TAGORE AND TOLSTOY

(Diary Leaves)

By Nicholas de Roerich

[The Twentieth Century is privileged to reproduce below Prof. Nicholas de Roerich's impressions of two noble servants of humanity—Tagore and Tolstoy. These impressions are being reproduced for the first time from Prof. Nicholas de Roerich's "Diary leaves" chronicled at Urusvati in the Himalayas in 1936.]

"By all means visit Tolstoy", thundered the grey bearded Stassoff, Director, Slavonic Department of the St. Petersburg Public Library. This happened during my visit to him after graduating at the Academy of Fine Arts in 1897.

I do not care much for academical diplomas and distinctions. But let the great writer of Russia recognize you as artist. That will be a real distinction. And no one will appreciate your "Messenger"1 better than Tolstoy. He will at once understand with what a message your envoy is speeding. Don't delay, in two days I am going with Rimsky-Korsakoff2 to Moscow. Come along with us. Elias (the sculptor Hinsburg) will also join us. Come along, come along!

Thus we are together in the railway compartment. Stassoff, a septuagenarian took the upper berth, grumbling that otherwise he cannot sleep. His long white beard was hanging down. A heated dispute starts with Rimsky-Korsakoff about his new opera. To a realist like Stassoff the entire poetical epic of "Grad Kitej" does not appeal.

1 "Messenger" is the name of Roerich's first painting, now in the Tretyakoff gallery in Moscow.
2 Rimsky-Korsakoff—famous Russian composer of national operas.
“Just wait, you have to discuss this matter with Tolstoy. He says that he does not understand music, but he weeps, when he hears it,” jokingly says Stassoff to Korsakoff.

At that time there was much talk about Tolstoy’s “What is Art” and “My Belief”. All sorts of fables about Tolstoy and his life were whispered, as is usual around great men. Gossipers had a wide field for their imagination. They could not grasp how Count Tolstoy could plough the field or make shoes. Absurd anecdotes about Tolstoy’s so called “godlessness” were in circulation. These slanderers concealed the fact that a godless person could never have written the beautiful parable about the three hermits.

I regret that I do not have at hand the actual text of this narrative, but everyone who wishes to cognize the great personality of Tolstoy should know at least a short summary of it.

On an island there lived three old hermits. They were so simple that the only prayer which they used was: “We are three—You are Three—have mercy upon us!” And great miracles were manifested during this simple prayer. The local bishop came to hear about these hermits and this inadmissible prayer and decided to visit and to teach them the canonical prayers. He arrived on the island, told hermits that their prayer was undignified and taught them many of the customary ones. Then the bishop left on a boat. And he sees that across the sea there follows the boat a radiant light. As this light approached he discerned the three hermits who were holding their hands and were running upon the waves hastening to catch the boat. When they had approached they said to the bishop: “We have forgotten the prayers you taught us and have hastened to ask you to repeat them”. When the bishop saw this miracle, he said to the hermits: “Continue to live with your old prayer!”

Could any godless person give such a remarkable image
of hermits, who attained illumination in their simple prayer? Indeed to Tolstoy, a great seeker, everything basic and truthful was near to the heart.

Everyone remembers also his “Fruits of Enlightenment”, which is full of sarcasm about ignorantly interpreted spiritistic séances. Certain people wished to see in this a negative attitude of Tolstoy towards the entire metaphysical domain. But the great thinker only scourged ignorance.

In his epic “War and Peace”, “Anna Karenina” and many other essays and parables there has been manifested a wide comprehension of psychology in its highest sense. In the heat of argument Tolstoy may indeed have asserted that a simple folk dance for him is equal to the highest symphony. But when one had opportunity to witness how deeply Tolstoy was moved especially by symphonies, one understands perfectly well that in his paradoxes was contained something by far finer and broader than the public may have wished to see in its own interpretation. Tolstoy, the great teacher, before his very end started out to the Optina Pustyn³ and did not this spiritual act signify a remarkable apotheosis of his wonderful life?

Upon arrival in Moscow we went on the following morning to Tolstoy’s home in Hamovniki. Each of us brought something: Rimsky-Korsakoff—his latest compositions, Hinsburg—a bronze statue of Tolstoy, Stassoff—some new books and I—a photograph of my “Messenger”.

Those who know the quiet side streets of Ancient Moscow, the old residences divided from the street by a yard, and the special atmosphere of those historical dwellings—they will understand the whole unforgettable impression of those surroundings. There was fragrance of apples in the air, mixed with the aroma of libraries and old furniture. Everything

³ ‘Optina Pustyn’ is a well-known place of hermitage in Russia.
was simple and yet refined. We were welcomed by Countess Sophia Andreevna, the wife of the great thinker. Stassoff took command of the conversation, and Tolstoy himself only joined later. He appeared in his typical 'tolstovka', quite in white and there remained for ever the first impression of his radiant white appearance.

Only in great men can this simplicity be combined with majestic convincingness. I know that this definition "majestic" would not please Tolstoy and he would probably have interrupted it with some harsh remark. But he was never against simplicity. Only such a gigantic philosophical and literary talent and unusually expanded consciousness can create that grandeur, which was expressed in the entire figure, gestures and sayings of Tolstoy. It was said that his face was a simple one. This is not so—he had a strong typically Russian face. Old wise peasants and so-called old-believers who live far away from cities sometimes have such faces. Indeed the expression of such faces may be severe. But in them there is no mean irritation, but on the contrary there is expressed a mighty thought. India also knows such faces.

Tolstoy admired the work of Hinsburg, making some abrupt remarks to the point. Then my turn came and Stassoff had been quite right supposing that the "Messenger" was not only approved but even called forth some remarkable comments. On my painting a messenger is seen hastening in a boat to some ancient Slavonic settlement, carrying the important news that some tribes had attacked their neighbours. Tolstoy said:

Did you ever cross a swift river in a boat? You must aim higher than the desired destination or you will be carried downstream. So also in the domain of morality one should always steer

*Tolstovka* is a kind of workman’s over-shirt, which Tolstoy liked and usually wore.
much higher—life anyhow will carry one down! Let your
"Messenger" aim very high—then he will attain!

Very often in life this advice of Tolstoy was remem­bered by me. Then Tolstoy dwelt on folk art, on certain paintings from peasant life as if wishing to direct my atten­tion towards the people. "Know how to suffer with them"—was also one of Tolstoy's ordainments. Then we talked about music. Again there flashed some paradoxes, but behind them there was such a love for art, such a searching for Truth and such a care for the people's education that all these disputes merged into a beautiful symphony of service to humanity. And from morning till evening there resounded an unforgettable Tolstoviana.

On the following morning, starting on our return journey, Stassoff said to me: "Now you have been bestowed with the true distinction of an artist!"

Amazing is the whole life of Tolstoy as great writer and great teacher of light. Every event of his life increased the deep veneration of the people to him. And when his ex­communication from the Church took place, the undivided sympathy of the masses was with him.

Besides many published works of Tolstoy there circulated everywhere in Russian society many banned essays and letters. The causes and effects of Tolstoy's ex­communication were discussed in whispers, there were rumours about his private meetings with the Emperor. Also certain pro­phecies of Tolstoy were discussed—later these remarkable predictions were widely announced through the press. In these the prophetic writer already foresaw the Great War and many other stirring events.

Every news about Tolstoy's sayings was attentively received, as if above official authorities Tolstoy's mighty thought was dominating. Besides his thundering statements
about non-resistance to evil, about pan-human love, about true education for all, there were also such touching descriptions, as for instance on the death of a tree. India would especially value these simple truthful words, which contained a deep thought about the life omnipresent. Through one of his feminine heroes Natasha, Tolstoy exclaims:

Yes, I was thinking, that we are hastening and think we are hastening home. But God only knows whereto we are going in this darkness. And perhaps we shall arrive and will find ourselves not in ‘Otradnoye’ (estate) but in a fairy-tale kingdom. And then I thought...........

The sacred thought of a beautiful realm lived in Tolstoy’s heart when he followed the plough like the true ancient hero of the Russian epos, Mikula Selianinovitch or when like Boehme he made shoes or when like the great Carpenter he stood at the bench, seeking contact with all phases of labour. Untiringly this sower cast his precious seeds and they took firm root in the consciousness of the Russian people. Innumerable are in Russia the home in the name of Tolstoy, Tolstoy museums, Tolstoy libraries and reading rooms. And can one imagine a more glorious end for Tolstoy than his departure to the “Optina Pustyn” and passing away on a small railway station? A significant end for a great traveller! This passing was beyond all imagination and Russia at the first moment could not even believe it. I remember how Elena Ivanovna brought this news to me, repeating sorrowfully: “It is unbelievable. It is unbelievable. As if something basic, some part of Russia itself, has left us. As if an epoch is closed.........”

And now as I write these lines there suddenly appears a radiant rainbow, across all purple and snowy ridges of the Himalayas, from the very earth to the very sky. A blessed

5 Elena Ivanovna—Madame Helena Roerich.
sign from Heaven to Earth.

Again Elena Ivanovna brought news, but quite a different one. She often through her great intuition found in bookshops something new, needed and inspiring. Thus she brought Tagore’s “Gitanjali” in translation of Baltrushaitis. These beautiful sonorous poems radiated like a rainbow and in the Russian translation of Baltrushaitis they sounded as a clarion call.

Up to that time Rabindranath Tagore was not known in Russia in his entire scope; it was known that Tagore’s name was acclaimed all over the world, but we, Russians, had no occasion to cognize the depth of the heart of this great poet.

“Gitanjali” came like a revelation. The poems were read at gatherings and at private at-homes. Only true talent could create such a precious mutual understanding. The quality of convincingness is mysterious. The foundation of Beauty is ineffable and every pure human heart rejoices at the reunion with Light. This realization of Beauty, this universal response of the soul was brought by Tagore. What may he be like? Where and how does this giant of thought and beautiful images dwell? The inborn love for the wisdom of the East finds its application in the touching, calling persuasive chords of the poet. How everyone at once became imbued with love for Tagore. It was evident how most contradictory people, the most irreconcilable psychologists were united by the call of the poet. As if under the beautiful dome of a Temple, or in the consonances of a majestic symphony the inspiring song victoriously united all human hearts. Just as Tagore himself proclaims in his uplifting “What is Art”.

In Art the person in us is sending its answer to the Supreme Person, who reveals himself to us in a world of endless beauty
across the lightless world of facts.

Everyone knows that Tagore does not belong to the earthly world of petty facts, but to the world of Truth and Beauty. And the persistent desire arose: “How and where to meet?” Will not fate bring about a meeting here, on this plane, with him who is so powerfully called towards Beauty—the Conqueror? Strangely Providence transforms imperative dreams into reality. Indeed unforeseen are the paths. Life itself weaves the beautiful web as no human imagination can visualize it. Life is the best fairy tale.

We dreamt of meeting Tagore and there he himself appears in my studio on Queen’s Gate Terrace in London in 1920. Tagore had heard of my Russian paintings and wanted to meet me. And just at that time I was painting a Hindu series—“Dreams of the East”. I remember the amazement of the poet at such a coincidence. We recall how beautifully he entered and how his spiritual appearance impressed us. Verily the first impressions are the true ones.

At the Luncheon of the World Fellowship of Faiths in 1934 in New York, Dr. Kedarnath Das Gupta recalled our first meeting with Tagore in the following words:

This occasion has its beginning about 14 years ago in London. At that time, I was one day at the home of Rabindranath Tagore, who said to me, ‘Today I am going to give you a very great treat’. I followed him and he took me to South Kensington to an apartment filled with superb canvases and paintings. And there were Nicholas Roerich and Mme. Roerich. As Mme. Roerich showed us the paintings, I thought of our beautiful ideals of the East: prakriti and purusba, man revealed through the woman. That visit has never been out of my mind.

Just as unforgettable remains for us this visit of Tagore with his inspiring talks on art. His letter about paintings also remains as a cherished momento. Then we met in America, where the poet lectured so convincingly about the
immutable laws of beauty and about mutual human understanding. In the rush of the leviathan city the words of Tagore sometimes sounded as paradoxical as the fairy tale realm of Tolstoy. The greater was the attainment of Tagore who untiringly travelled all over the world with the imperative call about Beauty. The poet said in China: “civilization expects the great culmination of the expression of its soul in beauty.” One may quote at length from the books of Tagore his prayers and ordainments for a better life, which are so easily carried out in the beautiful domain of the poet’s heart.

Are these calls far from life? Are they but the dreams of a poet? By no means! This whole truth, in its entire essence, is pre-ordained and realisable in earthly life. Ignoramuses will assert in vain that the worlds of Tagore and Tolstoy are utopian. This is thrice wrong! Is it an utopia that one should live beautifully? Is it an utopia that one should not kill and not destroy? Is it an utopia that one should learn imbue one’s surroundings with knowledge? These are not utopias but reality itself, as real as the fact that one should help wherever possible. If the light of beauty would not penetrate at least through dimmed sparks into the earthly plane, life itself would be unbearable. What deep gratitude humanity should render to those giants of thought, who self-sacrificingly taught the eternal foundations of life. Without these laws of the Beautiful, life would turn into such bestiality and ugliness that every living breath would be choked.

Horrible is the curse of ugliness. Terrible is the persecution which throughout history tried to destroy true seeking and cognizance. When an ignoramus orders that everyone should think according to his codex, this is tantamount to the demand of nonsense and imbecility, for it is destruc-
Majestic are the gifts of Tolstoy and Tagore to humanity. They are not selfish misers, but most generous donors, they give and give endlessly. Tagore’s heart strives to spread real education. Santiniketan—this stronghold of enlightenment—is forever linked with a host of great names. So many artists and cultural leaders of India and many foreign co-workers participate in the ideals of Santiniketan.

The ploughfield of Culture is not easy. People sometimes believe that the accomplishment of colossal historical events was always crowned with laurels. History sometimes records entire periods of difficulty in but a few stingy words. Yet how many thorns were met on the way and how much priceless energy was expended in order to lay the steps of human achievement despite all obstacles, enmity and ignorance. The more joyful is it to witness how esteemed are the harvests of Tagore’s sowing. In Tagore we see a wonderful synthesis of the thinker, the poet, the bard, the artist and the teacher of life. From the depths of ages we heard that such co-ordination of happy manifestations is possible. But when it takes place before our very eyes, here on our terra dolorosa, against all attacks of chaos, then such attainments verily open for us new vistas. The human hearts become filled with gratitude when witnessing such glorious deeds. The giants of thoughts are not in need of such gratitude. But it is necessary for space, as building material for a more radiant future.

One cannot name any sphere of Culture to which Tagore is indifferent. With everything educational, creative and constructive Tagore will not only sympathise but he will find forceful helping suggestions. It is but natural that Rabindranath Tagore responded cordially to the Pact for the Protection of the World’s Cultural Treasures. Whose soul could vibrate with greater ardour for the safeguarding of the fruits of
creativity than Tagore? But he knows the difficulty of the present moment. He feels what malice and hatred hover above the world at present. Not from newspapers but through his wise heart he comprehends what danger to peaceful labour threatens during the present Armageddon. Tagore does not conceal these dangers. As always he speaks daringly on questions of peace and education. One can imagine how ignorance is hissing somewhere at his call for peace.

The last letter I received from him recently sorrowfully defines the present world situation:

My dear Friend,—The Problem of Peace is today the most serious concern with humanity and our efforts seem so insignificant and futile before the onrush of a new barbarism, that is sweeping over the West with an accelerating momentum. The ugly manifestations of naked militarism on all sides forebode an evil future and I almost lose faith in civilization itself. And yet we cannot give up our efforts, for that would only hasten the end.

The heart of the great poet is filled with grief at the current confusion. The thinker knows that every worker of culture should valiantly defend his post and self-sacrificingly stand up for the treasures of the world. And in this self-sacrifice is also manifested the sign of Tolstoy's service to humanity. As Tolstoy was never a politician, so also Tagore stands adamant as the mighty teacher of life.

One cannot name anyone who with such convincingness combines modernism with the ordainments of ancient wisdom. Such a synthesis to the majority of people seems even irreconcilable. Even the esteemed philosophers often state their forbidding "or"—"or". As if life is not of one source and as if the cosmical are not immutable. Even the most ancient ordainment proclaimed through the Rig Vedas: "Truth is One, men call it by various names". I often had occasion to hear how even educated people said that it is old fashion to quote Confucius or the Vedas. They suspected
a certain lack of progress, when someone studied ancient wisdom. Only now science in the person of some advanced research workers begins to reaffirm the value of knowledge that has reached us from the depths of antiquity. In Tagore such wisdom is inborn and his deep understanding of modern literature and science gives that equilibrium, that golden path, that to the majority seems a utopia. But this attainment is right in front of us, one has but to admit it in full attentiveness and goodwill.

On the seventieth anniversary of Tagore's birthday we wrote: "Vijaya, Tagore!" Difficult is such a victory, but the more precious is it to admire the radiant hero in the service of humanity.

To the superficial outside observer Tolstoy and Tagore may seem different. Some people, who like to revel in contradictions, will no doubt try to apply their wit also in this case in order to separate. But if we shall analyse both the thinkers benevolently and without prejudice, we shall but regret that there exist no portraits of Tolstoy and Tagore taken together—in a hearty talk, in deep wisdom and in the desire to bring good to humanity. On the occasion of Tagore's seventieth birthday we rejoiced to see Tagore's portrait in the Latvian newspaper "Segodnia". The renowned poet of Latvia Rudzitis has beautifully characterized the great Tagore in a monograph, and now from Praha, Prof. V. Bulgakoff sends me a beautiful postcard of Tolstoy and himself, taken in 1910 in Yasnaya Poliana. And again the great images of Tagore and Tolstoy rise before me in their great service to humanity. Together on one picture I would like to see these two giants of thought.

Deep homage to Tagore and Tolstoy!

Reprint