

Tagore the Eternal Seeker

Footprints of a World Traveller

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Rabindranath Tagore and Angelos Sikelianos – Two Universal Thinkers: A Comparative Study

Andreas L. Katonis

I have preferred to use the words 'thinkers': though Tagore and Sikelianos may be familiar to us more as national poets and writers, both are something more. They are comparable, and their work and their universality connect them. The Greek Indologist and historian of philosophy Vassiliades remarked that they shared similar inspirations. Both of them founded, e.g., spiritual movements to promote global understanding (2000: 174). The two lives (Tagore: 1861-1941, Sikelianos: 1884-1951) ran, indeed, almost in parallel. Tagore, to be sure, is better known worldwide; he came from a big country and he travelled a lot, whereas Sikelianos' Greece was and remains small, and if the country is familiar, then its reputation is generally reserved for Ancient Greece. This was, in a sense, also the concern of the Greek thinker helped by his first, American wife: the revival of certain aspects of Ancient Greece, not for his actual homeland only but for the whole world. This was his 'Delphic Idea', still not forgotten: efforts are being made in our days again, to give his dream a modern shape. Now admired in his country and in Europe, Sikelianos is among the most renowned modern Greek poets, integrated by some critics, together with Kavafis (Cavafy) and Seferis, into a 'Modern Greek Triptych' (Ivanovici 1979).

As we know from different sources, Tagore visited Greece in 1926, during a series of travels in European countries.¹ Some evidence on his arrival and visit could be collected from the contemporary press: he arrived in Piraeus in late November, coming from Rumania on a steamer, attended by his wife, grand-daughter, P.K. Mahalanobis, Professor of the University of Calcutta, the professor's wife, and others. He was given a warm welcome by Kastriotis, the Director, and by the members of the Piraeus Literary Society, and later by the Committee of the Society of Greek Writers, led by Mrs. Eleni Negroponti. He came for a two-day visit, and the next day he left for Alexandria, Egypt. During his short stay, he visited the Acropolis and its Museum, the Stadium (one of the ancient monuments rebuilt), where a patriotic event took place, the workroom of the artist Von Peske where he was given a portrait by the latter, and had different talks with Greek fellow writers and officials. One is impressed to read that Tagore knew not only about ancient Delphi but also about the plans for the cultural revival of the place and would have liked to visit Greece, again, in the next spring to attend the first Delphic Festivals (cf. the issues of the newspaper *Vradini*, Thursday 25, and Friday 26, November 1926).

This paper is dedicated to a comparative study between Tagore's and Sikelianos' thinking and literary work rather than to investigating the details of Tagore's visit to Greece and of his initiatives,

for which an extended domestic and international archival research is needed. Such a research would be most welcome, however, both for the case of the Greek-Indian relations and the Delphic Idea which never ceased entirely to be an inspiring source, and which, in our time, is the subject of new efforts to revive and further develop the Sikelianian ideals.²

Tagore's *Song Offerings* or *Gitanjali* had already been translated by the time he came to Greece, and this cycle was republished, for the last time in 1978.³ The collection contains 103 poems, so that it may be assumed that it relies on the English corpus that consisted largely of the translations made by Tagore himself. The Greek title, like the English one, may not render satisfactorily the strong devotional connotation of the Sanskrit *añjali*, something like a 'prayer offering', but, to be sure, the religious tenor is well apprehensible in all texts. Trioglidis, who approaches his work with great respect, goes as far as to place Tagore's figure between Jesus of Nazareth and Plato (Tagore 1978: 5).⁴ He adds that the Indian poet, with his calmness and his serene beauty, 'paved for the Europeans the way to the orient', and 'graced the entrance to the Oriental temples with flowers; the exhausted western spirit found a new source of inspiration' (*ib.* p. 6).

There are several points where a comparison between the Indian and Greek poets is relevant. Tagore may have been more successful in reaching his objectives but the *universalism*⁵ of the two authors in thought and program is similar. Both of them travelled a lot. Sikelianos travelled mostly to the West whereas Tagore visited several other countries as well. Both of them originated from a respected family: a wealthy one, self-evident for a Brahmin family like in the case of Tagore, whereas Sikelianos was born into a good and educated milieu (his father was a language teacher having his own school) with an aristocratic attitude and traditions (Anton 1988b: 253), on the western Greek island of Leukas. Both of them had the possibility to read and learn at home, and, strikingly, both of them began to read law: prospective barrister. Tagore left University College London to explore Shakespeare and more; Sikelianos enrolled at the Faculty of Law of Athens University in 1901. By 1902, it was clear that he took a much more intense interest in the cultural and literary life of the Greek capital, and he never transferred to the Bar. Tagore won the Nobel Prize for Literature as early as 1913, and was the first non-European to receive the award. The Greek poet was not as lucky, but he was nominated for this prize three times, in 1945, 1947 and 1949 (Frangou-Kikilia 1993/2001: 47). Tagore, in the wake of the family tradition, founded an ashram, a spiritual hermitage, which later became the Visva-Bharati University in Santiniketan (Vassiliades 2000: 191[17], Sen 2005: 114ff.). 'Santiniketan' which means 'Abode of Peace' (cf. Sanskrit *shanti* or *sāntin* 'peace, rest, calmness, tranquillity, bliss') expresses Tagore's intentions well. Sikelianos did much to develop the so-called *Delphic Idea*, part of which would have been an international 'Delphic University' (Sikelianos 1930b). If he had been successful the university would have been, in continuation of the Delphic Oracle that was in a sense a centre in classical times, an educational establishment, open to the whole world (*ib.*, e.g. p. 7), with a focus on art, literature, drama, dance and similar practices. One may recall that from the 6th c. B.C. onward, a famous oracle of international reputation had developed in Delphi, on the site of very ancient cult centres, and it was literally believed that Delphi was the centre ('the navel') of the Earth. The *omphalos*, symbolizing the centre, an ancient religious

stone artifact, is now on exhibition in Delphi Archaeological Museum. Like the Olympic Games, the Pythian (i.e. Delphic) Games were important and had a panhellenic character. These were, however, not only athletic games but also various cultural events where drama and music had a paramount role.

Sikelianos was helped by his wife, Eva, with her contributions, and in an altruistic fashion, with her whole fortune. Eva's contribution is set out in a large autobiography (Palmer-Sikelianos 2010). Tagore was happier: the Visva-Bharati University in Santiniketan provides education on Indian culture both to Indians and foreigners. The Delphic University would have been also part of a universal *Delphic Union* (on which cf. Sikelianos 1932). There is no direct information on any relationship between Sikelianos and Tagore. But, to be sure, Tagore, when he visited Greece, was aware of the plans for the Sikelianian Delphic Games, and he wished to be able to visit Delphi the next spring in order to attend the Games.⁶

They may not have known each other personally but certainly, the Indian tradition and culture is present in the Greek thinker's work. E.g., he writes on cultural and moral 'revolution' and he acknowledges Gandhi's achievements (1932: 3-4). He also invites East and West to meet at Delphi (*ib.* p. 16), and does not forget about Eastern and Western music either, for the cultivation of which he had ordered a special organ for his wife from Germany capable to analyze and play also Eastern tunes (*ib.* p. 17). One remembers that Tagore was a composer, too. He is the composer of 'Jana Gana Mana', the National Anthem of India. The composition, first sung in 1911, was officially adopted by the Constituent Assembly as the Indian National Anthem on January 24, 1950. In his treatise on the *Delphic Union*, in quest for origins, Sikelianos alludes to 'the clean foundations of primeval societies', and Vedic India, together with 'Orphic Greece', is among them (1932: XI). Surprisingly, he cites Dhan Gopal Mukerji who wrote that 'Europe cannot attract India any more, only if Greece is with Europe; Greece, indeed, speaks to the heart of the Indians' (*ib.* p. 2). Last but not least, *love* is essential in the poetry of Tagore. Sikelianos may not have written on love and affection so often if compared, but in his *Delphic Appeal* this is, beside universality, very emphatically present: 'Mankind needs love', he repeats several times (e.g. 1930a: 4-5). Similarly, an important thought is expressed in his work on Digenis Akritas, a medieval Greek epic hero, when he declares that thought is unable to come up because love had come before (cited by Ivanovici 1979: 67).⁷ Whereas Tagore's religiousness and spirituality cannot be questioned, his Supreme Lord was neither a Hindu god nor the Christian one but a universal spiritual being; similarly, as Keely and Sherrard remark, 'Sikelianos felt no embarrassment in invoking "my Christ and my Dionysos" in a single breath' (Sikelianos 1979: XVI). Both of them were prolific writers, and in any case, Sikelianos was much more prolific than Kavafis (Cavafy) and Seferis, his two comparable fellow-travellers (*ib.* XIX). Last but not least, the 'Delphic Idea' can be compared with the 'Idea of India', at least in Tagore's interpretation, who thought that the idea 'militates against the intense consciousness of the separateness of one's own people from others' (Sen 2005: 72). Sen adds: 'Celebration of Indian civilization can go hand in hand with an affirmation of India's active role in the global world'. On Tagore, he writes further that 'Tagore put the rationale well, in a letter to C.F. Andrews: 'Whatever we understand and enjoy in human products instantly

becomes ours, wherever they might have their origin' (*ib.* p. 86). From the Greek side, we add to this that the newspaper *Vradini* greets Tagore on his visit as the 'noble apostle for the brotherhood between peoples' (25 November, 1926, p. 1.).

Having a look at Tagore's Nobel Prize winning work, the *Gitanjali*,⁸ the Western reader is impressed by the similarity between his poems and works of Christian inspiration. This might be a 'departure' from the prescribed course of Indian thinking. We know, however, that the moral worth of Hinduism and the Christian values are close. Sikelianos also 'departed' from accepted values, but this was not a real departure: he remained in his native culture and native land. He only expanded various dimensions and stressed things differently. Hinduism and Christianity, two spiritual commitments, have universality in common, and similarly, the two creative geniuses, Tagore and Sikelianos, were committed to *universality*. Besides the universality of the two spiritual commitments, Hinduism and Christianity, there is also the universality, strongly felt, both in Tagore and Sikelianos. One may consider Tagore's short poem 'Who is This?' meaning the Lord in whose company the poet is 'ashamed to come to [His] door' - this finds a parallel in Christian liturgy. This may be compared to a New Testament passage: 'When Jesus entered Capernaum, a Roman officer met him and begged him for help: "Sir, my servant is sick in bed at home, unable to move and suffering terribly." "I will go and make him well," Jesus said. "Oh, no, Sir," answered the officer. "I do not deserve to have you come into my house. Just give the order, and my servant will get well" (Matthew 8: 5-8).' In the Catholic liturgy, during the Holy Communion, the passage beginning with 'Just give the order' is adapted as a parable where the word 'soul' substitutes the original 'servant'.

Here is the famous 'Prayer' by Sikelianos, where *love* is also present, comparable not only with Tagore's 'Give me Strength' using the word 'prayer' but first of all with his 'Face to Face'. Sikelianos writes:

Naked the soul prays to You. Stripped of joy,
of suffering and pleasure,
naked the soul prays to You, Creator, with its
uncreated voice alone,

that voice which, before entering my flesh, in Your breast -
as a cicada hidden in the olive tree -
beat in my heart as Your will, crying 'Victory,
victory in all things,

and it was not my voice, it was Yours, Lord; with that
alone I pray to You: release in me

the secret purpose I tasted deeply outside time,
so that I may love, may love

beyond human images and all created things, beyond the single
pulse that throbs inside me,
one now for the living and the dead: grant me,
grant me deliverance,

to feel again the uncreated Eros
filling my breast,
and to be to all, to things near and far away,
as the wind's sound and breath.⁹

Tagore's 'Face to face' from the *Gitanjali*:

Day after day, O lord of my life,
shall I stand before thee face to face.
with folded hands, O lord of all worlds,
shall I stand before thee face to face.
Under thy great sky in solitude and silence,
with humble heart shall I stand before thee face to face.
In this laborious world of thine, tumultuous with toil
and with struggle, among hurrying crowds
shall I stand before thee face to face.
And when my work shall be done in this world,
O King of kings, alone and speechless
shall I stand before thee face to face.¹⁰

The 'Signet of Eternity' by Tagore expands the horizon both in time and space: the poet waits for 'the happy moment [when he is going] to see', whereas in the 'Brink of Eternity', at which he has arrived to see 'the allness of the universe' one feels an affinity with Christian hymns. Let's stop here: this is not the place to analyze the amazing passage by Sikelianos on 'The death of Digenis'. Besides 'love' that 'overtakes thought', there is an addition. Thought says 'you can't enter', but the poet is defiant: 'I'll enter; and I enter free, and I will step out free' (Ivanovici 1979: 67).¹¹

Tagore did not visit Greece again and could not attend the Delphic Games. Nor did Gandhi. Yet, they were and they are here, in Greece, in many ways. Leaving Greece, the Indian writer said goodbye with these words: 'With my good wishes for Greece and my sympathy for her people'.¹² During 2011 and 2012, Tagore was warmly celebrated and evaluated in a series of commemorative programs, with a Festschrift (Vassiliades 2012) included.¹³

Sikelianos, who did so much for Delphi, the Delphic Games, for bringing peoples together culturally and in their physical reality, was not lucky enough either in being able to continue the games or in establishing a university.

Like Tagore, he 'did not fit', either. Yet Tagore gained a unique professional and social standing. For Sikelianos, there was indifference instead. This may happen to great spirits. In such cases, it is Posterity that must discover them, give them a just evaluation, and carry their work further. That is our duty, indeed.¹⁴

Notes

- 1 A first source for this date is to be found in the Preface by Tsewang Topden, Ambassador of India in 2012 (see Vassiliades 2012: 4).
- 2 It would be exciting to search in Greek sources for details of the occasion when Tagore was decorated with the Order of the Redeemer by the Greek Government. This event took place, according to Kripalani's Tagore biography, on 25 November, 1926.
- 3 This is an edition by the Athenian publisher Iridanos, under the title *Lyric Offerings*, with the subtitle *Gitanjali*, containing the 1921 Foreword by the translator K. Trikoglidis, and a new note by Iridanos. The same publishing house, in the same year, also issued *Indian Short Stories* by Tagore, containing e.g. the story on the Ganges riverside, that of Kouzoum. The second edition of the *Lyric Offerings* translated by Rena Kartheou (Athens, 1954) was included as no. 51 in the series *A Hundred Immortal Works*. The volume contains also *The Gardener* (published by Tagore in 1913), translated by Kostas Kartheos, and *Stray Birds* (published by Tagore in 1916), translated by Kostas Kartheos and Rena Kartheou). This book gives, in Greek translation, W. B. Yeats' Introduction to *Gitanjali* (pp. 5-14). A number of other works of Tagore have also been translated into Greek.
- 4 Indeed, in the contemporary press, like in the two numbers of the newspaper *Vradini*, this impression recurs: the first report, written by the editor-in-chief, writes on his 'beautiful shape' and compares him

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with Jesus of Nazareth (Vradini, 26 November 1926, p. 7), whereas in the issue of the next day, the poet's appearance is found 'patriarchic', and a portrait made by the artist K. Klonis is published there, too (p. 1).

- 5 Sen (2005: 95) relates that 'Tagore's many sided writings' did not fit 'into the narrow box Yeats wanted to place - and keep him'. Whereas he admired the *Gitanjali* and supported its English edition, Yeats had come to denounce Tagore by 1935.
- 6 We are informed on this by the 25.-26.11.1926 issues of *Vradini* (pp. 1 and 7 of the first, and p. 1 of the second). What is even more impressive, is that Tagore had the program for the next year's Delphic Games in his hand and showed it to the editor of the newspaper. The second adds that Mahatma Gandhi, too, knew about the Games, and was interested in attending them. The editor also remarks that he had a correspondence with Eva Palmer-Sikelianos. This gives the impression that a sort of indirect contact must have existed, if not between Sikelianos and Tagore, at least between Tagore and Sikelianos' wife. Further archival research may add more evidence to this exciting subject.
- 7 On Sikelianos' religiousness, cf. Palmer-Sikelianos 2000: 143.
- 8 There is one more Greek tribute to the Indian poet: a recent Festschrift edited by D. Vassiliades, with the Preface by Tsewang Topden, the Ambassador of India in Athens, containing contributions by such names as Supriyo Tagore, also active in Santiniketan, Amartya Sen, Professor at Harvard University, and others, with a CD added on the history of *Gitanjali* by Malaya Bhattacharya (Vassiliades 2012).
- 9 For the Greek original, see Sikelianos 1979: 40, where also the English translation, cited here.
- 10 For the Greek rendering of this poem, see Tagore 1978: 56-57 (no. 76). For the English translation, here, as well as elsewhere, I used online sources that could be considered reliable.
- 11 As far as I know, there is no English translation of this play. I cite the whole passage in the French rendering:

'Je me suis endormi dans un profond vertige,
Comme l'abeille une nuit entière dans la rose,
Et je viens de rouvrir les yeux pour veiller
Sur mes derniers moments, là où la pensée n'arrive pas,
Mais où l'amour parvient,
Là où la pensée écrit: «tu ne peux entrer», à quoi je répons
«J'entrerai», car j'entre et sors comme je veux...» (Sikelianos 1960: 117-118). For the Greek original, cf. Sikelianos 1948: 76).
- 12 *Vradini*, 26 November, 1926, p. 1.
- 13 D. Vassiliades recently released a book on Mahatma Gandhi, published by ELINEPA, the Greek-Indian Society, in Athens.
- 14 On the contemporary lack of understanding about Sikelianos' ideas, cf. Samoladas 1982: 25. Still, in a sense, posterity decided in favour of the Greek poet. Now, an International Delphic Council exists, the founder of which is the German Christian Kirsch. He could win the support of the late Minister of

Education Melina Mercouri, whose death in the early 90's was a serious setback. Yet international cultural events called the Delphic Games regularly take place in recent years. But Delphi is not the only scene of the modern games: see some remarks on the ancient and modern importance of Delphi by M. Laser (1995) and by the archaeologist F. Lang (1995), in German, with parallel Greek texts.

- 15 This first edition was followed by a second one in 1950 in the 2nd volume of works collected under the title *Thymele* with an added part to the title: *Christ Unbound or The Death of Digenes*, and so was the French translation: *Christ délivré. La mort de Digénis*. In its final form, the work was placed in the 3rd volume of *Thymele*, which, again, forms part of the *Apanda*, the Collected Works of Sikelianos, © Anna Sikelianou 1951, 1955, 1971.

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