TAGORE: POET AND MYSTIC.*

The award of the Nobel Prize for "idealistic literature" to Rabindranath Tagore suddenly made him an international figure. At that time his work was scarcely known, except to a limited circle; the award was due, according to Mr. Ernest Rhys, to "a distinguished Swedish Orientalist who had read the poems in Bengali before they appeared in English." Tagore has since translated a number of his representative books into English, in which the finer harmony of prose has been rendered with a sensitiveness and refinement rare in our Western literature. But as a man he has remained shadowy to us. And inasmuch as circumstances have made him in some sort an ambassador of the East to the West, we have come to desire a larger body of biographical fact concerning him, as well as an account of his place in the traditions of his own land.

To fill this need we now have two biographies: one by Mr. Ernest Rhys, a friend of the poet, and temperamentally fitted to appreciate him; the other by Mr. Basanta Koomar Roy, a fellow countryman who is endeavoring to make his native land better understood in America. Both biographers have gathered their information at first hand, and so have made their books authoritative; but Mr. Rhys, partly because of his style and partly because of his merely appreciative and interpretative rôle, has given no very definite outline to the character of the poet and mystic. Mr. Roy has been more conscious of the difficulties in interpreting the East to the West, and has maintained a more critical poise throughout his book.

The impression we derive from Mr. Roy's volume is of a personality of rich charm and great activity. Tagore's varied career as manager of his father's country estate, as poet, musician, essayist, dramatist, novelist, editor, national leader, and finally as educator, seems to us too prolific and energetic to be truly Oriental. Moreover, quotations from his letters prove him a keen observer and thinker, with decided opinions on such dangerous subjects as feminism, education, and the defects of Americans. "Tagore is a voracious reader. Every month he buys many books on literature, philosophy, economics, politics, sociology, and history. He reads them all." He is not ascetic or soured. "He loves the world as passionately as a miser loves money." It is reassuring to the Western mind to find a spiritual hero so human, a seer so practical and near.

To rehearse the main incidents in the quiet life of Tagore is not necessary; they have been known since the publication of "Gitanjali" with Mr. Yeats's introduction. But in the full account of the poet's career given in Mr. Roy's book, it is interesting to look for important points of contact with the romanticism of Europe. Thus we read:

"The realistic love poems of Tagore's youth shocked many old-fashioned Hindu moralists, who received them with disdain. They were up in arms against Rabindranath, thinking that he was likely

* RABINDRANATH TAGORE. A Biographical Study. By Ernest Rhys. New York: The Macmillan Co.
RABINDRANATH TAGORE. The Man and His Poetry. By Basanta Koomar Roy. With an Introduction by Hamilton W. Mabie. New York: Dodd, Mead & Co.
SONGS OF KABIR. Translated by Rabindranath Tagore. With Introduction by Evelyn Underhill. New York: The Macmillan Co.

to demoralize the youths of India by the sensuousness of his love poems and songs. They were afraid that he was going to introduce the romanticism of the West, of Byron and Shelley, in India, and to depart from the classic serenity of Indian literary treatment of the human passions."

In his love of nature, also, he wins at once the sympathy of those who have been nourished on Wordsworth. How near he approaches the nature worship of European romanticists may be seen from a letter written in his youth from a house-boat on the Padma River, where he was superintending his father's estate:

"Truly, I love this Padma River very dearly, it is so wild, so undomesticated. I feel like riding on its back and patting it caressingly on its neck. . . I no more like to take a part before the footlights of the stage of publicity. I rather feel like doing my duty in silent solitude amid these transparent days that we have here. . . Here man is insignificant, but nature great and imposing. The things we see around us are of such a nature that one cannot create to-day, mend to-morrow and throw them off the day after. These things stand permanent, amidst birth and death, action and inaction, change and changelessness. When I come to the countryside I do not look upon man as anything separate from nature. Just as rivers flow by through many strange lands, similarly the current of humanity, too, is incessantly following its zig-zag path through dense forests, lonely meadows, and crowded cities, always accompanied by its divine music. It is not quite right to make the river sing, 'Man may come, man may go, but I go on forever' — for man, too, is going on forever with his thousand branches and tributaries. He has his one end attached to the root of birth, and the other to the ocean of death — both enveloped in the mysterious darkness; and between these two extremes lie life, labour and love."

Such evidences of parallel movements of romanticism in the East and the West seem even more conclusive when we read that "Raja Ram Mohun Roy, the father of modern India, introduced an age of reform in India. Well versed in the literature of the East and of the West, he strove to unite the cultural life of both for mutual benefit. With his towering genius he handled the social, political, religious, and literary life with the hand of a master. . . At his death, he left a unique worker as his intellectual descendant, De-bendranath Tagore, the father of Rabindranath." Frequently Rabindranath Tagore is praised for uniting the wisdom of the East and the West, and so being able to see the defects of both. One begins to wonder if the whole national renaissance of India was due to European stimulus.

But the Hindus see that materialism and luxury are dominant in our civilization, and by their clear vision are defended against our influence. "I am afraid," wrote Tagore, "that the present-day civilization of Europe is imperceptibly extending the arid zone in its social life. The super-abundance of luxuries is smothering the soul of the home — home that is the very abode of love, tenderness, and beneficence — a thing that is, above all, most essential for the healthy development of the human heart. In Europe homes are disappearing and hotels are increasing in number." In a letter he once wrote that "as the streets in the European cities are made of hard stone, brick and mortar, to be made fit for commerce and transportation, so the human heart becomes hardened and best suited for business. In the hard pavement of their heart there is not the slightest opening for a tender tendril, or a single blade of useless grass to grow. Everything is made bare and strong."

Contact with European civilization has, of course, had a liberating influence on Tagore. But his true antecedents are members of the great poetical and religious tradition of India. In his poetry of nature he was deeply influenced by the Vaishnava poets of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, "even though," says Mr. Roy, "in the poems of Tagore the love fervour of the Vaishnava poets fades a little." In his devotional and religious poetry he was profoundly influenced by Kabir, Chandidas, and Joy Dev. In the translations which he himself has given us of the songs of Kabir, the fifteenth century mystic and poet, we find the same religious universalism, the same acceptance of actual life, as in the work of Tagore. Kabir was a Mohammedan youth who was admitted to discipleship by the great Hindu teacher Ramananda, even though a Mohammedan, a weaver, a simple and unlettered man. "Hating mere bodily austerities, he was no ascetic, but a married man, the father of a family — a circumstance which Hindu legends of the monastic type vainly attempt to conceal or explain — and it was from out of the heart of the common life that he sang his rapturous lyrics of divine love." This disregard for the letter of the law, however, is not popular in India, and the religious songs of Tagore are not the songs of the masses. "The masses have no comprehension of the Brahmo Somaj — the religious Unitarians of Hindusthan. . . One might sing Tagore's religious songs to a Bengali farmer, but he would listen unmoved; and might even ask the singer to stop if he happened to detect it to be a Brahmo song. The orthodox hatred for Brahmo disregard for Hindu mythology is very intense."

It is interesting to note from Mr. Roy's book that admiration for Tagore is much more critical and reserved in India than in England and

America. His countrymen admit his greatness, but not that he is the greatest Bengali poet for many centuries, as is sometimes hastily said. One literary Bengali in America commented: "If Mr. Tagore had ever attempted to write profound books like 'Raibatak' or 'Kurukshetra' of Nabin Chandra Sen, his lyric brain would have burst before finishing even one canto of either." Another said: "His love lyrics are poor imitations of the poems of our Vaishnava poets of old, and his philosophy is the philosophy of the Upanishads. Let the Europeans and the Americans rave over Tagore. But there is nothing new for us in his writings." Tagore himself pleads guilty to dabbling with too many things: "I am like a coquettish lady that wants to please all her lovers, and is afraid to lose a single one. I do not want to disappoint any of the Muses." Nevertheless "no other literary man in Bengal has done so well in so many things. Even the most adverse critics of Tagore are bound to admit that he has adorned every department of Bengali literature by his transcendent genius." He has become a representative, especially in poetry, of the Bengali renaissance which is saving the classical culture of India. "He was needed in India as Dante was needed in Italy, Shakespeare in England, and Goethe in Germany."

In seeking to define and estimate the significance of Tagore for the West, it is interesting to recall that poetry had been drifting in the direction of mysticism before Tagore became known to us. "These lyrics," wrote Mr. Yeats in his preface to "Gitanjali," "display in their thought a world I have dreamed of all my life long." Poetry had sought to become a symbol, a musical suggestion. And so we were prepared to understand an art which proceeds, not by definition and outline, after the Greek manner, but by suggestion and symbolism. But it is out of the question that the main body of our poetry and art should ever become merely suggestive and mystical; the hold of the Greek spirit on us is too great; Phidias and Plato make us afraid of intellectual twilight, of emotional dissipation. In one respect, however, the literature and life of the Orient are a deep challenge to our civilization. "If I work in my garden and prune an apple-tree," wrote Emerson, "I am well enough entertained, and could continue indefinitely in the like occupation. But it comes to mind that a day is gone, and I have got this precious nothing done." It is characteristic of our civilization, however, that we continue the activity without reflecting upon its vacuity. We are not happy unless active. Hindu poetry should reveal to us that the lack of a core of thought accounts for the fatuity of our religious efforts, the charlatanism in our culture, the restlessness and materialism of our life. "You people over here," Tagore once remarked to Mr. Rhys, "seem to me to be all in a state of continual strife. It is all struggling, hard striving to live. There is no place for rest, or peace of mind, or that meditative relief which in our country we feel to be needed for the health of our spirits." When the Nobel Prize was awarded to him, he gave all the money to his remarkable school at Shanti Niketan; but, overwhelmed by publicity, he wrote, "They have taken away my shelter."

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