

**Genius of the Shore:  
Memorial Address for Dr. Balachandra Rajan**

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The license to kill is fortified by the assumption that the life  
of a single servant of God is worth the life of a thousand  
citizens of otherness.

–Balachandra Rajan, ““Samson Hath Quit Himself / Like  
Samson””

For a long time, for a very long time, I feared having to say goodbye to Balachandra Rajan.<sup>1</sup> And for that reason, I cleaved ever more lovingly and circumspectly to his ideas and to his teaching, to the example of his generous scholarly demeanour and to the friendship that we forged and shared for so many years. I was and I am to this day Balachandra's student, and although he did me the enormous courtesy of treating me as a colleague and as a fellow-traveller from the instant that I completed my dissertation with him many years ago, and no doubt for some time before, I always happily experienced my comradeship with him as his pupil—his by turns wayward, dissenting, and dutiful pupil, to be sure, but his pupil nevertheless. Only recently I was discussing with my undergraduate theory students the felicitous complexity of the mentoring relationship between Socrates and Plato, and in the course of that conversation I confided something to them about the experience of my own mentor: even though the day eventually came when I began to address Balachandra familiarly as "Bal," in my mind I always said something else, namely "Dr. Rajan." In his gentle and compelling presence (to remember something Heidegger once said of the ancients), I may have spoken his name in Greek but I thought it in German. Indeed, few things have given me greater pleasure in my scholarly life than befriending Balachandra as my teacher, and that is why to this day I am honored to refer to him, as I do to his colleague, Dr. Ross G. Woodman, as my supervisor. Perhaps that is not a very fashionable thing to admit, not in a scholarly milieu that puts so much emphasis on forming oneself as an autonomous academic subject, and thus on the ritualistic slaying of one's father or fathers. But Balachandra always did teach his students to be at odds with everything fashionable, intellectually speaking. I live in hope that he forgave me this indulgence, this insistence that I remain, as it were, after class, my only explanation being Michel de Montaigne's: I imagined him this way, and hardly imagined him in any other way, because it was him, because it was me.<sup>2</sup> He was first my respected teacher, then my friend as my teacher, and one of the many, many things that he taught me was

how truly to be friends with one's instructor, and to make teaching and learning the enduring and enduringly fruitful source of a loving friendship.

But as Jacques Derrida reminds us, becoming a friend means doing nothing less than the impossible. It means dwelling with the vulnerability of the loved other, and enduring the unhappy chance that you will lose that friend before losing one's own life. Remembering Paul de Man, a dear comrade and esteemed colleague from whom he never ceased learning, Derrida remarks: "It suffices that I know him to be mortal, and that he knows me to be mortal—there is no friendship without this knowledge of finitude" ("Mnemosyne" 29). I first felt this intimation of my teacher's mortality as a doctoral student, more than a quarter of a century ago, when I interviewed Balachandra for *The Gazette*—the student newspaper at the University of Western Ontario—on the occasion of his being awarded the Royal Society of Canada's prestigious Pierre Chauveau Medal for contributions to knowledge in the humanities. In that interview, I asked him about remarks that he had made in a recent lecture describing the two generations over which Ezra Pound's *Cantos* had been written, remarks that I found to be at once illuminating about the subject at hand, and moving because they seemed to reveal something about my professor's current state of mind. "Another war is fought to make war impossible," Balachandra had said . . . and if I close my eyes, I can hear him unfolding those measured and purposive sentences again:

Another war is fought to make war impossible. Mass communications bring the world to our doorstep while the loneliness of the individual intensifies within the global village. The proliferating technologies which we have invented erect and proclaim stereotypes to which we must conform and by which, if necessary, we are to be re-invented. The capacity of the human race for destructiveness multiplies a billionfold.<sup>3</sup>

Professors sometimes wryly note that students remain oblivious to the fact that their teachers grow old while they—the students—seem to remain ageless, like figures on a Grecian urn, but I remember hearing these words and realizing, as if never before, that my beloved teacher was himself a creature of time and of the times, and that he was not only describing the world as exhausted and in jeopardy, but also that he was himself exhaustible, vulnerable, and mortal. Lamely—I blush to remember this moment now—lamely, I said, "surely the years that you describe in these sentences cover your own lifetime and paint a saddening picture." Balachandra's response to my impudence and naïveté was as telling as it was thoughtful, and if anyone has ever proven the truth

of Northrop Frye's observation that teachers learn to substitute patience for heroism it was Professor Rajan. Without for a moment disowning his grievous thoughts, or their palpable autobiographical resonances, Balachandra responded to my inquiry by insisting not on the calamities of the present, which he had plainly identified as his present, but much rather on the importance of rejecting nihilisms of all kinds, and in particular the annihilation of the humanities in the face of what he called "the disciplines of utility and production." In other words, he made of this encounter a scene of teaching and learning in which professing literary studies in the falling dark meant not the abstention from responsibility but its very reason for being. "What the humanities must do," he said to me, his voice rising in intensity, "is to make people reflect a little more deeply on what constitutes them as persons, and on the extent to which their own views of their reality and identity as persons are conditioned by the technologies with which they are enveloped. There has to be a definition of the human," he continued, "that stands apart from what we have surrounded ourselves with, and which isn't derived from the political technological production-oriented world which encircles us and which is fed back into our own sense of ourselves. I don't think that disciplines which are utility and production oriented are capable of this kind of understanding," he concluded: "In present circumstances such an understanding would really have to arise out of an act of detachment from the environment. I would prefer to say detachment and not disengagement . . . withdrawal rather than severance. Severance is not something I would in any way wish to support" ("Rajan" 9).

"Detachment, not disengagement." The very words tolled me back to my sole self, as if awakening me from a dogmatic slumber about what it meant to be a public intellectual. They awaken me still. Perhaps that is the lesson that Balachandra leaves most vividly with me as my teacher and my friend, and that so palpably characterizes his work, early and late. Here the humanities classroom, which is to say the space of learning that Balachandra tirelessly created and recreated with every word that he wrote, every sentence that he published, every paper that he read, here the humanities classroom is not abandoned but affirmed, not an evasion of history but a principal location from which to disavow history's necessity. Classmates often marvelled at Balachandra's prestigious power to recite volumes of poetry by heart, and I wouldn't be honest if I didn't say that I too was mesmerized by those performances. But in truth what always struck me much more was what Balachandra *did* with that poetry, the illuminating power and integrity of his analyses, never a claim that was not won and hard won, the humane quality of his readings, their worldliness, their encouraging alchemy of sobriety and delight—not to mention the "ethic and politic consideration" that he brought to these alien texts, texts whose otherness he re-

fused to reconcile to the demands of the present at the same instant that he urged them to speak more forcefully to it. "Detachment, not disengagement." It was his capacity as a thinker for whom the humanities mattered that made me swoon, but with this difference: it brought me to my senses.

For a long time, I feared having to say goodbye to Balachandra Rajan. And never more so than during those arresting moments when his texts, which to my mind grew ever more beautiful and pointed, more pressing in their sparseness and candour, turned towards something like autobiography. Let me turn very briefly to one telling example. In a landmark essay first published in 1999, Rajan worries Milton's complicated allegiance to the "condemnation of the havoc wrought by empire builders" ("Imperial" 100). Up until the concluding pages of his argument, the scholar's focus has been on the intricacies of *Paradise Regained*, and on the political unconscious by which it is troubled, and which in turn troubles the rest of Milton's *oeuvre*. Then the essay makes a most interesting swerve, suddenly pulling the reader from the seventeenth to the twentieth century. In that instant we realize that this has been Rajan's point all along, and that the analysis of *Paradise Regained*, as richly detailed and compelling as it is, has been destined to illuminate the vicissitudes of the author's—and our own—present. "Milton's writing takes two different routes across the terrain of imperial history," he notes. "The routes come together in the peripeteia of the colonial classroom, with the teachers imparting one lesson and the students learning another. A particular incident comes to mind" (106). The "incident" that comes to mind may well be "particular," but it will here be recalled in a manner that feels curiously generalizing and anonymous, as if absorbed from the *Zeitgeist* of the Indian subcontinent and channelled through Rajan's inimitable prose. As the story that he is about to relate makes clear, the "incident" in question is somehow at once autobiographical and biographical, personal and political; it summons a memory that is his, but not his alone.

The windows of the classroom look out on a beach. A political demonstration is beginning to form itself on the yellow, mud-flecked sands in front of the catamarans and fishing boats. The lecturer, armed with Verity's influential notes, instructs the students on the classical strain in Milton. If he has one eye on the demonstration he may point to the limitations of 'immortal hate' and the 'study of revenge.' The students find these limitations effaced by the crowd's non-violent behaviour as it faces a lathy charge by the police (106).

With its combination of naturalism and staginess, Rajan leaves un-

determined whether this is a historical scene that is invented or an event that he witnessed (or knew others had witnessed), but he does so in the context of an essay that has steadfastly put to us the role of invention in testifying to history. The tableau thrums with ironic expectation, capturing the instant when the climates of reading begin to undergo a sea-change. Whose story is this? What genius of the shore—touched by violence, loss, and changefulness, but holding those qualities at a clarifying distance—speaks these words? In truth, a great part of me would rather have spent this afternoon parsing these apparently simple sentences, reading them in the spirit of Balachandra's intellectual courage, and as an example of what could be called his late style. Style was a term that he taught me to think, use, and teach without a trace of embarrassment; against all odds, he always insisted that "style" was not a four-letter word. It was that emphasis on form, presentation, genre, and technique that laid a kind of groove in my thinking, an open-ended call to pay rigorous attention to "what the form helps us to think," as he says in one of his last essays, including the "turning of the form against itself," and perhaps most evocatively of all, now, more than ever, "the form of the unfinished."<sup>4</sup> Had we the time, and if this were another occasion, I would rather have unpacked these self-effacing phrases, this little school-room allegory, with the patient subtlety that characterizes Balachandra's own readings. We might, for example, have considered the vivid threshold setting of the moment as it unfolds on the water's edge, a scene that is dreamily bucolic and forebodingly post-lapsarian, a scene of transformation as much as contrast, in which the manhandling of literature by a mostly oblivious teacher is aligned with the fury of the police—but without quite saying that they are the indistinguishable either. If I had the time, and if this were a different occasion, we could discuss how at this very moment, in this work, Balachandra sees fit to break the momentum of his own scholarly thinking, because sometimes the momentum is not the most important thing, and perhaps it is not the thing at all. By arresting his discussion of *Paradise Regained* with this memory, if it is a memory, the Milton scholar repeats in the narrative of his own essay the very interruption that he describes as having once happened on the sea-shore—as if he were compelled to return to a scene of personal, national, and aesthetic tribulation that he cannot and will not forget. The fact that the tableau permits us to identify its author with both the confused lecturer and the distracted students is itself revealing, reminding us that even at the height of his career Rajan was the first to say that he had much to learn, and that he was, in effect, still in the process of looking up from his edition of Milton, and taking in the worlds, past, present, and future, in which the English poet lives and breathes and has his being.

If we probe this scene further, it may even function as a kind of

screen-memory for a more distant element of Rajan's biography. This indeterminate distance between the classroom and the sea-shore, the students and the protestors, reminds us that while Rajan was in the midst of crafting his first monumental book on Milton, he observed the "Quit India" movement from afar. He did so both out of necessity—he was immersed in his studies at Cambridge at the time—and as a result of a certain scholarly temperament that was as yet unsure of how to negotiate the space between poems and events, scholarly civility and civil disobedience. We know—and he knows that we know—that the political and cultural history of colonialism in the subcontinent would subsequently come to play a much more pressing role in his scholarly writing (it was already the most significant theme of his two novels), so I think that Rajan demonstrates remarkable candour when he quietly confesses, as I think he does here, that over his long life he has found himself on both sides of the classroom, "imparting one lesson" and "learning another." In other words, from the vantage point of his *fin de siècle* present, Balachandra uses this scene as a means to look back at a past that was on the threshold of an extraordinary future, both his and that of a generation of concerned Indian thinkers. Here the private space of the classroom is unexpectedly over-run by the lesson of history—over-run, but not destroyed, because the lesson that is being taught is not only about the frailty but also about the irrepressibility of peace, non-violent dissent, and right reason. The non-violence of the classroom and the non-violence of the crowd find an unexpected affinity, even as Rajan's vignette values them in different ways and holds them apart with such pointed irony. Indeed, the scholarly essay in which this "incident" is cached confirms that poetry cannot *not* be taught, and this includes the most canonical texts, no matter what is happening in the streets, if for no other reason that there are poets whose deepest significance lies in their willingness to denounce poetry that refuses to resist its imperial temptations. It is Rajan's enormous insight to have seen, in his final analyses, that Milton was one of those poets. "In waging war against his own splendid excess," Rajan concludes, the English poet "problematizes at the deepest level a necessity which continues to perplex us: to achieve the extinction of empire not simply in our ideological commitments, but in the language we write and which writes us as we write it" ("Imperial" 109). Literary education is arguably the single cultural location in which this dialectic of writing and being (over-)written is subjected—or should be subjected—to the most rigorous analysis, and this includes an analysis that is perhaps too quickly called "political." Under the pressure of the history of which it is ineluctably a part, the education happening in Rajan's lecture hall is compelled to expand and complicate itself, to be itself and something else again, if it is to thrive and be meaningful in a world undergoing changes after which there is

no turning back. "Detachment, not disengagement." Rajan does not suggest that the coming world will be without classrooms; but when the times catch up with education, we can be assured that education will never be the same because of it. On this beach, with its "mud-flecked sands" and fishing boats, the day is like wide water without sound—and on that day the teacher becomes the student, even if he is not yet prepared for that mutation; and the student becomes the teacher, and specifically the teacher of teachers—which is to say the exemplary role that Balachandra himself so vividly played for me, as he did for so many other scholars.

For a long time now, I feared saying goodbye to Balachandra Rajan. At the visitation in London not long after his death, a coming-together at which many of us in this room today were also present, one of Balachandra's colleagues and long-time friends read Chandra Rajan's incandescent translation of the passage from the Rig-Veda with which *The Form of the Unfinished* concludes.<sup>5</sup> I'm not afraid to say that her words were then a balm to me, and helped to allay the perturbations of my mind. As I heard those gorgeous cadences read aloud, words that meant so much to Balachandra, more perhaps than he could ever have himself said in words, as I thought about how those verses hint at the wondrous possibility that there is no creation without a questioning intelligence to parse its mysteries, I imagined Chandra toiling carefully over their design and significance—and I thought of how far these phrases of light had travelled, from India to Canada, from Sanskrit to English, and from ancient times to our sorrowful present. She had made this translation, this voyage between worlds, possible, and I was grateful as never before for what she had freely given us, the way in which their improbable yet extraordinary presence captured something of the many translations—joyful, burdensome, unfinished, and mortal—that had quickened and defined Balachandra's own life: diplomat and scholar, east and west, war and peace, husband and father, reader and writer, student and teacher, mentor and friend. As I sat there, I was thinking too of the last time my wife, Tracy Wynne, and I spoke with Balachandra, after he had been moved to Victoria Hospital, not two weeks before his passing. From Toronto, we arrived in London just ahead of one of those terrific winter storms that sometimes bear down on the city. We knew it was coming, but even then its ferocity caught us by surprise. Safe inside the hospital, as the snow began to swirl in anonymous arcs outside the window of Balachandra's room, we sat close by and chatted quietly for an hour or so about any number of things. He spoke with enormous fondness and concern for his wife and of course for his daughter. He asked me to watch out for them, and this I promised to do. He spoke too about his formative days at Cambridge, as the war came to its end, and that led in turn to a conversation about T.S. Eliot's *Four*

*Quartets*, which Balachandra argued should be read as a war poem, written both amid and against the trauma of a burning, riven world. In that instant, I heard Balachandra's remarks as a kind of metaphor of his life, his way of teaching me about the vulnerable solaces of literature to be proclaimed against the struggles of mortality. Once more I found myself in his absorbing classroom, and the lesson that he taught me was that it mattered a great deal to him that he was alive when he died.<sup>6</sup> I looked into his eyes and he looked into mine, and we paused there for a moment, the silence broken only by the sounds of the gathering storm outside. I grasped his hand, and in that quietness he graciously let me believe that our parting was well met, as well as could be in this world, which is all the world that is. "Hurry up please, it's time," the charge nurse said. And so Tracy and I left, filled not only with concern about Balachandra's evident discomfort but also with immense pleasure in having seen him, and having once again felt his knowing and thoughtful presence in our lives.

For a long time now, I have feared saying goodbye to Balachandra Rajan. With love and respect, and in the presence of his cherished daughter, who is near, and his treasured wife, who is also near, even at this great distance . . . with measureless love and respect I embrace his memory, and say goodbye to him now.

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<sup>1</sup> This essay is a slightly revised version of an addressed delivered at the memorial held for Dr. Balachandra Rajan on 20 March 2009 at the University of Western Ontario.

In rhetoric and sentiment, my refrain recalls Jacques Derrida's turn of phrase in "Adieu:"

For a long time, for a very long time, I've fear having to say *Adieu* to Emmanuel Levinas. I knew that my voice would tremble at the moment of saying it, and especially saying it aloud, right here, before him, so close to him, pronouncing this word of *adieu*, this word *à-Dieu*, which, in a certain sense, I get from him, a word that he will have taught me to think or to pronounce otherwise. (200)

<sup>2</sup> Montaigne: "If you press me to say why I loved him, I feel that it cannot be expressed except by replying: 'Because it was him: because it was me'" (212).

<sup>3</sup> See Clark, "Rajan: A distinguished scholar and humanist talks about teaching, politics, and the role of the humanities" (9).

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4. The phrases "what the form helps us to think" and the "turning of the form against itself" both come from the forthcoming "Ludlow Revisited: Milton and Eco-Justice."

5. See Chandra Rajan's translation of *Rig-Veda* X, 129, which forms the "Postscript" to *The Form of the Unfinished: English Poetics from Spenser to Pound*.

6. I here recall Anatole Broyard's explanation for continuing to think and write in the face of his impending death. This labour is, as he says, "to make sure I'll be alive when I die" (30).

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