

essay

Goethe and Tagore: An Evaluation and Inspiration

by Dr Martin Kampchen

Continued from last week

SENSUAL love became a creative force from his early adolescence. Goethe's love poetry has sometimes been termed frivolous and his life-long pre-occupation with amorous conquests has exasperated critics who insist that their most eminent classical writer should be more restrained and conservative. Yet the expression of the pleasures and pangs of love had a therapeutic effect on Goethe. His first major work, written at the age of 25 years, *Die Leiden des jungen Werther* ("The Sorrows of Young Werther"), was a novel in the form of a series of letters. It expressed a young man's unrequited passion which lead him to suicide. The book created a sensation; it was banned in some parts of Germany. Still it found a number of imitators who saw, like Werther, their only solace in suicide. Goethe, however, had cured himself of the love-disease by penning his book.

His sensuality was, however, just one aspect of Goethe's keen joy in any kind of perception by the senses. He particularly sought the joy of experiencing, tasting the world around through his eyes. He was a typical *Augenmensch* — a person who experiences life with his eyes. In this Goethe was similar to Rabindranath's own disposition. We recall young Amal's ecstatic cry in *Dakghar: am dekhbo kebal dekhbo*. In the song of the watch-tower's warden in the Second Part of Faust, Goethe lends lasting expression to his predilection of enjoying the world by seeing it:

*Keen vision my dower,
Placed here for my sight,
And sworn to the tower,
In the world I delight.
I gaze at the far,
I look at the near,
The moon and the star,
The wood and the deer
In all things around me
Is grace without end,
And as they astound me,
Myself I commend. (Faust II, V)*

A year later, in 1775, barely 26 years of age, Johann Wolfgang Goethe arrived at the small town of Weimar in the east of Germany never to take up residence in Frankfurt again and never to shift his residence elsewhere. Invited by the Duke of Weimar, Carl August, Goethe had gone to visit Weimar and to spend some time at the Duke's court. Yet hardly two months later, Goethe decided to remain. The Duke took him into his salaried employment as a Civil Servant and Minister with a variety of duties to perform. Carl August became his employer and patron, friend and councillor. Goethe apparently enjoyed his duties as an administrator. It helped him to get involved in various areas of social life, and to study human nature. It certainly gave him sufficient leisure to write and study, to maintain a large circle of friends by correspondence and personal interaction, to entertain generously, if not lavishly, to indulge such pastimes as satirical writing against his critics and even to travel quite frequently.

Through Goethe Weimar became what it is famous for: the seat of classical German literature. For a German, Weimar has become synonymous with Goethe. In Weimar and on his travels, Goethe was creatively active continuously. He was a bubbling fountain of productivity working on several smaller and larger projects simultaneously, constantly revising and remod-

elling already completed, also already published works. Even while traveling or visiting friends he penned quick poems, made notes, read books. Being enormously social, he loved to collaborate with other writers, or with painters, musicians and with people from the theatre.

One of the duties at the Weimar court which absorbed Goethe was the establishment and direction of a professional theatre. Like Rabindranath, he became interested in all aspects of the theatre. Goethe wrote, translated and adapted plays for the Weimar stage. He also arranged for operas to be staged — although he did not, like Tagore, compose songs himself. Goethe arranged for the stage props and the lighting, and he directed numerous plays — his own and those of others. Goethe acted himself, again like Tagore used to do. The theatre of Weimar was the place where classical German culture was first conceptualised and then was made to take firm roots. This theatre became the seat of classical German culture.

There were three long-term literary projects to which Goethe lend his creative energies for the best part of his life. They were the drama Faust, the twin novel Wilhelm Meister, and his scientific treatise on colours. By reviewing these project, I hope we can comprehend the principal concerns of Goethe's life as a writer.

Goethe's best-known drama is Faust. It preoccupied him throughout his almost entire life. He discovered the German medieval fable of Dr Faustus even before he moved to Weimar. He began writing the *Urfaust*, the "Original Faust" in Frankfurt. This rudimentary play gradually evolved into "Faust First Part." To this Goethe added a "Faust Second Part" in his advanced old age.

Faust is a man whose desire for knowledge and insights is unceasing. He is consumed by the burning desire "zu wissen, was die Welt/im Innersten zusammenhalt" ("that I may perceive whatever holds/The world together in its inmost folds"). For the fulfilment of this desire he succumbs to temptation and enters into a pact with the devil. The devil promises Faust to show and to explain to him everything there is to be seen and understood in the world. This is the archetypal situation of man desiring to overreach himself, of confessing what is humanly possible with what is divinely possible. We see a similar situation in the Old Testament where Adam and Eve are tempted by Satan; and in the New Testament when Jesus Christ is led on a mountain and is being tempted by the Evil One. Rather than becoming superhuman, or divine, Faust, through his alliance with the Devil becomes dependent and weak.

The person of Faust has often been described as the archetypal German, and Faust as a deeply "German" play. Let us listen to the play's opening lines which is Faust's self-characterising monologue:

*I've studied now Philosophy
And Jurisprudence, Medicine,
And even, alas! Theology
All through and through with ardour keen!
Here now I stand, poor fool, and see
I'm just as wise as formerly.
Am called a Master, even Doctor too,
And now I've nearly ten years through.
Pulled my students by their noses to and fro
and up and down, across, about.
And see there's nothing we can know!
That all but burns my heart right out."*

The devil thoroughly disappoints

Faust, but once on his job, he cannot be shaken off easily. Only at the very end Faust is absolved from his sin of making a deal with the Evil One. God's grace and Divine Eros draw Faust up to heaven.

There was another project which had absorbed Goethe for several decades. This was his novel on Wilhelm Meister written in two parts, namely *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* ("Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship Years") and *Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre* ("Wilhelm Meister's Travel Years"). As will be apparent by now, Goethe did not see himself merely as a writer. Very much like Rabindranath after the Nobel Prize, Goethe assumed the role of the Educator of his Nation. He became the representative voice of the German people. He understood his historic mission to set before his people in a variety of ways the model of a "complete man" who has fully interiorised the ideals of classical education. In his two-volume *Wilhelm Meister* Goethe narrated the evolution of a human being who, from childhood to adulthood, experiences the classical methods and contents of education.

The third project encompassing several decades of his life was the *Farbenlehre*, his "Theory of Colours." In fact, Goethe's interest in the natural sciences was so keen and basic to his core concerns that, while reading his biography, one may sometimes doubt whether he was more of a scientific researcher than a writer. Starting from his early adulthood, he studied anatomy, geology, especially mineralogy, botany and biology, physics and chemistry. In 1784, Goethe discovered a particular bone in the formation of the human jaw. He made good use of his trips to visit museums, meet scientists, see private collections. His "theory of Colours" was written after decades of physical experiments and have their validity until today.

We have sketched Goethe's three major literary projects which meandered through his life like leitmotifs: the drama Faust, the twin novel *Wilhelm Meister* and the scientific treatise on Colours. Next we must mention two major literary associations which shaped Goethe's life from his middle years onwards: this is his complicated friendship with the German poet Friedrich Schiller and his study of the Persian poet Hafis.

Schiller is the second major writer of classical German literature after Goethe. Ten years younger to the great master, he was also of an entirely different temperament. Goethe: light-hearted, poetic and expansive, intuitive and led by moodswings; Schiller: ponderous, moralistic and a great philosophical conceptualiser, an ascetic driven on by sheer will-power. It was Goethe who, after a first meeting with Schiller, arranged a professorship at the University of Jena — not far from Weimar — for the rather impoverished writer. This was in 1788. Their friendship grew at first hesitantly. But from 1794 until 1805, the year of Schiller's premature death, their friendship developed into intensive interaction and collaboration. Schiller started a journal *Die Horen* to which Goethe became a principal contributor. Schiller's proximity inspired Goethe in resuming his work on Faust, in writing his magnificent long narrative poems and many other major and minor texts. In fact, the two wrote their ballads almost simultaneously by mutual inspiration. So deep was their collaboration that when Goethe conceived of a drama

on the Swiss national hero Wilhelm Tell, he left his material to Schiller to mould it into a play. This Schiller did most successfully.

Yet, there were tensions, too: Schiller, the disciplinarian, considered it his sacred duty to prod and nudge Goethe's genius towards even greater productivity. And Goethe invented ever new ways to elude and escape. It was Schiller himself who created the two terms that pinpoint the polarity of their two natures: Goethe was a "naive" poet who poured out images in a natural flow welling up from within. By contrast, Schiller was a "sentimental" writer who conceived ideas which he then fashioned into dialogues and storylines.



Schiller was no primeval, original poet, like Goethe, but first and foremost a thinker. The correspondence between the naive poet and the sentimental writer is part of World Literature. The decade from 1794 to 1805 is considered the period proper of German Classical Literature.

After Schiller died and other great contemporary figures like Herder, Wieland and Lavater had gone, Goethe remained alone and lonely on the Olymp of poetry. The literary style of the day moved from the firmness and clarity he had projected as a model, to a romantic mellowness and formless-

ness. In his old age, Goethe saw himself more and more in opposition to the Romantics ruling the day. Once before he had taken refuge from the suffocating social climate of Weimar and fled to Italy. There he as a young man had roamed among the remnants of a long passed age of heroic antiquity. Goethe had returned to Germany rejuvenated. Now, in his mid-sixties, he took flight for a second time. This time he found refuge in the study of the Persian poet Hafis. The orientalist Josef von Hammer-Purgstall had translated Hafis' collection of poetry, the *Divan* in 1814. Deeply impressed, Goethe spontaneously began to pen the poems which constitute his *West-östlicher Divan* ("The West-Eastern Divan"). Their significant opening lines are:

*Nord und west und Süd zersplittern,
Throne bersten, Rajched Zittern,
Fluchte du, im reinen Osten
Patriarchenluft zu kosten...
('North and West and South are shattered, thrones are sinking, kingdoms tremble. In the pure East do take refuge, breathe the air of patriarchs.')*

On the whole, Goethe was not sympathetically inclined towards the India of Hinduism, although he wrote two significant ballads based on Indian myths — *Der Gott und die Bajadere* ("The God and the Bayaders") and *Paria* ("The Pariah") — and an admiring little poem on *Sakuntala*. As an elderly man, Goethe felt increasingly threatened by wild and chaotic circumstances preferring the noble composure of his classical ideal. Hence the polytheistic reality of Hinduism appalled him. With a reference to temple sculptures, Goethe wrote:

*In Indien möcht' ich selder leben,
hätte es nur keine Steinhauer
gegeben.*

("I might have liked to live in India/if no sculptors had existed there.")

Hafis was different. Goethe considered him a kindred spirit. First, Hafis' poetic world reminded Goethe — as the opening lines of the *Divan* acknowledge — of the world of the patriarchs in the Old Testament. Hence the transition to this new realm of experience was not a radical one. Muslim monotheism was a familiar and safe terrain. Hafis' poetry combined a temperate worldly liberalism with an inclination towards mysticism. Goethe fled to this "pure East" for emotional and intellectual comfort.

With this "Pure East"-theory, Goethe established and confirmed the orientalist paradigm which claims that the orient is pure, childlike and natural whereas the occident is degenerate, artificial and is in need for the orient to return to its original state of innocence. To the German Romantics this theory was a major aspect of their world-view. Yet, Goethe did not elaborate further. Basically, his experience of Hafis was for him yet another conquest of a new territory of the mind. First Goethe had moved southward to classical Italy and Greece, thereafter eastward to Persia. It was an attempt at forever broadening the experience of classical University whose aim was a fully human humankind.

This takes us back to Rabindranath Tagore. He, a man of the East himself, fully subscribed to this "pure East"-paradigm. In fact, he developed the clichéd dichotomy of the "spiritual East" and the "materialistic West" in his many lectures held in Europe and America and his letters to CF Andrews written from the West. In a way, this "spiritual East"-paradigm was for Tagore a tool against India's political

conquerors and colonisers, who were thus quasi "conquered" spiritually. Yet, both Goethe and Tagore had the Unity of "East" and "West" in mind, not any opposition and antagonism. They were convinced of the mutual complementarity of "east" and "west" and thus themselves profited from it.

Here are a few lines from Goethe's *Divan* confirming this Unity:
*Wer sich selbst und andre kennt
Wird auch hier erkennen:
Orient und Okcident
Sind nicht mehr zu trennen.
Sinnig zwischen beiden Welten
Sich zu wiegen. Laß ich gelten;
Also zwischen Ost-und Westen
Sich bewegen, sei's zum Besten!*
(Der West-östliche Divan: Aus dem Nach lab)

("Those who know themselves and others/will confirm this here with me: Orient and Occident/are no more apart./I love to swing from one world to another/I move from East to West and back again./ that will be best.")

For both Goethe and Tagore, Universality meant breadth and depth of knowledge and experience. Their inherent idealistic belief was that knowing another culture and people will inadvertently draw one closer to this culture and its people: Just by knowing another culture one realises the underlying unity of one's home culture and the alien culture. As a result, both went on studying the literatures, the art and music traditions of far-flung peoples in order to broaden the content of their own humanistic universality.

From this conviction flows their mission as educators of their people. Tagore established Visva-Bharati as an instrument of world peace. Goethe, in turn, chose the theatre as a "moral institution" in which he could experiment with and propagate his ideas of universal education.

In conclusion allow me to return to a point made earlier. I have mentioned that both Goethe and Tagore were deeply engrossed in the visual attraction of the world. They loved to see, watch, observe nature as well as human beings: they were both devotees of physical beauty in nature and humans. Their inspiration welled up at a thing of beauty, and more than once they confessed that beauty brought them face to face with Divinity.

In Rabindranath's poetry we are often unsure whether he sings worshipfully of a woman or of God in female form. He keeps the definite meaning purposefully vague allowing for the two to fuse. With Goethe, too, his love for woman had such deep layers of meaning that he worshipped her as the "Eternal Feminine" in which both the human and the divine are inextricably combined. Faust at the end of the drama's Second Part finds redemption not by a Christian God, not by angels or by saints, but by the Eternal Feminine which "draw him up" into a celestial sphere.

It is my conviction that this "worldly mysticism" defines the most distinct and most basic similarity between these two world poets. A poet is perforce tied to the experience of his senses in order to continue to be creative. Goethe and Tagore both understood that this creative process is, at the same time, their path to salvation, their way to God. Or saying it is the words of the great Bengali Poet:
*asankhya bandhan-majhe ma hanandamay
Tabhita mukhtir svad. (Naibedyo 30)
'Futangled in a thousand lousds
I taste with deep joy my freedom.*

poems

A Selection of Poems

by Razia Sultana Khan

The Elusive Muse

I thought of a poem last night:
an idea, an expression,
it barely touched my consciousness.
Too lazy I let it drift.

Now ready, paper and pencil in hand
I search the elusive muse.

The Joy of Painting

The joy of touching a barren canvas:
the emptiness giving birth to life.
Each stroke brings it closer to fruition.
Each dab of colour makes a difference;
moulding the images.
And when reality fades,
like a phoenix reborn
the image lives on.

What do you do?

'So what do you do?'
'Nothing,' I say softly with an apologetic smile.
The other woman looks at me, her eyes accusing.
'What a waste,' they say.
'The country needs workers.'
Her accusations flow over me.
'I am a house wife,' I add softly.
'I only clean.
wash
cook
nurse,
and take care of the family.
I am just a housewife.'

First Impressions on a Slum

Thatched hut, bits of plastic covering the roof, stapled with bricks,
the cellophane ends flutter in the hot breeze.
Keeps the sun, wind and rain out.
A woman comes out with a baby, looks up.
Goes on her way — content.
Thatched hut lined with cement bags:

they're cheaper and work just as well.
Keeps the wind, rain and sun out.
A woman comes out looks up,
heaves a sign of — relief?

The door? a bamboo mat
bordered with bamboo stick is ready at one side.
Keeps intruders out.
Come night it will find a place.
Will keep the wind, rain and sun out.

Thatched hut quilted with patches of dark 'kathas'
The grime hiding their bright color and intricate patterns.
Oozing out the night's secretions.
The outside stench engulfs the fresh odours.
Absorbing it before the sun can dry and disinfect.
Kept the cold out as well as the prying eyes
giving some semblance of privacy.

Privacy? what privacy?
Why not, homes are private.
The woman comes out, looks up,
smiles, and goes back into her home.

