

Tagore's Dark Vision of Humanity

Alok BHALLA*

“What shall I do with that which will not make me immortal?”
Maitreyi asks in the *Brahdranayaka Upanishad*
“What am I to do with these, which are not of immortal spirit?”
Rabindranath Tagore¹

Abstract

Tagore struggled against his dark vision of humanity to assert that the earth was a place of hierophanies and human life had a divine purpose. He failed. He called, with skepticism, for peace, equality and the restoration of earth's loveliness: “I know I am crying in the wilderness, when I raise my voice of warning...” In a war-haunted and hungry Europe and Asia, he was confronted by a strange, cruel, and obstinately tribal world with its “legacy of ruin.” Though he asserted till his death in 1940 that he could never “commit the grievous sin of losing faith in man,” he could not turn away from “the crumbling ruins of ... civilization....”

Keywords: Rabindranath Tagore, skepticism, dark-vision, civilization, beauty, Tolstoy

Izveček

Tagore se je boril proti svoji temni viziji človeštva, da bi potrdil, da je zemlja božanski kraj in človeško življenje božanski namen. Ni mu uspelo. S skepticizmom je pozival k miru, enakosti in obnavljanju miline zemlje: »Vem, da jočem v puščavi, ko sem dvignil glas opozorila ...«. Ob vojnah in lakoti, v takratni Evropi in Aziji se je soočal z odtujenim, krutim in omejenim svetom in njegovo »zapuščino propada«. Čeprav je do smrti leta 1940 trdil, da nikoli ne bi »storil bridkega greha in izgubil vero v človeka«, se ni mogel odvrniti od »razbitih ruševin ... civilizacije ...«.

Ključne besede: Rabindranath Tagore, skepticizem, vizija temnega, civilizacija, lepota, Tolstoj

* Alok Bhalla, Professor, Department of English, Ambedkar University, Delhi, India.
alokbhalla45@gmail.com

¹Tagore, Rabindranath. 2008. *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*, p. 32. Hereafter, all further references to Tagore's English works are from the four volumes published by the Sahitya Akademi and are referred to as *EWRT*.

Between 1903 and 1909, Tolstoy wrote, “The Restoration of Hell,” “After the Ball,” and “The Law of Love and the Law of Violence,” amongst his last and bitterest denunciations of the orthodox Christian Church and Tsarist Russia (Tolstoj 1985 and 1987). The reasons for his rage and despondency were many: in 1891–92, an estimated forty thousand peasants had died of famine in Russia and thousands more had been forced into labour camps of torture and stagnation; around a hundred and fifty thousand soldiers had been killed in a pointless war between Russia and Japan in 1904–05; and, Father Gapon’s peaceful march to the Winter palace in 1905 asking for political reforms was met with violence by the Tsarist forces. Like the later prophets of the Old Testament, Tolstoy’s three texts have the conviction of a visionary who knows how simple the good and the true can be, but also how difficult.² However, they also have the wrathfulness of a man who recognizes at the end of his life that society is now deaf to the call of human sympathy. Thus, in “The Law of Love...,” he thinks that all the citizens and institutions of Russia—thieves, soldiers, universities, ballets, synods, prisons, taxes, judges, gallows and conservatories (Tolstoj 1987, 178)—are “corrupted by wealth, power or civilization” (Tolstoj 1987, 172), and practice “deceit through violence, and violence through deceit” (Tolstoj 1987, 162). In the brilliant short story, “After the Ball,” the narrator is filled with nausea as he watches a naked soldier, who is being pushed through a line of army cadets and whipped on a winter morning, plead: “Have mercy on me, lads. Have mercy on me lads.” (Tolstoj 1985, 264)

It is as if late in life, Tolstoy has understood with a shocked sense of finality that the conversations about love, peace and justice which he had once thought were possible either in his great novels or with his friends like Chekhov and Gorky, have ceased to inspire Russia (Tolstoj 1985, 264). With the scathing wit of a defeated moralist, in his play “The Restoration of Hell” he imagines a people who finally stage a revolt against Christ’s vows of poverty, chastity and *caritas* (Tolstoj 1985, 264), and establish a Church where they can at last worship the Devil. With Beelzebub as its new presiding deity, the Church can display its power through the ornate splendour of rituals, teach with clear conscience the virtues of killing for national pride, sanction flogging of the peasants for discipline, support prisons for the safety of the state, advocate drinking for the lucidity of the soul, and encourage class snobbery for the maintenance of a predatory but cultured aristocracy. Since

² In a diary entry dated May 19, 1905, Tolstoy says: “What is invaluable, important and difficult, is a good life” (Wilson 1988, 473).

the people had finally accepted the legitimacy of the Satanic Church and found in it a justification for their “habitual and favourite vices; vengeance, avarice, envy, ambition, pride, cowardice and spite” (Tolstoj 1987, 216), the State, Tolstoj declares darkly, can carry on with its rapacious functions with greater confidence. It comes as a surprise to realize how abrasively close Tolstoj is placing his two texts beside Dostoevsky’s Grand Inquisitor in *The Brothers Karamazov*; how dangerously near he has come to erasing his own long abiding faith that because human beings are innately good, they would eventually display their natural innocence just as trees burst into leaves. Dostoevsky, we feel, at least framed the ferocious logic of the Grand Inquisitor’s contempt for Christ’s sermons of peace within the gentle faith of Alyosha on the one hand and Ivan’s intellectual passion for the truth on the other, thereby leaving open the possibility of conversations about love and goodness.³ Tolstoj seems to have concluded that “the whole structure of the world [is] founded on violence” (Tolstoj 1987, 176), and leaves people locked in their own special areas of hate or anguish. So deeply dyed he appears in his melancholic appraisal of “human becoming” that one cannot imagine him even conceding with Chekhov’s sadly defeated characters in *The Three Sisters* that “a time will come when everyone will know what all this was for, why there is misery.” Perhaps, that is why there is unredeemable pathos, both in the homelessness of his death at Astapovo on November 7, 1910, and his final whisper as if to his own soul: “Search, always go on searching” (Wilson 1988, 513). Tolstoj, of course, had no idea of the barbaric century in which Tagore would make his life-history.

Tagore’s imaginative journey towards a darkening vision of humanity in the twentieth-century is analogous to Tolstoj’s. Like Tolstoj, he too struggled against skepticism to maintain his faith in the idea that the earth was a place of hierophanies and that human life had a divine purpose.⁴ He failed. He also called, again and again, but with ever deepening sense of gloom, for peace, equality and the restoration of the loveliness of the earth. As early as 1919, in a piece entitled,

³ On conversation as a way of evading skepticism see Cavell 1990.

⁴ Skepticism can, perhaps, be defined as that feeling of profound melancholy which burrows itself so deeply within us when we feel that life’s finitude is “inadequate to the demands of the spirit.” Life, as it moves through its diurnal course, seems strange to skeptical reason; it seems isolating, stifling or false to the one who does not know how to deal with human complexity. Emerson calls this refusal to struggle towards a life of the imagination as the “unawakening” of the soul; Thoreau speaks about it as a life of mere “business”; Nietzsche contemptuously dismisses it as “philistinism.” In such a mood we begin to accept a life of injustice or violence as inevitable as death. For a detailed discussion of skepticism see Cavell 2005, 44–51.

"A Cry for Peace" he confessed his despair: "I know I am crying in the wilderness, when I raise my voice of warning; and while the West is busy in its organization of building its machine-made peace, it will still continue to nourish its iniquities" (*EWRT* 3: 410). As he traveled through Bengal and, then through war-haunted and hungry Europe and Asia, he inevitably found himself confronted by a world which was strange, threatened, "virulently cruel" ("At the Cross Roads," 1918, *EWRT* 3: 380), and so obstinately tribal that it could only leave behind a "legacy of ruin" ("At the Cross Roads," 1918, *EWRT* 3: 382). Early in his imaginative journey, he wrote to C.F. Andrews on July 16, 1915, "The world is wonderfully beautiful, but you cannot help feeling that there is a lurking pain in its heart" ("Letters to a friend," *EWRT* 3: 246). Indeed, even as he continued to assert till the very end of his life that emotionally he could never "commit the grievous sin of losing faith in man," he had to admit that his reasoning self would not let him turn away from "the crumbling ruins of ... civilization strewn like a vast heap of futility" all around him ("Crisis of Civilisation," 1941, *EWRT* 3: 726).

In 1909, Tagore published *Gora*, a sad and forlorn account of the dangers that threaten a society when it becomes arrogantly narcissistic about its religious and national identity, but fails to confront a contemporary reality scarred by rural hunger, religious contempt, and a decadent aristocracy. Years before the First World War, in a text like *The Post-Office* written in 1911, he had premonitions of a world where innocence is perpetually lost. In the same year, in a play entitled *Achalayatan (The Institute of Fixed Belief)*, he showed how humiliating it is to be in the thrall of narrow religious certainties and sectarian politics (Dutta and Robinson 1995, 157). Religious bigotry and ideological arrogance can only light "unholy fires" fed by "human sacrifice" (*EWRT* 3: 773). As the 20th century turned into a slaughter-house far surpassing the bleakest fantasies of evil human beings, Tagore's social and moral analysis became more and more desolate. Of course, he continued to assert even in his last stories and essays that there was an indestructible part of us which was made of enchantment, of "forests" not reason.⁵ But he also knew, in the deepest recesses of his soul, that human thought had failed once again, as always, to withstand "the demon of barbarity" striding across the earth with its "unconcealed fangs, ready to tear up humanity in an orgy of devastation" ("Crisis of Civilization," *EWRT* 3: 726). Tagore, I would like to argue, was not merely a maker of melodies and a dreamer of supernal dreams, he was also a skeptical thinker who knew how easily and often human reason could go to

⁵ See Tagore's story "Last Word" (1939) in *Thee Companions* (1992, 29).

sleep⁶ and so breed monsters of colonial greed, racial hate, religious bigotry and xenophobic wars.

Of course, my assertion that Tagore was, throughout his creative life, a harsh and despairing critic of his times is contrary to received opinion about his life and works. Perhaps, I can make this assertion because I am an outsider who does not know Bengali. Further, I have only made a few fleeting trips to Calcutta. I have never been to Shantiniketan—a place which is still reported to resonate with the idea of a university of creative freedom that has little to do with the teaching of instrumental rationality which structures contemporary politics, commerce and everyday practicality and, at the same time, makes our world noisy, obsessive, threatening and, perhaps, fascinatingly complex. In Bengal, for most intellectuals, Tagore is still a quintessential mystical poet whose music aspires to a state of transcendence which reason cannot reach. In Shantiniketan, he is Gurudev, divine teacher; a prophet who knows that the primordial word waits patiently to be heard again just as a seed lies patiently for its turn in the cycle of seasons to sprout again; a hierophant whose presence inspires a sense of holiness. Indeed, that is how he is often painted. Elizabeth Brunner, for example, uses soft water colours in her painting of Tagore as a poet-sage at work in the last years of his life. In Brunner's painting Tagore is the archetype of an inspired Biblical thinker working in a ritual space sanctified by a garland of flowers. Nand Lal Bose, in a mural, shows Tagore as a ploughman showing ordinary humanity the way to a more creative life free from the desperation a farmer feels when there is famine and he does not know if his prayer will be answered.⁷

To an outsider it seems as if every man, woman and child in Bengal thinks about Tagore as the earth thinks of rain; he is as necessary to their daily lives as ritual is to worship; as inseparable from their daily journey as dreams are from sleep. Indeed, Nirad C. Chaudhuri says as much in his *Autobiography of an Unknown Indian*, the only time when he is in awe of someone worthy of his adulation in “native” India:

Even now I cannot read the words of these songs, far less whistle the tunes, without instantly bringing back to my ears and eyes all the sounds from the soft rumble of rain on our corrugated-iron roofs to the bamboo pipe of the cowherds, and all the sights from the sails of the boats on our great rivers to

⁶ I am thinking here of Francisco Goya's inspired etching, “The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters,” (1799) *Capricio*, No. 5.

⁷ Max Beerbhom draws a lovely parody of Tagore's portraits by his painterly disciples.

the spreading banyan [sic] tree—the sounds and sights which embody for me the idea of Bengal (Dutta and Robinson 1995, 144).

Not having grown up in a Bengal, I can be fascinated by Tagore's music and yet acknowledge that throughout his life and frequently, he slipped into despair because he could not endure the knowledge of so much inhumanity. My heretical impulse tells me that my position as a critic of Tagore, as a non-Bengali outsider gives me a slight, though momentary, advantage. It helps me to resist becoming a mere acolyte of Tagore the singer of earth's sacred beauty. I can, instead, be a respectful, historically attentive and skeptical reader who knows from experience that a mere song will not push the world's brutes back into the abyss. Because Tagore is not for me primarily an inspired crafter of Bengali poetry and prose, I am perhaps more conscious of the tragic resonances which give to his writings and paintings during a ravaged century, through which he lived, their continuing importance and human worth. I can sense why Tagore's hymns to nature move Bengali speakers deeply, but I am alert to his own skepticism when he adds almost immediately that humankind has always been impatient to sweep away the cover of the green earth and the blue sky is lifted—the veil of nature—so that it can either “lose itself in the sands of the self” (“The Message of the Forest,” *EWRT* 3: 391), or in the “fury of passion” devour the wealth of the earth through loot and slavery (“The Message of the Forest,” *EWRT* 3: 388).⁸

My quest for Tagore teaches me that as a poet, Tagore self-consciously echoes India's religious and classical texts as well as invokes the history of the country's saint-poets in his songs. But it also never allows me to ignore the fact that his poetry, fiction, music and paintings, from their earliest days of fame with *Gitanjali* to the end of his life, is infected by each historical moment in which human beings have broken their faith with the earth and made a fool's bargain with murder, lust and greed. It is Tagore's skeptical reason which makes him subtly transform the Upanishadic statement by Maitreyi, with which I began. Maitreyi rejects all that impedes human progress towards immortality. Tagore's skepticism, however, makes him ask what a poet can do on “the sin-laden dust of the earth” (*EWRT* 3: 43)⁹ where human beings refuse to have anything to do with immortality?

⁸ Tagore speaks of “the mailed fist of earth-hunger” which has laid “waste heaven's own kingdom” (“The Message of the Forest,” *EWRT* 3: 393).

⁹ It is surprising to note that this collection, “Thoughts from Rabindranath Tagore,” edited by C. F. Andrews. 1929 (*EWRT* 3), put together from Tagore's religious discourses at Shantiniketan, is completely cleansed of his darker thoughts on colonialism, exploitation, and war which are so conspicuous in his lectures in Europe, China, Japan, and America throughout the twenties.

When, as a critic at the margins of a culture, I hear such despondent sentences repeatedly, I begin to catch beneath the cadences of grace, holiness, and innocence in Tagore's music, darker tones of loss of home, betrayal of trust, sectarian arrogance and the spirit of persecution which has made the earth into a charnel-house. Sharp-clawed, bloody-beaked monsters did not suddenly crash into his godly and enchanted landscape late in his life when he began to paint at the age of seventy as many of his Bengali critics claim.¹⁰ As he traveled restlessly through what was "without doubt the most murderous century of which we have a record," (Hobsbawm 1994, 13) Tagore was always aware of the ghastly and grotesque figures of terror gathered around him everywhere in Europe, India, China or Japan. How could it have been otherwise? How could he not have smelt a European sky filled either with poison gas; or, not have seen fertile fields crisscrossed with barbed wires and mud-filled trenches; or, not have consciously recorded the fact that during the battle of Verdun between 21 February and December 18, 1916, artillery fire had killed 306,000 German, French and British soldiers; or, ignored the famines of Bengal which left skeletons of animals and human beings scattered across the land; or, the imperial wars of Japan in China whose savagery could shock even the callous; or, the irrationality of ethnic, religious and linguistic nationalisms on the rise everywhere which were predictably paranoiac and genocidal. Unless, one prefers to remain an innocent lost in the mist of enchantment, it is not a surprise to hear Tagore interpret his 1915 poem, "The Boatman" (Poem 41 in *Fruit Gathering*, in *EWRT* 1: 173–74) as an anti-war allegory. He tells C.F. Andrews that the seafarer, who carries only "a white rose in his hand and a song on his lips" as he travels through a night "poisoned with black fear" is seeking an innocent country ("Letters to a Friend," *EWRT* 3: 237). The woman, whom the war-weary traveller finds on the shore in the following line represents, he told Andrews, Belgium which was neutral in the First World War: "I know not at what shore, at last, he lands to reach the silent courtyard where the lamp is burning and to find her who sits in the dust and waits" (*EWRT* 1: 173).

Of course Tagore sang of the earth's extraordinary beauty, but he also continuously mocked "the physical brutes" and "the intellectual brutes" ("Letters to a Friend," New York, December 20, 1920, *EWRT* 3: 273), whose "political and commercial ambition is the ambition of cannibalism, and through its years of accumulation it must get ready for its carnival of suicide" ("At the Cross Roads,

¹⁰ See, for example, many of the articles in *Rabindranath Tagore: Collection of Essays*. Edited by Rattan Parimoo. 1989; rpt. 2008. New Delhi: Lalit Kala Akademi.

1918," *EWRT* 3: 381). Asserting continuously that the aims of a truthful life must always be freedom and a sense of responsibility towards all things, he was in actuality tormented by nightmares of a deceased Europe and Asia where everything seemed to smoulder with rottenness even as it wrapped itself in the most glowing forms. In the first version of his English translation of the poem, "The Oarsman" published in *The Times* on 28 January, 1916, he says that the cause for the present evil is "The cowardice of the weak, the arrogance of the strong, the greed of fated prosperity, the rancour of the deprived, pride of race, and insult to man" (*EWRT* 1: 608).¹¹

He is, however, not confident that many in war-crazed Europe or a viciously nationalist India, China and Japan would heed his call: "Stop your bluster of abuse and self-praise, my friend" ("The Oarsman," *EWRT* 1: 608). In one of his bitterest attacks on modern European civilization and its imitators in Asia, delivered in Japan in 1915, he says that everything vital in Europe is in "the exclusive possession of the devil" ("The Spirit of Japan," *EWRT* 3: 371). He chides Japan for its militant nationalism. He tells his audience that nationalism's "eruptive inflammation of aggressiveness" first led Europe into violent colonial adventures across the globe, and then so imbued it with an "abnormal vanity of its own superiority" that it began "to take pride in its moral callousness and ill-begotten wealth" ("The Spirit of Japan," *EWRT* 3: 370). First, in the spirit of caution against Japan's new ambitions, Tagore renews his attack on the degrading violence of colonialism which sustained Europe's unappeasable "earth-hunger" ("The Message of the Forest," *EWRT* 3: 393) and the spirit of hatred, half-truths and narcissism inherent in nationalism which can only lead to "moral death" ("The Spirit of Japan," *EWRT* 3: 371). Then, with mounting anger and in growing notes of despair, he tells his audience:

The furies of terror, which the West has let loose upon God's world, come back to threaten herself and goad her into preparations of more and more frightfulness ... To the worship of this devil of politics she sacrifices other countries as victims. She feeds upon their dead flesh and grows fat upon it, so long as the carcasses remain fresh,—but they are sure to rot at last, and the dead will take their revenge, by spreading pollution far and wide and poisoning the vitality of the feeder ("The Spirit of Japan," *EWRT* 3: 371).

¹¹ The translated version published in *Fruit Gathering* is slightly different. See, poem no. 84, *EWRT* 1: 190.

Then he adds, much to the annoyance of his hosts: “The bloodhounds of Satan are not only bred in the kennels of Europe, but can also be domesticated in Japan and fed on man’s miseries” (“The Spirit of Japan,” *EWRT* 3: 371). Even as his anger at Japan’s incursion into China mounts, he tries, both lyrically and hopelessly, to offer his alternative vision of a Japanese civilization which thinks of nature and other human beings, not as alien others who need to be subjugated as they are in a degraded Europe, but as sources of inspiration where the “rhythm of a perfect grace can be heard” (“The Spirit of Japan,” *EWRT* 3: 367). He is suddenly overwhelmed by the beauty of Fujiyama at sunset

growing faint against the golden horizon, like a god overcome with his own radiance,—the music of eternity welled through the evening silence, and I felt that the silence and the earth and the lyrics of the dawn and the dayfall [sic] are with the poets and the idealists ... that after the forgetfulness of his own divinity, man will remember again that heaven is always in touch with the world which can never be abandoned for good (“The Spirit of Japan,” *EWRT* 3:375).

But immediately afterwards, as it happens throughout Tagore’s poetical journey, forebodings of disaster wreck his vision for he knows the sources of pain and understands that they have stained the human self so deeply that they can neither be erased nor evaded. As he ends his talk, he hears “the hounding wolves of the modern era, scenting human blood and howling to the skies” (“The Spirit of Japan,” *EWRT* 3: 375).

Even though I cannot sing, I am not deaf to Tagore’s enticing music about the beauty of nature, the special benediction of reason bestowed on man, and the eternal gracefulness of the divine everywhere. But I am also alert to the fact that all the diverse range of forms he worked in are broken into by lamentation; his public lectures speak about the human soul as a tormented victim who “walks through a bloodstained path of violence and crime” (“Philosophy of Fascism,” *EWRT* 3: 773); his painted manuscripts are filled with acrid smoke that eats through words and strange beastly forms that leave trails of blood and slime. Thus, for example, in a 1929 poem appropriately entitled “A Weary Pilgrim,” he says that in his innocence he thought he would find a place where “the spirit of man” was “great as the grass that blesses the lowly dust, / And meek as the mountain under the stars” (*EWRT* 3: 953). Now, having travelled through part of the century and looking prophetically to the future, he can only say, with unredeemable melancholy in his voice:

A weary pilgrim, I traveled across the haunts
of iron-limbed monsters,
prolific of progeny,
shrieking and stinking,
befouling heaven and earth,

devouring life
to change into piles of deadly peril.

The path is intricate,
Unfriendly the night,
The barred gates guarded by snarling suspicion
That growls at the shadows of strangers seeking home.
(*EWRT* 3: 953).

To a non-devotee like me, Tagore seems like a man who is so helplessly entrapped by the endless barbarity of the world around him that when two of his dearest friends, C.F. Andrews and W.W. Pearson, set out for Fiji to document yet another history of human servitude in Fiji, all he can offer them are a few lines from the Upanishads as a runic charm to ward off despondency: "From Joy all things have their origin; in Joy they subsist, and unto Joy they return...I meditate upon His glory, who created the earth, the sky and the stars, and sends into our minds the power of comprehension" ("Letters to a Friend," *EWRT* 3: 244).

Sometimes, talismanic charms may be all one has when one is utterly vulnerable in times of the extreme civilizational crises which Tagore lived through most of his adult life. Indeed, the Upanishadic chant must also have helped Tagore to keep his own spirits up during all those times when he felt that he was "suffering from ... deep depression and weariness" and was on "the brink of a breakdown" ("Letters to a Friend," *EWRT* 3: 241).

Similarly, his own early poetry, so full of hope and beauty and prayerfulness, often worked like a "charm" and gave a fleeting hope to many in India and elsewhere who found themselves standing at the brink of annihilation. We are familiar with Gandhi singing in times of personal distress and rejection by his followers "If no one answers to your call walk alone, walk alone," and with Wilfred Owen, the young English poet, waiting for death in the rat infested trenches of France on the last day of the First World War, reading Verse 96 of *Gitanjali*: "When I go from hence, let this be my parting word, that what I have seen is unsurpassable" (*EWRT* 1: 76). What we did not know, till recently, was that soon after the anguish of the First World War, Tagore offered a vision of the earth

as an incandescent place where insulted humanity could still dream of peace, to a young and amazingly gifted Slovenian poet, Srečko Kosovel (1904–1926) who died at the age of twenty-two. Kosovel read Tagore and Gandhi in a Europe still torn between fear and self-loathing on the one hand and tormented by ancient inner demons of racial contempt, religious bigotry and military arrogance on the other—a contradiction that would take another twenty-five years of war to resolve. Kosovel was stranded on a wasted land. Tagore’s poetry helped him ask if modernity could be so renovated as to ensure that societies live with each other in “perpetual peace” and, pledge never to violate the great Enlightenment promise of the autonomy of all human beings and their covenant with the earth. Like Tagore’s writings during the war years, Kosovel’s poetry shifts between a sense of hopelessness and a lyricism inflected with visions of a gentler and a more tolerant world. And much like Tagore in his skeptical moods which overwhelmed him almost always from 1910 onwards, Kosovel was not convinced that Europe and all the other nations damaged by imperial wars, class contempt, gendered violence and other passions which can only derange the human soul, would ever find a place of calm understanding:

In green India among quiet
trees that bend over blue water
lives Tagore.

Time there is spellbound, a cerulean circle,
the clock tells neither month nor year
but ripples in silence
as if from invisible springs
over ridges of temples and hills of trees.
There nobody is dying, nobody’s saying
Goodbye— life is like eternity, caught in a tree¹²

It is clear that Kosovel does not read Tagore to evade the miseries of a war-torn Europe through devotion and song. Given that Kosovel has the same bitterness of experience and bleakness of vision as Tagore, my suggestion is that we learn to read Tagore’s lyrical works differently as part of a new visionary programme of hope in times of great despair. Tagore is, I think, *writing beauty back into the social, political and physical landscape*. In his prose he offers a harsh analysis of why the world has become a wasteland. He is, after all a contemporary of the great

¹² “In Green India” (Translated by Jelnicar and Siegal Carlson 2010, 97).

modernists like T.S. Eliot, W. B. Yeats, Ezra Pound, Sigmund Freud, George Grosz and Bertold Brecht for whom the world's miseries were a consequence of an evil so deeply dyed in the soul of human beings that it was no longer possible to erase it; for them the world could only end in a scream. Tagore is not blind to their reality nor dismissive of their analysis of life as meaningless which he echoes when he says, for example, in a letter to Andrews dated 19 December, 1920, that he has to try his best to "prove that Man has not been the greatest mistake in Creation" ("Letters to a Friend," *EWRT* 3: 273).

However, unlike many thinkers of modern despair, Tagore's visionary politics also urges him to record the continuing existence of a supernal space and a unique time where the "miracle of Being" (Vaclav Havel's phrase)¹³ manifests itself even amongst the powerless and even in the present. In the physical world, rivers still glow in the sunset and the music of the Baul singers still mingles with the laughter of children and birdsong. In the social and political realm, a courageous human being can still assert "I shall not commit the grievous sin of losing faith in man" and, can still affirm his faith in the moral dictum "By unrighteousness man prospers, gains what appears desirable, conquers enemies, but perishes at the root" ("Crisis in Civilisation," *EWRT* 3: 726).

The poems in *Gitanjali* or *Fruit-Gatherer* are testimonies to those fleeting moments when the beauty of the earth manifests itself, and human beings step out of the structures of power and refuse their humiliations and predatoriness. When Tagore catches those lovely "spots of time," (the phrase is William Wordsworth's) he feels that the earth is open to the glory of the divine, and human beings are so transfigured that they can fulfill their imaginative and rational promise—they can be source of happiness and its guardians for the rest of the earthly habitat. The struggle of his life's work is to somehow find ways of making these "visionary gleams" of internal calm and peaceful responsibility toward all things that are on the earth more permanent.

But, contrary to a kind of consensus among the acolytes, Tagore is not a mystic who has detached himself from the worldly. His commitment to analytic reason is so fierce that merely "quoting scripture against conscience" ("The Changing Age," *EWRT* 4: 445) does not satisfy him. He wants to know, as the poet Anne Carson puts it in another context "What it is like to be a human being in a family, in a fantasy, in longing, in a mistake." Such a complex human

¹³ Quoted from a speech delivered by Vaclav Havel on July 4, 1994 by Bruce Rich (2010, 169).

understanding is crucial because Tagore has experienced human sorrow and knows what it means to stumble upon the earth. That is why, after the light of revelation, when he looks at the world again, it darkens. The “demon of barbarity,” he bemoans in his final note

has given up all pretence and has emerged with unconcealed fangs, ready to tear up humanity in an orgy of devastation. From one end of the world to the other the poisonous fumes of hatred darken the atmosphere. The spirit of violence ... has at last roused itself and desecrates the spirit of Man (“Crisis in Civilization,” *EWRT* 3: 726).

It is not surprising, then, that his last series of self-portraits, made when the world had once again plunged into its relentless wars, are blotted by dark shadows. In these self-reflective images, red blood-marks suddenly appear from nowhere to disfigure the face; one portrait acquires the rigidity of a death-mask; in another the surface of the skin is cut deeply by crevices before it finally flakes and decays; and in the next, the eyes seem to know so much horror that they can no longer express pity. There is no light that softens these images, no brightness of colours to give them the quality of hope. The faces appear like unfamiliar ghosts still hovering between hope and death. Tagore’s skepticism is too relentless to let him find easy comfort in the assertions of peace and beauty; his faith is too persistent to let him vanish with quiet acceptance into the heart of silence.

One has to admit that Tagore, despite the consistent notes of despair that can be heard throughout his works, is a visionary who struggles, like a righteous man of wisdom and love, to shake off the nightmares of his times and place, and become the advocate for all created things (Benjamin 1969, 104). “Against the tranquil light of morning” he affirms in one of his last poems “I can see myself as a conqueror of sorrows” (Dutta and Robinson 1995, 363). There is in him, as the following poem-painting he composed in Baghdad in 1932 indicates, an incandescence of faith which refuses to be extinguished. It is as if, like the small flame in the painting still burning in some wayside shrine, his works shall continue to add to the enigma of our survival on a violent earth and be the mysterious sources of hope which urge us to carry on.

The night has ended
 Put out the light of the lamp
 of thine own narrow corner
 smudged with smoke
 the great morning which is for all
 appears in the East.

Let its light reveal us to each other
who walk on the same path
of pilgrimage.¹⁴ (EWRT 4: 108)

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¹⁴ This printed version of the translation is slightly different from the one written in Tagore's own handwriting in the painting.