
Rabindranath Tagore's English Prose: "Some Qualities of Permanence"

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Abstract

This paper explores the enduring qualities of Rabindranath Tagore's English prose and puts forward the thesis that not only the *Gitanjali* poems but also many other of his English writings attained "some qualities of permanence" almost wholly because of his artistic skills. In addition to the strength of his ideas and the intensity of his feelings, the main reason why his prose works found an appreciative audience for a long time in the west can often be attributed to his adroit use of the English language in his letters, lectures, essays and speeches and his ability to adjust his style in accordance with the occasion, the audience, the genre and the subject matter. Without the impact the English prose writings have had, Tagore's international reputation would not have survived thus far. Indeed, the enduring popularity of a work such as *Nationalism* tells us quite clearly that while as far as his argument is concerned there is a lot that is still relevant for the world in Tagore's English writings, they should still appeal to us also because of his eloquence and writing skills.

How good is Rabindranath Tagore's English prose? And how substantial is the vast corpus of nonfictional works in the language that he has left behind? He had used the English language to write countless letters, deliver innumerable lectures, give numerous talks, speeches, and addresses, compose many a prose poem and essay and pen not a few Introductions and Prefaces for people he knew and causes he believed in. In fact, his English writings run in the indispensable folio-size Sahitya Akademi volumes to thousands of pages, but are they still worth reading for the quality of the writing as well as the ideas and thoughts contained in them?

If Tagore himself is to be believed on most occasions, his English writings are not good at all. Skimming through the excellent *Selected Letters of Tagore* edited by Krishna Dutta and Andrew Robinson, one is bound to find Tagore again and again denigrating his English prose, or acknowledging ruefully his inadequate command over the language, or apologizing for writing in the language at all. Initially, he would even request people who he knew were outstanding in the language to help him edit his work. To Ezra Pound, for instance, he wrote:

“I am not at all strong in my English grammar—please do not hesitate to make corrections when necessary. Then again I do not know the exact value of your English words...So in my use of words there must be lack of proportion and appropriateness” (Letter 56, 103).

As he wrote to Pound in another letter, he was afraid that in his English versions the *Gitanjali* poems “would be bereft of their language and suggestiveness” (Letter 58). After he had begun lecturing in America, he noted wryly in a letter to his daughter Bela how he had been reluctant to appear in the lecture circuit because he was “absolutely certain” that if he “were to lecture in the English language” he “could not possibly” keep his dignity (Letter 60, 109). As for his essays, he told Ramananda Chatterjee, the editor of the *Modern Review*, the journal that was to be the forum for many of them, “Please keep an eye out for errors in its English—I write the language without knowing it, almost by guesswork”. He goes on to claim that an Englishman who had glanced over one of them had been too benign for he had only removed “a surfeit of definite articles, supplied some missing ones and corrected some misapplied prepositions” (Letter 64, 115).

Writing in Bengali to Indira Devi Chaudhuri, the niece who was the recipient of some of his most heart-felt letters, Tagore points out how amazed he was by the success of the English versions of *Gitanjali* since he himself knew that his English was simply not good enough. After all, he tells her, didn’t he know about the pitfalls of the language, “the definite and indefinite articles, the prepositions, the use of “shall” and “will”—pitfalls which could not be “avoided by intuition” and could be acquired only through “tuition”. As he suggested wryly, he actually knew English “well enough to say” that he did not know it” (Letter 65, 118). To his good friend and steadfast promoter William Rothenstein, he added to his list of failings in the language, his lack of knowledge of English “set phrases and inability on many occasions “to write simple matter-of-fact things in English” (Letter 82, 141). When E. P. Thompson kept suggesting that he would like to translate some of his works, Tagore responded initially by saying that he liked the idea and wittily confessed his failings in English thus: “You know I began to pay court to your language when I was fifty. It was pretty late for me ever to hope to win her heart” (Letter 162, 254). In his correspondence with Thomas Sturge Moore he claimed that his English was “like a frail boat” (Letter 171, 273) and

said that that he did not “trust” his own “judgment about anything written” in that language, whether verse or prose” (Letter 197, 311).

Nevertheless, a close reading of Tagore's letters suggests that he was not totally blind to his achievements in the language. After all, the success of the English versions of his *Gitanjali* poems and the demand for him in the American lecture circuit even before he had received the Nobel Prize must have indicated to him that he was not completely deficient in English writing skills; besides he kept hearing complimentary things about them very early in his career as a translator of his own verse into English and as a writer of essays and a popular speaker in the American lecture circuit for quite a few years. There is, for instance, a kind of quiet pride and sense of satisfaction in the letter he sent to his scholar friend Kshiti Mohan Sen about a literary evening in London when W. B. Yeats had read some of the *Gitanjali* poems and then commented that “if someone were to say he could improve this piece of writing, that person did not understand literature” (Letter 46, 90). Indeed, the remarkable letter in Bengali that he had written to his niece Indira Devi Chaudhuri which I had read out from earlier to show his awareness of his deficiencies in the English language also makes clear his joy in composing in the language: “I had started a festival of poetic delight in my mind once before, fanned by the zephyr of my emotions [in writing the *Gitanjali* poems in Bengali], and so now I felt an urge to rekindle it through the medium of a foreign language”. Before he knew it, he goes on to say in the letter, he had filled two notebooks with his English versions. Surely this suggests that he must have been almost as overwhelmed in composing the English versions as he was previously when he was writing the Bengali poems (Letter 65, 117). The same letter records that Americans who had heard him lecture had disbelieved his claim that he did not know the language, stating to him that he spoke “excellent English” (118).

On the other hand, when Thompson offered to correct the English of some of the poems on another occasion, Tagore positively balked at the idea, claiming that they were “intimately personal” to him and that “every line” of these poems would be “as closely” his as possible. He indicated to Thompson that he would like to translate his poems unaided or have them only edited as lightly as Yeats had edited the *Gitanjali* poems (Letter 74, 132). When Robert Bridges, another English well-wisher, wrote to him proposing something similar, Tagore responded in a disingenuous manner suggesting as politely as he could that he

was reluctant to have anyone tinker with his own translations. As he put it to Bridges, though he “had no exaggerated notion” of his English style, and though he knew for certain that it must have “blemishes” he also knew that he was not “competent” to detect and much less to remove” them. (Letter, 104, 171). But it is in a letter to James Drummond Anderson, a lecturer in Bengali at Cambridge with whom he carried out a correspondence for almost a decade based on great mutual respect that Tagore suggests unequivocally for once that he actually had enjoyed grappling with the English language in translating his poems. Commenting on “the wonderful power of English prose” and its “magic” qualities, Tagore confides in Anderson that “the clearness, strength and suggestive music of well-balanced English sentences” made it a “delightful task” for him to “mould” his Bengali poems into English prose forms (Letter 121, 196).

This paper assumes that Tagore was very much the creative artist in the best of his English works, be it in prose or verse, although it will concentrate almost entirely on his nonfictional prose works. It takes its title from a letter that Tagore wrote to Rothenstein late in his life and at a time when he was increasingly defensive about some of his translations both because of the persistent rumors about the extent of the help he had received from Yeats and Sturge Moore initially and the dismal reception his later verse translations had been receiving. Claiming that he had published the *Gitanjali* translation only at Rothenstein’s behest, he acknowledges—quite generously one may add in parenthesis given Rothenstein’s observation that Yeats “did here and there suggest slight changes, but the main text was printed as it came from Tagore’s hands”—that the published collection attained “some quality of permanence” because of his collaboration with Yeats. My thesis in this paper, however, is that not only the *Gitanjali* poems but also many other of his English writings attained “some qualities of permanence” almost wholly because of Tagore’s artistic skills (Letter 263, 419) for even when they did not have the benefit of Yeats or anyone else’s editing skills, they are often of high quality. In addition to the strength of his ideas and the intensity of his feelings, the main reason why his prose works found an appreciative audience for a long time in the west can, I believe, often be attributed to his adroit use of the English language in his letters, lectures, essays and speeches and his ability to adjust his style in accordance with the occasion, the audience, the genre and the subject matter. Here it is important to remember that without the impact the English prose writings have had, Tagore’s

international reputation would not have survived thus far. What Sisir Kumar Das, the editor of the first three volumes of his English works, has to say about his prose is also worth quoting: “there is a large body of original prose writings which is important and as significant as his Bengali prose work” (I, 27). Indeed, the enduring popularity of a work such as *Nationalism* tells us quite clearly that while as far as his argument is concerned there is a lot that is still relevant for the world in Tagore's English writings they should still appeal to us also because of his eloquence and writing skills.

Take, for example, the letter that he wrote surrendering his knighthood. From its opening sentence to almost its end the letter manages to be at the same time indignant and dignified, pained and passionate, and polite and powerful. Thus Tagore manages to be scathing about the punitive measures taken by the British in Punjab even as he evokes the brutal power of empire to hurt and humiliate their Indian subjects in the following sentence:

“The accounts of insults and sufferings undergone by our brothers in the Punjab have trickled through the gagged silence, reaching every corner of India, and the universal agony of indignation roused in the hearts of our people has been ignored by our rulers—possibly congratulating themselves for what they imagine as salutary lessons”.

Notice here the control over syntax and diction and the ironic tone that give force to the sentence. But the eloquence Tagore was capable of in his English prose through his ability to register his feelings by manipulating the English language comes out most clearly in the sentence in which he announces that he was repudiating the honor done to him by the British when they had knighted him thus:

“The time has come when badges of honor make our shame glaring in their incongruous context of humiliation, and I for my part wish to stand, shorn of all special distinctions, by the side of those of my countrymen, who, for their so-called insignificance, are liable to suffer a degradation not fit for human beings” (Letter 142, 223).

Sadhana: the Realization of Life, the first book of prose that Tagore published came out from London in October, 1913 and collects eight essays that he had read out at Harvard University. In his preface, Tagore acknowledges the editorial help that he received from Ernest Rhys, but it is clear from the opening paragraphs of the book that what we have in front of us is a poet's work, for what

Tagore seems very adept at doing in English prose is weaving his argument through the effective deployment of image and sound patterns. He does so to contrast the civilization that developed in the west with the one that evolved in India to make the point that meditation is at the heart of Indian thoughts and aspirations. He thus compares the walled civilization of Greece with the forest habitations the Aryans built when they came to India. The city walls the Greeks built, he stresses, euphoniously, “left their mark in the minds of men” (II, 281). Developing these contrasting image patterns over the next few pages, he implies that while westerners did not “realize their kinship with the world” and lived in a “prison-house whose walls are alien” to them, in India “men are enjoined to be fully awake to the fact that they are in the closest relation to things around them, body and soul, and that they are to hail the morning sun, the flowing water, the fruitful earth, as the same manifestation of the same living truth which holds them in its embrace” (II, 283)

The rest of *Sadhana* continues to display Tagore’s adroitness in weaving images and sounds and maneuvering syntax while utilizing stylistic devices such as repetition, balance and parallel structures. His overall performance in these essays suggests that far from being a novice writer of English prose he has everywhere in them an admirable control over the language as well as a poet’s penchant for rhythm and figures of speech. He also seems to be as adept in coming up with pithy formulations as he is in controlling phrases and clauses to construct long and complex sentences. In talking about “the truth of the unity which comprehends multiplicity”, for example, he says epigrammatically: “acts are many, but the truth is one” (II, 290). Note also how naturally he slips into simple but effective analogies to come up with a precise image to convey succinctly the point he is trying to make:

“For, a mere fact is like a blind lane, it leads only to itself—it has no beyond. But a truth opens up a whole horizon; it leads us to the infinite” (II, 290).

On the other hand, Tagore shows that the intricacies of English syntax is no barrier to him when he wants to make an extended comparison or create a sentence that must necessarily expand to encapsulate an idea whose ramifications extend over time. To emphasize how we must be able to separate the soul from the self through *sadhana*, for instance, he comes up with successive sentences which develop the image of the soul as a bird which must

break through the shell that contained the chick because of the instinctive knowledge that “the shell is a dead thing, it has no growth, it affords no glimpse whatever of the vast beyond that lies outside it” (II, 292). To clinch the point that “man’s history is the history of his journey to the unknown in quest of the realization of his immortal self—his soul”, Tagore comes up with the following sprawling sentence to enact the long, onward and complex path man has had to travel:

Through the rise and fall of empires; through the building up [of] gigantic piles of wealth and the ruthless scattering of them upon the dust; through the creation of vast bodies of symbols that give shape to his dreams and aspirations, and the casting of them away like the playthings of an outworn infancy; through his forging of magic keys with which to unlock the mysteries of creation, and through his throwing away of this labor of ages to go back to his workshop and work up afresh some new form; yes, through it all man is marching from epoch to epoch towards the full realization of his soul,—the soul which is greater than the things man accumulates, the deeds he accomplishes, the theories he builds, the soul whose onward course is never checked by death or dissolution (II, 293-4).

In such a sentence Tagore is able to use imagery, repetition and parallel structures to good use to create the sort of prose which could only be perfected by someone with consummate command over the English language.

In fact, in the fourth essay of *Sadhana*, titled “The Problem of Self”, Tagore seemed to hint self-reflexively that he had managed sufficient mastery over the English language and was now able to wield it in a manner that was allowing him to be quite expressive in it. This, at least, is what I deduce from the point that he makes negatively about the problems of those who try to communicate their ideas in a language that they don’t know much about. “To be free from this fetter of words”, he declares, we must “rid ourselves of the *avidya*, our ignorance, and then our mind will find its freedom in the inner idea” (II, 307). Once this is achieved and the writer attains “perfect knowledge”, he implies, he can organize every word “in its place”. This, to me, is what he himself has done in *Sadhana* and the best of his English prose. Indeed, it appears to me that Tagore’s prose at its peak is able to reconcile the rhythms of a consciousness that is Indian with the movement of a mind that has reaped the benefits of a sustained study of skilled prose writers in English such as Ralph Waldo Emerson

and Henry David Thoreau. What he says about the rhythms of the universe is surely true of his English prose: “In fact, these undulations and vibrations, these risings and fallings, are not due to the erratic contortions of disparate bodies, they are a rhythmic dance” After all, “rhythm can never be born of the haphazard struggle of combat” for “its underlying principle must be unity, not opposition” (II, 316).

What I have said just now implies that as a prose craftsman using the English language, Tagore was also acutely conscious of making his figures of speech, his rhythms, and his diction suit the mood and the occasion. The celebrated 1917 collection of essays, *Nationalism*, based on lectures he gave in a Japan bent on a program of modernizing and militarizing and pursuing a goal that appeared to be based on chauvinism and jingoism, was, it seems clear, designed to be passionate and provocative unlike the serene and pensive talks he had given in America on *Sadhana*. In the *Nationalism* lectures, Tagore resorts insistently but ingeniously to the image of the machine to show how through a combination of capitalism and nationalism the west that Japan was apparently modeling itself on was now becoming mechanical, dehumanized and oppressive as well as voracious and all-consuming. No doubt deriving his metaphor from the Kolkata jute industry that the British had been developing, he points out how “in the west the national machinery of commerce and politics turns out neatly compressed bales of humanity which have their use and high market value; but they are bound in iron hoops, labeled and separated off with scientific care and precision” (II, 420).

To Tagore, the nation is the outcome of capitalist state formation organized to make “a whole population” serve “a mechanical purpose” (II, 421). Tagore is appalled by the relentless growth of the nation as “a wealth-producing mechanism” that was “incessantly growing into vast stature”. He points out that in the process “the full reality of man is more and more crushed under its weight” (II, 422). Wringing innumerable changes on his central metaphor, Tagore compares the nation variously to a hydraulic press, a power loom, etc, vividly evoking the image of the way the imperialist “nations of the West forges their “iron chains of organization which are the most relentless and unbreakable that has ever been manufactured in the whole history of man” or as a “monster organization” at the “least turn” of whose screw, “the grip is tightened to the point of suffocation

around every man, woman and child of a vast population, for whom no escape is imaginable in their country, or even in any country outside their own" (II, 427).

Images such as these remind us that Tagore is in the long line of romantic thinkers who have been exhorting us at least since the beginning of the nineteenth century about the spreading tentacles of capitalism and its vise-like grip and the necessity of mobilizing countervailing forces and/or arousing our consciences. I am thinking here particularly of Thoreau who uses the machine metaphor with such splendid effect in his classic "Resistance to Civil Government" where, we remember, the great American had argued that "the mass of men serve the State...not as men mainly, but as machines with their bodies" as members of the standing army of an imperialist America grabbing parts of Mexico and where he had exhorted his audience to oppose the tyranny of the nation-state by declaring "when the friction comes to have its machine, and oppression and robbery are organized, I say, let us not have such a machine any longer" (Thoreau 1481). But Tagore's stance and imagery in *Nationalism* also reminds one of Foucault and his probes into the carceral society created by the enlightenment state, as when Tagore talks sarcastically about the colonial state's attempts to suffocate India while offering it pittance of mechanized relief:

"While the small feeding bottle of our education is nearly dry, and sanitation sucks its own thumbs in despair, the military organization, the magisterial offices, the police, the Criminal Investigation Department, the secret spy system, attain to an abnormal girth in their waists, occupying every inch of our country" (II, 426).

In its time, *Nationalism* was the most controversial of Tagore's collection of lectures. According to Sisir Kumar Das, "Tagore's forthright denunciation provoked violent attacks in the American press and severe criticism by the Japanese intellectuals". Das adds that "this work made him unpopular not only in America and Japan, but also in India where nationalism had already entered a new phase of growth" (771). Reading the lectures after all these years to pinpoint the source of their capacity to arouse strong emotions, one is impressed with Tagore's eloquence and polemical power, for there is something very uniquely punchy about them, at least if one considers them in the overall context of Tagore's English oeuvre. Again and again in this work one comes across a Tagore who adopts a denunciatory and indignant tone. The west appears to be the silent interlocutor of the book in some places but he also resorts to

straightforward attack on it in parts of this text. Here, for example, he is taking it to task frontally, accusing it of choking the world through its engine of domination, the Nation:

You, the people of the West, who have manufactured this abnormality [the Nation], can you imagine the desolating despair of this haunted world of suffering man possessed by the ghastly abstraction of the organizing man? Can you put yourself into the position of the peoples, who seem to have been doomed to an eternal damnation of their own humanity, who not only must suffer continual curtailment of their manhood, but even raise their voices in paeans of praise for the benignity of a mechanical apparatus in its interminable parody of providence? (II, 428)

One notices in such passages how Tagore adopts a hectoring tone by posing a series of successive rhetorical questions worked up to a climax to indict the west. He makes use of contrasts (“suffering man...organizing man”), marshals his syntax (“not only...but even”) and deploys alliteration for emphasis (“doomed...damnation”: “continual curtailment”; “paeans of praise” and “parody of providence”) to assault his audiences who presumably were guilty of self-aggrandizing nationalism and oblivious to its devastating impact on the rest of humanity.

Such emphatic passages abound in *Nationalism*, indicating how in 1917 Tagore felt it imperative to use the most vigorous mode of address that he could muster to arraign the west as well as Japan and also confront the nascent nationalists of India to underscore the urgency of the situation. What he was afraid of was the circular motion by which the nationalism let loose by the west would then rebound on whole peoples, ultimately contaminating the whole of humanity. Tagore makes the case against the vainglorious, swirling and ultimately self-destructive nationalism of his time as dramatically as possible in a sentence like the following one:

“The Nation, with all its paraphernalia of power and prosperity, its flags and pious hymns, its blasphemous prayers in the churches, and the literary mock thunders of its patriotic bragging, cannot hide the fact that the Nation is the greatest evil for the Nation, that all its precautions are against it, and any new birth of its fellow is always followed in its mind by the dread of a new peril” (II, 429).

Using sarcasm, invective and irony, and departing completely from the mild-mannered or meditative mode that was typical of his previous English lectures, Tagore adopts the tone of someone intent on exhorting the Japanese to abandon nationalism and of a man by turns mocking the west and condemning it for creating a Frankenstein. Or as he presents the case:

“The West in the voice of her thundering cannon had said at the door of Japan, Let there be a Nation—and there was a Nation. And now that has come into existence, why do you not feel in your heart of hearts a pure feeling of gladness and say that it is good?” (II, 433).

Ultimately, he implies, he is so indignant and aggressive in pursuing the nation because he is aware that India itself is becoming infected by the excesses of nationalism. To quote him once again:

“Are we to bend our knees to this spirit of nationalism, which is sowing broadcast all over the world seeds of fear, greed, suspicion, [the] unashamed lies of its diplomacy, and unctuous lies of its profession of peace and good-will and universal brotherhood of Man?” (II, 449).

It is only in the conclusion of his lecture on nationalism in Japan that Tagore returns to the poetic mode one usually associates with him and even the prose of the *Sadhana* lectures. Watching the sunset in the modern port city of Yokohama one evening, he tells his audience, and taking in the peace and majesty of the scene, “with the great Fujiyama growing faint against the golden horizon, like a god overcome with his radiance—the music of eternity welled up through the evening silence”, convincing him that “the sky and the earth and the lyrics of the dawn and the dayfall are with the poets and idealists, and not with the market men robustly contemptuous of all sentiments” (II, 452).

In complete contrast to the *Nationalism* lectures are the ones Tagore wrote in his third trip to America in 1920-21 and then published in the volume titled *Creative Unity* (1922). Most of these essays were apparently written in English and are written in a prose that is melodious and picturesque. It is almost as if the lyric poet in him that had flourished in his English renderings of the *Gitanjali* prose poems had found another outlet now in his English prose. Here, for example, we come across lines such as the following: “The bare facts about April are alternate sunshine and showers; but the subtle blendings of shadows and lights, of murmurs and movements, in April, gives us not mere shocks of sensation, but unity of joy as does music” (499). Like the music, the metaphors

here keep flowing, as when he compares institutionalized religion with the soulful lyrics of the mendicant Baul poets of Bengal. The former, he suggests, is located in the “inaccessible mountain peaks of theology” while the latter reveal that “God’s manifest shower falls direct on the plain of humble hearts, flowing there in various channels, even getting mixed with some mud in its course, as it is soaked into the underground currents, invisible, but ever-moving” (II, 528).

As his confidence in his ability to write in English grew, Tagore attempted experiments in the language that are noteworthy. The volume *Thoughts from Tagore* (1921), for example, consists mostly of brief meditations on various topics, not unlike the collection of thoughts he was to publish in 1924 as *Stray Birds*. Tagore seems to have been inspired in this book to try out brief prose excursions composed in the vein of Pascal’s *pensees*. Like the compositions of the French thinker, Tagore’s can only be a brief paragraph long at times but can occasionally run to several pages. Like Pascal’s *pensees*, too, Tagore’s “thoughts” tend often to be aphoristic and are almost always profound, registering within their brief compass the movement of a mind that is acute in its apprehensions and lyrical-meditative in bent. In these “thoughts”, Tagore tries to tackle as concisely as possible some of his favorite themes such as nature and life, God and man, power and egoism and art and music. Sometimes the results can be quite striking as in the following example where he is able to transform an aesthetic principle into a metaphysical one. In a seemingly effortless move that shows that by this time his instinctively symbol-seeking mind has learned to move seamlessly in English as well as Bengali, he transcends from the particular and the quotidian to the supranatural and the sublime within the space of a few lines:

We are like a stray line of a poem, which ever feels that it rhymes with another line and must find it, or miss its own fulfillment. This quest of the unattained is the great impulse in man which brings forth all his best creations. Man seems deeply to be aware of a separation at the root of his own being; he cries to be led across it to a union; and somehow he knows that it is love which can lead him to a love which is final (III, 33).

Time and again Tagore’s *pensee*-like compositions surprise us not merely with the turn of the thought but with the deftness with which he handles an image and converts it into a symbol and the way he begins with a commonplace situation only to formulate sagaciously a maxim that has far-reaching implications. Take this *pensee* for instance:

We light the lamp in our room which creates a seeming opposition between it and the great outside world. Our life on the earth is like that small room in which our consciousness has been concentrated. And we imagine that outside it lies death. But the one indivisible truth of existence which is for us must not be doubted because our life obscures it for a moment (III, 57)

That Tagore became increasingly adept in suiting his English prose to the occasion and ordering his thoughts in it in many different ways to reflect different audiences and articulate varied moods can be seen when one moves from books like *Sadhana*, *Nationalism* and *Thoughts* to the work titled *Talks in China* (1925) that was the result of the lectures and speeches he gave in the country in April and May 1924. According to Sisir Kumar Das, the many talks Tagore gave on the tour were “delivered informally without any written notes” and then assembled and reprinted on the basis of the drafts and reports published in Chinese newspapers without the benefit of the poet’s revisioning of the text. It is little surprise, then, to find the talks given in China represent a Tagore who writes English that is easy to understand, fluid and conversational. Of course he can be witty and charming in them as when he tells his Chinese audience, “I am gratified to hear from you that you are convinced that I am a poet because I have a beautiful grey beard” but can also make a serious point lightly about his work when he goes on to say, “But my vanity will remain unsatisfied until you know me from my voice that is in my poems” (II, 588). However, in most of the talks he gave in China he makes a very pronounced effort to be as simple as possible, no doubt because he realized that only a succession of simple sentences and the most basic images would communicate best in this context.

One of the Chinese lectures is also quite useful because it informs us that he lectured in English there and elsewhere because of a sense of compulsion and after much preparation, that is to say, not at all spontaneously, as was the case when his Bengali songs and poems came to him. Nevertheless, he tells us, he sat down to write his lectures in English happily enough because he believed that it was “a poet’s mission to attract the voice which is yet inaudible in the air; to inspire faith in the dream which is unfulfilled; to bring the earliest tidings of the unborn flower to a skeptic world” (II, 394). The result in the Chinese talks is a prose that is engaging and gently persuasive, as when he posits the following question and then furnishes its best possible answer: “Why should there remain

forever a gulf between progress and perfection? If you can bridge the gulf with the gift of beauty, you will do a great service to humanity” (II, 608). In the talk titled “Civilization and Progress” it is obvious that Tagore is making an effort to incorporate not only the thought of Chinese sages such as Lao-tze but also the landscape of China to create a variation on his favorite image of oriental life as something embedded in nature as opposed to the mechanical existence of the west when he invokes “the mountain pines [that] grows tall and great” maintaining an “inner balance” so that even “in its seeming extravagance it has the reticent grace of self-control” (II, 629).

The Religion of Man (1931) was not Tagore’s final book in English but as the work based on the Hibbert Lectures that he gave in May 1930 it has been widely circulated and read. Indeed, this book has been in print much longer than most of Tagore’s other English compositions. Tagore revised the first edition, published by Allen and Unwin in 1930 the next year for Macmillan. Sisir Kumar Das comments that a look at the revised edition reveals “substantive corrections” (II, 971), indicating his increasing fastidiousness about the quality of his English writings. The lectures themselves constitute another attempt to present what he had often labeled as “a poet’s religion” (ii,127) and his humanism. The prose, as is always the case with him, is also a poet’s prose, rhythmic, vivid because of his endless capacity for similes, metaphors and analogies, and as usual written with sincerity and intense feeling. These qualities can be seen, for instance, in the flowing sentence where he describes how the Spirit of God appeared for him in a tropical storm: “The wonder of the gathering clouds hanging heavy with the unshed rain, or the sudden sweep of storms arousing vehement gestures along the line of coconut trees, the fierce loneliness of the blazing summer noon, the silent sunrise behind the dewy veil of [an] autumn morning, kept my mind with [sic] the intimacy of a pervasive companionship” (II, 121). What is new in this text, however, is that the imagery appears to be deliberately incorporating advances in science and the theory of evolution into his argument to depict what he calls the “Spirit of Life” ascending into the “Spirit of Man”. Tagore is bent on showing that technological advancements can never approximate the life of the spirit as when he argues that “a lotus has in common with a piece of rotten flesh the elements of carbon and hydrogen. In a state of dissolution there is no difference between them, but in a state of creation the difference is immense” (II, 136). Noticeably, he is quite willing in these lectures to sprinkle his English prose with Sanskrit

phrases and snatches of Sanskrit verse and intersperse them with translated lines from the Baul songs of Bengal.

The first volume of the Sahitya Akademi edition of Tagore's English writings represents his verse in English and the second concentrate on his stories, plays and essays in English. The third volume is aptly titled "A Miscellany" and contains not only his essays, talks, messages, prefaces, appeals but also his letters and much, much more. I believe there is a fourth volume that the Sahitya Akademi brought out last year that I intend to buy on this trip and take back to Dhaka. But I would like to conclude my survey of the achievements of Tagore's English prose by looking briefly at what is perhaps his last composition in the English language, a piece which has been titled simply as "Reply to Miss Rathbone". Written in June 1941, that is to say, a couple of months before he died, and at a time when he was gravely ill, it was dictated by Tagore to Krishna Kripalini. He had stirred himself from his deathbed to do so, protesting the "open letter to Indians" published by Miss E. Rathbone against an India clamoring for independence. She also arraigns Nehru's leadership of the agitation because she had felt that this was a time when the allied forces and the British government had their hands full contending with their enemies and did not need the Indians to make things worse for them. What Tagore took exception to however, was the insinuation of ingratitude. His angry response shows that he can be scathing when he wants to be as when he writes: "She is scandalized at our ingratitude—that having 'drunk deeply at the wells of English thought' we should still have some thought left for our poor country's interests" (III, 851). Tagore's indignation at the colonizer's arrogance comes out forcefully also when he notes, "The British hate the Nazis for merely challenging their world-mastery and Miss Rathbone expects us to kiss the hand of her people in servility for having riveted chain on ours" (II, 852).

This paper began by noting Tagore's diffidence about his English prose. No less a Tagore lover than Satyajit Ray, too, had felt that Tagore never "wrote idiomatic English" (*Letters*, 3). I could also add that till the end Tagore had problems with articles, prepositions, numbers, etc in using the language. But as this paper has, hopefully, demonstrated, he kept growing as a writer of English prose and was able to express himself in it eloquently, imaginatively, and variously. On occasions his English prose was very good indeed and it was never execrable. On the contrary, the fact that works like *Nationalism* and *The Religion*

of Man have been in print for generations reveal not merely that their contents have remained valid over time but also that they are written in a prose that is as readable and as thought-provoking now as they were many decades ago. One can say with certainty then that his English works have in them “some qualities of permanence” and that these qualities enable them to be still relevant and expressive for us now. Sifting through the vast body of Tagore’s English prose for this paper, I have come to the conclusion that like many other aspects of the man, his English prose works need to be studied thoroughly anew and that judicious selections of them should be brought out so that the English-reading world can rediscover the extent of his achievement as a major thinker and an important writer of English prose of his time.

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