

Where the Dreams Cross: T.S. Eliot and French Poetry. Chinmoy Guha. Primus Books.

Pp. 227. Reprint Edition 2020. ISBN: 978-81-947560-0-2. New Delhi.

Chinmoy Guha refers to Stephen Spender “when he [Spender] says unwittingly” of one of Eliot’s poems, *The Lovesong of J Alfred Prufrock*, that Prufrock “suffers” (emphasis Spender’s) and “is in a Baudelairean hell” (96). As unwittingly, that is, without intention, when Spender writes on Prufrock being in a Symbolist hell, Guha without intending to be, has become an Indian voice in systematic theology and many of his observations in this book under review demand Lenten readings. We knew about Baudelaire and his flamboyant short life. But how many of us know of Baudelaire’s spirituality? Guha writes that Baudelaire had a profound understanding “of Original Sin” (92). It is another matter that, as Guha points out, Eliot too shared this Baudelairean sense of Original Sin (92). Before reading this book, the reviewer was aware of Eliot’s self-confessed Christianity, but there exists no work where Baudelaire’s views on spirituality have been connected to Eliot’s poetry and criticism. Guha’s genius unearths for us a new Baudelaire and a new Eliot. Who would have thought before Guha researched Eliot that Baudelaire took a dim view of Victor Hugo being opaque to spirituality? In fact, Guha’s Baudelaire is not a picaresque avant garde, he is a young man searching for the numinous. “In a life of misery and wretchedness”, Baudelaire was tortured by his “sense of Sin and Redemption” (92). Guha backs up his assertion by reading Baudelaire himself. Guha quotes Baudelaire:

...my whole heart, all my tenderness all my religion (travesty), all my hate. It is true that I shall write the opposite, that I shall swear by all my gods that this is a book of pure art, of antics, of jugglery... (Baudelaire quoted and translated by Guha, 85-86)

Yet Guha rightly notes that “with the possible exception of Dante” few poets “expressed the whole range of human emotions...in such a ruthlessly uncompromising manner” (86) effecting

a redefinition of “the moral position of a poet in a world of suffering” (86). Guha, taking the cue from Rimbaud goes on to foreground the vatic or, prophetic role of Baudelaire. Had Guha written only this much about Baudelaire and Victor Hugo and Eliot, he would have accomplished something rich and strange, to quote Shakespeare. The leitmotifs of suffering and loneliness (*acedia*, mentioned by Guha while quoting Eliot in p. 89, italics’ Eliot’s) mark Guha’s works and especially this book which is not a monograph but a theological contribution to India’s rich legacy of Hindus engaging with Christianity. The length of the book is well beyond a standard monograph’s. This needs being noted since it has been elsewhere erroneously termed a monograph. In *Prabuddha Bharata*, while reviewing Guha’s book on Tagore, this reviewer had pointed out how he is a theologian in the line of the late Catholic priest Raimundo Panikkar. As will be shown in a moment, Guha’s book arrived just at the right time when Eliot scholarship is under existential threat from insufficient and desacralized exegesis in our country. Eliot is taught and studied through purely materialist hermeneutics and studied out of context in our classrooms. Let us now turn to Guha to examine how he interprets Eliot. “... *The Waste Land*...asserts the necessity of Christianity” (89), earlier in the same page, Guha writes that Eliot was convinced that Baudelaire’s “sense of Evil implies the sense of Good”. Guha has even unearthed Eliot’s conviction of Baudelaire’s theological innocence (89). Classrooms globally miss this point about both Baudelaire and Eliot and harp on Baudelaire’s Byronic exploits and Eliot’s personal life without considering both their intellectual and spiritual foundations. Only Guha can write of their “aesthetics of suffering” (Guha quotes and translates Eliot, 89). This is a book about the Passion of the Christ mimetically represented in the works of the French Symbolists and T.S. Eliot. Once Julia Kristeva gave a Lenten talk to the College of Cardinals, though she is known for her insights into psychoanalysis and feminism. Guha deserves to be known as a theologian in his own right. Further textual references from his book will support this contention.

In Chapter 5, Claudel and Eliot: In Search of the Still Point, Guha quoting A.H. Moody, points out that the Christian zeitgeist pervaded Claudel's poems and poetic dramas (168). This chapter is unique within Eliot studies. By Guha's own admission (169), Claudel was not connected with Eliot studies earlier, and it is to be added, that without Guha's cultural intervention we would have never known this. In a review limited in scope it is impossible to speak further on Claudel and Eliot here and their shared Christian consciousness. It suffices to just point out that Guha writes of "Claudel's light of Christianity" as leading Eliot to that peace which only the Risen Lord can give to us in this valley of tears (172). Then comes the real clincher. Guha negotiates the Catholic theologian, Jacques Maritain's influence on Eliot. It is from Maritain's insights that Eliot's writings became "also a diary of a soul" (173). Guha comments on the poem Ash-Wednesday and without perhaps realising it, on the real Ash Wednesday, that Eliot celebrates, to quote Claudel, "the immense Octave of ...creation" (173). Writing of Maritain's understanding of Roman Catholicism and his importance to Eliot, Guha meditates: Maritain comprehends the anguish of the time as true Catholicism (176). In this sense Maritain, and Eliot being an acolyte of Maritain become proto-liberation theologians since both heard the anguish of their times. They were Christians who would be aghast to be thought of as anything else. In his Introduction, Guha sets to define what is meant by tradition to Eliot. It is not merely a literary continuum which quickened Eliot, but a definite Catholic and Christian sensibility which took hold of Eliot and thus Guha writes in the beginning of the book that an "intensely Catholic" tradition deriving from the French Symbolists overwhelmed Eliot (19).

Fr. Clooney is a Jesuit who specialises in Hinduism. Chinmoy Guha is a polyglot Hindu who would himself probably reject the fact he is a theologian. This Sahitya Academy winner and litterateur is also an Indian Christian theologian who remains Hindu and in the best

Catholic sense, has insights into the Roman Catholic Faith found in no other Eliot critic. It is high time we study Guha's works as treatises of what Hans K  ng calls the kerygma of the Lord.

Subhasis Chattopadhyay Ph.D.

Ex- Judge, Sahitya Akademi