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ENGLAND and the NOBEL PRIZE

by Michael Collins

A passage to England, 1912-1913

Tagore's son Rathindranath, who was closely associated with his father's work and accompanied him on his 1912 voyage, has written that as a result of ill health doctors and friends prevailed upon... [his father] to take a long sea-voyage and visit Europe for treatment and an operation, if necessary.¹ In a letter to his niece, written from London on 6 May 1913, Tagore provides further evidence to support the idea that his trip to England and his subsequent new career in English letters was "accidental": "You may wonder why such a crazy ambition should possess one in such a weak state of health," Tagore writes that he felt he "did not undertake this task in a spirit of reckless bravado, I simply felt an urge to recapture, through the medium of another language, the feeling and sentiment which had created such a feast of joy within me in these days gone by."²

Nival C Chaudhuri has hinted at a deeper drive emanating from Tagore's dissatisfaction with his reputation in his native Bengal. "The idea of obtaining from the English literary world," writes Chaudhuri, "what he had not secured in Bengal must have been vaguely present in his mind."³ It is true that in late 1911 and early 1912 Tagore was coming more and more into conflict with his fellow Bengalis. According to

Datta and Robinson, "orthodoxy – both Hindu and Brahmo – was up in arms over his novel *Gora*, his satirical play *Achutanand*, and a lecture to Brahmo sectarians", in which Tagore stated provocatively: "How can we utter the great lie that only what is Hindu and Bengali is part of Hinduism, whereas it is the world but not to the Hindus?"⁴ In her biography of Tagore, Uma Das Gupta has written that in the *Gitanjali* episode Tagore "saw God's hand."⁵ And in an address in Shantiniketan shortly before his departure for London, Tagore had spoken of his trip as a "pilgrimage", though it was "without a particular mission."⁶ In retrospect, he felt that his visit was "an opportunity given by God for a meeting of the races."⁷ This idea is also hinted at, though not fully pursued, by Datta and Robinson in their edited volume of Tagore's letters when they suggest that he undertook his voyage partly for medical treatment and "partly because he felt a need to get in touch with Western artists and intellectuals."⁸

However, such intimations seem unconvincing as explanations of the crisis of 1912 for, as Mahasweta Sengupta has argued, "in spite of the widely prevalent myth of the sudden and capricious nature of Tagore's efforts at translating his own poems it could be proved that... he had been preparing to reach a wider audience for quite some time."⁹ Tagore

may have decided to take up translation work on *Gitanjali* as a way of consolidating during the period of illness in early 1912, but he had been encouraged to translate – particularly by the London-based art critic AK Coomaraswamy – since about 1908, a period that coincided with Tagore's growing belief that "it is literature, art and such like that are the real bridges uniting one country with another."¹⁰

Existing historical accounts and interpretations of Tagore's 1912 visit to London do not do justice to the significance of his motivations, which grew out of a major shift in his thinking that followed the violence of the swadeshi period. The years 1912 and 1913 mark the period during which Tagore emerged into the imperial metropolitan public sphere. It constituted a new development in his identity, during which he began to write privately and directly in English on a wide range of social, political, philosophical and theological issues. In short, this was the moment at which he became an English language theorist and critic. Most significantly of all, the archive for this period can be read as revealing the first traces of Tagore's grand design for repairing the damage done by colonialism to the relationship between East and West.

Robtstein and the India Society

On 13 January, 1910, at the Royal Society of Arts, London, William Robtstein and Ernest B. Havell (the former principal of the Calcutta School of Art) attended a meeting on Indian art education and the issue of "fine arts." Outraged by the attitude of certain members regarding the supposed inferiority of Indian art, the two men proposed, there and then, the creation of an "India Society" to educate the British public about Indian art, music and literature. The London India Society was founded later in the year by an assembled group of artists and intellectuals that included Abanindranath Tagore, Rathindranath's nephew and then President of the Indian Society of Oriental Art, Calcutta, the art critic AK Coomaraswamy, and the eminent industrial magnate and philanthropist Sir Ratan Tata. The founders declared their belief that "the aesthetic culture of India, more particularly in the provinces of Painting, Sculpture, and Music, had in it elements of beauty and interest which in Europe and even in modern India were too little understood and valued."¹¹ Yet the Society was explicit and categorical in stating in its objectives that "politics are definitely excluded from its scope."¹²

During the winter of 1910-1911, Lady Christiansa Hemmingham – an expert copyist of Indian paintings – travelled to Hyderabad to secure, on behalf of the Society, copies of the remaining Buddhist frescoes found in the famous rock temples of Ajanta. She was accompanied by Robtstein and assisted by four Indian artists trained at the Government School of Art in Calcutta under the supervision of Abanindranath Tagore. After Hyderabad, EB Havell recommended that Robtstein travel to Calcutta with Abanindranath to meet Tagore's other nephew Gaganendranath (1867-1938), also an artist working with Indian motifs. It is via this route that Robtstein first met Tagore and made his now famous set of portrait drawings.¹³

Tagore's first point of contact with a British metropolitan intellectual in 1912 was thus with Robtstein. As Tagore's son wrote, "We hardly knew anybody except Mr Robtstein, whom father had met when he was in Calcutta about a year before."¹⁴ That meeting had taken place at the Tagore's house in the Jorhatnagar district of Calcutta when Robtstein was visiting Tagore's nephews. Recalling this day in his memoirs, Robtstein wrote that he was...

...arrived early one time I went to introduce by... a strongly handsome figure dressed in a white sheet... He sat silently listening as we talked. I felt an immediate attraction and asked whether I might draw him for I observed in him an inner charm as well as great physical beauty which I tried to set down with a pencil. That this was one of the remarkable men of his time we now give me a hint.¹⁵

The summer season

Back in London, Robtstein was eager to introduce Tagore to his extensive network of literary friends. Although Robtstein's primary occupation was that of a painter, he was equally well known for having "an instinct for the most effective way of setting careers in motion and for recognising emerging genius in others – genius that very often produced words widely divergent from his own tastes."¹⁶ Somewhat bewildered by London's settling metropolis, Tagore called upon Robtstein at his Hampshire residence almost immediately upon his arrival and offered him his *Gitanjali* translations. Robtstein had written that Tagore "begged" that he would accept them.¹⁷ Tagore's account is somewhat different. "I hardly believe the opinion he expressed after going through it. He then made over the manuscript to me."¹⁸

Robtstein is to some degree a unique character amongst the figures who took it upon themselves to communicate or represent Tagore to Western audiences (primarily WB Yeats, GE Andrews and EJ Thompson) for, as well as having one foot firmly in the camp of London's literary intelligentsia (unlike Andrews and Thompson), Robtstein also qualifies as a genuine "Indianist". As opposed to holding only a rather abstract fascination for things Oriental, Robtstein took a genuine and active part in aiming to secure what he saw as a better future for India. Robtstein sought to elevate India's status in the eyes of the West and showed concern for India's political troubles. Nevertheless, he also remained something of a "liberal imperialist", seeking to improve Britain's relationship with India (as manifested in projects such as the India Society), but not to challenge or fundamentally question British political rule. Indeed, this position was manifest in the animating philosophy of the India Society which sought "less friction between rulers and ruled."¹⁹

Robtstein had thus passed WB Yeats the manuscript of *Gitanjali* and the lines stirred the latter's blood "as nothing had for years."²⁰ We have seen, so years were in his introduction to the 1913 Macmillan edition of *Gitanjali*, "our own image... our voice as if in a dream."²¹ Yet his reading



Robert Southey

at Robert Southey's house on 7 July 1912 was to prove the sentimental moment.²²

Robert Southey had managed to assemble a host of London luminaries including George Bernard Shaw, H.G. Wells, John Galsworthy, Ernest Rhys, Thomas Sturge Moore and Robert Bridges. Also present – somewhat inconspicuously – was C.F. Andrews, the Christian missionary who would soon become intimate with Tagore, deriving the rest of his life (from 1913 onwards) to serve as Tagore's *admirer* in Shantiniketan, recollecting that night, Robert Southey wrote in his memoirs that the young poets came to sit at Tagore's feet, Ezra Pound the most assiduously.²³ It was pleasant to see how Tagore paid so readily to an Indian, the conclusion, 'for nothing of the kind had happened before'.²⁴ Among these men, Yeats and Ezra Pound had the influence to 'make or break' a poet, and they decided they would 'make' Tagore. Exactly what they made of him, and why, is significant in understanding certain aspects of British cultural life during this period, and the perceptions that intellectuals such as Yeats and Pound had of the 'East'. It is also important if we are to properly comprehend Tagore's subsequent reputation in the West.

In a revealing article placed in the influential *Fortnightly Review* in March 1913, Ezra Pound praised Tagore's poetry for both its aesthetic and technical qualities. Seemingly ignorant of the politics of Bengal and Tagore's controversial standing in his native land, Pound wrote that he (Tagore) is 'the great poet and their great musician as well. He has made them their national song, their Mosaic, their Old Testament'. Tagore's 'Golden Bengal' is wholly Eastern, yet it has a 'certain power, ... to move the crowd' and 'all the properties of action'.²⁵ The idea of Tagore's poetry and song containing 'the properties of action' obviously contradicts established stereotypes of the Oriental as placid and static, ideas to which Pound soon returns. 'And yet there is in him,' he continues, 'the stillness of nature.'

The poems do not seem to have been produced by storm or by lightning, but seem to show the normal habits of his mind. He is at one with nature, and finds no contradictions. And this is in sharp contrast with the Western mode, where man must be shown attempting to master nature if he are to have great drama.²⁶

In the case of both Yeats and Pound, Tagore would be instrumentalised for their own ends. The objective was cultural and intellectual renewal, a way out of the mechanical, declining weight of modernity that was crushing man's creative spirit. For Pound, the 'discovery' of Tagore meant that 'we' – that is a narrow section of London's cultural elite, usually meaning those with a fondness for aristocratic social orders and a weakness for imaged pasts – 'there found our new Greece'. 'I find in these poems' he adds, 'a sort of ultimate common sense, a reminder of one thing and of forty things which we are ever likely to lose sight of in the confusion of our Western life, in the racket of our cities, in the jobbery of manufactured literature, in the voracity of advertising men.'²⁷

For Yeats, the 'discovery' of Tagore – and India more generally – was a stimulus to the reawakening of Celtic mysticism that would ingrain Irish nationalism and its bid for independence from British rule. Neither Pound nor Yeats showed any such concern for the politics of India or the problem of colonialism in general. In fact – echoing Robert Southey's and Andrews' sentiments about recapturing and soothing relations between coloniser and colonised – Yeats wrote to Edmund Gosse in November 1912, regarding Tagore's proposed election to the committee of the India Society, that 'from the English point of view it would be a fine thing to do, a piece of wise imperialism, for he is not shipped as no poet of Europe is ... I believe that if we pay him honour, it will be understood that we honour India also for he is its most famous man today'.²⁸ Yeats was essentially oblivious to the fact that Tagore was a deeply controversial and far from universally acclaimed writer in India.²⁹ For now, it will suffice to say that Yeats shared Robert Southey's idea that cultural dialogue could be part of a liberal imperialist agenda. Yet for both Yeats and Pound, issues of colonialism were clearly of secondary importance, and there was seemingly no clear link established in their minds between the Irish and Indian predicaments.

Tagore's primary function was as a reminder of a forgotten European past, and thus they proffered an interpretation of *Gitanjali* that, as has been argued elsewhere, 'denies the existence of a separate history and [a] culture different from their own, something new, something they do not have'.³⁰ Tagore's poetry was immediately incorporated into existing philosophical divisions between idealism and realism, with Tagore characterised as 'highly idealistic and subjective, moody or fanciful', in the words of Ernest Rhys, one of Tagore's earliest Western biographers.³¹ In some senses, intellectuals such as Yeats and Pound merely reflected many of the ideas about India that permeated the British imagination's perceptions of Tagore's work and his visit. Like Pound and Yeats, a November 1912 review of *Gitanjali* in the *Times Literary Supplement* went so far as to see Tagore's poetry as 'a positive influence upon a decadent British poetic scene that "lacked ideas" and "effused coldness towards God, values and nature"'. Tagore's efforts to create a 'harmony of emotion and ideal' represented welcome input.³²

By contrast, my reading of this encounter suggests that what Yeats and Pound were unwilling to accept was Tagore's idealism. This was clear as early as 1913, when, in a review of *The Gardener* – Tagore's second collection of English language poems – in the feminist journal *Freemasonry*, Pound complained that

perhaps the good people of this island [Britain] are unable to foster a fine art as such, why they are incapable, or apparently incapable, of learning for the learning, why better than them that of wrapping the life in cotton wool and parading about with the effigy of a sentimental idealism, remains and will remain for me and unworldly readers.³³

At this early stage, Pound was willing to blame the so-called sentimentalists. 'The long untrammelled view of the time was, of course, that art and politics fell into separate categories and their mixture was untrammelled ... Robert Southey

Tagore as a mystic poet, as a seer from the East was welcome in Britain, but not a political Robert Southey'.³⁴ Tagore's intention to lecture and educate the Western reading public on topics such as colonialism, nationalism and the modern nation state would become clear by the late 1910s, and accordingly the interest from men such as Yeats and Pound would soon wane.

The politics of the prize

The fusion of Tagore's western voyage in 1912 came with his receipt of the Nobel Prize in late 1913, and unsurprisingly it was this event that provided the largest number of column inches. By this time, Tagore had returned to Shantiniketan, where news of the accolade reached him by telegram on the afternoon of the 14 November. Much perturbed by what he saw as the undue attention he soon gained from his compatriots, who flooded to Shantiniketan to disturb the poet's peace, Tagore happily avoided immediate exposure to much of what British journalists had to say.

The *Birmingham Post* wrote that 'the chief significance of Mr. Tagore's triumph is that it marks the culmination of the development of an outlook of English literature'.³⁵ There was much consternation that Thomas Hardy had not been awarded the prize. The *Daily News* and *Leader* of 14 November felt that Tagore was an easy and uncontroversial choice because 'the great themes of art are the same for the Orient as for the Occident'.³⁶ (Tagore would have partly agreed with this assertion, though he would have disagreed that this should make his writings 'easy' or 'uncontroversial').

Linked to the idea of the spread of the English language as an imperial 'gift', many commentators were also keen to see the influence of a Christian ethic in Tagore's work. In July 1913 William Cannon wrote to his friend Edward J. Thompson – later to become one of the foremost interpreters of Tagore to the English speaking world – that it was 'impossible to accept the poems as Hindu pure and simple, unless Indian religion had been grossly misrepresented'. In Cannon, they were 'essentially Christian in their feeling'.³⁷ An article by R. Ellis Roberts in the *Daily News* and the *Leader* of 27 October 1913 rejected the idea that East and West were different at all. What is important to recognise about India, he wrote, is that 'there is in art not longer has it ever reached the perfection which Europe attained'.³⁸ Tagore's popularity was an account of the fact that his 'inspiration derived from Western rather than Eastern sources'.³⁹ By early 1914, the tone in some quarters had turned from patronising to hostile. 'Unfortunately Tagore does not acknowledge his debt to Christianity,' wrote *The Spectator* on 14 February, and implicitly 'asserts that India has nothing to learn from Europe on the spiritual side'. Tagore, they claimed, was so obviously influenced by Christian teaching that to claim his work 'as an unadorned product of Hindu inspiration was wrong'. In fact, it 'was a hostility and reckless ingratitude to his debt to Western teaching'.⁴⁰ The story behind the awarding of the Nobel Prize to Tagore has been subjected to much speculation – and not too few conspiracy theories – many of which still have some currency today. The most significant one was the idea that the English version of *Gitanjali* was not in fact Tagore's work, but was dependent upon Yeats' translation. Sir Valentine Chirol – an infamous imperialist reactionary and Calcutta-based correspondent for *The Times* – led public accusations that Tagore was essentially taking credit for someone else's labour, and Tagore wrote to Thomas Sturge Moore in early 1914 expressing his concern over this matter.

A report has reached me from a barrister friend of mine who was present on the occasion when in a meeting of the leading Mahomedan gentlemen of Bombay, Valentine Chirol took the audience that the English *Gitanjali* was practically a production of Yeats. It is very likely that he did not believe it himself, it being merely a political move on his part to minimise the significance of this Nobel Prize affair, which our people naturally consider to be a matter for national rejoicing. It is not possible for him to reject the idea of Mahomedanists sharing the honour with Englishmen. Unfortunately for me there are signs of the feeling of anti-Indian reaction following the efforts of friends that *Gitanjali* received and worthy as you have and in your history, to the detriment of the development in the minds of the generations of the candidates for the Nobel Prize.⁴¹

There was actually aware of the dangers of this suggestion, and in the context of both colonial politics and of Tagore's vision of a meeting of minds between East and West, the issue of authenticity is a matter of some importance.

Four days after receiving the prize, Tagore wrote to William Robert Southey to acknowledge his debt. 'The very first moment I received message of the great honour conferred on me by the award of the Nobel Prize, my heart turned towards you with love and gratitude'.⁴² The extent to which his fame and feature in the West was due to the assistance given to him by his Western, largely English, friends was an issue that was uppermost in his mind. 'The issue of direct involvement in creating *Gitanjali* as a work of English literature still plagued him as late as April 1915, when Tagore wrote to William Robert Southey that, 'since I have got my fame as an English writer I feel extreme reluctance in accepting alterations in my English poems by any of your writers'.⁴³ Well aware of the rumours that had circulated since *Gitanjali*'s critical acclaim, he added that he

must not give any reasonable ground for accusing me – which I am to – of having advantage from other men's genius and skill. There are people who suspect that I owe in a large measure to C.F. Andrews help for my literary success, which is no false I can assure to myself as it is off-fact about Yeats. I think Yeats was sparing in his suggestions – however, I was with him during the revisions, but one is not to debate himself, and it is very easy for me to gradually forget the share Yeats had in making my things possible. ... if it is true that Yeats therefore have made it possible for *Gitanjali* to occupy the place it does then it must be confessed.⁴⁴

With regard to the translations, the evidence is mixed.

