; it is a tradition that he represents and that shapes his own personality. He thus asserts that his religious life has followed “the same line of development as his poetic life” (Tagore 1922b, 93).



## UNITY WITH THE ABSOLUTE

The conception and definition of the Absolute as a philosophical category is generally bound up with God. Among the names attributed to God in the Quranic sura *Al-Ikhlās*, which George Sale (1877, 504) entitles the *Declaration of God's Unity* - besides *the One, the Only, and the Eternal* - is *the Absolute* (*The Koran*, 1877, 112:2). God is omniscient, omnipotent and omnipresent, and therefore he is Absolute. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1977) defines the Absolute as a dynamic process and equates it with the category of real truth, and the latter with entirety, considering that in the end the world is itself an organic and strongly inter-connected whole, and that "thought concludes with knowledge of the Absolute" (Stumpf 1994, 316). Radhakrishnan (1919, 16), on the other hand, equates the Absolute with the Universe: "Absolute is nothing short of the universe in its totality." Tagore refers to the Absolute (*Satchidānanda*) as the Supreme One or the Supreme Reality (*Brahma*), and in this regard its definition is gathered into three phases: existence, knowledge and love:

The meaning is that Reality, which is essentially One, has three phases. The first is Sat; it is the simple fact that things are, the fact which relates to all things through the relationship of common existence. The second is Chit; it is the fact that we know which relates us with all things through the relationship of knowledge. The third is Ānanda; it is the fact that we enjoy, which unites us with all things through the relationship of love (Tagore 1922a, 14).

For Tagore, the perfect harmony of the Absolute is best demonstrated as the appearance of a perfect balance between joy and love, which together open the truth path to approaching God. According to Tagore, God (*Brahma*) is Absolute, and cannot be anything less or anything more.

The human struggle to know the Absolute, and thereby to attain final fulfilment, is fraught and permanent. The path to the Absolute is by definition the path to God, and it is completed only with love and with spiritual and infinite freedom, a state in which humans - unconstrained and unobstructed - succeed in discovering within themselves the essence of God. Freedom is essential because it gives meaning to life: "Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high; Where knowledge is free; Where the world has not been broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls" (Tagore 1920, 31). Only when we trample human egoism and individualism may we feel the

presence of the divine within ourselves, and we cannot achieve this through logic or knowledge, but rather through the personal experience of faith.

For Tagore, God is the Infinite Being and man the Finite Being. The principal imperative of life is spiritual union between the Infinite Being and the Finite Being - more precisely the only way in which the circle of truth may be completed:

The Infinite, for its self-expression, comes down into the manifoldness of the Finite; and the Finite, for its self-realisation, must rise into the unity of the Infinite. Then only is the Cycle of Truth complete. (Tagore 1922a, 23)

The path to finding and knowing the Infinite Being is not knowledge but love. Any experience that transcends the boundaries of the physical cannot in any way be linked to learning or knowledge, but only to intuition and spiritual vision - something which, according to Radhakrishnan, has extraordinary importance for Hindu culture. This premise is supported in the ancient wisdom of the *Upanishads* because, as we learn from them, God (Brahma) cannot be known through the mind, but only through the soul. Tagore focuses on unity, which he distinguishes as the highest of the ideals and the chief goal of life: “We must be one with our Father, we must be perfect as he is (Tagore 1915, 88). Meanwhile, “the realization of the Supreme Spirit (*Paramātman*) in the spirit within us (*Antarātman*) is a condition of absolute fulfilment” (Ibid). Tagore believes that “the only way to achieve true satisfaction is to surrender ourselves to the Universal Being” (Ibid, 23).

We find a dual relationship consolidated in *Gitanjali*, fully delineated from beginning to end. It is the relationship between Man and God or, in other words, the relationship between the Human and the Divine, the Finite and the Infinite. For this reason, Radhakrishnan (1919, 52) considers that “the poems of *Gitanjali* are the offerings of the finite to the infinite.”

## THE SAGA OF LIFE AND DEATH, AND GOD AS THE SYMMETRY BETWEEN THEM

Tagore sees everything around him as a manifestation of God, and he sees God as the only source of happiness in life. He is determined accordingly to reveal him in every action he does, wholly subject to his will. The two essential entities, life and death, one demonstrating existence and the other not, are given truly unique form in *Gitanjali*. In

articulating this, we have in mind their symbiotic relationship. Tagore presents them as “twin sisters”, thereby affirming their unity. He expresses life for both of them, and even undertakes to love death as much as he loves life. If discourse around death is generally sombre and cold, just as the phenomenon of death is itself perceived, that is not the case for this author. Tagore is not afraid of death, because he considers it as something natural, and, for him, whatever comes from nature is a gift. Thus the attitude to death in *Gitanjali* is atypical. As a state, death is to be envied as much as life. The metaphor of life and death is encapsulated wonderfully in the following: “The child cries out when from the right breast the mother takes it away, in the very next moment to find in the left one its consolation” (Tagore 1920, 61). Tagore believes fervently in the immortality of the soul, and sees it as an entity existing independently of the body, a notion encountered in the *Bhagavad Gita*:

The soul is neither born, nor does it ever die; nor having once existed, does it ever cease to be. The soul is without birth, eternal, immortal, and ageless. It is not destroyed when the body is destroyed. (*The Bhagavad Gita*, 2:20)

So, the soul does not die, but rather passes from the physical world to the metaphysical and it is precisely death that enables the encounter with the Supreme Spirit. Tagore accordingly writes: “This frail vessel thou emptiest again and again, and fillest it ever with fresh life” (Tagore 1920, 15). It is God who puts the stamp of eternity on the ephemeral moments of life on earth, and an instant of happiness is an instant of meeting God. His presence may be sensed before then, sensed in the air, as the most beautiful perfume, because he is forever approaching: “Every moment and every age, every day and every night he comes, comes, ever comes” (Ibid, 35). The idea of death is manifest throughout *Gitanjali*. It is ever-present, and walks hand-in-hand with life. It has no age, and pays no heed to time: it is an entity in itself. Death is the slave of God, and comes to collect humans, to accompany them to the life beyond, which is eternal. Death speaks with the voice of God, because it is his herald:

Death, thy servant, is at my door. He has crossed the unknown sea and brought thy call to my home. The night is dark and my heart is fearful yet I will take up the lamp, open my gates and bow to him my welcome.

It is thy messenger who stands at my door. I will worship him with folded hands, and with tears (Tagore 1920, 57).

Through death we attain the eternal kingdom, and we go where the Lord of this kingdom is to be found. We are perpetually drawn to God, and every passing second is a step towards death, or more precisely towards the meeting with God. Since death promises that meeting, for Tagore it is sweet and acceptable. Death is the final fulfilment of life. Accordingly, if life lacks just one thing to make it complete, it is death. More concretely, death is the crown placed on the head of life, and the poet looks forward to the sight of death to the extent of devoting his life to it. The journey of life is less important than the journey of death, which Tagore does not fear. There remains only one desire: to die in the undying. The kingdom of God is immortality, the place of peace, the place to encounter God, the place where the soul flies free and attains its long-anticipated liberty. “But there, where spreads the infinite sky for the soul to take her flight in, reigns the stainless white radiance. There is no day nor night, nor form nor colour, and never, never a word” (Tagore 1920, 48).

Thus, if we conceive the universe as a work of God it follows that God is in the beginning, and if the universe is drawn towards God it follows that he is in the end. We read the same in the *Bhagavad Gita* (10:8): “I am the origin of all creation. Everything proceeds from Me. The wise who know this perfectly worship Me with great faith and devotion”. God is the beginning and the end of everything. In particular, he is the symmetry between life and death, and it is he who validates both. The concept of life is reduced to the point where the poet sees it merely as a bridge to cross to immortality, for what is important is that the human heart knows God and becomes one with him throughout life, which by nature is ephemeral - for as Tagore tells us: “Wherever our heart touches the One, in the small or the big, it finds the touch of the infinite” (Tagore 1922a, 3), and “only through love and oneness the gates of the world of the Infinite One are opened” (Ibid, 106).

## CONCLUSION

In *Gitanjali*, God is the epicentre and axis around which all of Tagore’s concerns rotate. We understand that God is the Being manifested in all things that the human mind sees or conceives, in human desire, and in human will. The philosophy of *Gitanjali* is embodied in the existence of an all-encompassing harmony with the

Absolute One, a harmony that will guide and accompany humanity in its relationship with the divine. When we speak of Tagore, Schiller's (2004, 42) famous maxim that "the artist is the child of his time" is unsatisfactory, because in the end he is like some bird of the skies, and this kind of earthliness is wholly irrelevant to him. Although the God of the *Gitanjali* is among humans, he is never stripped of his divine attributes; on the contrary, they are strengthened. This concept is really a kind of humanism in God, through which we understand that God is to be found in every human being - while never forgetting that he governs humanity, being its all-powerful and absolute deity. Accordingly, the poet's over-riding prayer is precisely that he never lacks the touch of the One, in the game of the many. In essence, *Gitanjali* elaborates the question of unity with God, which is literally the quest for human salvation. In conclusion, according to Edward Thompson (1979, 218), *Gitanjali* "brings us very close to a religious experience, which is universal, yet intensely individual."

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