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ASCETICISM IN TAGORE'S AESTHETICS

And in the midst of this wide quietness,
A rosy sanctuary will I dress—KEATS.

THE ASCETIC ideal of beauty set up and worshipped by the Scholastics as well as the Indian aestheticians in the medieval period has fallen into disrepute in our age of positivism and even the best efforts of a Maritain¹ or a Coomaraswamy² could not revive it. Ascetic beauty does not mean an abstract and, so, nugatory, principle, but a concrete spiritual one which operates not by annihilating feelings and sensations but by controlling and organizing them. This demands a greater detachment from them than does extirpation of them; employment of the senses as a means to spirituality implies a deeper and a bolder self-discipline than total rejection of them. But modern aesthetics makes a fetish of them and confuses beauty with the pleasurable.

It is strange and regrettable that Tagore is sometimes identified with an aesthete dallying with easy beauty and refinements of a leisured life, a delicate artist of all that is soft and sweet—flowing water, dancing flowers, floating clouds and the play of light and shade on undulating paddy fields. Perhaps this notion is not as strange as it appears at first. An artist in a country like India where the majority of the people are weighed down by their vital needs may easily be dubbed an easy-going aesthete, for that is exactly what the people themselves want to be. So it is a case of projection and, moreover, it helps some to rationalize their escapism and irresponsible hedonism. However, great men are often misunderstood, and their creeds distorted and misapplied. What we seek here to establish is that Tagore was just the opposite of the conventional aesthete; that though he held renunciation to be no cult of his, he shows ascetic leanings in his aesthetic theory. His aesthetics is out and out metaphysical and not naturalistic or psychological, with the result that beauty is separated from charm by the whole dimension of physical becoming, and so are its characters, aesthetic delight, truth and absolute goodness, separated from their respective naturalistic analogues, pleasure, facthood and relative goodness or utility. In fine, Tagore's conception of beauty is spiritual and it is neither sensational nor intellectual and so his conception of art too is transcendental. To realize this beauty and art one has to discipline the affective and cognitive tendencies of one's nature and to realize the essential unity of his higher self with the spirit of the outer objects.

Let us examine this in greater detail. Beauty for Tagore is nothing but the

sense of unity and self-enlargement one experiences when one realizes the essential kinship of one's own self with the spirit of objects without. "Beauty is but a bridge between the self and matter."³ This bridge-building is a natural consequence of the metaphysical fact that whatever appears strange is but our self, so that "the function of the soul is to fraternise with others."⁴ Beauty can thus be realized only on a metaphysical plane where the ultimate natures of our self and the world are seized and the identity of the two experienced. To enjoy true beauty is, therefore, not a matter of feeling or reasoning but of trans-cension of these and intuition of the very self that is reality itself. Tagore's theory of beauty is neither sensational like that of some hedonists (e. g. Marshall, Santayana) nor intellectual like that of the formalists (e. g. Plato, Aristotle, Clive Bell and Roger Fry). Nor is it like Kant's theory based on an interplay of understanding and imagination. It rises above the cognitive faculties and rests on a kind of metaphysical intuition in which the true and identical natures of the knower and the known are revealed. "This is indeed the divine manner of understanding in which the knower is the known. Hence the Scholastic and Indian definitions of perfect understanding as involving *adequatio vei et intellectus* or *tadākarata*.⁵ This *tadākarata* is stressed by Tagore who holds that in aesthetic intuition we know but ourselves.⁶

Now this metaphysical intuition which is the condition for realization of beauty can be had through a discipline similar to that of *Yoga*. *Yoga* speaks of stilling the mind and laying bare the soul-life, the spirit which is hidden in us under the feverish activity of our mind, that is, the sensitive and cognitive appetencies. Tagore speaks of this soul as something free of the burden of the mind. "It is alone, integrally perfect, carefree and effortless. Over its boundless blue forehead there is no mark of intelligence, there shines forever the light of genius."⁷ So the genius who visualizes beauty in concrete forms is a *Yogi* in so far as he has to discipline his mind and capture his true soul-life. Tagore speaks of this matter thus: "I do not know details of *Yoga*, but we hear that the *Yogis* could create by *Yogic* powers. The creation by genius is of a similar kind. The poets, restraining their mind by virtue of their spontaneous power, and in a semi-conscious manner, somehow attract the ideas, feelings, sights, colours and sounds to their soul, and collecting them there, build out of them a coherent and lively whole."⁸ The *Sukranītisāra* also asks the artist to have a contemplative vision (*yoga-dhyāna*) and not to have a direct observation of any form or figure. The Scholastic aesthetics also speaks of a contemplative primary act to be followed by a secondary act of setting down what has been visualized in contemplation. In any case, Tagore conceives of beauty as an experience of a higher kind in which the mind with its perceptive and reasoning powers is subordinated to and controlled by the spirit which realizes its kinship with outer objects. In the highest stage of *yoga-sādhanā* the mind is completely stilled into a quiescent state, but in lower stages it is only controlled. Aesthetic contemplation requires one of these lower stages. The mind here is active but does not sway the spirit which remains self-composed and supreme. This is a condition of true joy according to Tagore.⁹ And this aesthetic joy which ever accompanies beauty is far from

pleasure we have in feelings and sensations. The latter is an ordinary reaction to objects of the world that satisfy some organic cravings while the former is an extra-ordinary attitude towards all objects seen in their truth and beauty. This extra-ordinary joy or beatitude distinguishes beauty from charm.

Tagore has amply explicated this distinction.¹⁰ Like Keats he, too, had a conception of beauty that is not easy enough to please only by serving some organic interest but beauty that transcends and reconciles pleasure and pain, good and evil. This is the beauty of Moneta's face that Keats describes in his *Fall of Hyperion: a Dream*. This beauty is denied to one who does not "feel the giant agony of the world," and it is beauty that is truth. Keats, in search of true beauty, bids farewell to the simple joys of "flora and old Pan" and determines to "pass them for a nobler life" where he might find "the agonies, the strife of human hearts."¹¹ Tagore in the same search leaves a life of soft dalliance for one of suffering and sacrifice.¹² He boldly faced life with its pain and confusion in order to strike out a rich harmony that is beauty, he welcomes the terrible beauty of the month of *Vaisākh*.¹³ He often quotes Keats' famous line, "Beauty is truth, truth beauty" and along with it the Upanishadic saying, "Whatever is dear to me I find in it my true self, that is why it is dear and beautiful."¹⁴ Tagore held reality that is beauty to be a higher value than ordinary good and evil which after all concern our worldly interests. Therefore he sang, "Good and evil whatever comes, accept reality with easy grace," and wrote in separation from his dearest one, "Thou hast mixed the sweetness of death with my life."¹⁵ This bold attitude towards death and disaster is born of the disciplining of the mind which shows things in their true light. Keats sought this state and in a moment of despair cried out, "Oh, never will the prize of High reason, and the love of good and ill, Be my award."¹⁶ This high reason is a means to realization of beauty that is truth.

This ascetic ideal of beauty solves one baffling problem in aesthetics which is the question how a tragedy can be beautiful and agreeable. Aristotle's cathartic theory, that pity and fear in us are expelled through excitation, is unsatisfactory. So also is the theory of disinterested contemplation advanced in various forms by the majority of the aestheticians, e. g. Hegel, A. C. Bradley and Bosanquet. Disinterested contemplation is a contradiction in terms unless it is further explained from some deeper reality. Tagore's theory (which is essentially Vedantic), that the self in the aesthetic attitude is above the egotistic interests and distortions and communes with all objects in delight,—offers this needed explanation. Keats refers by implication to this transcendent self when he speaks of the poetic character as chameleon-like, one that has no identity, that "lives in gusto be it foul or fair, high or elevated. . ."¹⁷ In fact Keats' famous concept of negative capability which he prizes as a positive virtue in a great artist is nothing but the capacity of the true self to assert itself over the individual ego. The true self delights in reality as it is irrespective of its particular value to the phenomenal self or ego; so it is disinterested and its attitude towards everything is one of joy. In a tragedy the mind (because it is not suppressed in the aesthetic attitude but only controlled) feels the pity and terror depicted therein, but over and

above the mind, and controlling it, is the self that contemplates these very mental affects with joy. Othello and Hamlet do not please us in the ordinary sense but they delight us extraordinarily because they represent truth which is beauty.¹⁸ This is the metaphysical explanation of 'psychical distance'¹⁹ involved in disinterested contemplation of art and delight in it.

We thus see that beauty is the prize of self-discipline and not of self-gratification. We may quote Tagore to substantiate this point. Says he:

So we arrive at this that ultimately beauty makes for discipline. And as Beauty thus softly leads us towards discipline, so does discipline, in turn, make us more deeply conscious of Beauty. We cannot taste of the honey at its core unless we poise ourselves into stillness before it. It is the chaste and devoted, not the light and flighty woman, who achieves true love. Chastity is the calmness of steadfast devotion that enables us to penetrate to the mystic depths of Beauty . . . That is why for the complete understanding of beauty, it is necessary to cultivate tranquillity, a state that is impossible for a distracted undisciplined mind to attain.²⁰

Art demands tranquillity, said Fra Angelico,²¹ and so say Indian aestheticians of the classical period for whom aesthetic joy is a kind of beatitude. It is called the twin of the flavor of Brahma (*Brahmasvādasahodora*). It is not strange, therefore, that aesthetic attitude should be one of tranquillity. Tagore quotes the Upanishad to stress this point. "Only those of tranquil minds, and none else, can attain abiding joy, by realising within their souls the Being who manifests one essence in a multiplicity of forms."²²

But this beauty which is attained through self-discipline and which is identical with truth must be true goodness. Yet we have seen that beauty is beyond ordinary good and evil. The latter, like charms of the empirical world, are relative to the individual ego which is led by various interests and inclinations. In the aesthetic attitude the ego and the mind are transcended by the self which takes a view that is beyond ordinary morality and yet is moral in the highest sense. For here the self overcomes the interests of the ego and identifies itself with all that appears alien to the latter. In this attitude of self-abandonment and fraternization consists absolute goodness.²³ So that beauty is true goodness for Tagore as it is for Plato, the Scholastics, Kant and many others.

So we see that for Tagore beauty is absolute goodness and truth to be realized not through our sensitive, affective and cognitive faculties, that is, through the mind. Rather, the mind is to be disciplined and subdued as is done in *yoga* and the spiritual self is to be realized and set over it. Beauty is essentially a spiritual experience; though the mental activities are not stopped, they are thoroughly controlled and serve as accessories. For the control of mental activities to be possible and adequate, one has to undergo mental and spiritual discipline either deliberately and methodically through some psychical science (such as *yoga*) or naturally and semi-consciously as it usually happens through study, creative work or good living. In other words, self-control leading to self-knowledge and self-composure is needed for enjoyment of beauty. This is more or less an ascetic concept of beauty and this is the true concept, whatever might the hedonists and the intellectualists say to the contrary.

- ¹ Jacques Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism* (1946).
- ² A. K. Coomaraswamy, *Figures of Speech or Figures of Thought* (1946).
- ³ *Panchabhut*, p. 31.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 32.
- ⁵ Coomaraswamy, *Op. cit.*, p. 153.
- ⁶ *Sahityer Pathe*, p. viii.
- ⁷ *Panchabhut*, p. 114.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 121.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 32.
- ¹⁰ *Sahityer Pathe*, pp. 58–59.
- ¹¹ *Sleep and Poetry*.
- ¹² Poem in *Chitra*, written in 1306 B. S.
- ¹³ Poem in *Kalpan*, written in 1306 B. S.
- ¹⁴ *Sahityer Pathe*, p. v.
- ¹⁵ Poem in *Smarana*, written in 1309 B. S.
- ¹⁶ Verse-letter to Reynolds, dated March 25, 1818.
- ¹⁷ Letter to Woodhouse, dated Oct. 27, 1818.
- ¹⁸ *Sahityer Pathe*, p. 173.
- ¹⁹ Author's article, "Psychical Distance in Indian Aesthetics," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* (Dec. 1948).
- ²⁰ *Sahitya*, p. 29. English version, "Sense of Beauty," *Visva-Bharati Quarterly* (May 1936)..
- ²¹ Maritain, *op. cit.*, p. 55.
- ²² *Sadhana*, (1919), p. 36.
- ²³ *Sahitya*, pp. 37–38.