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.

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