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# A Classic Eclipsed
## Tagore in the West

Bernd-Peter Lange

Halle (Saale) 2011

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# Foreword

On the occasion of the celebrations of the 150th anniversary of Rabindranath Tagore's birth the Embassy of the People's Republic of Bangladesh asked me to deliver a keynote address in which the German connections of the great man were to be highlighted, at a small conference on Tagore at the Humboldt University, Berlin, on May 8, 2011. In spite of the fact that I have no knowledge of Tagore's mother language and am not a specialist in the field of Tagore studies, I accepted the invitation. My credentials for this undertaking are merely an interest and a teaching and research record in Anglophone South Asian literatures. This includes various visits to Tagore's university of Visva Bharati at Santiniketan, where I was involved in some as yet inconclusive efforts to augment the international range of this institution of learning. One result of these activities has been a growing personal interest in Tagore's works inasmuch as they are accessible to a Western scholar.

These meagre credentials have to be borne in mind in any reading of the following paper that makes an attempt at critiquing the often too facile and Orientalising views of Tagore's literary works in the West, and particularly Germany. Such approaches have not done the towering figure of the great Bengali any lasting service. However, as was said on the panel after my address, an eclipse of a poet's critical fortunes might well be followed by renewed visibility.

Though my oral presentation has been reworked and aug-

mented for print, its original character remains very much in evidence, particularly in several time-related references. I have, however, refrained from amending these as I felt that such would have diluted the flavour of the whole.

# Contents

## Tagore in East and West Today

One familiar way of celebrating the memory of an outstanding historical figure such as Rabindranath Tagore (Rabīndranāth Ṭhākur in the original Bengali) is to look at the impact his works have left on his own and other cultures. Today in 2011, on the occasion of the 150th anniversary of Tagore's birth, it is tempting to look back on an earlier of such celebratory events, the *Tagore Memorial Lectures* in 1980. Then the Indian poet Nissim Ezekiel tried to describe the cultural impact of Tagore, whom he called "the 'voice' of Asia" following HAY 1970: 11 (EZEKIEL 1992: 71). The special drift Ezekiel's argument takes concerns modern culture in a post-colonial dispensation; as envisaged in Tagore's lectures on nationalism (TAGORE 1917: 94):[1]

> True modernism is freedom of mind, not slavery of taste. It is independence of thought and action, not tutelage under European schoolmasters.

Talking today about the curious fate that befell Tagore's work and ideas among the European, and Western, schoolmasters, I shall start with perhaps a quite parochial, though recent, example of the great man's cultural afterlife. In January 2011, The Berlin Radio Symphony Orchestra performed

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[1] Quoted by HAY 1970: 331, whom EZEKIEL 1992: 81 in turn quotes. Originally in "The Spirit of Japan" (1915) (cf. TAGORE 1996: 364–375; quotation on p. 368).

Alexander Zemlinsky's once famous *Lyric Symphony* at the Berlin Philharmonic. It thereby linked up with one of the many sites of Tagore's creative reception in German language regions, strongly focused on Berlin. In fact, this was almost precisely 75 years after Tagore's enthusiastic welcome at the old Berlin Philharmonic on his second visit to the city. Zemlinsky's *Lyric Symphony* derived its text from Tagore's second publication of his verse in English, the collection *The Gardener* (1913). This the London publishers Macmillan were issuing as a follow-on to the universally acclaimed, and Nobel Prize winning, *Gitanjali*[2] a few months earlier. The text Zemlinsky used was Hans Effenberger's German translation of Tagore's own English version, itself at some remove (I have to trust critical opinion here) from the Bengali original, "the originals being sometimes abridged and sometimes paraphrased" — as Tagore himself put it in his preface to the English publication.

What happened in this process of textual appropriation to the — by most accounts — fine examples of Tagore's lyric poetry in *The Gardener* is indicative of a measure of marginalisation that was setting in in the West once the initial enthusiasm over the Nobel Laureate had abated. The manner in which the composer employed the text created a narrative sequence that was absent from the Bengali original. All in

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[2] Here and in the following, *Gitanjali* refers to the English work (and its translations), not to the Bengali *Gītāñjali*.

all, in spite of Zemlinsky's compositional achievement with its late-Romantic musical score, the use he made of Tagore's poetry chimed in with the one-sided and eventually narrowing dominance of the devotional character of that earlier collection *Gitanjali* on which the poet's fame in the West came largely to depend. This was eventually, as can be argued about Britain and Germany, to its disadvantage, and so to containing it in a limited terrain of cultural responses that does not do justice to the protean nature of Tagore's vast achievement.

What this critical containment also led to, was a widening chasm between the critical and popular reception of Tagore's work in East and West. In this it fell behind Tagore's own fine criticism of Kipling's phrase about East and West never being meant to meet, implying the opposite as a desirable goal. In an essay on the occasion of fifty years of independence for the successor states of British Imperial India, one of Tagore's Bengali successors as Nobel Laureate, Amartya Sen, a native of Tagore's Santiniketan, described the discrepancy between the reputation of Tagore in South Asia and the West in no uncertain terms. In South Asia, SEN 2005: 89 writes,

> Rabindranath Tagore … is a towering figure in the millennium-old literature of Bengal. Anyone who becomes familiar with this large and flourishing tradition will be impressed by the power of Tagore's presence in Bangladesh and in India.

> His poetry as well as his novels, short stories and essays are very widely read, and the songs he composed reverberate around the eastern part of India and throughout Bangladesh.

Sen then goes on to compare this wide impact to its absence in the West (SEN 2005: 89):

> In contrast, in the rest of the world, especially in Europe and America, the excitement that Tagore's writing created in the early years of the twentieth century has largely vanished.

This summarises well informed opinion today: while Tagore is a cultural icon whose lyrics grace two Subcontinental national anthems,[3] in Europe he has transformed into a hazy luminary on the horizon of cultural memory. But it may be true that this difference between East and West is not completely watertight — in India's young generation there are signs of fatigue due to the educational exposure to a received classic's work,[4] while in Europe South Asianists and translators from Bengali, as well as various devotees of esoteric knowledge, have kept up a limited public interest in Tagore.

Both, the continuity of Tagore's commanding status in the East, and its gradual eclipse in the West, are predicated on the problem of literary and cultural translation, a problem that Tagore himself was much aware of in his essays (TAGORE 1997a: 353). One of the older literary histories of Indi-

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[3] Namely those of India and Bangladesh, both in Bengali.

[4] Anita Desai in her foreword to DUTTA/ROBINSON 2009: xviii.

an writing in English, by K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar,[5] emphasises the transcendence by Tagore of linguistic boundaries (IYENGAR 1995: 99):

> Tagore wrote primarily in Bengali, but had a mastery of English also. He translated many of his poems and plays into English, often changing, telescoping, transforming the originals.

Iyengar follows this with a listing of the many creative roles that Tagore adopted in his long career (IYENGAR 1995: 99):

> He was a poet, dramatist, actor, producer; he was a musician and a painter; he was an educationist, a practical idealist who turned his dreams into reality at Santiniketan; he was a reformer, philosopher, prophet; he was a novelist and short-story writer, and a critic of life and literature; he even made occasional excursions into nationalist politics, although he was essentially an internationalist. He was thus many persons … .

In a recent literary history of the same Anglophone terrain, the Calcutta based, England-returned writer Amit Chaudhuri gives a more detailed analysis of the cultural contours of Tagore's position across East and West (CHAUDHURI 2003: 110, CHAUDHURI 2008: 100):

> … much of Tagore's achievement — whether in Bengali writing, or in his musical compositions — was hybrid, very much a product of the colonial situation, the result of bor-

[5] Iyengar's work was first published in 1962.

> rowings, reworkings, and of influence ranging from English literature, Western music, Vaishnavite literature, Baul songs, Kabir dohas, Kalidas, to the Upanishads. Tagore's intellectual background consists of both Western culture, thus, and a new pan-Indian tradition that was being collated, translated, and made material by teachers, Orientalist scholars, and the English and Bengali printing presses.

In spite of this hybrid nature of Tagore's work, there is however, no denying that translating between Bengali and other cultures also incurred losses that eventually led to an eclipse in Tagore's Western reputation, as one of his English translators, William Radice, noted in an introduction to his selection of Tagore's poems (in TAGORE 1994: 24):

> Tagore is … inseparable from his Bengali background. This was the basic trouble with what the West saw of him: they got the universal message, which because it came to them detached from Tagore's background appeared to many insipid or gutless; they saw the all-Indian, all-world figure, not the Bengali; they read the poetry in English … not in the poet's mother tongue.

This is in tune with Tagore's own concern with the privileges of mother tongues (DAS 2011), though it takes its implications very far: demanding to read anybody's poems in the mother tongue would preempt the claims of a world literature from which, in spite of a rather limited acquaintance, people in the West would not exclude Tagore.

## Early Enthusiasm in the West

The origins of Tagore's enthusiastic early recognition in the West is a familiar story. The superb biography of Tagore by Krishna Dutta and Andrew Robinson (DUTTA/ROBINSON 2009) gives most of the details. It relates that Tagore brought his own prose rendition of *Gitanjali* with him on a visit to London where the artist William Rothenstein was overwhelmed by it, passed it on to William Butler Yeats and his circle and arranged its publication after Yeats had introduced some corrections to its language. In a letter to Yeats Rothenstein pointed out the special relevance he saw in *Gitanjali* for the Irish poet's own poetic innovations and the need for minor changes in the text (DUTTA/ROBINSON 2009: 164):

> Above all, the poems have nothing in them which any man must feel it necessary to reject, as is the case with so much of the great mystical poetry of the world, where here and there are stated things which offend that perfect balance of visions which great art must show.

This shows some awareness of the development of Yeats's poetic visions in his middle period, when he was working his path through John Donne's metaphysical poetry to construct his own highly idiosyncratic system of the occult and the mystical in a modernist framework. Yeats on his part felt it possible to respond to Tagore's poems in *Gitanjali* as an expression of a harmony and wholeness lost as irrevocably to himself, as to Western modernity generally. This is empha-

sised in Yeats's introduction to the first English language edition of *Gitanjali* in 1912. There he plays off Tagore's poetry and its author against Western materialism (TAGORE 1997b: 41):

> … we fight and make money and fill our heads with politics — all dull things in the doing — while Mr. Tagore, like the Indian civilization itself, has been content to discover the soul and surrender himself to its spontaneity.

To Yeats, Tagore's poems are an expression of a holistic culture promising to retain its unity (TAGORE 1997b: 40):

> If the civilisation of Bengal remains unbroken, if that common mind which — as one divines — runs through all, is not, as with us, broken into a dozen minds that know nothing of each other, something even of what is most subtle in these verses will have come, in a few generations, to the beggar on the roads.

For Yeats at this time, Tagore's poetry is the expression of "a tradition, where poetry and religion are the same thing, [that] has passed through the centuries" (TAGORE 1997b: 39) — a tradition, Yeats implies, at once popular and aristocratic, a strongly appealing quality for Yeats in this period and later. All in all, there appears a very strong identification between the poems and their author and his Irish fellow-poet and editor, as in the much quoted personal remarks in the introduction to *Gitanjali* (TAGORE 1997b: 39):

> I have carried the manuscript of these translations about with me for days, reading it in railway trains, or on the top of omnibuses and in restaurants, and I have often had to close it lest some stranger would see how much it moved me.

Inevitably, in a modernist poet like Yeats, as in his Western contemporaries, there was a downside to this emotional receptivity, a strong ambivalence that came out early on when in a reply to some skeptical remarks about Tagore made by a friend of Yeats he was reported as saying that, of course, Tagore was "absorbed in God" (DUTTA/ROBINSON 2009: 170). In a culture of the West turning ever more secular, where soon Walter Benjamin was to refer to religion having become "small and ugly" as a philosophical agent for society's future (BENJAMIN 2010: 16), the appeal of Eastern spirituality could easily be followed by disenchantment. In fact, it ran counter to the tenets of much modernist poetics, in a position of un-belonging similar to that Judith Butler has recently seen in Kafka (BUTLER 2011: 4ff.). This was at the opposite end of Tagore's poetics of universalist harmonious embrace.[6] For a short phase, however, this resistance to a positive acceptance of Tagore's conceptual field was kept in check by an affinity in the space of the occult and theoso-

[6] In Yeats's own case, a similar loss of spatial focus is seen evolving in the famous lines from *The Second Coming*, soon after his friendship with Tagore, that "things fall apart, the centre cannot hold", and in his turn against "old mythologies" in the same decade.

phy, a unity of aristocratic and popular leanings, including nationalist and also anti-colonialist perspectives.

The tension between personal and exoticist attractions on the one side, and a feeling of Eurocentric superiority based on language and culture on the other, in the response to Tagore's personality and poetry, was even stronger in Ezra Pound than in Yeats. On their first meeting, Tagore made Pound feel like "a painted pict with a stone war-club" (DUTTA/ROBINSON 2009: 166). Pound's review of the English *Gitanjali* in the *Fortnightly Review* (1913) saw in Tagore's lines an antidote to the strains on Western life of modernity's urbanisation, mechanisation and manipulation. As he averred (DUTTA/ROBINSON 2009: 166):

> Briefly, I find in these poems a sort of ultimate common sense, a reminder of one thing and forty things of which we are over likely to lose sight of in the confusion of our Western life, in the racket of our cities, in the jabber of our manufactured literature, in the vortex of advertisement.

Pound himself was not at all immune to such modern "confusions" such as journalistic hype, promising his American readers Tagore as "the sensation of the Winter" (DUTTA/ROBINSON 2009: 171) when he introduced them to the Bengali poet. Soon, though, Pound started putting Tagore's poetry down, and in a letter in 1916 to a friend after Tagore's American tour of that year he was scathing in disputing the Nobel Prize merit (DUTTA/ROBINSON 2009: 208):

> Tagore got the Nobel Prize because, after the cleverest boom of our times, after the fiat of the omnipotent literati of distinction, he lapsed into religion and was boomed by the pious non-conformists.

What Pound initially extolled as an antidote to the Western culture industry and helped on its way, he soon projectively charged with its supposed complicity in the same capitalist formation.

## The German Boom

Almost exactly 90 years ago, in May 1921, Tagore gave a lecture in the Auditorium Maximum of the Kaiser-Wilhelm-Universität (now Humboldt-Universität) in Berlin. It was so extremely successful and well-attended that it had to be repeated the next day. The report on the event in the liberal *Berliner Tageblatt* (3.6.1921) set the tone for the kind of reception, and also the expectations of his German audiences, that Tagore gracefully accepted on his tour of Germany. I translate this Teutonic kind of hype, the original of which is quoted in GÜNTHER/REHMER 1999: 65:

> On his triumphant tour of Europe, the poet from India has at last, after some detours North and South, landed at the German imperial capital. Yesterday at 12 noon when the sun was in its zenith, the sage from Buddha-country gave a unique guest lecture in the new main auditorium of the University. Attracted by the splendour of the meteor that has ap-

> peared for it in the declining Occident and is throwing its light over Berlin, the vast family of the alma mater has closed its ranks into one unified community … .

And so on … .

Whereas the message the wise man from the East delivered is taken as known to his audience from his publications, in the newspaper coverage emphasis is placed on Tagore's personal charisma:

> How wonderful is the picture of this personality, this august appearance in a silver-grey gown, with its infinitely noble head framed by the flowing hair of venerable old age.

The academically loaded German term *Talar*[7] (here translated as "gown") for the chapkan that Tagore donned as an inclusive synthesis for Bengali intellectuals — and which earlier on in one of his realist short stories, *Samāpti*,[8] he had made fun of because of its inappropriateness in a rural Hindu context — was a subtle kind of translation, often supported by Tagore's Sufi cap, in cultural politics that the journalists in Berlin could not be familiar with. K.N. Panikkar calls this specific cultural politics of dress a means "to define cultural nationalism in non-sectarian terms" (PANIKKAR 2007: 81). It was not eventually successful except in a highly individual-

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[7] Used particularly for the academic gown or robe of professors.

[8] In English *The Conclusion* (TAGORE 1997a: 268–287; see pp. 272f.).

ised way. The cultural meaning accruing to a particular style of dressing may be based on a misunderstanding of its original cultural significance. A person's social coding can equally easily be misconstrued as his/her verbal utterances. Translation, in this extended sense, was a treacherous, but in this instance exceptionally beneficial, friend for Tagore's critical fortunes in the West.

The purple prose of the *Berliner Tageblatt* was representative of the main line of Tagore's enthusiastic reception as a visible appearance in Germany, and also of his poetry and lectures. It united his early popularisers and translators in the circle around Hermann Keyserling with such unlikely figures as the future Nazi propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels. A trace of it reemerged in much later Indian writing in Anita Desai's flashbacks to her central figure's Berlin childhood in *Baumgartner's Bombay* (DESAI 1988).

The limited way in which after the Nobel Prize Tagore found a positive critical and popular reception in the West — and the USA and France (QURESHI 2011) might be added to my focus here on Britain and Germany — signalled a short-circuiting of the process of cultural appropriation, a certain narrowing of responses in terms of aesthetics and ideology. One major obstacle to the transfer of Tagore's work was, of course, the necessity of translation. As Tagore himself, and all his Western readers with any knowledge of Bengali recognised, whole tracts of his best, and also his most popular creations (the songs, much of his poetry) are 'lost in transla-

tion', not just because of inadequate renditions — like some of Tagore's own — but because of the sheer untranslatability of some of the finest parts of his original publications. The late Tagore sometimes simplified this problem by saying that his poetry was for the East while his paintings were for the West, thus for once falling behind his many attempts at bridging that cultural gap. But obviously there is a particular hermeneutic problematic of the spoken, sung or printed word that the visual sister arts are not subject to in any comparable way. This problem of translation is made more stringent in German as removed from Tagore's writing by the double barrier of Bengali and English as the early mediating source of translations.

## Translation (*Gitanjali* 18 as an Example)

It is a commonplace to regret the losses incurred in any translation of a literary text — more so in the area of poetry than in other genres, and similarly in the case of more distant cultures. No doubt this affected Tagore's poetry in Germany. A sound philological analysis would unearth the differences between the original and the translated versions of any text. This kind of analysis has been done a few times — not very often, surprisingly, in view of the remarkable response elicited by Tagore's poetry in Germany after its introduction. Debarred from such an undertaking, I have to reverse the customary process of translation comparisons. Instead of start-

ing from an interpretation of a Bengali original and then looking at the different versions in other languages, I concentrate on just one poem from *Gitanjali* (no. 18 in the reselected English edition) in some of its many versions. The poem *Megher pare megh jameche* appeared in most of the early translations of *Gitanjali* that Martin Kämpchen has enumerated in his meticulous review of Tagore's translations into German (KÄMPCHEN 1999: 66–77). The special point about these translations, from Marie-Luise Gothein's earliest one through Hans Effenberger's and all the other early ones, is that they are not grounded in Tagore's original Bengali song but in the poet's own English translation in 1912.

Tagore's rather sparse English rendition highlights the same hybrid version of human and spiritual love that pervades *Gitanjali* (TAGORE 1997b: 48):

> Clouds heap upon clouds and it darkens. Ah, love, why dost thou let me wait outside at the door all alone?
> In the busy moments of the noontide work I am with the crowd, but on this dark lonely day it is only for thee that I hope.
> If thou showest me not thy face, if thou leavest me wholly aside, I know not how I am to pass these long, rainy hours.
> I keep gazing on the far-away gloom of the sky, and my heart wanders wailing with the restless wind.

The first German translator, Marie-Luise Gothein, follows this version fairly closely, giving it a slightly heightened lyr-

ical quality, but refraining from any additions to the prose of the slightly anachronistic Tagore translation (TAGORE 1921: 18):

> Wolken häufen auf Wolken sich und es dunkelt.
> Geliebter, warum läßt du mich draußen vor dem Tore warten ganz allein?
> In der geschäftigen Zeit des Mittagwerkes steh ich zur Menge, aber an diesem dunklen, einsamen Tage hoff ich auf dich allein.
> Wenn Du mir dein Antlitz nicht zeigst, wenn du mich beiseite läßt, so weiß ich nicht, wie ich die langen Regenstunden verbringen soll.
> Ich starre zum fernen Schimmer des Himmels, und mein Herz wandert klagend mit dem ruhelosen Wind.

The many known among the numerous German translators of Tagore's English prose version of the poem in this early phase of its reception follow Gothein's stylistic lead.

Martin Kämpchen in his survey of them notes that the first German translation of the Bengali original to be published by the major early translator of Tagore's work in Germany, Helene Meyer-Franck, could only appear in 1946 because of the ban on new publications of Tagore's books in the Nazi era (KÄMPCHEN 1999: 88–92). But that collection excludes *Gitanjali* 18. A translation of this poem from the Bengali was, however, published earlier. This is the one addition to Kämpchen's survey I could trace; it is to be found in the classic history of Indian literature by the Indologist Helmuth

von Glasenapp which appeared in the magisterial *Handbuch der Literaturwissenschaft* in 1929. There *Gitanjali* 18 (in the European editions) is cited as an example of the superiority of Tagore's Bengali original to both the English and German translations then available (GLASENAPP 1929: 263):[9]

> Wolken ballen sich, das Dunkel kommt heraufgezogen.
> Warum lässest du mich warten an des Tores Bogen?
> Hier im letzten Abendscheine weil' ich harrend ganz alleine;
> Während bei des Tags Geschäften Menschen mich umwogen.
> Warum lässest du mich warten an des Tores Bogen?
> Willst du dich vor mir verbergen und dich mir versagen?
> Ach, wie soll ich die bewölkten Stunden dann ertragen?
> In die Ferne einzig seh' ich,
> Einsam nach dir suchend steh' ich,
> Und mein Atem wandert klagend mit des Windes Wogen.
> Warum lässest du mich warten an des Tores Bogen?

This translation differs from the earlier ones by the retention

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[9] To facilitate comparison, the Bengali original is reproduced here (with the refrain in round brackets): *megher pare megh jameche, ãdhār kare āse. | āmāẏ kena basiẏe rākha ekā dbārer pāśe. || kājer dine nānā kāje thāki nānā loker mājhe, | āj āmi ye base āchi tomāri āśbāse. || (āmāẏ kena basiẏe rākha ekā dbārer pāśe.) || tumi yadi nā dekhā dāo, kara āmāẏ helā, | keman kare kāṭe āmār eman bādal belā. || dūrer pāne mele ãkhi kebal āmi ceẏe thāki, | parān āmār kẽde beṙāẏ duranta bātāse || (āmāẏ kena basiẏe rākha ekā dbārer pāśe.) ||*

of the rhythmical structure of a text characterised by repetitions of the refrain, by creating rhymes and a stronger, although admittedly somewhat conventionalised late-Romantic lyrical imagery.

Martin Kämpchen has added the probably most contemporary German translation of the Bengali original of *Gitanjali* 18 (TAGORE 1995: 77):

Wolken türmen sich auf Wolken,
Nacht fällt ein.
Warum läßt du mich am Tor
warten ganz allein?

Will die Pflicht es, kann ich hundert Pflichten
täglich unter hundert Menschen tun.
Doch heute warte ich nur hier:
Halte Wort und komm zu mir!
Warum läßt du mich am Tor
warten ganz allein?

Willst du dich nicht zeigen
und mich weiter übersehen,
wie können solche Regentage
dann vergehen?

Mit starren Augen blicke ich
unaufhörlich in die Ferne.
Meine Seele schweift, von Weinen blind,
umher mit dem ruhelosen Wind.
Warum läßt du mich am Tor
warten ganz allein?

This expansion of the strictly lyrical elements of *Gitanjali* 18 also characterises a contemporary English translation by Supriyo Sen which is accessible on *YouTube* on the internet (TAGORE 2007):

> Clouds have heaped on clouds galore,
> And dark now comes to the fore.
> Why must you keep me seated here,
> All alone by the door?
> Clouds have heaped on clouds galore … .
> On most days while in much travail,
> In throngs of many others I hail,
> Today I sit here entirely hoping for your encore.
> Clouds have heaped on clouds galore … .
> If you don't show yourself to me,
> Choose to evade this yearning,
> I don't know how to, in solitary,
> Bear these hours of storming.
> Eyes set out on a distant expanse
> I keep on gazing as if in a trance[,]
> My heart cries out in a rambling prance,
> To a wind's restless score.
> Clouds have heaped on clouds galore,
> And dark now comes to the fore.

Unfortunately, the *YouTube* version suffers from its awkward English, partly due to an attempt to shape a regular rhyme scheme, but it does construct quite a poignant rhythmical pattern as well as a nice visualisation of the poem's theme.

In sum, looking at the German and English translations in prose or lyricised prose lends some weight to the often repeated statement, not least by Tagore himself, about the untranslatability of his best work in poetry and song.

## The Eclipse

In the peak period of Tagore's reception in Britain few reservations about his poetry were publicised. Surprisingly, perhaps, the most noticeable ambivalence about his work was to be seen among his early mediators like Yeats and Pound. The point in their reservations, at least on the surface, concerned Tagore's translations of his own poetry.[10] After the first three volumes, *Gitanjali*, *The Gardener*, and *The Crescent Moon*, had been heavily edited by Tagore's literary friends, Yeats himself in 1917 warned the Macmillan publishing house against subsequent translations by Tagore. Twenty years later such critical distance hardened into a generalised conviction that nobody from Tagore's part of the world was, as it were congenitally, able to use English well, as Yeats put it in a letter about Tagore (quoted in DUTTA/

[10] Cf. the excellent detailed summary of the debates about the translations into English of Tagore's poetry by himself in Sisir Kumar Das's foreword to the collection of Tagore's English poem translations (TAGORE 1997b: 21–26). There Tagore's own growing awareness of the problematic nature of his early publishing policies, as well as the criticism of his contemporaries, is well documented.

ROBINSON 2009: 4). Ironically, this was the same year in which Graham Greene complained that it was only Yeats who was still taking Tagore seriously.

The reasons for such a surprising fall from critical grace varied. Inevitably, the linguistic and cultural distance between Tagore's background and the European scene posed recurrent problems for the appropriation of his work. In Britain particularly, there was an increasing distance from the idealist positions in philosophical thought and political ideology that Tagore confidently went on propounding. Here as in other countries, literary and popular responses concentrated heavily on the poetry, to the exclusion of huge tracts of Tagore's work. The narrow boundaries of the literary corpus that were accessible to British readers led to a definite restriction of the range of possible responses.

This was similar in the Germany of the 1910s and 1920s but also different in one major conjuncture. The special relationship that Tagore himself saw between himself and Germany existed because of a perceived or real affinity in idealism. While this affinity Tagore expressed was reciprocated by his immediate mediators into the German cultural scene like Hermann Keyserling, there was more ambivalence among some of the great modernist writers in the German language. This is evidenced by the irony in Kafka's conversational remark to Gustav Janouch about his fellow-author on Kurt Wolff's publication lists: "In reality Tagore is only a German in disguise", with the frivolous addition that "he

could be a Saxon — like Richard Wagner" (JANOUCH 1971: 85). There were signs of an equal detachment in remarks made by Thomas Mann, Georg Lukács, and perhaps also in Rainer Maria Rilke's refusal to translate Tagore's *Gitanjali* (DUTTA/ROBINSON 2009: 235). Nevertheless, there is no doubt about the strongly positive reactions to Tagore's charismatic appearance and pronouncements in the Germany of the 1920s and early 1930s, between his first and his last visits to the country.

In the Nazi era public enthusiasm around the sage from Bengal was not encouraged any more. Among the Nazi top brass Joseph Goebbels gave an example of such lack of support to an earlier idol. While that mediocre literary scholar was full of admiration for the first German language publication of *The Gardener* in 1918, at the Nazi Party Rally of 1937 his early enthusiasm had changed into disappointment that Tagore was just another figure of world liberalism, then defending the Spanish Republic against Franco's assaults.

In some ways, the early Goebbels was representative of considerable sections of his generation of the German intelligentsia. In the 1922 prologue to his doctoral thesis, the later fascist leader, at that time in a phase of intellectual and political indecision, opposed all materialism and enlightenment and spoke for "the young generation of Godseekers, mystics and Romantics" (LONGERICH 2010: 38; my translation). This was in line with his earlier student self as a self-styled idealist and *schwärmerischer* poet. In his doctoral thesis he also

expressed the need for a great figure as a leader of the young. At this point, in his contemporary journalism, he could still only define such leadership in negative terms, as something not to be found in internationalist fashions of the "Russian spirit" or "the Indian man", least of all in Jewishness (LONGERICH 2010: 38f.). The hardly concealed reference to Tagore as *indischer Mensch* (after Tagore's first extended tour of Germany in the vicinity of Goebbels's universities) already foreshadows the later distance in spite of all sympathy for what appeared to him as mystical anti-rationalism — to which, at least on the surface, Tagore's interest in some German Youth Movements of the 1920s like the *Wandervögel* seems to correspond. But of course there were light years between Tagore's internationalist humanism and the fixation on a leader-cult by the failed artist-intellectual Goebbels.

Whatever the chasm between Tagore's benign universalism and the quest for a leader of the future Minister of Propaganda, Tagore's books escaped the fate of the public burning of so many others of Kurt Wolff's publications. They are not listed in any of the publicised lists of the many book burnings of indigenous and foreign authors in German cities during the year 1933 available on the internet. He was honoured, however, by the inclusion of his paintings in the Nazi's category of *entartete Kunst* ("degenerate art").

The last flurry of publications around Tagore in Germany occurred through the great public interest aroused by the dia-

logue with Albert Einstein in 1931, and it was followed by a drop in new translations until after the end of the Second World War when these came onto the book market in a renewed trickle of publications. At that stage, the absence of any stronger reintensifications of Tagore's critical German fortunes was due to the narrowing basis of the initial enthusiasm, without the personal charisma of a great man, but loaded with peripheral acclaim by spiritualist seekers after the esoteric, attracted by an idealism fundamentally at odds with the spirit of that period of post-war reconstruction.

In both Britain and Germany, though partly for different reasons, Tagore thus fell from grace. In the period of capitalist reconstruction in Britain and Germany after 1945 the materialist sobriety pervading societies severely limited any positive reception of Tagore's work. The generalised hostility to any deviance from the mundane and everyday perhaps accounts for such venom with which the poet Philip Larkin fantasised a telegram reply to an Indian asking for his views on Tagore.[11] This, in the 1950s, marks the lowest point in known reactions to "that myriad-minded man" in Britain. In Germany, there was no such hostility, but after the cultural void owing to the severance of so many ties with the pre-Nazi period, and also after the death of the early German mediators of Tagore's work — publisher, translators and dialogue-partners —, there was a lull in public appreciation for

[11] "Fuck all, Larkin" (DUTTA/ROBINSON 2009: 8).

some decades, apart from residual appeals to Tagore's liberal humanism in both the Federal Republic of Germany and the German Democratic Republic.

## Revival vs. Continuity in Tagore's Impact

It may not be by chance that in the global transformation after 1989 there were voices in the West seeing an enhanced affinity to Tagore's work. The influential English translator of Tagore's poetry and prose, William Radice, put this renewed interest, short of a full-fledged revival, down to a generational proximity (in TAGORE 1994: 33):

> Thus, to children of the neo-Romanticism of the 1960s, my own era, he is a sympathetic voice. His educational ideals, his anti-materialism, his feminism, his version of the spiritual are all, to my own generation, familiar. In these he is near.

While some of these ideals no doubt also carried some weight in postmodernist or deconstructionist contexts, one might object that it is surely risky to generalise Romanticism for Radice's generation, and to make it the basis for hopes of a critical revaluation of Tagore's reputation in the West. At least there is by now a greater number of responsible editions of Tagore's English writings in global book-markets. Also, the great present exhibition of Tagore's paintings in Paris seems to justify his expectations of their suitability for a specifically Western appreciation.

Equally optimistic seems to me the recent claim made by

Martin Kämpchen that "Rabindranath Tagore is beginning to assume his place in world literature". This is, in translation, the opening sentence in an afterword to a wide-ranging edition of German translations of Tagore's writings across the manifold literary genres he employed (TAGORE 2005).[12] It is still significant that the publishing house partly in charge of Tagore's work in Germany was for some time a Roman Catholic one (Herder). Kämpchen attributes this to the persistent image, in Germany, of Tagore as a thinker and wise man from the East (KÄMPCHEN 2011: 104).[13] However, even the new excellent edition he has added to his long labours in Tagore's fields still carries a strongly spiritual and religious bias, particularly in his own selections from the master's poems. This may not do the poet an injustice, but it certainly fails to meet the mainstream of the German public sphere and the book-market serving it.

The slow recovery of Tagore's reputation in the West contrasts strongly with the continuously canonised status he has posthumously been able to claim in his native context. This

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[12] TAGORE 2005: 547 ("Rabīndranāth Tagore beginnt sich seinen Platz in der Weltliteratur zu erobern"). Also cf. KÄMPCHEN 1992: 125.

[13] This is also evident in the title (*Mein Vermächtnis*, i.e. "My Legacy") chosen by the publisher (Kösel) for the German translation (by Rahul Peter Das) of a selection from Tagore's Bengali essays (TAGORE 1997c) despite the express purpose of this translation to counter the image of Tagore as a mystic and sage from the East (cf. Martin Kämpchen in his foreword to TAGORE 1997c: 10f.)

is naturally most strongly marked in Bengal, but also noticeable in all successor states to British India. It has permeated the original media Tagore enriched — songs, poetry, dance, drama, prose fiction —, but it has also found a new field in the film versions of Tagore's stories and novels by Satyajit Ray, whereas the internet provides a new communicative medium for the representation and discussion of Tagore's classical works.

References to Tagore abound among the contemporary diasporic or cosmopolitan writers from South Asia. Just a few examples from books that have been successful in the world of Anglophone fiction over the last twenty years:

In that great epic of early independent India, *A Suitable Boy* by Vikram Seth (another writer with a family background from Bengal) allusions to Tagore range from serious quotations from the well-known uplifting lines from *Gitanjali* 35,[14] to the playful puerile habit of poking fun at the poet's authority by the younger members of one of the four central families of the book's social panorama.[15]

In manifold ways, other writers from South Asia too have carried Tagore's fame and their familiarity with his work across the waters into the globalising literary public domain.

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[14] "Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way into the dreary desert sand of dead habit …" (SETH 1993: 446).

[15] One of the juveniles complaining that "reading Tagore is like trying to swim breast-stroke through treacle" (SETH 1993: 412).

To give just a few out of many examples, Gita Mehta cites her longing for her native surroundings as an instance of Tagore's phrase that a geography can be made "sacred by devotion", although her *Snakes and Ladders*, where this is quoted, is not at all a devotional book (MEHTA 1998: 216). In diasporic fiction, in Sunetra Gupta's fine first novel *Memories of Rain* (GUPTA 1995) set in contemporary England, Tagore's songs shape the rhythm of the novel's plot by feeding into its nostalgia throughout, as do the recurrent quotes from his love poetry. The list of such citations in diasporic writers' books might be extended almost indefinitely. I will just again mention Anita Desai's *Baumgartner's Bombay* (DESAI 1988) as the one text that shifts the narrative point of view to a foreigner's (a German boy's) reaction to the historical figure of Tagore.

## Light from the East?

Why not learn something from the critical discourse around Tagore in the Subcontinent itself? The critic Aijaz Ahmad has seen a persistent ambivalence in Tagore's place in literary and cultural history in both the East and the West (AHMAD 1994: 197):

> A Tagore novel, patently canonical and hegemonising inside the Indian cultural context, could be taught in the syllabi of 'Third World Literature' as a marginal, non-canonical text, counterpoised against 'Europe'.

Both these concepts Ahmad critiques as falsely homogeneous in Western analyses of Orientalism, but he makes no attempt at finding a common ground for a positive appreciation of Tagore on a global level, other than by insisting on the secularity required to counter stereotypes about "Eastern spirituality".

In his excellent collection of essays *Clearing a Space* (CHAUDHURI 2008), Amit Chaudhuri is more successful in constructing a bridge for Tagore's reception in both East and West. He tries to include the mystical and transcendental influences operative in Tagore's work by coining the phrase of "secular spirituality" for his fellow-Bengali's achievement. Mainly, however, he tries to extend Tagore's reputation in the West beyond Tagore's traditional circle of admirers: "Indophiles, amateur religious enthusiasts, and followers of Khalil Gibran[16]" (CHAUDHURI 2008: 80).

Paradoxically, by placing Tagore squarely in his social context of the Bengali middle class, the *bhadralok*, Chaudhuri succeeds in extracting characteristics in Tagore's heritage that offer an avenue for a renewed, and different, reception outside the native range. Instead of the elusive universalism that the poet himself could not resist appealing to, Chaudhuri praises him for nuances much more in tune with postmodernist stances, stating that (CHAUDHURI 2008: 81)

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[16] I.e. philosophers mixing Sufism and Christianity, particularly in the USA.

> few poets in their work … have devoted so much of their gift to describing what is half-understood, partially grasped, unclear, or ambiguous — but that is the temperament of Tagore's songs and his lyricism.

If this puts Tagore into the position of a postmodernist *avant la lettre*, it is certainly acceptable not merely for the critical establishment in the West that dropped him so long ago, but for much of contemporary thinking worldwide.

That other great Bengali Nobel Laureate of our own time, Amartya Sen, places a different emphasis in his essay "Tagore and his India" (SEN 2005: 89–120) . He builds a bridge between Tagore's hegemonic status in his South Asian context and his narrow Western reception. He singles out "reasoning in freedom" as a value even in the largely devotional poems in *Gitanjali* like the one about the mind without fear quoted above (Nr. 35).[17] One contemporary political application of such libertarian reasoning is Tagore's determinedly anti-separatist, inclusive attempt to create a humanist synthesis of the world's cultural achievements. Amartya Sen reaffirms his predecessor's views on the rights to other cultures' products (SEN 2005: 119):

> Whatever we understand and enjoy in human products instantly becomes ours, wherever they might have their origin. I am proud of my humanity when I can acknowledge the poets and artists of other countries as my own. Let me feel

[17] See above, p. 27.

with unalloyed gladness that all the great glories of man are mine.

In a similar strategy, K.N. Panikkar marshals Tagore's criticism of blind belief in traditional values passed down by one's ancestors — "no social system has been perfected for all times by our ancestors" (PANIKKAR 2007: 102) — against the "social and ideological project of Hindutva". Thus, Tagore's legacy is an antidote to separatist communalism and an incitement for progress and modernity no matter where they are to be met with. It therefore transcends the nationalist frame with which Nissim Ezekiel began his Tagore Memorial Lecture over thirty years ago.[18] But then, Ezekiel had to rely on English translations of Tagore's Bengali works like many of his readers, including, as Anita Desai stressed in her foreword to Dutta's and Robinson's biography of Tagore, many readers in the Subcontinent itself, thus preventing "the kind of scrutiny that is the favoured way in our age of deconstruction" (Desai in DUTTA/ROBINSON 2009: viii).

It is quite possible to assemble all the progressive themes in Tagore's work — his reasonably accentuated modernism, his reflexive nationalism, his all-encompassing humanism, his productive hybridity, his internationalism, his anti-communalism etc. — into an attractive basis for a revaluation of his image particularly in the West. However, this would not entirely do justice to the pervasive integration of all these

[18] See above, p. 1.

themes into one holistic approach to life and art that marks his work. In it, everything connects with everything else in a polarity of spiritual transcendentalism and down-to-earth pragmatism (as in education and on many occasions in politics). In the period of Tagore's greatest public resonance in Germany in the 1920s there was a significant parallel in the life-reformist endeavours of Rudolf Steiner and its *lebensphilosophisches* groundwork.

2011 is also the sesquicentennial of Steiner's birth in 1861. Steiner shared with Tagore many tendencies, including centrally a spiritual pantheistic transcendentalism transferred onto educational practice. Like Tagore, Steiner survives outside his native context, but in a much more limited way through educational institutions like the Waldorf schools, whereas his ideas now mainly find an echo in a small circle of alternative thinkers and academic specialists. Even his recent biographers take care to dissociate themselves from his philosophy with its bias for the occult and spiritualism.

This, incidentally, also disproves that there is a specifically Eurocentric opposition to Tagore in the posthumous distance to his work in Britain and Germany. The basic issue in the difficulties of an active appropriation to Tagore's legacy, in the West but increasingly also in Asia, lies in the tension between the transcendental universalism in both Tagore and Steiner and the mainstream of scientific and public opinion.

## Epilogue

At the end of the English version of the collection *The Gardener* that the composer Alexander Zemlinsky set to his *Lyric Symphony* in 1924,[19] there is a final poem (no. 85) in which Tagore reflects on his critical fortunes a hundred years on (TAGORE 1997b: 125):

> Who are you, reader, reading my poems an hundred years hence?
> I cannot send you one single flower from this wealth of the spring, one single streak of gold from yonder clouds.
> Open your doors and look abroad.
> From your blossoming garden gather fragrant memories of the vanished flowers of an hundred years before.
> In the joy of your heart may you feel the living joy that sang one spring morning, sending its glad voice across an hundred years.

Zemlinsky did not use this particular poem, and the German translator replaced it by a pious Christian invocation in Latin. Now in a spring only a little short of the century that Tagore was wistfully looking forward to, the question still receives a plurality of different, and ever changing answers. It addresses a global audience, not just to be accessed on memorial occasions like the present celebrations of Rabindranath Tagore's 150th birthday anniversary.

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[19] See above, p. 2.

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