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 unjustifyable 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.

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\(^1\)From an unpublished letter to C. F. Andrews, dated Los Angeles, 20th April 1929.