



**NATIONALISM BEYOND FRONTIERS: A COMPARATIVE ESTIMATE OF THE VIEWS OF
RABINDRANATH TAGORE AND WILFRED OWEN**

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Though not the first war humanity has ever witnessed, the First World War, still known many years later by the adjective 'Great', was unprecedented in its range, immensity of its impact and the response it engendered likewise from the literary world. Accordingly, it was during the events of 1914-1918 that the term 'War poet' gained wide currency. A group of young poets, some of whom were also soldiers in their personal life, came forward to write poetry about the war. One of the foremost of them is Wilfred Edward Salter Owen, whose thread of life was cut short at the age of twenty-five while leading his platoon to the west bank of the Sambre and Oise Canal early in the morning of November 4, 1918. While visiting London in 1920, Rabindranath Tagore received a letter from the British poet's mother Susan Owen which read, most heart-warmingly: "...It is nearly two years ago, that my dear eldest son went out to the War for the last time and the day he said Goodbye to me—we were looking together across the sun-glorified sea—looking towards France with breaking hearts—when he, my poet son, said these wonderful words of yours... 'when I leave, let these be my parting words: what my eyes have seen, what my life received, are unsurpassable'. And when his pocket book came back to me—I found these words written in his dear writing—with your name beneath." (Ghoshal) Susan's reference to Tagore's 'wonderful words' from Gitanjali verse 96 bespeaks of a profound influence of the Nobel Laureate on young Wilfred Owen, otherwise a very different poet from Tagore. Intending to explore the underlying kinship beneath the facade of their apparent dissimilarity, this paper concerns itself with the response towards nationalism and nationhood that surface in the writings of these two literary figures across the globe.

The outbreak of the First World War in August 1914 was greeted with a surge of patriotic emotion in England. The war was at the outset, an affair of the whole nation, passionately convinced that it was embarking on a crusade for a righteous cause. As Sir Maurice Bowra says: "Love of country is far too deeply ingrained in human nature for most men not to feel grave anxiety and fear when their land is in danger, and their first reaction is that they must do all that they can to save it." (Bowra 8) Furthermore, the lure of excitement after years of drab routine caused the war at the outset to be actually welcomed by the great majority of those who found themselves caught in it, a fact that Sir Maurice Bowra describes as a 'tragic paradox' (Bowra 4) of the war. Accordingly, most of the poets of the Great War, like other young men of England, were volunteers from civilian life. So too was our poet in question, Wilfred Owen, though the over-enthusiastic, patriotic fervour has never really defined Owen's response to war

Born in an obscure, border town of Oswestry, Wilfred Owen was educated first at a minor fee paying school in Birkinhead and later at a technical school in Shrewsbury. As a result of this provincial background, Owen was at some remove from the main currents of English life. He had not been indoctrinated in the imperialistic spirit



that most of the great and typical public schools in those days went in for. Mention in this regard may be made of C. K. Ogden and Mary Sargant Florence's article '*Militarism versus Feminism: an enquiry and a policy demonstrating that Militarism involves the subjection of women*' (1915) as cited by Jennifer Breen: "English public schools...turn out an imperial race, a race of warriors, and it is not without significance that they are constructed on the barracks system, and that their sport is all mimic warfare." Moreover, they observed that, at the turn of the century in state elementary schools, children were drilled into "passive obedience." (Breen 5) Furthermore, in August 1914, when the war broke out, Owen was in the Pyrenees, acting as a tutor in a cultivated French household. As a result he was out of touch with the surge of enthusiasm that swept over England when war was declared. Owen himself declares in his letter of August 10, 1914, that he wrote to his youngest brother, Colin Owen: "I have only a faint idea of what is going on, and what is felt, in England..." While in most of the capital cities of Europe there was a good deal of hysterical gaiety, Owen came across a different picture in France that he recorded in his letter to his mother, Susan Owen, on August 1, 1914: "Women were weeping all about; work was suspended. Nearly all the men have already departed...Nobody is very gay." (Owen *Collected Letters* 272) Meanwhile, "in the hands of most amiable friends, away from danger to life, and sure enough of food" (Owen *Collected Letters* 272), Owen nevertheless continues "to be immensely happy and famously well." (Owen *Collected Letters* 273). In such a situation he expresses contradictory views about whether he would enlist or not. In a letter written to Susan Owen on December 2, 1914, one finds him suffering "a good deal of shame" because "The Daily Mail speaks very movingly about the 'duties shirked' by English young men." "But" he declares, "I shall go on playing with my little axiom that: - my life is worth more than my death to Englishmen." (Owen *Collected Letters* 300) He keeps track of latest developments, e.g. the 'Annexation of the Scarborough affair', 'the Fall of Berlin' (Owen *Collected Letters* 311), at the same time, the war in question seems very remote even when he warms to a vision of himself in the British army: "I want to visit the battlefield of Castillon, where, in 1453 Talbot Sail of Shrewsbury suffered the defeat which lost Guienne and Bordeaux to the English for ever...I am reading a tale of the Punic wars with more interest than the communiqués." (Owen *Collected Letters* 348) Furthermore, British army was not an automatic choice. For a while he played half-seriously with the alternatives of serving in the French army or joining the Italian cavalry. That war was not his main concern is evident in a letter in which, explaining his desire to join the French army, Wilfred Owen says that: "Everything, even insults (my inefficient fumbling with a rifle will surely bring these down upon me) will be much more bearable in French – after all they will even increase my vocabulary..." (Owen *Journey from Obscurity* 121) During his visit to a hospital in Bordeaux where the casualties had just arrived from the front Owen was for the first time brought up hard against the facts of war. Here too he noticed the German wretches more seriously wounded than the French, and being treated without the slightest distinction from the French, that he describes in a letter of September 23, 1914, to his younger brother Harold as "the actualities of the war." (Owen *Collected Letters* 285)

Thus even before his eventual enlistment in the Artists' Rifles in October 1915, Owen's writings offer a glimpse of a compassionate attitude, capable of reaching out beyond national boundaries. It is here that his kinship is manifest with the great visionary Tagore. A champion of international solidarity Tagore has a strong apathy for aggressive nationalism which promotes fragmentation and splintered view of humanity. In 'Nationalism in the



West', one of a series of lectures delivered throughout the United States during the winter of 1916-17, Tagore discusses the different implications of the terms society and nation. Society according to Tagore is a wider term which "as such has no ulterior purpose. It is an end in itself. It is a spontaneous self-expression of man as a social being." (Tagore *Nationalism* 19) Nation, on the other hand "in the sense of the political and economic union of a people, is that aspect which a whole population assumes when organized for a mechanical purpose." (Tagore 19) Under pretext of 'self-preservation' (Tagore *Nationalism* 20) it narrows down to "the side of power, not of human ideals." (Tagore *Nationalism* 20) Strongly critical of the concept of nationhood in the west, Tagore finds it driven by materialistic, technological advancement that is prone to becoming increasingly self-centred, ruthlessly competitive and at its extreme level, alarmingly destructive to the human society at large. Replacing cooperation, this fierce competition paves way for serious confrontation when the rival nations meet as enemies in the battlefield. In his poem 'The Sunset of the Century', a veritable part of his anti-nationalist discourse, composed in 1899 Tagore has already predicted: "The hungry self of the Nation shall burst in a / violence of fury from its own shameless / feeding. / For it has made the world its food, / And licking it, crunching it, and swallowing it in / big morsels, / It swells and swells". (Tagore *Nationalism* 157) The First World War is a large-scale manifestation of such inversion of the natural order in human society. Offset by the same, the finer sensibilities of both Tagore and Owen, despite their different vantage points have strongly resisted adulation of such constricted, delimiting and potentially destructive nationhood.

In such a situation, patriotism is deemed a veritable obstacle to universal peace and brotherhood. In a letter to his friend A. M. Bose Tagore declares: "I will never allow patriotism to triumph over humanity as long as I live." (Ghoshal) Never really a war enthusiast, Owen's poetry comes in direct conflict with the patriotic war poetry articulated, most popularly at that time by Rupert Brooke. 'An Imperial Elegy' or 'Libretto for Marche Funibre', one of his early compositions penned during his musketry courses in the army base, runs thus: "Not one corner of a foreign field / But a span as wide as Europe, / Deep as [] / I looked and saw. / An appearance of a titan's grave, / And the length thereof a thousand miles. / It crossed all Europe like a mystic road, / Or as the Spirits' pathway lieth on the night. / And I heard a voice crying, / This is the path of Glory." (Stallworthy 453) This is Owen's response to Brooke's passionately enthusiastic utterances in 'The Soldier': "If I should die, think only this of me: / That there's some corner of a foreign field / That is forever England..." (Brooke 15) Gazetted to the Manchester Regiment, Owen joined the Second Battalion in France in January 1917 only to return to Britain as a shell-shocked victim of the war. Admitted to the Craiglockhart war hospital he was introduced to Siegfried Sassoon and his war poems which had a great bearing on Owen's compositions hereafter. He rejoined his regiment in Scarborough in June 1918 and in August he returned to France firmly resolved to 'cry my outcry'. (Owen *Collected Letters* 568) During this period he penned down some of his most scathing rebuke of vain patriotism. In his poem 'Dulce Et Decorum Est' dealing with a gas attack and the subsequent death of a soldier probably in memory of the night when Owen himself had "got overtaken by GAS" (Owen *Collected Letters* 428) Owen blatantly denounces "The old Lie: Dulce et Decorum est. / Pro patria mori" (Stallworthy 140) which implies in Latin, as Owen has clarified in his letter of October 16, 1917: "It is sweet and meet to die for one's country. Sweet! And decorous!" (Owen *Collected Letters* 500) His poem 'A Terre' depicts a maimed soldier whose sordid experiences have completely changed his philosophy of life. "We used



to say we'd hate to live dead-old. / Yet now...I'd willingly be puffy, bald / And patriotic." (Stallworthy 178) The shadow of death that is looming large on him has brought to fore his instinctive desire for life that has been so far treacherously subdued by the advocacy of certain bombastic notions of patriotism. In 'Smile, Smile Smile' Owen parodies the speeches of the politicians who, sitting safe and secure at home, exalt the bloodshed in the battlefield as a glorious endeavour to safeguard the nation's integrity. Such patriotic sentiments though taken in by the ignorant civilians provoke derisive laughter from the soldiers who have been come back physically handicapped from the warfront. They smile ironically in knowledge of the secret: "That England one by one had fled to France, / Not many elsewhere now, save under France." (Stallworthy 190) By sending the youth to fight in France, most of whom now lie buried under French soil, England has been bereft of her essential and most valuable segment.

One of the ardent champions of peace and universal brotherhood, Tagore castigates the "National manufactory" for turning men "in huge numbers as war-making and money-making puppets". (Tagore *Nationalism* 58) Leading to bloodbath this nation fetishism is according to him a 'deformity' which eventually cannot contain "its ugly voluminousness, - till it begins to crack and gape, breathe gas and fire in gasps, and its death-rattles sound in cannon roars. In this war, the death-throes of the Nation have commenced." (Tagore *Nationalism* 59) Owen amply depicts this corrosiveness of war in his poems. He depicts the soldiers as "Pale rain-flawed phantom of the place..." ('Six O' Clock in Princes Street Stallworthy 102) in dying moments whose blood "Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs, / Obscene as cancer, bitter as cud" ('Dulce Et Decorum Est' Stallworthy 140); These "men who die as cattle" are accompanied by: "Only the monstrous anger of the guns. / Only the stuttering rifles rapid rattle". ('Anthem for Doomed Youth' Stallworthy 99) 'Cramped in That Funnelled Hole' is replete with memories of his shell-shocking experiences. The soldiers are trapped in a funnelled hole that is no better than 'one of many mouths of Hell', where the onset of each dawn implies a fresh yawn of death's jaws, eager to swallow them. Those still living are in close communion with the dead and buried, the former even smelling the latter 'Under the mud-trap...' (Blunden 55)

With profound respect for humanity whom God has created in his own image, Tagore believes that man "has his responsibilities to the higher faculties of his nature" (Tagore *Nationalism* 14) "Man in his fullness is not powerful, but perfect. Therefore, to turn him into mere power, you have to curtail his soul as much as possible. When we are fully human, we cannot fly at one another's throats; our instincts of social life, our traditions of moral ideals stand in the way. If you want me to take to butchering human beings, you must break up that wholeness of my humanity through some discipline which makes my will dead, my thoughts numb, my movements automatic, and then from the dissolution of the complex personal man will come out that abstraction, that destructive force, which has no relation to human truth and therefore can be easily brutal or mechanical." (Tagore *Nationalism* 50) In a similar vein Owen in his poem 'Insensibility', composed in March 1918 depicts the insensitive soldiers, whom 'no compassion fleers', 'let their veins run cold' 'And some cease feeling / Even themselves or for themselves'. (Stallworthy 145) Constant sight of mass slaughter in the battlefield has deadened their finer feelings and sentiment. In his personal life, Owen primarily known for his finer sensibilities and tenderness of feeling may not have been totally unacquainted with such fits of



insensibility as is indicated in his letter of January 7, 1917: “I have no Fancies and no Feeling. Positively they went numb with my feet.” (Owen *Collected Letters* 424) In ‘Inspection’ Owen dwells on the inhuman aspect of military discipline that cannot excuse a soldier for being “dirty on parade”, the dirt being nothing but a spot of the soldier’s own blood due to a wound he has received on a previous fight. (Stallworthy 95) ‘The Dead-Beat’ presents an appalling picture of the military personnel’s insensitive attitude towards a soldier whose body has apparently collapsed under the strain of war. Unable to make him stand on his feet, they send him to a hospital at last, under the suspicion that the soldier might have been ‘malingering’. The Doctor too, could not have cared less as with a ‘well-whiskied laugh’, he reports “That scum you sent last night soon died. Hooray.” (Stallworthy 144) Composed in the context of an ongoing battle in September 1918, ‘Spring Offensive’ poignantly depicts the dehumanized spectacle of warring soldiers who under pretext of nationalistic interest “rushed in the body to enter hell, / And there out-fiending all its fiends and flames / With superhuman inhumanities, / Long-famous glories, immemorial shames”. (Stallworthy 193) ‘The Show’ initially titled ‘Vision’ presents a panoramic vision of the war-blasted landscape and in such a situation the loathsome dehumanization of the soldiers who appear as ‘thin caterpillars’. Towards, the end of the poem, reacting to his own vision in terror, the poet narrator falls ‘earthward like a feather’ only to find: “Death fell with me, like a deepening moan / And He, picking a manner of worm, which half had hid / Its bruises in the earth, but crawled no further, / Showed me its feet, the feet of many men, / And the fresh-severed head of it, my head.” (Stallworthy 155-6) In terms of an imaginative experience Owen reveals the world’s destiny and his own. The ‘destructive force’ (Tagore *Nationalism* 50) to quote Tagore is completely manifested with its own destruction in the end.

Owen’s harrowing experiences at the warfront made him yearn for peace. Inclined more towards literary than military activities from the very beginning, Owen is known to have been an ardent admirer of Romantic poetry, in particular that of John Keats. His stark portrayal of the underlying realities of war in his poems is indebted to a great extent to the mentoring of perhaps the most vehement anti-war poet Siegfried Sassoon. Yet Owen’s composition of the theme is such that it transcends the barriers of time and place. There is nothing in the compositions as such to indicate the topicality of their utterance and the nationalities of the combatants have been suppressed, but for a few poems. Even in those poems e.g. ‘Futility’, ‘The Show’, ‘Disabled’, as in others, there is no hint of the national bias of the poet. Instead of the enemies in the opposite camp who are viewed as fellow sufferers, the people responsible for the deplorable condition of the soldiers have been identified as the self-serving hypocritical politicians, the journalists with their misleading reports, the callously ignorant civilians, even the military officers, brutally indifferent to the sufferings of their men. The soldier is propelled to the front with a desire to please his family members (Self Inflicted Wound), sometimes ‘his Meg’, the ‘giddy jilts’ even ‘someone’ who ‘had said he’d look like a god in kilts’ all the while thinking ‘scarcely’ of the ‘Germans’ (Disabled). In the battlefield the wretched condition of the soldiers, to whichever side they may belong is no better than loathsome caterpillars, ‘brown strings’ of which, indicating the Englishmen in khaki, move ‘towards strings of gray’, indicating the Germans, ‘All migrants from green fields, intent on mire’, with the result that they ‘ate them and were eaten’. (Stallworthy 155) In ‘Mental Cases’, the shell-shocked victims of war are shown as “Picking at the rope-knouts of their scourging; / Snatching after us who smote them brother, - / Pawing us who dealt them war and madness”; ‘us’ implying the society that has dragged the soldiers to their



premature sacrifice, the poetic persona of Owen too being a part of it. When a tired, exhausted, disillusioned Owen searches for mental peace and comfort, he finds it in the philosophy imbued in the compositions of Rabindranath Tagore, the Nobel Laureate from colonial India. Tagore's words in 'The Sunset of the Century' ring very sweetly to the tired, aching soul: "Come, Peace, thou daughter of God's own great suffering. / Come with thy treasure of contentment, the sword of fortitude, / And meekness crowning thy forehead...Let your crown be of humility, your freedom the freedom of the soul." (Tagore *Nationalism* 158-159)

This anti-nationalist discourse in the works of Tagore and Owen ultimately culminates in a hopeful note. Seeking a way out from the ugly, fanatic, and eventually self-destructive display of nation fetishism, Tagore looks forward to posterity "who will break themselves free from the slavery of this illusion, this perversion of brotherhood founded upon self-seeking, those who will own themselves as God's children and as no bond-slaves of machinery, which turns souls into commodities and life into compartments, which, with its iron claws, scratches out the heart of the world and knows not what it has done." (Tagore *Nationalism* 60) In a similar vein, the concept of heroism that Owen idealizes far surpasses military activities. Mention here may be made of 'The Next war' in which Owen throws some illuminating light on it. "We laughed, knowing that better men would come, / And greater wars, when each proud fighter brags, / He wars on Death – for Life; not men – for flags." (Stallworthy 165) These 'better' and nobler type of men, will dedicate themselves not at the altar of patriotism or of war, but for the good of humanity at large. "And we can still cherish the hope," writes Tagore, "that, when power becomes ashamed to occupy its throne and is ready to make way for love, when the morning comes for cleansing the blood-stained steps of the Nation along the highroad of humanity, we shall be called upon to bring our own vessel of sacred water – the water of worship – to sweeten the history of man into purity, and with its sprinkling make the trampled dust of the centuries blessed with fruitfulness." (Tagore *Nationalism* 61) These words of Tagore are almost echoed in Owen's 'Strange Meeting', a visionary poem where the protagonist envisions his descent in hell and his subsequent meeting with the apparition of a soldier he had killed in the battlefield, the day before. Presented as an altar-ego of the protagonist who in all likelihood is the poet himself, the apparition rues his untimely death in the battlefield, but for which he would have halted "the march of this retreating world / Into vain citadels that are not walled. / Then, when much blood had clogged their chariot-wheels, / I would go up and wash them from sweet wells, / Even with truths that lie too deep for taint." (Stallworthy 148) Barely one week before the much awaited peace, Lieutenant Owen succumbed to canon shells leaving behind his war poetry destined to be posthumously published and acclaimed as enduring appeal for peace and universal brotherhood.

It is not therefore to imply that the Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore and the British war poet Wilfred Owen had no special feelings to spare for their own country and its people. "Neither the colourless vagueness of cosmopolitanism, nor the fierce self-idolatry of nation-worship is the goal of human history" (Tagore *Nationalism* 15) according to Tagore. His apparently anti-nationalistic stand does not make him lose sight of the need to nurture the characteristic traits that establish a country's identity worldwide. India, according to Tagore is defined by its "social life and attainment of spiritual ideals." (*Nationalism* 16) Inhabited by widely varying strands of humanity, India has tried to exemplify unity in diversity "through social regulation of differences, on



the one hand, and the spiritual recognition of unity, on the other.” (Tagore *Nationalism* 15) In the case of Wilfred Owen, his literary inclinations and love of mother language seem to have guided him consciously towards the British army in the Great War. Thus he declares on December 2, 1914: “Do you know what would hold me together on a battlefield? The sense that I was perpetuating the language in which Keats and the rest of them wrote. I do not know in what else England is greatly superior, or dearer to me, than another land and people.” (Owen *Collected Letters* 300) This reminds one of an earlier letter to his mother, dated November 6, 1914: “if once my fears are roused for the perpetuity and supremacy of the mother-tongue in the world – I would not hesitate, as I hesitate now – to enlist.” (Owen *Collected Letters* 296)

Great minds with all their original trajectories invariably meet at some point. They understand and appreciate each other’s breadth of vision and aversion to all that seems parochial from that vantage point. The influence of Rabindranath Tagore on Wilfred Owen is a wonderful instance of the same. More a poet at heart than a warrior, Owen’s creativity ironically has been shaped by his first-hand experiences as a soldier. Accordingly, his progressive disillusionment with the saga of destruction and growing bitterness with its contributing factors imbues his articulations with a remarkable insight. It is no wonder that *Song Offerings*, the English version of *Gitanjali*, Tagore’s collection of Bengali poems, attracted the attention of avid reader Owen, soon after its international recognition by dint of the Noble Prize in 1913. Owen’s sensitive, compassionate mind finds succour in the spirituality and philosophy of Tagore’s *Song Offerings*. As his epitaph his mother Susan Owen fell back on his sonnet ‘The End’ where Wilfred ponders over and eventually negates the possibility of renewal – of life into the dead, of youthful vigour and liveliness into the old and weary. From the two lines: “Shall life renew these bodies? Of a truth, / All death will he annul, all tears assuage?” (Stallworthy 491) which were eventually inscribed on his tombstone, Susan removed the later part of the second line with the accompanying question mark i.e. “all tears assuage?” This interestingly, alters Wilfred’s depiction of the finality of death and destruction inkeeping with Susan’s religiosity and basic need as a bereaved mother to feel her son’s continued presence. However, known to have repeated very often shortly before his death, the lines from poem number 96 in Tagore’s *Gitanjali* that Susan herself mentions in her aforementioned letter to Tagore, Wilfred Owen himself, if given the choice, would perhaps have a different say in this matter.

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