CHAPTER IV

POLITICAL AMBIGUITIES

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

When, in the last war, Indian troops were fighting

¹ Daily News, Colombo, 18.6.1929.
² The Statesman, Calcutta, 9.7.1933.
side by side with British and French troops, a protest was raised in England against sending “pagan” Hindus to fight against “Christian” Germans. Here is the reply given by a widely read paper:

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

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

¹ Western Mail, 10.10.1914.
cations whatsoever:

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

Politicians in England never felt very happy about Rabindranath’s success in Germany. And in 1926 they retaliated by means of hints, vague rumours, and Reuter’s messages. When Rabindranath landed in Hamburg the same scenes of enthusiasm took place as in 1921. The English press got worried, and the correspondent of the Daily Telegraph suggested “that the ovation accorded to the poet at Hamburg was propagandist in origin, contrived by German industrialists to cultivate a good opinion among Indian intellectuals as a stepping-stone towards the capture of the Indian markets.”² Even more entertaining is the episode in which Rabindranath got mixed up in an exhibition in the Berlin Zoo. The facts as given out by Reuter’s English correspondent are simple enough. It seems that, by a curious coincidence, at the very time when Rabindranath was being applauded in Berlin in 1926, the students of Allahabad were holding a meeting to protest against the Germans “for parading a hundred Indians with wild beasts in the Zoo at Berlin.”³ That this rumour was actually founded upon truth, is testified by a journalist’s account of how,

¹ Rote Fahne, Vienna, 19.6.1921.
² Quoted in Shanghai Mercury, 25.10.1926.
³ Ibid.
in one afternoon, he “covered” the whole of India in a taxi, by driving first to the exhibition in the Zoo and then to Rabindranath’s lecture in the University. Later on Germans tried to pacify the rather exasperated Indian intellectuals. In a book, published in 1931, the writer indignantly refers to the hundred Indians in the Berlin Zoo as “Aboriginals from Ceylon” adding that “the news of this exhibition during Rabindranath Tagore’s visit to Berlin was wired by Reuter’s English correspondent to India for propaganda purposes.”

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

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

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1 Furtwaengler: *Indien, das Brahmaerland in Freiiblick.* 1931.
the French people were again confronted with a neighbour who was mystically looking forward into a vague but menacing future, apparently unrepenting and not willing to acknowledge defeat. The "scenes of frenzied hero-worship" in Berlin on the occasion of Rabindranath's lecture in the University, seemed to Frenchmen symptomatic of a dangerous tendency of the teutonic mind towards the irrational and the mystic, not only as regards "culture," but also in the field of politics. Things deteriorated even further, when French people read the text of a message addressed by Rabindranath to Professor Rudolf Eucken, the German philosopher, on the eve of his departure from Germany. We shall see in the following few lines what happened to this message when crossed the Rhine. Here is a French paper's account of what "popular feelings" were like at that time in France:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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1 The original copy of the message (in English) was found among Rabindranath’s papers; it is addressed to Dr. Rudolf Eucken, dated “Neues Palais,” Darmstadt, June 13, 1921. It was reproduced in all German newspapers. (Italics mine.)
of French Classics.”¹ In Paris, however, to judge again by a German newspaper report, the confusion was even greater. For there “for the poet’s 60th birthday some Indians domiciled in Paris decided to publish a birthday-book to which both Indian and European writers should contribute. French writers invited on this occasion declared themselves willing to contribute. But when they heard, that also German writers had been invited, they withdrew their promise and demanded that the Germans should be excluded. But the Indians did not want to exclude the Germans......and so the idea of publishing the book had to be dropped.”² And the opinion gained ground in France more and more, that Rabindranath’s success in Germany was in reality the political success of a vanquished and unrepenting nation. In this sense the French defence of the West was indeed the defence of their own country against teutonic fanaticism.

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

Rabindranath’s message has frequently been identi-

¹ Stuttgart Zeitung, 29.7.1921.
² Morgen, Olten (Switzerland), 21.8.1921.
fied in Europe and in America with certain pan-Asiatic political ideologies. Rabindranath, as is well known, never associated himself with the more chauvinistic type of pan-Asiaticism and, in fact, repudiated it more than once. However, his visit to the Far East, especially to China, created a good deal of mental unrest in the West. For there was no doubt that “Chinese students rejoiced at the news of his coming, for Tagore represents the intellectual triumph of Asia over Europe and America, and his visit will probably mark the beginning of a pan-Asiatic movement, just as the visit of Bertrand Russell helped to foster a more radical mentality among the students.”¹ A similarly misleading kind of comment was passed on Rabindranath’s supposedly “communist” propaganda, especially again in China. That Rabindranath never made any kind of political propaganda either in the Far East or in the West is known to any one acquainted with his life and work. And yet we read in a book published in London in 1929 and dealing with Communist propaganda in China the following illuminating statement:

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

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

¹ *La Patrie*, Montreal, Canada, 15.4.1924.
² *Peking and Tientsin Times*, 21.5.1928. (Quotation from Rodney Gilbert’s *What’s Wrong With China*, London, John Murray, P. 315.)
in China itself took up a hostile attitude towards Rabin-
dranath whose visit and "propaganda" they considered
inopportune and uncalled for. The spectre of commu-
nism and allied ideologies accompanied Rabindranath
even to Peking where the following storm in a tea-cup
took place:

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

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

¹ North China Star, Pekin, 26.3.29.
² New York Herald Tribune, 20.3.1930.
Whenever countries turned fascist or semi-fascist, Rabindranath was subjected to all sorts of indignities; his speeches were censored beforehand, his works were suppressed. We hear, for instance, that in Bucharest, in 1926, “his lecture was disappointing, as he really said nothing, but dwelt on reminiscences of his youthful political development. This appears to be accounted for by the fact whispered abroad that his utterances were subjected to censorship by the Roumanian authorities.”¹ Most students of Rabindranath may not be aware of the fact that his works were banned in at least one country, long before Nazi-Germany came into existence. Lithuania is a small state and we do not hear much of Lithuanian “culture” and literature. However, the Lithuanian Government considered it necessary to ban Rabindranath’s work in 1927, and that at a time when 43.18% of the male and 49.98% of the female inhabitants of that country were illiterate. Rabindranath, however, was not alone in his unexpected misfortune; here is the official Reuter’s communique:

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

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

¹ Near East, London, 16.2.1926.
² Westminster Gazette, 25.4.1927.
That Rabindranath had as little to do with Vilna, Memel, and the dispatch of these warships as Oscar Wilde and Shakespeare, need not be particularly stressed. But lacking ammunitions and acroplanes to drive these warships away, the Government of that small country took refuge in “cultural” suppression, first by imprisoning large numbers of students and even schoolboys, and later on by banning these three authors. And one of the organs of the Fascist Government of Lithuania solemnly declared that it was all necessary in order to “free Lithuania from the errors of the 18th century,” to which, by the way, neither of the three authors belonged. This brings us to the end of our analysis of international ambiguities with regard to Rabindranath. The “national” ambiguities still remain to be discussed, especially those that were directed against Rabindranath in Germany and in Italy.

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

1 See the full account in Indian Social Reformer, 28.5.1927.
at that time, was already in 1921 in the grips of political disintegration. With about twenty "major" political parties and a similar number of other "minor" parties, Germany offered an excellent field for every kind of political opportunism. And all parties took full advantage of Rabindranath's stay there to vent their feelings of grief or hope, of enthusiasm or abhorrence. From the radical Communists to the radical Fascists, every one had his own opinion to contribute or his own grievance to ventilate. The following paragraphs will provide us with an almost complete picture of the "decline of the West" in terms of political consciousness; for nowhere was this decline more rapid than in Germany.

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

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

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

1 Volkszeitung, 10.8.1921.
vented their grievances we may quote a passage from a Socialist paper; it is an inspired piece of writing and it makes us wonder what Rabindranath would have thought had he seen it:

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

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

1 14.5.1921.
that certain interested circles systematically work at the
disintegration and destruction of our national conscious-
ness;" Tagore’s convictions, continues the paper, "are
really nothing else but the poetic phantoms and the
illusory hopes of an oppressed people......which only the
contemporary madness of nihilism and bolshevism can
possibly take seriously......"1

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

1 Rheinisch-Westfälische Zeitung, Essen, 7.12.1921.
makes us think.”

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

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

All that did not prevent them, a few years later, from declaring Rabindranath to the ‘Indo-Germanic’ race, to which—as the name implies—both Indians and Germans belong. “On the way of this race immigrated to India,” is the rather astounding statement made by a converted Nicker from Ceylon, “is still the Indo-Germanic stock and this stock still continues to produce world personalities as Rabindranath Tagore and the Nehrus.”

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

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1 Deutschoesterreichische Tageszeitung, Vienna, 18.6.1921.
2 Cornelia Bake in a letter to The Statesman, Calcutta, 21.7.1933.
3 Ceylon Daily News, Colombo, 6.10.1936.
of loose thinking. They were deliberate attempts to make use of Rabindranath whenever the occasion demanded it and whenever fascist propaganda thought it fit to introduce his name. That is how the mind of a people is poisoned. And that is how “anti-human forces spread their dominion” until the whole of a continent is engulfed by the crude psychological methods of infantile fascist regression.

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

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

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

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

¹ *Letters from Abroad*, 10.6.1921 (Darmstadt). Here is E. J. Thompson’s comment on this letter in his book on Rabindranath: “I think that Indians overrate the powers and achievements of the German intellect, great as they are, and underestimate those of the French and English.” (p. 278).
directly responsible for such a statement. But there
is no doubt—as will be seen shortly—that Keyserling and
his circle had very definite grievances against England.
Let us see, for the time being, what actually happened
at this "School of Wisdom" during Rabindranath's stay
there. It seems that "thousands of people from all parts
of Germany went thither during the week. Every
morning at 9 and every evening at 4, open air meetings
were held in the garden, and he used to deliver short
discourses in answer to questions put to him and these
were translated and interpreted by Count Keyserling.
Bulletins of these discourses were issued every day and
widely circulated throughout the country." ¹ On the
12th June, a 'Sunday, the famous "wood-gathering"
took place; more than 4,000 people were present, when
Rabindranath accompanied by the Grand Duke of Hesse
and Count Keyserling ascended a nearby mountain where
songs and dances were offered him as a "spontaneous"
gift of the German people. Did Rabindranath
know that most of these songs were of a narrow
nationalistic kind, that the rather nauseating sentimentality
of this summer morning on the mountain near
Darmstadt, was not in the least "spontaneous," but was
very well rehearsed beforehand, especially the singing of
the German National Anthem? Did he know of the
contemporary accounts of this modern version of the
Sermon on the Mount in the daily press and the way it
was exploited by the chauvinist right-wing parties?
We are afraid, he did not. Nor did he read, we are sure,
this amazing account of his visit to Darmstadt, publish-
ed in Keyserling's own Magazine; here is an extract in as
literal a translation as possible; we have tried to retain
the inspired and elevated prose; it begins with the fol-
lowing dedication:

¹ *The Servant, India, 11.8.1921*. 
‘Om! Our Adoration to the Holy Ganesha, the God of Wisdom’......In the land of the sinking sun there is a town, Dharmanagara by name. And in it there lives a friend of Rabindra, a Kshatriya. He had built a school and to him he came. And whatever his friend, the Kshatriya had taught, according to the fashion of the land of the sinking sun, of kingly life, of light-fulfilling existence, it appeared now in person among the men of the West, a living symbol of the eternal One personified by the man from the East. But the generous Duke of the land offered him his palace and opened wide all the gates of the Royal park in order not to prevent any one from seeing the light of the Eastern sun.\(1\)

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

\(1\) Der Weg zur Vollendung. (“The Path to Perfection.”) Mitteilungen der Schule der Weisheit. Herausgegeben von Graf Hermann Keyserling. 2. Heft. 1921. (p. 42. Erwin Rouselle: Rabindranath Tagore; Die Legende der Darmstaedter Tagore-Woche 9-14.6.1921.)
to this problem. For it was really he who for the first time formulated Rabindranath’s spiritual leadership of Germany in a way which could but hurt the French and disconcert the rest of the world. In an article entitled “Rabindranath and Germany,” Count Keyserling writes:

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

And about the proposed visit to Darmstadt he says:

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

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

1 Der Tag, 22.5.1921.
2 Quoted in Berliner Boersen Courier, 27.5.1921. Here is a complete bibliography of the more important books and articles dealing with Count Keyserling as a philosopher, a representative of Eastern culture in the West, and of pan-Germanism. The fact that most of the articles, etc., are written by French intellectuals proves that he was taken to be a potential enemy of France and
The more democratic press in Germany looked upon the Tagore Week at Darmstadt with grave misgivings and concern. They found patriotic sentimentality and an insistence, on the part of the Count, on the "spontaneity" of the people. The political implications became obvious to any one acquainted with intellectual background of Keyserling's School of Wisdom and his own political ideas; and one of the leading democratic papers remarks quite rightly: "Frequently and in a strange manner it was insisted upon that we had a strong patriotic interest in creating a favourable impression in the mind of the Indian poet. The whole spectacle, therefore, took sometimes a most political turn the more so as Tagore, because of his position in Indian politics, is himself a person of some definite political standing. It was a disharmonious mixture of senti-

Western civilisation:

Ernest Seillere: La Sagesse de Darmstadt.
Will Durant: Adventures in Genius. (I Chapter on Keyserling).
Mercedes Gallagher Parks: Introduction to Keyserling. An Account of the man and his work. 1934.
René Lauret: Les Idées politiques de Hermann Keyserling.
(In: Vie des Peuples, 25.6.1921.)
Jean Gucheno: Un sorcier: Le Comte Keyserling. (In: Europe No. 93, 15.9.1930.)
Jean Caves: Le nihilism européen et les appels de l'Orient.
(In: Philosophies, Nos. 1 and 2).
R. Zabloudovsky: 'La crise de la culture intellectuelle en Allemagne. (In: Mercure de France, 15-7-1924.)
M. Baldensperger: Ou l'Orient et l' Occidents' affrontent.
(In: Revue de Litterature comparee, 1922.)
ments and ideologies.”¹

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

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

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

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

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

¹ Frankfurter Zeitung, 16.6.1921.
² René Guénon: East and West. (Engl. Translation, 1942.)
from the point of view of the spirit than an aristocrat, nay even a tyrant, who lives according to the law of his own creative conscience.¹

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

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

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

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

¹ Count Keyserling: “Key to America’s Spiritual Freedom.”
(In *The Drift of Civilisation*, 1930.) (Italics mine.)
² *Times of India*, 9.7.1937.
expression.¹

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

The personality and character of Count Keyserling are intriguing in the extreme, and so is his friendship with Rabindranath: We have no reason to doubt that, at least at beginning, his feelings towards Rabindranath were genuine. But we must not forget that he—more perhaps than any one else—was a product of his age, an age of fast changing standards and values, attitudes and beliefs, both in the cultural and political life of Europe. In one way, at least, this strange friendship is fascinating and not without pathos. For here we see two great men belonging to the same age, the Western philosopher with a leaning towards the East and the Eastern poet with a leaning towards the West, struggling side by side for certainty and truth, until their paths separate for ever, one being engulfed by the rising tide of teutonic fanaticism and the other becoming more and more "acutely conscious of the menace to man" and fearlessly fulfilling his destiny "through insult and isolation." But nothing made Rabindranath politically more conscious of this menace than his experience in Italy to which a few more paragraphs in this chapter will be devoted. For here for the first time Rabindranath was face to face with political facts. The menace was no longer "spiritual" or ideological. It was the first experience of the poet of the East with those forces in man which he and many with him call "anti-human." ²

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

² From an unpublished letter from H. Keyserling to Rabindranath, dated Darmstadt, 12.8.1938.
Rabindranath’s Italian experience in 1926 is in many respects much less involved than the German political ambiguities in 1921. The complete absence of political parties except one, and the suppression of free speech in Italy, greatly simplified the response of the people to Rabindranath. There is no doubt, however, that the Italian public in general paid genuine homage to the poet from the East, that the number of his admirers in Italy was not less than anywhere else in Europe, and that the reception accorded to him was to a considerable degree spontaneous. But behind it all we feel the hand of the Government, a very strong hand indeed who did not mind bestowing honour as long as it suited it, but who a few weeks later did not hesitate to vilify that same man whom it had honoured.

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

1 From a conversation between Rabindranath and Romain Rolland at Villeneuve on 25th June 1926, as recorded by Mr. P. C. Mahalanobis.—The English press in Italy made no secret out of
Rabindranath believed neither of them; but this time his instinct went wrong, and instead of looking at Italy in terms of human nature and experience, he indulged (as many other intellectuals at that time) in wishful thinking, self-deception, and an unjustifiable optimism. For instance, in the conversation with Romain Rolland which took place after he had left Italy, Rabindranath summarises as follows Italy’s progress under Mussolini:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

R. Perhaps a new Rome is being created. I see signs of a new creative activity. There is need of harsh discipline before one can attain true freedom. But such discipline is negative, it merely removes obstacles, it cannot of itself create. A great vision is necessary for a new synthesis. I believe I see signs of this masterful vision in Italy. We are awaiting for this freedom of the spirit without which all discipline is meaningless. I hope there will be a great future for Italy. Material wealth and power cannot make a country immortal. She must contribute something which is great and which is
for somebody, and which does not merely glorify herself.\(^1\)

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

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

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

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

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\(^1\) From the Notes of P. C. Mahalanobis.

\(^2\) 25th June 1926. (Ibid.)

\(^3\) The Englishman, Calcutta, 6.8.1926. (This message was later on contradicted.)
A poet’s responsibility towards society must, however, remain ineffective within the context of contemporary political ambiguities. His statements and messages, his open letters and his burning speeches remain without an echo, lost in the wilderness of totalitarian propaganda. And we who are only spectators from far away, children in front of the rising curtain in a theatre, we too are deeply moved when we again see Rabindranath, the disillusioned fighter for reconciliation, the poet with a message in a waste land, reading out the first draft of his open letter to the press to Romain Rolland, in the very same room in which once another fighter, another poet lived and worked, Victor Hugo. There they sit, and Rabindranath’s gentle voice floats towards the open window and across the lake in the falling darkness:

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

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

1 5th July, 1926. (From the Notes of P. C. Mahalanobis.)
2 Villeneuve, 27th June 1926. (Ibid.)
farcical comedy before the eyes of complacent Italian blackguards. How easy it is to turn a poet into a clown; Shakespeare must have known it when he wrote *Twelfth Night*. And in Mussolini's own paper there appeared the following editorial:

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

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

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

¹ *Popolo d'Italia*. (Reproduced in *Manchester Guardian*, 15-7-1926.)
Italy—instead of devoting ourselves, as we would both have liked, to things eternal. Be assured that they occupy my mind very much—more indeed than the ephemeral vicissitudes of the continual battle. And I would have liked to exchange with you—but all alone (with my good and dear interpreter, my sister)—our thoughts concerning the soul and destiny, the invisible, the omnipresent, and the eternal essence of things... Often have I accused myself for having disturbed your rest when I took away from you the confidence you have had in your Italian hosts. However, I had no other interest in my mind but your glory, which I value more than your rest. I did not want devils misusing your sacred name in the annals of history. Forgive me if my intervention has caused you some restless hours. The future (the present already) will show you that I have acted as your faithful and vigilant guide.¹

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

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

RELIGIOUS REVIVALISM

"Is not my God an eternal master of time."

It is not uncommon to hear people speak of a religious revival at the beginning of this century. How far this revival was "religious," that is, connected with some definite religious dogma or belief, it would be difficult to determine. All the evidence available points towards a broadening of the spiritual basis of human conceptions, an interpretation of life in terms of spiritual awareness and integration. This was undoubtedly due to a spontaneous reaction against nineteenth-century rationalism, the reply given by the human spirit to the increasing mechanisation and standardisation of life. In literature it may be said to begin with Tolstoy's works which evoked a ready response all over Europe; but in the years that preceded and followed the great war, there arose a great desire within the hearts of countless Europeans to replace the merely material considerations which had guided them for so long a time by a spiritual and moral revaluation of the universe. It is doubtful whether this craving for spiritual enlightenment was really due to an overwhelming personal need, or whether it was not the result of fear and the sudden realisation that despite the mastery over the material universe, the spirit of the age was out of joint and that they were called upon to set it right. It is no accident that many of these
new spiritual leaders were also either actual or potential social reformers; for they all realised that a spiritual renaissance in the West is possible only if society itself is changed; and that is also why many of them turned towards the East either for a possible spiritual rejuvenation, but also for the sake of freeing the colonial people from material and moral oppression. Religious and social activities went hand in hand, and Christianity was imbibed with a new and deeper meaning than before. That is why Schweitzer went to Africa and opened a hospital in the jungle, that is why C. F. Andrews went to India and fought for the emancipation of the Indian masses. Both were deeply religious, and reached a level of saintliness rarely attained by human beings in modern times. And, strangely enough, in both the guiding principle was art which they considered to be the purest expression of the human spirit; C. F. Andrews proved it in his friendship with Rabindranath, Schweitzer in his deep knowledge and understanding of classical Western music, especially Bach.

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

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

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

One impression definitely predominates over all others, namely, the religious spirit that rules over millions of souls and unites them. The whole East is permeated with religion, just as the West is permeated with reason and science. In the West the life of the soul seems to be primitive and haphazard if one compares it with the religiosity of the sons of Asia, Buddhists, Mahomedans, and others...This impression is so overwhelming because it makes us intensely aware of a force in the East and a weakness, a defect in the West. This contrast strengthens our doubts, our fears, and our
hopes. It is evident that no spiritual importation from the East will save us, neither a loan from China or from India, nor the return to the dogmas of some particular church. But also it is evident that the salvation and the continuity of European civilisation will be possible only if we rediscover a discipline of the soul, a spiritual horst which will belong to all men alike.¹

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

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

¹ Published in Der Bund (Switzerland), 1915, and quoted in Tagore Educateur by E. Pieczynska, Paris, 1921.
² Basler Nachrichten, Basel, 12-5-1921.
ral remarks about mysticism in general she comes to the conclusion that “only the classics of mystical literature provide a standard by which this handful of ‘Song-Offerings’ can be appraised or understood.” It is doubtful whether this critical analysis of Gitanjali in terms of mysticism found a very large following; the more popular attitude consisted rather in a loss of critical awareness and an indiscriminate acceptance of anything, whether good or bad, that could provide an outlet for their emotional ambiguities. When, for instance, we read in a Review devoted to Occultism that “the poems of our Brother from India are steeped in all the magic and the mystery of the moon” we are not ready to believe in the sincerity of the mystical experience. Rabindranath’s “mystical appeal” became a kind of stock-response with many people; they indeed believed in their own sincerity; but it remained a “pose” and an attitude only, for they could not live up to it:

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

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

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1 The Nation, 16.11.1912.
2 The Occult Review, Sept. 1914.—Already in 1913 Ezra Pound warns the “common reader” not to confuse Rabindranath “with that jolly and religious bourgeois Abdul Baha; nor with any Theosophist propaganda; nor with any of the various missionaries of the seven and seventy isms of the mystical East.” (In Freewoman, 1-11.1913).
who had turned mystics overnight, especially on the continent, admired Rabindranath for the wrong reasons. From being a poet, he was transformed into an “angel,” a kind of Messiah, almost a pure spirit. “We have seen a saint face to face,” writes an Austrian paper, “it is like a miracle of which one has always heard speaking, and in which one does not believe, when it is there... By the movement of his hands the curtains in front of temples might rise and one might look into the most holy shrine; thousands might bend their knees in front of his words and might kiss the border of his robe.... Mankind should listen still, for centuries are speaking again... But that we did see what seemed to us so far away across the infinity of time, that is the miracle.”

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

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1 _Widerhall_, Innsbruck, Austria, 1-8-1921.
2 _Fortnightly Review_, March 1913.
Rabindranath’s works, nobody can say. The following statement, however, is representative of this kind of attitude:

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

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

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

1 Baptist Times, 13-2-1914.
2 Boston Evening Transcript, 4-4-1925.
Perhaps Rabindranath was a kind of reincarnated Christ come back on earth to preach and put into practice the Gospels again. This impression was particularly strong in those who had gone to Darmstadt and had listened to Rabindranath’s short speech on that memorable Sunday morning on the mountain: “Like a prophet he stood on the mountain of our Lord,” exclaims one paper, “and many of his listeners had the impression of standing face to face with the bringer of a religion, the bringer of the old religion of sympathy and love of which we speak so much in Europe, but which fewer here than anywhere else put into practice.”

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

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1 *Hamburger Fremdenblatt*, July 1921.—Rabindranath’s “spiritual” success on the Continent is depicted as follows in *The Westminster Gazette* under the heading: *BERLIN OVERRUN BY CHARLATANS*: “To-day the new fashion for ‘oriental mysticism’ gives magnificent opportunity to the members of the ubiquitous profession, whom O. Henry described in ‘The Gentle Grafter.’ Rabindranath Tagore gave a great impetus to the movement by his visit to Berlin. His resemblance to a Hebrew prophet, and the incomprehensibility of the German version of his poems, insured his complete success. Naturally he has had a number of very unworthy imitators, the more ambitious of whom have started sects and founded schools.” (16-1-1921).
rightly used whenever attempts at unifying religious beliefs in the West were made. Here is a significant extract from an article, dealing with the formation of a world-church:

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

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

¹ Public Opinion, 9-12-1927.
raphy of Rabindranath we read, for instance:

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

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

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

¹ The Guardian, London, 10-6-1915.
² The following anecdote is told by Lady Benson in her book of reminiscences Mainly About Prayers (1926). It provides us with an unconsciously humorous picture of the spiritual stock-response of the average Westerner to Rabindranath: "My hostess explained to me that Tagore was a Yogi and his creed forbade him to look upon a woman's bare arms and neck. I felt horribly uncomfortable and immodest, especially as I had been given the honoured place beside him, so I carefully draped my table napkin over the shoulder next to him......" (Quoted in The Globe, St. John, N.B., U.S.A., 7-8-1926).
³ Allgemeine Rundschau, Berlin, 30-7-1921.
Indeed, it is hardly imaginable at all what his success would have been like: for so strong still is the power of religious prejudices, of mediæval attitudes of mind. How few indeed realised Rabindranath’s spiritual significance in the West; how few responded to his message with the necessary open-mindedness and the desire to understand his revaluation of traditional beliefs and dogmas. Whenever they felt themselves menaced in their spiritual traditions and conventions, they took up an aggressive and militant attitude, probably a kind of escape from their own spiritual failure. When reviewing a book by Sadhu Sunder Singh, an Australian paper says:

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

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

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1 *The Argus*, Melbourne, Australia, 8-7-1924. (Review of Sadhu Sunder Singh’s *Reality and Religion, Meditation on God, Man and Nature*, 1924).
standard by which to measure the spiritual response of the average Westerner. It must go deeper and must be more lasting to constitute a spiritual and religious revaluation of which the West was in such a great need. The fact that Rabindranath’s spiritual message was so soon forgotten in Europe and America only goes to prove that his time had not yet come, that perhaps the West had not yet reached that stillness of mind, that detachment from the neurosis of their own time, which alone would enable them to search the one which is at the root of all things.
CHAPTER VI

THE TEST OF SENSIBILITY

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

1. The Search for Standards

Rabindranath was, perhaps more than any other poet during the last thirty years in Europe, exposed to critical comments. When, one after another, his works were translated into European languages, and when he himself appeared in person among those who either worshipped him as a saint or condemned him as a false and pretentious prophet, voices were heard from all sides clamouring for critical standards by which to measure this exotic and Eastern sensibility which had intruded upon their Western tradition in literature and to which they had to adjust themselves all of a sudden. It would, however, be wrong to over-estimate the difficulties that confronted the European critics. Both before and during Rabindranath’s rise to literary fame in the West, works of poetry and prose came into existence which were directly inspired by the East, and particularly India. Not only in literature, but even in music and the Fine Arts, this influence is discernible. Indeed, the more enlightened among the litterateurs, found no difficulty in admiring either “the jewelled raptures of Francis Thompson or the
vague ecstasies of Rabindranath Tagore.”¹ On the other hand, even if this direct influence was absent, poets all over Europe both before and after the war, indulged in an over-emphasis of the individual, his experiences, his search for truth and certainty, his self-realisation.

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

But there was that subtle and undefinable some-

¹ Walter Raleigh: Some Authors (1923), p. 156.
thing that created an abyss between him and his contemporaries. It was not so much his utmost sincerity – for at that time poets all over Europe had long ago given up pretending and nothing much was left of the Victorian “poetical” pose—rather it was “the East,” India, the Orient, the mysterious and to most Westerners vague background of a foreign and exotic civilisation. In the preceding chapters of this book we have tried to make clear the issues involved in the problem of “East and West.” Everything that has been said, has to be applied to Europe’s literary appreciation of Rabindranath. For the meaning of a poem is nothing ready made, is, in fact, communicable only if personal or collective prejudices are eliminated to a considerable extent. Literary prejudices are expressed in form of stock-responses, aesthetic conventions and an immature understanding of a poet’s experiences. The meaning is distorted or only half understood, and communication becomes impossible. Perhaps this problem was stated clearest of all in a review of The Gardener in 1913:

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

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

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

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

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

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

¹ Manchester Guardian, 28-3-1922.
When, therefore, we speak of a test of sensibility we mean the response, genuine or artificial, sincere or conventional, of Western readers to Rabindranath's work. The number of Western critics, who from the very beginning frankly acknowledged Rabindranath's greatness as a poet, is extraordinarily small. In England it is Ezra Pound alone (with the exception of W. B. Yeats) whose criticism and comment carries conviction. His criticism of Gitanjali in the Fortnightly Review and that of The Gardener in Freewoman, still belong to the very best yet written on Rabindranath in the West. He was also the first to realise this test of sensibility, and the first to put before the English-reading public the problem of literary communication in all its complexity:

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

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

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

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\[1\] *Fortnightly Review*, March 1913.
trying to say about these poems is that one must read each poem as a whole and then re-conceive it as a song, of which you have half forgotten the cords. You must see them not as you see stars on a flag, but as you have seen stars in the heaven.\(^1\)

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

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

\(^1\) *Freshman*, 1-11-1913. (Ezra Pound’s review of The Gardener).
The King of the Dark Chamber which appeared in the Manchester Guardian in 1914. Here the critic distinguishes, and I believe quite rightly so, between the genuine poetic impulse in Rabindranath and his “poetical conventions,” a distinction which is the more significant as it establishes a precedent in the literary criticism of Rabindranath in the West. There is neither undiluted praise nor snobbish contempt; the conclusions which the writer arrives at, whether right or wrong, are at least based upon intelligent reading and an attempt to understand the essential qualities of Rabindranath’s poetry:

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

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

¹ Manchester Guardian, 6-10-1914.
posed "asceticism" which, according to some writers, is unsuitable for great poetry. Rabindranath's poetry, they say, is cold, abstract, bloodless, and "to English minds, that is to say, to the majority of English minds, he would certainly appear to lack substance"\(^1\); on the other hand, his poems "contain too much that is remote from actual human issues"\(^2\). Other critics again accused Rabindranath of "a cloying quality about his thought which is a little sickly to the average reader's taste"\(^3\), or found that "there is about all his work a wooliness, a lack of definition, either of character, incident or purpose"\(^4\). Then there are those, and some of them outstanding critics, who are altogether unable to see anything at all in Rabindranath's poetry. "There is not a single quotation in this book", says Leonard Woolf, "which does not seem to be second-rate and rather tiresome." He, however, confesses that "this may be due to prejudice or blindness."\(^5\) And what are we to think of those who simplify the problem of communication between the poet and his readers to such an extent that nothing remains of it at all but a slightly sneering attitude in which a complete lack of comprehension and a contempt for everything foreign are equally distributed:

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

\(^1\) *The Bookman*, April 1913. (Review of *Gitanjali*).
\(^2\) *The English Review*, April 1913. (Review of *Gitanjali*).
\(^3\) *Church Times*, London, 24-7-1925.
\(^4\) *British Weekly*, 10-12-1925. (Review of *Broken Ties*).
\(^6\) *Sheffield Telegraph*, 23-7-1925. (Review of *Red Oleanders*).
This is not intelligent criticism; and when one writer exclaims that the effect of the beauty of *Gitanjali* was "a certain paralysis of judgment before the trance, the mirage of the East"\(^1\) we are now quite ready to believe him. The approach to Rabindranath which is to be found in the preceding quotations is one that is lacking in critical standards and that makes us painfully aware of the failure of many critics in the West to adjust their sensibility and to respond to the experiences of a foreign mind.

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

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

\(^1\) *The Athenaeum*, No. 4567, 8-5-1915.
ries and uses it as the raw material of his art, reintegrating it into visual images and sounds and the patterns of his own experiences? Rabindranath uses symbols which are intricate enough for his own countrymen to follow, symbols that came to him straight from the soil of his people, and others again that had laid hidden in the treasure-house of ancient Indian civilisation. And in his writings they were infused with a new life all their own, and fulfilled a new and contemporary purpose. Can we, indeed, expect the average Western critic to interpret these symbols correctly? Is it likely at all that he should be aware of their very existence? Scholars, we know, have tried their best; but theirs was a pedantic and, perhaps, slightly dogmatic interpretation. They “explained” the symbols, instead of interpreting them in terms of experiences; they gave us knowledge, instead of integrated emotion.

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

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

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

¹ *Times Literary Supplement*, 9-7-1925.
"dialectical" symbolism in which movement, drama, and external paraphernalia play an essential part. Symbolism in the East is, indeed, all thought; that does not, however, imply the use of abstract images and concepts alone. Symbolism is fundamentally the same everywhere; the difference between Eastern and Western symbolism is one of degree and emphasis, in short, of technique:

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

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

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

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

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

¹ Times Literary Supplement, 14-I-1926.
² New Statesman, Review of Gitanjali, April 1913.
Rabindranath’s literary genius was discovered in the West, Hopkins too was resurrected from oblivion, together with Blake and the mediaeval bards and long forgotten singers? For all these poets have one thing in common, however different they may be otherwise: belief that was counterbalanced by doubt, symbols that were unconscious, a plot consisting of intensified thought or emotion, and a music, an inner or outer rhythm, that was all their own. The following extract from a review of Gitanjali can safely be placed side by side with Yeats’ Preface and with Ezra Pound’s critical comment, for its deep insight into Rabindranath’s literary genius:

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

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

1 Times Literary Supplement (Review of Gitanjali), 7-11-1912.
one of standards. Those for whom the language of unconscious poetic symbolism still meant something, those who were more concerned with the essential reality of experiences and the poet's way of integrating the past, present, and future in one, realised Rabindranath's significance as a "contemporary" poet whose experiences belonged neither to the East nor to the West, but to humanity which is ever present and endless.

2. Literary Ambiguities

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

In poetry, for obvious reasons, literary critics emphasised the "Celtic" element in Rabindranath's work. Though Rabindranath was not an Irishman, they found affinities everywhere, however far-fetched they may be. Irish literary critics, indeed, took pride in establishing this parallel between the new Irish revival in poetry and Rabindranath. This comparison does not strike us as very fortunate. Though both these revivals were determined by historically very similar forces, though their literary inspiration had many affinities, yet Rabindranath soon outgrew this stage
of narrow nationalistic revival and aimed at a more comprehensive interpretation of life. The following remarks from an Irish newspaper have, therefore, to be read in their proper context. For though there is much in it with which we agree, yet we have to beware of abstractions such as the “Celtic temperament” and the “Irishman of India.” If, indeed, Rabindranath had been nothing but the “Irishman of India,” he would never have achieved that broadness of vision that characterises all his work:

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

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

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

¹ The Pioneer, 3-11-1913.
haps, the forerunners (in conjunction with the poems of W.B. Yeats and AE) of the greatest movement in European Literature yet experienced—its coming emergence from the low levels of ‘realism’ and intellectualism merely, to the plane of its truc voice as the exponent of a divine humanity.¹

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

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

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

² The Nation, Vol. 96, No. 2489, 1913.
honour upon him. And Rabindranath, the poet of Bengal, becomes in their eyes a kind of glorified ‘Irish citizen’ and since 1913 we hear people (even in India) speak of him as the “Irishman of India.”

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

¹ 7-12-1912.
³ L’Echo National, Paris, 16-7-1922.
⁴ Manchester Guardian, 15-11-1921.
⁵ Sunday Times, 4-12-1921.
land some of the most exquisite love-lyrics ever written:

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

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

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

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

¹ *The Athenaeum*, 8-5-1915.
² *Birmingham Post*, 6-12-1915.
more and more that Rabindranath’s literary antecedents could only be found in the West. This explains the many comparisons, parallels, and immature judgments. And we wonder what would have happened to an Indian literary critic who would review T. S. Eliot’s poems (and there is a good deal of Eastern influence in them too) establishing far-fetched comparisons with Indian poets of the past, without ever having cared to understand or study Western civilisation. The average literary criticism of Rabindranath’s poetry in the West is pathetic in its ignorance, pitiable in its contempt, but most remarkable in its lack of humility. Some may consider this to be too harsh a judgment on the critics of Rabindranath who had only a translation to go by. But we must remember that Ezra Pound and Yeats were not treated much better by the average critic whose main concern is and has always been to maintain a status quo not only in poetry, but also in politics.

One of the difficulties in reviewing Rabindranath’s short stories and novels was the obvious discrepancy between the excellence of thought and the apparent mediocrity of form in translation. From an ideological point of view, most of his novels found an eager reading public. The Victorian India of magic and mystical vagueness was transformed in his books and it became essentially an India of living human beings. From the point of view of form, however, the more sophisticated readers at least were dissatisfied. This need not surprise us: at a time when writers like Aldous Huxley, James Joyce, and Virginia Woolf, were experimenting with new forms of novel-writing, at a time also when the novel had reached its fullest maturity with the work of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky in Russia, with Marcel Proust and André Gide in France, Rabindranath could not but strike his European contempora-
ries as belonging both in style and characterisation to a different order of artistic expression which they had passed long ago, somewhere in the first half of the 19th century. The following remarks on *Gora* by Leonard Woolf seem to be representative of this kind of criticism:

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

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

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

¹ *Nation and Athenaeum, 9-2-1924.*
common. Kipling provided the Western reader with all the "glamour" and romanticism of the East for which there was such a great demand at that time. His sensibility responded to India in terms of romantic idealisation or in terms of either snobbish contempt or condescension. This, however, did not prevent English critics, from establishing irrelevant comparisons between Kipling's and Rabindranath's novels. We read, for instance, in a review of *Gora*:

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

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

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

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

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\(^1\) *Birmingham Gazette*, 12-4-1924.

\(^2\) *Natal Mercury*, Durban, S.A., 24-7-1929.
Another method of interpreting Rabindranath's novels consisted in establishing parallels between him and the great Russians. The point of comparison was undoubtedly the emphasis on the inner life of thought which is found in both the Russian novels and in Rabindranath. This parallel was particularly tempting, for the ideal of human excellence in Tolstoy and even in Dostoevsky is in many respects similar to that of Rabindranath:

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

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

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

¹ *The Church Times*, 1-8-1919. (Review of *Home and World*).
² *The London Mercury*, July 1926.
ber that in the years after the last war, both Tolstoy and Dostoevsky were rediscovered by millions of Western readers, we shall find the clue to these frequently repeated comparisons between Rabindranath and the great Russians. In a preceding chapter already we have heard a French critic call Rabindranath a “Hindu Tolstoy;” here is, a few years later, another Frenchman who goes a step further and tries to establish a parallel not only between the ideals of these two great men, but also between their lives: “Both were of feudal origin,” he says, “and both went to the people. At the beginning they both thought of helping the downtrodden masses by the half-hearted methods of political and material charity; later on when they realised that these means are not worthy of them and of humanity at large, they both escaped into religion, the Russian into a revivalist evangelism, the Indian into a broadened but also weakened Hinduism, which is akin to Western doctrines, with its conception of a personal God; and both became, either in prose or in verse, great religious poets. Confronted by the problem of the destiny of humanity, both have one principle in common, that of non-resistance to evil, if the only remaining form of resistance is violence.”

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

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

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

\(^1\) Manchester Guardian, 10-11-1921.
well indeed. Perhaps the difference between him and most of the other writers was that he had very definite ideas to express, while the others were contented to distort reality in a dreamy and vague way.

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

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

1 *Times of India*, Bombay, 4-2-1930.
Rabindranath’s plays were found to have many affinities with ancient Greek tragedy and the mediaeval religious allegories. These comparisons are, of course, only partly correct. What distinguishes Greek tragedy from Rabindranath’s plays, is its sense of the dramatic conflict, of sin and punishment, of a supernatural fate that shape the tragic characters, their thoughts, their emotions, and their actions. Rabindranath’s characters are more humane, and dramatically less intense; the supernatural is there too, but it has become a personal God with Rabindranath, no longer the impersonal *deus ex machina* of the Greeks. The difference between Rabindranath and the mediaeval allegories consists in the fact that these allegories were, as a rule, devoid of any intellectual or ideological problems and appealed directly to the religious consciousness of the people. For Rabindranath in his plays religion is hardly ever an end in itself; it is the background, against which the characters live or die, an “atmosphere” or a guiding emotion. It is never dogmatic, and, therefore, can never be called “mediaeval.”

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

1 *The Scotsman*, Edinburgh, 23-7-1925.
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Drama in which no action takes place: a drama in which vague, shadowy figures, indecisively male or female, meander through the pages, uttering pseudo-Maeterlinckian platitudes."\(^1\) And one critic when reviewing *The King of the Dark Chamber* thinks that the characters "flit to and fro across the scene like people in a dream or in a play of Ibsen (sic)".\(^2\) The tremendous opposition against Ibsen’s plays in England is still in our memory; no wonder, therefore, that this reviewer who evidently did not grasp the significance of either Ibsen or Rabindranath as playwrights, makes no distinction at all between the two and considers both of them equally nonsensical. The next generation of theatre-goers was more sophisticated. It had been overfed on Ibsen and Shaw, it could hardly adjust itself to the subtle and suggestive symbolism of Rabindranath. And after a performance of *Chitra* in Sydney, Australia, a critic makes the following extraordinary remarks:

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

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

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\(^1\) *Dublin Evening Mail*, 22-7-1925.

\(^2\) *The Guardian*, 17-9-1914.

\(^3\) *The Bulletin*, Sydney, Australia, 17-12-1925.
of which we have been looking at Rabindranath until now. What these scholars have to say may without doubt be illuminating, but it does not throw light on the actual response of Western people to Rabindranath. We have tried to show that this response was of an extremely complex nature, much more complex indeed than the reading of the more scholarly works on Rabindranath would lead us to expect. It is no accident, for instance, that both Thompson and Lesny in their otherwise remarkable books, devote only a few pages to a discussion of Rabindranath in the West. Preoccupied as they were with a purely academic interpretation of Rabindranath’s work, they neglected that part of his life which is, perhaps, the most fascinating: his meeting with the Western sensibility, with Western tradition of thought and action, with the continuity of European civilisation. The following paragraphs will serve the purpose of elucidating the causes that led to the rapid decline of Rabindranath’s fame in the West. For this decline—unfortunate as it undoubtedly is—is also part of Rabindranath’s experience in the West, and he himself was, in his later years, intensely conscious of it.

3. Rise and Fall

The rise or decline of a poet’s fame is conditioned by social as well as psychological factors. During the great crisis of the European soul, poetry was a kind of safety-valve for all those individual or collective emotions that had to be suppressed in the process of monopoly-formation in the political and economic life of the West. The West had lost its “soul” during the four years of the war; it found her again—weak, but purified and detached—in the poetry of Rabindranath during the period following the War. But Rabindranath to them was like a feeble and flickering
light in the darkness, separating the chaos of the past from the chaos of the future. And after the first great enthusiasm had passed away, people approached Rabindranath with the scepticism and doubt that come from defeat and spiritual impotence. It almost seems sometimes as though the West was ashamed for having bestowed honour upon one who remained outside the vicious circle of defeat and frustration. They tried to find reasons why Indian literature should not be taken seriously; perhaps, they did so in order to compensate their own awareness of failure and spiritual inferiority. What else can we think of the following statement which appeared in the Times Literary Supplement in 1932:

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

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

¹ Times Literary Supplement, 11-2-1932.
of intellectual bullying:

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

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

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

¹ The Church Times, 15-6-1937.
time, and though the very essence of his English will always give his verse distinction, it would be safe to prophesy that his work will not be at all closely related to the English poetry of his day. His ways are not our ways and never can be unless and until, as Count Keyserling prophesied might happen, the West goes over to the East, makes philosophy its religion and forgets its last disreputable two thousand years.¹

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

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

¹ *Oxford Mail*, 27-5-1930.
² *New English Weekly*, 15-12-1932. (Review of *The Golden Boat*).
whose inspiration was foreign to their twisted and sophisticated intellect? When W. B. Yeats included some of Rabindranath's poems in his Oxford Book of Modern English Verse, even literary critics of some distinction expressed their misgivings:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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