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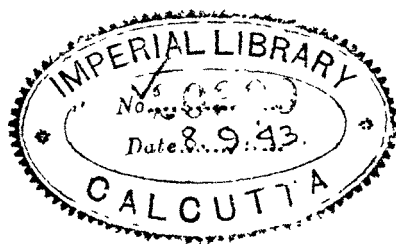
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RABINDRANATH THROUGH WESTERN EYES

Rabindranath Through WESTERN EYES

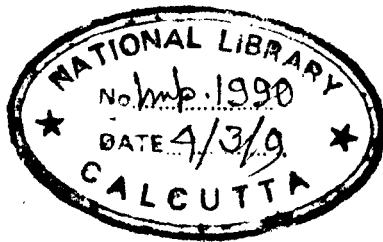
By

DR. A. ARONSON, M.A. (CANTAB.)



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PREFACE

New literary criticism, quickened by a social conscience, is turning to the context of daily events for a revaluation of creative work. Art is being tested as an expression of contemporaneous trends; the main emphasis is laid on the economic and political cross-currents which, according to this school, determine the products of a civilisation. Popular responses to an author, as revealed in the press of different countries, are regarded as serious evidence, rather than changing side-lights, in literary assessment.

This is a modern corrective to the professional criteria which flourished on famous sayings, standardised reactions, and on textual notions of "pure art" that needed little or no contact with time or environment. "Applied values" in criticism—even politically applied values—are a wholesome counter to abstractions; and if some ruthlessness is being shown to the immaculate conception of art, we are at least more vividly aware to-day of literary realities. The still air, one hopes, will remain in criticism, along with an eye for whirling kaleidoscopic facts; artistic truth comprehends both. But the analytical approach has certainly heightened our sense of correlation, and if we cannot admit over-emphasised sociology, modern critics have to be praised for tackling new aspects of the creative process. The function of literature, the index of public reactions—not excluding those which are diplomatically contrived—the story of books and men, and the clash of cultures are being studied with richer significance.

Dr. Aronson's book shows the new trend, though he does not by any means deny the unanalysable and transcending factors of the human mind. Rabindranath Tagore's genius, and the cultural inheritance which he mingled with western inspiration, are both stressed, especially in the fifth and sixth chapters; the poet's continental tours provide the background for a fascinating survey. While we are given an intricate pattern of European reactions, mainly from a political angle, the author scrutinises it with trained discernment. His own bias is there, both with regard to authors and to particular countries, but no effort is spared in presenting a documentary view of swift events, an enormous number of news-comments and letters are analysed and assimilated, mass enthusiasm is critically handled whenever it threatens to overwhelm judgment, and we are provided with an entirely novel perspective as we follow Rabindranath in a panoramic literary tour through Europe. Controversies are inevitably raised; we are too closely identified with the historical forces of this age to arrive at agreement; but the finest justification of this book is that it compels us to face the pressing problems of our civilisation. Some of us will not wholly accept the author's use of "random samples"—the statistical technique has yet to be adapted to literature; indeed, it assumes the causal links which have got to be established—but the method is exciting. Sudden and unexpected light falls on issues which we might have ignored; a stray letter, or a reported interview is brought into relationship with a major incident in the poet's continental progress, and deep penetration is often achieved into fundamental problems that were raised by Rabindranath's changing contact with European audiences. The author's selection of material has not always convinced me—this personal reference will be excused—on the basis of my

experience of tours with the poet, I could have selected other scripts and impressions to set up a different hypothesis, but this is inevitable in a survey of current events. Dr. Aronson has, in my opinion, been unfair to pre-1930 Germany and used involved political and racial logic to explain away genuine popular enthusiasm for Tagore. European jealousies and intrigues may have played a secret part in the rise and fall of the poet's reputation in the West but this needed less emphasis than simpler and more fundamental goodwill. Rabindranath Tagore's personality—I refer to his figure, his countenance, and the quality of his voice—and the serenity which he brought from a distant land to war-torn central Europe, invested his name and his presence, as well as his writings, with an almost mythical appeal which was also very real; the effect was incalculable, and spontaneous. Even Keyserling, on whom far too much importance has been bestowed in this work, must have been enthusiastic for genuine, if somewhat excessively emotional and intellectual reasons. The simplest story is often the truest, and the darkening of Germany need not deflect our narrative of better days, especially in connection with the people's response to a spiritual poet. Recent cultural mutations are sufficient unto the present context.

If Dr. Aronson had included Scandinavia in his account of the West, the picture would have been lightened, and one or two countries would not have dominated this book marring an otherwise brilliant and incisive criticism. Soviet Russia entered later into the poet's Western career and that great event, which meant so much for the poet and for the international world, demands a place in this narration.

These introductory criticisms, paradoxically enough, must be accepted as evidence of this writer's appreciation of Dr. Aronson's book. It is a rare and

enlivening account of a poet's wanderings in this wide earth; such an illuminating figure and a world stage had surely never come together in literary history. Dr. Aronson has brought a devoted interest and great erudition to his survey, and written with eloquence on a subject of pioneer importance.

"RABINDRANATH THROUGH WESTERN EYES" will stimulate an international awakening, so gravely needed at this hour, making us face cultural difficulties which must be understood and, if possible, conquered before internationalism can be real. Literary critics will value this original approach, and students of Rabindranath Tagore's works, in many countries, will find in it a new incentive for explorative studies. The Common Reader—who dwells within each one of us—will enjoy this book as a news-reel, and follow the author from one capital to another, listening to the commentary, and eager to know more about India's great son who was loved and honoured by an entire continent. It is good to think of this in a world temporarily obscured by cataclysms, but such things will pass revealing more brightly than before the light that a poet lit for all mankind.

CALCUTTA
January, 1943

AMIYA CHAKRAVARTY

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INTRODUCTION

When an Eastern poet goes to the West he carries with him a tradition that is foreign to most Europeans. The greater his fame in the West the more will he be conscious of the differences in sensibility and cultural heritage that separate the East from the West. This consciousness will create a message, and the West will respond to it according to its own beliefs and attitudes. It is this response we are concerned with here.

The literary critic who follows the Eastern poet across the Suez will be confronted by a clash of civilisations which is both disconcerting and fascinating. He will find that the poet and his critics often fail in their attempts at mutual adjustment. A tradition that gives meaning to the life of the one is unintelligible to the other; a social or religious system that has been infused into the one from his earliest childhood contradicts the very essence of the other's conceptions and beliefs; their definition of civilisation itself lowers the one in the eyes of the other.

Millions of Westerners saw and read and responded to Rabindranath. A few great and open minds responded wholeheartedly and unhesitatingly. Some had to fight hard and they succeeded in the end. But many failed either because they admired Rabindranath in the wrong way and for the wrong reasons or because they could never detach themselves from their own little self and their own half-digested tradition. On no other Eastern poet greater honour was bestowed during his lifetime in the West than on Rabindranath. And yet, if we want to do justice both to his memory and to

those in the West who not only admired but indeed understood him, we shall have to separate the genuine from the artificial and the relevant from the irrelevant. Therefore, some of the pages in this book will provide grim reading for those whose sympathy and admiration are equally divided between East and West.

When I started collecting material for this book I found, on the one hand, the West, frustrated after a gigantic and futile attempt at political re-adjustment, intensely pre-occupied with the ultimate problems of existence and striving after a yet greater material domination of the universe; on the other, Rabindranath preaching the same message again and again, appealing to their intelligence, their goodwill, their longing for emancipation from the chains of dead matter, speaking to white, black, and yellow in the same language,—probably a unique linguistic synthesis of poetic flights and common sense,—with the simplicity of a child and a prophet. Wherever he went he was received with the same unbounded almost delirious enthusiasm. His picture was flashed across continents and oceans. He travelled in the special trains put at his disposal by the Fascist Government of Italy and went to Russia on a special invitation of the Soviet Government; he was the guest of Presidents of Democratic Republics, of Kings, both before and after their abdication, of the greatest men of letters and of science. We see him speaking to audiences of many thousands, and to millions through the radio. His portrait has been painted by several hundreds of artists, his bust could be seen in almost all the exhibitions of the outstanding sculptors of the world. And yet, wherever he went, he wanted to see the children: perhaps he felt, they were the only ones who understood him.

There was a great and stark silence around him during those European tours, the silence of all isolated

greatness. And only from far away can we hear the subtle murmuring of the daily press, the monthly magazines, the quarterly reviews, the increasing or decreasing sale of his books; but after he had left, the murmur became a deafening noise of speech and counter-speech, of book and counter-book, of praise and doubt and vilification. A great scholar would expound the philosophy of Rabindranath in terms of metaphysics and mysticism; a politician would elucidate his position in European politics; litterateurs would establish comparisons and parallels; and priests of various denominations would exalt his spiritual message. Every one of them had his own axe to grind, and Rabindranath became a useful and innocent tool which they knew how to handle for their own ulterior purposes. So it came about that he was unknowingly made to represent certain tendencies in the party-politics of various nations, that his name was freely used for the sake of either appeasing or inflaming national hatred; the various religious and pseudo-racial denominations used him for their own ends; the litterateurs were often uncritical and unnecessarily condescending; and there are the thousands of highly-strung and hysterical women who lost themselves in a pathological ecstasy whenever he appeared among them, a sensationalism which is symptomatic of the loss of mental equilibrium, and perhaps also of the loss of all beliefs in the West.

The problem of response is both cultural and psychological. And in the complex framework of contemporary civilisation it is to a very considerable extent also the problem of how public opinion is formed, re-formed, twisted, and frequently guided along wrong channels. That is why much of the material used in this book is taken from newspapers and periodicals which reflect better than anything else the subtle currents along which public opinion moved during these fateful

last twenty years.¹

Some may still be asking; what does it matter whether a poet is understood or not? Indeed it matters very little; for the greatness of his creation is justification by itself. But what matters, I believe, is whether the sensibility of Western people was at all ready to respond, whether Rabindranath's message meant anything at all to them. We are not concerned here to know whether, for instance, that unfortunate American customs-official who asked Rabindranath whether he could read and write, did so with the deliberate intention of insulting an Indian Nobel Prize winner; nor do we suggest that he represented the public opinion of the United States. What we are rather concerned with, are the comments on such an irrelevant incident, in the papers, magazines, and reviews in New York and London, in Berlin and Paris, and in Shanghai. For they throw light on the sensibility of those people who responded to Rabindranath's poetry, they open our eyes to the way the West accepted or rejected the message of a mature intellect and a poet of genius. Similarly the literary critic cannot do justice to either Rabindranath or the West, if, for instance, he bases his argument on a letter written by Rabindranath a few days after this incident to his friend C. F. Andrews and in which he gives vent to his feeling of disappointment and to a not quite unjustifiable bitterness:

In the meantime their newspapers are hilariously impressed by this figure of an oriental mystic coming out of the railway train and also down from his cloudland of introspection, to the mundane world, dressed in a long robe and blue socks, graciously posing himself to be photographed. Yesterday I gave a lecture to a small group of students and some of them sat mopping their faces with powder puffs and some

¹ A special Appendix will, however, be devoted to an analysis of Rabindranath's bibliography in the West.

at the end came to shake hands with me. The President benignly pleased had a photograph taken later of a group composed of an oriental fool and a member of the Nordic race who always minds his own purpose while the cost is paid by others less favoured by fortune.....This is a fit climax which had its first act in the Immigration Office, Vancouver.¹

This book, therefore, will be one more attempt to place literary criticism within the definite context of living human beings, of classes and creeds, nations and races. It will be, in the main, a study in values. For the response of people to a poet is beyond all the standards of literary criticism and aesthetics; it reflects their system of values, and not only with regard to literature, but also with regard to religion, to their moral and social attitudes, and their political awareness. And if we say that Rabindranath's sudden leap to fame in Europe was the most severe test of sensibility that the West had to pass through during the last twenty years, then we mean by it a test of values, indeed, a test of their critical intelligence.

I should like to thank Mr. Rathindranath Tagore for kindly having put at my disposal all the material on Rabindranath in his possession; this includes many as yet unpublished letters, cuttings from newspapers, periodicals, and magazines, and his complete collection of books about Rabindranath.

The opinions expressed throughout this book are, however, entirely my own and do not necessarily represent those of the Santiniketan authorities.

My thanks are also due to my friends at Santiniketan, who by their kind advice and encouragement have helped me in writing this book.

SANTINIKETAN

A. A.

April, 1942

¹ From an unpublished letter to C. F. Andrews, dated Los Angeles, 20th April 1929.

CHAPTER I

POETIC JUSTICE

*"One day I shall have to fight my way
out of my own reputation."*

The year 1913 was an average year in every respect. More than 12,000 books were published in England alone; but, according to a survey made by a journalist early in 1914 "no single book attracted an unusual amount of attention."¹ The best sellers during this uneventful year were *The Diary and Antarctic Journals* of Captain Scott and Ronald Amundsen's *The South Pole*. The choice of these two books indicates the growing eagerness of the reading public to know something of the world at large and their still strong belief in the possibility of scientific advancement, but also their lack of literary appreciation. Among the other "best books" of the year we find Trevelyan's *John Bright* and A. E. W. Mason's *The Witness for the Defence*. Theodore Roosevelt's *Autobiography* and August Bebel's *My Life* as well as E. T. Cook's *Life of Florence Nightingale*; Cardinal Newman's *Sermon Notes* were greatly appreciated and so were Thomas Hardy's *Tales* and Winston Churchill's *The Inside of the Cup*. There is only one book of poems among the "best books" of 1913: Rabindranath's *Gitanjali*.² This is undoubtedly a strange assortment of books: politics and biography predominate, if we make

¹ *The Scotsman*, 3. 1. 1914.

² *Book Monthly*, December 1913.

exception for the two travel stories; next comes light fiction, followed by a slender volume of religious prose; and last of all a solitary volume of poems translated into English by a writer practically unknown to the English reading public.

People later on tried to explain the award of the Nobel Prize to Rabindranath by the fact that this was an otherwise most uneventful year and that the reading public was ready to welcome any kind of exotic literary adventure. For the man-in-the-street was liable to find life increasingly monotonous; he cultivated his most cherished self-deception, his belief in the progress of science, and a superficial optimism as regards political affairs. The year 1913 was, according to him, "a good average year for fiction, rather less so for the drama, and rather more so for science. The distinctive achievements of the year have been in the science and art of aviation, which is acquiring mastery of the air with triumphant acceleration of speed. In politics our finest achievement of the year is the maintenance of the peace of Europe, with a good second to it in the notable improvement of our relations with Germany."¹

There is certainly some truth in the assertion that the intelligentsia, not only in England, but all over Europe, was open to any kind of Eastern influence at that time. In literature and philosophy as well as in painting, sculpture, and music, we find such influences at work long before Rabindranath's name was known to any one outside India. And yet the sudden award of the Nobel Prize to an Indian was something of a shock to most intellectuals even. First they refused to believe it; later on, after the press had supplied them with hastily written biographical sketches of the Indian Nobel Prize

¹ *Daily Telegraph*, 26. 2. 1914.

winner with this incredible name,¹ they started lengthy and involved arguments on the merits and demerits of Rabindranath's poetry and the possible political implications of the award. Before, however, attempting an analysis of these arguments let us state the following two facts which in themselves are significant: the latest edition of *Who's Who* of December 1913 does not include Rabindranath's name, a fact which was commented upon by a number of newspapers in England. And in the *Cambridge History of English Literature*, Vol. XIV, published in 1916, we read the following illuminating lines in an article devoted to "Anglo-Indian" literature, in which some of the great Indian writers of the past are discussed but no mention is made at all of Rabindranath:

But until its full results are made manifest, Anglo-Indian literature will continue to be mainly what it has been, with few exceptions, in the past,—literature written by Englishmen and Englishwomen who have devoted their lives to the service of India.²

It seems, therefore, that even after the award of the Nobel Prize to Rabindranath, a large number of people refused to take any notice of it, in spite of the fact that he had by that time already become a "best seller."

During the second half of February 1914, almost all the leading newspapers in England, on the Continent, and in America, published editorials dealing with Rabindranath and the Nobel Prize. Very few among these articles approached Rabindranath from a purely literary

¹ One of the greatest stumbling-blocks to Rabindranath's rise to fame in Europe was his name which people found extremely difficult to pronounce.

² *Cambridge History of English Literature*, Vol. XIV, Chap. X—"Anglo-Indian Literature," by Prof. E. E. Oaten, M.A., LL.B., I.E.S., 1916.

point of view; this was evidently due to the fact that many of the writers were unacquainted with his work even in English translation. Many of them reproduced parts of W. B. Yeats' Preface to *Gitanjali*, without passing any further comment upon it. English newspapers are remarkably silent as regards Rabindranath's religious and racial descent; it undoubtedly goes to their credit that hardly any one passes judgment on Rabindranath, merely because he was not "white" or because he belonged to a "colonial" people. American and Canadian editorials were far more outspoken. Most of the newspapers there speak of the "Caucasian race" as distinguished from the "Indian race," implying thereby the superiority of the former over the latter. Whether this purely racial attitude was due to the influence of Kipling's books or to the actually existing racial conflict in America, would be difficult to say. Nevertheless, these considerations seemed to overshadow all others in the United States. Here is a representative instance:

The awarding of the Nobel Prize for literature.....to a Hindu has occasioned much chagrin and no little surprise among writers of the Caucasian race. They cannot understand why this distinction was bestowed upon one who is not white.¹

We shall come across a similar muddle-headed biological approach to Rabindranath some ten years later in Germany. For the time being it is the narrow-minded American and Canadian middle-class that most resents the intrusion of this foreigner into world literature. They see in it something of a humiliation to which they have to "accommodate" themselves:

It is the first time that the Nobel Prize has gone to any one who is not what we call 'white.' It will take time, of

¹ *News*, Macon, Ga., 20.11.1913.

course, for us to accommodate ourselves to the idea that any one called Rabindranath Tagore should receive a world prize for literature. (Have we not been told that the East and the West shall never meet?) The name has a curious sound. The first time we saw it in print it did not seem real.¹

When reading the comments on the Nobel Prize award of 1913, we become increasingly aware of the fact that India to both the man-in-the-street and the politician was nothing but a political and geographical abstraction. Almost overnight Rabindranath had become the most illustrious representative of a country which played a not unimportant part in the political machinations of pre-war Europe. Indeed, political considerations are so intricately bound up with Rabindranath's rise to fame in the West that it is sometimes difficult to separate even the most genuine literary appreciation (or depreciation) of his work from international politics, colonial policy, or the way the Indian market was captured by England or Germany, America or Japan. The literary critic who deals with Rabindranath's rise to fame in the West finds himself all the time in an exceedingly disconcerting position; for he will have to refer almost all the statements made on Rabindranath in Europe to the then existing national rivalries (and they changed a good deal during these thirty years), to problems of colonial policy, and to the Stock Exchange.²

This unfortunately also applies to the Nobel Prize award. For apart from the usual praise liberally bestowed upon Rabindranath by the daily press in November 1913 and the extracts from W. B. Yeats' Preface to *Gitanjali*, there are a number of significant comments, especially in continental papers which involve Rabindra-

¹ *The Globe*, Toronto, Canada, 16.6.1914.

² See Chap. IV.

nath for the first time in the muddy waters of European politics. Five countries are concerned: England, Germany, Sweden, Norway, and the small Czech minority in the then Austro-Hungarian Empire.

"Why has Rabindranath Tagore been awarded the Nobel Prize for literature?" asks the man-in-the-street and the politician. Whether Rabindranath was of the "Caucasian" race or not did not really matter on the Continent; but that he was an Indian, and, therefore, a citizen of the British Empire did matter very much indeed. Says a well-known liberal paper from Vienna:

Has the award of the prize been due to the exotic Buddhist fashion or has England's policy in India been, perhaps, in favour of the crowning of the Bengali poet? This will remain the secret of the judges in Stockholm.¹

England, however, was not slow to retaliate. An unfortunate Scandinavian prince, Prince William of Sweden, of German descent, had been to India in 1912 and had spent some delightful hours in the house of the Tagores at Calcutta. After returning to Europe he published a book in which he gives some of the impressions he received in India and also mentions this visit to Rabindranath. But it so happened that the Swedes were in no amiable mood towards England ever since the Norwegians had chosen for their King and Queen a son-in-law and a daughter to King Edward. They indeed credited this selection to the long-headed management of Queen Louisa of Denmark through sixty years of her reign.

This rather involved Scandinavian royal family affair explains some of the less flattering remarks passed by the Prince of Sweden with regard to England. Here is an extract from this otherwise rather indifferent book;

¹ *Neue Freie Presse*, Vienna, November, 1913. (The translation of this as well as of all the following quotations is, unless otherwise stated, my own.)

while admiring the beautiful art collection at Jorasanko and listening to Indian music, the prince and the Tagores also touched upon some political topics:

Now and then.....contemporary India was mentioned in our conversation. And then it always seemed as though a painfully repressed fire began burning in the heart of the brothers. Their eyes were glowing, and they spoke of hatred, hatred against Englishmen. And with dread and awe I thought of the time when this hatred will express itself in deeds.¹

To judge by this description, it was not in order to favour England, but to favour Germany that the Nobel Prize was awarded to Rabindranath. For many people at that time believed that this Prince of Sweden was instrumental in securing the Nobel Prize for him. And here is the comment, from the English point of view, on Prince William's pleasure-trip to India and the complicated princely family affairs in Scandinavia:

Prince William's visit 'to Calcutta, Swedes have said, brought about the award of the Nobel Prize to Rabindranath Tagore. This Bengali poet, in the opinion of the French and other Orientalist scholars, is hardly a typical Oriental, but rather an Anglo-Indian hybrid—at any rate as a poet..... After descanting on his host's loathing of British rule, Prince William writes: 'In all my life, I never spent moments so poignant as at the house of the Hindu poet Rabindranath Tagore.'²

Germany, however, in the meantime was grinding her own axe. For she had a candidate of her own, an otherwise perfectly harmless poet and novelist, Rosegger by name, who had the misfortune of being an ardent patriot, although he did not live in Germany

¹ Prince William of Sweden: *Wo die Sonne scheint. (Where the Sun shines)* 1913. (Extract quoted in *Leipziger Neueste Nachrichten*, Leipzig, 18.12.1913.)

² *Truth*, London, 24.11.1913.

proper; but in that part of Austria which had an extremely 'mixed' population, the majority of whom, however, were Czechs. Strangely enough, one day before the award was made known to the world, that is on the 13th November 1913, a German newspaper already gave the whole show away:

It is still in our memory how Czechoslovakian associations protested with the Academy at Stockholm against the coming award of the prize to Rosegger, because he belongs to the most ardent well-wishers of the German schools in those parts of Austria with a mixed population, and because, should it be awarded to him, he will use it as a means of attack against slavonic culture. This overhasty interference makes the award of the prize for literature to the young (sic!) Indian poet altogether insignificant.

It is, perhaps, not without interest to know that the Germans at that time were firmly convinced that their candidate had by far the greatest chances (despite Thomas Hardy in England and Anatole France in France); all through February 1913 the same story of Czech interference was told over and over again, and, as one newspaper puts it, although only one national minority protested against Rosegger "the protest of all European nations will be raised against Rabindranath Tagore."¹ We can fairly well imagine the outburst of hilarious joy that swept over France and Belgium when they came to know of the German 'defeat.' Of course, no long articles were devoted to it; perhaps they felt that Rosegger was not worth all the trouble:

The press notice which announced a few days ago that the fortunate winner of the Nobel Prize would be the German novelist in Styria, Mr. Peter Rosegger, who is an ardent defender of the German cause in that country, was in too great a hurry.²

¹ *Basler Anzeiger*, Basel, 15.11.1913.

² *L'Indépendance Belge*, Bruxelles, 24.11.1913.

But Germany was not alone in her disappointment. There existed among litterateurs at that time the vague feeling that something went wrong in Stockholm and that by awarding the prize "to a Hindu poet whose name few people can pronounce, with whose work fewer in America are familiar, and whose claim for that high distinction still fewer will recognise"¹ the judges had discouraged young modern writers in Europe and America; furthermore there still were a number of really great writers who either had died without receiving due recognition from the Swedish Academy or who were already so old that there was reason to fear that they too would share the same neglect. A good amount of resentment had been caused by the award of the Nobel Prize to the Italian Carducci and the German Paul Heyse of whom very few people had ever heard before, while writers like Tolstoy, Zola, and Strindberg, had not received the recognition due to them from Stockholm. In the year 1913 the candidates that were on everybody's lips were, quite naturally, Thomas Hardy and Anatole France. Although they had established their position in the literary world for quite a long time past, the conservatism of many literary critics of the older generation, brought up as they were on the ideals of the mid-nineteenth century, refused to accept either the pessimism of Hardy or the scepticism of Anatole France. Hardy, it will be remembered, was never awarded the prize, and Anatole France had to wait, until one year before his death the judges in Stockholm decided in his favour. Here is a significant extract from an article written on the very day the decision of the Nobel Prize committee was announced in England:

Perhaps there is here evidence of a change of the temper of thought, for the opinions and tendencies of writers are

¹ *Times*, Los Angeles, 15.11.1913.

not disregarded by the Nobel Committee when they are weighing their literary merits. On no other hypothesis can be explained the persistence with which the claims of Anatole France, assuredly the living writer with the most universal reputation, have been passed over. Or, again, their blindness to Hardy's pre-eminence; for Hardy is no longer a purely insular classic: no Continental critic worthy his salt or heedful of his reputation now dares ignore Hardy. The Nobel Committee is a conservative body, and the scepticism of Anatole France and the pessimism of Hardy are too unorthodox to find favour.¹

We do not wish to create the impression as though the only result of the award was bitter criticism and ironical comment. We have selected some of these extracts because the attitudes they represent seemed to us significant as regards not only Rabindranath but India as a whole. It is true, some writers were extremely cynical: for instance the one who comes to the conclusion that "any one of us could write such stuff *ad libitum*; but nobody should be deceived into thinking it good English, good poetry, good sense, or good ethics."² But, on the other hand, the praise bestowed upon Rabindranath was not altogether unconditional. It was coloured and determined by those very values we are out to discover in this book; and the first response to Rabindranath was conditioned by certain political, moral, and literary pre-conceptions which will re-appear again and again throughout this book in various forms.

One fact, however, stands out above all others. The Nobel Prize literally forced the European reading public to acknowledge the existence of a culture based on traditions not their own and made them realise that outside the Western sphere of influence new forces were stirring of which now they had to take notice. In 1919 an emi-

¹ *Daily News and Leader*, London, 14.11.1913.

² *New Age*, London, 20.11.1913.

nent Frenchman of letters formulated this newly acquired awareness which will be of the utmost importance for a proper understanding of the problems involved in the relationship between East and West during the following decade:

That the very name of a poet who in his country enjoyed such a reputation should have been almost ignored by the whole of Europe until these last few years, goes to prove the limits of human glory. It also proves the narrowness of our civilisation and points out—whatever one may say—its provincialism.....The knowledge that these ideals are different from ours, at least makes us aware of the relativity of our European concepts. We do not sufficiently realise that millions of human beings are fed on different ideas from ours, and yet live.¹

These words will find a ready echo in the minds of innumerable intellectuals all over Europe. It is the beginning of a re-valuation of many of the European concepts that were so deeply rooted in the Western tradition. But it is also a restatement of the issues involved in a possible rapprochement of East and West. India had all of a sudden ceased to be a merely political abstraction. People began asking, what is the East, what is this country that has brought forth a poet of genius comparable only to our own Dante, Shakespeare, and Goethe.

It is only after the war that this process of adjustment started in the West. If we leave apart the usual praise bestowed upon Rabindranath, we shall soon realise that this process of adjustment to an alien culture was extremely painful and was responsible for the creation of various parties among the intelligentsia of Europe.

¹ Jean Guehenno: "Le Message de l'Orient—Rabindranath Tagore." (In *La Revue de Paris*, 1.9.1919.) This is a long and extremely readable article on Rabindranath, dealing with his message to the West.

Some appointed themselves the Defenders of the West, others hailed the light from the East as the only salvation for Europe. For in the search after certainty that began after the war and failed so utterly twenty years later, India and Rabindranath played a not unimportant part. The following chapters will serve the purpose of defining, on the basis of the material available, this process of re-valuation of standards with regard to the East, and particularly to Rabindranath.

CHAPTER II

OCCIDENTAL MISGIVINGS

*"What have they received from me?
But the fact is, they are waiting for
the day-break after the orgies of
night, and they have their expectation
of light from the East."*

Rabindranath personified to the West not only his poetry and his message, but also India. The East which had been known only on account of its vague influence on Schopenhauer's philosophy and by the popularised Victorian translation of Omar Khayyam by Fitzgerald, had suddenly been "humanised" by Rabindranath. His personality—and here we use this word in the largest sense of the term—stood for everything Indian, indeed, for everything Eastern. People started thinking of the East in terms of intellectual generalisations, and instead of the usual political abstractions we have a living organism subjected to a similar mental analysis as the West itself.

Nothing was more tempting for European intellectuals than to establish comparisons between Eastern and Western ways of life as represented, on the one hand, by Rabindranath and, on the other, by the artists and writers in the West. The first impression Rabindranath created in Europe must have been overwhelming. When he visited London in 1912/13 people were struck both by his majestic figure and his oriental "demeanour." The following comparison is not flattering to Western

people; but that is undoubtedly the way Europe "saw" Rabindranath before the war:

During his recent residence in London, it was a lesson in irony to watch his meditative figure and the face as harmless as a dove while he sat in unruffled silence among the flickering tongues of distinguished people who had never meditated in their lives, but, no doubt, combined the wisdom of the serpent with its other qualities.¹

Tagore, the man, was a mystery to many. Most of the articles dealing with him, significantly enough, end with a question-mark. Some of his most sincere admirers, perhaps, admired him precisely for this element of mystery and oriental ambiguity. And his personality seemed to them ambiguous, not because he was a poet, but because he was an Indian. Both Schopenhauer and Omar Khayyam, and not very long ago Kipling, had taught them that the very essence of all things Eastern is some kind of super-personal and undefinable mystery. Therefore, when they met Rabindranath face to face, instead of looking upon him as a man among men, they elevated him to the level of a saint and a seer. They did so unconsciously, for it was part of their efforts at adjustment. And with an almost childish eagerness, they observed Rabindranath whenever he showed himself in public. For instance, one evening he went to a concert in Queen's Hall in which Beethoven's Fifth Symphony evoked an unusual amount of delirious applause:

But Tagore? His face wore through all the varying movements a gentle and unchanging smile. But was it his pleasure in the music which caused it?²

Or there is that thought-provoking meeting of three

¹ *The Nation*, London, 25.10.1913.

² *New Leader*, London, 27.8.1926.

great men in the garden of King's College, at Cambridge, when Rabindranath sang some of his songs and then "passed into a higher state of consciousness;" this is how Lowes Dickinson speaks of this meeting:

It is a June evening, in a Cambridge garden. Mr. Bertrand Russell and myself sit there alone with Tagore. He sings to us some of his poems, the beautiful voice and the strange mode floating away on the gathering darkness. Then Russell begins to talk, coruscating like lightning in the dusk. Tagore falls into silence. But afterwards he said, it had been wonderful to hear Russell talk. He had passed into a 'higher state of consciousness' and heard it, as it were, from a distance. What, I wonder, had he heard?¹

This meeting between Rabindranath and Bertrand Russell seemed fascinating to Europeans for more than one reason. For here were two master minds who each represented what was greatest in their civilisation, the one a dreamer transcending the reality of earthly things, the other personifying the urge of the West for dynamic action and analysis, and its everstruggling doubt. Here is the clash of civilisation, of which we spoke in our introduction, at its very climax. And the admirable tension created by these two minds is almost an end in itself; though they represented two civilisations, they were at the same time far above them.

With the passing of years, however, this clash of

¹ Ibid., 22.2.1923. The answer to the question, what indeed did Rabindranath hear on that fateful evening is given to us two years later in an article in which Rabindranath is, strangely enough, supposed to have uttered the following words next morning: "The truth is that in that hallowed enclosure, I quickly passed into the second state of consciousness, and experienced absorbing apprehensions. I do not remember a word of what the Professor said, though my ear listened intently, and appreciated the facility in his method. But it was all entirely irrelevant to the important matters of life and devoid of scientific discernment of demonstrably accessible facts." (*The Nation*, London, 18.7.1925.)

civilisations was somehow taken for granted, and instead of the first sparkling fire of song and speech, of dream and intellectual analysis, we find a journalistic *cliché*, a kind of literary convention. It seems that the fight for adjustment and re-valuation which had its beginning in King's College Garden had been given up as fruitless after a few years of vain endeavour. Compare, for instance, Dickinson's description of the meeting between Bertrand Russell and Rabindranath, with the following misleading account of a meeting between Rabindranath and Bernard Shaw, written in 1934:

Tagore dreams while Shaw talks and as there is nothing Tagore likes better than to dream and there is nothing Shaw likes better than to talk, the two of them are supremely happy in each other's company.....Without Tagore the mysticism of the East would have for him no appeal.¹

And what does the "average Westerner" say to all this? He is bewildered by the unfathomable, terrified by the "mystery," and sublimely unaware of any clash whatsoever. This is how a reviewer of *Broken Ties* puts it: "It is difficult for the average Westerner to appreciate much of this; he dips into something that he cannot fathom."² Only one element in Rabindranath's personality and work could save the response of the reading public from becoming altogether stereotyped: the exotic. It would indeed be tempting to investigate how far the appeal of the exotic had been responsible for Rabindranath's great popularity in the West. The average Englishman probably thinks twice before he gives himself heart and soul to anything foreign. Conservative habits of mind have trained him to regard everything that is exotic with a slight suspicion, mixed, however, with the curiosity and fascination of a stamp-collector :

¹ *Morning Post*, London, 18.5.1934.

² *Manchester Guardian*, Weekly Edition, 27.11.1925.

We treasure the volume as we treasure a Persian carpet or a Japanese print; the colour is good, but we do not understand the thoughts of those quaint figures boating or fishing in the sunlight or in the rain.¹

A large number of average Western readers undoubtedly took to Rabindranath, because they expected to find in his books all the exotic material necessary for their escape from the "realities" of life in Europe both before and after the war. Rabindranath, however, is no exotic writer—in the sense in which Omar Khayyam or even Kipling appealed to the European public. Therefore, it is not surprising to find that many readers turned away from Rabindranath disappointed, because they did not find in his books the necessary exotic outlet for their Western inhibitions. In this connection it should be remembered that the East, especially India, had been providing Europe for the last few centuries with ready-made exotic formulas which found their place in all the arts, including, of course, literature. After this long "de-humanising" process, many readers considered Rabindranath an anti-climax, in short, not sufficiently "Eastern." He seemed to them unoriginal, because his poetry did not correspond with what they considered the East to be like. For the East was to them hardly anything more but a wish-fulfilment. The "clash of civilisations" or "traditions" of which we spoke just now, is indeed a threefold clash. For not only had the "West" to adjust itself to the "East," but also the Western conception of the East had to conform itself to the "real" East as represented by Rabindranath. We can without any exaggeration speak of an Eastern tradition in the West which was the result of a slow evolution beginning with the 17th century and ending

¹ *Manchester Guardian*, 15.11.1921. (In a Review of *The Fugitive*.)

with Kipling. It was this conception of the East that Rabindranath had to face and that proved one more obstacle to an intelligent response among his Western readers. Here is a representative stock-response of this kind:

The Editor is quite right. We of the West do not want from the East poetic edifices built upon a foundation of Yeats and Shelley and Walt Whitman. 'We want to hear the flute of Krishna as Radha heard it, to fall under the spell of the blue god in the lotus-heart of dream.' This is, of course, those of us interested enough in Indian poetry not to be disgusted by its disparagement of Self-hood.¹

When reviewing Rabindranath's books critics were frequently handicapped by this traditional conception of the East; instead of constructive criticism they offered their own irrelevant stock-responses. They resented all Western influences, because they destroyed, according to them, the local colour and the 'native elements' in Rabindranath's work. *Gora*, for instance, "could have been written by an Englishman acquainted with Indian conditions of life"; and "Tagore, *the mystic*, is more genuine, more rooted in the soil, and greater."² It is not without psychological interest that the average Western reader expected something from the East which would be both "disturbing" and "inspiring." But when asked to define this something, he, as a rule, took Kipling as the standard by which to measure Eastern civilisation. This again goes to prove how extremely complex was this process of re-valuation, how deeply rooted was this antiquated system of values with regard to the East. No wonder, therefore, that among all

¹ *Liverpool Post*, 20.7.27. (Review of Miss Gwendoline Goodwine's *Anthology of Modern Indian Poetry*. In the 'Wisdom of the East' Series, by John Murray.)

² *Boersen Courier*, Berlin, 17.2.1925. (Review of *Gora*) (Italics mine.)

Rabindranath's works his novels were exposed more than anything else to this kind of criticism:

But if he is a typical Oriental poet, then the Orient has nothing to offer us that we did not know already beyond a little local colour. There is very little that is *strange* or *disturbing* in the work of Sir Rabindranath Tagore. Those who wish to be impressed by glimpses of a life that is different from our own, *by revelations of the Eastern mind* which works in a way *we can never understand*, would do far better to go to Mr. Kipling for what they want.....And he is European (sic!) in what can be called a somewhat Victorian style. His humour is always the gentle playfulness of the 'eminent Victorians'.....and the description of Ramesh's entanglement with the charming, cultured and elegant Menalini.....is nothing but late Victorian philandering with a late Victorian girl. Sir Rabindranath Tagore is not a poet who brings us news from the East but one who returns to us what we have already lent.¹

Western disappointment with Rabindranath's lack of Eastern or native elements reaches its lowest level, in those writings in which Rabindranath is accused of belonging neither to the East nor to the West. Here, they say, is an Eastern poet with a message to us, but the East which he represents does not live up to our expectation, and the West whom he wishes to teach, he does not understand:

This man from the East, a dreamer and a poet, has a narrow European outlook. He has gained from the genius of his country only historical and philosophical impressions, but not a formidable poetical impetus. Not deliberately is he deceiving Europe, but he deceives himself as regards his message, because he cannot sufficiently penetrate Western mentality and the European social structure.²

¹ *The Queen*, London, 21.5.1921. (Article by Edward Shanks: Sir Rabindranath Tagore). (Italics mine.) For a more lengthy discussion of this comparison between Rabindranath and Kipling see chapter VI. p. 110 sq.

² *Vorwärts*, Berlin, June 1921.

This tendency in the European criticism of Rabindranath is even more explicitly stated by a French writer in 1930 who quotes a Bengali gentleman as saying that "many of Rabindranath's compatriots appreciate the English translation of *Gitanjali* more than the original Bengali," that "only uprooted litterateurs who are no longer in touch with Bengali culture and only read English books are his most enthusiastic admirers," and that, lastly "the so-called mysticism of his poems was only a feeble echo of the Upanishads."¹

Let us, however, attempt a closer analysis of the issues involved in the meeting of Bertrand Russell and Rabindranath. Let us assume, for the time being, that there exist on this globe two separate intellectual entities, a "pure" East and a "pure" West, and that really it does not matter what Rabindranath thought of the West and what Bertrand Russell thought of the East. This assumption, of course, implies the use of abstract and generalised terms, as though the East and the West were two altogether distinct civilisations. And this approach also is necessary because a number of critics started from this very assumption, namely, that the gulf separating East and West is unbridgeable because of the existence of what they call an Eastern and a Western "Mind."

This purely intellectual conception of the East was responsible for many a failure in the appreciation of Rabindranath's work. If really "to understand Mr. Tagore thoroughly one needs to have an Oriental mind,"² then communication between an Eastern poet and a Western reader becomes altogether impossible, or at least a mere matter of chance. The same can be

¹ *Revue Anglo-Américaine*, Paris, Feb. 1930.

² *Sheffield Daily Telegraph*, 18.12.1925. (Review of *Broken Ties*).

said with regard to those critics who believe that only after a prolonged study of the East (by which most of them mean Hindu mysticism) can communication be achieved. Generalisations about "minds" are bound to remain vague, if they are not applied to certain given conditions. For instance, one reviewer "shows the need of the Western mind to realise that psychology is the key to the understanding of other minds, while the Eastern mind often fails to realise that the Western mind is more concerned with the objective than the subjective."¹ It is a short step only from the abstract concept of an Eastern mind to a no less abstract concept of Eastern civilisation. Again and again literary critics refuse to discuss the East in terms of human beings and human experiences. Their misgivings are always expressed as stock-responses taking for granted the inevitable gulf between East and West:

For if the ingeniousness of one civilisation is remote from that of another, how much more remote is its sophistication from that of another's!.....Let us confess the inability (to understand) in ourselves and leave it at that.²

Perhaps the worst kind of this criticism is to be found in those reviews of Rabindranath's books in which the writer refuses to understand anything whatsoever of the East. In such cases communication fails utterly and the reader cannot help feeling frustrated, for instance, when he comes across a review of *Gora* such as the following:

Gora is really too disconcerting. Its theme is caste, and caste is a thing a Westerner cannot take seriously.³

On the Continent similar problems arise although

¹ *The Asiatic Review*, December 1925.

² *Daily News*, 30.11.1925. (Review of *Broken Ties*, by Gerald Gould.)

³ *Westminster Weekly*, 23.2.1924.

in a slightly modified form. The meaning of Western civilisation is stated in a more definite but also in a more intellectualised way than in Anglo-Saxon countries. What the Germans call "Kultur" was found to be in many respects opposed to Rabindranath's work and message. Three elements are frequently mentioned in connection with Rabindranath; one is the element of continual fight that characterises Europe among all other continents; the second is scepticism, the Aristotelian doubt which leads to knowledge; the third is the desire for action as an end in itself. On the occasion of the German translation of Rabindranath's works a Swiss newspaper wrote:

It will, perhaps, be difficult to get used to this soft, undulating, and quiet kind of poetry, especially to Northern people who for ever oppose the misfortunes of life with an iron determination; in Tagore's poetry they are all flooded by the mild rays of the moon and the outlines are silvery vague, so that they easily become one with the infinite.¹

And if we remember that Germany was passing through a time of storm and stress, we shall understand this insistence on the ultimate values of Western culture as opposed to those imported from the East by Rabindranath. "It is to the world of European scepticism that Asia is speaking," says one writer; "for every spiritual crisis in Europe ends in doubt; and out of doubt comes a new movement and a new truth. We Europeans," he continues, "are still young. We admire the mind of Asia and its venerable messenger; but we know that always we have to come back to the dynamic forces of Europe."²

What are these dynamic forces that stand in the way of a full acceptance of Rabindranath's work and mes-

¹ *Nationale Zeitung*, Basel, 6-8-1921.

² From an Austrian Newspaper, 21.6.1921.

sage? It is, they say, the different meanings attached to "wisdom" in the East and in the West; Europeans *must* live according to an inner rhythm different from that of the East; for "Tagore does not see that Europe can find fulfilment only in action, India only in contemplation; that all our culture is based upon the creative individual, but Indian culture upon love within society; that Faust as a blind old man still devoted to creation and rooted in the earth—is and will remain the most forceful symbolic figure of the European mind, while India's symbol is the great founder of religion (Buddha) who together with his disciples longs for detachment, face to face with God....." Europe, they say, had lost God in its vain striving after power; and now it is searching for the lost unity. "Should Europe find it in the Far East? No. It will have to find it within itself."¹

We have devoted so much space to an analysis of this "clash of civilisation" because here, for the first time, we touch upon the ultimate issues involved in the appreciation of Rabindranath in the West. The meeting of Rabindranath and Bertrand Russell with which this chapter opened was symptomatic of the obstacles and inhibitions that had to be overcome before communication between the poet and his readers could be established. In the following chapter, however, we shall leave behind us these occidental misgivings, based as they are upon abstractions and generalisations, and attempt an analysis of the same problems in terms of human experience. For we have to take into account, on the one hand, Rabindranath's very real success in Europe, and on the other, those intellectuals who considered the defence of the West to be their most sacred duty. It is here indeed that we shall find face to face

¹ *Vossische Zeitung*, 16.10.1921. (From an article entitled: "Tagore's Message.")

those who denied the West, European civilisation and all that it stands for, and those who most definitely rejected the message of the East. Any one acquainted with Rabindranath's own conception of and attitude to European civilisation, will realise the significance of the ensuing fight. Whether Rabindranath himself realised the part he was playing would be difficult to determine. He was, of course, intensely aware "of their expectation of light from the East after the orgies of night," but did he also know that his message let loose those forces in Europe that were diametrically opposed to his work? That indeed it was partly his own message that made the West conscious of its decline?

CHAPTER III

DEFENCE OF THE WEST

"Such fame as I have got I cannot take at all seriously. It is too readily given and too immediately."

The worldly success of a poet of genius in the twentieth century fills us with wonder and dismay. No other instance is known to us since Byron's time of a poet being accepted and worshipped by millions of readers. For poetry during these hundred years withdrew into the remoteness of private worlds expressing a reality altogether divorced from the masses. How did it happen then, that Rabindranath, a stranger to all of them, captured their hearts superseding with his fame, for the time being, even their own native poets and reigning supreme over the whole of Europe for a number of years?

A poet's success should not be measured by the sale of his books, by the number of people who attended his lectures or by the articles and books written about him. The response of human beings to a poet's work is of a fragile and delicate nature, hardly measurable at all. Did Rabindranath whose fame spread like wild fire over Europe in the years following the great war become, as some say, an innocent tool in the hands of shrewd publishers and business men who exploited his success for their own ends? A very close analysis will be needed, if we wish to find out whether the demand for his books was created by commercial enterprises or, whether such a demand existed long before any of Rabindranath's

works were translated into European languages. Lovers and admirers of Rabindranath may resent the bluntness with which the question is put. But any one acquainted with the business methods of modern publishing houses will realise the relevance of this question. On the other hand, Rabindranath's "worldly" success was too spontaneous to admit of any doubt; nor is it our intention to belittle his success here. What we want to investigate are the motives, both visible and hidden, that contributed to such a success, the social and psychological implications of his rise to fame in the West.

It is necessary for us to realise that Rabindranath's most sensational success was limited to Germany alone and reached its climax as early as the year 1921. In France and in England it was the intellectual elite, or at least the most progressive part of it, that went over to him wholeheartedly and unhesitatingly. Romain Rolland, André Gide, the Countess de Noailles, Paul Valéry and many other outstanding writers and scholars in France celebrated him as one of the greatest poets of the age and spontaneously responded to his message. In England it was W. B. Yeats, AE (George Russell), Ezra Pound, Sir William Rothenstein, Sturge Moore, Professor Gilbert Murray, to mention only a few, who from the very beginning recognised his greatness and remained his friends until the very end. The average reader, in France, and especially in England, was, as we have seen in the preceding chapter, less spontaneous in his response, because of certain inhibitions in his outlook on the East and partly also because of political or rather colonial prejudices.

In Germany, however, Rabindranath's success was on a much larger scale. That is why he became a sensation for the many, but a prophet only for the very few. The German middle-classes, frustrated after a long and futile struggle, turned towards him as to a saviour, while

German intellectuals with a few exceptions, looked upon his success with bewilderment and, perhaps also, with slight contempt. We have to realise (and it may be painful to some) that Rabindranath's poetry and message opened the eyes of millions of German middle-class people, the very same who had come back from the battle-fields of Flanders determined never to fight again and who ten years later, after Rabindranath's name had been long forgotten by most of them, started gigantic preparations for a renewal of the same futile attempt at self-destruction.

No generalisations and abstractions will help us in our analysis of Rabindranath's success in Germany. We must understand that his sensational fame in that country was part of an evolution, of a tendency towards the irrational and the pseudo-mystic, that started long before 1921 and reached its climax in the disaster of democratic failure in 1932. Even during his stay in Germany Rabindranath had become a myth. To the German middle-classes he personified the principle of the irrational and their newly acquired mysticism. From a purely intellectual point of view both Schopenhauer and Nietzsche had paved the way for Rabindranath's success. And for the time being Germans deceived themselves into finding in him a representative of Schopenhauer's oriental ambiguity and vague mystical appeal:

Rabindranath Tagore's gentle philosophy has superseded the fiery creed of Nietzsche, which nurtured the German mind before the war. Tagore's success is astounding—he is the best seller of the year. No German novelist, dramatist, or poet is in it with the Indian gentle dreamer. The cheapest edition I saw was 15 marks the volume, but I saw many complete editions of Tagore at 250 marks to 300 marks the set.¹

¹ *The Advertiser*, Adelaide, Australia, 11.11.1921.

When Rabindranath lectured for the first time in Berlin University in June 1921, the occasion was marked by "scenes of frenzied hero-worship.....In the rush for seats many girl students fainted and were trampled on by the crowd."¹ During the summer of 1921 the German publishers of Rabindranath had placed in America an order for 1,000,000 kilogrammes—more than 2,000,000 pounds—of paper for his books, which was enough for 3,000,000 copies.² By October 1921 "more than 800,000 copies of his work had been sold."³ These are facts that are indeed bewildering; for such a success—even of a poet of genius—is not in the nature of things. German enthusiasm for poetry had in no way been more emphatic in the past than in France or in England. At a time when Rabindranath's name was on everybody's lips in Germany, poets of distinction such as Rainer Maria Rilke or Stephen George, were known only to a small intellectual minority. If we leave out, for the time being, the possible political implications of his success,⁴ Rabindranath's message seemed at first sight to...correspond to the many pseudo-oriental conceptions rampant in post-war Germany. We hear, for instance, that in Germany at that time "treatises on philosophy, art and religion are at present far out-selling works of fiction..... Another in great demand is Spengler's *Decline of the West*."⁵

Intellectuals in England and France tried their best to understand this unique literary phenomenon. The English comment in a leading newspaper is not without significance, if we remember what actually happened ten years later in Germany.

¹ *Daily News*, London, 3.6.1921.

² *The Mail*, Birmingham, 2.9.1921.

³ *Evening Post*, London, 21.10.1922.

⁴ See Chapter IV.

⁵ *The Mail*, Birmingham, 2.9.1921.

It is perhaps, politically typical in Germany to-day that one of the best read authors is the Indian Tagore, whose mystic dullness appeals as a kind of anodyne. The knowledge that they must sometime next year default to the Allies, and the apparent impossibility of producing either leaders or principles is the main cause for the despair I mentioned above.....What is wanted is a spiritual revival, similar to that after Jena—a great idea to take the place of the old *Furor Teutonicus*.¹

The French took a larger view on the matter. To some of them this turning towards the East was part of the spiritual crisis through which Germany was passing at that time. In this context it is necessary to remember that the irrational hardly ever had any place at all in French civilisation, that since the Renaissance the French had cultivated a rational outlook on life which, as we shall see in the course of this chapter, was quite naturally opposed to any far-reaching Eastern influence. France is essentially a Mediterranean country and any message that comes from beyond the Suez is liable to be subjected to the closest scrutiny before it is accepted by the French intelligentsia. Even André Gide in the following few lines, cannot repress a feeling of intense bewilderment, if not anguish, at this sudden outburst of teutonic mysticism:

The youth of Germany looks towards the East and turns its back to Europe. This indicates a decisive revival. At all times the German mind had to lose itself in order to find unity only after a fertilisation from abroad. But whenever this tendency is active, that is, where it is not repressed by an old-fashioned and pedantic spiritual nationalism, their minds turn towards Russia, and beyond, towards India and China.²

¹ *Sunday Times*, London, 18.9.1921.

² *Nouvelle Revue Française*, 1.11.1921. (André Gide on an article by M. E. R. Curtius dealing with French-German cultural relations).

Dismay at this mass-enthusiasm was expressed by Germans themselves who felt a deep aversion against the sensationalism associated with Rabindranath during his stay in Germany in 1921. They knew that his poetry appeals most to the individual struggling for certainty in utter isolation, and not to the indiscriminate mass with its fastchanging standards of taste and fashion. And they refused to join those tumultuous meetings, those private matinees and sumptuous dinner parties; one of them, directly addressing Rabindranath, complains bitterly:

You did not see those who searched for you and who were near you through your books; instead you passed your days with well-clad men and decorated women and you were honoured by them and you rejoiced at it.¹

The writer of this article is not alone in his disappointment. From all parts of Germany voices were heard protesting against this kind of mass-response to a poet whose words are addressed to the creative and struggling individual alone: "For what he has to give cannot be expressed amidst multitudes; it can only be received by those sensibilities that respond in silence to the gifts of a superior mind."² If we add to this that his audiences were frequently composed of women many of whom did not know a word of English, then the bewilderment of intellectuals all over Europe seemed to be justified.

The sensationalism brought about by Rabindranath's success in Germany is, however, only one aspect of a much larger problem. It is not possible to guide public opinion along a definite channel unless the ground had been prepared beforehand. We already mentioned Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. Books, however, will never provide us with a full explanation of Rabindranath's

¹ *Die Kunstwache*, Munich, August 1921. .

² *Weser Zeitung*, Bremen, 15.6.1921.

success. There existed at that time—as it still exists to-day—a very real desire for a re-valuation of standards all over Europe; and this desire was brought about not by books, but by events of a political as well as of a moral nature. Rabindranath, in his own inimitable language, expressed the need of the hour better than any other writer at that time. Whether the mass intuitively grasped the meaning of his message, it would be difficult to say. But the response of intellectuals was undoubtedly due to the awareness that Rabindranath succeeded “in saying the things that are in our minds, but which we cannot quite bring out.”¹ The fact that Rabindranath did say them, evoked within them responsive attitudes which had long lain forgotten or repressed. And all of a sudden they found that “Dr. Tagore is not alone in his dismay, nor is he alone in desiring a restatement of personal values in a wilderness of impersonal forces.”²

European defeatism which reached its climax in the years following the great war found a reaffirmation of its own fears and a new consolation in Rabindranath's writings. Spengler's *Decline of the West* provided them only with a grim and pedantic picture of the shape of things to come. They were thirsting for ideals and, even after having found them, they realised that they could not put them into practice. It was a time of general frustration and spiritual impotence, combined, however, with a very real political and economic crisis. “We do not lack ideals,” says a socialist paper, “but we cannot put them into practice, just as India with regard to England.”³ But in England itself similar feelings of

¹ From an unpublished letter of Gilbert Murray to Rabindranath Tagore, dated Yatscombe, Boar's Hill, Oxford, 9.5.37.

² *Manchester Guardian*, 28.8.1925.

³ *Arbeiter Zeitung*, Vienna, 19.6.1921.

frustration prevailed. And when reviewing *Creative Unity*, one writer exclaims:

We know this. But we cannot act it out. Are we afraid? Are we afraid of one another? Or is it that we are afraid of the easiness of words like 'ideal,' and so become afraid of what they signify; as of a league of nations, which might be a new committee of priests to purify the religion.¹

«The European middle-class and many intellectuals, both before and after the last war, were firmly convinced that only "ideals" could save them. There existed a vague feeling in England and on the Continent that what is most needed is a new Renaissance, a re-awakening of Europe's spiritual life. This desire for moral integration went hand in hand with the awareness of the everdeepening spiritual crisis in the West. No wonder, therefore, that Rabindranath was hailed as a prophet of the East coming to deliver his message of goodwill and fraternity among men. So eager were the masses to receive inspiration from the

¹ *The Church Quarterly*, Oct. 1922.—America which was perhaps less affected by the last war than any other country responded to Rabindranath's fear and dismay less wholeheartedly than Europe. Here is an amusing extract from an article dealing with the newly found 'happiness' of the American continent: "Did Mr. Tagore ever stop to join a crowd which was watching men hoist a safe or put in a plate-glass window? If he did or mingled with a thoughtful group observing a total stranger search for engine trouble in his car, he was in the midst of happy men. It is hard in fact to imagine where Mr. Tagore got his wrong ideas about us. He obviously never saw the happy, smiling faces of American throngs making their way workward and homeward with their eyes full of the elbows of people they never met before. He cannot have looked in on the United States Senate while a merry filibuster was on. Where indeed has Mr. Tagore been? The inevitable conclusion is he has been attending banquets ever since he came to America, listening to toastmasters and afterdinner speakers." (*News*, Newark, N. Y., 12.7.30.)

East that innumerable pseudo-oriental societies were founded all over Europe, and especially again in Germany, which indulged in the performance of pseudo-Buddhist cults and worships, in the more popularised forms of theosophical "research," and the cultivation of an "inner rhythm." The better known ones are Rudolf Steiner's Anthroposophical School and Count Keyserling's School of Wisdom.¹

Intellectual movements of this kind are bound to occur as a spontaneous reaction to the feeling of disintegration that pervaded Europe since before the war. Europe learnt to see herself through the eyes of the East. And the judgment passed by the East on Europe was devastating and uncompromising. Here is an instance, dated as early as 1910:

One-tenth of the British population dies in the gaol, the workhouse, or the lunatic asylum. The increasing contrast between extremes of wealth and poverty, the unemployed and many other urgent problems point the same moral. Extreme developments of vulgarity and selfishness imply the necessary reaction. To Europe in this crisis the East brings a message: The East has indeed revealed a new world to the West, which will be the inspiration of a 'Renaissance' more profound and far-reaching than that which resulted from the rediscovery of the classic world of the West.²

In Ezra Pound's famous review of *Gitanjali* similar sentiments are expressed in no less forceful language. Europe has found her new Renaissance:

As the sense of balance came back upon Europe in the days before the Renaissance, so it seems to me does this sense of a saner stillness come now to us in the midst of our clangour of mechanisms.....³

¹ A detailed discussion of this institution and Rabindranath's association with it will be found in the following chapter, p. 64 sq.

² Ananda Coomaraswamy: *The Message of the East*, Ganesh, Madras, 1910.

³ Ezra Pound: In '*Fortnightly Review*,' March 1913.]

The very standards by which Europeans were used to measure the varying degrees of civilisation were subjected to a process of revaluation at that time. Progress and scientific advancement, compulsory education and free trade, all these are "barbarous." "Civilisation" is the stillness and mental equilibrium of the East, its detachment and its unity with nature. Ernest Rhys, two years after *Gitanjali* comes to the same conclusion: "It may prove to be the vision of India from which we are to get a fresher sense of nature and life."¹

Others again remember the missionaries that had come from the East two thousand years ago, preaching to crude Western barbarians the art to live and to love one another. Rabindranath seems to them one of those prophets of old come back from the East where he had been waiting all these centuries until the time was ripe for his message. For the Orient has always been providing Europe with prophets and saints who had come to save that unfortunate continent from self-destruction and utter annihilation. And a few months after the war while Europe was still haunted by the memory of its battle-fields and the futility of it all, a voice was heard from France re-affirming the belief that salvation must come from the East; "Always have come from that part of the world that lies at the back of Europe thoughts which elevated the occidental soul and inspired her to a new effort after her last futile attempts. The East, perhaps the cradle of mankind, the home of the mind, seems to watch for ever in its mysterious silence, and keeps to itself the secret of an immense future to come. Two thousand years ago a new word came from the East, a word of humility and goodness, and rebuilt the world of

¹ Ernest Rhys: *Rabindranath Tagore. A Biographical Sketch*, 1915, p. 100.

disintegrating Roman greatness."¹

It would be tempting to analyse this feeling of inferiority towards the East that swept over Europe in the years following the war. Intellectuals in almost all the countries, seemed to relish a peculiar pleasure in this self-debasement. The consciousness of their own decline became more and more intense, until a French writer (and a very well-known novelist at that) could exclaim without blushing: "Rabindranath loves us while despising us; and the spectacle which we offer to the world at large is indeed and without doubt the most contemptible."² In Germany this feeling of frustration was quite naturally more pronounced than anywhere else. One more reason for it, probably, can be found in the fact that the middle-classes in that country were subjected to a much speedier process of decay than those in the Western democracies. Here 'the decline of the West' was indeed a decline of the middle-classes and all they stand for. Ideals had to be supplied at short notice; for Germany realised that "the traditional European mental equipment will not be able to stop the decline of the West."³ Rabindranath came like a *dans ex machina* when he was most needed. And Germany took hold of him with all her usual thoroughness and a good deal of pedantic scholasticism and considered him henceforth as a kind of glorified 'leader' of the German 'soul.' How could otherwise be explained the following statement made in a speech by one of the best-known professors of literature at that time:

It is Tagore's merit to have helped us to wake up the

¹ Jean Guehenno: *Le Message de l'Orient*, in '*La Revue de Paris*,' 1.9.1919, p. 80.

² Edmond Jaloux, in *Les Appels de l'Orient*, 1925. (See Bibliography, p. 130.)

³ *Leipziger Tageblatt*, 1.7.1921. (Review of *Sadhana*.)

German soul, to make her conscious again of her own strength. But out of ourselves must come our new strength. The German soul must regain its former health through German strength. But that Tagore has pointed out the way in these evil times, for this we Germans owe him a debt of gratitude.¹

We do not know how Rabindranath reacted to this role of awakener and preserver of the German soul. He certainly had his doubts as regards the sincerity of the response; for "it was too readily given and too immediately." But had he known of all the melodramatic statements made by German professors at that time (and we hope he did not), he might have smiled at his own fame and, perhaps, also would have taken it even less seriously than before. For what most of these learned professors were lacking, he had in abundance: a sound sense of humour But already new forces were stirring, melodramatic like the first, but more aggressive and self-conscious. No more self-humiliation and a morbid consciousness of unavoidable decay. With clenched fists European tradition replied to the message of the East.

We have already seen in the preceding chapter how at first these "occidental misgivings" were founded on abstract concepts and generalisations, on a purely intellectual distinction between the Eastern and the Western "mind," and between oriental and occidental "civilisations." But when we speak here of European tradition we no longer mean abstract and super-personal forces, but the cultural heritage of the West based as it is on individual experience and the sensibility of Western man. We can distinguish three main tendencies in this attack on Rabindranath. All three of them have in common their desire to defend the West against any

¹ *Neue Hamburger Zeitung*, 13.1.22. (From a speech by Professor Eugen Kuehnemann.)

spiritual invasion coming from the East. According to all three of them the decline of the West is due to a breakdown in the cultural tradition of Europe brought about by an indiscriminate acceptance of and admiration for Eastern ideas and ways of life. Furthermore, all of them chose Rabindranath as their object of attack because, according to them, he was the most powerful representative of oriental "ideology" which, according to them, embraces not only India, but also China and especially Russia. The first attack emanates from France and is based on the age-long tradition of the Roman Catholic Church, the second predominated in most Western European countries, including Germany, and originated in a revival of "hellenistic" thought opposing the constructive and creative influence of ancient Greece (and the Renaissance) to the comparatively foreign and mysterious influence of the East; the third which was mainly limited to Germany saw in the Idealist School of philosophy of the 19th century the strongest and most desirable bulwark against Oriental thought.

Their principle of action was that the West must be defended at all costs and "to the last man;" and that the best defensive method is attack. We have to remember that one country at least had turned its back to Western tradition after the last war: Russia. European intellectuals were not slow to grasp the implications of the revolution as regards their cultural heritage. Here, they thought, is the backdoor by which the East is trying to penetrate into the very heart of Europe. And the first to go over to the attack were some French Roman Catholic leaders, who, significantly enough, were also intimately associated with the French Royalist party, the "Action Francaise." Any one acquainted with French political life in the post-war period knows that this party had no actual political power, although it was composed of higher middle-class people, aristocrats and a sprinkling

of well-known artists and writers. On the other hand, their pronouncements created a good deal of intellectual unrest and bewilderment. Their main object of attack was, of course, Russia; but, as will be seen, they included in their "aggressive defence" both India and Germany, the former because of her growing influence on the European intelligentsia, the latter because she had become a breeding-ground for anti-occidental ideas. And, of course, they also included in their attack those Frenchmen and others who by being "pro-Indian" were also considered to be pro-Russian and pro-German. Here is how a "neutral" newspaper looks at it all:

Romain Rolland complains that France has not accepted Rabindranath Tagore wholeheartedly. And yet this poet whose works have been translated and published by eminent publishers is being offered in Paris a similar literary worship as was once offered to Claudel and André Gide, and duchesses have dedicated themselves to him. Romain Rolland is wrong to find only snobbism in this worship. He himself brings to this worship the faith of his revolutionary heart. His admiration for Tagore and Gandhi expands into a condemnation of the West which, in its turn, is being attacked, under the name of anti-occidentalism, by Charles Maurras and Henri Massis.¹

We are concerned here only with Henri Massis, a Roman Catholic of the more reactionary kind and a monarchist. In 1927 a book of his was published in Paris which was later on translated into English under the name *Defence of the West*. G. K. Chesterton, another defender of the West, wrote the preface for the English edition. In this book Massis lays down his principles of Western civilisation (by which he means the Roman Catholic Church and a kind of cultural hegemony of France over all other European countries) and opposes them to Eastern civilisation (by which he means

¹ *L'Information*, Paris, 24.2.1924.

Rabindranath's poetry and message, Mahatma Gandhi's non-violence, Spengler's *Decline of the West*, and Count Keyserling's vague and mystical attempts at self-realisation).¹ England did not respond very well to this book; perhaps English people felt at that time that the real issues of the problem did not really concern them; perhaps also their indifference was due to their insular position. Spengler and Keyserling were known to a few only; the India Government could very well take care of Rabindranath and Gandhi, and as for Lenin and the rest, they were too far away, and only by attaching too much importance to them, might they become dangerous. Here is a representative review of Massis's book:

M. Massis's defence of Western civilisation against sinister Asiatic hordes—led by the Prussian philosopher Spengler, along with Rabindranath Tagore, Ghandi (sic!), Lenin, Keyserling, and all sorts of German idealists and Slav mystics—is as an exhibition of militant enthusiasm, uncommonly stimulating. 'The poison of the East, in the form most easily assimilated by us, insinuates itself, invisible and subtly, by way of German idealism and Slav mysticism, by certain attacks aimed at the very notion of personality, at autonomy, and at the spiritual and moral identity of the human composite.' That is the ground of M. Massis's attackM. Massis, in fact, seems to underestimate the tremendous power of Western common sense or its home-made variant British stolidity (or stupidity) as a bulwark against Eastern Fanaticism. Withal, one respects his fighting spirit and welcomes his book not as a scare, but as a thrilling trumpet-call to action in conserving our Western civilisation.²

Massis emphasises again and again that the real "danger from the East" comes from Germany rather than from India. And if we remember the bewilderment with

¹ See Bibliography p. 133.

² *Liverpool Post*, 14.7.1927. (Review of *Defence of the West* by Henri Massis, with a Preface by G. K. Chesterton. Faber and Gwyer.)

which even Germans themselves looked upon Rabindranath's astounding success there, we shall understand the cause of... Massis's fears: "The vanquished nation," says Massis elsewhere, "have a definite interest of their own to propagate all over agonising Europe a catastrophic vision of the universe; we should never be affected by the 'Spenglerian' contagion which was only one of the forms of German despair." And Massis's vigorous attack culminates in a condemnation of the defenders of the East: "But actually the orientalism of these Asiatic propagandists (Tagore, Okakura, Coomaraswamy, Gandhi) is no less suspect than that of a Keyserling, a Hermann Hesse, a Bonsels, a Romain Rolland."¹ We do not think that Massis's book had a very large following either in France or in England. Ideologically speaking, he belongs to that group of writers in post-war Europe who never missed an opportunity of attacking Russia; Rabindranath's visit to Europe provided him with such an opportunity. It is of particular interest for us to note that he includes Count Keyserling among those whose orientalism he considers to be "dangerous". Perhaps he did not know that this German Count of Russian extraction, an admirer of Rabindranath if ever there was one, opposed Russian communism even more violently and uncompromisingly than he himself.

The second point of attack, as has been said, was Hellenism. Nothing was easier for Western intellectuals than to compare and oppose the Greek love of form and their principle of rational analysis to the supposed vagueness of all things Eastern and to Indian "passivity" and "resignation." Put before such an alternative Western man had to choose the former and to reject the latter; for, in a simplified manner of speaking, the decline or survival of the West depended on his choice. And they

¹ Henri Massis: in *Les Appels de l'Orient*. 1925.

foresaw the melodramatic possibility of Europe becoming the cultural "hinterland" of the East; only Greece, they thought, could save them:

On the contrary, I am convinced that a full acceptance of Tagore's ideas would mean a grave danger, nay, the decline of European culture. One thing, however, is certain: the hellenistic thought that until now dominated over the spiritual history of Europe and was responsible for its progress must be rejected by us as an error, should Tagore be right.¹

The last attack of the defenders of the West was, strangely enough, based upon the Idealism of the 19th century. Although Rabindranath himself was an idealist he never drew spiritual comfort from the more aggressive type of German idealism. His idealism was one of positive acceptance of the universe, not one of continual struggle, mental unrest and self-destructive dualism. No wonder, therefore, that the more reactionary Germans opposed their own teutonic mysticism to the "mysticism" of the East. This is the more remarkable because, as we have seen at the beginning of this chapter, this teutonic mysticism was itself partly responsible for Rabindranath's success in Germany. We cannot but conclude that this is an instance of Germany's proverbially divided soul:

Although his (Rabindranath's) stand for the realisation of the soul is valuable and necessary, India is too far away to be able to save us from our agonies. To-day we are in far greater need of a Fichte, but who knows whether he would receive even a hundredth part of the recognition which is given to this foreigner from the East.²

Indeed the German soul was "divided"; for, according to many of them, those who are "for" Rabindranath are

¹ *Neue Züricher Zeitung*, 28.5.1921.

² *Das Kreuz*, Berlin, 3.6.1921.

"against" Germany. It is, therefore, quite in the nature of things that Rabindranath's spiritual "leadership" of that unfortunate country ended a few years later in a complete fiasco. Already in 1921 a melodramatic journalist exclaims: "Rabindranath Tagore cannot and must not be our leader (Feuhrer) in the reconstruction of our disintegrating culture."

Germany's concern for "Kultur" leads her indeed to identify Rabindranath's message with her own cultural disintegration. How else, they say, could Rabindranath's great popularity be explained if not by the fact that traditional values and beliefs were subjected to a slow but gradual destruction which opened the doors to all possible foreign influences. This point is clearly stated in a lecture delivered in 1921 and dealing with Rabindranath and Keyserling: "Tagore and Keyserling have become fashion," says the learned lecturer, "because they are 'modern', because they represent an essential tendency in contemporary culture. Indian thought", he continues, "has been rampant in the spiritual evolution of Europe since the death of Goethe, and is symptomatic of cultural anarchy, of anarchy itself." And now follows one of those definitions of culture which Germans are so fond of: "For culture means limit, means solid form. But we oppose all solid form sceptically, we can no longer think of the absolute in terms of form, we have, for instance, no more religion. The ancient Indian thought," he concludes, "that is the relativity of the finite, has defeated the European belief in form."

England and, to a certain extent, also America did not take part in this fight. Rabindranath's influence was more limited there, the masses did not respond so wholeheartedly, and the intellectuals, even when criticising Rabindranath, were hardly as conscious of this cultural and spiritual antagonism. And their own culture is, perhaps, too much part of an unconscious tradition, too

much part also of their firmly established social life, to be "actively" opposed to anything foreign. On the other hand, the hysteric and melodramatic outbursts of continental intellectuals are unintelligible to Englishmen. For they have achieved a certain insular self-sufficiency in their "culture" which expresses itself either in indifference to or in quiet acceptance of foreign influences. It is, therefore, no surprise to find that only an Englishman who never felt quite at home in England, who always longed for the dark and exotic mysteries of the East, turns a defender of the West and consequently loses himself in an intense feeling of his own impotence. According to D. H. Lawrence, in one of his less fortunate letters, it is (in 1916) not the West but the East which is decaying:

I become more and more surprised to see how far higher, in reality, our European civilisation stands than the East, India and Persia ever dreamed of. And one is glad to *realise* how these Hindus are horribly decadent and reverting to all forms of barbarism in all sorts of ugly ways. We feel surer on our feet, then. But this fraud of looking up to them—this wretched worship-of-Tagore attitude—is disgusting. 'Better fifty years of Europe' even as she is. Buddha worship is completely decadent and foul nowadays: and it *was* always only half-civilised.¹

This account, together with the preceding chapter is hardly anything more than an enumeration and a summary of facts and opinions and contradictory ideologies as they are reflected in the contemporary press throughout Europe. We have purposely avoided to take sides. There is no doubt that both the average Westerner and the intellectual were, in moments of stillness and meditation led to reflect on the astounding success of this Eastern poet with a message, and that this quiet reflec-

¹ D. H. Lawrence in a letter, dated 24.5.1916, to Lady Ottoline Morrell. (*Coll. Letters*, Heinemann, p. 350.)

tion often resulted in doubts and misgivings and a desire to defend what they considered to be worth preserving in Western civilisation. Is it for us to decide, whether their self-imposed task of defence was justified or not? Is it for us to pass judgment on something that already now belongs to the realm of history and the far away past? No continent ever accepted missionaries wholeheartedly, even in times of most acute crisis.

Indians are liable to misunderstand this defence of the West; they believe that it was due to narrow-minded prejudice and racial bias. Perhaps they forget or do not know that many of these "defenders", despite a sometimes aggressive tone in their statements, were inspired by no evil motive, but rather by the sincere desire to preserve the integrity of European tradition at a time when this integrity was gravely endangered by events of a political and social nature.

We have followed Rabindranath in his painful attempts at establishing a sane and creative contact between East and West. It was a storm-tossed voyage and the boat in which we travelled was small and fragile. When we were on the crest of a wave we saw a dark and threatening sky and no land in sight. Hurlled down to the very bottom of the sea, we were surrounded by the shadows and the ghosts of the floating wreckages of the past.

Was there ever anything more moving than this pilgrimage of the ageing poet of the East across the waste land of Europe looking for an island of sanity and intelligent understanding? And does not, on the other hand, the response of those Europeans who received him either with open arms or with clenched fists indicate a growing awareness in the West that Rabindranath's message mattered to them most intensely? This collection of facts, fragmentary as it needs must be, proves at least that the East has ceased to be in the

eyes of Westerners a geographical or political abstraction; that Rabindranath, the poet, the seer, and the mystic, had become a man again among men.

We have seen in these two chapters how the various countries in Europe accepted or rejected Rabindranath's message from the East. Our emphasis, therefore, until now was laid on the relation between East and West. In the following chapters Rabindranath will be seen through Western eyes in the more specific contexts of Europe's political life during the post-war period, of the spiritual revival that swept over the civilised West in the last twenty years, and lastly of literary criticism and comment.

CHAPTER IV

POLITICAL AMBIGUITIES

"I believe that when anti-human forces spread their dominion, individuals with firm faith in humanity are born, who become acutely conscious of the menace to man and fearlessly fulfil their destiny through insult and isolation."

We are not concerned here with the response of the European public to Rabindranath's political writings. Very little constructive criticism was offered: many praised him for having written *Nationalism*, but many more attacked him for it. Both praise and attack are, however, irrelevant to our present purpose; what matters to us here is how the political West "saw" Rabindranath regardless of his political writings. For there is no doubt that politically biased people will look upon a poet as a passive tool in the hands of some political opponent, be it a nation, a party, or a class, even if he has never made any explicitly political pronouncements. The problem with regard to Rabindranath is even more involved, firstly because he was unacquainted with the intricacies of European political life when he first set foot on the Continent, and secondly because he committed himself in his political statements and could, therefore, be easily "placed" by politicians among the more progressive forces in contemporary politics. Rabindranath's role, however, was not of a passive nature. Many of the

facts that will be discussed in this chapter were unknown even to him; and fortunately so, for otherwise he might have despaired of human sanity and common sense.

We can suppose that at one time or another every contemporary poet comes in contact with political forces; frequently also he cannot avoid taking an active part in the political life of his own country. For he has been rather roughly pulled down from his ivory-tower and, standing again on the firm soil of his land, he has to commit himself in one way or another. Rabindranath never lost touch with the Indian political arena; indeed, he was one of the main actors in the drama of Indian national revival. But his voice was heard as if from far away. It was a sympathetic and gentle voice, and even when it thundered, it did not call for immediate action and violent upheavals. But it was different on the arena on which the tragedy of contemporary Western political consciousness was being enacted. There Rabindranath was only one actor among many, and one who felt diffident about his acting, because the stage-management seemed to him all wrong. He entered this arena almost against his will, certainly against his inclination, and whenever he started speaking a deafening noise rose from the audience in which the highest praise and the lowest vilification were equally distributed. Even on the stage itself he was never alone and his sympathetic and gentle voice was lost in the tumult and increasing excitement from all sides. Only in great moments of inspirations, when he all of a sudden started reciting his verses in his own native tongue, the noise subsided, and friend and foe alike submitted to the colourful harmony of words the meaning of which they did not grasp. Then, indeed, the stage belonged all to himself; and both audience and co-actors kept peace for the time being. And unseen by them, unobserved by the multitude, he went back to his ivory-tower to rehearse his part again,

and better, for next time. For after a few years, he knew, the arena will call him back; and only when frustration came in old age, did he almost despair and almost acknowledged his own defeat.

But we are only silent spectators in this drama. We are like children before the rising curtain in a theatre, suspending our disbelief for a while and taking for granted that this is how it was, and not otherwise. We shall keep our eyes open and shall not pass over-hasty judgments. Full detachment, we know, we shall never attain; for our sympathies too are with those who sacrifice themselves for their "faith in humanity," those who "fearlessly fulfil their destiny through insult and isolation." And we know that Rabindranath was one of them.

Twice already in the course of this book did we touch upon political problems in connection with Rabindranath's success in the West; first in the chapter dealing with the Nobel Prize award and later on when we discussed Henri Massis's *Defence of the West*. On both occasions we realised that Rabindranath was subjected to political comment and criticism from the two opposing parties at a time, and sometimes even from a third or a fourth party. The way in which this criticism originated entirely depended either on the then existing political alliances or on various international tensions. Our story here has to begin with the last war, during which Rabindranath—as could be expected—was used for purposes altogether foreign to him. When, in 1916, he went over to America a rumour was afloat during his stay in St. Francisco that some Indian revolutionaries (presumably members of the Gahdr Party) were planning to kill him in his hotel. Whether this rather incredible story is true or not, would be difficult to ascertain. What is of particular interest to us, are the political issues involved in this rumour. Here is a full report of what

actually happened:

It was believed that the lie was circulated with the object of prejudicing the Indians in the eyes of the American public at the moment when Anti-Asiatic legislation was under discussion. But this was not the end. After Tagore's return to India, his name was dragged into the American Courts where a prosecution had been entered against the Indian revolutionists in San Francisco on a charge of conspiring to overthrow British rule in India. The infamous suggestion was made that Tagore had taken money from the Germans to further their object in America. His American friends who were naturally scandalised, wrote to the poet, some even reproaching him with having betrayed the trust of a friendly nation. Tagore thereupon cabled his explanation to President Wilson asking for his protection. But the President neither published his explanation nor even acknowledged the cable.¹

To make confusion worse confounded, we read a few years later that "the motive for the attempted murder was that the Gahdr Party regarded Dr. Tagore as an agent of the British Government.....The informant further stated that he had personal knowledge that the Gahdr Party had dealings with the Third Internationale at Moscow."²

This is indeed a mystery story full of vague rumours and ambiguous hints; it is certainly irrelevant as far as the actual facts are concerned. But it is symptomatic of the utter political confusion that created myths founded on hearsay and drawing-room gossip around a poet who was entirely ignorant of what was happening to him. This is an instance of "political ambiguity" in the worst sense of the term; some more will follow, less thrilling perhaps than the first, but, therefore, none the less ambiguous.

When, in the last war, Indian troops were fighting

¹ *Daily News*, Colombo, 18.6.1929.

² *The Statesman*, Calcutta, 9.7.1933.

side by side with British and French troops, a protest was raised in England against sending "pagan" Hindus to fight against "Christian" Germans. Here is the reply given by a widely read paper:

One wonders to-day, whether the people who still talk with a pathetic falling cadence of German "culture," and who lift up their hands at the thought of setting Pagan Hindus against them on the fated field, know aught of Tagore. Perhaps, indeed, their worship of the materialistic cult of Germany would shut them out from the Chamber of Peace in the House Beautiful from whence Tagore's culture derives its inspiration.¹


The Treaty of Versailles did not put an end to this political opportunism. Only now both sides, England and Germany alike used him for their own ends. Whenever, therefore, Rabindranath made his appearance in any one of the European cities, his arrival was commented upon by the respective Foreign Offices, by the leading political parties, by national or international organisations, and, quite naturally, by commercial enterprises. As regards England and Germany, both of them tried their best—as it is only in the nature of things—to make their point quite clear. The German comment was, however, clumsy and outspoken, while the British was more shrewd and diplomatic. During Rabindranath's visit to Germany in 1921, people anxiously debated among themselves the possible political implications of such a surprising success. A Communist newspaper in Vienna leaves nothing to be desired as regards the explicitness of the following statement; it also provides us with an unconscious comment on the continual quarrels going on between the Communist and the Socialist newspaper in that city; for it seems the Socialist paper was entirely unaware of any political or international impli-

¹ *Western Mail*, 10.10.1914.

cations whatsoever:

This is what we should ask: why has all of a sudden the interest for Indian wisdom been revived in unsophisticated Europe? or: what has driven the Bengali out of the silence of Indian forests and into the tumult of German cities? Only the correspondent of the local socialist paper does not realise the meaning of this Indo-German rapprochement. The propaganda department of the German Foreign Office knows better: the time is ripe in India and England must be made to disintegrate. The foreign policy of Soviet Russia works with Communist propaganda and has no need for nonsense of this kind.¹

Politicians in England never felt very happy about Rabindranath's success in Germany. And in 1926 they retaliated by means of hints, vague rumours, and Reuter's messages. When Rabindranath landed in Hamburg the same scenes of enthusiasm took place as in 1921. The English press got worried, and the correspondent of the *Daily Telegraph* suggested "that the ovation accorded to the poet at Hamburg was propagandist in origin, contrived by German industrialists to cultivate a good opinion among Indian intellectuals as a stepping-stone towards the capture of the Indian markets."² Even more entertaining is the episode in which Rabindranath got mixed up in an exhibition in the Berlin Zoo. The facts as given out by Reuter's English correspondent are simple enough. It seems that, by a curious coincidence, at the same time when Rabindranath was in



in one afternoon, he "covered" the whole of India in a taxi, by driving first to the exhibition in the Zoo and then to Rabindranath's lecture in the University. Later on Germans tried to pacify the rather exasperated Indian intellectuals. In a book, published in 1931, the writer indignantly refers to the hundred Indians in the Berlin Zoo as "Aboriginals from Ceylon" adding that "the news of this exhibition during Rabindranath Tagore's visit to Berlin was wired by Reuter's English correspondent to India for propaganda purposes."¹

In more recent times political attacks in Germany against Rabindranath as a representative of the British Empire were more frequent, more outspoken and also more clumsy. During the Spanish Civil War, for instance Goebbels delivered an unusually violent speech on the occasion of the party-rally at Nuremberg in 1937, in which he attacked "world liberalism for having lent its moral aid to the Spanish Government," mentioning specifically by name Rabindranath Tagore, the Dean of Canterbury, the Bishop of Worcester, and the Archbishop of York.²

The gradual deterioration of political life in the West is reflected in the attitude of the various countries to Rabindranath. What has been said with regard to England and Germany can be applied to an ever greater extent to political relations between Germany and France. French people were even more than Englishmen suspicious of Rabindranath's success in Germany and looked for possible political implications. Henri Massis's *Defence of the West* analysed only the cultural aspect of a problem which vitally concerned the French nation as a whole. For instead of repentance and material and moral reparations on the part of Germany,

¹ Furtwaengler: *Indien, das Brahmanenland in Fruehlicht*. 1931.

² *News Chronicle*, London, 10.9.1937.

the French people were again confronted with a neighbour who was mystically looking forward into a vague but menacing future, apparently unrepenting and not willing to acknowledge defeat. The "scenes of frenzied hero-worship" in Berlin on the occasion of Rabindranath's lecture in the University, seemed to Frenchmen symptomatic of a dangerous tendency of the teutonic mind towards the irrational and the mystic, not only as regards "culture," but also in the field of politics. Things deteriorated even further, when French people read the text of a message addressed by Rabindranath to Professor Rudolf Eucken, the German philosopher, on the eve of his departure from Germany. We shall see in the following few lines what happened to this message when it crossed the Rhine. Here is a French paper's account of what "popular feelings" were like at that time in France:

Rabindranath Tagore is a kind of Hindu Tolstoy. As one might have expected, Germany uses him for propaganda purposes; and he exalts pan-Germanism in a whole-hearted and painstaking manner for which the press beyond the Rhine, for the last few days, pays him unanimous homage. 'German civilisation alone is capable of saving the world,' proclaims Tagore during his tour of lectures across the Reich. 'This Germanic civilisation conforms in its details as well as in its general outline to oriental civilisation, and from it alone can one expect a rejuvenation of the modern mind.' And yet, during his recent stay in France, Tagore has abstained from making statements which would have shown him to be insensible to the charm of our country, to its artistic beauties, and its innate sense of courtesy.¹

Did Rabindranath ever make such incredible statements in his message to Professor Eucken or in his lectures? To judge by the evidence available most of his lectures dealt with "The Message of the Forest," in

¹ *L'Eclair*, Paris, 20.6.1921.

his private interviews with journalists he was careful enough not to commit himself beyond an occasional expression of sympathy with the sufferings of the people after the war; and here is the original message to Professor Eucken:

*If it be the destiny of Germany to go through the penance for the sin of the modern age and come out purified and strong, if she can know how to make use of the fire that has scorched her for lighting up the path to a great future, to the aspiration of soul for its true freedom, she will be blessed in the history of humanity.*¹

While crossing the frontier the 'ifs' were dropped from the message and Rabindranath was exposed as a preacher of pan-Germanism. It is needless to point out that Rabindranath never had the slightest intention of propagating any definite political doctrine. True it is, however, that both Germany and France used him for their own ends. And nothing is easier for a journalist or a politician than to give his own interpretation to a poet's innocuous statements

In May 1921 Rabindranath's birthday was celebrated all over Europe. This again gave rise to political ambiguities of a particularly distasteful nature. It seems, to judge by newspaper reports, that a gift of books sent to Rabindranath on the part of German artists and writers, created grave misgivings among French intellectuals. "In order to expose these impudent Germans," says an ironical German press-comment, "the rivals of yesterday and of to-morrow, who flatter the Indian poet only for political reasons, the French at Strassburg decided to present him also with a gift of books; a complete collection

¹ The original copy of the message (in English) was found among Rabindranath's papers; it is addressed to Dr. Rudolf Eucken, dated "Neues Palais," Darmstadt, June 13, 1921. It was reproduced in all German newspapers. (*Italics mine.*)

of French Classics.”¹ In Paris, however, to judge again by a German newspaper report, the confusion was even greater. For there “for the poet’s 60th birthday some Indians domiciled in Paris decided to publish a birthday-book to which both Indian and European writers should contribute. French writers invited on this occasion declared themselves willing to contribute. But when they heard, that also German writers had been invited, they withdrew their promise and demanded that the Germans should be excluded. But the Indians did not want to exclude the Germans.....and so the idea of publishing the book had to be dropped.”² And the opinion gained ground in France more and more, that Rabindranath’s success in Germany was in reality the political success of a vanquished and unrepenting nation. In this sense the French defence of the West was indeed the defence of their own country against teutonic fanaticism.

Did Rabindranath know of all this when he crossed and recrossed the Rhine during his visits to Europe? Perhaps he did. But his mind was so deeply infused with his message of goodwill and reconciliation that he could easily overlook these petty quarrels among petty politicians. But can we? What right have we to deceive ourselves into thinking that his message was accepted wholeheartedly by the masses in the West? His hope and optimism led him into even greater creative effort; but we would indeed do him injustice if we would mention only the praise and the honour bestowed upon him, but not the criticism, even though it was frequently founded on untruth and misrepresentation. For these political ambiguities are inherent in modern man’s approach to a poet, and, indeed, to poetry in general.

Rabindranath’s message has frequently been identi-

¹ *Stuttgarter Zeitung*, 29.7.1921.

² *Morgen*, Olten (Switzerland), 21.8.1921.

fied in Europe and in America with certain pan-Asiatic political ideologies. Rabindranath, as is well known, never associated himself with the more chauvinistic type of pan-Asiaticism and, in fact, repudiated it more than once. However, his visit to the Far East, especially to China, created a good deal of mental unrest in the West. For there was no doubt that "Chinese students rejoiced at the news of his coming, for Tagore represents the intellectual triumph of Asia over Europe and America, and his visit will probably mark the beginning of a pan-Asiatic movement, just as the visit of Bertrand Russell helped to foster a more radical mentality among the students."¹ A similarly misleading kind of comment was passed on Rabindranath's supposedly "communist" propaganda, especially again in China. That Rabindranath never made any kind of political propaganda either in the Far East or in the West is known to any one acquainted with his life and work. And yet we read in a book published in London in 1929 and dealing with Communist propaganda in China the following illuminating statement:

China's future has been much more seriously prejudiced by the ideas imported and peddled by such persons as Bertrand Russell, John Dewey, Tagore and Karakhan than by all the opium, morphia, heroin, cocain, and hashish imported and produced in China during the past three centuries.²

Such pronouncements were made possible at that time because China was herself passing through a grave political crisis in which many of the European powers and America took an intense interest. It is, therefore, no surprise to find that the politically more radical people

¹ *La Patrie*, Montreal, Canada, 15.4.1924.

² *Peking and Tientsin Times*, 21.5.1928. (Quotation from Rodney Gilbert's *What's Wrong With China*, London, John Murray, p. 315.)

in China itself took up a hostile attitude towards Rabindranath whose visit and "propaganda" they considered inopportune and uncalled for. The spectre of communism and allied ideologies accompanied Rabindranath even to Peking where the following storm in a tea-cup took place:

The local Kuomintang men pointed out that the doctrines and principles held by Dr. Tagore were just as dangerous and poisonous as those of Karl Marx. The above petition says that Dr. Tagore has been welcomed in China simply by a group of retired politicians and unemployed scholars and that at this juncture when every one in the country should strictly observe the San Min principles of the late Dr. Sun Yat Sen in order to develop China in a more material way for the welfare of the Chinese people. Hence it is requested that the Koumintang authorities stop and prevent any school or any public body to extend welcome to the Indian Poet-philosopher.¹

Statements of this kind were made again and again in various countries in Europe and in the Far East, especially after Rabindranath's visit to Russia in 1930. There is, for instance, that strange letter by the famous composer Rachmaninoff—"protesting against statements made by Rabindranath Tagore, the Indian poet, in defence of the present Russian government," and the amazing reply given by the Soviet government in which Rachmaninoff's compositions were termed "reactionary and particularly dangerous to conditions in the acute class-struggle on the musical front"² and a boycott campaign was suggested in several Russian newspapers. Not to mention all the vilification hurled upon Rabindranath by Nazi-Germany for being in alliance both with Archbishops and with Communists. It is indeed very difficult to find one's way about in these ambiguities of international politics.

¹ *North China Star*, Peking, 26.3.29.

² *New York Herald Tribune*, 20.3.1930.

Whenever countries turned fascist or semi-fascist, Rabindranath was subjected to all sorts of indignities; his speeches were censored beforehand, his works were suppressed. We hear, for instance, that in Bucharest, in 1926, "his lecture was disappointing, as he really said nothing, but dwelt on reminiscences of his youthful political development. This appears to be accounted for by the fact whispered abroad that his utterances were subjected to censorship by the Roumanian authorities."¹ Most students of Rabindranath may not be aware of the fact that his works were banned in at least one country, long before Nazi-Germany came into existence. Lithuania is a small state and we do not hear much of Lithuanian "culture" and literature. However, the Lithuanian Government considered it necessary to ban Rabindranath's work in 1927, and that at a time when 43.18% of the male and 49.98% of the female inhabitants of that country were illiterate. Rabindranath, however, was not alone in his unexpected misfortune; here is the official Reuter's communique:

It is announced that the Lithuanian Government had issued a decree forbidding the sale in Lithuania of the works of Shakespeare, Oscar Wilde, and Sir Rabindranath Tagore.....The reason given for this step is that the works in question are immoral and anti-social.²

Any one acquainted with the troublesome history of this small Baltic state since the treaty of Versailles, will guess the political implications. Lithuania's alliance with Russia, and France's alliance with Poland are one aspect of the problem; the award of Vilna (Lithuania's capital) to Poland and the invasion of Memel by Lithuanian troops followed by the dispatch of French and British warships to that city, the other aspect of the same problem.

¹ *Near East*, London, 16.2.1926.

² *Westminster Gazette*, 25.4.1927.

That Rabindranath had as little to do with Vilna, Memel, and the dispatch of these warships as Oscar Wilde and Shakespeare, need not be particularly stressed. But lacking ammunitions and aeroplanes to drive these warships away, the Government of that small country took refuge in "cultural" suppression, first by imprisoning large numbers of students and even schoolboys, and later on by banning these three authors. And one of the organs of the Fascist Government of Lithuania solemnly declared that it was all necessary in order to "free Lithuania from the errors of the 18th century,"¹ to which, by the way, neither of the three authors belonged. This brings us to the end of our analysis of international ambiguities with regard to Rabindranath. The "national" ambiguities still remain to be discussed, especially those that were directed against Rabindranath in Germany and in Italy.

It is not possible within the limited framework of this book to pass in review all the criticism of Rabindranath's political writings, especially those which refer to India. A special volume will have to be written on this aspect of Western criticism alone. If, however, we look upon the great Western democracies as a whole, that is England, France, and the United States, we shall find surprisingly little political comment on Rabindranath's work and message; furthermore, we do not find politicians within any one of these countries expressing views on Rabindranath which were likely to excite antagonism or even hatred between opposing political parties or classes. Except as part of the international "war of nerves" (as we have seen in the preceding paragraphs), neither of the democratic countries used Rabindranath as a tool in the hands of clever "local" politicians. Germany, although by name a democracy

¹ See the full account in *Indian Social Reformer*, 28.5.1927.

at that time, was already in 1921 in the grips of political disintegration. With about twenty "major" political parties and a similar number of other "minor" parties, Germany offered an excellent field for every kind of political opportunism. And all parties took full advantage of Rabindranath's stay there to vent their feelings of grief or hope, of enthusiasm or abhorrence. From the radical Communists to the radical Fascists, every one had his own opinion to contribute or his own grievance to ventilate. The following paragraphs will provide us with an almost complete picture of the "decline of the West" in terms of political consciousness; for nowhere was this decline more rapid than in Germany.

Here is an unprejudiced account of how German political parties reacted to Rabindranath during his stay there in 1921:

The right wing responded with nationalistic bias and Tagore was called a defeatist or even a 'traitor'.....our middle parties took up the often repeated philistine slogan: one surely overestimates this sympathetic native from Asia; what for all this fuss: one should never lose one's mental equilibrium, and anyhow it is only a concern of Jewish editors and publishing agents who want to 'push' this otherwise perfectly sympathetic poet on the market.....The left wing lastly exclaimed: take care, this man wants to subdue your urge towards activity, he comes from the sleepy Orient, his doctrine—complacent and divorced from reality—has very little significance for Western society with its urge towards active efforts and accumulation of strength.¹

This account is representative; for here it is no longer a matter of civilisations or "Kultur" or the clash of the Eastern and Western "Mind," but a plain statement on the purely political response to Rabindranath in that country which honoured—and vilified—him most. If there is still any doubt left as to how actually political parties

¹ *Volkszeitung*, 10.8.1921.

ventilated their grievances we may quote a passage from a Socialist paper; it is an inspired piece of writing and it makes us wonder what Rabindranath would have thought had he seen it:

Although he delivers his lectures before the privileged classes, the bourgeoisie, we should not condemn him therefore. The bourgeoisie wants to draw him towards her, wants to fill her own emptiness with his abundance. Europe praises you as a poet and as a seer; but it does not know and it does not search for your path. For those, who search it, are by fetters bound. They groan in their chains—they rise menacingly—and one day they will break them. And the earth will tremble with their triumphal shout—Freedom.¹

But while the democratic and mildly socialist public opinion accepted Rabindranath without asking too many questions, on the right wing the protest against this "alien" became more and more pronounced. The right wing, it must be understood, consisted of the disillusioned middle-classes, the "declining" bourgeoisie whose mental emptiness needed a stronger food than Rabindranath's message of goodwill. They were in 1921 at least, less self-conscious than the Communists or the Democrats; they were still "in the dark;" but they felt howsoever vaguely it might have been, that Rabindranath was a potential enemy to their aspirations towards political and "racial" supremacy in Europe. It is, therefore, no accident that a paper, whose associations with the largest armament manufacturing centre in the Rhineland are well known, gives expression to this nationalistic or fascist protest. Tagore's attitude towards nationalism in general and his interference in European politics, says the paper, must be rejected most emphatically, "especially as there are reasons to believe

¹ 14.5.1921.

that certain interested circles systematically work at the disintegration and destruction of our national consciousness;" Tagore's convictions, continues the paper, "are really nothing else but the poetic phantoms and the illusory hopes of an oppressed people.....which only the contemporary madness of nihilism and bolshevism can possibly take seriously....."¹

Already in 1921 the Fascist papers began asking: is Tagore an Aryan? "He certainly is not of Semitic race," solemnly declares a writer, "and that would qualify him to wear a swastika, although his pacifism might give rise to suspicions."² But if he is not of "Semitic" race, if he belongs to one of the oldest branches of the Aryan group ("Caucasian," as the Americans might have said in 1913), why is he to be seen all the time with Jews, with Jewish publishers and writers, scientists and even politicians? Perhaps he is a Jew himself; in fact, a look at his beard would convince anybody of his Semitic extraction! And if he is a saint and a seer (we are quite willing to believe it), why does he associate himself with the most unsaintly and materialistically minded of all the races on earth? Indeed, says an Aryan paper from Vienna "one thing surprises us, namely, that the Jewish public calls all men on deck to praise this man. It reminds us of an old German saying: 'What the Jew praises accept critically! For only what he treats with contempt or silence, is useful to your kind!' Do the Jews underestimate so much the possible effects of the Indo-Aryan mind, that they dare play with it, and do they misuse a saint from the shores of the Ganges as an ornament for their own 'progressive' and 'intellectual' pride? Or is Tagore's 'pacifism' responsible for it?.....In any case this Jewish showiness and enthusiasm is suspicious and

¹ *Rheinisch-Westfaelische Zeitung*, Essen, 7.12.1921.

² *Der Gegner*, Berlin, 20.6.1921.

makes us think."¹

It made them think hard for several years, until the advent of Fascism; thereafter they ceased thinking altogether: the German "soul" was no longer divided; Rabindranath *was* a Jew after all, and the less said about him the better:

After the lecture somebody got up and said that it was improper to speak about such people. He asked whether the lecturer was unacquainted with the 'well-known fact that Dr. Tagore was a Jew, whose real name was 'Rabbi Nathan;' that he had married a rich Jewess from Bombay by the name of Oppenheimer, daughter of a bamboo-dealer; and that his wealth came from this marriage."²

All that did not prevent them, a few years later, from claiming Rabindranath to the 'Indo-Germanic' race, to which—as the name implies—both Indians and Germans belong: "One section of this race immigrated to India," is the rather astonishing statement made by a converted Nazi from Ceylon, "Asoka belongs to the Indo-Germanic stock and this stock still continues to produce world personalities as Rabindranath Tagore and the Nehrus."³

I do not think we need trouble ourselves any longer as to whether Rabindranath was a Jew, a Caucasian, or an Aryan, whether he belonged to the Indo-Germanic "stock" or to any other less aristocratic breed. This all goes to prove, however, that, after all, the German soul was less "unified" than we were made to believe: for Rabindranath could not conceivably be both the son-in-law of a Jewish Bamboo-dealer and an Indo-Germanic superman, nor could he be a Communist and associate himself with Archbishops. These contradictory statements, it must be emphasised, are not the result

¹ *Deutschösterreichische Tageszeitung*, Vienna, 18.6.1921.

² Cornelia Bake in a letter to *The Statesman*, Calcutta, 21.7.1933.

³ *Ceylon Daily News*, Colombo, 6.10.1936.

of loose thinking. They were deliberate attempts to make use of Rabindranath whenever the occasion demanded it and whenever fascist propaganda thought it fit to introduce his name. That is how the mind of a people is poisoned. And that is how "anti-human forces spread their dominion" until the whole of a continent is engulfed by the crude psychological methods of infantile fascist regression.

One more event of utmost political and cultural importance should be mentioned here, before we go over to Italy: Rabindranath's fateful stay in Count Keyserling's School of Wisdom at Darmstadt in June 1921. For during these eight days Rabindranath's fame reached a climax. Our analysis of this "Tagore-week" will provide us with a fitting conclusion to Rabindranath's place in German party politics.

Unaware of the political machinations behind the stage, Rabindranath was genuinely moved by all the friendship and honour bestowed upon him in Germany. On the other hand, he found the cool reception accorded to his works in England discouraging. One day after reaching Darmstadt, he committed his ideas to writing and bitterly accused England of indifference to ideas in general:

Our modern schoolmasters are Englishmen, and they of all the Western nations, are the least susceptible to ideas. They are good, honest and reliable, but they have vigorous excess of animal spirits, which seek for exercise in racing, fox-hunting, boxing-matches, etc., and they offer stubborn resistance to all contagion of ideas.¹

We do not know how far Keyserling's School was in-

¹ *Letters from Abroad*, 10.6.1921 (Darmstadt). Here is E. J. Thompson's comment on this letter in his book on Rabindranath: "I think that Indians overrate the powers and achievements of the German intellect, great as they are, and underestimate those of the French and English." (p. 278).

directly responsible for such a statement. But there is no doubt—as will be seen shortly—that Keyserling and his circle had very definite grievances against England. Let us see, for the time being, what actually happened at this “School of Wisdom” during Rabindranath’s stay there. It seems that “thousands of people from all parts of Germany went thither during the week. Every morning at 9 and every evening at 4, open air meetings were held in the garden, and he used to deliver short discourses in answer to questions put to him and these were translated and interpreted by Count Keyserling. Bulletins of these discourses were issued every day and widely circulated throughout the country.”¹ On the 12th June, a Sunday, the famous “wood-gathering” took place; more than 4,000 people were present, when Rabindranath accompanied by the Grand Duke of Hesse and Count Keyserling ascended a nearby mountain where songs and dances were offered him as a “spontaneous” gift of the German people. Did Rabindranath know that most of these songs were of a narrow nationalistic kind, that the rather nauseating sentimentality of this summer morning on the mountain near Darmstadt, was not in the least “spontaneous,” but was very well rehearsed beforehand, especially the singing of the German National Anthem? Did he know of the contemporary accounts of this modern version of the Sermon on the Mount in the daily press and the way it was exploited by the chauvinist right-wing parties? We are afraid, he did not. Nor did he read, we are sure, this amazing account of his visit to Darmstadt, published in Keyserling’s own Magazine; here is an extract in as literal a translation as possible; we have tried to retain the inspired and elevated prose; it begins with the following dedication:

¹ *The Servant*, India, 11.8.1921.

'OM! OUR ADORATION TO THE HOLY GANESHA, THE GOD OF WISDOM'.....In the land of the sinking sun there is a town, Dharmanagara by name. And in it there lives a friend of Rabindra, a Kshatriya. He had built a school and to him he came. And whatever his friend, the Kshatriya had taught, according to the fashion of the land of the sinking sun, of kingly life, of light-fulfilling existence, it appeared now in person among the men of the West, a living symbol of the eternal One personified by the man from the East. But the generous Duke of the land offered him his palace and opened wide all the gates of the Royal park in order not to prevent any one from seeing the light of the Eastern sun.¹

What exactly Keyserling thought of Rabindranath's visit to his school, what was "at the back" of his mind when he let loose in Darmstadt all the sentimentality of the German "soul," we do not know. He himself issued contradictory statements, sometimes praising Rabindranath as a seer and a prophet, sometimes as an admirer and worshipper of the German nation. We have, in the last chapter, made an attempt at analysing the motives that led to Rabindranath's success in Germany and have laid particular stress on the Defence of the West emanating as it did in France. We have seen again and again that the attacks were not so much directed against Rabindranath as an Indian poet with a message, but as an "awakener" and "preserver" of the German soul, the potential enemy of France. And, lastly, it has been clear from the very outset that Rabindranath played his part unconsciously, hardly at all aware of the cultural or political implications of his success in Germany. Count Keyserling provides us with the finishing touch

¹ *Der Weg zur Vollendung*. ("The Path to Perfection.") Mitteilungen der Schule der Weisheit. Herausgegeben von Graf Hermann Keyserling. 2. Hft. 1921. (p. 42 Erwin Rouselle: Rabindranath Tagore; Die Legende der Darmstaedter Tagore-Woche 9-14.6.1921.)

to this problem. For it was really he who for the first time formulated Rabindranath's spiritual leadership of Germany in a way which could but hurt the French and disconcert the rest of the world. In an article entitled "Rabindranath and Germany," Count Keyserling writes:

But what many do not know and yet should know is that this Indian who, never before walked on German soil, realises with the instinct of a seer that Germany will be the spiritual treasure-house of the entire West in the future. Here first of all, he feels, can take place the spiritual and cultural renaissance of Europe. America, according to him, is more materialistic than ever before; the victorious nations are victims of spiritual blindness. In Germany can and will originate a new humanity. This he believes with all the fire of his great soul....

And about the proposed visit to Darmstadt he says:

If he meets here the right kind of people, if he comes into living contact with men of real worth, then he will announce in his masterful language, what Germany essentially stands for, and in millions of souls the light of truth will shine, piercing through all the mist of lies.¹

This article was published at the right psychological moment. For one day before, Rabindranath had issued a statement in the papers thanking Germany for the gift of books and the hospitality offered to him. In this message we find a few lines which were liable to be misinterpreted, and, of course, were misused both by Count Keyserling and the French press: "I really have the feeling of a renaissance in the heart of the people and the great country which has accepted me as one of her own."²

¹ *Der Tag*, 22.5.1921.

² Quoted in *Berliner Boersen Courier*, 21.5.1921. Here is a complete bibliography of the more important books and articles dealing with Count Keyserling as a philosopher, a representative of Eastern culture in the West, and of pan-Germanism. The fact that most of the articles, etc., are written by French intellectuals proves that he was taken to be a potential enemy of France and

The more democratic press in Germany looked upon the Tagore Week at Darmstadt with grave misgivings and concern. They found patriotic sentimentality and an insistence, on the part of the Count, on the "spontaneity" of the people. The political implications became obvious to any one acquainted with intellectual background of Keyserling's School of Wisdom and his own political ideas; and one of the leading democratic papers remarks quite rightly: "Frequently and in a strange manner it was insisted upon that we had a strong patriotic interest in creating a favourable impression in the mind of the Indian poet. The whole spectacle, therefore, took sometimes a most political turn the more so as Tagore, because of his position in Indian politics, is himself a person of some definite political standing. It was a disharmonious mixture of senti-

Western civilisation:

Ernest Seilleire: *La Sagesse de Darmstadt*.

Ibid.: *Les Idées du Comte Keyserling*. (In: *Revue Universelle*, 15.7.1924.)

Will Durant: *Adventures in Genius*. (I Chapter on Keyserling).

Mercedes Gallagher Parks: *Introduction to Keyserling*. An Account of the man and his work. 1934.

Maurice Boucher: *La Philosophie de Hermann Keyserling*. Paris 1927.

René Lauret: *Les Idées politiques de Hermann Keyserling*. (In: *Vie des Peuples*, 25.6.1921.)

Jean Guhenno: *Un sorcier: Le Comte Keyserling*. (In: *Europe* No. 93, 15.9.1930.)

Jean Caves: *Le nihilisme européen et les appels de l'Orient*. (In: *Philosophies*, Nos. 1 and 2).

R. Zablonovsky: *La crise de la culture intellectuelle en Allemagne*. (In *Mercur de France*, 15-7-1924.)

Maurize Betz: *Les Idées du Comte Keyserling et le mouvement asiatique en Allemagne*. (In: *Revue des Arts Asiatiques*, Sept. 1924.)

M. Baldensperger: *Où l'Orient et l'Occident's affrontent*. (In: *Revue de Littérature comparée*, 1922.)

ments and ideologies.”¹

This is not the place to discuss the ideas underlying Keyserling's School of Wisdom at Darmstadt. Its bias was undoubtedly “Eastern” without, however, being associated with any particular Eastern religion. It trained its pupils and followers in some kind of “inner rhythm” and “self-realisation;” later on we also find definite traces of the more fascist training for “leadership.” According to René Guénon, an authority on Hinduism and Eastern traditional ways of life in general, “we have reason for thinking that Count Keyserling has not been altogether unconnected with the theosophist movement or its derivations; in any case the information that we have been able to get from Hindu sources with regard to him is altogether unfavourable.”²

As regards Keyserling's political theories, they are consistently and disconcertingly vague, although we might find in them again and again a repudiation of the Russian Revolution and all it stands for, and an increasing insistence on leadership as a “spiritual force.” Speaking of Communism, Keyserling says:

But it is clear, nevertheless, that neither the materialism, nor its collectivism, nor, above all, its Satanism are true to our profoundest and most essential aspirations.....The Russian Revolution is a more magnificent confirmation of the truth of the myth of Lucifer than any event of ancient history.³

Fascist tendencies are no less frequent; they are usually hidden behind a veil of pretentious and pseudo-philosophical terminology:

A Republican, a Democrat, a Protestant, who is inwardly bound by the belief in definite forms, is infinitely less free

¹ *Frankfurter Zeitung*, 16.6.1921.

² René Guénon: *East and West*. (Engl. Translation, 1942.)

³ *Spectator*, London, 13.11.1932. (From Count Keyserling's *South American Meditations*, 1932).

from the point of view of the spirit than an aristocrat, nay even a tyrant, who lives according to the law of his own creative conscience.¹

We have not heard much of Keyserling these last few years since the advent of Fascism in Germany. From time to time only he breaks his silence with some new book, more ambiguous than the last and turning more and more towards the attitude represented by Massis's *Defence of the West*. Politically his leanings are towards Fascism in its cultural and "spiritual" applications. Here is, for instance, an English review of one of his recent books, *The Art of Life*:

His political criticism is weak: for he recommends Nazism as expressing 'the profound meaning of all Communism,' and refers to Rabindranath Tagore as 'the prototype of the complete man'.....so much greater than Gandhi 'who is merely the representative of an embryonic phase of the pre-Bolshevik period' in India whereas both are equally *bourgeois* and capitalist in ideology.²

The ties of friendship that bound him to Rabindranath weakened perceptibly as the years passed. Now and then he wrote one of his ego-centric letters, speaking much about himself, intensely preoccupied, as he always has been, with his own spiritual welfare. Here are two letters from the year 1938, written at a time when the whole world was trembling in the darkness of the approaching storm: he seems to be blissfully unaware of anything happening outside himself, cultivating his soul and his spiritual integrity:

I am leading a life of almost pure meditation, and curious enough; having found my own way I see that the traditional path most akin to mine is that of Zen—in its highest Chinese

¹ Count Keyserling: "Key to America's Spiritual Freedom." (In *The Drift of Civilisation*, 1930.) (Italics mine.)

² *Times of India*, 9.7.1937.

expression.¹

Nevertheless, I feel even now, that all is for the best; that an entirely new period of life and work is preparing her birth, amidst ever so many pangs; and that my real life is perhaps only beginning.²

The personality and character of Count Keyserling are intriguing in the extreme, and so is his friendship with Rabindranath. We have no reason to doubt that, at least at beginning, his feelings towards Rabindranath were genuine. But we must not forget that he—more perhaps than any one else—was a product of his age, an age of fast changing standards and values, attitudes and beliefs, both in the cultural and political life of Europe. In one way, at least, this strange friendship is fascinating and not without pathos. For here we see two great men belonging to the same age, the Western philosopher with a leaning towards the East and the Eastern poet with a leaning towards the West, struggling side by side for certainty and truth, until their paths separate for ever, one being engulfed by the rising tide of teutonic fanaticism and the other becoming more and more “acutely conscious of the menace to man” and fearlessly fulfilling his destiny “through insult and isolation.” But nothing made Rabindranath politically more conscious of this menace than his experience in Italy to which a few more paragraphs in this chapter will be devoted. For here for the first time Rabindranath was face to face with political facts. The menace was no longer “spiritual” or ideological. It was the first experience of the poet of the East with those forces in man which he and many with him call “anti-human.”

¹ From an unpublished letter from H. Keyserling to Rabindranath, dated Darmstadt, 5.6.1938.

² From an unpublished letter from H. Keyserling to Rabindranath, dated Darmstadt, 12.8.1938.

Rabindranath's Italian experience in 1926 is in many respects much less involved than the German political ambiguities in 1921. The complete absence of political parties except one, and the suppression of free speech in Italy, greatly simplified the response of the people to Rabindranath. There is no doubt, however, that the Italian public in general paid genuine homage to the poet from the East, that the number of his admirers in Italy was not less than anywhere else in Europe, and that the reception accorded to him was to a considerable degree spontaneous. But behind it all we feel the hand of the Government, a very strong hand indeed who did not mind bestowing honour as long as it suited it, but who a few weeks later did not hesitate to vilify that same man whom it had honoured.

We know sufficiently well to-day what happens to poetry—and to the arts in general—in a fascist state. In 1926 people did not know. They were ignorant of the real state of affairs in a totalitarian country, they were misled by contradictory propaganda, and many intellectuals in democratic countries were obsessed by a morbid curiosity to know more about that man whose will was law over millions of human beings, and who had succeeded in making trains in Italy run according to the timetable. We have no doubt whatsoever that Rabindranath himself was misled by the ambiguities of political propaganda before he set foot on Italian soil; for, on the one hand, the anti-fascist press told him all about the sufferings brought about by the revolution, and on the other, leading Englishmen and Frenchmen themselves, for instance the French ambassador in Rome, asserted "that Mussolini had saved Italy from utter ruin."¹ Perhaps

¹From a conversation between Rabindranath and Romain Rolland at Villeneuve on 25th June 1926, as recorded by Mr. P. C. Mahalanobis.—The English press in Italy made no secret out of

Rabindranath believed neither of them; but this time his instinct went wrong, and instead of looking at Italy in terms of human nature and experience, he indulged (as many other intellectuals at that time) in wishful thinking, self-deception, and an unjustifiable optimism. For instance, in the conversation with Romain Rolland which took place after he had left Italy, Rabindranath summarises as follows Italy's progress under Mussolini:

I have been told that this is what actually happened: Mussolini has succeeded in bringing back law and order for the people. Now they are prosperous and happy, in fact far better than they were just after the war. I am told that formerly peaceful citizens could not go out without weapons and ran the risk of being assassinated and looted at any moment. One thing is now changed, namely, that foreigners can now travel with security in every part of Italy, and I was told that all this was due to the forceful personality of Mussolini.¹

When we look at the meeting between Rabindranath and Mussolini, the same kind of disappointment awaits us. Rabindranath in a few sentences expounds his thesis that East and West must collaborate in order to create a new and better civilisation. Mussolini either nods his head or simply agrees. Not once in the conversation does he commit himself in any way; Rabindranath, however, does. Carried away by his sincere admiration for this "strong man" (and we must remember that poets are particularly liable to be carried away by "personalities" rather than by objective political facts) he commits him-

its admiration for Mussolini; here is a significant extract: "The meeting between Tagore and Mussolini is symbolical; the two great men of East and West—contemplation and action personified—who are striving by different roads to reach the same goal—the elevation of mankind." (*Italian Mail*, Florence, 12.6.1926.)

¹ Ibid.

self, to the great joy of the Italian press and the great bewilderment of all freedom-loving people across the frontiers. Here is an account of this conversation, as it took place on the 13th June 1926, and as it was dictated on the same day by Rabindranath himself to his Private Secretary:

R. You in Europe are objective, while we in the East are introspective; the synthesis of these two elements is required for the civilisation of the future.

M. I admit it. The East has got her spiritual wealth. We require it. Science is not sufficient; without spiritual life we shall not be complete.

R. Science has power, but it cannot create. It can accumulate vast heaps of materials, multiply an unending succession of things, but that is not creation.

M. It is true; in reality multiplication is nothing. Look at our multiplicity of electric lamps; they are the same in every room; they have no variety.

R. That is typical of science. Only life has variety. The present moment offers a great opportunity for a true unity of East and West. It will have great significance in history, and I hope we shall succeed in our efforts.

(Mussolini nodded his head and agreed.....)

R. But in Rome I have seen your masterful personality. You know you are the most misrepresented person in the world. I also came with grave doubts and misgivings; but I am glad to have met you, for it has cleared many misunderstandings.

M. I know I am most misrepresented and most abused. But what can I do? I must go on with my work.

R. Perhaps a new Rome is being created. I see signs of a new creative activity. There is need of harsh discipline before one can attain true freedom. But such discipline is negative, it merely removes obstacles, it cannot of itself create. A great vision is necessary for a new synthesis. I believe I see signs of this masterful vision in Italy. We are awaiting for this freedom of the spirit without which all discipline is meaningless. I hope there will be a great future for Italy. Material wealth and power cannot make a country immortal. She must contribute something which is great and which is

for somebody, and which does not merely glorify herself.¹

We have every reason to believe this account. One thing, however, we do not know and that cannot be recorded in any way: the subtle influences from outside that made Rabindranath say certain things, while others remained unsaid. Does he not allude to it, when he remarks to Romain Rolland a few days later: "While I had been talking to the Duce my guide and interpreter (Professor Formichi) got extremely nervous from time to time so that I did not get an opportunity of having a quiet talk with the Duce."²

The political ambiguities in Fascist Italy are of a subtler kind than those in Germany, but they are, therefore, not less dangerous for a poet's good name and reputation. What are we, for instance, to think of this message supposedly sent by Rabindranath from Rome to the Indian press:

But renown has bounded me even while I am under the aegis of Signor Mussolini, that gentle hermit, who like myself, shuns fame and whose life and its message are interior.³

Rabindranath himself made his position quite clear when he stayed with Romain Rolland at Villeneuve in Switzerland. Throughout these memorable conversations and later on in his open letter to the press, he took up the attitude of an artist who while admiring the tremendous "personality" of Mussolini avoids all political issues, but who—when told of the real state of affairs in Italy—is deeply shocked: "I had not met any of the people who suffered," he tells Mrs. Salvadori, an Italian exile's wife in Zurich, "but now that I have seen you I realise my own

¹ From the Notes of P. C. Mahalanobis.

² 25th June 1926. (Ibid.)

³ *The Englishman*, Calcutta, 6.8.1926. (This message was later on contradicted.)

responsibility.”¹ A poet’s responsibility towards society must, however, remain ineffective within the context of contemporary political ambiguities. His statements and messages, his open letters and his burning speeches remain without an echo, lost in the wilderness of totalitarian propaganda. And we who are only spectators from far away, children in front of the rising curtain in a theatre, we too are deeply moved when we again see Rabindranath, the disillusioned fighter for reconciliation, the poet with a message in a waste land, reading out the first draft of his open letter to the press to Romain Rolland, in the very same room in which once another fighter, another poet lived and worked, Victor Hugo. There they sit, and Rabindranath’s gentle voice floats towards the open window and across the lake in the falling darkness:

For an artist it is a great chance to be able to meet a man of personality who walks solitary among men who are members of a crowd which is always on the move pressed from behind. He is fully visible in his integrity above the lower horizon obstructed by the dense human undergrowth. Such men are the masters of history and one cannot but be fearful in their presence that they miss their eternity by using all their force in capturing the present by its throat and leave it killed for all future.²

But when he finishes reading Romain Rolland is silent and seems dissatisfied. That is not enough, he thinks; the time to speak for the poet had not yet come. And, we wonder, we in front of the bewildering stage, whether the time will ever come, when a poet will be able to speak out and people will listen to him. But already in the meanwhile journalists were hard at work in Rome itself, denying all the honour they had bestowed upon Rabindranath and turning his words and gestures into a

¹ 5th July, 1926. (From the Notes of P. C. Mahalonobis.)

² Villeneuve, 27th June 1926. (Ibid.)

farcical comedy before the eyes of complacent Italian blackguards. How easy it is to turn a poet into a clown; Shakespeare must have known it when he wrote *Twelfth Night*. And in Mussolini's own paper there appeared the following editorial:

When the unemployed hangers-on of certain so-called circles of culture decided to invite the celebrated Indian poet Tagore to tour our country we were not enthusiastic for the idea. Italy, by good fortune for herself and the world has plenty of literary schools and of art in general and has nothing to learn from the Indians. Anyway, Mr. Tagore, poet of Flowers, Stars, and Pounds Sterling, unbuttoned his tunic and preached in broken English to various provincial gatherings overcome by the imbecile attraction of the exotic and the international. ... A poet who does not feel the tragedy of his own people is for us a pseudo-mystic. The dishonest Tartuffe (santone) whom the idiocy of others has promoted to the stature of greatness profited by Italy's traditional and lordly hospitality. ... Italy laughs at Tagore and those who brought thisunctuous and insupportable fellow in our midst.¹

Rabindranath had by then left Romain Rolland and was busy lecturing to overcrowded audiences all over Europe. But a few months after this editorial, Romain Rolland wrote him a letter. This letter never appeared in any newspaper, it did not stir the conscience of those who were responsible for all the political ambiguities in Europe: it was indeed like the cry of a bewildered soul to a kindred spirit, the intensely personal appeal of a man of the West who had not lost his moral integrity, to the poet of the East whose "firm faith in humanity" had been rudely shaken:

What I most regret is that circumstances have forced us to devote a large part of our conversations to discussing contemporary and depressing subjects—that unfortunate

¹ *Popolo d'Italia*. (Reproduced in *Manchester Guardian*, 15-7-1926.)

Italy—instead of devoting ourselves, as we would both have liked, to things eternal. Be assured that they occupy my mind very much—more indeed than the ephemeral vicissitudes of the continual battle. And I would have liked to exchange with you—but all alone (with my good and dear interpreter, my sister)—our thoughts concerning the soul and destiny, the invisible, the omnipresent, and the eternal essence of things... Often have I accused myself for having disturbed your rest when I took away from you the confidence you have had in your Italian hosts. However, I had no other interest in my mind but your glory, which I value more than your rest. I did not want devils misusing your sacred name in the annals of history. Forgive me if my intervention has caused you some restless hours. The future (the present already) will show you that I have acted as your faithful and vigilant guide.¹

Such letters are rare; for they throw open the stage behind the actors and show us the wide horizon of neverchanging reality, the reality that is beyond all the petty ambiguities of political life on earth. And we like to imagine these two great men, Rabindranath and Romain Rolland, turning towards that horizon and becoming oblivious of the eternal battle fought on the stage. And we who had to suspend our disbelief for such a long time, we who were the silent witnesses of the political vicissitudes and battles, of ambiguities and an intolerable moral decline, we also turn now towards that open horizon behind the stage, the invisible and yet omnipresent reality of the spirit, the eternal essence of things.

¹ From an unpublished letter by Romain Rolland to Rabindranath, dated Villeneuve, 11-11-26. (Translated from the French by the author).

CHAPTER V

RELIGIOUS REVIVALISM

*"Is not my God an eternal master
of time?"*

It is not uncommon to hear people speak of a religious revival at the beginning of this century. How far this revival was "religious," that is, connected with some definite religious dogma or belief, it would be difficult to determine. All the evidence available points towards a broadening of the spiritual basis of human conceptions, an interpretation of life in terms of spiritual awareness and integration. This was undoubtedly due to a spontaneous reaction against nineteenth-century rationalism, the reply given by the human spirit to the increasing mechanisation and standardisation of life. In literature it may be said to begin with Tolstoy's works which evoked a ready response all over Europe; but in the years that preceded and followed the great war, there arose a great desire within the hearts of countless Europeans to replace the merely material considerations which had guided them for so long a time by a spiritual and moral revaluation of the universe. It is doubtful whether this craving for spiritual enlightenment was really due to an overwhelming personal need, or whether it was not the result of fear and the sudden realisation that despite the mastery over the material universe, the spirit of the age was out of joint and that they were called upon to set it right. It is no accident that many of these

new spiritual leaders were also either actual or potential social reformers; for they all realised that a spiritual renaissance in the West is possible only if society itself is changed; and that is also why many of them turned towards the East either for a possible spiritual rejuvenation, but also for the sake of freeing the colonial people from material and moral oppression. Religious and social activities went hand in hand, and Christianity was imbibed with a new and deeper meaning than before. That is why Schweitzer went to Africa and opened a hospital in the jungle, that is why C. F. Andrews went to India and fought for the emancipation of the Indian masses. Both were deeply religious and reached a level of saintliness rarely attained by human beings in modern times. And, strangely enough, in both the guiding principle was art which they considered to be the purest expression of the human spirit; C. F. Andrews proved it in his friendship with Rabindranath, Schweitzer in his deep knowledge and understanding of classical Western music, especially Bach.

A sincere desire for social reform, spiritual awareness, and a renaissance of mysticism in art, therefore, are the main characteristics of this religious revival during the last 30 or 40 years. It provided a small intellectual elite with a unifying principle, with a new integrity of thought and purpose. That is why people belonging to different nationalities and religious denominations yet found a common spiritual basis in their endeavours. And more than once this basis was the East, and particularly India. This applies to Schweitzer, Hermann Hesse, Keyserling in Germany, to René Guénon, Romain Rolland, Maritain in France, to C. F. Andrews, Sturge Moore, and Sir Patrick Geddes in England. In their own way they all were revolutionaries, moral and religious non-conformists; every one of them was obsessed by an idea which he tried

his best to propagate and put into practice.

Together with these genuine attempts at spiritual rejuvenation there were numerous pseudo-mystical societies flourishing all over Europe, false prophets who under the garb of Eastern mysticism preached doctrines that were neither Eastern nor spiritual, but which satisfied the craving for sensationalism of the Western masses and which provided them with a popularised and sentimentalised form of religion. In the course of this chapter it will not always be easy to differentiate between the response of the genuine religious reformers and those who took to Rabindranath because he appealed to their vague and aimless religious longings. There is no doubt, however, that religious ambiguities in the response of the West to Rabindranath did as much harm to a proper appreciation of his work and message as the political ambiguities of the last chapter.

The fact that Europe, even before the last war, was in search of a "new" religion, and that, therefore, Rabindranath's arrival there took place at the right psychological moment, is obvious from many statements made at that time by leading Western writers, especially those who had been to India and were in touch with Eastern religions. Hermann Hesse, the German novelist, writes as follows after returning from a voyage to the East:

One impression definitely predominates over all others, namely, the religious spirit that rules over millions of souls and unites them. The whole East is permeated with religion, just as the West is permeated with reason and science. In the West the life of the soul seems to be primitive and haphazard if one compares it with the religiosity of the sons of Asia, Buddhists, Mahomedans, and others... This impression is so overwhelming because it makes us intensely aware of a force in the East and a weakness, a defect in the West. This contrast strengthens our doubts, our fears, and our

hopes. It is evident that no spiritual importation from the East will save us, neither a loan from China or from India, nor the return to the dogmas of some particular church. But also it is evident that the salvation and the continuity of European civilisation will be possible only if we rediscover a discipline of the soul, a spiritual horst which will belong to all men alike.¹

This was written during the War. And when Rabindranath appeared among them in the years following the war, especially in 1921, the people seemed to be ready to receive his message driven as they were towards religion by their fear and their sense of frustration. They felt that a prophet was among them bringing with him a message of hope and fulfilment: "There are many false prophets in the land," writes one paper, "full of ignorance and insincerity. Neither do we lack in disbelieving and despairing people. Therefore, the effect of genuine prophetic words is the more lasting and the hope the stronger, that once we might reap a rich harvest of fulfilment for humanity in accordance with the message of the forest."²

We can distinguish three stages in the spiritual response of the Western public to Rabindranath. The first is based on their expectation of a rejuvenated mysticism from the East; the second identified Rabindranath's poetry and message with the teachings of the Christian Church; the third, which is also the most ambiguous, while accepting Rabindranath as a "mystic," rejects his work because of its "pagan," that is, un-Christian origin. Rabindranath was first identified with mysticism, both Eastern and Western, in a review of *Gitanjali* by Evelyn Underhill which appeared in *The Nation* in November 1912; after a few gene-

¹ Published in *Der Bund* (Switzerland), 1915, and quoted in *Tagore Educateur* by E. Pieczynska, Paris, 1921.

² *Basler Nachrichten*, Basel, 12-5-1921.

ral remarks about mysticism in general she comes to the conclusion that "only the classics of mystical literature provide a standard by which this handful of 'Song-Offerings' can be appraised or understood."¹ It is doubtful whether this critical analysis of *Gitanjali* in terms of mysticism found a very large following; the more popular attitude consisted rather in a loss of critical awareness and an indiscriminate acceptance of anything, whether good or bad, that could provide an outlet for their emotional ambiguities. When, for instance, we read in a Review devoted to Occultism that "the poems of our Brother from India are steeped in all the magic and the mystery of the moon"² we are not ready to believe in the sincerity of the mystical experience. Rabindranath's "mystical appeal" became a kind of stock-response with many people; they indeed believed in their own sincerity; but it remained a "pose" and an attitude only, for they could not live up to it:

He comes like an angel of old to the apostle enchained, bidding the fetters fall and leading out the soul to loving service. To assure him once more that this ministry of song has been a benediction, to remind him again that he has become an angel-friend to half the world, is perchance to offer in humble gratitude the nectar of the gods—to an immortal? We hope so.³

This loss of all critical standards with regard to a genius like Rabindranath, is symptomatic of a general loss of standards in post-war Europe. Many of those

¹ *The Nation*, 16-11-1912.

² *The Occult Review*, Sept. 1914.—Already in 1913 Ezra Pound warns the "common reader" not to confuse Rabindranath "with that jolly and religious bourgeois Abdul Baha; nor with any Theosophist propaganda; nor with any of the various missionaries of the seven and seventy isms of the mystical East." (In *Freewoman*, 1-11-1913).

³ *The Asiatic Review*, London, July 1918.

who had turned mystics overnight, especially on the continent, admired Rabindranath for the wrong reasons. From being a poet, he was transformed into an "angel," a kind of Messiah, almost a pure spirit. "We have seen a saint face to face," writes an Austrian paper, "it is like a miracle of which one has always heard speaking, and in which one does not believe, when it is there. . . . By the movement of his hands the curtains in front of temples might rise and one might look into the most holy shrine; thousands might bend their knees in front of his words and might kiss the border of his robe.... Mankind should listen still, for centuries are speaking again. . . . But that we did see what seemed to us so far away across the infinity of time, that is the miracle."¹

Side by side with this vague mysticism we also find the purely Christian response to Rabindranath. Already in Ezra Pound's review of *Gitanjali* mention is made of "the same sort of common sense in the first part of the New Testament, the same happiness in some of the psalms."² Much has been written on the possible influence of Christian thought on Rabindranath. Most of the scholars who attempted an analysis of Rabindranath's work in the light of Christianity have come to the conclusion that—despite his great admiration for the Christian religion—there is very little, if any, direct influence of the Gospels on his thought. When his poems, however, first appeared in English translation, many people were led to believe that Rabindranath's philosophy or "mysticism" were the result of a definite Christian influence upon him, as upon India at large. Whether this was due to wishful thinking or a wrong interpretation of

¹ *Widerhall*, Innsbruck, Austria, 1-8-1921.

² *Fortnightly Review*, March 1913.

Rabindranath's works; nobody can say. The following statement, however, is representative of this kind of attitude:

The poems of Rabindranath Tagore are valuable for their performance, but still more valuable for the promise they afford of a coming dawn. We have been waiting anxiously for some indication of the effect of Christian ideas on a truly representative Hindu mind. Here, surely, is the person we have been longing for—one sent before the chariot of the Lord to make His path straight. And when we remember that this poet's every word is eagerly caught up by waiting millions, may we not venture to assert that the new, the Christian India, is already at the door?¹

The fact that Christianity itself is an Eastern religion made many people identify Rabindranath with the various attempts in Europe and America to rejuvenate Christianity and to infuse a new life into a dogmatic and stereotyped cult that had lost all touch with reality. Nothing was easier for them than to point out Rabindranath to the growing generation of disbelievers and atheists: here, again, they would say, is a prophet from the East, one who is no Christian "by religion," and yet one who represents Christianity better than any other living Christian. No doubt Rabindranath's external appearance helped them in their task; for indeed he had the looks of a Prophet of old and his message in no way differed fundamentally from that preached by Christ. Therefore, Dean Inge of St. Paul's could write as follows without arousing any protest on the part of the orthodox Christians:

Tagore is not a Christian; but his attitude reminds us that there was a time when Christianity was an Asiatic creed—it was the time of the original Gospel. Again and again he seemed to be more Christian than the Christians.²

¹ *Baptist Times*, 13-2-1914.

² *Boston Evening Transcript*, 4-4-1925.

Perhaps Rabindranath was a kind of reincarnated Christ come back on earth to preach and put into practice the Gospels again. This impression was particularly strong in those who had gone to Darmstadt and had listened to Rabindranath's short speech on that memorable Sunday morning on the mountain: "Like a prophet he stood on the mountain of our Lord," exclaims one paper, "and many of his listeners had the impression of standing face to face with the bringer of a religion, the bringer of the old religion of sympathy and love of which we speak so much in Europe, but which fewer here than anywhere else put into practice."¹

As regards the numerous attempts at establishing a world-church, a new international kind of religion, we find that many of these religious thinkers and innovators found themselves in agreement with Rabindranath. There is no doubt, however, that his name was frequently used, both in East and West, for pseudo-religious international movements; on the other hand, however, the very fact that Rabindranath never preached any definite form of religious worship, but rather insisted on the principle of self-realisation common to all religions, made him one of the leading religious reformers of our time; and his name was freely and

¹ *Hamburger Fremdenblatt*, July 1921.—Rabindranath's "spiritual" success on the Continent is depicted as follows in *The Westminster Gazette* under the heading: **BERLIN OVERRUN BY CHARLATANS**: "To-day the new fashion for 'oriental mysticism' gives magnificent opportunity to the members of the ubiquitous profession, whom O. Henry described in 'The Gentle Grafter.' Rabindranath Tagore gave a great impetus to the movement by his visit to Berlin. His resemblance to a Hebrew prophet, and the incomprehensibility of the German version of his poems, insured his complete success. Naturally he has had a number of very unworthy imitators, the more ambitious of whom have started sects and founded schools." (16-1-1921).

rightly used whenever attempts at unifying religious beliefs in the West were made. Here is a significant extract from an article, dealing with the formation of a world-church:

Such a faith would be religion within the bounds of pure reason, certainly, but those churches which have most claimed a special revelation have also insisted upon the existence of a natural religion discoverable by human reason. The extent to which thinkers so representative of East and West as Rabindranath Tagore and Hoffding can speak a common language, and at the same time agree with so orthodox a churchman as Dean Inge points to a convergence of belief upon religious principles such as has not been hitherto seen in the world.¹

The spiritual impact of Rabindranath's personality on the West must have been tremendous. The few quotations which we have given can hardly do justice to the spiritual upheaval that took place all over Europe. Perhaps, we can measure it only in terms of "reaction," of negative response founded on religious bias and preconceptions. The vehemence with which some influential circles both on the Continent and in the Anglo-Saxon countries attacked Rabindranath for his spiritual convictions, can serve as a criterion by which to measure the overwhelming force of this impact. We enter here into the domain of the "Defence of Christianity" against "Oriental Mysticism," a defence which was as much based upon ambiguities and misunderstandings, as the political and cultural "defence of the West." Spiritual ambiguities are of a subtler kind than those that concern politics and "culture;" for here we are confronted by religious stock-responses which express themselves either in "righteous indignation" or in a mediaeval dogmatism and narrow-mindedness. In a review of Rhys's bio-

¹ *Public Opinion*, 9-12-1927.

graphy of Rabindranath we read, for instance:

The cult of the amiable Bengali litterateur and mystic, Rabindranath Tagore, threatens to become something of a nuisance. It is being promoted by that class of persons whose credulity is unbounded wherever a hint of hostility to Christianity can be detected, and this trait Mr. Tagore possesses in sufficient quantity for their purpose.¹

That this was in no way the personal opinion of the reviewer only, is shown a few years later when we read in an American paper, under a full-page picture of Rabindranath: "The Hindu writer, versifier, quasi-philosopher, and believer in the superiority of the Hindus above all other people."² Those who considered Christianity to be a part and parcel of the spiritual superiority of the West over the East, contrasted Rabindranath's "pagan" religion with the teaching and symbolism of the Christian church. On the one hand, they say, there is "this poet of lotus-eaters and opium-smokers, of those who lose themselves in the ecstasy of the Nirvana;" on the other, there is Christ symbolising an all-embracing love "the only love which despite all the agonies of unreconcilable contrasts has alone a sacred right to exist."³

Had Rabindranath been a Christian his success would have been on an even larger scale than before.

¹ *The Guardian*, London, 10-6-1915.

² The following anecdote is told by Lady Benson in her book of reminiscences *Mainly About Prayers* (1926). It provides us with an unconsciously humorous picture of the spiritual stock-response of the average Westerner to Rabindranath: "My hostess explained to me that Tagore was a Yogi and his creed forbade him to look upon a woman's bare arms and neck. I felt horribly uncomfortable and immodest, especially as I had been given the honoured place beside him, so I carefully draped my table napkin over the shoulder next to him....." (Quoted in *The Globe*, St. John, N.B., U.S.A., 7-8-1926).

³ *Allgemeine Rundschau*, Berlin, 30-7-1921.

Indeed, it is hardly imaginable at all what his success would have been like : for so strong still is the power of religious prejudices, of mediaeval attitudes of mind. How few indeed realised Rabindranath's spiritual significance in the West; how few responded to his message with the necessary open-mindedness and the desire to understand his revaluation of traditional beliefs and dogmas. Whenever they felt themselves menaced in their spiritual traditions and conventions, they took up an aggressive and militant attitude, probably a kind of escape from their own spiritual failure. When reviewing a book by Sadhu Sunder Singh, an Australian paper says :

It has none of the vague, emotional, mystical washiness of Tagore; it is all thought; it is Christian thought, and yet it has passed through the mind of a Hindu. Tagore is non-ethical; because he is a pantheist in all his absorption into the infinite; but Sunder Singh is intensely ethical because he is intensely Christian.¹

We have devoted less space to the spiritual response to Rabindranath in the West, because it is exceedingly difficult to come to definite conclusions as regards the genuineness and sincerity of this response. Here again we had to make a distinction between the average man's spiritual attitude to Rabindranath and that of men of superior spiritual awareness. There is no doubt that C. F. Andrews or Romain Rolland or Albert Schweitzer responded with all the fire of their great souls; the same cannot be said as regards the man-in-the-street in the West. Rabindranath was to many a great solace in their agonies, as thousands of letters testify; but this by itself does not provide us with a

¹ *The Argus*, Melbourne, Australia, 8-7-1924. (Review of Sadhu Sunder Singh's *Reality and Religion, Meditation on God, Man and Nature*, 1924).

standard by which to measure the spiritual response of the average Westerner. It must go deeper and must be more lasting to constitute a spiritual and religious revaluation of which the West was in such a great need. The fact that Rabindranath's spiritual message was so soon forgotten in Europe and America only goes to prove that his time had not yet come, that perhaps the West had not yet reached that stillness of mind, that detachment from the neurosis of their own time, which alone would enable them to search the one which is at the root of all things.

CHAPTER VI

THE TEST OF SENSIBILITY

*"And yet I know for certain that
there is not a single individual in
their midst who is a poet as I
am."*

1. *The Search for Standards*

Rabindranath was, more perhaps than any other poet during the last thirty years in Europe, exposed to critical comments. When, one after another, his works were translated into European languages, and when he himself appeared in person among those who either worshipped him as a saint or condemned him as a false and pretentious prophet, voices were heard from all sides clamouring for critical standards by which to measure this exotic and Eastern sensibility which had intruded upon their Western tradition in literature and to which they had to adjust themselves all of a sudden. It would, however, be wrong to over-estimate the difficulties that confronted the European critics. Both before and during Rabindranath's rise to literary fame in the West, works of poetry and prose came into existence which were directly inspired by the East, and particularly India. Not only in literature, but even in music and the Fine Arts, this influence is discernible. Indeed, the more enlightened among the litterateurs, found no difficulty in admiring either "the jewelled raptures of Francis Thompson or the

vague ecstasies of Rabindranath Tagore.”¹ On the other hand, even if this direct influence was absent, poets all over Europe both before and after the war, indulged in an over-emphasis of the individual, his experiences, his search for truth and certainty, his self-realisation.

It would be too difficult a task for us in the narrow framework of this book to analyse the causes that created this tendency towards a deepening and broadening of the personal sensibility of the poet in Europe. (Certain it is, however, that Rabindranath’s poetry could have been expected to fit in extraordinarily well not only with the “jewelled raptures” of Francis Thompson, but also with the dreamy fairyland of W.B. Yeats, with the Irish folklore of AE (George Russell), even with the intricate and eccentric symbolism of Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot’s detached poetry of unrest and doubt. In Germany Werfel, Hugo v. Hoffmannstal, Rainer Maria Rilke, and Stefan George, spoke in an idiom singularly like his own. In France Verlaine, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, and in more recent times Paul Valéry, Maeterlinck, and a host of others had opened the eyes of the French reading public to the impenetrable darkness of the human soul, the mysteries of birth, growth, and decay, the inimitable characteristics of individual existence.) Rabindranath spoke the language and expressed the sensibility of Strindberg’s *Dreamplays*, of d’Annuncio’s *Dead City*, of Turgenev’s *Tales*. (Rabindranath should have been one of them, a contemporary in the best sense of the term, part of the great European tradition in literature which he too was going to shape for the better or for the worse.)

But there was that subtle and undefinable some-

¹ Walter Raleigh : *Some Authors* (1923), p. 156.

thing that created an abyss between him and his contemporaries. It was not so much his utmost sincerity - for at that time poets all over Europe had long ago given up pretending and nothing much was left of the Victorian "poetical" pose—rather it was "the East," India, the Orient, the mysterious and to most Westerners vague background of a foreign and exotic civilisation. In the preceding chapters of this book we have tried to make clear the issues involved in the problem of "East and West." Everything that has been said, has to be applied to Europe's literary appreciation of Rabindranath. For the meaning of a poem is nothing ready made, is, in fact, communicable only if personal or collective prejudices are eliminated to a considerable extent. Literary prejudices are expressed in form of stock-responses, aesthetic conventions and an immature understanding of a poet's experiences. The meaning is distorted or only half understood, and communication becomes impossible. Perhaps this problem was stated clearest of all in a review of *The Gardener* in 1913 :

Finally we may note that these poems strike a heavy blow at the conventional poetry of Asia made familiar to us by Fitzgerald, Matthew Arnold, and their many imitators. The convention is full of beauty and has an Asiatic source, but it has lost in transition the real Eastern note. That that is something quite different, the poems of Mr. Tagore amply prove.¹

The Western reader was, quite naturally, out to find "the real Eastern note" in Rabindranath's poetry and prose. It should, however, be clear by now that there was considerable disagreement among both the readers and the critics as to what constitutes the real Eastern note. What was "real" to some, was "un-

¹ *Contemporary Review*, Nov. 1913. (Review of *The Gardener*).

real" to others, and the complete ignorance of the Eastern literary tradition made any kind of intelligent criticism difficult. And their search for standards was indeed a painful attempt to adjust themselves to a foreign and Eastern sensibility.

The easiest way of approach to Rabindranath was by way of comparison. Although such an approach excludes the use of any critical standards, it provides the literary critic with ready-made formulas which it was his business henceforth to apply to Rabindranath. Let us analyse one of those comparisons :

Among much that Nietzsche said more lyrically and Tolstoy more bluntly, *Creative Unity* contains many wise and arresting statements.¹

Is this comparison with Nietzsche and Tolstoy in any way relevant? Does it provide the reader with the necessary critical intelligence which alone would enable him to appreciate Rabindranath in the right spirit? What purpose does such a statement serve except to encourage the reader to indulge in his own stock-responses comparing Rabindranath with other Western writers with whom, in all probability, he had much in common, but whose works were based on experiences that were not and could not be Rabindranath's own. Nietzsche's lyrical ecstasy and Tolstoy's moralising attitude to art and life are of a different level of awareness from Rabindranath's joyful acceptance of the universe. Such a comparison might help in certain cases, as will be seen in the course of this chapter; but it can never explain the "uniqueness" and separateness of a work of art which does not need any comparison to be explained; for it "explains itself" by the very fact of its existence.

¹ *Manchester Guardian*, 28-3-1921.

When, therefore, we speak of a test of sensibility we mean the response, genuine or artificial, sincere or conventional, of Western readers to Rabindranath's work. (The number of Western critics, who from the very beginning frankly acknowledged Rabindranath's greatness as a poet, is extraordinarily small. In England it is Ezra Pound alone (with the exception of W. B. Yeats) whose criticism and comment carries conviction.) His criticism of *Gitanjali* in the *Fortnightly Review* and that of *The Gardener* in *Freewoman*, still belong to the very best yet written on Rabindranath in the West. He was also the first to realise this test of sensibility, and the first to put before the English-reading public the problem of literary communication in all its complexity :

I do not think I have ever undertaken so difficult a problem of criticism, for one can praise most poetry in a series of antitheses. In the work of Mr. Tagore the source of the charm is in the subtle underflow. It is nothing else than his 'sense of life.' The sort of profound apperception of it which leads Rodin to proclaim that 'Energy is Beauty.'¹

Ezra Pound was also the first to become aware of the intensely musical quality of Rabindranath's poetry, the music which is both a "subtle underflow" and also a most intricate combination of very real sounds and harmonies. And he bitterly complains of the lack of imagination in pre-war England which turns every poet into a moralist and a preacher :

Why the good people of this island are unable to honour a fine artist as such; why they are incapable or apparently incapable, of devising for his honour any better device than that of wrapping his life in cotton wool and parading about with the effigy of a sanctimonious moralist, remains and will remain for me an unsolvable mystery. I think what I am

¹ *Fortnightly Review*, March 1913.

trying to say about these poems is that one must read each poem as a whole and then re-conceive it as a song, of which you have half forgotten the cords. You must see them not as you see stars on a flag, but as you have seen stars in the heaven.¹

It may, perhaps, surprise some to learn that the two poets who, as regards their own poetry, were in so many respects opposed to each other—Yeats and Ezra Pound—should both praise Rabindranath for precisely the same reasons. For a careful analysis of Yeats' Preface to *Gitanjali* and Ezra Pound's review of it, will lead the reader to very similar conclusions as regards Rabindranath's peculiar greatness as a poet. Is this not an indication that genuine poets, however different their own outlook on life, almost intuitively recognise the characteristics of great art in another poet? And yet, although both reacted to Rabindranath spontaneously, they later on transformed their first emotional response into arguments of a more intellectual and analytical nature. They adjusted themselves successfully to Rabindranath's poetry, and passed this test of sensibility in which many of their contemporaries were doomed to fail. (For both of them it meant an intense critical effort, and their own sensibility had to undergo certain changes first, before they could reach that intellectual detachment which alone would enable them to see beyond the "reality" of appearances, beyond even the "real Eastern note," into the very essence of Rabindranath's poetry.)

Very few other critics in England achieved that same stillness of mind, that intellectual and emotional concentration which is the critic's most essential mental equipment. There is, for instance, that review of

¹ *Freewoman*, 1-11-1913. (Ezra Pound's review of *The Gardener*).

The King of the Dark Chamber which appeared in the *Manchester Guardian* in 1914. Here the critic distinguishes, and I believe quite rightly so, between the genuine poetic impulse in Rabindranath and his "poetical conventions," a distinction which is the more significant as it establishes a precedent in the literary criticism of Rabindranath in the West. There is neither undiluted praise nor snobbish contempt: the conclusions which the writer arrives at, whether right or wrong, are at least based upon intelligent reading and an attempt to understand the essential qualities of Rabindranath's poetry :

Without his lyric he cannot express himself. He is a mind of a rare innocence, so that there is no covering up his incapacities, and never is he infected by the self-hypnosis of the crowd. A mystic? What kind of mystic is this who hymns the passion of love, youth, motherhood, in an ecstasy of the senses? He feels the sharp sting of life. He sings its praises. With that joy he overcomes all its hardships and repulsions. When it leaves him he is left in a dreamy contemplation. Then, speaking without his rapture, he lays before the world a vision he has never seen, the exposition of his own passive state in which the world and its life are huddled away in the dim depths of a tropical forest or drowned beneath...the sea of traditional thought. So it is with every poet who remains bounded in his own gift and counts himself a 'King of infinite space.' He is that in his activity; without his activity he is less than the least of human brothers, and then, if he is wise, holds his peace. That wisdom is denied Mr. Tagore in his innocence. He gives us for Eastern wisdom his own acceptance of his inactive state.¹

With this quotation we have already reached the less responsive kind of criticism to Rabindranath. In this search for standards we can distinguish a number of sometimes contradictory attitudes. The first charge levelled against Rabindranath is based upon his sup-

¹ *Manchester Guardian*, 6-10-1914.

posed "asceticism" which, according to some writers, is unsuitable for great poetry. Rabindranath's poetry, they say, is cold, abstract, bloodless, and "to English minds, that is to say, to the majority of English minds, he would certainly appear to lack substance"¹; on the other hand, his poems "contain too much that is remote from actual human issues"². Other critics again accused Rabindranath of "a cloying quality about his thought which is a little sickly to the average reader's taste"³, or found that "there is about all his work a woolliness, a lack of definition, either of character, incident or purpose"⁴. Then there are those, and some of them outstanding critics, who are altogether unable to see anything at all in Rabindranath's poetry. "There is not a single quotation in this book", says Leonard Woolf, "which does not seem to be second-rate and rather tiresome." He, however, confesses that "this may be due to prejudice or blindness."⁵ And what are we to think of those who simplify the problem of communication between the poet and his readers to such an extent that nothing remains of it at all but a slightly sneering attitude in which a complete lack of comprehension and a contempt for everything foreign are equally distributed :

Mr. Tagore is too serious a writer to be suspected of publishing absolute nonsense on purpose, so one must suppose that he did it by accident. Presumably he is able to follow the workings of his brain, and it would be very interesting to hear from him just what it is all about.⁶

¹ *The Bookman*, April 1913. (Review of *Gitanjali*).

² *The English Review*, April 1913. (Review of *Gitanjali*).

³ *Church Times*, London, 24-7-1925.

⁴ *British Weekly*, 10-12-1925. (Review of *Broken Ties*).

⁵ *The Nation and Athenaeum*, 20-11-1926. (Review of Thompson's book on Rabindranath).

⁶ *Sheffield Telegraph*, 23-7-1925. (Review of *Red Oleanders*).

This is not intelligent criticism; and when one writer exclaims that the effect of the beauty of *Gitanjali* was "a certain paralysis of judgment before the trance, the mirage of the East"¹ we are now quite ready to believe him. The approach to Rabindranath which is to be found in the preceding quotations is one that is lacking in critical standards and that makes us painfully aware of the failure of many critics in the West to adjust their sensibility and to respond to the experiences of a foreign mind.

{What was it that made communication between the Eastern poet and his readers so difficult? If we remember what has been said about the "clash of civilisations," about the Eastern and the Western "Mind," in the preceding chapters, the complexities of interpretation will become more obvious. A poet handles his material, the experiences which he communicates, in terms of symbols. Not all symbols, however, are of his own creation. He himself is part of a tradition, which is not only "literary," but embraces the whole of his being. The language in which he clothes his experiences is rich with the symbols of a past which is foreign to most Westerners, with the exception of a handful of scholars, whose interpretation again suffered from a painful lack of imagination. }

We must remember that symbolism in poetry, in the drama, and in the novel, is used unconsciously and that every conscious attempt at interpreting it is bound to fail; for the poet quite rightly presupposes that his readers are acquainted with his symbols, since they themselves, the people, are to a considerable extent, responsible for their creation. Is it not, indeed, the poet who takes from "the people" all the unconscious symbolism that had accumulated during the past centu-

¹ *The Athenaeum*, No. 4567, 8-5-1915.

ries and uses it as the raw material of his art, reintegrating it into visual images and sounds and the patterns of his own experiences? Rabindranath uses symbols which are intricate enough for his own countrymen to follow, symbols that came to him straight from the soil of his people, and others again that had laid hidden in the treasure-house of ancient Indian civilisation. And in his writings they were infused with a new life all their own, and fulfilled a new and contemporary purpose. Can we, indeed, expect the average Western critic to interpret these symbols correctly? Is it likely at all that he should be aware of their very existence? Scholars, we know, have tried their best; but theirs was a pedantic and, perhaps, slightly dogmatic interpretation. They "explained" the symbols, instead of interpreting them in terms of experiences; they gave us knowledge, instead of integrated emotion.

To some, Rabindranath's symbolism was altogether unintelligible. This may be due to intellectual complacency or to an utter ignorance of Eastern artistic tradition. A reviewer of *Red Oleanders* in a widely-read literary paper, for instance, writes :

Many of the lofty utterances of Nandini and the Voice are so devoid of meaning that one is constantly aware of the emptiness of such symbols as the tassel of *Oleanders*, the network in front of the Palace, and the caves of Yaksha town.¹

Other reviewers again approached the problem of symbolism from the point of view of technique. A comparison between the Western and Eastern use of symbols in literature will, in fact, show an emphasis in the East on the purely mental and abstract patterns of symbols which results in an intensification of the symbolic process, while the West has elaborated a kind of

¹ *Times Literary Supplement*, 9-7-1925.

“dialectical” symbolism in which movement, drama, and external paraphernalia play an essential part. Symbolism in the East is, indeed, all thought; that does not, however, imply the use of abstract images and concepts alone. Symbolism is fundamentally the same everywhere; the difference between Eastern and Western symbolism is one of degree and emphasis, in short, of technique :

In this intense concentration on the inner life of thought, in this comparative contempt for scenery and events and drama, have we not the most precious and natural expression of the Indian mind? We should not welcome in an Indian painter the technique of Paris or South Kensington. Why should we expect in an Indian novel a sense of the dramatic which may be peculiarly European?¹

Perhaps the most interesting comment on Rabindranath's use of symbols is again to be found in the *Times Literary Supplement* in a review of *Broken Ties*. For here it is no longer a question of technique alone. Rabindranath, as it has been said just now, uses symbols that have been part either of the life of the “common people” or of ancient Indian civilisation. Only by using them *unconsciously* could he transform them into the living symbols, not of any particular time, but of the past, present, and future in one. And yet all the while, he also had a story to tell. And this story, the plot, the inner or outer drama, is the result of a conscious effort. The reviewer here compares him with Coleridge and T.S. Eliot, and this comparison seems to be singularly appropriate: for Coleridge while using unconscious symbols also told his story, as he had said himself so often, in an almost unconscious manner: did he not write *Kubla Khan* “half-asleep”? T.S. Eliot, on the contrary, uses symbols of a sophisticated

¹ *The New Leader*, 15-2-1924.

kind, conscious to the extent of almost being unintelligible to the average unsophisticated reader, and the story he has to tell is full of those sudden mental twists which indicate a peculiarly conscious attitude to the plot in question. Does not Rabindranath stand in between these two artists, asks the reviewer :

Tagore has the rare gift which some poets and writers of fairy stories have of unconsciously using symbols while consciously writing an interesting story. But he appears to be aware of his gift, and for this reason he is not like the writers of fairy stories, and is, indeed, half-way between Coleridge and T.S. Eliot.¹

This comparison with T.S. Eliot may come as a surprise to some. For, were there ever two poets more dissimilar than Rabindranath and T. S. Eliot and his group? The "Age of T. S. Eliot" in England and the "Age of Rabindranath" in India have, indeed, very little in common. Rabindranath's poetry is devoid of all the little mental twists, the sophistication, the "intellectual atavism which cuts the secret current affiliating the artist to the collective thought of the multitude;" Rabindranath's thought, furthermore, "is not shattered into bewildered fragments"². What has been said about Rabindranath's symbolism applies to an even greater extent to his mental and emotional integrity, when compared with the metaphysical confusion that prevailed in the West in the first decades of this century. The last poet in England who had expressed beliefs in terms of objectified visual reality, Gerald Manley Hopkins, had been misunderstood, and his "terrible pathos" remained unintelligible until very recently to almost all the readers of poetry. And is it not of utmost significance that at the same time as

¹ *Times Literary Supplement*, 14-1-1926.

² *New Statesman*, Review of *Gitanjali*, April 1913.

Rabindranath's literary genius was discovered in the West, Hopkins too was resurrected from oblivion, together with Blake and the mediaeval bards and long forgotten singers? For all these poets have one thing in common, however different they may be otherwise: belief that was counterbalanced by doubt, symbols that were unconscious, a plot consisting of intensified thought or emotion, and a music, an inner or outer rhythm, that was all their own. The following extract from a review of *Gitanjali* can safely be placed side by side with Yeats' Preface and with Ezra Pound's critical comment, for its deep insight into Rabindranath's literary genius :

And in reading these poems one feels, not that they are the curiosities of an alien mind, but that they are prophetic of the poetry that might be written in England if our poets could attain to the same harmony of emotion and idea. That divorce of religion and philosophy which prevails among us is a sign of our failure in both. We keep our emotions for particular things and cannot carry them into our contemplation of the universe. That chills us and turns our speech to cold scientific jargon, and the jargon affects our very thought, so that from speaking of life as if it were a mechanical process we come to think of it so..... But this Indian poet.....contemplates the universe as a primitive poet might contemplate a pair of lovers, and makes poetry out of it as naturally and simply. As we read his pieces we seem to be reading the Psalms of a David of our own time.... Some perhaps will refuse to fall under the spell of this Indian poet because this philosophy is not theirs. If it seems to us fantastic and alien, before we despise it we should ask ourselves the question: What is our philosophy? We are very restless in thought, but we have none that poets can express.¹

The ultimate problem with regard to the literary appreciation of Rabindranath in the West was, indeed,

¹ *Times Literary Supplement* (Review of *Gitanjali*), 7-11-1912.

one of standards. Those for whom the language of unconscious poetic symbolism still meant something, those who were more concerned with the essential reality of experiences and the poet's way of integrating the past, present, and future in one, realised Rabindranath's significance as a "contemporary" poet whose experiences belonged neither to the East nor to the West, but to humanity which is ever present and endless.

2. *Literary Ambiguities*

We have already touched upon the problem of relevant and irrelevant comparisons. Literary critics who otherwise felt quite at a loss with Rabindranath's poetry, nevertheless, wanted to "place" him, to make him fit into their own literary classification. It is extremely doubtful whether terms such as classicism, romanticism, expressionism, or realism, have any meaning at all when applied to Eastern art and literature. What may be a comparatively recent development in Western art, may have been an age-long artistic convention in the East. Comparisons, therefore, will not help us except as a reminder of the ambiguity of all literary concepts and abstractions when taken out of their natural historical and social context.

In poetry, for obvious reasons, literary critics emphasised the "Celtic" element in Rabindranath's work. Though Rabindranath was not an Irishman, they found affinities everywhere, however far-fetched they may be. Irish literary critics, indeed, took pride in establishing this parallel between the new Irish revival in poetry and Rabindranath. This comparison does not strike us as very fortunate. Though both these revivals were determined by historically very similar forces, though their literary inspiration had many affinities, yet Rabindranath soon outgrew this stage

of narrow nationalistic revival and aimed at a more comprehensive interpretation of life. The following remarks from an Irish newspaper have, therefore, to be read in their proper context. For though there is much in it with which we agree, yet we have to beware of abstractions such as the "Celtic temperament" and the "Irishman of India." If, indeed, Rabindranath had been nothing but the "Irishman of India," he would never have achieved that broadness of vision that characterises all his work :

There is something significant in the sponsorship of Yeats for this new poet. The temperament of the Celt is akin to the temperament of the Bengali, and in genius at any rate, the latter may be called the Irishman of India..... And in this inexplicable quality which we call Celtic may be found, apart from the novel form of it, much of the charm which Tagore's poetry has exercised upon English readers. For this is the day of the Celt. Like conquered Greece, the Celtic countries have led captive their conquerors; a Lloyd George makes our laws and a Bernard Shaw our plays.¹

Though Irishmen are famous throughout the world for their sound sense of humour and their sense of proportion, the temptation to take advantage of Yeats' sponsorship of Rabindranath was evidently too great for them. Their sudden enthusiasm for this Eastern poet is not always above suspicion. It is certainly not of a purely literary nature. We are reminded here of the delightful irony with which James Joyce treats the Irish literary revival in his *Ulysses*. While we have no reason to doubt the sincerity of Yeats with regard to Rabindranath, we have our misgivings as regards the "Irish Citizen."

These poems take their place, without question, not far from the summit of 'English Literature.' They are, per-

¹ *The Pioneer*, 3-11-1913.

haps, the forerunners (in conjunction with the poems of W.B. Yeats and AE) of the greatest movement in European Literature yet experienced—its coming emergence from the low levels of 'realism' and intellectualism merely, to the plane of its true voice as the exponent of a divine humanity.¹

The English were not slow to grasp the implications of this Irish sponsorship of Rabindranath. And they gave a fitting reply, again not quite of a literary nature, though expressed in terms of literary formulas and abstractions. Irony is a helpful weapon against defenceless poets; everything is permitted as long as one remains in the realm of literature; for those who can read between the lines, the following review of *Gitanjali* will be found to be singularly illuminating:

They are lauded by Mr. Yeats for the good reason that they somehow belong to the same trailing end of the romantic movement as do his own sweet mysticisms. Their parentage goes back, by what channels or concealed sympathies we do not know, to the source from which come Maeterlinck's reveries and the *théâtre de l'âme*..... Though his poems show none of the virile quality of the older Hindu mysticism, and essentially have more the flavour of modern Paris than of ancient Oudh, yet they are haunted by emotions and images, ghostly thin no doubt, of the past.²

People in 1913 were hardly aware of these subtle undercurrents of literary criticism. The average reader is always liable to take both the poet and the critic at their face value without inquiring any further into the social or historical context that went to the making of either the poem or the piece of criticism. This Irish interlude seems to be as good an instance as any of a literary ambiguity. Yeats praised Rabindranath as one poet praises another. The "Irish Citizen" praises Rabindranath, because Yeats, the Irish poet, bestowed

¹ *The Irish Citizen*, 1-11-13. (Review of *The Gardener*).

² *The Nation*, Vol. 96, No. 2489, 1913.

honour upon him. And Rabindranath, the poet of Bengal, becomes in their eyes a kind of glorified 'Irish citizen' and since 1913 we hear people (even in India) speak of him as the "Irishman of India."

The poems of *Gitanjali* have been compared to the work of almost all the living or dead poets on earth, from Sappho to T. S. Eliot. These comparisons are significant; for they indicate a loss of all critical standards, and an over-emphasis on the possible similarities of poets who in terms of artistic sensibility have very little in common. Thus, we find in a review of *Gitanjali* in *The Westminster Gazette* parallels established between Rabindranath and Francis Thompson, Wordsworth, Patmore, Tennyson, Walt Whitman, Traherne, and Herbert Vaughan.¹ Robert Bridges too is mentioned more than once: "For the two men are not dissimilar in their tone and attitude. Each chooses the *fallentis semita vitae*, the way of quietness."² *The Crescent Moon* reminded many of Blake's child-poems, and *The Fugitive* is, strangely enough, once compared to Shakespeare's Sonnets³ and to Ossian "where in the cloud and darkness by the King's grave on the cold hillside we seem to join in the whole world's lamentations and to forget what king is dead."⁴ Christina Rossetti is also mentioned for those who were eager "to listen in English literature for notes which are heard in Tagore, who is, of course, entirely independent and original..."⁵ The greatest stumbling-block was, of course, Wordsworth; Wordsworth who sang his songs in praise of nature, and who had given Eng-

¹ 7-12-1912.

² *The Pioneer*, 3-11-1913. (Review of *The Gardener*).

³ *L'Echo National*, Paris, 16-7-1922.

⁴ *Manchester Guardian*, 15-11-1921.

⁵ *Sunday Times*, 4-12-1921.

land some of the most exquisite love-lyrics ever written:

Many of his readers, even of his English readers, are probably unaware that the essence of what Tagore has to say has been said, and more fruitfully said by Wordsworth—more fruitful, because in wider and more worldly context, with less mystification and more of easy humanity.¹

The least sensitive of Rabindranath's critics in England praised him for having brought honour to "Anglo-Indian" poetry, thereby providing English culture in India with a new significance. The combination Kipling-Rabindranath is unfortunate not only from the literary point of view; but we shall have to come back to it more than once in the course of this chapter:

The chief significance of Mr. Tagore's triumph is that it marks the culmination of the development of an offshoot of English literature, the importance of which has not been sufficiently recognised. Indian-English poetry cannot well be ignored henceforward seeing that two of its representatives have been the only English authors who have won the annual Nobel Prize for literature.²

The following points are worth mentioning before we go over to the Western criticism of Rabindranath's novels and short stories: hardly ever do we find in the day-to-day reviews of his books mention made of the Indian literary tradition of which he was a part; many people in Europe, therefore, laboured under the illusion that no literature of any kind had been written in India before Rabindranath, and that so great an honour was bestowed upon him, not because he was an outstanding poet, but because he was the "first" poet from India whose name they had heard. And the fact that they *did* hear of him at all, convinced them

¹ *The Athenaeum*, 8-5-1915.

² *Birmingham Post*, 6-12-1913.

more and more that Rabindranath's literary antecedents could only be found in the West. This explains the many comparisons, parallels, and immature judgments. And we wonder what would have happened to an Indian literary critic who would review T. S. Eliot's poems (and there is a good deal of Eastern influence in them too) establishing far-fetched comparisons with Indian poets of the past, without ever having cared to understand or study Western civilisation. The average literary criticism of Rabindranath's poetry in the West is pathetic in its ignorance, pitiable in its contempt, but most remarkable in its lack of humility. Some may consider this to be too harsh a judgment on the critics of Rabindranath who had only a translation to go by. But we must remember that Ezra Pound and Yeats were not treated much better by the average critic whose main concern is and has always been to maintain a *status quo* not only in poetry, but also in politics.

One of the difficulties in reviewing Rabindranath's short stories and novels was the obvious discrepancy between the excellence of thought and the apparent mediocrity of form in translation. From an ideological point of view, most of his novels found an eager reading public. The Victorian India of magic and mystical vagueness was transformed in his books and it became essentially an India of living human beings. From the point of view of form, however, the more sophisticated readers at least were dissatisfied. This need not surprise us: at a time when writers like Aldous Huxley, James Joyce, and Virginia Woolf, were experimenting with new forms of novel-writing, at a time also when the novel had reached its fullest maturity with the work of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky in Russia, with Marcel Proust and André Gide in France, Rabindranath could not but strike his European contempora-

ries as belonging both in style and characterisation to a different order of artistic expression which they had passed long ago, somewhere in the first half of the 19th century. The following remarks on *Gora* by Leonard Woolf seem to be representative of this kind of criticism :

I can only record the fact that to me it was extraordinarily interesting, and that I think it a book of considerable merit. In form it is very old-fashioned, indeed, it belongs to the antediluvian school of Anthony Throllope.....¹

Those who are acquainted with the history of the European novel from Rabelais to D. H. Lawrence, will in all probability look upon Rabindranath's novels as his least convincing artistic achievement. However thought-provoking they may be, they seem to be lacking in that self-sufficiency and vigour which characterises all his poetic and dramatic work. Neither the novel nor the modern short story are in their origin purely Eastern forms of Art; perhaps this conscious borrowing from the West is the reason why Rabindranath could not achieve that same greatness in his prose works as in his poetry. He was undoubtedly more successful in his short stories and prose-sketches which gave greater scope to his poetical and lyrical powers. Rabindranath's distinction as a prose writer consists in his having infused a new dynamic vitality into the conventional descriptions of Indian life, and in his having transformed the "mystical" East into experiences told in terms of human joys and sufferings, of hope and despair.

That is why any comparison between Rabindranath and Kipling is bound to be misleading. Kipling's India and Rabindranath's India have nothing at all in

¹ *Nation and Athenaeum*, 9-2-1924.

common. Kipling provided the Western reader with all the "glamour" and romanticism of the East for which there was such a great demand at that time. His sensibility responded to India in terms of romantic idealisation or in terms of either snobbish contempt, or condescension. This, however, did not prevent English critics, from establishing irrelevant comparisons between Kipling's and Rabindranath's novels. We read, for instance, in a review of *Gora* :

Yet the denouement of this Indian novel will recall to many readers that of Kipling's story *Namgay Doola*. In both the fervent patriot turns out to be not pure Indian, but half-Irish !¹

Outside England this kind of criticism was even more emphatic. Australia and South Africa provide us with some of the most contemptuous, though, therefore, no less amusing, criticism of Rabindranath's novels. Again with reference to *Gora*, a subscriber to the *Natal Mercury* writes in an open letter to the paper as follows :

My God ! shall I ever forget that awful book ? It is a kind of inversion of Kipling's 'KIM', in which the author tries to point the opposite moral. It is utterly without the genius of Kipling--long, surgid, meandering, in which what plot there is is continually lost sight of in a mass of side-issues and irrelevancies. 'The Poet,' in fact, is the sort of writer that a few silly people talk about, but nobody reads..... But why should we rack our poor Western brains, inventing phrases whereby to describe a literary impostor, when the incomparable Gilbert gives us all we want.....²

The contents of this open letter need hardly be taken seriously : the fact that it was at all published by a respectable paper is, however, not without significance.

¹ *Birmingham Gazette*, 12-4-1924.

² *Natal Mercury*, Durban, S.A., 24-7-1929.

Another method of interpreting Rabindranath's novels consisted in establishing parallels between him and the great Russians. The point of comparison was undoubtedly the emphasis on the inner life of thought which is found in both the Russian novels and in Rabindranath. This parallel was particularly tempting, for the ideal of human excellence in Tolstoy and even in Dostoevsky is in many respects similar to that of Rabindranath :

It is interesting to compare this work of Rabindranath Tagore (*The Home and the World*) with that of Dostoevsky; not that there is any similarity between the two as artists; one might as well compare a cathedral organ to a flute—the great Russian, moreover, has the background of a deep Christianity. But both are Orientals, and their ideal of human excellence is in many ways the same.¹

Others again thought that a close study of Rabindranath may lead Westerners to a proper understanding of Russian literature. For according to them, "Dostoevsky and Tchekov stand half-way between the mercilessly clear thinking, moral lucidity, the sense of structure which are our dramatic ideals, and the lovely pungent elusiveness of Tagore."²

The fact that the reading of Rabindranath's short stories and novels reminded so many Western readers of the work of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky is in itself remarkable. Rabindranath's "realism" is certainly of a different kind from that of Dostoevsky, while certain resemblances can undoubtedly be found to exist between Rabindranath's method of dealing with a subject and that of Tolstoy. On the other hand, neither Tolstoy nor Dostoevsky, give any place at all in their work to the poetic and the lyrical. If we remem-

¹ *The Church Times*, 1-8-1919. (Review of *Home and World*).

² *The London Mercury*, July 1926.

ber that in the years after the last war, both Tolstoy and Dostoevsky were rediscovered by millions of Western readers, we shall find the clue to these frequently repeated comparisons between Rabindranath and the great Russians. In a preceding chapter already we have heard a French critic call Rabindranath a "Hindu Tolstoy;" here is, a few years later, another Frenchman who goes a step further and tries to establish a parallel not only between the ideals of these two great men, but also between their lives: "Both were of feudal origin," he says, "and both went to the people. At the beginning they both thought of helping the down-trodden masses by the half-hearted methods of political and material charity; later on when they realised that these means are not worthy of them and of humanity at large, they both escaped into religion, the Russian into a revivalist evangelism, the Indian into a broadened but also weakened Hinduism, which is akin to Western doctrines, with its conception of a personal God; and both became, either in prose or in verse, great religious poets. Confronted by the problem of the destiny of humanity, both have one principle in common, that of non-resistance to evil, if the only remaining form of resistance is violence."¹

We can say in conclusion that Rabindranath's novels were as a rule found unusually stimulating as regards their contents, but out-of-date and Victorian as regards their form. Rabindranath himself was undoubtedly treading on new ground; and he felt less sure of himself in his prose works than in his poetry. Though neither Kipling nor the Russians can possibly help us much in an interpretation of Rabindranath's novels and short stories, they at least provided the Western critic with certain critical standards—though

¹ *Revue Anglo-Américaine*, Paris, 1930.

sometimes of a very ambiguous nature—by which to measure the merits or demerits of Rabindranath as a prose writer. It is significant that neither *Gora* nor *The Home and the World* found a Yeats or an Ezra Pound to praise them and to introduce them to the Western reading public. Most of the reviews of his novels were half-hearted and unconvincing. And it often seems as though the critic or reviewer, even when praising one of Rabindranath's novels, was himself not quite sure to what class of literature the work in question belonged. That is why instead of speaking of Rabindranath, they often speak more of Tolstoy and Tchekov, of Turgeniev and Dostoevsky, of Maupassant and Zola, of Balzac and Kipling.

An even greater surprise awaits the literary critic when he looks through the criticism and reviews of Rabindranath's plays in Europe. It is true, Rabindranath had to fight against heavy odds; his plays reached Europe at a time, when the political or ideological drama had already started to push aside the former symbolism on the stage. Rabindranath's success in the drama, therefore, was shortlived, though, therefore, not less intense. And his plays were quite naturally associated with the symbolist movement in play-writing which flourished in Europe during the first two decades of this century. Here is, for instance, the *repertoire* of a theatrical company in 1921: Arthur Schnitzler: *Playing with Love*; O. Wilde: *A Woman of No Importance*; D'Annuncio: *The Dead City*; Rabindranath Tagore: *Chitra*; Maeterlinck: *The Blue Bird*; Masfield: *Man*.¹ All these plays belong to one and the same group: and if we add to them Strindberg's and G. Hauptmann's Dreamplays, we shall understand why Rabindranath's plays fitted in very

¹ *Manchester Guardian*, 10-11-1921.

well indeed. Perhaps the difference between him and most of the other writers was that he had very definite ideas to express, while the others were contented to distort reality in a dreamy and vague way.

Symbolism on the stage has, it seems, a very obvious function to fulfil: that of depicting reality in such a way as to appeal directly not only to our intellect but also to our emotions, and of evoking by means of a process of selection only those emotions that are relevant. Relevant emotions, however, are never dreamy and vague. That is why the effect of a symbolist play can be sometimes more intense and as "purifying" indeed as an ideological play with some explicitly stated political or social bias. It is no accident, for instance, that a writer with so very pronounced political opinions as John Dos Passos should write symbolist plays. It almost seems—to judge by the following quotation—as though symbolism has come back again on to the stage in recent times, and has given a new vigour to the languishing and explicitly "realistic" drama of Bernard Shaw and his followers. Those who are acquainted with the modern version of Gay's *Beggar's Opera* which had such a great success in the decade following the last war, will, perhaps, realise what is meant by a symbolist representation of reality. John Dos Passos is attempting a similar dramatic symbolism:

The Garbage Man (by John Dos Passos) puts one in mind of Tagore's *Red Oleanders* and, just a little of Maeterlinck's *Blue Bird* and *The Betrothal*..... It is the type of dramatisation of ideas and forces with a little of the literal detail and sequence of events to give it a certain verisimilitude to actuality, while its driving, overwhelming dramatic effect is essentially achieved by that very slight poetic vagueness that symbolically lights up that tragedy, the hypocrisy and the opportunism that is modern life.....¹

¹ *Times of India*, Bombay, 4-2-1930.

Rabindranath's plays were found to have many affinities with ancient Greek tragedy and the mediaeval religious allegories. These comparisons are, of course, only partly correct. What distinguishes Greek tragedy from Rabindranath's plays, is its sense of the dramatic conflict, of sin and punishment, of a supernatural fate that shape the tragic characters, their thoughts, their emotions, and their actions. Rabindranath's characters are more humane, and dramatically less intense; the supernatural is there too, but it has become a personal God with Rabindranath, no longer the impersonal *deus ex machina* of the Greeks. The difference between Rabindranath and the mediaeval allegories consists in the fact that these allegories were, as a rule, devoid of any intellectual or ideological problems and appealed directly to the religious consciousness of the people. For Rabindranath in his plays religion is hardly ever an end in itself; it is the background, against which the characters live or die, an "atmosphere" or a guiding emotion. It is never dogmatic, and, therefore, can never be called "mediaeval."

Rabindranath, like most of his contemporaries in Europe, had to overcome many of the literary prejudices with regard to the drama which were at that time rampant in the West. The classical formulas of play-writing were opposed to Rabindranath's symbolism; the definiteness in character of classical heroes and heroines was compared to the vague characterisation in Rabindranath's plays. One critic, after seeing *Red Oleanders* staged in Edinburgh exclaims: "But its characters come on and go off the stage without doing anything that forms a plot with exposition, development, and denouement."¹ A similar criticism is to be found even in an Irish paper: "It is

¹ *The Scotsman*, Edinburgh, 23-7-1925.

drama in which no action takes place : a drama in which vague, shadowy figures, indecisively male or female, meander through the pages, uttering pseudo-Maeterlinckian platitudes."¹ And one critic when reviewing *The King of the Dark Chamber* thinks that the characters "flit to and fro across the scene like people in a dream or in a play of Ibsen (sic)".² The tremendous opposition against Ibsen's plays in England is still in our memory; no wonder, therefore, that this reviewer who evidently did not grasp the significance of either Ibsen or Rabindranath as play-wrights, makes no distinction at all between the two and considers both of them equally nonsensical. The next generation of theatre-goers was more sophisticated. It had been overfed on Ibsen and Shaw, it could hardly adjust itself to the subtle and suggestive symbolism of Rabindranath. And after a performance of *Chitra* in Sydney, Australia, a critic makes the following extraordinary remarks :

Bernard Shaw would have made a modern social comedy of it and carried more conviction. These poetic romances are better in their natural setting, chanted by a solitary loin-clothed spokesman to the thumping of a drum while a posse of dancing-girls makes sensuous explanatory movements.³

Future historians of literature will find it exceedingly difficult to make Rabindranath fit in the history of European literature. We have chosen only a few relevant quotations out of the large material that was at our disposal. We have deliberately left out the comment made by Sanscrit scholars or Indologists. For theirs is an exclusive and slightly esoteric attitude; they do not represent "the West" through the eyes

¹ *Dublin Evening Mail*, 22-7-1925.

² *The Guardian*, 17-9-1914.

³ *The Bulletin*, Sydney, Australia, 17-12-1925.

of which we have been looking at Rabindranath until now. What these scholars have to say may without doubt be illuminating, but it does not throw light on the actual response of Western people to Rabindranath. We have tried to show that this response was of an extremely complex nature, much more complex indeed than the reading of the more scholarly works on Rabindranath would lead us to expect. It is no accident, for instance, that both Thompson and Lesny in their otherwise remarkable books, devote only a few pages to a discussion of Rabindranath in the West. Preoccupied as they were with a purely academic interpretation of Rabindranath's work, they neglected that part of his life which is, perhaps, the most fascinating: his meeting with the Western sensibility, with Western tradition of thought and action, with the continuity of European civilisation. The following paragraphs will serve the purpose of elucidating the causes that led to the rapid decline of Rabindranath's fame in the West. For this decline—unfortunate as it undoubtedly is—is also part of Rabindranath's experience in the West, and he himself was, in his later years, intensely conscious of it.

3. *Rise and Fall*

The rise or decline of a poet's fame is conditioned by social as well as psychological factors. During the great crisis of the European soul, poetry was a kind of safety-valve for all those individual or collective emotions that had to be suppressed in the process of monopoly-formation in the political and economic life of the West. The West had lost its "soul" during the four years of the war; it found her again—weak, but purified and detached—in the poetry of Rabindranath during the period following the War. But Rabindranath to them was like a feeble and flickering

light in the darkness, separating the chaos of the past from the chaos of the future. And after the first great enthusiasm had passed away, people approached Rabindranath with the scepticism and doubt that come from defeat and spiritual impotence. It almost seems sometimes as though the West was ashamed for having bestowed honour upon one who remained outside the vicious circle of defeat and frustration. They tried to find reasons why Indian literature should *not* be taken seriously; perhaps, they did so in order to compensate their own awareness of failure and spiritual inferiority. What else can we think of the following statement which appeared in the *Times Literary Supplement* in 1932 :

Enthusiasts make extravagant claims, which are not taken seriously. Indeed, one disability under which Indian thought and literature suffers is the fact that so few Europeans, and Americans who highly value them deserve respect except for kindness and good intentions. The critical mind confronted by uncritical appraisal, is apt to take refuge in disbelief concerning what is appraised. There is a considerable body of respectable opinion which holds that the intellectual achievement of India is no great matter. If this opinion is rarely expressed, that is because sceptics can be tactful.¹

Perhaps, our worship and admiration for Rabindranath was, after all, a mistake, a misunderstanding excusable only because of the utter intellectual collapse after the war ! And since India, according to them, has never produced a literature of her own, Rabindranath can hardly be considered an Indian poet at all. (And, strangely enough, the same uncanny arguments that were used against Rabindranath in 1913 reappear again in 1937.) The defence of the West is most pathetic when it ceases to be dignified and takes recourse to childish methods

¹ *Times Literary Supplement*, 11-2-1932.

of intellectual bullying :

The great reputation gained by Tagore when *Gitanjali* was first published was largely based on a misapprehension, and the departure of that misapprehension may be partly responsible for a certain decline in his fame. People ignorant of India, and others who should have known better, hailed him as a typical representative of Eastern thought. Tagore is a product, not of India, but of Anglo-India. It is, indeed, a strange thought that, had Macaulay never planned Indian education, this mystic might never have written. All his works show traces of Western and Christian influences, as well as of his own India which predominates but his India is that of the English Raj, just as his thought is that of an Indian educated by European methods.¹

More significant for us is the purely literary aspect of the decline of Rabindranath's fame in the West. Already, on the occasion of his Hibbert Lectures people were heard expressing doubts as to the appeal of Rabindranath's poetry in Europe. Genuine and spontaneous emotion of any kind, but especially of the religious kind was looked down upon with suspicion. We cannot write such poetry, they would say, but neither can we read it :

Not that Tagore's verse is difficult or obscure. It is crystal clear; but it is written from another continent. In its abstraction, its constant use of earthly things as spiritual symbols, it is nearer to the poetry of Shelley than to that of any other Western writer. But Shelley is unpopular with our newer poets, and so is Tagore. For Tagore's first concern is with God, a God of whom the East has never for a moment lost sight. So there is a conviction in his approach, a spontaneity in his devotion. But for a long time now our own poets have been on a different road. We simply have not the nerve now-a-days to write mystical verse, to start a poem : 'Thou art the sky and thou art also the nest. O thou beautiful !' And so although Tagore's poetry has been popular amongst some people for some

¹ *The Church Times*, 15-6-1937.

time, and though the very essence of his English will always give his verse distinction, it would be safe to prophesy that his work will not be at all closely related to the English poetry of his day. His ways are not our ways and never can be unless and until, as Count Keyserling prophesied might happen, the West goes over to the East, makes philosophy its religion and forgets its last disreputable two thousand years.¹

Rabindranath's problems, in short, are not those in which contemporary Europeans are vitally interested, and, on the other hand, his abstract way of answering questions results in "profound and sympathetic platitudes which contemporaries find it necessary to assume or deny rather than to ponder."²

This constant fear of committing oneself, of being "too simple", indicates the everdeepening crisis of the Western sensibility. Indeed, it appears as though the decline of Rabindranath's fame in the literary West was due to a general decline of all positive beliefs, to a lowering of the level of experience and, therefore, of criticism. It is unfortunately true that one could neither read nor write the kind of poetry that Rabindranath brought to perfection, in the mechanised and standardised environment of European cities. But does the responsibility for this state of affairs lie with the poet? His inspiration remained ultimately the same from *Gitanjali* to his last poems; it was an ever more joyful acceptance of the universe, an ever greater identification of his own being with all the animate and inanimate objects of nature, "with rocks and stones and trees." How indeed could the West respond to a poet whose beliefs they did not share, whose original work they could not read, and

¹ *Oxford Mail*, 27-5-1930.

² *New English Weekly*, 15-12-1932. (Review of *The Golden Boat*).

whose inspiration was foreign to their twisted and sophisticated intellect? When W. B. Yeats included some of Rabindranath's poems in his Oxford Book of Modern English Verse, even literary critics of some distinction expressed their misgivings:

I fancy there are many beside myself, who are puzzled by Mr. Yeats' enthusiasm for the work of Rabindranath Tagore, whose Collected Poems and Plays have just been issued in a volume of six hundred pages. When I read a poem by this famous Hindu mystic I frequently find in it the raw material of poetry, but seldom or never poetry itself..... The solemn but self-conscious rhythms, the diction that somehow contrives to be at once precious and commonplace, these do not avail in my judgment, to give poetic quality to the expression of familiar mystical doctrine.¹

Throughout this book we were confronted again and again by the pathetic helplessness of the poet whenever he ventures into the whirlwind of contemporary civilisation with its machines, its cities, its wars. We have seen the insane enthusiasm of a whole people driven to hysterical acclamation and applause by its own failure to integrate reality; we have seen the subtle and cunning methods of how a poet's name is being used in the warfare of political gangsters and upstarts. But we have also seen the great ones in this declining civilisation, those who still carry their head erect and are not prepared to bow down to the evil forces in man; we have seen them bowing down to Rabindranath, not in the humiliation of defeat and failure, but in the awareness of equality in greatness, whether this greatness comes from the East or the West. Artists and scholars, scientists and politicians, shook hands with him across oceans and continents, across the man-made frontiers that still separate them, across

¹ *John O'London's Weekly*, 27-11-1936.

eternity which is always one and indivisible. One of his earliest friends in Europe, Thomas Sturge Moore, wrote to him a letter a few years before his death which should be placed side by side with Romain Rolland's letter which we quoted in a previous chapter. There is something infinitely moving about the sincerity of great men; their words seem to illumine a wider horizon, and the human mind is blinded by the sudden flash of light from nowhere; for does it not seem now as though the decline of Rabindranath's fame in the West is in reality the beginning of his "true" fame which will be devoid of the hysterical acclamations of the frustrated millions, but which will ripen in the silence of the centuries :

Immediately after the war there had been a violent reaction towards hope and generosity but it was short-lived and people are no longer thirsty for spirituality and beauty, but relish cynicism, pessimism, and mechanical cruelty. Just as your work fed the first reaction, it now seems tasteless to the second..... You have had a myriad lovers in your lifetime and I make no doubt will have a myriad more who, though of a more trustworthy character, will never fill their eyes with your bodily presence. So you are one of the luckiest poets.¹

Does it matter what Rabindranath replied to this letter? He was an old man by then, weary of Western confusion, and disappointed with the clamour of the continual battle. Perhaps, also, he already wanted to leave it all; and, significantly enough, in his reply, he uses an image of leave-taking, uncanny in its appropriateness: "Only I feel like a departing guest at a weary ceremony of farewell, when the railway train which is to take him away makes an unaccountable

¹ From an unpublished letter from Thomas Sturge Moore to Rabindranath, dated Daneway House, by Cirencester, 20-5-1935.

delay in spite of repeated whistles."¹ Did Rabindranath not perhaps misunderstand the meaning of these repeated whistles? Did he not know where the train was going to take him? Or was he afraid of the darkness which he saw coming fast towards humanity struggling in doubt and frustration?

When the news of his death was flashed across an agonising world, people decided to erect monuments in public places, to hang up his picture in National Galleries, to collect funds in order to keep alive his memory. But these were the decisions of people whose mind was tortured into insufferable convulsions by the futile roar of eternal battlefields. Rabindranath did not want monuments, he despised the cheap honour of publicity and common applause. He wanted the silence that comes with maturity, the stillness of mind that comes with the belief in the inherent goodness of all created things, the realisation of one's self in thought, in love, and in action.

¹ Unpublished letter of Rabindranath to Thomas Sturge Moore, dated Santiniketan, 20-6-1935.

APPENDIX A

NOTES ON A RABINDRANATH BIBLIOGRAPHY IN THE WEST

As far as is known to me, no complete and up-to-date bibliography of Rabindranath in the West has been compiled as yet. Most of the bibliographies available also suffer from a lack of proper classification. Here, the attempt has been made to group the various books on, or dealing with, Rabindranath under different headings; we have avoided both the chronological and the alphabetical order as neither of them is suitable for the purposes of a comprehensive bibliography. To classify the books according to the language in which they were written, does not seem very useful either. For what matters is not so much the number of writers using a particular language, but their approach to Rabindranath. We have, therefore, attempted the following subdivisions. 1. Bibliographical, 2. Biographical, 3. Literary, 4. Religious, Philosophical, etc. 5. Educational, 6. Political, 7. Personal meeting with Rabindranath, 8. Various essays on Rabindranath. It will be seen that we have also included books which do not deal exclusively with Rabindranath, but in which he is mentioned in some relevant and significant context.

It should also be noted that books written by Indian writers in European languages are not mentioned here, with the exception of one or two who had a definite influence on the reading public in the West.

Throughout every subdivision we have used a

chronological order according to the date of publication of the book. The comment on the book, whenever necessary, will be found in the footnotes.

I. BIBLIOGRAPHICAL

"American Bulletin of Bibliography," Nov., 1921; a bibliography of the writings of and about Rabindranath Tagore, compiled by Ethel M. Kitch, of Oberlin College. (The following divisions have been used: Works of Tagore, Works about Tagore, Some Literature leading to an Interpretation of Tagore.¹

II. BIOGRAPHICAL

- Paul Cremer: Rabindranath Tagore. 1914. (German)²
- ✓ Earnest Rhys: Rabindranath Tagore; a biographical study. 1915.
- ✓ Basanta Kumar Roy: Rabindranath Tagore; translated into Swedish by P. G. Norberg. Stockholm, 1916.³
- Noto Soeroto: Rabindranath Tagore: een biografische schets. Amsterdam, 1916. (Dutch).

¹ This is probably the only bibliographical article written on Rabindranath as yet. As it has been compiled in 1921, it cannot be of very great use now.—We also hear of a graduate of Gröningen University, Holland, who in 1938 was "making a study and gathering a bibliography on Rabindranath and his father Debendranath Tagore," in a letter from the Secretary of the "Federation Internationale de Documentation," The Hague, 23.7.38. Whether this book has been published is not known to me.

² This book was reviewed as early as April 1914 (in *Lodzger Zeitung*) and can, therefore, be considered to be the first biography of Rabindranath in any European language.

³ It is of considerable interest to find that the first book on Rabindranath in Swedish was a translation of a biography written by an Indian writer, and not a translation of the books of Cremer or Rhys.

- F. Bellon-Filippi: Tagore. Roma 1920. (Italian).
- ✓ E. J. Thompson: Rabindranath Tagore. His Life and Work. Calcutta, 1921.
- Dr. Arthur Schurig: Tagore, seine Personlichkeit, seine Werke, seine Weltanschauung, Dresden, 1921.¹ (German). (Tagore, his personality, works, and philosophy).
- Heinrich Meyer-Benfey: Rabindranath Tagore. Berlin, 1921. (German).
- Emil Engelhardt: Rabindranath Tagore als Mensch, Dichter und Philosoph. Berlin, 1921. (German).² (Rabindranath Tagore as Man, Poet, and Philosopher).
- Johannes Auken-Larsen: Rabindranath Tagore. Posthuset oversættelse. Kopenhagen, 1921. (Danish).
- Niklas Bergius: Tagore. Foredrag vid Brunsviks folkhögskolas midsommarfest. 1921. (Swedish).
- Roberto Assagioli: Rabindranath Tagore, Florence, 1921. (Italian).
- Leandre Vaillat: Le poète hindou Rabindranath Tagore. Paris, 1922. (French).³
- Annie Russel Marble: The Nobel Prize Winners in Literature. 1925. (One chapter on Rabindranath.)
- Hans Leoned ved Jens Marinus Jensen: Rabindranath Tagore. Kopenhagen, 1925. (Danish).
- Dr. Egon Erhn. von Lickstedt: Der Stammbaum von Rabindranath Tagore. Munich, 1927. (German) (The family-tree of Rabindranath Tagore). (This

¹ In this book we find a rather violent criticism of Rabindranath, his supposed "sensationalism," and the suggestion that he was paid by "British Imperialism."

² This is a book of some 450 pages in which not a single reference is given; it is carelessly written, but full of enthusiasm and uncritical praise.

³ This is both a biography and political revaluation of Rabindranath; the author was at one time collaborator of the famous French daily *Le Temps*, Paris.

- is a reprint from the "Archiv fuer Rassen-und Gesellschaftskunde," Vol 20. No. 1.)
- Karla Egles: Rabindranath Tagore, Riga 1934. (Latvian).¹
- Stephanie Chandler: Rabindranath Tagore. (Les Cahiers du Journal des poètes; Collection 1936, No. 17.) (French).
- V. Lesny: Rabindranath Thakur; Osobnost A Dilo, 1937. (Czech).²
- Janis Anders: Rabindranath Tagore. Dzive, darbi un Personiba. (His life, works and personality). Riga *n.d.* (Latvian).
- Baktay Ervin: Rabindranath Tagore as Ember a Muvesc es a Bolcs. Vilagirodalom, pp. 272. *n.d.* (Hungarian).

III. LITERARY³

- C. F. Andrews: Rabindranath Tagore. A Lecture. (Cape Town, 1914).⁴
- "La poesia di Rabindranath Tagore," Roma, pp. 74, 1914. (Italian). (Author's name not given).
- Enrico Castelnuovo: Rabindranath Tagore: un poeta Indiano, Venezia, 1914. (Italian).

¹ In the first volume of Rabindranath's collected works in Latvian; this volume consists of a life-sketch by Karla Egles, an article on Rabindranath's ideals by Richard Rudzisa, one on "Indian Music and Rabindranath," by Jana Zalisa, a bibliography and chronology.

² This book appeared in English, under the title: Rabindranath Tagore, his personality and work. 1937.

³ In this section only those writers are mentioned whose approach was mainly literary; it goes without saying that much valuable literary material will also be found in the biographical section.

⁴ This seems to be one of the first public pronouncements made by C. F. Andrews on Rabindranath. It is divided into two parts, I. The Bengal Renaissance, II. The Poet's Personality. Its main interest is, however, literary.

- Lina Caico: *Con Gitanjali*. Milano 1919. (Italian).
 A. Klaver: *Tagore en zijn wegbereiders*. Zeist, 1920. (Dutch).
 Hans Fiedler: *Die Welt in Drama Rabindranath Tagores*, Berlin, 1921. (German) ("The world in Rabindranath Tagore's Drama").
 M. Winternitz: *Geschichte der Indischen Literature*. (History of Indian Literature). (German). 1920. Vol. III.¹
 Richard Rudzitis: *Saules Kultura*. Riga 1923. (Latvian) (Essay about Rabindranath's poetry, ideals, etc.)
 Edward Thompson: *Rabindranath Tagore: Poet and Dramatist*. London, 1926.
 Manjula J. Dave: *La poésie de Rabindranath Tagore*. Montpellier 1927 (Doctor-Thesis). (French).²
 Herbert H. Gowen: *History of Indian Literature from Vedic times to the present day*. 1932. (One chapter on Rabindranath).
 T. Earle Welby: *One Man's India*. 1933.³

IV. RELIGIOUS, PHILOSOPHICAL, ETC.

J. N. Farquhar: *Modern Religious Movements in*

¹ This 3rd volume of Winternitz's 'History' is apparently not yet translated into English.

² This book has been included here, though it is written by an Indian, as it is the only comprehensive account in French of Rabindranath's poetry.

³ Mr. Welby was a writer in an Indian daily paper. His book consists of 18 little essays published posthumously. Here is an extract from the review of this book as it appeared in *The Times*, London on September 22, 1933: "It is perhaps the distasteful memory of Indian politics that leads Mr. Welby to speak lightly of Indian literature, and undoubtedly to underrate the poetic merit of Rabindranath Tagore. Preoccupied with Tagore's political utterances he may not have approached Tagore's poetry with sufficient detachment."

- India, N. Y. 1918, (see Chapter on Religious Nationalism).¹
- Helmut v. Glasenapp: *Der Hinduismus. Religion und Gesellschaft im heutigen Indien.* 1922. (Hinduism; Religion and Society in contemporary India). (German) cf. p. 412: Rabindranath's religious and political ideals.
- Nathan Soderblom: *Sunder Singhs Budsk.* Stockholm 1922 (Swedish).²
- Victor Branford: *Living Religions. A plea for the larger modernism.* pp. 290, 1924.³
- Nicol Macnicol: *The Making of Modern India.* Oxford Univ. Press. 1924.⁴
- Vitcho Ivanov: *The Wisdom of Rabindranath Tagore,* 1926. Sofia. (Bulgarian).
- "Les Appels de l'Orient": *Les Cahiers du Mois* 9/10; Paris 1925. (French).⁵
- Friedrich Heiler: *Christlicher Glaube and Indisches*

¹ In this book we also find one of the first critical appreciations of *Gitanjali*, written before 1914.

² In this book by the Swedish Archbishop we find a full account of Rabindranath's religious works with special reference to Christianity.

³ This is mainly a discussion, in very vague terms on the "interaction of occidental science and oriental religion," in which we also hear a good deal about Rabindranath's "synthetic university" at Santiniketan.

⁴ Written with a strong Christian bias, we find in it an elaborate comparison between Eastern and Western mysticism with reference to Kabir and Rabindranath, and one chapter on the Maharsi.

⁵ This is an extremely important publication. It consists of 1. A number of general articles on "East and West," 2. A questionnaire, sent to writers and philosophers all over the world, 3. The replies sent to the questionnaire, 4. Extracts from relevant books dealing with the problem of "East and West". The questions put to them mainly refer to Massis's *Defence of the West* (see Index). Rabindranath is frequently mentioned both in the articles and in the replies.

- Geistesleben. (Rabindranath Tagore/Mahatma Gandhi/Brahmabandav Upadhyaya/Sadhu Sunder Singh); 1926. (Christian Beliefs and Indian spiritual life). (German).¹
- W. Graefe: Die Weltanschauung Rabindranath Tagore's. 1930. (German). (Rabindranath Tagore's conception of the Universe).
- R. Otto: Rabindranath Tagore's Bekenntnis, 1931. (German.) (Rabindranath Tagore's religious confession.)
- V. Lesny: India and the Indians. A pilgrimage through the ages. Prague, 1932.
- Albert Schweitzer: Die Weltanschauung der Indischen Denker, Mystik und Ethik, XII, Munich, 1935. (Engl. Translation: Indian thought and its development, Hodder, 1936).²
- Moritz Winternitz: Religion and Weltanschauung des Dichters. (German). (The poet's Religion and conception of the universe). 1936.
- Sybil Baumer: Tagore's mysticism. pp. 41. *n.d.*
- Chaise-Borel: Sur le mysticism oriental de Rabindranath Tagore. *n.d.*

V. EDUCATIONAL

W. W. Pearson: Santiniketan, the Bolpur School of

¹ This is again a book with a strong Christian bias in which the Christian influence on contemporary Indian thought is discussed.

² Here is an extract from a letter which Schweitzer wrote to Rabindranath when he sent him this book "I do not think that you agree with everything as regards my analysis; neither will you agree with everything I say about you. But I still believe that you will feel in this book my deep understanding of the greatness of Indian thought and the sympathy I have for it. Let me tell you on this occasion the great love I have for you and your thought. When I call you in this book the Goethe of India that is because, in my opinion, you are as important for India as Goethe was for Europe," (Dated Gunsbach, près Munster, Alsace, France, 15 August, 1936).

- Rabindranath Tagore, 1918.¹
 Noto Soeroto: Rabindranath Tagore's opvoedingsidealen, Amsterdam 1921, pp. 84. (Dutch). (Rabindranath Tagore's educational ideals).
 E. Pieczynsky: Tagore Educateur. Paris. 1921.² (French).
 Arthur Mayhew: The Education in India. 1926.³
 E. Tudella de Castro: Santiniketan, o Asilos da Pas. pp. 62. (Portuguese.) *n.d.*

VI. POLITICAL

- G. Currie Martin: Poets of Democracy, London 1917. (1 chap. on Rabindranath).
 Romain Rolland: Mahatma Gandhi, Madras, 1932. (1 chap. on Gandhi and Rabindranath).
 Isabella Bux: A Comparison of the Social teachings of Tagore and Gandhi. University of Chicago, typed thesis, June 1925.
 Luciano Magrini: India. 1927 (Italian) (1 chap. Comparison between Santiniketan and Gandhi's asram)⁴

¹ This book was translated into Spanish under the title "Morada de Paz (Shantiniketan)" Madrid, 1919.

² This book consists of extracts from Rabindranath's writings on education and some chapters on his educational ideals. It has also been translated into German under the title "Tagore als Erzieher," Zurich, *n. d.*

³ There are frequent references to Rabindranath and Santiniketan.

⁴ In an open letter to the press on April 13, 1931, Rabindranath writes as follows about this book: "Next comes a letter from Koenigsberg from the great Indologist Glasenapp, who asks my authority for contradicting the libellous remarks attributed to Mahatmajee and myself in a book called 'India' by the Italian author—Mr. Luciano Magrini. I am also made to express my approval of the author's statement. I have never heard of the author of this book. I have been able to contract these lies, because they were brought before me by my friends."

- Henri Massis: *La Defense de l'Occident* (French) (*The Defence of the West*). 1928.¹
- Hans Kohn: *A History of Nationalism in the East*. London 1929.
- Basil Mathews: *India Reveals Herself*. 1937. (1 chap. on Rabindranath).

VII. PERSONAL MEETINGS WITH RABINDRANATH

- Paul Natorp: *Stunden mit Rabindranath*. (Hours with Rabindranath), (German), Jena, 1921.²
- D. Sylvain-Levy: *Dans L'Inde* (*De Ceylan au Nepal*), Paris, 1925. (French.)³
- Count Hermann Keyserling: *The Travel Diary of a Philosopher*. (Translated from the German),

¹ The *Chicago Evening Post* reviews the book as follows: "And M. Massis represents the innocent Rabindranath Tagore as a subtle propagandist for Asiatic supremacy, who hates the West so much that he can barely dissemble that hate when he is lecturing. Then in an appendix he quotes hostile criticisms of the school at Santiniketan—it seems that on two occasions teachers in that school suddenly disappeared." (10.2.1928).

² This small book is the result of the meeting that took place between Rabindranath and this famous German philosopher at Darmstadt in June 1921. It is both a personal and a critical account of the impression Rabindranath made on him, and probably one of the very few detached accounts ever written in German on Rabindranath. Paul Natorp mentions Rabindranath in another small book of his "Beethoven and Wir," 1921, in which he compares the symbolism and myth-creating power of Rabindranath with that of Beethoven and Aeschylus, with special reference to "The King of the Dark Chamber."

³ This is a day-to-day account of Madame Sylvain-Levy's stay at Santiniketan, together with her husband who had come out on the special invitation of Rabindranath to deliver lectures on Sanscrit literature. It is well and humorously written, though the writer can hardly ever detach herself from her own Western background and upbringing.

1925. Vol. I.¹

J. A. Spender: *The Changing East*. 1926. (1 Chap. on Santiniketan and Rabindranath).

Fia Ohman: *Sous le Ciel de l'Inde*. (Under India's Sky). Translated from the Swedish; also a German translation available 1926.²

Count Hermann Keyserling: *Creative Understanding*. Translated from the German. 1929.³

Muriel Lester: *My Host the Hindu*. 1931.

William Rothenstein: *Men and Memories*. 1932.⁴

Roger Dattler: *A Pitman looks at Oxford*. 1933.⁵

Rom Landau: *God is my adventure*. 1935.⁶

Gretchen Green: *The Whole World and Company*. 1936⁷

¹ On page 332 sqq. we find a description of the first meeting between Rabindranath and Keyserling at Calcutta in 1911.

² The chapter dealing with Rabindranath and Santiniketan was first published in Stockholm in 1916 and, therefore, constitutes one of the first personal accounts of Santiniketan by a European.

³ There are several paragraphs on Rabindranath and his association with Keyserling's School of Wisdom at Darmstadt, and the significance of his visit there in 1921, cf. p. 306 sqq.

⁴ Several chapters on Rabindranath in 1912 and his meeting with W. B. Yeats.

⁵ This is an account of a pitman's experiences at Oxford as a scholarship-holder. It includes a description of Rabindranath at Oxford during his Hibbert Lectures.

⁶ "This book," says the *English Review* of Oct. 1935, "deals with persons who have been the object of every kind of uncritical praise and abuse," including Krishnamurti, Keyserling, Tagore and Rudolf Steiner. It also describes the meeting of Keyserling and Rabindranath at Darmstadt: "The hills and the fields, the poet (Tagore), the Grand Duke and the many royal and imperial princes, Keyserling and all the philosophers and philistines, were bathed in the glow of the evening sun. It was a very striking picture."

⁷ Gretchen Green was Rabindranath's personal secretary and a helper in the rural reconstruction work at Sriniketan for some time. *The New York Post* reviews the book as follows: "At Tagore's Headquarters in Santiniketan she listened to the little Hindus singing 'Hark, the Herald Angels sing' and 'Raggle, Taggle, Gypsy, Oh'

Werner Zimmermann: *Weitheimat. Erlebnisse in Kanada und Asien.* (World Home. Experiences in Canada and Asia). (German) 1937. (Santiniketan and Gandhi ashrama compared).

Franz Joseph Furtwaengler: *Indien. Das Brahmanenland in Fruehlicht.* (India. Dawn in the land of the Brahmins). (German), 1937. (Rabindranath frequently mentioned).

F. Yeats-Brown: *Lancers at Large.* 1937. (Chap. on Santiniketan).

Harriet Monroe: *A Poet's Life. Seventy years in a changing world.* New York, 1938.¹

"The Living Torch." Selections from the work of George Russell (AE), edited by Monk Gibbeon. 1938.²

Muriel Lester: *It Occurred To Me.* 1939.³

and when Tagore sent for her she rose at dawn, and tiptoed out to a hilltop with her Corona typewriter, there to take down poetry at Tagore's dictation."—When sending the book to Rabindranath she wrote: "I have made a book and I lay it at your feet. Who am I to write of you and of your country? It is because of you and of your country that I could write at all. All I could say and all that is in my heart because of my years with you I cannot say." (From an unpublished letter, dated 'The Seeing Eye,' Morristown, New Jersey, *n.d.*, probably Jan. 1936).

¹ Harriet Monroe was the first to publish Rabindranath's poems in English, in her Magazine "Poetry" from Chicago, in Dec. 1912. In this biography of hers "we find in the latter half of the book a detailed account of early responses to her circular letter to poets, of the lively championship of Ezra Pound, and of the exciting first years, when Yeats, Tagore, Lindsay, Sandburg, Frost, Eliot, and others were discovered," (*Boston Evening Transcript*, 12.3.1938).

² This is a volume of essays, aphorisms, reviews, and editorials; there are also sections dealing with personalities such as Yeats, Rabindranath, Gandhi, B. Shaw, etc.

³ An account of Muriel Lester's stay in the Gandhi ashram and at Santiniketan.

Ernest Rhys: Wales England Wed. 1940.¹

VIII. VARIOUS ESSAYS

C. Lewis Hind: More Authors and I. 1922.²

Edward Shanks: First Essays in Criticism. 1923.³

Arthur J. Todd: Three Wise Men of the East. 1928.⁴

Hamlin Garland: My friendly contemporaries. 1932.⁵

E. M. Forster: Abinger Harvest. 1936. (1 Chapter on Rabindranath).

¹ In this autobiography of Earnest Rhys, Rabindranath's first meeting with him is depicted.

² Fifty short summary appreciations and depreciations of famous writers in America and England. Here is an extract from a review: "He writes most entertainingly; he does not in the least mind saying that Ibanez and Rabindranath Tagore are not geniuses and in America it requires courage to say that." (*Cape Argus*, Cape Town, 21.10.1922).

³ Criticism of contemporary writers, including Walter de la Mare, John Freeman, John Masefield, H. G. Wells, Hilaire Belloc, W. B. Yeats, Tagore.

⁴ Gandhi, Tagore, Sir J. C. Bose.

⁵ "Trenchant observations on Tagore, and others," says the *Dallas Morning News*, Texas, U. S. A., 11.12.1932.

APPENDIX B

LIST OF TRANSLATIONS OF RABINDRANATH'S WORKS INTO EUROPEAN LANGUAGES, IN CHRONOLOGICAL ORDER

This list of translations does not aim at completeness. Some of the books which should have been included were not available or are out of print. Nor has it been possible here to say anything much on the merit of the various translations. From a general point of view, however, it appears that the French and Italian translations are most satisfying, perhaps, because of the great similarity of these languages with the original Bengali.

As regards the number of books translated, it might be noted that Rabindranath's poetry had a much greater appeal in the West than his prose works, and that at the beginning, from 1913 to 1921, there were many more translations attempted than during the last 20 years. With regard to the collected works of Rabindranath we have a full edition in German, published in 1921, one in Spanish, published between 1919 and 1922, one in Italian published between 1919 and 1920 but incomplete, one in Hungarian, published in 1922, one in Czech published serially between 1914 and 1922 but incomplete, one in Danish, published serially between 1913 and 1922, one in Swedish published from 1913 to 1932 which is both complete and extensively annotated, and, lastly, one in Latvian published around 1930 (some volumes are not dated) and which is probably the most complete and best annotated of all.

It should also be noted that in some cases a large

number, if not all the books, were translated by the same translator; this applies especially to the Spanish and the Latvian edition; in the former, instead of an introduction to the books in question, we find in seven volumes, including *Gitanjali*, a poem by Juan Ramon Jimenez which served the purpose of "creating the right kind of atmosphere" and of enhancing the popularity of the local poet; in the latter the translator took the greatest pains to annotate all the books, and I believe, with a considerable degree of success. The French and Russian editions are probably the most varied of all, owing to the fact that many of the books got their own translators who, therefore, could choose the work which appealed to them most. That is, perhaps, why, André Gide's translation of *Gitanjali* is in some respects more satisfying than Rabindranath's own English version.

With regard to the Russian translations we have to distinguish three periods, or rather classes of translations, first those made between 1914 and 1917, secondly those published by the Soviet Government after 1917, and thirdly the translations made by refugees abroad after the revolution. It is also interesting to note that women provide a very large percentage of translators for Rabindranath's works, especially in Germany and in France. W. B. Yeats' preface to *Gitanjali* has been included in some of the translations as will be seen from the list. Unless otherwise stated the translations were made from the English version; in a few cases, however, the original Bengali was used and sometimes also the French version. This, perhaps, explains how it came about that a large number of Western readers were totally ignorant as to the language in which Rabindranath's works were originally written; some thought it was Sanscrit, some others called it "Indian," and one English writer goes so far as to assert that "one of the strange things about Rabindranath Tagore's literary career was that his books

had to be translated into his native language."¹

We hope that this list—incomplete as it needs must be—will serve the purpose of encouraging further research on the translations of Rabindranath's poetry and prose into European languages; for they indeed are the raw material of literary appreciation and response without which no critical approach to Rabindranath's appeal in the West is possible.

GITANJALI (1913)

SWEDISH: tr. Andrea Butenschön, incl. Yeats, publ. P. A. Norstedt and Soners Forlag, Stockholm; 1913².

DANISH: tr. Louis v. Kohl, introduction by translator, excl. Yeats, publ. V. Pio's Boghandel, Copenhagen, 1913.

GERMAN: (Sangesopfer) tr. Marie Louise Gothein, excl. Yeats, publ. Kurt Wolff Verlag, Berlin, 1914.³

id. (Three poems from Gitanjali were translated from the original Bengali into German by Dr. H. v. Glasenapp, the Sanscrit scholar, and published in *Unterhaltungsblatt*, Berlin, 1.6.1921).

FRENCH: (*Offrande Lyrique*) tr. André Gide, long

¹ John O'London's Weekly, 13.9.1924.

² In future the following abbreviations will be used to indicate the publishing-houses: K. W.—Kurt Wolff, Berlin; P. A. N.—P. A. Norstedt and Soners, Stockholm; C. L.—G. Canbera, Lanciano, Abbruzzi; N. R. F.—Nouvelle Revue Française, Paris; Madrid-Edition, for the complete works of Rabindranath as translated by Zonobia Cambrubi de Jimenez into Spanish.

³ A complete edition of the German translations of Rabindranath's works was published by the Kurt Wolff Verlag, Berlin in 1921. It consists of 8 volumes: 1. Poems, 2. Poems, 3. Dramas, 4. Stories, 5. The Wreck, 6. The Home and the World, 7. Sadhana-Nationalism, 8. Personality, Straybirds, Lectures, and general introduction to Rabindranath.

introduction by Gide, publ. Nouvelle Revue Française, Paris, 1914.

DUTCH: (Wij-Zangen) tr. Frederic van Eeden, excl. Yeats, publ. W. Verhuysen, Amsterdam, 1914.

ITALIAN: (Offerta di Canti) tr. Arundel del Re, excl. Yeats, publ. G. Canberra, Lanciano, Abbruzzi, 1914.

RUSSIAN: 1. tr. U. Baltrushaitz, incl. Yeats, publ. Valentin Portugalov, Moscow, 1914. 2. tr. N. A. Pusheshnikov, together with Iv. A. Bunin, publ. 'Writers Publishers,' Moscow, 1914. (This translation seems to be the authorized one; it was re-published again in 1918 in Moscow, with a short introduction in which Yeats' Preface is quoted). This is the only instance known to me where two different versions of one of Rabindranath's books were published simultaneously in the same language.

CZECH: tr. F. Balej, introduction by translator, excl. Yeats, Kladne, 1914.

SPANISH: (Ofrenda Lirica), tr. Zonobia Cambrubi de Jimenez, excl. Yeats, Madrid 1919.

id. A free translation "en verso castellano" was published in Mexico in 1918; the translation is by Pedro Requena Legarreta.

RUSSIAN: (Poems) This is a selection from the poems of Oscar Wilde and Rabindranath's *Gitanjali*, *The Gardener*, *The Crescent Moon* and *Fruitgathering* by Alexey Smirnov, publ. A. Liskovitch, Cairo 1919.

JUGOSLAV: tr. David S. Piyade, Belgrad, 1926.

LATVIAN: tr. Karla Egles, publ. A. Gulbis, Riga, 1930.¹

¹ A complete edition of Rabindranath's works in Latvian was published in Riga from 1927 to 1939. Translations and very extensive notes are by Karla Egles. The edition consists of 10 volu-

ESTONIAN: tr. Hugo Masing, incl. Yeats, 1926.

HEBREW: tr. David Frishman.² *n.d.*

THE GARDENER (1913)

SWEDISH: (Ortagardsmastaren) tr. Kr. Anderberg, P. A. N., Stockholm, 1914.

DANISH: (Blomsternes Bevogter) tr. Louis v. Kohl, V. Pio's, Kopenhagen, 1914.

GERMAN: (Der Gärtner) tr. Hans Effenberger, K. W. Berlin, 1914.

DUTCH: (De Hoovenier) tr. Frederic van Eeden, publ. W. Verhuys, Amsterdam 1914.

JIDDISH: tr. Oscar Dubin, Philadelphia, 1915.

CZECH: (Zahradník) tr. F. Balej, Kladno, 1917.

RUSSIAN: (Extracts from *Gardener*); tr. A. E. Grusinskaya, introduction by the translator, Moscow 1918.

id. ("Flowers from my Garden;" extracts from *Gitanjali* and *Gardener*) tr. N. A. Pusheshnikov, Moscow, 1925.

FRENCH: (Le Jardinier d'Amour) tr. Henriette Mirabaud-Thorens, publ. N. R. F., Paris, 1920.
(Extracts from *The Gardener* were already trans-

mes: 1. Rabindranath's life and work including bibliography and chronology; 2. The Wreck; 3a. Gora, 3b. Gora cont., 4. Home and World; 5. Dramas; 6. Poems; 7. (not available); 8. Stories; 9. Sadhana. All the volumes were published by A. Gulbis Riga; in future the following abbreviation will be used; A.G.—Riga.

² Although Hebrew is, properly speaking, not a Western language, we have included the Hebrew translation of Rabindranath's work here because this language is spoken to-day by many thousands of Western Jews who immigrated into Palestine during the last 50 years or so. It is interesting to know that Rabindranath's poetry is in many ways akin to the ancient language of the Bible and that he is still to-day one of the most popular writers in the new villages and cities of Palestine.

lated in 1916 and published in book-form under the title, "Quelques poemes"—"Some poems" publ. 'Le Divan', Paris. The translator is Hélène du Pasquier.)

SPANISH: (El Jardinero d'Amor), tr. Antonio Figueirinhas, Porto, 1922.

PORTUGUESE: (O Jardineiro) tr. Francisca de Basto Cordeiro, publ. Rio de Janeiro, Brasil, 1927.)

JUGOSLAV: tr. David S. Piyade, Belgrad, 1923.

GREEK: (O Kepoiros) tr. Eyfes Lagopoiloï Aposti-loi, publ. Alexandria, Egypt, 1926.

LATVIAN: (Darznieks) tr. Karla Egles, see Coll. Works, vol. VI, 1930, publ. A.G.-Riga.

ESTONIAN: (Aednik) tr. Hugo Masing, *n.d.*

HEBREW: (Ha'ganan) tr. David Frishman *n.d.*

THE CRESCENT MOON (1913)

SWEDISH: (Nymanen) tr. from Bengali and English by Harald Heyman, P.A.N. Stockholm, 1914.

RUSSIAN: tr. M. Likiardopulov, publ. Valentin Portugalov, Moscow, 1914.

id. tr. B. Vassin, Moscow, 1925.

GERMAN: (Der Zunchmende Mond) tr. Hans Effenberg, K. W.—Berlin, 1915.

SPANISH: (La Luna Nueva) tr. Z.C.A., Madrid 1915. (The Crescent Moon was published in the Collected Works, the Madrid Edition, in 1921).

DANISH: (Halvmaanen) publ. V. Pio's Boghandel, Kopenhagen, 1918.

CZECH: (Přibývající Měsíc), 1920. (Translator's name not given).

ITALIAN: (La Luna Crescente) tr. Clary Zannoni-Chauvet, introduction by Luigi Luzzati, L.G., 1920.

HUNGARIAN: (Novekvo Hold) tr. Zsoldas Beno, Pan-

theon Edition, Budapest, 1922.

FRENCH: (La jeune lune) tr. Mme Sturge Moore, N.R.F. Paris, 1923.

HEBREW: (Ha'fareach ha'oleh) tr. David Frishman. *n.d.*

CHITRA (1913)

GERMAN: tr. Elisabeth Wolff-Merck (with short introduction by the translator), K.W.—Berlin 1914.

PORTUGUESE: tr. Jose F. Ferreira Martins, Nova Goa, India, 1914.

ITALIAN: tr. Ferd. Verdinois (with long introduction), C.L., 1916.

SPANISH: Madrid Edition, 1919.

RUSSIAN: (King of the Dark Chamber, *Chitra*, Sannyasi, Sacrifice) tr. C.A. Adrianov, G. P. Phedotov, Leningrad, 1927.

LATVIAN: see Coll. Works, vol. V., A.G. Riga.

HUNGARIAN: tr. Laky Dezso; publ. Sacellary Kiadasa, Budapest, *n.d.*

HEBREW: tr. David Frishman. *n.d.*

THE KING OF THE DARK CHAMBER (1914)

ITALIAN: (Il Re della Camera Oscura) tr. Ferd. Verdinois, C. L., 1916.

SWEDISH: (Konungen av det mörka rummet) tr. Kr. I. Anderberg, P. A. N. Stockholm, 1917.

SPANISH: (El Rey del Salon Oscura), Madrid Edition 1919.

CZECH: (Kral temne Komnaty) tr. Dr. F. Balej and Dr. V. Lesny from English and Bengali, Kladno 1920.

RUSSIAN: SEE CHITRA, and (Songs and Poems from Sacrifice, *King of the Dark Chamber*, Sannyasi,

- Gardener—in Prose) tr. B. B. Gippius, D. H. Nosovitch, Moscow, 1923.
 LATVIAN: see Coll. Works, vol. V. 1929, A. G.-Riga.
 GERMAN: (Der König der Dunklen Kammer) tr. Hedwig Lachmann and Gustav Landauer, K. W.—Berlin, *n.d.*

THE POST OFFICE (1914)

- SWEDISH: (Postkontret) tr. Hugo Hultenberg, P.A.N. Stockholm, 1916.
 SPANISH: (El Cartero del Rey), Madrid Edition, 1917.
 ITALIAN: (L'Ufficio Postale) tr. M. Sesti-Strampfer, C. L. 1917.
 CZECH: tr. Jarmil Krecar, 1921.
 HUNGARIAN: (A Postahivatal) tr. Bartos Zoltan, Pantheon Edition, Budapest, 1922.
 FRENCH: (Amal ou la Letter du Roi) tr. André Gide, N.R.F. Paris, 1924.
 LATVIAN: (Pasta Nams) tr. Karla Egles, publ. O. Jeps Izvedums, Riga 1927. (Also Coll. Works, 1929).
 GERMAN: (Das Postamt) tr. Hedwig Lachmann and Gustav Landauer, K. W. Berlin, *n. d.*
 DUTCH: (De Brief van den Koning) tr. Henri Borel, publ. W. de Haan, Utrecht, *n. d.* (This is a *de luxe* edition).

SADHANA (1914)

- SWEDISH: tr. Aug. Carr, P. A. N. Stockholm, 1914.
 RUSSIAN: tr. V. Pogoskasky, publ. Valentin Portugalov, Moscow, 1914.
 ITALIAN: tr. Aug. Carelli, C.L. 1915. (Introduction by translator).

CZECH: tr. F. Balej, Kladno, 1920. (Introduction by translator).

GERMAN: tr. Helene Meyer-Franck, K.W. Berlin 1921.

LATVIAN: see Coll. Works, Vol. IX; republished in 1939.

FRENCH: tr. Jean Herbert (with long Introduction and Notes), publ. "Les Grands maîtres spirituels dans l'Inde contemporaine," Paris, 1940.

ONE HUNDRED POEMS OF KABIR (1914)

FRENCH: (Les poèmes de Kabir) tr. Mme Mirabaud-Thorens, N.R.F.—Paris, 1922.

ITALIAN: (I cento canti di Kabir) tr. Clary Zannoni-Chauvet, C.L. 1923.

SPANISH: (Cien poemas de Kabir) tr. "en castellano" with notes and a preface by Joaquín V. González, publ. 'La Facultad', Buenos Aires, 1924.

FRUITGATHERING (1916)

SWEDISH: (Fruktplockning) tr. Hugo Hultenberg, P.A.N. Stockholm, 1916.

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¹ An English translation of *Muktadhara* by Rabindranath himself appeared in the *Modern Review*, 1922; a second translation by Marjorie Sykes was published in the *Visva-Bharti Quarterly*, February 1941.

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