

Sofiul Azam

Ain't It That Tagore's Spectre?

(for Amit Kumar Dhar)

"We have one sap and one root— / Let there be commerce between us."
— from "A Pact", Ezra Pound

1.

Yes, I'm indebted to you, Tagore,¹ like some of us
who filched a bit of greenery from your meadows—
the tidy brushwork for your land of heart's desire.² It's
you the Lord of our hearts and lands in Bengal,³ this
sizeable clout of yours not hanging by a thread.

But all that often, thwarted by your frowns, I stutter
as does a recalcitrant nipper clothed with scruples.
Even if I tone down the pitch of what I'm going to say,
I ain't that dyslexic nor ever picked a rapper's scrawl,
even though cajoled into a fit of a cacophony;

my brain's not slimmed down, even after I've felt
I'm almost rooted out from my ersatz Bengal—
the ground beneath us slipping like sand at low tide.
I just splutter how my sailing close to the wind began,
not yet that frightened off, nor ever into hiving off

part of my love for these two halves of Bengal.

¹ Rabindranath Tagore's (1861-1941) entire oeuvre includes many things concerning Bengali-oriented life and that in other places of the Indian subcontinent. He was the first Asian to be awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913.

² This phrase comes from the title of a play *The Land of Heart's Desire* by W. B. Yeats, which was published in 1884.

³ Bengal was divided into West Bengal and East Bengal in 1905 but this was postponed by the authority of the British Raj on account of native resistance in 1912. Later in 1947, the division of Bengal was enacted as a legal process for the partition of British India. Then West Bengal was handed over to India, and the new country Pakistan born out of a "two-nations" theory based on differences in religious practice took charge of East Bengal—also then called East Pakistan being the east wing of Pakistan—which broke free of the oppressive Pakistani rule and came into being as Bangladesh in 1971. However, the majority of people both in Bangladesh and West Bengal in India share the same cultural ties if not religious.

2.

I confess I have long since been out of a paradise
you singled out from other places on Earth; I still
remember walking along summer-fields by the marshes.

I'm not of the lunatic fringe living off cornstarch,
fellatio, kerb-crawling and smut, Durex and DVDs,
the kind of stuff like docudramas and the blockbusters,

nor of those after smarmy Levi's and slinky T-shirts.
These days culminate in the thinking: enough of time's
spent on my sartorial finesse and fads, on firecrackers,

on love a waste of regrets about pleasures in the flesh.

3.

Every so often I can't snap out of the blame: I'm
the chronicler of this citizenry's litany and the spoils,
something of a porcupine to your diehards; jeez
Tagore, I didn't fornicate with your sacred alphabet.

I don't write in your language but we are next of kin;
(facing a bit of kerfuffle about my roots, I take aspirins)
so never sort me out for my ravings of an inner émigré:
all of my resources being pruned back, I implore you

not to run out on me nor to dig around for bloopers
in my poems not quite the finest dross they appear to be.
You are par excellence the chronicler rattling on and on.
But anger smoulders inside me as you psych me out;

up until then, I sang your songs, except when the panic
came and struck the terror into me, there was never
the sweats, the shaking, the fear and the tears, nor ever
any spark that lit my life on fire and turned it to ash.

I shamble on this city's asphalt motorways, or drive,
blinded by smog, like a pawn on a chessboard. I'll have
my right of way through your back-slapping horde
of smartarses, I may have to give them a clout myself.

Ours is not a tale of the worthies forsaken for worms.
Not steady but nicknamed The Good Heart, your Lordship;
somehow or other, I'll muddle through your mud-slingers.
Not that you have to hear about all this crappy guff.

Now let there be a little commerce between us: I'll
e-mail my translations of you to publishers and sit
mesmerized long after the singing stops. I won't sell off
your hardcovers even if I'm hard up. I won't blot you

out of my memory, rather sing your songs in spring.⁴

⁴ This part of the line alludes to the last stanza of a poem "Year 1400" in the Bengali calendar by Tagore where he wished for his songs to be sung in praise of spring in the future by later Bengali poets.