

## **Between Tyranny and Freedom: A Brief Voyage with the Bard**

Plenary paper by Anwar Ibrahim at the VIII World Shakespeare Congress  
Sunday 16 – Friday 21 July 2006 at Brisbane City Hall, Queensland, Australia.

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Ten years ago, I addressed an audience at the Ateneo de Manila University in the Philippines. I began with the following lines:

*Midway in the journey of our life I found myself in a dark wood, for the straight path was lost. Ah, how hard it is to tell what that wood was, wild, rugged, harsh; the very thought of it renews fear! It is so bitter that death is hardly more so.*

While I do not intend to sound like an antique drum, I do want to remind ourselves of our inter-connectedness in the face of the forces that threaten to separate us. It is said that throughout its history, the West has defined itself in opposition to the East, in terms of the rational against the irrational, the superior against the inferior, or as Edward Said puts it, the Orient is the West's great complementary opposite since antiquity. To paraphrase William Hazlitt in his characterization of Leontes, this discourse is "beset with doubts and fears, and entangled more and more in the thorny labyrinth" of mutual distrust and jealousy. We will have more to say about *The Winter's Tale* and the overriding theme of tyranny later, but, for now, let us just say that, it is this blinkered view of the world with vociferous advocates on both sides that has led us into

mutual suspicion, acrimony and hostility, and threatens to suck us into the quicksand of an even greater clash.

The *Divine Comedy* to my mind is really about the clash between good and evil, a universal and timeless drama of the human predicament. According to Santayana, the symbolism in *The Divine Comedy* had been devised for a purpose; “and this purpose, as the Koran, too, declares, had been to show forth the great difference there is in God’s sight between good and evil.” (1) Let me transpose the clash between evil and good onto the struggle between tyranny and freedom as we embark on a brief voyage with the Bard, “the most universal genius that ever lived”, as our guide and companion.

On September 2, 1998, I was sacked from the government and relieved of all executive positions. I have had the occasion to recount the stormy events that followed at a keynote address given last year to the Lawasian Conference held here too, and since brevity is the soul of wit, I will just round up the episode by saying, once again, that:

*Midway upon the journey of my life I found myself in a dark wood, where the right way was lost*

The ‘dark wood’ I found myself in was none other than the prison cell that would be my abode of solitary confinement for the next six years. Tyranny had been let loose. Freedom was being incarcerated. It might not have been the Gulag Archipelago of Solzhenitzyn’s but there was the same systematic, deeply irrational use of terror against a large section of society: people who supported the cause of reform; and people who just wanted to show that they cared for

freedom and justice and that they were prepared to suffer the consequences of fighting tyranny; But much as we opposed, we couldn't end them. *Hamlet* had gate crashed into our lives, so that we would have to bear the whips and scorns of time, the insolence of office and the law's delay. But, as I had said to Nelson Mandela when we met in Johannesburg soon after my release, mine was only a short walk to freedom.

Isaiah Berlin tells us that freedom is essentially the absence of constraints imposed by others. I am free to the degree to which no man interferes with my activity; political liberty in this sense is simply the area within which a man can act unobstructed by others. But viewed behind the walls of incarceration, shorn of philosophical abstraction, freedom takes on a completely different dimension. Thus, freedom is simply the day my lawyer placed on my table my own copy of the Riverside Edition of *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*. This came six months to the day of my incarceration. Before that, only one copy of the Qur'an was allowed which no doubt was the only thing I needed for my devotional activities. But even a man condemned to death row needs to read; I was only in for 15 years. Indeed as I soon discovered, deprivation of reading material was one of the chief attempts at inflicting mental torture by the powers that be.

When Walt Whitman described democracy as a young giant exposed all over to the life-giving air, he also meant that in such a democracy every citizen was free to think and feel for himself. But in the land of Shakespeare, thought control was introduced in the midst of civil war in 1643, prompting Milton to write *Areopagitica*. In what is generally regarded as the earliest indictment against censorship in England as well as his best prose writing, Milton wrote:

*Truth and understanding are not such wares as to be monopolized and traded in by tickets and statutes, and standards. We must not think to make a staple commodity of all the knowledge in the Land, to mark and licence it like our broad cloth, and our wool packs. (2)*

In modern Western societies the tension between the ultimate value of 'freedom' in its broadest sense and that of 'equality' has occasioned intense soul searching. The desire for 'freedom' is then counter-balanced by the demands for 'equality.' This is because those who may benefit most from freedom may not always be the weak, the marginalized and the oppressed, but also, the rich and the powerful. This situation may give rise to what Gore Vidal sums up as 'socialism for the rich and free enterprise for the poor!'

Could thought control be justified on the grounds that freedom of expression can never be absolute? In a civilized society, every individual has the right to express his or her thoughts and beliefs but we would imagine that there has to be some limits to freedom to defame, to incite to hatred one race or ethnic group against another, to blaspheme, or to disseminate falsehood, and so on.

But in reality, we find that there is an even greater likelihood of autocrats and tyrants abusing the constraints on freedom. For example, they will contend that the freedom to criticize the powers that be must also be curtailed because it causes political instability, which in turn may lead to insurrection and disorder. This pretext has been used habitually by petty despots and aspiring autocrats alike, some citing religious sanction for legitimacy. Of late, it is also being used by democracies as legitimate grounds to erode the basic freedoms of the people. In the name of the war on terror, these modern demagogues have no hesitation in suspending civil liberties which are supposed to be the hallmarks

of a constitutional democracy. In this regard, it is fashionable to invoke the virtues of traditional values and condemn the blind imitation of Western concepts: Consensus is better than individual freedom. Opinions of the state must prevail over those of the individual because of the need to protect public morals and to maintain peace and harmony. So on and so forth.

Our answer is that those who hold positions of power also carry a moral responsibility to listen to the people. To interfere with individual freedom is to rob individuals not just of their freedom, but of the right and responsibility they have to reason. No one has a right to take away that liberty, not a single despot and not even a duly constituted legislative majority.

According to Aristotle, tyrants acquire power by promising to protect the people and retain power by preventing the rise of any person of exceptional merit, by assassination if necessary. He should employ spies, sow the seeds of discord, and impoverish his subjects while keeping them occupied in great works, as the king of Egypt did in getting the pyramids built. For such a tyrant, freedom of expression is obviously untenable. On the contrary, literary conferences must be banned just as any education likely to produce hostile sentiment. (3) This really looks like “art made tongue-tied by authority”.

In my solitary confinement, I sought solace in prayer and reading the Qur’an. Subject to that, I would agree with Hazlitt that Shakespeare would indeed be enough for us. Apart from going back and forth to *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, Nehru’s Mandela’s *Long Walk to Freedom*, and al-Ghazali’s *Deliverance from Error*, Shakespeare remained my most intimate companion and chief source of comfort: *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *The Winter’s Tale* – the list may look predictable, even hackneyed, but only if we see it from the frigid perspective of

academia. But in the stoned silence of the night, when you have no one to talk to, Shakespeare's characters become more than mere *dramatis personae*. They speak to you and allow you to speak to them.

In *Julius Caesar* you hear yourself telling Brutus why he should not have made that fatal error in allowing Marc Anthony to address those fickle minded Romans. And then it dawns on you that you yourself might have suffered the same overweening confidence in the goodness of your cause to resist injustice and tyranny. Hazlitt sums up the argument: 'Tyranny and servility are to be dealt with after their own fashion: otherwise, they will triumph over those who spare them. Reading *Macbeth*, you tell yourself that the "air-drawn dagger" should be haunting your conspirators, assailing them with 'the stings of remorse" and "preternatural solicitings." Usurper, murderer and tyrant, that's what Macbeth is: but you're still alive. But it wasn't for want of trying – don't forget you were left for dead and the whole world saw your black eye. And now there's arsenic in your food. In *The Tempest*, you look around and find yourself surrounded by four walls; what else is there but to take a flight of fancy and start playing the part of Prospero? This one you could definitely relate to. It's the story about freedom over tyranny, the triumph of light over darkness. It starts with incarceration and ends with freedom. And between the idea and the reality you have to settle for Ariel instead, bending to the tasks at hand, do your time before the time is out. And as the end draws near, you gain freedom with the rediscovery of virtue within yourself. But we see tyranny in its most ruthless manifestation in *The Winter's Tale* unleashed on the saint-like Hermione. There is neither an Edmund nor an Iago to lay the blame on for Leontes's state of mind. Is there a way to rationalize the character of this jealous tyrant? Is it the tyrant in him that makes him so irrationally jealous or is it just the jealousy that

transforms him into a tyrant? Or does the answer lie in Shakespeare's metaphysics?

We could say, like Harold Bloom, that with *King Lear* we are at the very centre of canonical excellence just as we would be as we traverse the cantos of the *Inferno* or the *Purgatorio*. But above all, it is in the harrowing barrenness in the final scene that makes it particularly compelling for me to read the play, over and over again, in those long hours of solitude and read it with intense attention. Yet it is in defeat that we find victory as we can gather from Lear's speech to Cordelia after they have lost the battle:

*Come, let's away to prison;  
We two alone will sing like birds i' the cage:  
When thou dost ask me blessing, I'll kneel down,  
And ask of thee forgiveness: so we'll live,  
And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh  
At gilded butterflies, and hear poor rogues  
Talk of court news; and we'll talk with them too,  
Who loses and who wins; who's in, who's out,  
And take upon's the mystery of things,  
As if we were God's spies; and we'll wear out,  
In a wall'd prison, packs and sects of great ones  
That ebb and flow by the moon.*                      V, iii, 8-19

Needless to say, depending on your state of mind at any given time, with Shakespeare, you could be anyone you choose to be. When Keats was suffering from his bouts of depression, he wrote to his friend, the painter Benjamin

Robert Haydon, who chided him. In reply, Keats says “I never quite despair and I read Shakespeare – indeed I shall...never read any other Book...” (4) And this leads us to *Hamlet*.

According to Eliot’s doctrine of the “objective correlative”, the finding of which is the only way of expressing emotion in the form of art, *Hamlet* is a failure. Hamlet (the man) is dominated by an emotion which is inexpressible, because it is in excess of the facts as they appear. It is a feeling which he cannot understand; he cannot objectify it, and it therefore remains to poison life and obstruct action. In conclusion, Eliot says, we must simply admit that in *Hamlet* Shakespeare tackled a problem which proved too much for him. (5) With all due respect to the poet whose *Four Quartets* I continue to quarry whenever I am short of a quote or two, in my view, *Hamlet* needs no “objective correlative”, and this is what happens when we keep hoping to be wrong about Shakespeare in a new way. Coleridge, perhaps having foreknowledge of the self-induced intellectual conundrums that might be caused by *Hamlet*, had summed up the situation as follows: “It had been too much the custom when we could not explain anything that happened by the few words that were employed to explain everything; we passed it over as beyond our reach: they were looked upon as hints which Philosophy could not explain: as the terra incognita for future discoveries; the great ocean of unknown things to be afterward explored, or as the sacred fragments of a ruined temple, every part of which in itself was beautiful but the particular relation of which parts was unknown.” (6) Indeed it is this terra incognita in *Hamlet* which, in the language of transcendence, will remain hidden to those who are not initiated in the mysteries but not being unknowable, it is but a hidden treasure waiting to be discovered. It may be

more accurate to say therefore that in *Hamlet*, Shakespeare tackled a problem which proved too much for the audience at large to handle.

This calls to mind the observation made by the late Martin Lings that to be present at an adequate performance of *King Lear* is not merely to watch a play but to witness, mysteriously, the whole history of mankind. As Shakespeare matures he becomes more focused on the question of religion, not in the narrow sense of a mode of worship but in its most universal aspect, which is man having the right attitude of the soul towards God. He places himself at the very centre of the ancient world. For him Apollo is not the god of light but the light of God. Character after character is developed to a state of virtue which is pushed to the very limits of human nature. King Hamlet is purified in Purgatory but he is also a symbol of man's lost Edenic state spoken of by young Hamlet in the following terms:

*A combination and a form indeed,  
Where every god did seem to set his seal  
To give the world assurance of a man* (III, 4, 60-62)

The pious man looks at the story of the Garden of Eden objectively but imagines the devil to be harmless, unaware of the extent of his own subservience to him. The mystic, on the other hand, looks at it subjectively and knows that most of what seems neutral is harmful. *Hamlet* transcends the idea of salvation, that is, simple piety in the conventional sense, and shows that Shakespeare, having drunk from the fountain of esotericism, knew where to 'take upon us the mystery of things, as if we were God's spies' and tread the path towards sanctification. (7)

Whether it is Islam, Christianity, Judaism or other religions, faith reinvigorated could lead not just to bigotry, but may, when compounded with the elements of political and social discontent, cause us to express ourselves through violence and bloodshed. But if molded under the hand of the universal wisdom it could be a force to free us from ignorance and intolerance, injustice and greed. To use the language of the Gospel of Saint John, this perennial wisdom is the light that “shines in darkness,” although “the darkness comprehends it not.” It is also alluded to in the Qur’an with striking imagery: the light of a lamp “lit from a blessed tree, an olive neither of the East nor of the West, whose oil is well-nigh luminous, though fire scarce touches it.”

Shouldn’t this be the light to illuminate our path by imbuing us with ideals that are universal: a message of truth, justice and compassion, and above all, of the liberty and dignity of man? We talk of globalization and the end of history, but we remain a world torn asunder by the practice of polity identified solely with the exercise of power, and leadership that is increasingly divorced from ethical concerns and morality. Enduring peace and harmony of the world must be built not upon hegemonies but on mutual concern, trust and respect. We must discard our loyalties for the parochial and break free from the chains of outmoded mindsets; we should, like Hamlet, be “a little more than kin, and less than kind”. For more than a century, Kipling has had his say. Let us forswear “Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet”, and instead, like Prospero, proclaim a “fair encounter, of two most rare affections”.

I see that *The Tempest* is not in the list of performances; so let me throw caution to the wind and seize this moment while I still have the podium, to recite, as my parting words, the last few lines of the Epilogue:

*Gentle breath of yours my sails  
Must fill, or else my project fails,  
Which was to please. Now I want  
Spirits to enforce, art to enchant,  
And my ending is despair,  
Unless I be relieved by prayer,  
Which pierces so that it assaults  
Mercy itself and frees all faults.  
As you from crimes would pardon'd be,  
Let your indulgence set me free.*

Thank you.

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Notes

1. Santayana, G., *Three Philosophical Poets – Lucretius, Dante, and Goethe*, Cambridge Harvard University, 1910, pp 106-7
2. *Areopagitica*; A Speech of Mr John Milton For the Liberty of Unlicenced Printing, To the Parliament of England, 1644 p 107
3. Bertrand Russell, *A History of Western Philosophy*, George Allen and Unwin Ltd, London, 1946, p 214
4. Dorothy Hewlett, *Adonais – A Life of John Keats*, The Bobbs Merrill Co, New York, 1938, p 110

5. T.S. Eliot, *Selected Essays*, London, Faber & Faber Ltd, 1932, pp 141-46.
6. The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Lectures 1808-1819 On Literature I*, ed. R.A. Foakes, Routledge & Kegan Paul, Princeton University Press, 1987, p 316
7. Martin Lings, *The Secret of Shakespeare – His Greatest Plays Seen in the Light of Sacred Art*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn., Quinta Essentia, 1996, pp 5, 10-13, 22-25, 29-31; He is better known in the Muslim community as Shaikh Abu Bakar Siraj al-Din, the writer of the highly popular modern biography of the Prophet, *Mohamed, his life based on the earliest sources*.