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Sum ergo cogito: Tagore as a Thinker and Tagore as a Poet, and the Relationship between the Two

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Abstract

With special attention to Tagore's two plays *Bisarjan* and *Acalāyatan* the paper considers to what extent Tagore's thought as expounded in his lectures and essays in English and Bengali is relevant to the understanding of his literary works. Are there dangers in reading his works through the filter of his ideas and ideals? Would his creative works seem different if we pretended that his discursive writings did not exist? The paper addresses such questions in order to suggest a fresh approach to Tagore in his 150th anniversary year (2011).

Keywords: Tagore, Tagore's thought, Tagore's paintings, Tagore's plays, *Sacrifice*, *Acālayatan*

The folio of paintings and hand-written verses *Chitralipi* is among Rabindranath Tagore's very last creative works. Published in 1940, the year before he died, its contents may date from various earlier times, but unified by the poet's frail handwriting in both Bengali and English it comes across powerfully as an enigmatic late testament. Leafing through it as I thought about this lecture, I was struck by two verses in particular, with their accompanying paintings:

The black and white threads

weave the destiny of man

into a mystery of entanglements. (Tagore 1940a: 18)¹

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¹ In Bengali:

ghaṭanāy bedanāy mānuṣe cirakāl

and

The dark takes form

in the heart of the white

and reveals it. (Tagore 1940a: 26)²

These *kabitikā* (brief poems³) express something of the same bafflement that I feel on attempting to write this paper on my proposed theme, though the second one gives me hope that light may eventually be revealed by the daunting and confusing darkness it contains. I am trying, as the 150th anniversary of Tagore's birth approaches, to come up with new ideas and a fresh approach, and it is not easy. I want a new approach not just because I am temperamentally averse to recycling clichés and old ideas, but because in my reading of books and articles about Tagore I constantly come across statements that I disagree with. I am, however, only at the beginning of this arduous process of reassessment and questioning of old assumptions. If in this paper you find just tentative, speculative first steps, you must forgive me. One has to start somewhere.

Let me begin with three things that I have recently read that instantly made me think, "No, that can't be right." The first is from Flavia Arzeni's recent book, *An Education in Happiness: The Lessons of Hesse and Tagore*, published in Italian in 2008 and in English the following year.⁴ The book is an elegantly written and well-intentioned account of Hesse and Tagore as idealistic thinkers and writers, who have lessons for us all about how to live a balanced life in harmony with nature and free of materialism and selfishness. In a chapter about Tagore's paintings called *Which art to choose?*, Arzeni writes:

What is most surprising, apart from the sheer mass of the work, is that it went in a completely different, indeed radically opposed direction to that which he pursued in his literary work. In his poetry, as in his prose, Tagore always kept to the model of beauty and harmony which he himself advocated and which he expressed faithfully in both content and style. His painting seems to come from a different world, as if it were the product of someone else's mind. His visual universe is dark, often anguished, his self-portraits cruel and grotesque, his figures disturbing,

sādākālo suto diye cāridike bonā hay jāl.

se jāle pareche gāthā asamkhya itihās

jāni nā jagat-porā kena e prakāś aprakāś.

² *asīm sādāy kālo yabe pare*

sr̥ṣṭī sīmāy bādhā,

takhan to sei kālor rūpei

āpnāke pāy sādā.

³ The term I use in my book: Rabindranath Tagore: *Particles, Jottings, Sparks: The Collected Brief Poems* (2001). A new edition is forthcoming from Penguin India (in print).

⁴ Pushkin Press, London, 2009. Translated by Howard Curtis.

his landscapes crepuscular. Parallels could be drawn, with some justification, with certain styles of the European avant-garde, especially German expressionism. (Arzeni 2009: 178–179)

This idea – of a disjunction between Tagore’s paintings and his literary works – is not new. I was aware of it when I wrote the Introduction to my Penguin *Selected Poems* of Tagore, in which I called the paintings “something of an embarrassment to the Tagore cult,” though I went on to say, “The element in Tagore that found its clearest and most unfettered expression in his paintings was always present in him.” (Radice 1985: 83) I thought then, and I think even more strongly now, that the notion of a disjunction, of ‘two Tagores’ as Arzeni (2009: 179) puts it, is wrong. I do not believe that a creative genius can ever be entirely different in one genre or medium from how he is in another, as the brain and imagination he employs will be the same. The verses and paintings in *Chitralipi*, brought so movingly together in a single volume, are alone sufficient to refute the idea.

The second statement that brought me up short recently was in Partha Mitter’s admirable book on 20th-century Indian art, *The Triumph of Modernism*. There is a section on Tagore’s paintings and on the ‘vision of art and the community’ that was promoted at Santiniketan, which I mostly found perceptive and informative. But I was taken aback when Mitter comes on to the erotic elements in Tagore’s paintings, and writes of the painting *Untitled Cowering Nude Woman*: “One of his strangest paintings is of a submissive androgynous figure that hints at an ambiguous sexuality which none of his literary works ever does.” (Mitter 2007: 77) Androgyny? Ambiguity? Is not the whole universe of Tagore’s songs, in which gender is seldom explicit (thanks partly to there being no gender in Bengali pronouns) full of it? In new translation of *Gitanjali* I am currently doing, I have to be alert to constant shifts of voice from male to female. Take poem No. 26, in which a strange figure comes and plays a veena while the poet sleeps but does not wake up. I first made the figure female because of the associations between the veena and the goddess Saraswati and also the references to perfume ‘filling the dark’. When I turned to Tagore’s own translation I found he had made the figure male (and cut out the perfume). But Bengali friends have explained to me that the speaker has to be female and the visitor male, because the speaker describes herself as *hatabhāginī* (unfortunate, miserable) – a female adjectival form; and the word I understood as ‘perfume’ (*gandha*) is not as specific as that, and could indeed mean ‘scent of his body’ or maybe just ‘aura’. In this poem, Tagore is drawing on the Bengali Vishnava tradition in which songs of ‘yearning’ (*biraha*) are usually addressed by Radha to Krishna.⁵ But when these

⁵ Like many poems in *Gitanjali*, No. 26 is actually a song. I read my draft translation of it at the Evening of Poetry in Celebration of Rabindranath Tagore, Jazz Club Gajo, Ljubljana, 20th March 2010 that

mysterious, sensed-but-not-fully-seen figures are identifiable – as they often are – with Tagore’s concept of the *jīban-debatā*, the ‘life-deity’ guiding and harmonizing everything that he did, then the gender can be very fluid. As Reba Som (2009) rightly says in her recent book on Tagore’s songs, *Rabindranath Tagore: The Singer and the Song*, “Rabindranath’s *jeevan devata* appeared to him in different forms – masculine and feminine. In the first few years it was feminine, which came to him quite naturally.” (Som 2009: 71)

Reba Som’s book is a most valuable contribution, the first book on Tagore in English that focuses throughout on his songs. I learnt a great deal from it, and agreed with most of her analysis. I very much liked, for example, the way in which she finds in *Chitralipi* ‘deep resonances of several songs of Tagore’. (Som 2009: 161–164) But when I read her chapter on *Gitanjali*, I found myself thinking strongly that this was not the book I was currently experiencing through the creative act of translation. In fairness to Reba, she is describing here how *Gitanjali* was perceived and received, and is certainly aware that there was plenty that was not understood well, particularly the profound relationship the book has with music. Nevertheless, it is tempting to assume from her account that the understanding of *Gitanjali* in 1912–1913 was broadly correct:

To a reserved British people Tagore’s simple lyrics touched deeply their emotional core. Rabindranath recalled how Tagore’s poetry readings would be greeted by an ‘almost painful silence’ but then would come the flurry of congratulatory letters the next day. One such letter was by May Sinclair dated 8 July 1912, who wrote: ‘You have put into English, which is absolutely transparent in its perfection, things it is despaired of ever seeing written in English at all or in any Western language.’ Stopford Brooke wrote to Tagore about the *Gitanjali* poems, ‘they make for peace, peace breathing from love and they create for us, too storm-tossed in this modern world, a quiet refuge... It is well for us to have a book which, without denouncing us, leads us into meadows of peace and love and refreshes us where we are weary.’ (Som 2009: 108)

Simple lyrics? A quiet refuge? The most recent poem in *Gitanjali* that I have translated, No. 27, begins in my version:

Where’s the light, the light?

Ignite it with the fire of longing

The lamp is there, but no flame

followed the Symposium for which this paper was written. The audience seemed happy with my translation, but may have been puzzled that in Tagore’s own version – which I also read – the genders were different. The Bengali participants afterwards convinced me that Tagore was right and I was wrong.

What is this doom on my brow?

Death would be preferable

Light the lamp with the fire of longing. (Radice in print)

and ends

Where's the light, the light?

Ignite it with the fire of longing

Clouds thunder, wind howls

Time passes, but this deep night,

Black as a whetstone, doesn't pass

Light love's lamp with my breath

Ignite it with the fire of longing (Radice in print)

For anyone feeling 'too storm-tossed in this modern world', this is hardly going to be the right poem.

To understand why I felt dissatisfied by this and the previous two characterizations of Tagore, I need some kind of working hypothesis as to why people got him wrong – and continue to get him wrong: why they find the paintings at odds with the literary works; why they seem to assume that the literary works are simpler (and less ambiguous) than they are; why they think – even if they know that his novels, say, are complex – that in *Gitanjali* we find nothing but simplicity, harmony and calm.⁶

In Tagore's lifetime, quite a lot can be attributed to his extraordinary aura and charisma. When people met him, they felt – as with Mahatma Gandhi – that they were in the presence of someone of immense inner balance and self-control. They did not seem to understand that for both Tagore and Gandhi life was an unending struggle, a

⁶ In *This Song of Mine has Thrown Away All Ornaments*, my Rabindranath Tagore Memorial Lecture for the Netaji Subhas Open University, Calcutta, 2 December 2009 (NSOU, Calcutta, forthcoming), I considered and rejected what I called '*Gitanjali* exceptionalism', the notion that whatever the complexities of Tagore's other works, *Gitanjali* stands apart. I quoted, for example, Michael Collins's view (in a draft article he sent me, based on his Oxford D.Phil thesis) that "Yeats assumed that the devotional *Vedantic* poetry of *Gitanjali* was all there was to Tagore." I think Dr Collins is right about Yeats but wrong about *Gitanjali*.

relentless *sādhanā*, in which glimpses of the absolute perfection and truth that both so deeply craved came rarely and fleetingly. Of course that aura lives on, though with Gandhi knowledge of his inner battles and torments is quite widespread now, thanks to the labours of innumerable biographers. But I do not think that the *Gurudev* aura alone is enough to account for the problem in the perception of Tagore that I am trying to probe. Much more significant, I suspect, is the enormous corpus of writings in both Bengali and English in which Tagore expounded his religious, philosophical, ethical and aesthetic ideas.

Tagore was unusual, but not unique, in being a creative writer who was also a thinker, and gave many talks, lectures, sermons that were later published in journals or ultimately in books. Add to these all the carefully crafted letters that he wrote, his responses to reviews, and the conversations and interviews with him that were written down, and you have a formidable intellectual oeuvre, on top of many volumes of poetry, fiction and drama. Quite a large proportion of this was in English, giving it immediate international accessibility, and in recent times many of his discursive writings in Bengali have been translated, and brought out especially by Oxford University Press in Delhi in the Tagore series edited by Sukanta Chaudhuri. Essays and speeches that before were somewhat scattered were in the 1990s brought together by Sisir Kumar Das (1996) in the third volume of his massive, Sahitya Akademi edition of Tagore's English works. In 2007 a fourth volume, 811 pages long, was added, edited by Nityapriya Ghosh.

Let us compare this situation with two other writers of equivalent greatness and copiousness, Leo Tolstoy and William Shakespeare. In a recent article in the *Times Literary Supplement* on two films based on Tolstoy, *The Kreutzer Sonata* and *Last Station*, the writer and critic A. N. Wilson wrote:

The story he wrote, *The Kreutzer Sonata*, represented, in the words of his biographer Aylmer Maude, the fact that 'he had returned to art'. After years in which he had written nothing but pacifist or vegetarian tracts, 'his train has at last come out of the tunnel'. It was an age since the man who wrote *War and Peace* had given up art in favour of preaching. In that time, Tolstoy had slowly turned himself and his family into characters not from his own fiction but from Dostoevsky, eaten up with irrational passions and hatreds and religious obsessions. *The Kreutzer Sonata*, being the frenzied account of a wife-murderer muttered aloud during an overnight train journey, is the most Dostoevskian of Tolstoy's writings, though naturally the way it was written, and the gospel it preached, were flavoured with his own unmistakable pungency. (Wilson 2010: 17)

Although Tolstoy was certainly not without influence as a thinker, having a profound effect on Gandhi, and carrying off what A. N. Wilson rightly describes as "the twin trick of being one of the greatest novelists ever, and the conscience of the Western

world,” (Wilson 2010: 18) it has always been possible to enjoy his novels without bothering much with his ‘preachings’, even if the two came together in a late work such as *The Kreutzer Sonata*. Indeed, his two greatest novels were written before the preaching started.⁷ With Tagore, it is much less easy to detach the creative works from the discursive or didactic writings, not only because the two ran in parallel throughout his long life, but also because he himself tended to comment on his works in terms of the messages they conveyed, giving the strong impression that his prime purpose was to convey, through poetry, fiction, drama and even songs, ideas that were presented more abstractly elsewhere.

What about William Shakespeare? Although his plays are packed with ideas and many of them have intellectual, moral or philosophic aspects that will engage critics and directors for as long as his plays are studied or performed, he left behind no discursive writings, letters, autobiography or diaries whatsoever. This seems to me to have worked hugely to his advantage. It has forced actors, directors and critics to focus wholly on the works themselves, without being distracted by what Shakespeare himself may or may not have thought about them.

I have found myself asking recently, has the existence of such a vast discursive Tagore oeuvre come between readers and his works? Has it promoted a tendency to read his poems, songs, stories, novels and plays through the filter of his thought? Might it be possible – and both refreshing and healthy – to pretend that the discursive writings do not exist, in order to come closer to what the creative works actually are and what they are actually saying?

I can think of two main reasons why a critical experiment of this kind is daunting to contemplate. One is that Tagore the thinker has a unity and consistency – and a broad simplicity and penetrability – that his infinitely complex and many-layered creative works may lack. This is possibly a controversial view. In recent studies, much has been made of Tagore’s variety and changeability as a thinker. Falvia Arzeni, for example, writes:

Tagore was, in fact, a dazzling, enigmatic figure, an enlightened but profoundly contradictory mind. One of his most authoritative biographers, Krishna Kripalani, who knew him well when he was alive and married his granddaughter, has recalled that once, when Tagore was already well advanced in years and laden with honours and celebrity, he was asked what he considered his best quality.

⁷ It was, however, foreshadowed by the reflections on destiny and free will in the Epilogue to *War and Peace*.

Tagore replied, 'Inconsistency.' When asked what was his greatest failing, he replied, 'The same'. (Arzeni 2009: 114)⁸

At the more academic end of the spectrum, Sumit Sarkar (1973) in his seminal study of the Swadeshi movement, helps us to understand the evolution in Tagore's political ideas, and this has also been explored thoroughly by Ana Jelnikar (2009) in her recent London University PhD thesis on the concept of universalism in Tagore and Srečko Kosovel. Maybe in the sphere of politics or nationalism changeability and inconsistency are only to be expected, because Tagore was responding to changing circumstances and events. In Gandhi's political ideas – on, for example, whether Indians should support the British war effort in both the First and Second World Wars – we also find inconsistency, for the same reason.

But in the religious, philosophical and ethical sphere we find, I believe – though it would take another paper to argue this effectively – in Tagore (and in Gandhi) a remarkable, unflinching unity and consistency. Moreover, it is possible to take almost any essay, and lecture, any sermon from the two volumes entitled *Śāntiniketan*, and find immediate connections with almost any of Tagore's creative works. I did this when I wrote the notes to my Penguin *Selected Poems*, connecting the poems with Tagore's main books of English essays and lectures, from *Sādhanā* (1913) to *The Religion of Man* (1931). This is actually the easiest thing for an interpreter and critic of Tagore to do. It is partly because I have done it myself in the past that I do not want to do it again now.

The other reason why reading Tagore through the filter of his thought is tempting, and the alternative – ignoring his ideas in favour of the creative works themselves – is daunting, is one that to a Bengali native speaker will sound lame, but which no foreign student of Tagore, however experienced and dedicated, can evade: namely that the thoughts – even in translated versions of Bengali texts – are more 'treatable' and accessible than poems, songs or plays, which for full and confident understanding need close attention to the Bengali original. With novels, the foreigner can feel a little more confident, and in my teaching at SOAS I do not have any compunction about asking my students to write essays on *Gora* or *The Home and the World* without reference to the original. But his short stories, being so lyrical and poetic, are more problematic, and with poetry and song even the best translations leave the non-Bengali reader uncertain whether he is really gaining access at all. Far easier, therefore, to focus on Tagore as a thinker, and bring in his creative works only when they seem to reflect or back up his abstract ideas.

⁸ In trying to account for the apparent disjuncture, between Tagore's paintings and literary works, Arzeni concludes that this "must be classed as just one of his many inconsistencies" (2009: 179).

Let me now take two of his creative works, his plays *Bisarjan* (*Sacrifice*, 1890, 1940b) and *Acalāyatan* (1912), try to understand their relationship to Tagore's ideas, consider whether his ideas are sufficient to explain all that is going on in these two plays, and finally determine what gains in understanding would arise if we detached them from his ideas altogether. My choice of these two particular works is rather random: I happen to have read them both recently, the first because I was asked for a scenario (a complete scene-by-scene summary) to be used by Tara Arts, London in a workshop that may lead to a complete new translation and production, the second because I was curious to know the original context of the song *Ālo, āmar ālo* (*Light, my light*), which Tagore selected as poem No. 57 in *Gitanjali* and changed somewhat in its tone and effect in his own English translation. (I will say more about that later.) Both plays seem to me to lend themselves well to the testing of my basic hypothesis in this paper, as by their very nature – their conflicts between characters, the arguments they contain representing different ideologies and points of view – they are unlikely to convey an unalloyed message or a single, unified philosophy.

Derived by Tagore from the first part (and from some later sections too) of his novel *Rājarsi* (1887), *Bisarjan* was first published in 1890 and went through several versions and editions before settling into the text as printed in the *Rabīndra-racanābālī*. (for details, see Pal 1987: 132–133) It has been universally recognized as one of Tagore's most powerful and performable plays, known outside Bengal through Tagore's own (truncated) English version, *Sacrifice* (1917).⁹ It presents the consequences of a decision by Gobindamanikya, King of Tripura, to ban animal sacrifice in the Kali temple in his kingdom. This brings him into conflict with his wife Gunabati, who has been desperately making offerings to Kali in order to bring her the child that she has been unable to conceive, and with Raghupati, chief Brahmin priest of the temple. Jaysinha, Raghupati's adopted son and assistant in the temple, finds himself torn between loyalty to Raghupati and his love for Aparna, a beggar-girl who has sought refuge in the temple and whose distress at the sacrifice of her pet goat inspires Gobindamanikya to issue his edict against animal sacrifice. Raghupati instigates a plot against the King involving the king's younger brother Nakshatra Ray. The overthrow of the King is, however, reversed when Jaysinha sacrifices his own life not only to escape from his torment but also (though this may not be a conscious motivation) to shock Raghupati and the Queen into seeing the cruelty and bigotry of their orthodoxy, and the superior morality and deeper religious insight of Gobindamanikya and Aparna.

It is not difficult to connect *Bisarjan* to Tagore's most deeply held moral and religious ideas, some of them derived from his Brahmo heritage and its rejection of

⁹ I compared the English version with the Bengali original in *Visarjan* and *Sacrifice* (1979: 10–32).

idolatry. In *An Artist in Life: A Commentary on the Life and Works of Rabindranath Tagore* (1967), still one of the best books on Tagore in English and one which I frequently turn to, Niharranjan Ray writes:

If proof were ever needed as to which side the contemporary ideologies in conflict the poet's sympathies lay, Visarjan gave it eloquently and once for all. They were decidedly against hatred and violence, against social and religious bigotry, against superstition and obscurantism, and squarely and committedly on the side of love and humanity, of piety and non-violence, of reason and progress. Incidentally, Visarjan was to be the first indictment of animal sacrifice as sanctioned by Hinduism, and since the indictment took an aesthetic form it proved very effective. The emotional and formal vigour of the drama came directly from the strength of conviction and the depth of feeling of the author. (Ray 1967: 142–143)¹⁰

This is true, and such is the force of the play's moral message that I await with some trepidation the effect of a new production of the play, in these days when God-based fanaticism presents such an international challenge and the appeal of *Hindutva* in India is by no means dead.

But if the main dramatic point of the play is its moral message, then it needs to leave its audience or readers with a feeling that the conflicts that it presents have been resolved. Yes, in the final scene of the play both Gunabati and Raghupati see the light, with Gunabati replacing Kali with her husband as her 'only god', and Raghupati saying over Jaysinha's self-slain body, "This is the last innocent blood in this sinful temple. Jaysinha has extinguished the flame of bloodshed (*hiṃsārakta-śikhā*) with his own blood." The King is able to pronounce: "Sin has gone. The goddess has returned in the form of my *debī* (i.e. my wife)."

But consider the cost of all this. Raghupati – along with the entire religious orthodoxy that he represents – has lost all authority, power and status. Gunabati has lost her defiance and independence of action, adopting at the end a stance of total obedience to her husband – and she still has no child. Jaysinha has lost first his faith and moral bearings and then his life. Aparna has lost the man she loves and – arguably, and depending on how the play is acted – her sanity, with her final invitation to Raghupati – "Come, father" being the last and most puzzling line in the play. Come to what? Has Aparna become the embodiment of the 'true' goddess of love and compassion, as opposed to the vengeful and illusory goddess Kali and thus the goddess that Raghupati, acknowledging her as *jananī amṛtamayī* (Mother that is full of nectar), must now serve? Is she in that case a human being any more, or merely a symbol? At a human level, her apparent replacement of the man she loved by the

¹⁰ Prabhatkumar Mukhopadhyay in his *Rabīndrajībanī* (1988: 287) quotes similar ideas from Niharranjan Ray's Bengali book, *Rabīndra-sāhityer bhūmikā* (1951).

‘father’ who was, by his bigotry, duplicity and cynicism, directly responsible for Jaysinha’s suicide, seems quite unbelievable. Yet played with sufficient intensity – hysteria? Irony? Ophelia-like madness? – I have no doubt that the departure of Ragupati and Aparna at the very end of the play can, and will in the planned new production, create an indelible effect. It is not an effect that can be reduced to a clear moral message. But in great drama, morality is seldom clear, seldom black and white, but a tangled mixture of the two.

That is what the verse from *Chitralipi* I quoted at the beginning tells us, and the other verse that struck me, about the dark taking form in the heart of the white in order to reveal it, seems equally relevant not to the message of *Bisarjan* but to its dramatic effect.

Consider the moments in the play when challenging, disorientating negatives are presented. Tagore often does this: key moments in his works – moments of maximum turbulence and intensity – often come when he is saying that something “is not”. Sometimes what is false is denied in order to assert what is true. One thinks of the moment in his great poem *Shah-Jahan* in *Balākā* (1916) when he rounds on the emperor for imagining that his dead beloved can be preserved forever in the beauty of the Taj Mahal (“Lies! Lies! Who says you have not forgotten?/ Who says you have not thrown open/ The cage that holds memory?” (Tagore 1985: 80)) Or of a similar turning-point in *Chabi (Picture)*, the famous poem in the same book about the memory of his beloved sister-in-law Kadambari, when he says:

kī pralāp kahe kabi?

tumi chabi?

*nahe, nahe, nao śudhu chabi.*¹¹ (Tagore 1942b: 13)

In *Bisarjan*, moments of denial come with both positive and negative effect. In Act 3 Scene 1, when Jaysinha challenges Ragupati to admit that he has manipulated the crowd by turning the image of Kali round to make them think she has rejected them, the Brahmin argues in a speech of violent nihilism that everything in this world depends on falsehood and illusion, that words are not true, writing is not true, images are not true, thought is not true, and that no one knows what truth is or where it is. This sweeps Jaysinha into a ‘shoreless ocean’ of moral confusion in which “There is no truth, no truth, no truth; everything is lies, lies, lies.” That is, of course, a false perception: Tagore certainly does not want us to think that there is actually no such

¹¹ What madness does the poet speak?
Are you a picture?
You are not, not, not just a picture!

thing as truth. But at the end of the play, after the death of Jaysinha, when Gunabati asks Raghupati – her guru – to confirm whether the image of Kali contains the goddess or not, his grief-stricken answers resonate with a shattering force that seems to me too powerful to overcome wholly the play’s message that idolatry is false but divinity is true:

Gunabati: Gurudeb, do not confuse me.

Tell me truly again. Is there no goddess?

Ragupati: No.

Gunabati: No goddess?

Raghupati: No.

Gaunabati: No goddess?

Then who is there?

Raghupati: No one is there. Nothing is there.

In reading these words, I am looking ahead to how they might play out on the stage in a new production for our own age. Tagore’s *message* in the play may not be atheistic, but among the many layers of his great play is a seam of pure scepticism. Any contemporary audience will include a good number of people who do not believe in God at all – any kind of god, whether expressed by an image or icon or not. That layer may well connect more strongly with a twenty-first century audience than Tagore’s desire in discursive writings and his creative works not to deny that God exists, but to redefine what or who God is. His play – and this is true of most of his works – may indeed be saying much more than its apparent ‘message’. And frankly, if what it said was limited to a message, I do not think most people today would find *Bisarjan* either relevant or interesting.

I am not enough of a Jungian to know whether the word ‘shadow’ is appropriate, but for me one of the chief fascinations of Tagore the artist – as opposed to Tagore the philosopher – is that for anything positive, in almost any work of his, a negative can also be found: light has an undercurrent of dark, joy always has a substratum of sorrow. One can argue that such mingling of opposites can also be found in his philosophic writings, which are certainly full of an awareness of darkness as well as light. In this paragraph from an address on ‘Truth’, for example, given in 1924 and included in Volume Four of the Sahitya Akademi’s collected edition of Tagore’s English writings:

It is to the person, who keeps his eyes solely fixed upon this aspect of the world which is an increasing series of changes, that the world appears as delusion, as the play of Kali, the black divinity of destruction. To such a one it becomes possible for his dealings with this world to be superficial and heartless. The world being, for him, an unmeaning progression of things and evolution that goes blindly jumping from chance to chance on a haphazard path of survival, he can have no scruple in gathering opportunity for himself, dealing cruel blows to others who come in his way. He does not suspect that thereby he hurts his own truth, because in the scheme of things, he recognises no such truth at all. A child can tear, without compunction, the pages of a book for the purposes of his play, because for him those pages have no serious truth. (Tagore 1924: 516)

This way of thinking is quite close to Ragupati's nihilism, or to Jaysinha when in Act 2 Scene 3 he first joins in a Baul song about cutting all ties, and then calls on Aparna to come away in a similar spirit, because "O Aparna, you and I are nothing that is true at all – so let us be happy... let us go away for ever and float together over the world like two pieces of weightless cloud in the empty sky!" But the difference is that, in his address, Tagore is telling us about such ideas in order to reject them; in the play, the ideas become part of the fabric of the drama. We cannot forget them or reject them purely because the play's message at the end tells us: they remain with us, as part of our total experience of the play, just as Gunabati's passionate defiance, Raghupati's malicious cynicism, or Jaysinha's tragic suicide will stay with us. In *Othello*, Iago's malevolence is as real – and as lasting in our minds – as Othello's gullibility and Desdemona's innocence. The tragedy cannot be reduced to a moral message about trust or love. Nor can *Bisarjan* be reduced to a message about non-violence and idolatry. Drama, literature, poetry do not work like that, and I suggest it is only the ubiquitous and compelling presence of Tagore's copious discursive writings that encourages us to forget this basic fact.

Acalāyatan is a later play, first published in the journal *Prabāsi* in 1911 (*Āśvin* 1318) and in book form the following year. Derived (though not in any great detail) from a story in Rajendralal Mitra's book of 1882 on *The Buddhist Literature of Nepal*, (see Pal 1993: 224) it is set in a rigidly orthodox ashram whose name 'Acalāyatan' suggests immobility.¹² It is not a tragedy like *Bisarjan*; indeed it seems to me essentially a comedy, though it may be that awareness of its 'message' has blinded some critics to its humour. Niharranjan Ray describes it as "a seriously satirical allegory aiming a frontal attack on our meaningless and antiquated socio-religious rites, beliefs and taboos, in a word, on our absurd Hindu orthodoxies" (Ray 1967: 177). He goes on to complain that it is rather too didactic:

¹² *Acal* (unmoving) + *āyatan* (abode, institution).

No one would object to a ‘message’ in a work of art so long as it is worked out in a creative, that is, in an artistic manner. In *Achalāyatan*, however, the didactic element is so loud and insistent that it affects the workmanship; the social awareness, so real in the context of the times, is so powerful that it obtrudes on the unity of design in the play. (Ray 1967: 178)

It did not strike me as quite like that when I read it, though, as with *Bisarjan*, it is certainly not difficult to relate it to Tagore’s philosophic and religious writings. Prasantakumar Pal links it not only to sermons in *Śāntiniketan* such as *Sāmañjasya* (*Balance*), *Karmayog* (*Karma yoga*) and *Brāhmasamājer sārthakatā* (*The significance of the Brahmo Samaj*) but to poems in *Naibedyā* (1901) including the most famous poem in the English *Gitanjali*, “Where the mind is without fear” (No. 35) with its references to places (unlike the Acalāyatan ashram) “Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way into the dreary desert sand of dead habit.”

The temptation to read the play as a moral tract has been exacerbated by Tagore’s own comments on it, in response to severe criticism by Professor Lalitkumar Bandopadhyay that was published in the journal *Prabāsī* after the play itself appeared there. Judging by Tagore’s lengthy rejoinders, reproduced in the *Granthaparicay* section at the end of the volume of Tagore’s collected works that contains the play, (Tagore 1942a: 504–511). Professor Bandopadhyay had objected to the play’s assault on orthodoxy. Tagore replied: “It is a universal truth that, where rules and ‘rites’ (*ācār*) overwhelm ‘religion’ (*dharma*) with their importance, they block the ‘human heart’ (*mānuṣer citta*). The pain of this blocked heart is the subject of the play,¹³ and as a corollary the ugliness of dry ritualism is inevitably conveyed.” (Tagore 1942a: 505)

Tagore goes on to take particular issue with the Professor’s charge that the play implies the destruction of orthodoxy without anything constructive being put in its place:

You ask what I am proposing. Can ‘just light, just love’ fill human stomachs?
That is, if the discipline of rites and rituals is removed, will man be fulfilled? If that is so, why do we see in history no clear example of it? (Tagore 1942a: 506)

But the writer of *Acalāyatan* has himself decided to ask this same question. Does the Guru of Acalāyatan end with a message of destruction? Does he not talk about building? When Pancak wants to quickly sweep away all controls, does the Guru not say, “No, that will not do – what has been torn down must be built up again in a better way” (Tagore 1942a: 506).

Pancak and his elder brother Mahapancak represent opposed points of view in *Acalāyatan*. Pancak is impatient with learning mantras and carrying out religious

¹³ Tagore actually uses the word *kābya* (poetry) here rather than *nāṭak* (play).

duties, whereas Mahapancak is a master of them. Pancak slips out of the ashram to meet communities that lie beyond the grip of its orthodoxy: the ‘Shonpangshus’, whose cheerful commitment to work is compared by Tagore’s biographer Prabhatkumar Mukhopadhyay to a Western-style obsession with work for work’s sake, (Mukhopadhyay 1988: 333)¹⁴ and the Darbhakas, a community of untouchables.¹⁵ In their different ways, these two communities offer him an alternative to the stifling regime inside the ashram, but he is not himself a revolutionary, merely a light-hearted teaser of his brother for his strictness, and a mildly anarchic influence on the less studious of the ashram’s pupils.

The cohesion of the ashram starts to break down when a boy called Subhadra commits the heinous sin of opening a window in its wall in order to look outside. The *Upācarya* (Deputy Minister) of the ashram, who is as strict in his orthodoxy as Mahapancak, insists that Subhadra will have to atone for this with an awesomely demanding and complicated penance that will be a deliberate threat to his life. The *Ācarya* or Chief Minister, however, reveals liberal tendencies and puts a stop to the penance, telling his colleagues that the ‘Guru’ of the ashram – who has not been seen there for a very long time – will arrive soon to point the right way forward. The *Upācarya* and his supporters start to machinate against the *Ācarya*, but the Guru arrives before they can complete their overthrow of him. (This is similar to the way in which the overthrow of King Gobindamanikya in *Bisarjan* is aborted.)

¹⁴ Prasantakumar Pal confirms the Western analogy, and says that when a revised version of the play was published in 1918 under the new title *Guru*, ‘Shonpangshu’ was changed to ‘Yunak’, which by its closeness to *Yaban* (a term for a Greek or Westerner, though later falsely applied to Muslims) made the analogy more explicit. (Pal 1993: 227)

¹⁵ As regards the meaning and connotations of the names Tagore gave to these two communities, Ketaki Kushari Dyson comments (private correspondence):

Shona in Skr means ‘red’ (hence *śonita* = blood). Pangshu as noun can be crumbling soil, dirt, dust, ashes, but in Bengali it can also be an adjective meaning ‘pale, ashen’ and is more often used as an adj. than as a noun, while the domesticated form *pāś* is the more common form of the noun (thus *chāi-pāś* = dust and ashes, dirt, rubbish). So the whole word literally means ‘red and ashen’ or ‘red and pale’. Shona (pronounced as end-stopped Shon in Bengali, Hindi etc) is also the name of the river (often written Son in English-language maps), so the compound word could also be broken down as ‘dust/sand of the Shon river’.

From the context of the play the Shonpangshus would seem to be an outcaste tribe living on the margins of society. Perhaps ‘red and ashen’ would point towards an identification with chandalas. There is also a faint suggestion of Tagore’s wry ‘colour humour’.

Darbha is the name of a grass, often identified with the ‘sacred’ kusha grass (the sharp grass referred to in my maiden surname). So it stands for something lowly but sharp, with the potential to become sacred. Darbhaka is also the name of a king or prince. In the play they also seem to be a lowly community with radical potential. Both the Shonpangshus and the Darbhakas are positive forces in the play, as differentiated from the people of the Acalāyatan.

Intriguingly, the Guru when he arrives turns out to be not only ‘Dadathakur’, the free-spirited leader and preceptor of the Shonpangshus, but also the ‘Gōsāi’ or spiritual leader of the Darbhakas. The light and freedom that he brings unites all communities, the orthodox, the foreign and the untouchables.

I only have time here to scratch the surface of this complex play, but what I find particularly interesting and relevant to the argument of this paper is that the composite Guru’s arrival is preceded by thunder, clouds and torrential rain, as well as the violent destruction of the walls of ashram. Then as light pours in, ‘as if the whole sky is rushing into this abode’, the boys of the ashram sing the song to the light that Pancak has taught them – the song that Tagore made into No. 57 in *Gitanjali*, changing the repeated *O bhāi* (‘O brothers’) to ‘my darling’, which give the poem a rather different tone and reference. I have never seen *Acalāyatan* performed, so I can only imagine how the climactic scene of the Guru’s arrival would work on stage, but I feel that its effect would be like dark (the clouds, thunder and destruction) emerging from white (the sky) in order to reveal the white, as in the verse in *Chitralipi* I quoted earlier. The dark would not be dispelled by the white or light, but would remain bound up with our perception of it, just as the horror of Jaysinha’s suicide stays in our minds at the end of *Bisarjan*. The Guru’s gesture towards construction (mentioned by Tagore in his comments) would not, I think, displace the lingering impression of destruction. His arrival would also have a touch of the absurd or (if you’ll pardon the pun) the camp, for Tagore gives the surprising direction, *Yoddhr̥beṣe Dādāṭhakurer prabeś*, “Enter Dadathakur in martial dress.” As he has led the military assault that has smashed the walls of the ashram, the martial dress seems logical enough, but imagine its effect! Whether one conceives it as traditional costume – the martial dress of the Kauravas and Pandavas in Bollywood films perhaps – or as modern battle fatigues, it seems at a stroke to subvert and complicate the idealistic message that, in his response to criticism, Tagore himself claimed he wanted to convey. If we cling to the notion that the play, despite its touches of fun and humour, is essentially ‘a seriously satirical allegory’, then not only the Guru’s martial arrival but also his exchanges with the boys in the ashram would probably seem inept and laughable. But if – as I am sure any modern director would – we were to revel in its absurdities, then the play becomes interesting, ambiguous, multi-layered, and irreducible to any straightforward message.¹⁶ The absurdities of the end of *Bisarjan*, would, I think, be absorbed by

¹⁶ Another question about it that I might consider in a future paper is whether it covertly expresses Tagore’s own worries about his *Gurudev* status and the new kind of educational community he was trying to create at Santiniketan. Prasantakumar Pal (1993: 225) writes about the fears Tagore had that the rules at his school were too strict: his correspondence in the year before he wrote the play reveals fears that he later expressed through the character of the *Ācārya*. I myself would relate the ambiguity of the ‘Guru’ when he arrives to the Vairagi Dhananjay in later play, *Muktadhārā* (1922). I have written elsewhere

intensity, poetry, tragedy, just as the absurdities at the end of Shakespeare's tragedies are absorbed and legitimized. King Gobindamanikya can get away with saying, *Geche pāp* (Sin has gone) because everything is in a state of emotional meltdown. But when the Guru at the end of *Acalāyatan* says something similar about sin, the only way in which it could possibly work would be to find absurdity in the whole play, and to see that absurdity as a rich and fascinating part of its meaning:

All: Guru!

Dadathakur: Come, my dears, come.

First boy: When shall we get out?

Dadathakur: Not long to go – you will soon have to come out.

Second boy: What shall we do now?

Dadathakur: Something has been prepared here for you to enjoy.

First boy: O *bhāi*, these are *jām*-berries – what fun!

Second boy: O *bhāi*, sugar-cane – what fun!

Third boy: Guru, is there no sin in this?

Dadathakur: None at all – it has virtue.

First boy: Shall we all sit here and eat?

Dadathakur: Yes, right here.

Indeed, the more one thinks about it the more one realizes that the mining of Tagore's plays for their messages, whether by critics or by the author itself, is always going to be at odds with the way actors and directors are likely to deal with them, for so much is left undefined. Stage directions are minimal, descriptions of characters are non-existent. His dramaturgy is at the opposite end of the spectrum from the plays of George Bernard Shaw, who certainly did aim to define his characters and convey messages and ideas, and made it absolutely clear in his elaborate stage directions and prefaces exactly what those characters and messages were.

I admire Shaw, but think of him as the ultimate in *prose* drama, whereas Tagore, in his plays, as in everything else, is always a poet. And this brings me to my concluding a point – a basic one and an obvious one that I have often made before and

about how 'Dhananjay is aware of the dangers of his own *gurugiri*.' See *Never not an educator: Tagore as a poet-teacher* (Radice in print).

will go on making in the future. If he was – as he himself repeatedly said – a poet first and foremost, then his philosophizing and preaching, however noble and inspiring it may be in itself, will always be secondary to the poetry. It is not the engine of the poetry, but a by-product of it. To return to the questions I raised at the beginning, my conclusion is that reading his creative works through the filter of his thought has misled us because it has distracted us from the *poetry*. In his discursive writings, Tagore often seems to imply that poetry is a simple thing, an expression of the spirit, an ultimate harmonization of the good, the true and the beautiful. That may be true of the *spirit* of poetry, the transcendent quality that lifts the heart and distinguishes poetry from prose. But it is not true (to use two of Tagore’s favourite terms) of the finite forms in which the infinite can be expressed. Poems, plays, songs as *finite* entities are exceedingly complex.

My reading of *Bisarjan* and *Acalāyatan* certainly encourages me to believe that pretending Tagore’s discursive writings and explanations do not exist might indeed help us to understand those plays – and many of his works – better. It would bring us much closer to his *poetry*. It would help us to see that he was a thinker not in order to plan, inform or drive forward his creative works, but as a *consequence* of those same works. He thought, because his restless, endlessly probing poetic and creative mind – dedicated always to the truth – obliged him to think, to think about everything, from God to Nature to science to society to politics to education. He knew that the actual truth was always more complicated than anything he could say about it in a lecture, essay or sermon, but was *not* too complicated for the media of poetry, drama, fiction, song or painting. The complex, strenuous ‘truth of art’ and Tagore’s fundamental commitment to it was summed up in a famous poem in *Śeṣ lekhā*, his last book of poems:

satya ye kathin,

kathinere bhālobāsilām –

*se kakhano kare nā bañcanā.*¹⁷ (Tagore 1947: 48)

It may be a daunting prospect, trying to understand and describe the hard truths of Tagore’s creative works, and it is always easier to reach for one of the essays or addresses that possibly gave him relief from the demands of his art. But I am certain we will remain forever ignorant of those works if we do not make the attempt.

¹⁷ Truth is hard,
I have loved the hard –
It never deceives.

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