



book review

Easeful Death: New Translations of Tagore's *Dakghar*

by Kaiser Haq

The Post Office by Rabindranath Tagore, translated by Krishna Dutta and Andrew Robinson. Illustrations by Michael McCurdy. Introduction by Anita Desai. New York: St Martin's Press, 1996. Pp.52.

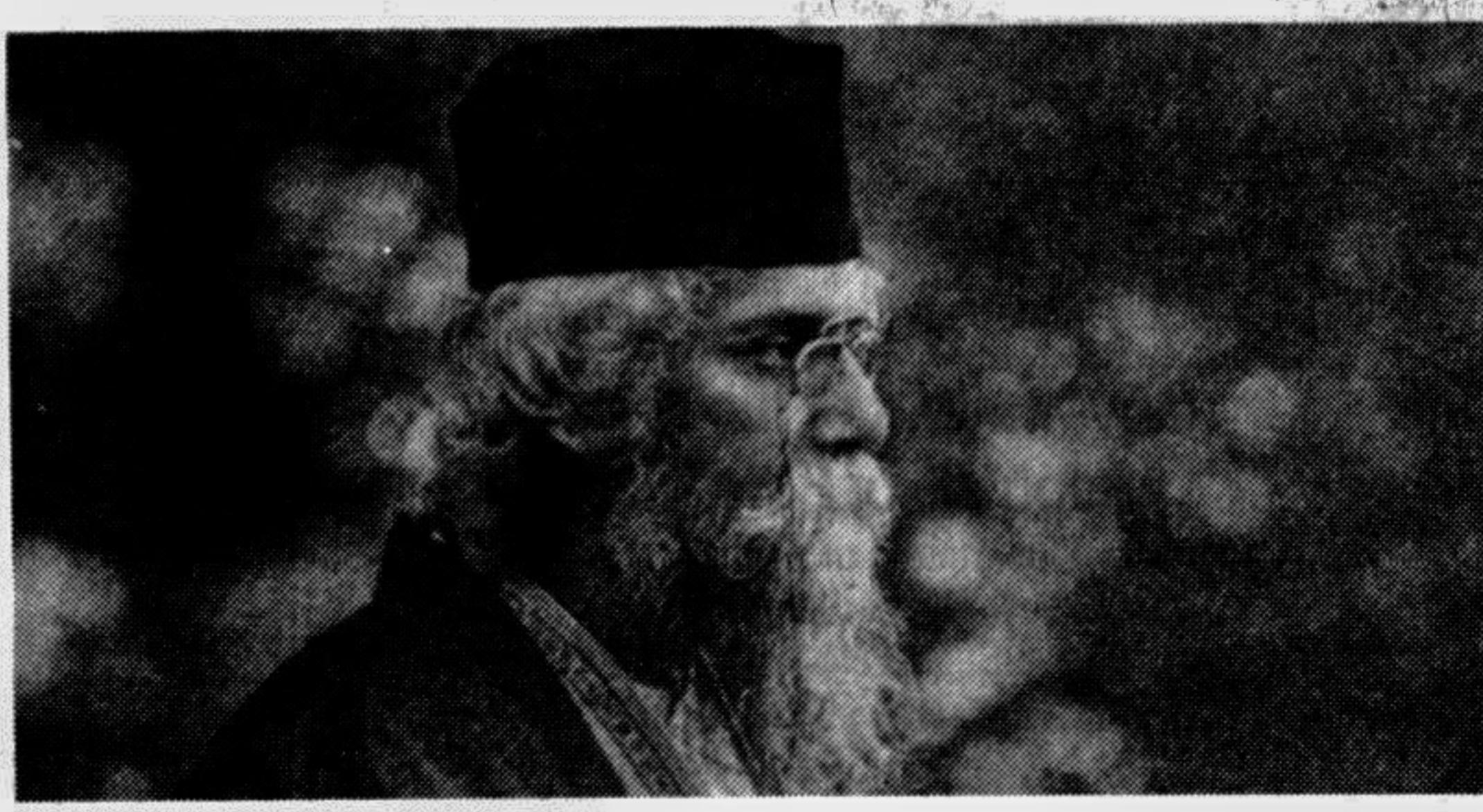
The Post Office by Rabindranath Tagore. Translated from the Bengali by William Radice. Set as a play-within-a-play by Jill Parvin. London: The Tagore Centre, 1996. Pp.100.

THE Post Office (Dakghar) is Tagore's best-known play, and one for which he himself had a special fondness. It was written in 1911 in a mood of profound *Weltenschmerz* bought on by a series of bereavements and distress at a violent turn in the nationalist movement. Tagore himself described the mood of the play as "a passionate feeling of wanting to go somewhere far away combined with thoughts of death — the writing of Dakghar was an expression of that restlessness." It took the form not of a story but of what he called a "prose-lyric." For good measure Tagore threw in a few songs in the productions he had a hand in. What there is of a story-line is simplicity itself. Confined indoors on doctor's orders, the fatally ill Amal yearns for freedom and open spaces, engages passers-by in eager conversation from the vantage of an open window and, fascinated by a new Post Office visible in the distance, develops a fancy that he will receive a letter from the King, an obviously allegorical per-

sonage. In an impressive denunciation the King's physician literally crashes into the sickroom to announce his royal master's imminent arrival and as the boy slips into unconsciousness, orders that the starlight be let in. Amal represents the man whose soul has received the call of the open road, Tagore explained to a friend: "... that which is 'death' to the world of hoarded wealth and certified creeds bring him awakening in the world of spiritual freedom."

It doesn't take much thought to see that Eliot's charge regarding *Hamlet*, that its "objective correlative" is not commensurate with its emotional freight, can be cogently applied to *The Post Office*. Tagore conflates two distinct themes. First there is "the call of the open road," which we know tugged at Tagore's heart-strings from childhood, and manifests here as Whitmanesque urge to encounter life in all its variegatedness. Then there is the mystical notion of death as "awakening in the world of spiritual freedom," which implies the individual soul's merger into the universal spirit and the disappearance of the distinctions that add variety to this world. Instead of relating the two themes in a comprehensible manner, Tagore collapses the distinction between them, and the play is consequently an inadequate "objective correlative" for the two of them combined.

In spite of this the play has never failed to touch a sympathetic chord in its audience. Yeats was moved by its "emotion of gentleness and peace" and Janusz Korczak had it performed in 1942 at his orphanage in the Warsaw



ghetto because it taught that "eventually one had to learn serenely to accept the angel of death." But Yeats was responding to a writer who still possessed the virtue of novelty, and Korczak was seeking solace in an extreme situation. To be of continuing interest, at least in the anglophone world, it requires imaginative productions (a subject beyond the scope of this review) and a good English version that is idiomatic and true to the original to replace Devabrat Mukerjee's dated 1914 translation. Radice's is just such a version, and Dutta's and Robinson's is not.

Those aware of the track records of these three writers will not be surprised, Radice's finely-crafted translations of Tagore's *Selected Poems* and *Selected Short Stories*, both available from

Penguin, will be read with pleasure for many years to come. The rival *Selected Stories* (Macmillan) co-translated by Dutta is simply pitiful (see my review "Reviving Tagore," London Magazine, December 1991/January 1992). More recently, Dutta and Robinson have collaborated on Rabindranath Tagore: the *Myriad-minded Man*, an indifferently researched, badly written and poorly edited biography (see my review, "Too bad for Tagore," London Magazine, October/November 1996).

It is amusing to go through the Dutta-Robinson version of *The Post Office*, blue pencil in hand. "Oh cease with your 'this, that and the other,'" expostulates Madhav, Amal's adoptive father (incidentally, in their Tagore biography Dutta and Robinson describe him as

Amal's stepfather!) though there is nothing in the original to justify such a studiously quaint expression. Then, after two sentences of colloquial English Madhav rounds off with a curious mixture of sentimental rhetoric and officialese: "it breaks my heart to see how your prescription makes him suffer further." Further comment is unnecessary but I cannot help adding that the use of the words "prescription" and "further" is not warranted by the Bengali text.

Dutta and Robinson give us an impossible acrobatic squirrel "balancing on its tail" when the Bengali simply has the animal — as Radice accurately puts it — "sitting on his tail." This is a visually accurate image, as anyone who takes a walk in the park will know.

In their Glossary Dutta and Robinson correctly define *chatu* as "fine flour made of maize, barley, etc." (The Radice-Parvin book doesn't have a glossary and could have done with a brief one) *Chatu* is poor man's fare and consequently something of little value is called *chatu* in Bangla slang. Thus we may say that Dutta and Robinson make *chatu* of the bit where *chatu* occurs in the text. They make Amals say. Then he opened his sack, took out some maize flour, kneaded it with water, and ate *chatu*. Now, maize-flour is *chatu*, whether in its dry state or as a ready-to-eat paste. But in this awkward sentence it seems either that the flour has to be mixed with water to get *chatu*, or, more amusingly, that after kneading the flour with water the man at something else called *chatu*.

We have only come to the end of Act

One is a three-act play. But enough is enough. Let students be set the task of comparing the three English translations of the play as a tutorial assignment.

Combing through the whole of Radice's translation I found only two sentences that could be called a little clumsy:

(i) "The Kabiraj says that with three humours at once in his young body so badly disturbed — wind, bile, phlegm — there isn't much hope.

(ii) "Rain or shine, rich or poor — going round all the houses delivering letters — a grand job."

As for other aspects of the two rival editions, Radice's introduction is more informative and critically sound than Anita Desai's brief comments and the Dutta-Robinson preface put together; and the photographs from two productions of the play and Wajda's film on Korezak in the Radice-Parvin book are more telling than McCurdy's woodcuts, which are unimaginative and give the play a small-town setting, complete with neatly paved streets; the presence of the moral "village headman" clearly indicates a rural setting. I have one complaint against the Radice-Parvin book, though. It is based on a 1993 Oxford/London production and sets down the complete play within the play arrangement used then. To the reader this may appear to be an appropriation of Tagore's text. Better if the bits added by Parvin were provided in an appendix.

(Processor Kaiser Haq's review first appeared in South Asia Research, published by Oxford University Press, UK)

profile

Anthony Powell: A Major English Novelist

by A S M Nurunnabi

ANTHONY Powell is considered a major English novelist. This estimation rests chiefly on his 12-volume sequence 'A Dance to the Music of Time'. He had, however, published five wholly readable novels in the 1930s. His career as a novelist was substantially interrupted by military service in first world war. After the war he at first got himself back into literary training as an editor and biographer, writing among other things, the literary, antiquarian, and philosophical scene of the 17th century. It is, however, recognised that the following years in his writing career contributed to a richer and riper eventual harvest.

His earlier novels, wittily contrived and always urbane in tone, take for their subject matter those social eche-ions observed and depicted contemporaneously by Aldous Huxley and Evelyn Waugh. For examples, 'Afternoon Men' explores the communal distractions and private gambits of upper-middle-class London society, if not wholly in decline and fall, at any rate starting to break up. 'Venusberg' carries the exploration further, both in terms of its thematic focus on Europe after the Bolshevik revolution and of its technically tighter organisation as a novel. In 'From a View to a Death' Powell turned to English rural society as yet rather less shaken by change, and, in the country-house setting and the theme of the artist who is determined to marry well, we find a pre-echo of themes in the major work to come. 'What's Become of

Waring' is a teasing story about an author who, for what turn out to be very good reasons, conceals his own life behind a screen of mystery.

It is possible to find in these earlier novels signposts pointing towards 'A Dance to the Music of Time'. In this most important novel, when considered as a whole, one is conscious that Powell presents his readers with a vast panorama that charts over 50 years of English life in the 20th century. His narratives evolve a brooding meditation on time and life and their growing patterns, whose faintly melancholic mood is relieved by acceptance of the ultimate logic of human affairs. The major theme which emerges from this meditation is the contrast between sensitive imagination and bludgeoning force. Men of imagination survive creatively as members of the human family; while

men of power destroy and are finally destroyed along with their own transient creations. The wit, elegance, and irony, both amused and amusing, are constantly deployed throughout each component part of the sequence and this powerfully imaginative wizardry invests the work with the secret harmonies whose resolution finally is reached in the last volume.

Often referred to as a social history, the series, set mainly within intersecting circles of fashionable and Bohemian society, contains hundreds of characters, closely observed by Nicholas Jenkins, the first-person narrator representing a generation whose youth was shadowed by the first war, adulthood disrupted by the second, and later life dampened by the post war climate. Because the novel is rich in amusing characters and incidents, readers may forget

the underlying seriousness with which Powell pictures individual and societal changes, unfolding a story both comic and melancholy.

Large metaphorical reference is one of the major devices Powell uses to underpin the structure of this outstanding novel. The cast of brilliantly presented major and minor characters is bound together in the metaphor derived from the painting by Poussin at the beginning of the novel. Life is a dance in which individuals move now in recognisable evolutions, now in seemingly meaningless gyrations, while partners disappear only to appear again, once more giving pattern to the spectacle, as Powell with extraordinary skill handles a multitude of strands of characters, places, and events in order to weave his grand design.

On completing his major work, Pow-

ell turned to the writing of his engaging and illuminating memoirs. These were followed by two novels, mannered but consciously so, which carry their learning and wit with characteristic urbanity and elegance.

'A Dance to the Music of Time' is generally considered as Anthony Powell's outstanding achievement. Inevitably, the sequence in that novel has been compared with works of other serial novelists of this century, especially Proust, Waugh, and Snow, whose series also contain elements of social history. Yet Powell's achievement is distinctive. Powell's vision is more humane than Waugh's, his language more allusive, more charged with implication than Snow's. Powell's main character is more outward looking self-absorbed than Proust's.

poems

Stop. stop. stop. and nothing does

by Nuzhat Amin Mannan

homeless sparrows drop brown and speckled, knobs and knots like music flattening blue hills flop.

circles like hollow bones climb and fly to the top cold as whisper, smooth as a spot.

On reading Langston Hughes' poem called 'What happens to a dream deferred?'

"What happens to a dream deferred?"

Not much, Langston Hughes.

Dreams don't become shrivelled "raisins" or oozing "sores" or like "rotten meat" does it frankly expose itself by its stench

It doesn't coolly caramelise nor "sag" like an indecorous bag.

"Does it explode?" you ask

No. no. no. No bangs, whimpers no snivelling, no explosions

bad time, empty stares and vacant caves just become a whole lot of unleadled leisure

Mr Hughes.



Bedtime (Dedicated to M Huq)

Boom. boom. womb goes the clock in the hall bedtime for me bedtime for teddy softly clutching me Rain pattering in the window the only breather me but every time I look there's some one else Besides teddy and me.

Boom. boom. womb goes the clock in the hall bedtime for me bedtime for lonely pills, hot water bottles gently clutching me Rain pattering in the window too, too quiet — see every time I breathe, Lonely's watching me.



What we had in life before the e-mail

We had time B.C and all our cumulative mess A.D and much much later we got the I.M.F.

corpuscles in our blood with its T.C, D.C, E.S.R, H.I.V to become alien, struggling, outnumbered by.

We had our kids in K.F.C joints and our teenaged ones on L.S.D. grown up groupies glued — their puppy necks sleek over sining P.Cs.

We had the U.N, the M.N.Cs and the CNN — to owe to, to know who we are — we the L.D.Cs waited for a quick fix : (sharp, swift and painless) from a world itself impaled, abbreviated, punctuated by solid caps matter-of-factly dotted.

From Amrapali to Amar Polli: a Reverse Journey

by Rebecca Haque

Not cluster bombs but cluster villages, Not destruction but construction, Not devastation but rejuvenation, Not confrontation but exploration, Not humiliation but celebration, Not renunciation but reciprocation.

Not desuetude but vicissitude, Not solitude but plenitude, Not servitude but beatitude.

Therefore, my bengal, I choose to be, Not sanyasini, birohini, but malini, ragini.

Not nagini, But toposhini.