

Towards an Ethics and Aesthetics of the Future:
Rabindranath Tagore 1930-41

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RABINDRANATH TAGORE 1930-41

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For
RINA, SUTIRTHO AND SUPROTIK

Acknowledgements

After contributing an essay several years back on the late poetry of Rabindranath Tagore to a Bengali journal in Kolkata on an invitation from Professor Swapan Kumar Chakravorty (at that time Professor of English, Jadavpur University, Kolkata), I felt that the subject deserved further exploration but academic duties at Delhi University and an ingrained habit of procrastination came in the way. Suddenly, in October 2011, Dr Anita Cherian of Indraprastha College, Delhi, a Fellow at the Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla, invited me to deliver a lecture on Tagore at an international conference at the institute on three representative poets of the South: Tagore, Neruda and Aimé Césaire. My paper on Tagore received much generous praise from the Fellows, particularly from the then director Prof. Peter Ronald deSouza.

I went back to Delhi and settled down to my academic duties and procrastination when I received an unforgettably warm invitation from Peter to a Tagore Fellowship at the Tagore Centre that was being set up at the Institute. For various reasons, it is very difficult for me to leave Delhi but on this occasion Peter's compassionate keenness was irresistible. Without this Fellowship (September 2012-September 2013), this book would not have been possible; Shimla provided me with the academic environment and caring humanity for unhurried speculation.

In addition, I am indebted to the Fellows for their comments, suggestions and self-effacing interest in my project. The current Director, Prof. Chetan Singh and Dr Debarshi Sen, the Academic Officer at that time, were very helpful and prompt in all academic matters. Mr Prem Chand,

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My greatest debt remains, however, to Professor Arun Kumar DasGupta, who was my tutor at Presidency College, Calcutta nearly fifty years ago and whose teaching, formal and informal, moulded the minds of many of my generation of students.

Although my manuscript was promptly sent to a reader for evaluation and then to an efficient copy-editor, I needed some time to return it to the Institute because of my sudden illness; postponement was beyond my control.

Preface

The germ of this project lies in my perception of the sustained mood of unattached observation stemming, as it were, from a slackening of the ego that characterises particularly—though not exclusively—the poetry of the closing decade of Tagore’s life. While analysing this stylistic tendency, I attempt to extend my argument to an exploration of the relationship between abstract ideas and their reincarnation in artistic form. How is the abstract transformed into the concrete, propositional truth into experiential authenticity in a poem, a novel or painting? What is the relationship between intellectual history and art? Within this broad philosophical rubric, I wish to concentrate on the artistic output of Tagore, specifically on the fusion of aesthetics and ethics. Such an interpenetration of the abstract and the concrete is particularly relevant to Tagore. At the first Indian Philosophical Congress (21 December 1925), he overcame his initial reluctance to preside precisely because, according to him, the adversarial relationship of philosophy and poetry in the West did not obtain in India.

My position springs from the conviction that the mode of entry into a work of art is always its form and the larger complex of its style and it is only through the latter that we may grasp the ideas as a kind of dissolved but distinctive presence in it. The film director, Satyajit Ray, had highlighted the primacy of form in matters artistic when he declared memorably in a lecture in Kolkata about three decades ago that the lousiest of films have been made on the loftiest of themes. From another and complementary direction, we

can say that form is the preoccupation specific to an artist wherein he is able to receive and in receiving transform the intellectual life of an entire age. When Tagore received a lot of hate mail for his depiction of Hindu family life in *Ghare-Baire*, one of his defences was that the writer was a sensitive medium through which society or history in the making expresses itself. Similarly, if we enter into the world of Balzac through his fiction, we will not encounter the Tory politics for which he was known but realize the fidelity with which his work intuitively grasps the very formation of mid-nineteenth-century Europe, including its tendencies and possibilities. Examples can be multiplied. What I wish to emphasize is that the key to Tagore's *oeuvre* and vision is his actual artistic practice through which we may arrive at its relationship to his transformative notion of human nature within a certain time, place and tradition. Specifically, I will attempt to explore the intermeshing of an ethics and aesthetics of freedom and simplicity in Tagore.

The aesthetic search for simplicity in Tagore's artistic *oeuvre* is inseparable from the ethical goal of freedom from attachment or power. While he no doubt conceptualized this goal in terms of Indian metaphysical traditions, the Upanishads in particular, his vision was not backward-looking or revivalist like to some extent that of Coomaraswamy. What brought metaphysics alive to him was his re-discovery of the poetry—Vaisnava, Bhakti or Baul—of demotic mysticism involving the surrender of the ego. This might again appear to be an escape from contemporaneity but it is turned into a critique of the alienation that affects modern society. In this sense he struggles towards an alternative modernity emancipated from the binary of the East and the West, adopting with eclectic freedom elements from both and developing a vision of the future. Insofar as this future is centred round the visibility of the individual human being unburdened of all divisive abstractions, the individual, in

other words, as the best picture of common humanity, it dwells more in the realm of imperishable possibility than in a realizable time-frame.

The slackening of the ego, suggested above, constitutes a subtle critique of the appetite for power and predatory competition that underlies modern Western society and that spread like a contagion through colonialism to India. The critique thereby has a radical political edge to it; if it seems somewhat muted, it is because of Tagore's artistic dissatisfaction with pragmatic compromise. Specifically, Tagore anatomises the master-servant relationship inherent in colonialism to reveal the strange interchangeability of those supposedly adversarial categories. But once again, what I hope to analyse is not so much these ideas, assumptions and issues within the context of discursive prose but their subtle, dissolved presence in the larger complex of style and form. For example, in the poetry of the last decade, which in many ways has been the starting point of this project, we may notice a pervasive mood of idleness and unattached observation that gives artistic life to the ethical goal of freedom from desire and ultimately questions the frenzied and seedy sensationalism of much modern poetry of the West, tendencies which, for Tagore, stemmed from a philosophy of greed and domination. As he puts it in *The Artist* (1930), the artist does not use the world's laws for his purposes of power, for he has no drive to power.

Tagore's entire work is characterized by mutually invigorating antithetical impulses. An almost ascetic search for the hard truth underlying the illusory nature of life is complemented by celebration of this illusory veil not by blindly submitting to it, but by an undecieved, willing and playful participation in it. For him, the truth of human existence is thus to be found in neither asceticism nor sensuousness. It coheres around the concept of evanescence. He traces the haunting sense of the meaninglessness of life,

particularly in his late work, to the delusion of permanence. If life is at bottom meaningless, both the divine Creator and the artist infuse meaning into it not by asserting its substantiality—that would mean submitting to illusion—but quite the opposite, by foregrounding and immersing in its insubstantiality and evanescence. *Māyā* obscures truth when it is *not* seen as a veil; once it is *seen* as a veil, however, it reveals truth. It is in this sense that he sees death as the prime mover of life.

The delusion of permanence is inseparable from the drive to power at the heart of all gigantic and labyrinthine structures. Historically Tagore associates these structures with the industrialized modernity of the West manifesting itself in modes of domination and control, in the phenomenon of reification and alienation within and imperialism without. Thus, the aesthetic of lightness and simplicity articulated in his late writings offers in its ethical dimension a radical critique of power abetted by scientific conceit, technological superiority and rationalised greed. Oppression is not unrelated to repression and it is not a coincidence that Tagore questions the drive towards tortuous interiority in Western art, although he concedes that it is the destiny of post-War Europe. His favourite motif of coming out into the open, severing the entanglements of enclosed domesticity and calculation, places the human subject within a framework of shared humanity. This ethical extension is matched by a parallel process in the aesthetic of lightness, for it is the smallness of the ego unburdened of power that makes possible the awareness of vastness.

The Search for an Alternative Modernity in Literature

In this paper I wish to examine Tagore's complex relationship with English/European modernity in literature and its larger implications. While Tagore clearly acknowledges the influence of Europe behind the advent of modernity in Bengali literature—consider, for instance, the essay, written in 1934, titled 'Bangla Sahityer Kromobikash' ['The Evolution of Bengali Literature']—he remained sceptical of the attempts, made in particular by the younger Bengali poets of the 1930s, to raise it to the status of a paradigm of modernity that ought to be imported and emulated. Perhaps because of this critical stance, Tagore was perceived often as ultimately pre-modern, but actually he clearly saw the anachronism implicit in the import of European modernity. Moreover, the colonial imposition of this modernity, mainly through English education, trapped the colonized into the equally extreme and futile modes of slavish imitation and bigoted rejection. Tagore attempted to extricate himself from this double trap, envisioning a modernity that was rooted in the Indian soil and yet not immune to the European contact. On a more extended view, he seemed committed to the construction of an Asian consciousness, pitted against the European. Tagore's ambivalent relationship with European modernity can certainly be and has been explored in terms of the search for an Asian identity, but I wish to venture upon the less tangible domain of his poetry and fiction in order to come to terms with this ambivalence.

The last decade of Tagore's life, 1931-41, is marked by an

unparalleled fecundity of the imagination—numerous volumes of verse, let alone myriad other publications and about 2,500 paintings. The poetry of this period is marked by the antithetical impulses that characterize his artistic oeuvre. On the one hand, he undertakes a relentless study of truth in all its hard clarity: ‘Truth is hard; /I came to love this hardness:/It never deceives’ (Poem No.11, *Shesh Lekhā*, 1941).¹ On the other hand, a year before this, he memorably wrote of the rich and untrammelled sensuousness, bordering upon the illusory, that floods his consciousness precisely at the point of this asceticism (‘Asambhab’ [‘Impossible’], *Shānāi*, 1940). Declining health and impending death paradoxically served as catalysts to the process of freedom from desire and attachment that is a necessary pre-condition for awareness of the hard truth mentioned above.

As he has reiterated in letters and reminiscences, he is at last liberated from the pressures of social service and a hectic public life into his proper domain of contemplative solitude and observation that had marked his childhood. Tagore reads his final intensification of artistic vitality in terms of a recovery of childhood, its freedom and simplicity: ‘Whatever I’ve found on my first day may I find in my last/Touch the world with these two hands, laughing like a child.’² The mutually invigorating nature of the impulses towards asceticism and sensuousness is affirmed as never before in his late poetry, whereby the awareness of the naked truth enables the poet to participate willingly in the play of illusion. Defending himself as a Romantic, considered to be somewhat out of touch with modernity, Tagore makes a forthright philosophical and aesthetic statement in the poem, ‘Romantic’ (*Nabajātak*, 1940), about the knowledge of illusion that is the bedrock to his play of imagination:

Cheating the almighty, I steal

Colours and feelings from his workshop,
 Steal his magical touch.
 Much, I know, is illusion,
 Much only shadow.
 When you ask, 'Could this ever be called realistic?'
 I say, 'Never, I am a Romantic.'

On the obverse is his knowledge of the real world—'There is poverty there, disease, ugliness'—and its merciless work cannot be performed by his poetry: 'There I throw down my mantle to wear armour' and may not 'play at reality'.³

It is not enough to realize that life is at bottom meaningless, characterized by endless flux; we must consciously submit ourselves to its fictive and fleeting manifold. Such submission may not come easily and is the product of the discipline that is a necessary preparation for the poet and the artist, a discipline free from aridity and comparable thus to the peasant's labour and its fruits. As Tagore puts it in the essay 'Soundaryabodh' ['The Sense of Beauty', 1906], the 'path to beauty is strewn about with delusions. One who aspires after the fullness of life, must needs train himself [sic] to overcome these obstacles, even at the cost of some initial hardship'.⁴ Thirty-five years later, he makes the same point more memorably in the last poem of his life, dictated a few hours before he lapsed into coma: the guileful one has strewn varied beguiling snares along the paths of Creation; only those who have easily endured this deception may lay claim to imperishable peace. The source of such unembittered endurance lies in the choice to play the game of illusion that is life, without being bound by its spell. While Tagore saluted the European modern poet's ascesis, he made that, the love of hard truth, the basis for his enjoyment of the transparent veneer of transitory illusion.

In his late poetry, the fictive and fleeting manifold is transferred to the page through the chosen poetic persona

of the observer, unattached but not detached, somewhat idly contemplating the fugitive beauties of the world. The motif of unattached observation is reinforced in this period by Tagore's parallel interest in painting which, as has been documented, grew out of manuscript deletions and revisions as well as doodles. He conveys to Rani Mahalanobis his urge for recording reality in its pictorial fecundity and fluidity from the banks of the vast river of East Bengal: 'I would live by the Padma and gather a harvest of pictures and nothing but pictures to load the Golden Boat of time with.'⁵ The visible world was for him a vast procession of forms: 'My artist's pen wishes to recapture this play of forms—not in any emotional, sentimental or intellectual manner, but purely for the sake of assembling different forms together.'⁶ One may note here in passing the freedom from attachment suggested in the rejection of any emotional, sentimental or intellectual manner. He often saw this intoxicating joy of sheer observation as a return in his declining years to the distinctive experience of his childhood when, confined indoors, he drew sustenance from looking through the window at the world of pure visible forms.

In this vision of circularity, we may detect that search for simplicity and hard clarity that must struggle through much suffering, confusion and despair to arrive at the joy of unattached observation of life. In a lecture delivered at Oxford in 1930, Tagore argues that while science is concerned with fact and metaphysics with truth, art is involved with reality, knowledge of which derives not from what we can think of it but from a direct seeing and feeling of it. He refers to an Upanishadic parable: two birds sit on the same bough, one of which feeds and the other looks on: 'There are both of these birds in man himself, the objective one with its business of life, the subjective one with its disinterested joy of vision.'⁷ His lack of attachment to this world is inseparable from his meditation on the stark truth

of human existence; at the same time, unattached observation releases him from a possessive relationship with reality to awareness and enjoyment of its evanescence: ‘The artist does not use the world’s laws for his purposes of power, he has no drive to power.’⁸ Such a relationship is not possible because the very attempt to possess that which is necessarily fugitive stifles it. The King in the play *Muktadhāra* [‘The Water-Fall’] (1922) thinks that this world will be his if he were to seize it by force (we may recall the political philosophy of Sandip in *Ghare-Bāire* [‘The Home and the World’] (1916), but the moment we grab that which can be gained only by relinquishing, it slips out of our grasp. On a train journey to Madras, looking at the passing images, Tagore remarks: ‘Those who counsel giving up the world because nothing in it lasts, should take lesson from the man in a moving train. Why talk of holding fast to things when every moment we have to give them up?’⁹

As he puts it in ‘Isteshan’ [‘Railway Station’], (*Nabajātak*), the world is not a thing to cling on to but only to observe because it is all a picture constantly being painted and blacked out by the same brush-stroke. If the indifference of vast time places in proportion the short-lived joys and achievements of our life, the momentary in turn defeats that vast time precisely by virtue of its momentariness (‘Mayurer Drishti’ [‘The Peacock’s Gaze’], *Ākāshpradeep*, 1939). It is this transience, this painting and erasing that is the foundation for the moving mirage of poetry (Poem No. 30, *Rogshajjā*, 1940). The desire to possess that which is necessarily in a state of flux stifles its mobility which is the very source of its beauty. The moment we relinquish this possessiveness, we are emancipated into a heightened sensuousness whereupon the world enters unimpeded through the passive but heightened receptivity of our senses. In Poem No.13, *Patraput* (1936), the ego is identified with the tree, its leaves receiving the subtle potencies of the

cosmos. As he puts it in ('Prāner Ras' ['The Vital Sap'], *Shyāmali*, 1936), he wants a little time to sit still and open his ears, eyes and mind to the world.

Such unattached observation and sensuous enjoyment of the passage of human existence spring from a slackening of the ego. The poetic imagination is freed, as it were, from the pressure of the ego perennially engaged in imposing a structure of wishfulness on an otherwise random and transient reality. Actually, Tagore habitually talks of his two selves, one that confines him to pragmatic negotiation of the world and the compulsions of attachment that hide the truth and the other that involves the slackening of that self leading him to the consciousness of a larger and transcendent humanity, releasing him into the realm of the incalculable and the imponderable. As he puts it in *Mānusher Dharma* (1933), the self has two names, *aham* and *ātman*, the first corresponding to the lamp and the second to its flame. The movement between these two selves, that plays no doubt an important role in his literary, philosophical and religious writings, is discussed even in conversation as is suggested by one of his letters to Rothenstein. In the quiet, sunny leisure of his country retreat in England, Tagore writes, the veil of his smaller self has been drawn aside and the great in him, the ancient, the true has found its voice today.¹⁰ When the pall of the smaller self slips off, our vision of truth gives us freedom from the wishful tyrannies generated by that self. The smaller is the enjoyer, the larger the seer. As he puts it in "The Religion of an Artist", the "immediate consciousness of reality in its purest form, unobscured by the shadow of self-interest, irrespective of moral or utilitarian recommendation, gives us joy".¹¹ Such a bond of the emancipated self with universal humanity is matched by a stylistic journey towards simplicity and unaggressive receptivity.

The ego, freed thus from the obstructions of desire, is

able to perform the contradictory functions of an unremitting search for truth and immersion in the *māyā* of creation. The knowledge of the illusory nature of this world intensifies Tagore's participation in its sensuous and transitory manifold. *Māyā* and *leelā* do not remain confined to the abstruse and rarefied realm of metaphysics but cut through the very nerve of experience. The 'untruth' of *māyā* introduces a kind of shimmering veneer which is the defining principle of the forms of Creation as well as art: 'the union of the subject and object gives us joy. Is it because there is no separation between them in truth, the separation being the *maya*, which is creation?' If there is a rhythm in the heart of Creation, then it is inseparable from the artist's undeceived attempt to 'weave the *maya*, the patterns of appearance, the incessant flow of change, that ever is and is not'.¹²

The slackened ego finds poetic life in a pervasive mood of indolence created by iterative images of the full but sluggish current of the river, of floating white clouds unburdened of rain and of bare fields after a reaped harvest—all images signaling the onset and progress of autumn in Bengal (from early to late autumn, from *sharat* to *hemanta*). These images foreground the immersion in almost childlike play (*leelā*) by divine creator and mortal artist alike in full knowledge of the *māyā* that is presupposed in it. In poem no.7 of *Patraput*, the unburdened white clouds of late autumn are compared to the floating paper boats of divine children. Fifteen years earlier, Tagore had described, in a letter to C.F. Andrews, his poems as 'whims that are content to be borne away by the current of time, dancing in the sun and laughing as they disappear'. This interplay of *māyā* and *leelā* links the poet harmoniously to Creation because the Creator himself 'floats paper boats of ages filled with his fancies on the rushing stream of appearance'.¹³ The motif of unattached observation becomes dominant in the

late poetry but is certainly not confined to it. It enters into his imagination in childhood, as he recounts in his reminiscences. We may also consider how the entire symbolic play, *Dāk-Ghar* [‘The Post Office’] (1912), is constructed around the child Amal’s window, around his unusual, necessarily withdrawn but therefore more keen observation of the stream of life.

Indolence is not torpor but a heightening of the consciousness which is released from the stubbornly overpowering ego and is thus able to perceive and enjoy the world. In his poetry and prose, Tagore often writes of the self as a veil, a life-long shadowy presence: ‘My own shadow/ Enveloped my eyes’ (Poem No.10, *Prāntik*, 1937) and when the pall of the self slips off easily, the clear light of consciousness pierces the mist to reveal the undying shape of truth (Poem No.33, *Ārogya*, 1940). Tagore attempted to project the self, ceaselessly involved in joys and sorrows, outside of himself at par with the countless floating incidents of life so that he could see that self in this unattached banishment with eyes free from fear and desire (Poem No. 35, *Rogshajjā*). In ‘That Ancient Old Man’ (Poem No. 22, *Shesh Saptak*, 1935), Tagore speaks of parting company with that ancient old man who has merged with him as one. This is the hankering self immersed in the varied manifold but the other self watches (mark the motif of observation) all this like a puppet show, free from the engrossed hankering. However, this freedom of destitution is a freedom from the attached ego and therefore is the veritable joy of creation: ‘I am the joy that wells from the spring of creation,/I am destitute./I have nothing of my own/Walled up in vanity.’ In ‘This is Freedom’ (Poem No. 6, *Prāntik*), as images of the plenitude and sensuous repose of nature slowly seep through the depths of his delighted being, the unattached observer-poet experiences a similar freedom: ‘This is freedom—this easy return to what is easy,/Not life denying itself,

tormented, withered, deprived/By ascetic practice.' No wonder, indolence is the propitious moment of poetic creativity: 'I begin to write:/The unhurried morning drips a little juice onto the tip of my pen/As from notches cut in a date-palm tree' ('The Peacock's Gaze', *Ākāshpradeep*)¹⁴.

II

The final decade of Tagore's life is also marked by the poet's engagement with the question of modernity in literature. Searching for an alternative to the European paradigm of modernity, one that would be authentically rooted in Indian historical experience, he assimilated some of its stylistic qualities while rejecting others. Certainly the aesthetic of simplicity that underlies Tagore's self-interrogating asceticism invites a parallel with the pursuit of an austere economy in European poetry. But Tagore's admiration for this stylistic frugality did not blind him to the tendency towards special effects and sensational negativity, ultimately indicative of an escape from truth to self-indulgent cynicism, which was really sentimentality in reverse. In his essay, 'Adhunik Kabya' ['Modern Poetry'] (1932), he endorses the modern European poets' rejection of the intrinsically poetic and their search for an austere simplicity dictated by a calm acceptance of the naked truth. All that exists becomes the stuff of poetry by virtue of its sheer existence. The modern poet no longer wishes to depend on the devices of sweetness; rather, he chooses objective reality in its thinsness, its impersonal purity. After giving an example from Amy Lowell ('Red Slippers'), in which the sheer description of slippers can turn poetic without any frills added to it, Tagore notes that the impersonal integrity of the object is a product of disinterested observation. He particularly admires the obliteration of the conventional distinctions between the 'poetic' and the 'unpoetic'. Quoting from and translating

extensively (into Bengali) from Eliot, he recognizes the compelling force of his depiction of the seediness, squalor and paltriness of modern urban life. At the same time, Tagore shrewdly notes Eliot's aversion to this life implicit in the very description and in particular in the contrary images awakened in his mind: 'I am moved by fancies that are curled/Around these images, and cling;/The notion of some infinitely gentle/Infinitely suffering thing' ('Preludes'). Tagore also refers to Ezra Pound's poem 'The Study in Aesthetics'. In this poem, Pound notes a young boy admiring the beauty of a girl; three years later, the same boy, handling the crated sardines in excitement, uses the same expression about their beauty: 'Ch'ebe'a'. While the poet is mildly abashed, Tagore eagerly defends the boy's expression since it springs from a pure, disinterested way of seeing.

However, not unexpectedly, Tagore cannot accept the modern attempt to eradicate illusion from human experience, for, in his view, the Creator has planted beguiling illusions at every step in his Creation and that endless play generates the varied manifold. As Tagore puts it ironically, being an old-fashioned poet, he had emulated the Creator by using the haunting resources of poetic form to instill in the reader that sense of illusion. If elsewhere he writes of the veil that obscures the truth, here he defines the veil that does not obscure but reveals or makes visible the truth; rejection of that amounts to the utter impoverishment of beauty. Moreover, the modern European poet is often not able to sustain his disinterested way of seeing. One such poet claims to be 'the greatest laugher of all', greater than the sun, the oak tree, the frog and Apollo. The attempt to put the last two on the same level is for Tagore not only an example of straining after sensational effects but also indicative of disingenuousness, for the shock effect would evaporate without a disparity between the frog and Apollo,

and yet the modern poet ostensibly believes in the parity of all things. The desire to shock is thus another species of illusion, for it acknowledges its inability to accept easily reality in a calm and unattached frame of mind. In ‘Sahitye Nabotto’ [‘Novelty in Literature’] (1927), Tagore identifies this vogue of strained cleverness with an age’s dwindling creativity whereupon, as in Dadaism, feverish delirium is considered to be intrinsically superior to conversation. It has become such a vogue because it is much easier to pick up than simplicity. Happiness is rejected as a snare by modern European poets because ‘enjoyment loses its direct touch with life, growing fastidious and fantastic’.¹⁵ In the modern age, our sensibility for the ‘simple aspects of existence’ is dulled and therefore literature engages in ‘things and effects that are out of the common’.¹⁶ But, as he puts it elsewhere, unchecked passions cannot create eternal beauty: ‘Some profess to see a kind of beauty in this frenzy. I have felt at times that the literature of Europe has taken a special delight in this type of suicidal orgy—aimless, purposeless and at war with itself.’¹⁷

The source of all this, Tagore is aware, lies no doubt in the traumatic experience of the First World War. At the same time, the resulting reaction against what he calls a ‘daintily saccharine’ and over-refined style drove many of these poets to engage in sensational and shocking novelties; that is, to equally falsifying modes of poeticizing reality: ‘reaction against a particular mannerism is liable to produce its own mannerism in a militant fashion.’ For Tagore, this tendency amounts to a ‘deliberately manufactured style of primitive rudeness’ and is thus a betrayal of the modern aesthetic of simplicity. In the essay, ‘The Religion of an Artist’ (1933), Tagore articulates a powerful critique of the modish cultivation of the seedy and repulsive in much European modern poetry which was actually a disguised and warped sentimentality. As he puts it in ‘Anasuyā’ (*Shānāī*), the squalor

of urban life functions on a level of truth quite different from that generated by the imagination. Looking back at the world he has left behind from the vantage point of reverie, he discovers that seamy actuality can also breed its own delusion. We may ask ourselves here which is the greater delusion, release into the fiction of reverie or confinement to the seamy actuality. To valorize the seediness of modern urban life as reality, as the norm and not a distortion of it, a deviation from it, is to see disease as truer to the human condition than health. The historically inevitable or inescapable is not necessarily the real. Fidelity to this seediness is the ultimate delusion denying us the possibility of a reflexive transformation of the world in which we live.

He detects in this poetry 'wisdom struggling to seem clever'. Such cleverness is evident in the description of evening referred to in the essay: 'the coming out of the stars in the evening is described as the sudden eruption of disease in the bloated body of darkness.' According to Tagore, the writer here is 'afraid to own the feeling of a cool purity in the star-sprinkled night which is *usual*, lest he should be found out as commonplace.' While acknowledging the outrageously virile realism of the image, Tagore nevertheless finds it 'a jerky shriek, something like the convulsive advertisement of the modern market that exploits mob psychology against its inattention'.¹⁸In the Bengali essay, 'Adhunik Kabya', referred to above, Tagore defines true modernity as an intently engaged but indifferent observation of the world free from personal/selfish attachment to it. Not only is this seeing true and illuminating, it also produces pure happiness. As a mode of vision, he hastens to add, it is not confined to the twentieth century but may be found more than thousand years ago in the Chinese poetry of Li Po.

Tagore's critique of the aesthetic of European modernity is, however, not confined to the sensational and shocking

impulse underlying it. He seems to identify European modernity with the assertive ego stamping itself on palpable reality, breaking it down to an ultimately idiosyncratic concept of style. He often links this urge towards strained cleverness to the predatory and possessive individualism that manifests itself in colonialism and imperialism. According to him, the Gandhara figures of the Buddha show the mark of Greece, whereas 'the purely Indian mind dwelt on the symbolic aspect... expressing the soul of Buddha, unlimited by realism'. His understanding of European modernity is thus inseparable from his conceptualization of the rather different aesthetic of the East: 'To the adventurous spirit of the great European sculptor, Rodin, the most significant aspect of reality is the unceasing struggle of the incomplete for its freedom from the fetters of imperfection, whereas before the naturally introspective mind of the Eastern artist the real appears in its ideal form of fulfillment.'¹⁹ Comparing Tagore and Robert Bridges, the art critic Shahid Suhrawardy had noted that beauty came to Tagore 'naturally as the cherished one to her lover' whereas 'to Bridges she was a burden; with him there was a constant struggle to reduce the conflict between language and mood to the counterpoints of harmony, to force Beauty into the fierce shackles of tone and rhythm.'²⁰

A certain amount of turmoil and confusion has often been associated in the West with the release of creative energies. The disruptive and capricious power of the imagination has been highlighted by European artists within a larger context of conflict and political disintegration. A strict regimen has been felt necessary to tame and regulate inspiration. The paradigmatic modern artist Baudelaire's prescription is 'trouver la frénésie journalière': [find the daily frenzy, as of a journeyman.] But even Goethe, in his *Annalen*, compiled in ripe and supposedly Olympian old age, was nervously afraid of the wild tricks that a lively imagination might play

on an otherwise cultivated man. 'What is the good,' he writes, 'of curbing sensuality, shaping the intellect, securing the supremacy of reason? Imagination lies in wait as the most powerful enemy. Naturally raw, and enamoured of absurdity, it breaks out against all civilizing restraints like a savage who takes delight in grimacing idols.'²¹ His entire confession is permeated with the philosophy of conflict and combat between order, authority, civilization on the one hand and disorder, anarchy and savagery on the other. I will resist the temptation here of entering into the troubled questions of the barbarism and genocide unleashed in the name of civilization and rational order.

Confining ourselves to the question of the disruptive power of the imagination, we may compare Tagore's handling of the whole situation. Perhaps by virtue of his cultural location, Tagore is able to see the anarchic and the terrifying in the context of cosmic *leelā* in which creation and destruction are co-extensive with each other. Once we are able to see them in a non-antagonistic relationship, as obverses of each other, we may detect the subtle prompting of the psychology of power whereby the modern European artist must engage in a struggle to control imagination so that it may not control him. Is it illegitimate to see here the consequences of possessive individualism? The desire to possess is inseparable from the desire to dominate. When a civilization dominates the rest of the world it may be said to exercise the mode of suppression. The same domination turned inwards produces repression and narcissistic tendencies. In both the domains, outer and inner, there is antagonism. If the suppressed cultures and societies rebel, resist and disrupt, the repressed elements similarly express themselves seismically in inner disruption. Inhabiting European modernity thus involves a competitive relationship between the self and the world, and knowledge and self-awareness become possible only through conflict with an alienated world.

The cultivation of an ingenious and convoluted style was for Tagore closely related to alienation, to an escape from reality into words, into an excessive involvement with the formal autonomy of art. Thus, he finds a book of critical essays in English ‘full of contorted disputation about poetry, art, beauty and so forth. As I plodded through these artificial discussions, my weary mind seemed to have strayed into a mirage, a land where things were constructed out of words’.²² He reiterates this position even more clearly when he praises Yeats for triumphing over this tendency. Modern poets have become so clever that their poems are not born out of their felt experience but out of other poems. When words do not come out of pain but out of words alone, the craftsmanship of those words becomes more and more intricate and adroit. In such a situation, emotions lose simplicity because they do not spring directly from the depths of the heart; unable to believe in themselves such emotions force themselves to rush towards exaggeration. Since novelty no longer comes easily, they ceaselessly strive for the bizarre in order to prove their uniqueness.²³ In his response to Pound’s *Personae* (1909), Tagore wrote: ‘your modern poetical literature has always seemed to me to have eaten the forbidden fruit, lost her simplicity and shamefully become conscious of her nakedness trying to hide herself in all manner of elaborate garbs woven of dead and decaying leaves.’ That such an estimate was shaped by an alternative civilizational location was recognized by Pound: ‘Tagore’s philosophy hasn’t much in it for a man who has “felt the pangs” and been pestered with western civilization.’²⁴

The mannerism of strenuous cleverness that he detected and decried in modern European literature was for Tagore clearly related to the labyrinthine complexity of European civilization, especially in its unbridled expansion of material culture, brought about by its mission to dominate the rest of the world. In many of his essays, sometimes drawing support

from the poetry of Keats, he cautions against the rupture between truth and beauty, between ethical and aesthetic preoccupations. In ‘Soundarya o Sahitya’ [‘Beauty and Literature’] (1907), he warns against the cult of beauty. In Europe, the votaries of aestheticism in their deluded bravado reject the common, the plebian and usual as humdrum, dull and trivial on what they consider to be the grounds of beauty. Referring to a famous French book, hailed by Swinburne as the gospel of beauty, Tagore discovers in it a profound inhumanity, for its breathtaking dexterity of style—effect piled on effect—articulates an intense eagerness for a nearly-inaccessible ideal of beauty but only by sanitizing itself from ordinary, everyday existence and by constantly humiliating the common forms of life.

His position invites a parallel with Hegel’s critique in his *Aesthetik* of Berlin romanticism: innovative, experimental variety and fertility is pitted by Hegel in an inversely proportional relationship to the power of art to affect deeply and significantly the lives of the readers or viewers. What is usually referred to as fin-de siècle aestheticism or art for art’s sake is only a culmination of the larger tendency identified by Hegel. As he sees it, art in modern European society aspires to autonomy unencumbered by didactic responsibilities and thereby attains an unprecedented freedom of creativity. Nevertheless, the rich and miscellaneous variety that characterized Berlin romanticism was ultimately unsatisfactory because by virtue of this very freedom from all constraints, ‘art would no longer be connected, as it had been in the past, with the central energies of man; it would move to the margin, where it would form a wide and splendidly varied horizon. The centre would be occupied by science—that is, by a relentless spirit of rational inquiry’. The paradox is that ‘by moving into the margin art does not lose its quality as art; it only loses its direct relevance to our existence: it becomes a splendid

superfluity'.²⁵ We may also recall Baudelaire's critique in *L'école païenne* ['The Pagan School'] (1852)—a kind of self-criticism—of the consequences of the immoderate taste for artistic form; absorption in the fierce passion for beauty makes the notions of truth and precision disappear. In *Réflexions sur quelques-uns de mes contemporains* ['Reflections on Some of My Contemporaries'] (1861), he relates the pursuit of pure art in modern Europe to an essentially demoniac tendency. Tagore's intuitive perception of the link between strenuous cleverness in art, colonial expansion and the cult of beauty has to be understood in this background.

III

Freedom from the desire to possess has invariably and justifiably reminded scholars of the wisdom of Buddhism or the Upanishads, which Tagore had copiously imbibed within his family circle. His return to the ancient metaphysical traditions of India is reinforced by his love for medieval religious poetry of the Bhakti or Vaisnava variety and of course the poetry of the Bauls. What seems like philosophical retrospection matched with aesthetic regression misled many critics to believe that Tagore had missed the bus of modernity. Of course, over the years, formidable evidence has been collected about his modernity—consider his views on science, education, the status of women, social evils, superstition and so on. As I have already pointed out, in the last decade of his life he also came to terms with modernity in European art and despite significant reservations about its appropriateness to Indian conditions and ultimately about the disguised colonialism behind the response of overwhelmed admiration in India, he assimilated and lauded some of its abiding achievements. His experiments with a version of *vers libre* and the prose poem and above all with the subtle introduction of prose rhythm and conversational

syntax blurring the margins of the ‘poetic’ and the ‘unpoetic’ began at this time. His social critique of European modernity begins much before 1930, but this is when the ethical and the aesthetic may be said to have converged.

But then the real question that we must ask is why Tagore, given his modern temperament and admiration for the hard precision and commitment to naked truth cleansed of all poeticized sentimentality that he found in Pound or Eliot, drew sustenance in matters ethical and aesthetic to sources that could be identified as obsolete, archaic and out of touch with historical actualities. Perhaps this was an integral part of his critique of European modernity in so far as the latter is inseparable from the pursuit of power, the desire to possess and dominate—inseparable in other words from the historically urgent context of colonialism or imperialism. Of course, Tagore’s preoccupation with this tendency in Europe sometimes led him to misjudgments. In a comparatively early essay, ‘Sakuntalā’ (1902), instead of reading *The Tempest* as an anatomy of power, he sees in it *shakti* in contrast to the *shanti* of *Abhijnānasakuntalam* of Kalidasa. Much later in life, he takes a more balanced though critical view of the West, when, for instance, in ‘Sahityer Matra’ (1933), he wrote that the tempo of human life was being practised on the demonic level. Much earlier he had written that the same Europe that promotes music, literature, arts and polite culture at home brandishes the naked sword in its colonies: is it not logical to see a connection between the two?²⁶ Certainly the European writers themselves, Goethe, Mann and Valéry, to name a few, struggled with variations on the paradigm of Faustian man that highlighted the problem of European individualism versus common humanity.

In modern Europe, Tagore notices a commercial ethic and industrial mechanization; its religion was Christian but its civilization inimical to the Sermon on the Mount. Tagore’s

critique of European modernity and its influence on writers and artists is based on the spawning of urban life under colonialism. Urbanization resulted in the deterioration of social life due to the increasing gulf between the educated and the common people. English education was introduced to the Indian universities and the exposure to modern European literature had a formidable impact on, say, the Bengali poets of the 1930s, but that same curriculum only abetted the alienation of the urban elite. The university is compared by Tagore to a fortress with a moat all around it. In the pre-colonial days before the agglomeration of the city, there was much disparity and domination in our villages but there was a shared space of joy and intimacy between the learned and the ignorant, the elite and the common. This space of joy became manifest in the festive traditions of communal existence. By comparison, the modern urban society of Europe is shot through with anonymity aggravated by the frenetic pursuit of individualistic glory, economic competition, loneliness and joylessness. Tagore's analysis has affinities here with the positions taken by Weber and Tönnies on European modernity.

Was Tagore searching for an alternative to European modernity particularly because this paradigm had begun to overpower the sensibilities of the younger poets and artists of his time? The humiliating impact of colonial superiority undermined confidence in our art to such an extent that artists churned out third-rate copies of French masters. As he put it in a lecture to the students of Presidency College, Calcutta, (11 September, 1924), he could not even utter terms like *Visva* or *Bhumā* without raising laughter whereas similar English words like 'humanity' and 'infinite', were acceptable.²⁷ At the same time, nationalist intolerance of this humiliation gave rise to an aesthetic norm of Indianness which was ultimately antiquarian in character. Tagore attempted to steer clear of this trap of slavish imitation and

exaggerated revolt which were interchangeable psychological states. This trap of interchangeability, as we shall see later, underlies Tagore's anatomy of the master-servant relationship in colonialism. If Tagore re-wrote the mystical religious poets of the past, he gave that mysticism a new accent, making it a radical critique of the present.

Whether it is the repository of metaphysical wisdom or the poignant intensities of Bhakti, Vaisnava and Baul poetry, the common concern underlying the two strands is the renunciation of the desire to possess, of the almost ineradicable impulse to power. Critics have not taken into account the fact that the latter strand—mystical poetry—is constituted by energies coming from below, that it is truly demotic in character. Tagore's valorization of this strand is thus a radical critique of the elite and alienated character of the peculiar brand of colonially mediated modernity in India, although, as I have already pointed out, he remained equally sceptical of the reactionary revivalism. Since colonial modernity is confined to the English-educated upper classes, it cannot claim to answer the needs of the common, uneducated people of India for whom Weberian disenchantment had not yet taken place. In other words, Tagore's reservations about modernity stem from his awareness of the teeming millions on whose unacknowledged daily toil survive and flourish all refined modes of culture. In Poem No. 10 of *Ārogya*, he identifies the work of peasant, boatman and weaver as the foundation of all civilization. In contrast to this labour which is imperishable, the monumental magnificence of the successive civilizations that have come to India is a passing mirage. In *Bharatbarsher Itihas* ['History of India'] (1902), he had argued that the real history of India is the ongoing flow of the common forms of life and not the bloody power struggles of dynasties and races. It was in the midst of the upheaval produced by such struggles that the Bhakti

movement grew, involving Kabir, Nanak, Chaitanya, Tukaram and so on. Which is closer to the truth of the India of that time? It is interesting to observe that in the history plays of Shakespeare, ostensibly concerned with dynastic warfare, the life and activities of common people, the lower orders, occupies much of the imaginative space. In the second part of *Henry IV*, the everyday, humdrum serenity of the Gloucestershire scenes suggests a parallel history untouched by the violent political history and more abiding in character.

Thus, Tagore discovered in the demotic traditions of mystical literature not an escape from the pressures of colonial modernity but an alternative to it and therefore an alternative to the appetite for power that was at the heart of all imperialism. The renunciation of the dominating ego is not a retreat into sanitized mysticism but acquires a new accent in the specific historical context of colonial India. In fact, mysticism in Tagore or his appeal to ancient India is never backward-looking as it is sometimes in the work of Coomaraswamy but rather envisions a future on the basis of a trenchant critique of the present. Once again we can say that Tagore was actually attempting to resist the forces of rationalization and disenchantment imposed by colonial contact with the West within a society where disenchantment had not yet found its soil in the lives of the common people.

If indolence is the mood in Tagore's late poetry that springs from the ethical position of freedom from power or attachment, its opposite is obviously not the labour of the lower orders which for him is the imperishable basis of human life surviving the rise and fall of civilizations. That is work never in self-interest but, sadly, the interest of the parasitic leisure class. The opposite of indolence is the inordinately glorified ethic of work and adventure totally devoted to the self-interest of the predatory and possessive individualism of Western modernity. It is such a whirling addiction that it destroys all peace on earth and its ecological

harmony: neither animal life in the remotest of regions nor human life is safe from this aggressive colonialism disguised as adventure and enterprise.²⁸ As Tagore puts it in the essay 'Imperialism', injustice and brutality become easy if we take recourse to a lofty slogan or motto. Dismantling ideology in such a simple manner, he detects the roots of imperialism in ancient Europe, in Thucydides's description of the Athenians' defence of occupation.²⁹ Such ideological mystification reminds us of the sanctification of the Protestant work ethic that laid the basis for the economically competitive and possessive-individualist system of capitalism. We may be stunned by the massive system of European civilization, but underneath is kept hidden a terrifying daily carnage. The secluded peace of the ashram makes Tagore realize that the ultimate goal of the world is to be and not to do; even Nature puts rest above movement. In the gigantic mechanical factory system, there is no solitude, no leisure, and no quiet; in this way, getting totally unused to his own company, the European forcibly tries to unshackle himself from himself into intoxication and frenetic pleasure. While the working classes are condemned to soulless drudgery and drunken violence in leisure, the upper classes are exhausted in the vortex of excited pleasure.³⁰ In the play *Raktakarabi* ['Red Oleanders'] (1926), where the characters struggle for emancipation from a mechanized and dehumanized Kafkaesque society, holiday for Fagual, the labourer in the gold mines, means riotous and drunken stupor. Tagore notes the parity between drudgery and leisure, thus characteristically rendering the contraries interchangeable. The machine-civilization results in a mind-boggling concentration of riches and accumulation of commodities but its demoniac urbanization leaves no room for community, intimacy and peace. While capitalist individualism supposedly allows the labourer to become a Rockefeller, the Indian ideal of austere simplicity puts Gandhi on a pedestal.

The contemplative peace of the ashram which enables Tagore to construct a radical critique of the possessive work ethic does not involve a narcissistic withdrawal from the world but in fact enables the self/soul to break through the trap of alienation. By contrast, the self becomes the very measure of alienation in modern European literature. The more it withdraws into narcissistic alienation from community, it exposes more the forces that stifle the individual in both the forms of European society, capitalist and socialist. This is the reason why we encounter there the inability to bear solitude. If the minimal self of Tagore experiences a sense of harmony with the play of creation, the aggressive individualism of European modernity becomes aware of itself in disjunction with the object, in conflict with the world.

As early as the Renaissance, we discover a dislocation of emphasis from the work of art to the artist and his personality. Thus, the aura that surrounded Michelangelo was something distinctively new, sharply in contrast with the anonymous artist of the Middle Ages. The exaggeration of individualism as well as its suppression was a movement away from simplicity. The manic striving for originality, bereft of the sustaining influence of community, found its culmination often in exhaustion and neuroses, that is, in the deformation and impoverishment of the self. Michelangelo experienced weariness with the very world and the culture of worldliness that had ignited his genius and withdrawing from it took refuge in the arms of Christ. Others trapped themselves in superficial and frivolous preciosity. Yet others suffered from various forms of neurotic disorders; in fact, neurosis and melancholy became a fashion. That Shakespeare was aware of the nexus between melancholy and alienated individualism is evident from his exploration of the condition in *Hamlet*. As Hamlet moves from brooding isolation to relationships with more and more people, his sense of identity finds its proper anchor in community.

On a more philosophical level, alienation or self-estrangement becomes in Hegel and Marx, despite their sharply opposed standpoints, a searching criticism of modern culture. For Marx, alienation springs from reification, the dehumanization caused by commodity fetishism abetted by the giant machine whereby man enslaves himself to what he invented, invention here being the product of greed, power and the exploitation of nature. Tagore also grasps with intuitive clarity the supremacy of the ideology of commodities and the dehumanizing effect of mechanization in collusion with international and colonial commerce: commerce wants only goods and not human beings. Having made this point in his Japan travelogue, Tagore contrasts the present with the past. Once upon a time, in our own texts, trade was associated with the Goddess Lakshmi, the symbol of prosperity, peace and happiness, because trade and humanity had not yet been wrenched apart. There was a bond between the weaver and his loom, the blacksmith's hand and his hammer, the craftsman and his craftsmanship. This intimacy between the worker and his tools has been destroyed by mechanization and the effect of that is easily discernible in the contrast between Venice and Manchester. Commerce does not express man, it only obscures him. His play *Raktakarabi* shows how in constructing the gigantic mechanical system to enslave human beings, man has shackled himself. If gold-mining is the central metaphor of dehumanization in this play, in *Muktadhāra*, it is the dam. The reification that results in subjugation to the gigantic machine ultimately enslaves our mental and imaginative life to mystifying abstractions like state, nation, commerce, society and so on. In the name of such abstractions, vulnerable groups and sections like workers, *shudras*, women are sacrificed. On a global scale, this is the principle on which colonialism and imperialism are practised with impunity.

In Hegel, Marx and Kierkegaard, divestiture of the self—

its exteriorization and objectification—is closely related to the loss of wholeness, the ‘universal nature’ of man, the unity of life. When Tagore reminds us repeatedly that what India prioritizes is becoming or contemplative self-realization over the ethic of addictive, relentless and instrumental action, we may juxtapose with it Hegel’s view of the consequences of the latter. According to Hegel, man loses himself in his own creations, his achievements in art, philosophy, religion and the sciences. Tagore’s model of the slackened ego, a heightened passivity and receptivity of the mind is by contrast a form of being for itself alone. For Hegel, the human mind is confronted by an alien element in its own creations; even God’s Creation is through His self-alienation. The model is of a dialectical opposition whereby self-awareness becomes possible only through conflict with the alienated world. Alienation is therefore a prerequisite, the price that must be paid by the mind for its ultimate self-realization.³¹

The forces of depersonalization are intimately linked with the spate of institutions which, despite their crucial role in society, tend to outlive and outstrip their original aim and utility. Tagore’s *Achalāyatan* is an exposure of this reification whereby institutions created by us for our benefit turn into masters from servants. Institutions transform means into ends whereby administration and office become self-enclosed, benefiting only the administrators and officials. This is perhaps reflected in modern poetry and art, in its pursuit of autonomy and autotelic activity resulting in strenuous cleverness, privileging virtuosity and bravura of style over simplicity—means are turned into ends. According to Tagore, a common form of this lack of relation between means and ends is, in fact, the pursuit of beauty as an end in itself, whereas it is only a means to the truth of self-realization: ‘confusion in our thought that the object of art is the production of beauty; whereas beauty in art has been the mere instrument and not its complete and ultimate significance.’³²

IV

At this point I want to bring out the political and psychological significance of Tagore's appeal to the demotic religious traditions or the wisdom of ancient India. The pervasive attitude of meek submission and humility that marks the latter actually offers a mode of release from the trap of power which ensnares both colonial master and colonized servant. Since this colonized servant is the *bhadralok*, who is influenced by European artistic modernity through English education, the release is simultaneously from the anachronism of that modernity with reference to India. For Tagore, the colonial master-servant relationship is an insidious one at once mutually sustaining and vitiating because the British master and the *bhadralok* servant are equally blinded by the possessive and dominating ego. In other words, master and servant become psychologically interchangeable, since to dominate is to enslave oneself to the dominated. We may recall here the important study by Ashis Nandy of the strange nuances of this intimacy.³³ In his introduction to *The Colonizer and the Colonized* by Albert Memmi,³⁴ Sartre noticed the relentless reciprocity that binds the colonizer to the colonized. Somewhat similarly, in his *Discourse on Colonialism*,³⁵ Aimé Césaire balances the obvious impact of colonialism on the colonized with its decivilizing effect on the colonizer. A nation which colonizes and justifies colonization is already a sick and morally diseased civilization. In such a view, all Europeans have been complicit with Nazism, since before they became its victims, they were its accomplices: Nazism, for Césaire, is the barbarity of colonialism turned inwards.

As Tagore puts it in the essay 'Samasya' ['Problem'] (1923), any relationship involves subjection; in the master-servant relationship, the master is also enslaved to the servant. Some years before this, in 'Rajnitir Dwidha' ['Vacillation in Politics'] (1893), he wrote that injustice and

injury to the other does not harm him or her really, but the very foundations of our own ideals of dharma are destroyed. Those who oppress their servants ruin their own character. Our treatment of the lower orders of our society exposes our deep-seated appetite for power, but their slavery is our enslavement. The demands made on the subordinates by their superiors are boundless; hence slavery and fear are in our marrow-bones. The culture of blind conformity conditions us to oppress our inferiors, to be envious of our peers and slaves to our superiors. Prolonged subjugation has shattered our racial humanity and our courage. For Tagore, the *bhadralok* is at once servant to his master, the British ruling class, and master to the lower orders of Indian society. Out of this unique historical location grows a dominating impulse that is strangely founded in servility. Tagore adroitly exposes in his political writings like *Kālāntar* ['Transition'] (1937) or *Raja Prajā* ['King and Subject'] (1908) how defiance of the British master is tainted by a disguised lust for power, which in turn stands exposed in the inhuman treatment of the lower orders by the Indian upper classes. The elite class in Indian society that clamours for freedom from British rule is itself guilty of denying that same freedom to the lower orders. This is why Gora wishes to mingle with and understand the latter and denounces the 'enlightened' contempt of the *bhadralok* as their ignorance and superstition (*Gora*, 1909), and low-caste people and poor Muslims are considered as the true images of God by the rebellious uncle of Sachis in *Chaturanga* ['Quartet'] (1915).

True freedom can be achieved not by toppling British authority because that would replace one master by another. Before we construct our love for the country, we must first learn to love our countrymen, a large section of whom are either contemptible or non-existent for us. That love is the true index to our emancipation from the lust for power disguised under shrill patriotism. In that emancipation lies

our freedom from the dominating ego, which for Tagore is the ultimate freedom envisioned in Indian Upanishadic thought in contradistinction to the political freedom conceptualized in the West. His answer to his own question in ‘Samasya’—which freedom is hailed as the true freedom in our *dharmasādhana*—is the freedom that removes egotism (*ahankāra*) and thereby forges a union between the mind/soul and the world. It is in this larger context that we may see, in the late poetry of Tagore, the slackened ego of unattached observation as a unique aesthetic equivalent of the ethical emancipation from the interlocked impulse to dominate and be dominated: subject and object, man and reality are no longer locked in the interchangeable domination of technology and reification. Tagore’s most penetrating analysis of this relationship of technological power and simultaneous enslavement to reification may be found in his plays, *Raktakarabi* and *Muktadhāra*.

Tagore’s search for a mode of transcendence of this trap of master and servant invites a parallel with that of the radical Romantic poet Shelley. As the latter puts it in his preface to *The Revolt of Islam*, despite the achievements of the French Revolution, the old revolutionaries or victims of tyranny soon turned into new tyrants. The terrifying recurrence of this interchangeability after the Russian Revolution has still not faded from public memory. For Shelley, the way out lies in the long and painstaking process through which the revolutionary protagonist may be able to expunge hatred from his soul. Thus, in *Prometheus Unbound*, Prometheus’s liberation of mankind is achieved with his renunciation of hatred.

Tagore was fully aware of the exploitative relationship between *zamindar* and *ryot*, and confessed to his unhappy location in the landowning class. Although he had reconciled himself to the despair that there will always be in society a class above and one below, in a letter to his son Rathindranath

(and in many other places) he recognizes the obsolescence of the zamindari system.³⁶ Around the same time, his *Russian Letters* (1931) bear testimony to the hope, on his initial impression of Soviet Russia, that this ineradicable division of above and below has been destroyed as never before. In a telegram to Professor Petrov in Moscow, Tagore wrote: 'Your success is due to turning the tide of wealth from the individual to collective humanity.'³⁷ Of course, in those same letters, Tagore repeatedly cautioned against the stifling and stunting effect of a uniform mould of humanity that was being brutally imposed by the Bolsheviks. This is because the revolutionaries were able to see the masses only in terms of their utility and function in a particular political programme; they were unable to see them as individual human beings.

Such an invisibility of the common humanity was of course the unquestioned foundation of imperialism as well as its 'intimate enemy', nationalist politics before Gandhi. For Tagore, such politics was for the bhadrakok a matter of aspiring for and sharing the seat of power with the ruling classes. While this politics was enveloped in much hot and empty air, the leaders had no inkling of the toiling masses wearing themselves out in their unchanging cycle of birth and death, tilling the soil, weaving and providing food to man while being preyed upon for food by animals. The disparity between above and below cannot be wiped out by headstrong violence but by the reformation of our mental disposition; Czarism and Bolshevism in this sense are flip sides of the same coin. Those below, specifically for Tagore's India, the ryots who till the lands, should be the real owners but in effect if ownership is summarily transferred from the zamindar to the ryot, the latter will be promptly swallowed up by the moneylender. Using the metaphor of the soil, Tagore argues that the zamindar-ryot disparity cannot be transformed without the transformation of the basis of society.

If the zamindars, who have grown out of the soil of the country, its specific bent of mind, are merely weeds, then crushing them underfoot will nurture a second round of weeds out of the decomposed fertility of those dead weeds. This is because the soil has not been changed ('Ryoter Kathā', 1926).

The hankering, obstructing ego is the ultimate impediment to our freedom, that is, freedom from the impulse to dominate and to be dominated. This impulse characteristically disguises its greed for power in modes of attachment and even solicitude. The point will become more tangible if I choose for illustration a well-known novel of Tagore, *GhareBāire* (1916). In this novel, Nikhilesh is shattered and transformed by the realization that his desire to 'educate' Bimala was actually a desire to mould her character according to some ideals cherished by him. Conversely, Bimala finds Nikhilesh far too mild and meek, and longs to be dominated by the aggressive masculinity of Sandeep; in turn she betrays in her treatment of the lower orders a dominating hauteur. According to Nikhilesh, his Bharatbarsha is not that of the bhadrakok but of the shudra and unlike Bimala he has the blood of the lower orders flowing through his veins.

If Sandeep's philosophy is openly founded on an appetite for power over people, Nikhilesh's educating-enlightening impulse betrays a similar appetite, unknown to him. Chandranath Babu, Nikhilesh's teacher, perceives a link, that of the doppelganger, between the two: they are the opposite sides of the moon. Between these two modes of male domination is Bimala with her unconscious yearning to be dominated and to dominate. In this triadic exploration, we encounter the ego perpetually trapped in the subtle nexus of domination and servility. Both servant and master are enslaved to each other in this insidiously interchangeable relationship. Nikhilesh discovers that the release from this trap lies in transcendence of these contraries:

The day I can really release the bird from its cage I will realize that it is the bird who releases me. The one I bind in a cage binds me in my desire and that is bondage stronger than that of chains.³⁸

It is not surprising that this slackening of the ego guides Nikhilesh out of the broken cage of their conjugal bedroom to an unattached observation of the stream of life in the ample, leisurely freedom of an autumn afternoon. It gives artistic life to the ethical position enunciated in 'Brihattaro Bharat' ['Extended India'] (1927) whereby the state of confinement within the circle of the ego is not the true state of the soul. Only he who knows the cosmic in the self and the self in the cosmic existence knows truth. Thus, the pervasive mood of indolence does not produce torpor but sharpens his awareness of reality, poverty and exploitation.

That the origins of the slackened ego and the pervasive motif of unattached, indolent observation of life can be traced back to Indian religious thought is undeniable. At the same time, it can be located within the far more pressing context of the interlocked and mutually corrosive master-servant relationship peculiar to colonial experience. In Tagore's view, this relationship is equally at work outside (*Bāire*) and in the domestic sphere (*Ghare*). The daughter-in-law who is oppressed by her mother-in-law in turn becomes an oppressive mother-in-law herself. The colonial master-servant relationship clouds the vision of many people in *Ghare Bāire*, so that under its addictive spell Bimala is simply unable to *see* Miss Gilby, her governess, as an individual. We may recall Rothenstein's perception that young men in India were caught between self-conscious Europeanization and a bitterness about Europeans that smothered their natural spirit of joy and interest in the world, preventing them from seeing English people in their individual identities.³⁹

When the swadeshis claim that their patriotic fervour is for the service of God in the shape of man, they do not realize that Englishmen and indeed all human beings are

included in that service. Our shastras teach us, Tagore writes in ‘Nabajug’ [‘The New Age’] (1932), that if you want the truth, then you must acknowledge yourself in others; in that truth lies virtue (*punya*) and with its help the bonds of dependence will be severed. There is no greater, no more destructive blindness than the inability to see a human being as a human being. If colonial subjectivity can escape from this trap of blindness, from this mutually corrosive bondage of master and servant by denudation of the ego, then its aesthetic equivalent may be found in the slackened consciousness of and receptivity to truth and the manifold that I have explored above in Tagore’s late poetry. In his fiction, it can be found in the muted presence of characters—women, unaggressive men, the lower orders—unaffected by the psychology of power bred in a brand of servility peculiar to the upperclasses in a colonial situation. Many of these characters, cutting across class/caste differences, pose a contrast in their self-effacing quietness to the dazzling verbal display occupying centre stage in the novels or novellas. One can mention in passing the quiet dignity of the low-caste Panchu (*Ghare Bāire*), the shy and nearly silent Jatishankar (*Shesher Kabitā* [‘The Last Poem’], 1929) and above all Anandamoyee in *Gora*.

Much of Tagore’s fiction is thus characterized by an aesthetic of deliberate asymmetry between an intricate, web-like stylistic structure and the understated, almost silent and invisible presence of the small lives with their simple goals, values and needs. The simplicity, I repeat, arises out of a freedom from possessiveness. Tagore realizes the narrow, almost claustrophobic nature of upperclass or bourgeois life under the impact of Western individualistic modernity, with its tensions, frictions, servile modes of power. He then seeks a way out of this world by traversing the complicated verbal and rhetorical structure that is proper to it. Of course, in many of his short stories Tagore draws upon a direct

experience of the simple existence of the lower orders in rural Bengal. In his novels and plays, however, the ethical centre is to be found in the simple, self-effacing, unobtrusively quiet characters, plebeian or patrician, but their silence is made audible through argument, clever talk, and intricate monologue appropriate to upper class life. The foreground is no doubt occupied by formal complexity while the background is constituted by the vast concourse of humanity in the shape of almost muted individuals deriving their simplicity, often across ranks and classes, from renunciation or absence of power. But the asymmetrical relationship of foreground and background, which is faithful to social reality and things as they are, effects a transposition whereby their competitive relationship—a variation upon master and servant—is transcended.

V

Tagore's sense of harmony with the cosmos may be related and has been related to Indian metaphysical traditions; but the distinctive accent given to it by Tagore links his mystic tendencies to an ethical celebration of common humanity. Thus, in poem no. 15 of *Patraput*, the cosmic becomes the specific framework where the metaphysical instincts of the lower orders, who were excluded from institutional religion, find expression. In this context, Tagore brings in the de-institutionalized *baul* and his philosophy of universal love, relating it to his identity as a poet. The cosmic is also offered as a mode of transcendence of all personal attachment: in love, the poet moves between the private and the vast. There is a parallel movement away from institutional religion, from its inevitable divisiveness, from the temple to nature, from the divine to the human. This of course rehearses Tagore's basic motif of inside and outside, closed room and the open road, home and the world. It is his hope for the future—a

prophecy but not a prediction—in which the realization of his unique individuality would release him from competitive relationship with others to union with common humanity. This is the true burden of the song ‘Oī Mahāmānab Āse’ [‘The Supreme Man comes’] (*Shesh Lekhā*), in which the advent is of common humanity, the universal man and not the extraordinary individual. By common humanity, Tagore did not restrict himself to a quasi-Marxist utopia of the awakening proletariat—although at places there are interesting affinities with the ethical foundations of Marxism. The Marxist utopia, however, is not free from divisiveness, for it aims to topple the age-old separation of above and below, elite and subaltern, without eliminating the paradigm of above and below.

By common humanity, Tagore meant the humanity that is common to all human beings irrespective of class, caste, gender or any functional group. This is not so much a programme of a realizable future but a future that is always contained in the present as its redemptive possibility, a prophecy but not a prediction. In poem no. 22 of *Rogshajjāy*, in a state between sleep and awakening, he dreams that his entire existence was floating away in an unknown river and asks himself what gives him the greatest pain. He discovers that it is not his past but his future, the ever unattainable, in which his yearning had envisioned, like a seed in the earth, the light that had not yet come. Tagore’s ethical presuppositions are tied up with the sanctity of the individual, who was, I repeat, neither the individual locked in predatory maximization of self-interest nor the individual cramped into a rigid collectivist mould. It was the individual generated by and within community and was thus not pitted antagonistically against community. The common humanity, in other words, is the fully visible individual human being, and in so far as such a human being was to be found more among the lower, humbler orders than among the upper

classes, in the lower deck than in the First Class of the steamer, as he puts it in *Pathe o Pather Prānte* (1938),⁴⁰ the idea is linked in Tagore to the vast concourse of demotic humanity. Within this cosmic drama of ever-unfolding humanity, each individual human being may play a role in which she or he can see the form of an unprecedented future (Poem no. 5, *Janmadine*). Significantly, Tagore locates this insight on entering the eightieth year of his life, thereby affirming the only immortality that is open to modern, post-Enlightenment, scientific man: a continuum of the individual and the universal. Mortality in this sense is an extension rather than contraction, an imperishable union with universal humanity.

We may be reminded of the *uomo universale* of the European Renaissance, not in its popular meaning of a polymath but as defined by Montaigne in his essays:

I propose a life ordinary and without lustre: 'tis all one; all moral philosophy may as well be applied to a common and private life, as to one of richer composition: every man carries the entire form of human condition. Authors communicate themselves to the people by some especial and extrinsic mark; I, the first of any, by my universal being; as Michel de Montaigne, not as a grammarian, a poet, or a lawyer.⁴¹

In other words, the fully developed universal man was the individual, emancipated from all his social and cultural baggage, who cannot be divided any further. At this level, the self is the soul, freed from all mythical accretions. This is what lies behind the genesis of art and its goal and destination. The 'uomo universale' that finds its fulfilment only in the individual idealized is similar to the common humanity and ordinary forms of existence that are central to Tagore's ethics and aesthetics. As we have already seen, he sharply criticizes the cult of beauty, the tendency towards art for art's sake that is founded in Europe on contemptuous exclusion of ordinary and common humanity. Once again, we may recall Montaigne's emphasis on the common forms

of life, the freedom of man as man and neither as angel nor as beast:

Grandeur of soul consists not so much in mounting and in pressing forward, as in knowing how to govern and circumscribe itself; ... There is nothing so fine and legitimate as well and duly to play the man; nor science so arduous as well and naturally to know how to live this life; and of all the infirmities we have, 'tis the most savage to despise our being. ... 'Tis an absolute and, as it were, a divine perfection, for a man to know how loyally to enjoy his being. We seek other conditions, by reason we do not understand the use of our own; and go out of ourselves, because we know not how there to reside. 'Tis to much purpose to go upon stilts, for, when upon stilts, we must yet walk with our legs; and, when seated upon the most elevated throne in the world, we are but seated upon our breech. The fairest lives, in my opinion, are those which regularly accommodate themselves to the common and human model; without miracle, without extravagance.⁴²

For Montaigne, the goal of commonness is the most arduous and yet worth achieving because of the inveterate tendency of the mind to aspire beyond its limits. Such aspiration is linked to the overreaching ego, and the belief in and pursuit of uncommonness has Faustian consequences. Montaigne remains one of the most perceptive critics of the Faustian element in Renaissance culture, for he makes knowledge and acceptance of limits the indispensable basis for any feasible philosophy of man. To acquire the true freedom of man as man, it is necessary to recognize and renounce the temptation of uncommonness which involves severing the sustaining link with common humanity and community. The pursuit of uncommonness—of which the extreme form was the libertine individualism that is often erroneously identified with the Renaissance—is the basis of the possessive individualism that was distinctive of the competitive and acquisitive society of capitalism. Individuality and common humanity (*uomo universale*) are thus not antagonistic notions or ideals but complementary.

While Tagore found visibility among the lower orders, he repeatedly confesses to his exclusion from the messy and random proximity and variety of ordinary, humdrum

existence because of his birth. From his side of the road, sitting amidst the peeled clarity of hard truth, he cannot cross over to the transient and trivial rhythms of life on the other side. Its ripples, however, make him eager for the vitalizing contact of the ordinary and the quotidian in all its cosmic dimension. But his mind is not able to come down from his lofty perch on the banks into the turbid Ganga of the whole ('Epāre-Opāre', *Nabajātak*). Contrary to some popular perceptions about Tagore's isolation, the utterly honest confession exposes the isolation disguised under the modishly sentimentalized and romanticized proletarianism that marked the output of many of his contemporaries. As he puts it in poem no. 10 of *Janmadine*, he has been able to occupy only a small corner of the vast world, unable to capture its polyphonic totality. Despite responding to the call of the vast, the poet has not been able to enter into all the layers of the inner world of man because of the obstacles of his status and social circle. The entire world is dependent on the extensive and varied labour of the peasant, weaver and fisherman, while the poet sits exiled in the narrow and confined upper echelons of society. At times he had ventured towards the world of the lower orders but never had the courage to enter. He openly admits this failure to relate to their lives, this incompleteness; varied as his verse is, it has not explored all spheres of social life. Hence, he waits for the poet who has shared in the peasant's life, matching word and deed (truth), staying close to the soil. But the crucial criterion is truth and authenticity and not merely proletarian posturing; that is a fake, subalternity as pastime. Towards the end of the poem he invokes the poet of the unknown, the mute masses, to play the one-stringed humble musical instrument of their lives in the concert hall of literature: 'O gifted one, may we hear the utterance/Of those who are mute in joy and grief,/Heads bowed and silent before the world—/Those who, close at hand, are yet afar.'⁴³

The valorization of ordinary, daily, demotic labour at the heart of all human civilization suggests an ethics of perpetually reflexive self-transformation, an ethics of the future. At the same time, in his critique of European modern art and its cult of beauty, its tendency towards strenuous cleverness, preciousity and sensationalism, he privileges the ordinary and thereby struggles towards an aesthetics of the future in which simplicity would offer a mode of release from that involved and joyless modernity. Truth, in other words, is a matter of scale related to man's place in the scheme of things. In many of these poems the juxtaposition of approaching death with the ongoing activities and movements of life does not arouse terror because for Tagore personal dissolution is not the truth of human existence; nor is the common instinct for clinging to life. The realization that life carries on even as he slides towards death turns into a promise of immortality.

NOTES

Since the writings of Tagore have been collected on various occasions in various forms, I have mentioned the original publication dates of the writings rather than refer to any particular edition which might be difficult to locate and consult. I have also tried to provide literal translations of the titles of Tagore's writings referred to in the essay. Unless otherwise mentioned, all translations from Tagore are mine.

1. *Rabindranath Tagore: Selected Poems*, ed. Sukanta Chaudhuri (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 373
2. Song No. 584, 'Puja', *Geetabitān*
3. *Rabindranath Tagore: Selected Poems*, p. 344
4. *Rabindranath Tagore On Art and Aesthetics: A Selection of Lectures, Essays and Letters* (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1961), p. 1
5. *Ibid.*, p. 90 (Letter to Rani Mahalanobis, 7 November 1928)
6. *Ibid.*, p. 91 (Letter to Rani Mahalanobis, 29 November 1928)
7. *Ibid.*, p. 77 ('The Artist')
8. *Ibid.*, p. 22 ('What is Art?', 1916)
9. *Ibid.*, p. 95 (Letter to A..., March 1930)
10. *Imperfect Encounter: Letters of William Rothenstein and Rabindranath Tagore 1911-41*, ed. Mary M. Lago (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1972), Tagore's letter to Rothenstein, November 10, 1912

11. 'The Religion of an Artist' (1936), *Tagore on Art and Aesthetics*, p. 46
12. 'The Artist', *Ibid.*, pp. 78-79
13. *Selected Letters of Rabindranath Tagore*, eds. Krishna Dutta and Andrew Robinson (New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 259 (5 March 1921)
14. *Tagore: Selected Poems*, op.cit., pp. 292, 315, 334
15. 'What is Art', (1916) *Tagore On Art and Aesthetics*, p. 14
16. 'The Religion of an Artist', *Ibid.*, p. 51
17. 'The Sense of Beauty', *Ibid.*, p. 4
18. *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*, Vol 3: 'A Miscellany', ed. Sisir Kumar Das (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1996), p. 694
19. 'Art and Tradition' (1926), *Tagore On Art and Aesthetics*, p. 59
20. Quoted on p.147, *Selected Letters of Rabindranath Tagore*.
21. Edgar Wind, *Art and Anarchy* (London: Faber & Faber, 1963), p. 2
22. *Selected Letters of Rabindranath Tagore*, Letter No.23 (12 December 1895), p. 44
23. 'Kabi Yeats' ['The Poet Yeats'] (1912)
24. Quoted on pp. 105-06, *Selected Letters*.
25. Edgar Wind, *Art and Anarchy* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), pp. 12-13
26. 'Rājnitir Dwidhā' ['Vacillation in Politics'] (1893)
27. *Rabindra Prasanga: Anandabazar Patrika*, ed. Chittaranjan Bandyopadhyay (Kolkata: Ananda Publishers, 1993), Vol 1, p. 358
28. 'Nababarsha' ['New Year'] (1902)
29. 'Imperialism' (1905)
30. 'Nababarsha' (1902)
31. I am indebted for this point to Arnold Hauser, *Mannerism: The Crisis of the Renaissance and the Origin of Modern Art* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1965), Section VII
32. 'What is Art' (1916), *Tagore On Art and Aesthetics*, p. 21
33. *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983)
34. Tr. Howard Greenfield (London: The Souvenir Press Ltd, 1974)
35. Tr. Joan Pinkham (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972)
36. *Rabindra Rachanabali* (Kolkata: Visva-Bharati, 1945), vol 20, p. 453
37. *Ibid.*, p. 455
38. *Rabindra Rachanabali* (Kolkata: Visva-Bharati, 1987), vol 4, p. 552
39. *Imperfect Encounter*, Letter to Tagore, March 14, 1913
40. *Pathe o Pather Prānte* (Kolkata: Visva-Bharati, 1938), pp. 21-22
41. 'Of Repentance', III. 2, *The Essays of Michel Eyquem de Montaigne*, tr. Charles Cotton (Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc. & University of Chicago, 1952), pp. 388-89
42. 'Of Experience', III, 13, *The Essays of Montaigne*, pp. 540, 543
43. *Selected Poems*, pp. 364-65

The Aesthetics and Ethics of Evanescence

The entire artistic *oeuvre* of Tagore, in particular the poetry of the last decade of his life, is characterized by antithetical impulses. As I have written before, on the one hand, he undertakes a relentless study of truth in all its hard clarity: 'Truth is hard; /I came to love this hardness:/It never deceives'¹ (Poem No.11, *Shesh Lekhā*,1941). On the other hand, a year before this, he memorably wrote of the rich and untrammled sensuousness, bordering upon the illusory, that floods his consciousness precisely at the point of this ascesis ('Asambhab' ['Impossible'], *Shānāi*, 1940). Declining health and impending death paradoxically catalysed the awakening of this sensuousness. The mutually invigorating nature of these impulses holds the key to the interrelationship of truth and illusion, of meaninglessness and meaning in Tagore's vision of the human condition. Instead of ascetic rejection of the world, the poet confesses to a *love* of the hard truth, thereby instilling the element of desire into a framework which presupposes the banishment of all desire. By the hard truth, Tagore implies the common experience of suffering and futility which traps us in endless oscillation of hope and despair. The attempt to escape from this trap has no doubt resulted in diverse modes of religious explanation with perhaps an underlying unity among them. Where religion has become unacceptable in a climate of unbelief, broadly existential modes of battling futility have been articulated. Tagore's poetic practice and vision, I suggest, offers us an alternative to the ascetic, the negative and the Absurd by forging a unique synthesis of reciprocity between truth and illusion.

The oscillation between truth and illusion, logical contradictories as they are, ultimately leads to perplexity that incapacitates us as ethical agents. Plunging in illusion will of course not enable us ethically but that does not mean that the opposite course of action, the expulsion of illusion, will, because an exclusive absorption in truth cannot accommodate the vitalizing role of hopes and wishes in our lives. At the same time, it is true that while many of our ennobling goals are prompted by this vitalizing role, hopes and wishes may often result in dangerous modes of deception and self-deception. Escape from the tyranny of hopes and wishes, whether directed outwards to the delusive exercise of power or turned inwards to fantasies shattered by actuality, may come from the ascetic life. But such a life is necessarily confined to the exceptional human being and is not a viable ideal for common humanity. If hopes and wishes are an important element of our lives then their marginalization in modern rationalist social practices results in repression leading to an uneasy and unhappy consciousness, to the man, as Pound put it as a counterblast to Tagore's philosophy, who has felt the pangs and been pestered with Western civilization.² Emancipation from this condition is of course not easy, simply because any attempt would involve turning back the tide of history. European possessive individualism, far from acknowledging the individual in all his irreducible difference, actually generated the forces of bureaucratization and governmentality, reducing all differences in the interest of efficiency. Modern industrial society is thus a gigantic labyrinth, strangely the outcome of the geometric and rectilinear paradigm of post-Enlightenment rationality, which renders the individual invisible. In *Japan Jātri* (1919), noticing the absence of any straight lines in the ever-changing cloud formations, Tagore remarks that the straight line is an insensate and inert line, readily submitting to human domination, bearing its burden

and its oppression.³ The interrelationship of enslavement and self-enslavement inherent in Western instrumental rationality is exposed at one stroke. By contrast, pre-modern Indian society, founded on the principle of community, did not suffer from this opacity, and despite entrenched categories of disparity, allowed much more room to the individual human being.

In arriving at the core of meaninglessness in phenomenal reality, Tagore seems to take recourse to the metaphysics of illusion and nothingness by referring often to *māyā* and *shunya*. Without going into the provenance of the concept of *māyā* in Indian philosophical traditions or highlighting its bookish or erudite sense, I wish to deploy the concept of *māyā* as a mental attitude, if not a feeling, towards the world in which we live and move. It is thus more in the nature of a 'passion' for renunciation that lies behind the perennial possibility of unworldliness informing popular life stories in India of king as well as commoner. In other words, this notion of *māyā* is sufficiently diffused in the popular imagination for Tagore to make use of it as a poet. I do not wish to suggest that Tagore had an inadequate philosophical understanding of *māyā* but, rather, that he wished to highlight the bond, however illusory and fugitive from the perspective of ultimate reality, that *māyā* creates in human relationships. The freedom that he sought was not that of the ascetic and he made the point even in his early work. Not for him the emancipation through ascetic practice, as he writes in a well-known poem (no. 30) from *Naibedyā* (1901). Similarly, in *Prakritir Pratishodh* (1884), the *sannyāsi* is brought back to the fold of *māyā* by his affection for a little girl.

As I will try to argue, this amounts to neither a defeat of unworldliness nor a victory of worldliness but something in between, that whole evanescent structure of hoping, wishing and feeling that constitutes life for the philosophically uninitiated common humanity. The binaries of subjection

to *māyā* and its ascetic rejection are transcended by the concept of willing immersion in *māyā* in full knowledge of its illusory character. When Tagore uses the concept of *māyā*, it is never in the spirit of denial or negation; rather, he identifies it with the very Creation through which the Creator, as it were, invites us to an undeceived and therefore playful participation in it. If life is at bottom meaningless, both the divine Creator and the artist infuse meaning into it not by asserting its substantiality—that would mean submitting to illusion—but quite the opposite, by foregrounding and immersing in its insubstantiality and evanescence. In other words, the hard truth need not necessarily lead to the ‘disenchantment’ that Max Weber famously identified with the project of scientific rationalism in European modernity, and instead of diverse modes of negativity may engender modes of re-enchantment through the flood of sensuousness mentioned above. Evanescence is in this sense as much an aesthetic ideal as an ethical one.

II

Tagore explores his awareness of the hard truth with a clarity and economy that stand opposed to the somewhat luxuriant conventions within which he began his poetic journey. In poem no. 5 of *Patraput* (1936), we may see the basic pattern of truth considered in terms of epistemology or the question of *māyā* on the one hand and the related ethical question of universal humanity offering release from self-interest. The poem begins in an evening, magically transformed by the figure of the familiar but unattainable woman, absorbed in singing and therein transported to an imponderable privacy. This enchanting vignette, broken by the poet’s disappointment, is transcended easily the next morning in the unimpeded clear light that wipes away the magic and then significantly spreads everywhere without any distinction.

The shattered illusion of individual emotional life with its clinging and hankering ego is redeemed on the universal level in the observation of the quotidian rhythm of the village market, the concourse of humanity engaged in the daily trade of existence which at last, in the unworldly songs of the *baul* and the *bairagi*, provides the proper context for the resolution of *māyā* and truth.

Tagore's struggle towards the undeceiving hard truth springs from an authentically modern encounter with the meaninglessness underlying all human endeavour. It is from this awareness that all human creativity must begin. Among the late poems, it is the volume titled *Nabajātak* (1940) which repeatedly engages with cosmic meaninglessness in the form of the unanswered question, an echoing emptiness. In the poem, appropriately titled 'Keno' ['Why'], the poet searches for the purpose behind the endless giving and taking away, the mobility and multiplicity of the cosmos as well as the human world. There seems to be no purpose and Time plays dice with the mind of man by meaningless and iterative deprivation and restoration. The refrain, 'But why?' to each section of the poem nevertheless articulates a consciousness that does not submit to the meaninglessness. The same questioning that leads us to nothingness enables the imagination to arrive at a core of echoes in Creation. Here the winged words of the universe come to nest, only to return as winged echoes carrying the primal seed of Creation. The motif of the echo becomes at once the focal point on which emptiness and meaning converge. It drives home the unresponsiveness of the cosmos but at the same time when the echoes return they make manifest the meaning and value that the human consciousness confers upon the void.

In 'Prasna' ['Question'], the poet contraposes the transience of human life and experience to cosmic permanence. The self that emerges in the midst of this remains ungraspable because of its fugitive nature

comparable to the multicoloured bubble that dissolves in meaningless momentariness. Even the attempt to call it *māyā* gives us only a shadow of its inexpressible meaning; it is only a word. From one point of view the self is shadowy, illusory; from another it is infinitely discoverable, acquiring thereby its specific depth and variety. Similarly, the cosmos itself, by virtue of its unresponsiveness, binds the human consciousness to a relationship of questioning and exploring. The metaphysical questioning that is implicit in the illusory evanescence of human life becomes in the last two lines of the poem a self-validating affirmation of human creativity: 'The questioning voice, intense and stricken, will ring on in emptiness/Without the sound of a reply.' The endless questioning creates the meaninglessness and that itself is an ultimate meaning that we arrive at on the brink of silence and darkness (to use two of Tagore's favourite motifs) after traversing the dense and fleeting manifold of *māyā*. The mysterious emergence of the self from cosmic flux determines the imagery of poem no. 11 of *Janmadine* (1941): 'Like clotted foam/Churned out of the turbulent whirlpool of time,/This phantasmagoria tinged with light and darkness'. This 'inscrutable, invisible beginning' takes us to the 'sportive mind' that 'might lie behind such sport', but the question remains unanswered.⁴ Once again it is the unresponsiveness of the cosmos, its meaninglessness that energizes us to a response, to the creation of meaning.

That Tagore retained till the end this mutually invigorating relationship of meaning and meaninglessness is borne out by a poem composed a few days before his death (Poem no. 13, *Shesh Lekhā*):

The first day's sun
 Asked at the first appearance of Being,
 'Who are you?'
 There was no answer.
 Year upon year passed,

The day's last sun
 Asked the last question on the shore of the western sea
 In the hushed evening:
 'Who are you?'
 It got no answer.⁵

The poem, however, in its sparseness of form bordering on bare purity, suggests a mastery of the meaninglessness of life, a mastery which is the poem itself, a positive statement. Meaninglessness, in other words, is the means but not the end; in the form of the poem this corresponds to *māyā* making truth graspable through its dissolving surface. The silence of the universe is, as it were, made audible and its darkness unfolds itself in colours, thereby embodying the infinite in the finite. What appears to be meaninglessness undergoes transformation, through an undecieved and deliberate participation in *māyā*, into the infinite, the ineffable and the imponderable. We may note here what has not been adequately recognized because of critical preoccupation with the supposed philosophical message: I mean the playfulness in the form of the poem, the repeated question and absence of answer almost mocking itself and stylistically enacting the meaninglessness. The enactment gives life to a fragile symmetry that rings in the form of an echo through the body of the poem, a meaningfulness that invites a parallel with *māyā* and *leelā*.

The intermeshing of meaning and meaninglessness is clearly located in the earth itself, in its equipoise of destruction and creation: 'Across land and sea your merciless theatre of war/Where death proclaims the triumph of victorious life' ('Prithibi' ['Earth'], *Patraput*, 1936)⁶. Her soil is permeated by vast life and death for even as she relegates her discarded creations to immeasurable oblivion, she generates and nurtures new forms of life, thus suggesting to the poet that evanescence is the true meaning of human life. That this equipoise is not indicative of an evasion of the

darker elements and energies is evident in the description of a stormy night in 'Kāl Rātre' ['Last Night'] (*Shyāmali*, 1936) despite the tranquil clarity of the morning:

Out of the hole of the void bereft of truth,
 The serpent brood of black desire
 Slithered out and entangled the hankerer—
 That shackled slave of nothingness—
 His back bent
 With the load of meaninglessness,
 His head stooped low.

III

From the familiar perspective of a certain influential tradition of metaphysics, *māyā* renders the truth invisible. For Tagore, however, the Creator conceals himself in order to make Creation visible. Thus, the surface of *māyā* can hide but it can also reveal; that is, it can make the infinite and the intelligible available to us on the margins of the finite. As he puts it in his 'Java Jātrir Patra' (1927), one should not ignore the surface as an index to human identity. The veil that covers truth with a counterfeit disguise deceives but the one which acquires on its own a shape through the ups and downs, twists, fluctuations at every moment of nimble life is not untrustworthy.⁷ *Māyā* obscures truth when it is *not* seen as a veil; once it is *seen* as a veil, however, it reveals truth by extracting meaning in its essential evanescence out of a playful relationship with meaninglessness as suggestively defined in Tagore's comments on the ballet of shadows in Java. Tagore writes that when the Creator, who resides in the sphere of light, conceals himself behind his own canvas of Creation, it becomes visible to us. Only he who knows that there is an unbroken link between the Creator and his Creation knows it as truth. If the nimble shadows of the ballet are seen in separation from this link they appear to be mere

illusion (*māyā*). Some ascetics want to tear apart the canvas in order to see beyond; that is to say, they attempt to see the Creator without his Creation, but no illusion is greater than that.⁸

All the varied colours of life—its entanglements and complexities—surrender their variegated *māyā* to the truth of darkness and white effulgence, both drained of all predicates. As in the case of meaninglessness, only when we grasp the truth of colourlessness at bottom can we really enjoy the colours without being shackled by them: ‘Let the colour daubed be wiped away from light/Let the futile play, oneself the plaything, be over,/Let unattached love receive/ Its final reward from its own bounty’ (Poem no.35, *Rogshajjāy*, 1940). This is the reason why the ray of light in dense darkness brings the message that the cosmic truth will be manifest, once the pall lifts, in an eternal revelation, a sea of light. The revelation invites a parallel with the reciprocity of colour and colourlessness, for eternity manifests itself in ceaseless movement—even the stars are like giant bubbles—in time. Meaning resides in this movement, this fugitive intermediary span between emptiness at origin and meaningless death in the end (Poem no. 28). In the poetry of Tagore’s last decade under consideration, the interrelationship of language and silence, of life and death is similar to that of colour and colourlessness. The relationship is that of the finite and the infinite: the finite form of art like that of Creation and indeed of the individual human being manifests the infinite not by arrogating to itself a spurious infinitude but by foregrounding its fugitive *māyā*. Tagore’s favourite metaphor is that of the river that flows and merges with the ocean; if this is evanescence, the opposite is the stagnant lake.

Consciousness of fugitive meaningfulness propels the river to the ocean, man to the cosmos. Truth is not to be confused with the blindness of the universe or of the ascetic who makes no distinction between the beautiful and the ugly. Being an

ideal category, intelligible and invisible, truth unfolds itself in the visible difference that is the hallmark of all Creation (Poem no. 21, *Rogshajjā*). To identify the ugly with the beautiful is to be unfaithful to the principle of difference; it involves the fallacy of superimposing the infinite or intelligible on the finite or sensible. In Tagore's vision, the harmony of the cosmos is ever-accommodative of differences and contrasts. Here we may find the metaphysical basis for Tagore's critique of the monolithic model of European nationalism.

Tagore's preoccupation with meaninglessness is thus inseparable from his awareness of meaning on its obverse, meaning that finds expression in sheer evanescence. In *Patraput*, the motifs of the sluggish current of the river in autumn carrying flotsam moss and weeds, the passing white clouds about to disappear, the fading daylight with its colours vanishing into blackness and so on are already in place. The fugitive experiences of the slackened consciousness lead to the celebration of the momentary. The poem 'Prāner Ras' (*Shyāmali*) does exactly that, expressing wonder at the mere fact of being alive at the fugitive moment of sunset. This fleeting leisure of the poet hovers in the sunset sky like a short-lived insect finishing the final play of its colourful wings. In his writings on art, Tagore repeatedly privileges the thisness of the surface of life, of the sheer existence of things. Unlike the concern founded on extraneous factors like birth, wealth, figure and so on, the artist's love is a far nobler thing—it is love for a thing simply because it exists.⁹ He wrote to the famous painter Jamini Roy, 'We want to see because we love to see things. ...The only message they have to convey is the fact that they exist and exist indubitably, absolutely. The fact of their existence enkindles in us the awareness that *we* also exist.'¹⁰ The act of seeing reveals the essentially evanescent character of this existence as *māyā*. He states in *Pathe O Pather Prānte* ['On the Road and

Roadside’] that the total reality that flows around us can be grasped only by its unbearable burden on the mind. Freedom from this burden can be found in seeing at the window which brings out the lightness of what is observed as flux. It is this lightness of the observed flow of existence that Tagore compares to the words in epistolary communication that dance in the air on light wings like insects.¹¹ The sentiment is echoed in the letter to Jamini Roy: the act of seeing is enjoyable not because of pleasing sights but the sheer flow of the visible world across our eyes. In contrast to the scientific method of knowing the world, seeing does not break it up into fragments for analysis and dissection: ‘We *know* a thing because it belongs to a class; we *see* a thing because it belongs to itself.’¹²

Evanescence is perceptible also in the indistinct messages of the unconscious—the bubbles in the stream of unconsciousness, as it were—which the morning light wipes away. And yet these bubbles leave behind a few indelible marks in the awakened mind. Thus, traversing the bounds of sense, nonsense sheds colourful shadows; thus, indeed, while actuality forges shackles, *māyā* creates toys (‘Aspashta’ [‘Indistinct’], *Nabajātak*). The human being is such a toy shaped by the sculptor in clay and light, black and white, out of distinct and indistinct, out of the *māyā* of imagination and intermittent emptiness. Everyone knows that it is fragile and fugitive, and will be pulverized under the wheels of time. What it brings with itself puts on the pretence of immortality and in a passing moment all is reduced to a handful of dust (‘Janmadin’ [‘Birthday’], *Nabajātak*). Since all creation—cosmic or artistic—is founded on the knowledge and acceptance of evanescence, Tagore locates it on the verge of dissolution, a world created there out of a little light, shade and *māyā* (Poem no.4, *Rogshajjāy*).

The question is ultimately tied up with our way of looking at the world. If we grasp evanescence in its momentariness

and participate knowingly in the *leelā*, it triumphs over the indifference of vast Time ('Mayurer Drishti' ['The Peacock's Gaze'], *Ākāshpradeep*, 1939). But if we see evanescence as mere unredeemed flux, we confine ourselves to the bounds of possessive anxiety. When Tagore defines this latter state as an interval trapped between nothingness in the beginning and meaningless death in the end (Poem no. 28, *Rogshajjāy*), the similarity with his picture of creation on the verge of dissolution is not fortuitous. He is thereby able to show that their fundamental dissimilarity derives from a difference in perspective. The vanishing point of being, the brink of dissolution generates recovery, after Tagore's near-fatal illness, in the cycle of eighteen poems called *Prāntik* (1937). In the poem quoted above from *Rogshajjāy*, with a change in perspective, acceptance of evanescence enlarges the narrowly personal to a cosmic dimension. From the standpoint of possessive individualism, mortality confines us to the personal; from that of universal humanity, mortality is an enlargement of being, a release into immortality in the form of a shared universality:

A train ride brings home to us the fact that what we momentarily leave behind becomes a part of us like an experience acquired. In this way our loss becomes our gain. As I look out of the compartment and observe a thing of indescribable beauty on this sunbathed noon of early spring—I realize at the very instant that this will not last, that this will vanish out of my line of vision. And yet, I ask myself, is my present experience an illusion? I am not prepared to accept this to be so. This picture that I see this instant is not a source of joy to me personally—as to an unrelated individual. My response does not depend on my flitting fancy, my individual idiosyncrasy. When the experience is one of joy, it is an experience I share with my brother man as a part of the larger humanity. As an individual person I shall not live everlastingly. I shall have to move and make place for the others who come after me. I shall go, but Man will live. The joy that Kalidasa poured in his verses ...is the joy of every man face to face with Beauty. This cannot vanish or die. ...It is a cumulative joy to which all of us contribute our share, and when I taste of it I enjoy a common heritage...¹³

Evanescence can thus be understood in terms of our mortality

once we are able to view death as the prime mover of life: 'life, which is an incessant explosion of freedom, finds its metre in a continual falling back in death.' The bleak truth of monotonous flux is transmuted into endless rejuvenation: 'Every day is a death, every moment even. If not, there would be amorphous desert of deathlessness eternally dumb and still.'¹⁴ Death steals all the colours and differences of life into itself. It provides the animating impetus to life which extends and expands itself and thereby approximates death. The pain and fear that grip us through life like derisive phantasms turn into death's dexterous art in the diffused dark (Poem no. 14, *Shesh Lekhā*). The mutual nourishment of life and death, that is a basic theme of the poetry of Tagore's last decade, holds the key to human freedom from time, a truly human and modern freedom untainted by regressive belief in versions of post-mortem immortality. He wrote to Pratima Debi, his daughter-in-law:

We clutch at the world because we can't see death's conjoined, true place in life. ...Death is the bearer of life, life flows forward in death's current: once this idea is properly grasped, our mind becomes free to see truth—within which there is no conflict. But as long as we persist in seeing life and death as fundamentally opposed, we feel attachment to the world.¹⁵

When Tagore considers the physical self, the body as a pall that hides the truth, he sees it as the source of blind desire that enslaves us to attachment. In poem no. 10 of *Patraput*, we find that the free form of the soul is shrouded repeatedly by the sullied veil of this body:

It screens the truth by putting on the mask of truth;
 Shapes its own effigy from the very loam of death,
 And yet at the slightest hint of death in it
 Complains in a stricken voice.
 Plays in order to beguile itself,
 Ever wishing to forget it's mere play.

But once the pall is grasped in its evanescence, that is, once

we grasp our mortality, the same body reveals its 'noble privilege to initiate our soul into the double mystery of life and death'.¹⁶ The body is in its perishability eminently suitable for the nomadic soul. This soul-body relationship is founded on the synthesis of the moving and unmoving, and the key to its beauty is flux and the shadow of death.¹⁷

The entire sequence of the eighteen short poems of *Prāntik* was composed on this converging point of life and death, light and darkness. As death's messenger comes in darkness (poem no. 1), it cleanses with pain all the layers of dust haze and reveals the truth in light racing through the veins of vacant darkness. The mirage or mist woven out of light and darkness disperses and the poet discovers that his body, repository of experience and memory, is no longer a barrier but only a passing cloud offering him his true identity in freedom on the illumined, vanishing verge of dissolution. The freedom is not only from the piled-up refuse of desire and the tangled skein of dreams or the hankering ego but also from the enfolding bonds of society into an inviolable loneliness parallel to that of the Creator. As the poet opens his eyes amidst 'the silence of countless unknown stars', he sees his solitude as a visionary empowerment, enabling him to engage perennially in creation, like the cosmic creator, out of nothingness. All human meaning presupposes a blank canvas on which it may set to work: 'Leaving behind the crumbling, soiled decrepitude/Of my old self, with empty hands I must fashion/A new image of life, cast on a blank horizon.'¹⁸

Death thus offers release from sociable palaver into a primordial solitariness, from the superficial structure of meaningfulness to a silence that, in a transvaluation of values, turns meaninglessness into the true meaning of life. This purification corresponds to the contemplative recovery of the individual as the universal man, unburdened of his multiple social functions. All the unfulfilled desires and pangs

of the past must be returned to death—for only death can lay true claim to them. That will lead us to the distant-looking cloudless early autumn skies, death thus drawing the unburdened eternal traveller out into the open (Poem no. 5). Individuality in all its purity becomes the basis for the cosmic extension of creativity. From this vantage point, social ties confine us to a relationship of attachment—like and dislike, love and hate—with the world and thus to divisive and competitive pragmatism. Society in this sense is a human invention to organize our lives but reified, it stifles our essential humanity. This obscuring of truth by the varied smearing of the business of negotiation of the world is brought out clearly in poem no. 4.

Death that had come in darkness with light invisible within it does not seem to accept the poet because of his inability to sing of the deeper identity of the terrifying and the benign, the interpenetration of life and death. What death can deliver to us is not only freedom from the oscillation between hope and despair but also the clarity of truth, the light that enables us to see that life is neither joy nor sorrow nor indeed the opposition of the two but a perennial journey towards truth. In the opening poem ‘Janmadin’ of *Senjuti* (1938), we thus find life as a gift received from death and the poet’s birthday and day of death sit face to face. The ruthless plunder of all strength and energy tied to desire takes us towards the hard truth of inevitable decrepitude but at the same time we move towards an unburdened lightness and freedom.

The animating role of death, its capacity for releasing us from the shackles of possessive clinging on to that which is necessarily fugitive, was brought home to Tagore often on a personal level. Although he suffered a bout of depression after the suicide of his sister-in-law, Kadambari Debi, in 1884, twenty-eight years later, in his reminiscences, he wrote: ‘What I had possessed I was made to let go—and it distressed

me—but when in the same moment I viewed it as a freedom gained, a great peace fell upon me.’¹⁹ He had to experience the untimely death of as many as three of his five children. Twenty-five years after the death of his thirteen-year-old son, Shami, he wrote to Mira, his daughter, that the night after his death the sky was awash with moonlight, with no sign of anything amiss anywhere.²⁰ Far from being an escapist attitude, this reveals the haunting presence of death in his life seen not in its emptiness but its nourishing fullness. Three year later he wrote again about Shami’s death, this time to Maharajkumari Vidyavati Devi. As he sat alone in the dark in an adjoining room, Tagore’s mind seemed to float in a sky where there was neither darkness nor light, but a profound depth of calm, a boundless sea of consciousness without a ripple or murmur.²¹

Māyā invites us to its limits, the limits of the finite in order to reveal the truth which is necessarily infinite. Tagore constantly takes us to the verge of silence, the invisible, intangible and imponderable because it is only there that we may surmise the blackness that steals all colours. In stealing the colours, the infinite engenders them, endowing them with evanescence. Tagore uses the same framework to bring out the relationship between silence and language. In *Japan Jātri* (1919), facing the open and endlessly stretching sea and sky—the typically vast setting to his many voyage-musings—he discovers that light extends till the bounds of the finite; beyond that there is infinite darkness, on whose bosom bobs this world’s illumined day like the necklace of Vishnu. Using the Radha-Krishna love story as a metaphor, he shows how *māyā* makes audible the flute-music of Krishna (‘krishna’, of course, also means ‘blackness’), drawing the *abhisārikā* out of the security and respectability of home and family into the open towards her love-tryst with that blackness, that unutterable infinite. This expressed world, this fair one, has put on her colourful garment for her tryst with the black,

the ineffable unexpressed. The dangers and afflictions that beset her journey make us realize the truth of the human condition permeated by time and flux.

But why does she go and in what direction? For there is no sign of a path, nothing is visible and all unexpressed. Unexpressed, but not empty, because it is from there that the flute music comes. This journey of ours is not guided by our eyes but spurred by the melody. Guided by eyes is the movement of intelligent calculation; it is palpable, circling within the respectable security of family. But there is no advancement. When we move, maddened by the flute, caring for neither life nor death, that movement advances the world. The traveller justifies her recklessness by saying that she is being summoned by the flute from inside that darkness. All human endeavour, all poetry, art, valour and sacrifice turn their faces to where the flute of entrancing darkness plays its music. Looking towards that, human beings have ventured out, renouncing all desire, joy of kingship, welcoming death with honour. Men are under the spell of that blackness.

From the reverse direction, we may see the black Infinite approaching his own white radiant beatific image. The Infinite endeavours for this beautiful feminine; that's why his flute plays so eagerly through the vast darkness. The Infinite's endeavour adorns this feminine with ever new garlands. That blackness can't take her off his breast for a moment because she is his supreme possession. How immeasurable this endeavour is of the vast for the small is captured every moment in the flower petals, the bird's wings, the cloud's hues, the incomparable beauty of the human heart. No end to happiness in line, colour and quality. What is this joy about? The unexpressed ceaselessly manifests itself in the expressed, recovering itself endlessly by relinquishing itself.

Had this unexpressed been merely nihilistic emptiness,

expression would have been meaningless. Had the expressed not been the manifestation of the unexpressed then all that is would have remained inert, unable to renew itself ceaselessly to what is more. The world is drawn to this unknown more, away from the security of home because there it surmises not emptiness but fullness. In this lies the *leelā* of Creation: light advancing to shoreless darkness and darkness descending to the shore of light. Light is beguiled by blackness, blackness by light. When people view the world from a nihilistic position, the whole metaphor is turned upside down. On the obverse of expression is cataclysm (*pralaya*). Life cannot unfold itself except through death and in this unfolding there must be two things: flux and becoming. Becoming is primary, flux only secondary.

But if we focus exclusively on the obverse and claim that everything passes and nothing abides, that the world is the image of destruction, that all is *māyā* and whatever we observe is nothingness, then we will see the very expression in form as black and terrible, that this black does not advance, it only dances in the guise of destruction. And the Boundless is withdrawn into himself in indifference while the blackness plays nimbly on his bosom like death's shadows, unable to touch the silence. The black is appearance, not reality, and the One who alone is stays still, not in the least agitated by the nothingness of the cataclysm. Here the relationship of light and blackness is that of existence and non-existence. The joyous *leelā* of blackness and light is absent; here the link is not of love but of knowledge. Not one out of the fusion of two but one in itself; not one in union, but one in *pralaya*.²²

As I have argued at the very outset of this paper, Tagore's knowledge of the hard truth does not prompt him to ascetic denial but is the very impetus to love of it whereby he is able to participate in the joyous *leelā* of blackness and light, silence and language and, as we shall see later, of vast openness and

enclosed interiority. The ‘untruth’ of *māyā* introduces a kind of shimmering veneer which is the defining principle of the forms of Creation as well as art: ‘the union of the subject and object gives us joy. Is it because there is no separation between them in truth, the separation being the *māyā*, which is creation?’ If there is a rhythm in the heart of Creation, then it is inseparable from the artist’s undeceived attempt to ‘weave the *māyā*, the patterns of appearance, the incessant flow of change, that ever is and is not’.²³ Without being an escapist, he willingly immerses, undeceived, in *māyā* in all its shimmering fugitiveness through which the Creator makes himself manifest:

I am the messenger of that playful variety. We dance making others dance, laugh making others laugh, sing and paint—I am the messenger of the spirit that is restless with the sheer joy of expressing the cosmos.... The boy’s heart had been animated by the ripples of the polyphonic playful variety like the heart of the cosmos and that animation remains undiminished. I have completed seventy years and my friends still find fault with my levity, my lapses in gravity. But the demands of the Creator are boundless, for he himself is frolicsome, ever-moving through the woods in the ruffling breeze of spring.²⁴

It is in this spirit of *māyā* as creativity that he brings out the evanescence of all art, all human activity, without the strenuous existentialism that is inescapable for the artist in the west: ‘O ever-concealed, whatever you have expressed in me from your depths like stars in form and word has eternal ambrosia in it. The triumphal monument of achievement that I have built by searching for and picking up stones is founded upon the eroding stream of time.’ (‘Paschim Jātrir Diary’, 12 February, 1925)

The Western inability to conceptualize anything analogous to the complementary notions of *māyā* and *leelā* may be ultimately related to the Christian myth of the Fall after which both nature and human nature were corrupted and therefore situated in an ineradicable relationship of mutual negation with the infinite or the divine. This contradiction

necessarily separating the finite and the infinite is brought out in Yeats's introduction to the poems of Blake:

That portion of creation, however, which we can touch and see with our bodily senses is "infected" with the power of Satan, one of whose names is "Opacity"; whereas that other portion which we can touch and see with the spiritual senses, and which we call "imagination" is truly "the body of God", and the only reality.²⁵

In this Christian view, the imagination is identified not with sensible apprehension but exclusively with spiritual vision which can see God or Reality. By contrast, *leelā* or play is the very soul of fiction which makes truth accessible through the sensuous veil of appearance. The world or sensible reality is not possessed by Satan but is the Creator's way of revealing himself by concealing. As Tagore puts it in his reminiscences, at one point in his life the false insignificance of the finite and the false nothingness of the infinite were obliterated.²⁶

IV

The idea of evanescence as articulated by Tagore generates an aesthetics and ethics of lightness and simplicity. The lightness of touch and execution that he considers appropriate to art and missing in strenuous cleverness is for him an antidote to the inherent tendency of power towards an agglomerated complexity. This orientation of Tagore's mind is evident perhaps even more sharply in some of his misjudgments, as in this excerpt from a letter to his niece in August 1894:

Tried to read *Anna Karenina*. Could not go on, found it so unpleasant. I cannot understand what pleasure can be had out of such a sickly [in English] book... I cannot stand for long these complicated, bizarre, and perverse goings-on.²⁷

In an exchange of letters with his friend Loken Palit, he is critical of the intellectual intricacy and elaboration he notices in English literature and criticism. The simple and short is

turned into difficult and huge and these days a novel must be in three volumes. Bankim's novels, Tagore continues, are of the right size. In one or two English novels, he found too many characters and incidents and too much talk. Truth in literature must be fit for the reception and use of all, but, he cautions, what can be received easily is not easy to create.²⁸

Contrasting art to pragmatic duty, he suggests that it is the lightest entity on earth; that is why its colourful wings float in the air everywhere ('Paschim Jātrir Diary' October, 1924). Opposed to this lightness is the tendency towards the labyrinthine and the gigantic—distinctive, in Tagore's view, of Western modernity—that is founded on the illusion of permanence. Thus, when Tagore engages with the question of stylistic ascesis, he considers restraint not merely as an issue in rhetoric but in fact as an integral aspect of *leelā*: 'If you revel in the addiction of composition/Creation will be cumbrous, banishing *leelā* from its midst' (Poem no. 18, *Patraput*). The spirit of play or *leelā* must permeate all activity for that would lighten the burden and thereby please the divine Creator for whom work and *leelā* are identical (Poem no. 28, *Ārogya*, 1940).

Tagore builds into his late poetry what might be called a device of 'open pretence': by actually foregrounding the colourful veneer of illusion, he is able to suggest the insubstantial truth. Human creativity (always parallel to the divine) conjures up this veneer in order to surrender to its bewildering illusion. This is the basis of the illusory form (akin to artistic form) that man searches for and endows woman with ('Nāmkanan' ['Naming'], *Ākāshpradeep*). If this process is exposed as false rhetoric, then its transparent character, its open pretence shows its strength which lies precisely in its undeceived yearning ('Tarka' [Debate], *Ākāshpradeep*). Tagore declares this strategy clearly in the poem 'Self-deception': 'I deceive myself, on my own' ('Ātmachhalana', *Shānāi*). The open pretence is taken into

the heart of routine domestic life, transforming the heroine into an *abhisārikā* of the remote past by the magic of a few verbal embellishments ('Sambhāsan' ['Greeting'], *Shyāmali*). The device is equally at work in the fear of real pretence in our use of language. When a lover meets his beloved after many years on the train, during a pause in conversation the latter asks if everything has been lost. After a while, the lover replies that all the stars of the night are there, in the depths of daylight. Having said this, however, he is instantly assailed by doubt whether his statement was concocted or not ('Hathāt-Dekhā' ['Sudden Meeting'], *Shyāmali*). As expected, Tagore's speculations in the same vein are extended to the act of writing poetry, to the nature of language. In Poem no. 28 of *Ārogya*, we discover that rhyme and rhythm introduce the lightness that is specific to art: 'Mere nothing filled with meaning sparkles before my eyes/Rhymes in the gaps of this verse./Fireflies among the trees/In their glow;/Not flames of lamps but night's play in darkness/Stringing together flecks of light.'

In so far as Tagore's conceptualization of lightness and simplicity nudges us to an exploration of the ontology of art, we may ponder in passing the difference between this notion of art and Plato's famous or infamous definition of the 'unreality' of art. The argument in Book 10 of *The Republic* is sufficiently well-known for me to not rehearse it here in full. For Plato, art is not the mimesis of ideal reality which is necessarily beyond any sensible, finite representation. Aristotle on the other hand is able to show clearly in his *Poetics* (see especially Chapter 9) that poetry is never concerned with that which has happened (that is, with the empirical, finite, and actual) but always with that which is possible or probable, that is, with the ideal. But Aristotle's interest is not in the playful and creative evanescence of *māyā* which suggests a different relationship between art and truth. Perhaps in rebutting Plato, Aristotle did not move

out of a shared framework of concepts and categories. His focus was on the teleology of art—mimesis as metamorphosis represents ideal reality—rather than on its ontology. For this we have to look at Renaissance theories of art, particularly of the Platonic Academy of Florence.

In the Platonic Academy of Florence, especially in Marsilio Ficino's commentaries on Plato, we encounter the notion of an intermediary that links the finite and sensible to the infinite and intelligible without being completely identified with either category. No doubt this notion springs from the recovery of Plato in Renaissance scholarship. When Renaissance Platonists went back to Plato in the original Greek, they discovered that the cosmos for him was divided into two segments, finite and infinite, related by mutual negation. If unity and permanence were the predicates of the infinite, multiplicity and flux were of the finite. Between the two, there was a necessary incommensurability, an unbridgeable gulf. This cosmology was fundamentally different from that of medieval Platonism, in which, instead of the chasm between the two segments of the cosmos, the Great Chain of Being linked the finite to the infinite, the lowest to the highest and the terrestrial to the celestial in a reciprocal continuity. The symbolic meeting point of the reciprocal movements was the figure of Christ, who was conceptualized as at once Incarnation (God made man) and Deification (man made God). The Renaissance Platonists attempted a synthesis of the classical and the Medieval. Beginning with the recovered original cosmology of Plato, involving the mutual negation and unbridgeable gulf between its two parts, they instilled in it the notion of Eros. Eros is the yearning hunger of the finite for the infinite which takes its origin from the necessary separation (*chorismos*) of the two: because of *chorismos* the finite is prompted towards participation (*methexis*) in the infinite. Of course, this conceptualization of Eros goes back to Plato's

Symposium in which Socrates defines love not as a god but as neither mortal nor immortal, the progeny of *Poros* and *Penia* combining the contraries of kingly glory and beggarly hunger, the intermediary, in short. In Renaissance Platonism this intermediary operates on three levels: the spirit that joins the two parts of the cosmos, the human being whose composite nature links him simultaneously to the celestial and the terrestrial and art that intermeshes the actual and the ideal. Thus, the concept of the intermediary introduces an ontological category which shares in the actual and the ideal while remaining in between. Renaissance art occupies a space which is neither the actual-material nor the ideal-spiritual. What is this category? What kind of a thing is a work of art? Such questions often struggled towards the validation of a dream-like insubstantiality, specific to the ontology of art.²⁹

What I have continuously referred to as Tagore's willing, undeceived and playful participation in illusion or *māyā* has the seeds of a radical transformation of the human consciousness and its engagement with reality. What needs to be transformed is the widespread and deep-seated tendency to submit to the illusion of permanence and durability. While this is the real *māyā*, it cannot really be overcome by denial, as I have tried to argue. Not only is denial untrue to the moving pageant of human existence—the veil of Creation in which the Creator conceals himself in order to reveal himself—it is also in its asceticism not a viable ideal for common humanity to pursue. Asceticism cripples our emotional and imaginative life, the entire symbolic dimension of human existence. Instead of outright denial, we must believe in and commit ourselves to evanescence or undeceived, playful participation in *māyā*. In our psychological life, this will free us from the burden of possessive attachment to that which is essentially fugitive and free us from the perpetual oscillation of hope and despair.

What is possessive attachment in the psychological domain is the drive to power in the social and political world: human salvation lies in eradication of this drive which has extended itself even to the natural world with catastrophic consequences. We may note here that the dangerous consequences of seeing the serpent in the rope were evident to Tagore with chilling immediacy in European imperialism and colonialism. Imperialism is the product of the illusion of power, of enslavement to *māyā*. Equally expressing itself in Europe's industrial-technological control of nature, it has a corrosive effect not only on the oppressed but also on the oppressor. In Tagore's detached and extensive historical vision, both in his discursive prose and poetry, empires rose and fell ceaselessly, driving home the self-destructive futility of power. Thus, his critique of imperialism was not confined to Europe but was extended to Japan—despite his immense empathy and admiration for that country—when he detected similar symptoms of power-lust. In fact, his most far-reaching critique was directed at the domination of the lower orders by the higher all over the world, including India.

Tagore's conceptualization of evanescence is intrinsically inimical to the drive to power which is founded on the delusion of permanence. It is this delusion which has produced the gigantic, complex and megalopolitic civilization of the West (though this is far from a unique phenomenon) with its rationalistic technologies of uniformity, equally homogenizing, with superficial differences, in communism and capitalism. If the modern bureaucratic state has resulted in de-personalization caused by reification and alienation, it has above all rendered the individual human being invisible. In the domain of art, this invisibility has given rise to the impulse for the labyrinthine and the subterranean. In this context, the aesthetic of evanescence and lightness that Tagore develops is not the product of his idle fancy but an attempt at securing an Archimedean foothold from which

he could question the fundamental nexus between civilization and power. In this sense the aesthetic is inseparable from an ethics of possibility, of prophecy though not prediction. After all, the imagination of the great ethical philosophers transcends the limits of actuality and the positivist-empiricist reliance on so-called facts. In rebutting the objection that the writings of Plato and his followers refer to a completely unreal world, Ernst Cassirer reminds us of Kant's position in his *Critique of Pure Reason*:

The Platonic Republic has been supposed to be a striking example of purely imaginary perfection. It has become a byword, as something that could exist only in the brain of an idle thinker.... We should do better, however, to follow up his thought and endeavour to place it in a clearer light by our own efforts, rather than to throw it aside as useless, under the miserable and very dangerous pretext of its impracticability.... For nothing can be more mischievous and more unworthy of a philosopher than the vulgar appeal to what is called adverse experience, which possibly might never have existed if at the proper time institutions had been formed according to those ideas, and not according to crude conceptions which, because they were derived from experience only, have marred all good intentions.

The ethical world is never given; it is forever in the making. 'To live in the ideal world,' said Goethe, 'is to treat the impossible as if it were possible.'³⁰

V

European artists and thinkers intuitively and consciously arrived at this spiritual crisis resulting from the pursuit of power at the heart of Western modernity but their location was inside the megalopolis, in its labyrinth which was the strange product of rational and meticulous planning dedicated to uniformity. The labyrinthine mode of strenuous cleverness that Tagore notes in modern European literature corresponds to the reification that puts the commodity at the centre of all human relationships. We may recall in passing Rousseau's insight that the more sophisticated and complex a society becomes, it loses in moral substance. The

corruption caused by power is known to all but perhaps its aesthetic manifestation is to be found in the movement away from simplicity. If Tagore finds the cleverness of the modern European poet ultimately unacceptable, it is because it was made possible by the same 'disenchanted' rationalism that has generated the ethos of a superior race and civilization experienced at the ground level as technological and commercial supremacy. Tagore's context is not yet that of the modern city thrust upon an agricultural society like that of India by a colonial accident. Like Gandhi, he writes at a point in Indian history when resistance to brutalizing urbanization had not yet become a counter-historical exercise. That the process of urbanization was irresistible cannot take away from the moral critique of either, which can be understood or evaluated not within a framework of historical determinism but within what I have referred to as an ethics of possibility and prophecy.

By contrast, the European artist had to choose the heroism of negativity. We may recall Baudelaire's position that industrial society and its poisons are a necessary condition for masterpieces. Critics have commented perceptively on Baudelaire's poetic filtering of the harsh refuse of modernity, extracting beauty from evil. In this sense, the negative beautiful dimensions of modern reality are the *materia prima* of the utopian art propagated by Baudelaire.³¹ The rupture between the good and the beautiful that is the necessary material, though not the end, of modern art is spelt out philosophically by Max Weber:

Since Nietzsche, we realize that something can be beautiful, not only in spite of the aspect in which it is not good, but rather in that very aspect. You will find this expressed earlier in the *Fleurs du mal* as Baudelaire named his volume of poems. It is commonplace to observe that something may be true although it is not beautiful and not holy and not good. Indeed it may be true precisely in those aspects.³²

If the European artist was disabused of all illusion, he was

unable to escape from disillusionment, bleak despair, distrust of reason and a psychology of guilt; there was no escape from this destiny. Has the European imagination trapped itself in the darkness that formed the core to the illusion of power?

The point will become clear if we juxtapose Tagore's notion of the aesthetics and ethics of the imponderable with a representative view from the West. In one of his many voyages he clearly associates the rainbow, its fugitive play of colours seen from the deck against the vast backdrop of sky and sea, with lyric poetry and song. At the same time, the play of forms in the playhouse of delight releases his mind from deluded attachment to things, transporting him to a joy that is weightless, measureless and ineffable ('Paschim Jātrir Diary', 402). Max Weber speaks from a different aesthetic and ethical standpoint when he sees lyric poetry as for example of Stefan George and its resistance to the impersonal, disenchanting forces seeking control over the self

partly as a protest, as a specific means of escape from this [mechanized] reality—that is, escape through the highest aesthetic abstractions or the deepest dream-states or more intense forms of excitation—and partly as a means of adaptation, an apology for its own fantastic and intoxicating rhythmic. Lyric poetry like Stefan George's—that is, poetry characterized by such intense consciousness of the last impregnable fortress of purely artistic form, yet aware of the frenzy produced by the *technique* of our lives—could not be written at all without the poet allowing the experience of the modern metropolis to flow through himself, even though these impressions devour him, shatter and parcel out his soul, and even though he may condemn them to the abyss.³³

The visibility of the world around us that Tagore highlights in his conceptualization of unattached observation is the only basis for re-enchantment which cannot be achieved by regression, by relapse into a magical cosmology. In some of the recent discussions on re-enchantment, the tendency to emphasize the entry of the extraordinary in our daily lives is

somewhat off target. Re-enchantment must be rooted in the ordinary. In his essay 'Mandir' ['Temple'] (1903), Tagore notes on the entire exterior of the Bhuvaneshwar temple images, not of the extraordinary *leelā* of mythology and paradise, but the everyday incidents and activities, big and small, good and bad, of human life. The attempt is to delineate the way this *samsāra* (earthly life) runs, without any principle of selection, any separation of the concealable and proclaimable, the trivial and the exalted. By contrast, inside the Christian church, there is only the divine, all traces of daily English life, their *samsāra*, completely excluded. This is why, Tagore continues, we are taken aback by our first sight of the Bhuvaneshwar temple because we have learnt through our English education that heaven and earth are set apart, that a wide gulf separates the human and the divine. Here we see man engaged in activity and movement, covered in dust, jostling with God. Inside the temple, there are no images, no light, no adornment; only the God's statue in the midst of secluded dim light.

For Tagore, the humdrum surface of the life that is common to all of us is itself the *māyā*. We may refer here to the magic that he wove into daily sunrise and sunset in his late poetry. Tagore has vividly described many times how as a boy he used to rush to see from the balcony the sunrise every morning. The bleak truth of monotonous flux is transmuted into new meaning on the fleeting margins of light and darkness, colour and colourlessness, sound and silence, on the margins of the finite and the infinite, in short. Meaning is thus teased out of meaninglessness by the basic motif of willing and undeceived participation in *māyā*. As a result, flux and decay make possible self-renewal: in taking away one day of our lifespan, death simultaneously rejuvenates us because every ordinary day is a new beginning for us only if we see the passing of a day co-extensive with it. Later, by relating it to death as the prime mover of life,

Tagore transcends the antagonism of time and timelessness, mortality and immortality, truth and illusion. It is the hard truth of mortality that generates the *māyā* of immortality everyday but only if we accept its invitation to a playful relationship, and do not make us vulnerable to the despair that must follow a non-playful surrender to its spell.

The invasive and analytical procedure of instrumental rationality has replaced this visibility with another kind of darkness that draws us compellingly to a core of nothingness. In place of the surface we have now the abyss of the human psyche down which we may descend not to illumination but to greater and greater darkness. It is the darkness of the *cul de sac*, whereas the darkness and blackness that Tagore writes of repeatedly is of a release from the claustrophobic architecture of material attachments to the vast open spaces with which the denuded self may communicate freely and directly. The invasive mode, the indulgence in introspection, the pull of the psychological abyss that characterize much modern European literature have resulted in the marginalization of the larger human world. By contrast, nineteenth-century literature explores human psychology always within a broader social framework. Interiority thus presupposes the invisibility of the individual human being. Abstractions first render the human being invisible and then that invisibility draws us into its labyrinthine darkness. This is how ethics and aesthetics are intertwined in Tagore. Referring to Gautier's 'Mademoiselle de Maupin' in a letter to his friend Loken Palit, he pits the invasive mode against the simple, visible everyday mode (the *māyā* of everyday life, its surface, as for example, in his short stories). According to Tagore, Shakespeare and the older writers saw man easily and clearly. Now there is a hidden man we can see only by entering our inner world in a subconscious state. This inner world has also become very complex and the road into it is also very secret.³⁴

But the labyrinthine is not confined to European civilization, for modernity, European-style, has been transmitted to us through colonial education, indoctrination and economic and technological change. In other words, the labyrinthine could not have been ignored by Tagore and in fact he does not ignore it. The use of the labyrinthine structure, of the consciously crafted intricacy of language—always related to the lack of simplicity inherent in alienation—that characterises many of the novels of Tagore invites a parallel with the model I have used of conscious and willing participation in *māyā*. Novels like *Gora*, *Ghare-Bāire*, *Shesher Kabitā*, *Chaturanga*, *Chār Adhyāy* are full of subtle debates, intricate language always associated with the English-educated middle and upper classes. But behind the intricate structure lies the muted presence of the simple, the ordinary, the common; behind the dazzling play of words, the ultimate silence. The reification, which is the source of the labyrinthine paradigm, is made explicit in the metaphors employed in Tagore's plays like *Raktakarabi*, *Muktadhārā* and so on. On the obverse of this is the simplicity and visibility of characters that he brought out consummately in those of his short stories—and there are many—that deal with the life of the lower orders he came to know closely as a zamindar. What we need to recognize here is the dual process involved: both the artist and his art must move through the density of phenomenal reality in order to approximate to the universal humanity shorn of all functions and predicates that otherwise produce a fragmentary version of it. These functions and predicates, this phenomenal density corresponds to the illusory and translucent surface that is art, making intelligible the ideal-infinite that cannot be grasped or represented without the aid of that density. In this way, the poet's use of language can take us to the brink of silence. The sight of the sandbanks of a river in fading light turns into a symbol of language and silence when

Tagore writes that it is the shoals of his mute mind that every day rise above the babbling stream of words.³⁵

In the lyrical poetry of his last decade, Tagore does not need to traverse the elaborate in order to suggest the truth of simplicity; the genre enables him to exclude the elaborate in order to confront the truth directly. What underlies the asymmetrical relationship between the chastening progress through the elaborate and the understated goal is foregrounded in the lyrical poetry. In some of these poems, Tagore counters unattached observation with wariness about its unconsciously claiming permanence. It is as though the articulation of an observation, however unattached, inherently tilts towards attachment or belief, given stylistic life, in the non-fugitive nature of that observation. That internalised questioning restores the language to its goal of playful impermanence. As he puts it appropriately in the concluding poem of *Prāntik*, the eagerness to express must not overreach the limits of simplicity. In creating a poetic or linguistic structure, the poet must leave room for silence; that is to say, all art must engage in the open pretence of magic, making manifest its insubstantial and evanescent character and therein reaching its fulfilment. Only by representing the moving mirage of our existence and always questioning from within our inveterate tendency to surrender, unknowingly and therefore deludedly, to the *māyā* of its permanence, can we give a surmised shape to truth.

The creative possibilities of *māyā* are not perceptible in our pragmatic involvement in life but in contemplative detachment from it. As Tagore puts it in 'Kabir Kaifiyat' (1915), if the West is engaged in the struggle for existence, India reads *leelā* into it. His disillusionment with the nationalist movement and withdrawal to Shantiniketan invited much criticism in the incendiary atmosphere of the time. For instance, Romain Rolland accused Tagore in 1930

of frivolous dalliance with painting and exhibitions abroad while India was on fire under Gandhi. According to Rolland, Tagore wished to forget his sorrows of isolation in the pastime of painting. Victoria Ocampo vigorously refutes this view and discusses the birth of Tagore's painting in manuscript revisions of his poems and doodles.³⁶ As I see it, this is not any escapist frivolity; rather, it is the prerogative of the artist to engage in the dance of Siva in the midst of destruction. Far from promoting comfortable escapism in the guise of *leelā*, Tagore was fully aware of the darker, malevolent energies at work but he saw them as the natural progeny of the power-lust and greed of rapacious civilizations which are, despite their delusions of perpetuity, ultimately transitory. Consequently, he refuses to be drowned in the hysteria of violence or animosity and already looks beyond it: this visionary transcendence informs what I have called the aesthetics and ethics of evanescence. It is in this sense that art is always a prophecy and only accidentally a prediction. Contingently located in the present, its non-contingent essence is in transcendence, in a future that is in the present in its aspect of perennial possibility.

In so far as this awareness of the future in the present implies a defiance of despair, this possibility is of human emancipation. As Shelley had put it in *Prometheus Unbound*, the ultimate impediment to freedom is the loss of hope and of faith in the human capacity for self-transformation. The pervasive mood of nihilism and negation in the West is the outcome of power and violence turned inwards. As he puts it in his *Java Jātrir Patra*, spurred on by the conceit of science, pride of power and greed for riches, Europe has for long been engaged in humiliating humanity all over the world; now that this activity has borne fruit at home it has become worried. Salvation lies in the renunciation of power and possessive involvement with the world, that is, of the entire ideological apparatus of domination supported by rationalist

technology. No doubt the two world wars and their unending sequels have left little room for belief in the human capacity for redemption. But surely the shattering of all illusions that has generated a tendency to dismantle all values and ideals has resulted from delusions of power and permanence. Tagore relentlessly searches for an aesthetics and ethics of the future in which the abjuration of power plays a central role. This is the larger and abiding significance of his defence of *māyā* which invites us to a playful participation in its evanescence in the full knowledge of its unreality and thus operates equally on the surface of life and art.

The poet's ability to look beyond immediate violence and animosity is reminiscent of Yeats's own position, in particular, in the *Last Poems*. In 'Lapis Lazuli', he locates the gaiety of the poet envisioning the future in the context of war hysteria: 'I have heard that hysterical women say/They are sick of the palette and fiddle-bow,/Of poets that are always gay'. As the poem extends to the history of endless destruction, the poet does not relinquish his regenerative role: 'All things fall and are built again/And those that build them again are gay.' Destruction is the periodically convulsive expression of the meaninglessness at the bottom of human existence, and the gaiety and tragic joy of the poet, intuitively existential in character, make it meaningful. Nothingness here is a part of the Absurd in European experience. The figure of the poet invites a parallel with Albert Camus's interpretation of the Sisyphus myth: the unremitting, undeterred and repetitive enactment of futility is the mode of meaningfulness specific to the universe of the Absurd. As we have seen, Tagore had an equally modern sense of this meaninglessness, including the enactment of futility in the repeated but unanswered question. But Tagore's universe, for identifiable historical and cultural reasons, does not follow the European trajectory to the absurd, because unlike Yeats or Camus, he engages in the play of illusion that affirms joyousness.

In Kafka we note the peculiar combination of unreality and systematic terror that springs from the inability of the West—imperial, rational, scientific, bureaucratic, totalizing—to accept the full implications of evanescence. That this is the obverse of evanescence is reinforced by the de-personalized presence of the tyrant, always invisible and unassailable behind a mesh, in Tagore's play *Raktakarabi*, but emancipated from his tyranny and its self-reflexive effects by frail and fleeting human love and its buoyancy. If that which is evanescent is seen as real then instead of *leelā* and its light, unattached participation we must confront the nightmare, the phantasmagoria. The denial of evanescence serves only to magnify the labyrinth of rational calculation and systematization and therefore endlessly whet the appetite for power and permanence, the work ethic of possessive individualism.

Shakespeare's heroes and heroines in his tragedies as well as comedies move between tangible, familiar actuality and a seemingly insubstantial and dream-like world. While some critics see this unreality in terms of the alienation and reification that is germane to Kafka's chilling allegories, it is equally possible to find in it a redemptive fictionality, a release from the pressures of pragmatic existence to a deeper realization. Thus, while *The Tempest* presents an anatomy of power, knowledge and language, it is surrounded by evanescence whereby the entire world is rendered an insubstantial pageant. If you presuppose the illusory nature of human existence then the oscillation between 'is' and 'is not' becomes a feature of the play of *māyā*. As Tagore puts it in *The Religion of an Artist*, 'art is *māyā*, it has no other explanation but that it seems to be what it is. It never tries to conceal its evasiveness.'³⁷ Tagore and Shakespeare seem thus to start from opposite directions but meet at a similar destination, a similar vision of life. The former enters into the illusory in the spirit of *leelā* while the

latter inhabits what he believes to be the real, only to discover its illusory nature: both arrive in their own ways at meaning and reality. It is only later, in the industrialized, alienated world peculiar to European modernity that the artist often takes refuge in dream from which all awakening is into shattering disillusionment necessitating a specific mode of heroic negativity. Megalopolic experience leads to an oneiric mode of existence, as is suggested by Baudelaire's teeming city full of dreams. But if in Shakespeare the realization of the illusory nature of reality takes his characters to a deeper, wider and surer understanding of life, in modern European literature there is a split, an unbridgeable gulf between the world of illusion and that of appalling reality. The mutually invigorating relationship has gone.

Evanesence finds its analogue in the minimal self. Instead of the bloated and predatory egotism of the West, Tagore highlights the smallness of the human subject pitted against the vast open spaces of nature. Paradoxically, it is the denuded ego, the smallness or minimality of the perceiving subject that enables it to grasp the vast underlying unity and harmony of the cosmos. The motif of the solitary observing consciousness and endlessly stretching space—the night sky, the ocean, the sandbanks of the Padma river—recurs in Tagore's writings always in terms of this asymmetrical relationship. As early as *Chaitāli* (1896), he derives the linguistic simplicity of that work from his unattached observation of the harvested fields in their unending emptiness. Two years before that, while talking to his companion Shailendra on the sandbanks under the stars at night, the silence caused by a sudden gap in conversation makes Tagore aware of the vastness and silence of the universe:

I too found my place at the far edge of that boundless gathering of soundless celestial luminaries. All the stars have their places in infinite space, as I, for my part, have my place on this empty sandbank beside the River Padma;

both they and I have our seats at the great reception known as existence.³⁸

It is where language ends that the infinite begins. The lack of proportion between the vast and the small, between language and silence becomes the basis for the only kind of proportion that is possible, linking the infinitesimal to the cosmic.

This relationship between the puniness of the subject and the vastness of the object (nature) has its ethical equivalent in the meekness of the religious-mystical traditions adopted by Tagore. It is by surrendering the ego that the Bhakti poet, Vaisnava poet or the Baul acquires a vision of the infinite. Transfer this out of a medieval or demotic religious context and you get the notion of common humanity, of ordinary existence as opposed to the inhumanity of the cult of beauty. Common humanity is the fundamental ethical standard which puts in proportion all attempts at establishing and glorifying the individualistic (possessive, competitive, capitalist, colonial-imperial) in terms of its uncommonness. The aesthetic equivalent of the standard of common humanity is, in Tagore's case, the search for simplicity. As early as 1906, in the essay 'Soundaryabodh', Tagore explores the inseparability of aesthetics (beauty) and ethics (truth). We may note here that the ordinary or the common 'humdrum' forms of life have the basic structure of evanescence (lasting only a day).

The minimal self is a version of the slackened ego, denuded of power-lust and finely attuned to an alert receptivity, which Tagore may have drawn from Indian metaphysics as well as the devotional traditions of poetry. But the movement towards the minimum approximates to the maximum because both are equally distant and distinct from the finite or the measurable. The infinitesimal is identical with the infinite just as the individual human being, divested of all social, functional and abstract accretions, is the best picture of universal humanity. The awe-inspiring

encounter of the vast by the small human subject has no doubt generated the Kantian notion of the sublime but the effect there has perhaps not gone beyond the humiliation of anthropocentric vanity. In Tagore, there is a shift of focus from the vast to the small, the infinite to the infinitesimal: it is only the small and not the vast that is able to perceive and experience the vast, make it possible, realizable. This has the seeds of re-enchanting the world.

The relationship of the small and the vast is captured in Tagore's writings in the recurrent motif of coming out from an inside, an enclosed interiority into the open. The experience of vast open spaces has an enlarging and enhancing effect upon the self by minimizing our vanity; it thereby captures the fusion of aesthetics and ethics. This is why Gora takes the open road at a crucial point in the novel (*Gora*) and his self-discovery takes him to Sucharita as well as Bharatvarsha. Similarly, Nikhilesh in *Ghare-Bāire* comes out of the cage of alienated bourgeois domesticity into the open where he senses his union with the vast manifold, the beating heart of nature. This is why the king in *Raja (The King of the Dark Chamber)* comes out into the open road and is visible in the concourse of common people and this is why Tagore claimed in *Pathe O Pather Prānte* that his most private, intimate and mystical *Gitanjali* poems were written when he was actively involved with the outside world. As he writes in *Japan Jātri*, death is revealed in its true beauty when we willingly sever all bonds of the household and surrender to it in complete faith, for all the things we are used to inside trammel up our life. Withdrawal from the world for Tagore (and perhaps in the Indian tradition) is not a narcissistic falling back upon the alienated self but emancipation from the pragmatic, calculating ego and its ligatures. This emancipation comes from the surrender of the self to another in spirit. As Sanjay puts it in *Muktadhāra*, no solitary human being is one, he is only a half; he acquires unity or

wholeness only when he is linked in spirit to another human being.

Tagore describes how on one of his voyages, as sudden illness confines him to his cabin, he tries to defy it characteristically by writing poetry. As the suffering increases, it releases him from his seclusion into the sorrow inherent in the human condition and at once it is transformed into a harmonious joy. When the illusion of escape vanishes, the mind wishes to participate in the destructive element, in the *tāndava*. We are able to know and accept death as the truth because its fullness banishes the fear of its emptiness. This brush with death makes Tagore realize the true meaning of the practice in India of taking a dying person out into the open, from all habitual attachments to everything inside. He is reminded of the beauty of a scene of death he had seen many years ago in Varanasi. In the morning light of early autumn touching with divinity the bustling life of the bathing ghats, the silence of the extending fields on the other bank and the flowing waters in the middle, he saw in the swift current a dinghy with a dying person lying in it silent, facing the sky while at his head loud kirtan was being sung with the accompaniment of cymbals. The primordial hospitality of death at the heart of the cosmos filled the skies with its deep harmony and Tagore saw clearly how beautiful death was in its serene form on its proper seat. Inside the house, everything denies it vociferously; that is why when death enters with its doom into the household amidst the furniture, architecture and domestic routine, it is mistaken for a brigand to whom there is no joy in submitting. What is truly beautiful is to release ourselves from these ties, come out of the enclosed present and hold death's hand in complete trust in the inviolable freedom of possibility, the future.³⁹

NOTES

Unless otherwise mentioned, all translations from Tagore are mine.

1. *Rabindranath Tagore: Selected Poems*, General Editor: Sukanta Chaudhuri (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 373
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3. *Rabindra Rachanabali* (Calcutta: Visva-Bharati, 1945; repr. 1956), vol 19, p. 314
4. *Selected Poems.*, p. 349
5. *Ibid.*, p. 374
6. *Ibid.*, p. 295
7. In *Jātri* ['Traveller'] (1929), *Rabindra Rachanabali*, vol 19, op. cit., p. 500
8. *Ibid.*, p. 511
9. 'A Random Discourse', *Rabindranath Tagore On Art and Aesthetics: A Selection of Lectures, Essays and Letters* (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1961), p. 70
10. 'Letter to Jamini Roy', *Ibid.*, p. 108
11. *Pathe O Pather Prānte* (Calcutta: Visva-Bharati, 1938), pp. 78-79
12. 'The Artist', *Tagore On Art and Aesthetics*, op. cit., p. 78
13. 'Letter to A...', tr. Kshitish Roy, March, 1930, *Ibid.*, p. 96
14. 'The Religion of an Artist', *Ibid.*, p. 49
15. *Selected Letters*, p. 83 (August 1911)
16. *Imperfect Encounter: Letters of William Rothenstein and Rabindranath Tagore 1911-41*, ed. Mary M. Lago (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1972) July 6, 1913
17. *Pathe O Pranter Prānte*, op.cit., p. 60
18. *Selected Poems*, p. 314
19. Quoted on p. 83, *Selected Letters*
20. 28 August 1932, Letter no. 258, *Selected Letters*
21. 27 December 1935, Letter no. 294, *Selected Letters*
22. This entire discussion is a translation, suitably abridged and paraphrased, of *Japan Jātri, Rabindra Rachanabali*, vol 19, (op. cit.), pp. 315-17
23. 'The Artist', *Tagore On Art and Aesthetics*, op. cit., pp. 78-79
24. *Ātmaparichay* (Calcutta: Visva-Bharati, 1961), pp. 73-74
25. *Poems of William Blake*, ed. W.B. Yeats (London, 1969), p. xxxii
26. *Jibansmriti, Rabindra Rachanabali*, vol. 17 (Calcutta: Visva-Bharati, 1943; repr. 1964), p. 409.
27. Quoted on p. 43, *Selected Letters*
28. *Patrālāp, Rabindra Rachanabali*, vol. 8 (Calcutta: Visva-Bharati, 1941), p. 465
29. For this discussion I am indebted to Ernst Cassirer, *The Individual and*

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 37. *Tagore On Art And Aesthetics*, op. cit., p.49
 38. Letter dated 7 December, 1894, *Selected Letters*, pp. 42-43
 39. 'Paschim Jātrir Diary', *Rabindra Rachanabali*, vol. 19, op. cit., pp. 428-29