RABINDRANATH TAGORE—A TRIBUTE

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The death of Rabindranath Tagore called forth from every part of India and from every centre of culture in the wider world tributes of grateful homage to the soul of one of the greatest of the sons of Mother India in recent history. Tagore died; but the Nobel Laureate who by his inspired songs of devotion and patriotism brought laurels to the land of his birth is immortal. It was most appropriate that throughout the length and breadth of the great country which gave him birth, his soul should be reverenced by the humble and the high alike. The Nation honoured itself in honouring so illustrious a son of our country. The day of his death was not a day of mourning or lamentation. For, full and varied, rich and glorious was the life of the sage whom it was our good fortune to have in our midst in flesh and blood till very recently. It was a life of sterling independence, of noble dedication to worthy causes, and of signal success in the high endeavour of interpreting the spirit of the culture of the East to the thoughtful peoples of the West. There is little to regret or mourn in that such a life should, in the mellow ripeness of honoured old age, be brought to a noble end. His life and his work are rather a call to us to steep ourselves in the wealth of poetic lore he has left behind as his bequest to posterity, so that every one of us, in his own humble way, may catch a glimpse of the lofty patriotism that inspired to high endeavour his own poetic soul.

It may not be inappropriate to dwell for a few fleeting moments on the life and the many literary masterpieces of this great poet. In one of his great lectures he tells us that from youth to age he was an idler in the land. Colleges were to him citadels of slavery. His free spirit found the cramping discipline of traditional schools and colleges most galling and stifling to the development of personality. Rather, like Shelley and Shakespeare before him, in the chirping of birds and the babble of brooks he found impulses of a deeper birth potent to educate and humanise. A true poet-soul, everywhere in nature and humble human habitations, he could not but come into vital touch with the spirit of the Divine potent to chasten and subdue the unregenerate in man. There were tongues in trees and sermons in stones. The flowing brooks were open books of wisdom. There was good in everything that was simple and natural. It was on the
peaceful banks of the holy Ganges that he came to be unconsciously educated in the school of nature, the only school which has ever been known to be fit nurse to a poetic child.

Extensive travels abroad and contact with human misery in its many forms made him wonder again and yet again, with the poet Wordsworth,—

Have I not reason to lament
What man has made of man!

When he returned home, it was to dedicate himself to the cause of the education of young children. On the banks of the Ganges he founded the nature school of Shantiniketan, which, under his wise supervision, early secured world-wide recognition because of the tendency to self-education that it fostered in the young ones who sought its sacred shelter.

The years that followed were years of leisure and study; of patient meditation and calm creation of poetic works of enduring interest to mankind. There is in all that this great poet has written something of subtle mysticism and rapturous sublimity. Almost all the well-known forms of literary expression have been tried by him. In every one of these forms he has attained unparalleled success. He was a genius, to use a familiar expression justly associated with gentle Goldsmith, who left nothing untouched, and touched none that he did not adorn.

His novels are wonderfully rich and realistic studies of the subtle changes setting in in Hindu society as a result of the cultural contact of the West with the East. His enchanting short stories,—“Hungry Stones and Other Stories,”—are among the best short stories of the world. There is in them a romantic atmosphere so charmingly beautiful that the like of them we look for in vain elsewhere in the sphere of the Short Story. The music of the language, in many places, echoes the tinkling sound of the tiny gold bells on the delicate ankles of the divine ladies whose descent down the steps to the river the poet describes very frequently. In one word, it is the prose of a poet. “Sadhana” and other philosophical lectures are the ripe comments of a great Indian scholar on the treasures of wisdom in the Upanishads and the Gita. His plays—“The Post Office”, “The King of the Dark Chamber” and “Chitra”—are again exquisite studies of the deeper conflicts of human life by one who had watched the drama of life with calm disinterestedness. Above all his inspired poetry in “The Gardener”, “The Crescent Moon” and “The Gitanjali” is the rapturous pouring forth of a full heart filled with gratitude at the blessedness of man’s lot in God’s good universe. Here again, amidst all the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings and sensations is a mysticism the like of which we come across only in the language of the
elite of the human race, like St. Paul and the Buddha. It was the poetic sublimity of the Gitanjali, let us remember, that compelled the world to recognize in this poet of India one worthy of the honours of the Nobel Laureateship for Literature. The serene joy of the poet and his implicit, almost childlike—faith in a benevolent Providence at whose feet he would offer his poetic flowers, meet us in every song of this marvellous collection. Of many that might be quoted here in illustration of the mystic powers of this poet one cannot help referring to the following few. The poet expresses in them what he would pray for on behalf of himself, but the prayer would be appropriate in the case of every thoughtful and self-less citizen anywhere in the world:

“This is my prayer to Thee, my Lord—Strike, Strike at the root of penury in my heart.

“Give me the strength lightly to bear my joys and sorrows.

“Give me the strength to make my love fruitful in service.

“Give me the strength never to disown the poor or bend my knees before insolent might.

“Give me the strength to raise my mind high above daily trifles.

“And give me the strength to surrender my strength to Thy will with love.”

Such is the prayer of a noble soul pining to make his love fruitful in service to mankind, with the determination never to bend his knees before insolent might of any kind. He would claim kinship with the poor, because of sympathetic understanding of the hearts of the poor.

In a slightly different mood, the mood of humility and submission to the Divine Lord conceived as Love, the poet would say to himself:

“Life of my life, I shall ever try to keep my body pure, knowing that Thy living touch is upon all my limbs.

“I shall ever try to keep all untruth out from my thoughts, knowing that Thou art that truth which has kindled the light of reason in my mind.

“I shall ever try to drive all evils away from my heart and keep my love in flower knowing that Thou hast thy seat in the inmost shrine of my heart.

“And it shall be my endeavour to reveal Thee in my actions, knowing it is Thy power gives me strength to act.”
The need for perfect purity of body, mind and spirit with the rooted conviction that the body is the temple of the Divine, and the insistence on loving service rendered to the needy as true worship of the Lord is what is dwelt on here. He looks upon God as ever keeping company with the companionless, among the poorest, the lowliest, and the lost. He would therefore laugh to scorn the ritual paraded by the traditional priest. He would request him to give up his chanting and singing and telling of beads in the lonely dark corner of a temple with doors all shut:

"Open thine eyes and see thy God is not before thee!

"He is there where the tiller is tilling the hard ground and where the path-maker is breaking stones. He is with them in sun and in shower and his garment is covered with dust. Put off thy holy mantle and even like him come down on the dusty soil!

"Deliverance? Where is this deliverance to be found? Our master himself has joyfully taken upon him the bonds of creation: he is bound with us all for ever.

"Come out of thy meditations and leave aside thy flowers and increase! What harm is there if thy clothes become tattered and stained? Meet him and stand by him in toil and in the sweat of thy brow."

This is an exalted conception of true religion worthy of a high-souled poet. Isolation from the common labourers, the true children of the earth, in secluded spots for the chanting of hymns and the telling of beads, in the hope of pleasing the Lord, is what is condemned here. Those who pretend to be religious often talk of expected deliverance to their souls. What is the deliverance they seek? The Lord himself has taken the bonds of creation. True deliverance, therefore, is in cheerful and useful service to the humble children of the earth, recognising in them the shrine of the divine. Such indeed is the poet's notion of true godliness.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the poet should dream of freedom for his country in terms of brotherliness and justice, of reasoned life and fervent faith in a loving God. This dream he sets forth in an inspired song which shows that the idea of freedom cherished by the true patriot reaches far beyond the love of country conceived by the ordinary statesman:

"Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high;

"Where knowledge is free;

"Where the world has not been broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls;"
“Where words come out from the depth of truth;
Where tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection;
Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way into the dreary desert sand of dead habit;
Where the mind is led forward by Thee into everwidening thought and action,—

“Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake.”

These are inspired words to comment on which would be an impertinence. That the exalted patriotism of the poet was nearer humanism than the traditional love of country or tribe, and that all the festering evils in the daily life of the people of his country had made his heart ache, is all that need be stated here. For the rest, as regards this song, one need only be reminded of the poet’s words used elsewhere.—

“From the words of the poet men take what meanings please them; yet their last meaning points to Thee.”

That a patriot and poet, philosopher and prophet of this magnanimous mould should always have retained a cheerful outlook upon life is not surprising. More than once he writes that life is full of blessedness. The very joys presented by the senses evoke thankfulness to the Lord in him:

“No, I will never shut the doors of my senses. The delights of sight and hearing and touch will bear Thy delight. * * * * All my desires ripen into fruits of Love.”

“Thy gifts to mortals fulfil all our needs and yet run back to Thee undiminished.”

It is not in the least surprising that this great poet should have a foretaste of his immortality. It only belongs to the fitness of things. One might appropriately close one’s homage to this honoured sage with a song which may serve as his epitaph in his own language:—

“I have had my invitation to this world’s festival, and thus my life has been blessed. My eyes have seen and my ears have heard.

“It was my part at this feast to play upon my instrument, and I have done all I could.

“Now, I ask, has the time come at last when I may go in and offer Thee my silent salutation?”