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."

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.
POETIC JUSTICE

winner with this incredible name, 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.

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 1913 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.

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.)
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 Basher 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 confes 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-

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

OCIDENTAL 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

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?

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.
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

¹The 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.
²Vorworte, 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.”

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,” 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

---


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.
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 battlefields 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." 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. By October 1921 "more than 800,000 copies of his work had been sold." 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, 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." 

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.

---

2 *The Mail*, Birmingham, 2.9.1921.
4 See Chapter IV.
5 *The Mail*, Birmingham, 2.9.1921.
DEFENCE OF THE WEST

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 Francaise*, 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 fast-changing 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.” 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.”

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 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-Buddhistic 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.
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."

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 battlefields 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

---

disintegrating Roman greatness.”

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.” 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.” Rabindranath came like a _deus 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

---

2 Edmond Jaloux, in _Les Appels de l’Orient_, 1925. (See Bibliography, p. 130.)
3 _Leipziger Tageblatt_, 1.7.1921. (Review of _Sadbana_.)
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 snobism 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 attack ...... M. 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.”

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

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-

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. Hurl ed 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.