

Towards One World:
A Journey Through the English Essays of Rabindranath Tagore

Submitted by Christine Elizabeth Marsh, to the University of Exeter
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Abstract

Tagore is viewed through the medium of five books of essays which he wrote in English. Most of the essays are the texts of lectures Tagore delivered to audiences in England and America. They are important because they constitute what Tagore actually communicated to audiences and readers in the West during his tours outside India. The five books are taken chronologically in the chapters of this thesis, each one being a stage on Tagore's journey. They are read in conjunction with information about his activities in India prior to each particular tour, his encounters during the trip, and any relevant correspondence, in order better to understand the ideas he expresses. A key finding from close study of the essays is the extent to which Tagore draws on his understanding of the evolution and special capabilities of the human species. This philosophical anthropology, or 'deep anthropology', is used to describe what mankind ought to be, as well as what we are. Tagore was critical of what he considered the dehumanising economic systems of the West, which were supported by educational methods that focussed narrowly on training people to participate in such systems. The ideal behind the design of Tagore's own practical projects was a modernised and less restrictive form of traditional society, comprising networks of self sustaining villages or small communities, where children and young people are encouraged to develop their natural curiosity and creativity, and to express themselves freely with body and mind. Tagore's approach to education and rural reconstruction, if implemented widely as he intended, could lead to a radical redesign of society, a turning of the world upside down. The aim of my dissertation is to help encourage a wider appreciation of Tagore's pioneering work in this field.

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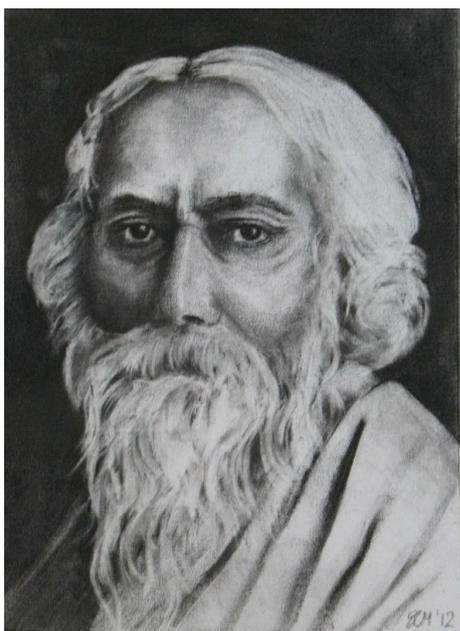
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Chapter 1: Introduction



Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) was the great Bengali poet who travelled the world in the first half of the last century, preaching his faith in human unity. A charismatic presence, with a beautiful voice, he delighted audiences in the more than thirty countries on five continents which he visited. When his words were reported in the press, and when the texts of his lectures were published, it was seen that he was critical of the modern world and the direction it was taking.

At home in Bengal he was not just a poet and preacher. He actively pursued an alternative course for his country, which he believed would ‘bring back life in its completeness’. Indian society had been severely disrupted by the British Raj. Where for centuries there had been mutually beneficial interaction between village and town, now the new urban middleclass of administrators and professionals looked down upon the village people, who were unable to help themselves. The villages were ‘drained of joy’, as Tagore expressed it. Tagore’s alternative was a modernised, less restrictive form of traditional society, comprising networks of self sustaining villages or small communities. In one of his lectures on this work, Tagore explains that ‘to resuscitate our moribund villages, we have to supply to them their basic need of food for the body and the mind’, bring back the old festivals and the ‘simple joys of social contact’, ‘enriching the folk mind with entertainment and education’.¹ Tagore had a modern approach to village revival. He encouraged the adoption cooperatively of new farming methods and machinery to make life easier for the cultivators, and the best tools and technologies for craft industries. These methods would be used primarily to meet local needs, and for goods to exchange at the fairs which had always been the way villages conducted festivities and met the wider world.

Tagore had advocated his direction for India as a political programme during the ‘Swadeshi Movement’ of 1903-1908 against the plan by the British Government to partition Bengal, and had taken a leading role in the protests. He withdrew when he

¹ Rabindranath Tagore, Appendix II, in Leonard Elmhirst, *Poet and Plowman* (Calcutta: Visva-Bharati, 1975), pp. 168-73 (p. 172). [Later references in footnotes to ‘Rabindranath Tagore’ as author are abbreviated to ‘Tagore’]

failed to persuade other leaders of the urban middle class in Calcutta of the viability of 'constructive swadeshi' (local social enterprise), and when the protests turned violent.² He continued with his rural reconstruction work, but on a small scale as part of the programme of education at the school and university he had established at Santiniketan in the Bengal countryside. In his essay 'City and Village', his aims appear very modest. He explains that rather than think of the whole country, it is best to start in a small way: 'If we could free even one village from the shackles of helplessness and ignorance, an ideal for the whole of India would be established'.³

Tagore was an important pioneer and advocate for the principle of self-help. He believed that people should be given the freedom to work cooperatively towards self-reliance at the local community level. To some extent this was the aspiration of a Romantic poet, deriving from his own sense of the unity of the individual self with the universe. But Tagore was also 'an indefatigable man of action',⁴ and had some success at identifying practical people with the skills to work with him to put his principles into practice. What he was unable to do was put this forward persuasively as the right and proper direction for India, at a time when an urban middle class had set its sights on India becoming an independent nation.

In this thesis I argue that Tagore envisaged an ideal for the whole world, and that his vision can be understood through his 'English Essays', the five books he wrote originally in English: *Sadhana* in 1913, *Personality* and *Nationalism* in 1917, *Creative Unity* in 1922, and *The Religion of Man* in 1931.⁵ These books provide an opportunity to seek out Tagore's ideal of 'the One, the Infinite, the harmony of the many' which is 'the object alike of our individual life and our society'.⁶ It is not enough to study the forty two essays 'in cold print'.⁷ We have to try to bring Tagore alive by going on a

² Sumit Sarkar, 'The Gospel of Atmasakti—Constructive Swadeshi', in 'Trends in Bengal's Swadeshi Movement', in *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal 1903-1908* (New Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1973), pp. 31-91 (pp. 53-63).

³ Tagore, 'City and Village', in *Towards Universal Man* (London: Asia Publishing House, 1961), pp. 302-22 (p. 322).

⁴ Uma Das Gupta, Preface, in *Rabindranath Tagore: A Biography* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. ix-xi (p. ix).

⁵ *Sadhana: The Realisation of Life* (London: Macmillan, 1915 [1913]); *Personality: Lectures Delivered in America* (London: Macmillan, 1919 [1917]); *Nationalism* (London: Macmillan, 1921 [1917]); *Creative Unity* (London: Macmillan, 1922); *The Religion of Man: Being the Hibbert Lectures for 1930* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1931). (The full texts are also freely available online. *Sadhana*: www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/6842; *Personality*: <http://archive.org/details/personality00tagorich>; *Nationalism* 1917: www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/40766; *Creative Unity*: www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/23136; *The Religion of Man*: <http://archive.org/details/religionofmanbei027987mbp>.)

⁶ *Creative Unity*, p. vi.

⁷ In the book (*Sadhana*) the 'warm colour' of the lectures 'has faded in cold print'. (Ernest Rhys, *Rabindranath Tagore: A Biographical Study* (London: Penguin, 1915), p. 123.)

journey through the twenty years of his life and four ‘foreign tours’, when he spoke so eloquently to the world.

Journeys and Stories

Most of Tagore’s English essays were originally lectures, addressed to audiences and readers in Britain and America, when he was away from the immediate concerns of his own country. My approach to the five books has been biographical. I tell the story of each of the journeys Tagore took which led to a book, describing his aims and encounters leading up to the lectures, and bringing in sufficient background on his activities in India prior to the tour as is necessary to clarify the subject matter.

A story-telling approach is appropriate for studying a set of works by Tagore, given that he was a master story-teller, and not only in fiction. Tagore’s desire to help village people originated from his period as a landlord in the 1890s, when he took responsibility for the family estates in East Bengal (now Bangladesh). During that decade, Tagore ‘made powerful stories out of the bits and pieces of daily lives of people in villages and towns along the rivers’, which he observed on his travels.⁸ He also told stories of his own life, particularly about his childhood, and he considered that the traditional epics of India were the country’s true history. For him, joy was the test of truth, rather than evidence and instrumental reason.

Each of the books of English essays is an outcome of one of Tagore’s ‘foreign tours’, of which there were twelve, according to the authoritative ‘Chronicle of Eighty Years’ included in *A Centenary Volume*.⁹

Sadhana: The Realisation of Life (1913) came about from Tagore’s ‘Third Foreign Tour (27 May 1912 – 4 October 1913)’,¹⁰ when he journeyed on to America after the *Gitanjali* episode,¹¹ and the book was seen as the prose counterpart to Tagore’s spiritual poems, and contributed to ‘the common notion of him as purely a mystic poet’.¹² Another reading is possible. All through the English essays there is evidence of

⁸ Mary Lago, ‘Tagore’s Short Fiction’, in *Rabindranath Tagore: A Celebration of his Life and Work*, ed. by Ray Monk and Andrew Robinson (Oxford: Rabindranath Tagore Festival Committee and Museum of Modern Art, 1986), pp. 44-5.

⁹ Prabhatkumar Mukhopadhyaya and Kshitis Roy, ‘Rabindranath Tagore: A Chronicle of Eighty Years, 1861-1941’, in *A Centenary Volume 1861-1941*, ed. by Radhakrishnan, Sarvepalli (Head of Editorial Board) (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1961), pp. 447-503. Hereafter ‘A Chronicle of Eighty Years’.

¹⁰ ‘A Chronicle of Eighty Years’, pp. 468-70.

¹¹ In 1912 Tagore brought to England a collection of devotional song lyrics translated from Bengali by himself. These were received enthusiastically by the London literati, and in 1913 Tagore was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature and became an international celebrity.

¹² Krishna Dutta and Andrew Robinson, ‘Editors’ Introduction’, in *Purabi: A Miscellany in Memory of Rabindranath Tagore 1941-1991* (London: The Tagore Centre UK, 1991), pp. 7-8 (p.7).

Tagore's sense that either a retreat from modern civilisation, or its collapse, is inevitable in order that mankind can return to the ideal society of cooperative and creative communities. We see this from the first essay in *Sadhana* when Tagore compares the 'divide and rule' culture of modern civilisation 'nurtured in city walls', with the forest-dwelling people of ancient Indian civilisation, 'in touch with the living growth of nature' and realising 'this great harmony between man's spirit with the spirit of the world'.¹³

Personality: Lectures Delivered in America (1917) contains the lectures Tagore intended to give on his 'Fourth Foreign Tour (May 1916 – March 1917)',¹⁴ when he went to America via Japan. The lectures owe much to conversations with the close friends he made during the previous journey, particularly William Rothenstein and Charles Freer Andrews. Bengali commentators have seen *Personality* as largely a continuation of the discourses in *Sadhana*, expressing Tagore's world-view of 'the integration of man and nature and God'.¹⁵ But as with *Sadhana*, there is an anthropological element, particularly in 'Second Birth', an essay on the biological evolution of the human animal, which Tagore sees as having a surplus capacity or 'abundance' whereby we can be moral, cooperative and creative, and yet are liable to relapse into savagery.¹⁶

Nationalism (1917) also came about from Tagore's fourth foreign tour. It contains the texts of three lectures, one of which Tagore delivered many times in America, rather than the material in *Personality*, which he used on few occasions. *Nationalism* received quite a lot of press attention at the time, and is frequently cited by critics and scholars. Several new editions have been published, some with new introductions and with the order of the essays changed.¹⁷ It tends to be read as anti-nationalist polemics, but with a knowledge of Tagore's arguments for 'constructive swadeshi' one can also read it as a re-examination of the ideas in his outstanding 1904 essay 'Society and State' (*Swadeshi Samaj*),¹⁸ applied in a global context.

Creative Unity (1922) derives from a very active period of Tagore's life, beginning

¹³ 'The Relation of the Individual to the Universe', in *Sadhana*, pp. 1-22 (pp. 3-4).

¹⁴ 'A Chronicle of Eighty Years', pp. 472-4.

¹⁵ Sujit Mukherjee, *Passage to America: The Reception of Rabindranath Tagore in the United States, 1912-1941* (Bookland, 1994), p. 198.

¹⁶ 'The Second Birth', in *Personality*, pp. 77-107.

¹⁷ *Nationalism* (London: Papermac, 1991) has an interesting introduction by E.P. Thompson, with the essays re-ordered, presumably to reflect the sequence in which Tagore delivered the lectures, but losing the historic sense which is behind the order he chose for the original.

¹⁸ 'Society and State', in *Towards Universal Man*, pp. 49-66.

with his ‘Fifth Foreign Tour (11 May 1920 – 16 July 1921)’.¹⁹ His journeys in India and Ceylon, Europe and America were undertaken to promote and raise money for Visva-Bharati, his newly established university. The book of essays has a more obvious structure than others in the series. In the first four essays Tagore describes various aspects of human potential, in the next four he sets out aspects of the problems he sees in the modern world. In the last essay, ‘An Eastern University’, Tagore sets out his constructive way forward. In my analysis of this work, I consider the substance and narrative form of Tagore’s human story, in contrast to works by Gandhi and Nehru.

The Religion of Man: Being the Hibbert Lectures for 1930 (1931), is the outcome of Tagore’s ‘Eleventh Foreign Tour (March 1930 – January 1931)’, when he visited Oxford to deliver a series of lectures, in response to an invitation in 1928, but he had to postpone the voyage due to ill health.²⁰ Tagore states in the Preface that in addition to the three Hibbert Lectures he has included ‘the gleanings of my thoughts on the same subject from the harvest of many lectures and addresses delivered in different countries of the world over a considerable period of my life’. He observes that his writings have carried a trace of the history of this growth from his ‘immature youth’ to the present, and only now is he seeing that they are ‘deeply linked by a unity of inspiration whose proper definition has often remained un-revealed to me’.²¹ In view of these remarks, it is not a surprise to find that *The Religion of Man* is an elaboration of the ideas Tagore sets out in *Personality*. In both books Tagore refers as much to science as to religion, but Tagore’s religion is his philosophy and also his science, and everything he writes is permeated by the emotions and insights of the poet and artist.

Tagore’s Alternative

In a lecture Tagore delivered over twenty times in America in 1917 he sets out graphically how he saw westernisation as dehumanising:

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, labelled and separated off with scientific care and precision. Obviously God made man to be human; but this modern product has such marvellous square-cut finish, savouring of gigantic manufacture, that the Creator will find it difficult to recognize it as a thing of spirit and a creature made in His own divine image.²²

¹⁹ ‘A Chronicle of Eighty Years’, pp. 476-80.

²⁰ ‘A Chronicle of Eighty Years’, pp. 490-2, 488.

²¹ Tagore, Preface, in *The Religion of Man*, pp. 7-8.

²² Tagore, ‘Nationalism in the West’, in *Nationalism* (London: Macmillan, 1921 [1917]), pp. 1-46 (p. 6).

Tagore's 'Western friends' told him that he seemed to offer no alternative.²³ A reviewer of *Nationalism* wrote that if Tagore were asked 'how the economic needs of mankind are now to be supplied without a complex industrial organization', he did not seem to have any answer.²⁴ This may be a valid criticism of the English essays as a whole, taken on their own, but not when the books are read in context. By taking these five journeys with Tagore again, and assembling five stories about the books of lectures and essays he composed in English, we give him an opportunity to reach out again to 'the West', this time setting out the principles behind his constructive solutions.

Bengali sociologist and economist, Sasadhar Sinha, in his book *Social Thinking of Rabindranath Tagore*, suggests that Tagore's ideal of human unity 'could only come when the present possibilities of compromise and reform had been completely exhausted', and that this would involve 'the disappearance of one's own familiar world'.²⁵ Sinha was writing in the 1960s, and fifty years later the national and international 'machinery of commerce and politics' which Tagore condemned survives.

Thinkers and activists have predicted the collapse of world systems from before Tagore was born through to the present.²⁶ It was my own particular focus of concern which drew me to Tagore. Ten years ago I had been carrying out research into the worsening problems of land degradation worldwide,²⁷ and I was convinced that relocalisation was the only reliable way to reverse these trends.²⁸ I encountered papers in the Dartington Hall Trust Archive describing Tagore's work on rural reconstruction, which had inspired Leonard Elmhirst to embark on his own experiment in the Devon countryside.²⁹ I was struck particularly by a letter in which Tagore refers to his practical initiatives as 'what has been my life's work'.³⁰ Tagore never wrote a book with a full and coherent account of his practical projects, and much of his thinking on this work

²³ Tagore, 'The Nation', in *Creative Unity*, pp. 141-53 (p. 152).

²⁴ 'The Protest of a Seer', review, *The Times Literary Supplement*, 13 September 1917, *Imagining Tagore: Rabindranath and the British Press (1912-1941)*, ed. by Kalyan Kundu, Sakti Bhattacharya and Kalyan Sircar (Calcutta: Shishu Sahitya Samsad, 2000) [hereafter '*Imagining Tagore*' ('reproduced in' is assumed – unless references are to editorial content)]

²⁵ Sasadhar Sinha, 'The Ideal of Human Unity', in *Social Thinking of Rabindranath Tagore* (London: Asia Publishing House, 1962), pp. 43-53 (p. 53).

²⁶ An authoritative scenario of immanent global collapse is given in Lester Brown's *World on the Edge: How to Prevent Environmental and Economic Collapse* (London: Earthscan, 2011). Brown is President of the Earth Policy Institute, and its website provides updates of full details. (www.earthpolicy.org)

²⁷ See e.g. William A. Alrecht, 'Physical, Chemical, and Biochemical Changes in the Soil Community', in *Man's Role in Changing the Face of the Earth: An International Symposium*, ed. by William L. Thomas (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956), pp. 648-73.

²⁸ See e.g. Bill Mollison, *Permaculture: A Practical Guide for a Sustainable Future* (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 1990)

²⁹ In her book *English Earth* (London: Harrap, 1935), Marjorie Hessel Tiltman describes the Elmhirsts' rural reconstruction experiment at Dartington. See Appendix 4, p. 196.

³⁰ In a begging letter to the Viceroy, Tagore describes his experiments in village revival as 'what has been my life's work'. (Appendix 1, p. 178.)

has to be pieced together from occasional comments.³¹ However, it is well known that Tagore's social concerns found their way into his prose fiction, much of which has been successfully translated into English. Hence my starting point in Tagore scholarship was to make three of Tagore's novels and three short story collections the subject of the dissertation for my MA in Literature entitled: 'The Village and the World: A Political Reading of Rabindranath Tagore's Prose Fiction',³²

As I have intimated, Tagore's social concerns and practical projects are revealed when the English essays are read in context. The essays themselves communicate Tagore's thinking when he was away from home. The author of these books is Tagore the writer in English, which makes them important as a body of work, even if they are a drop in the ocean of Tagore's total written oeuvre, which raises issues I come to now.

Tagore in English

I became a Tagore scholar out of respect for his ideas and practice. I am obviously aware that most of his writing was in Bengali, but I firmly believe that Tagore can and should be studied in English as well as in Bengali. There is certainly plenty of material. Uma Das Gupta has estimated that around forty per cent of Tagore's writing is available in English, either written by him in English or in translation.³³ I also believe that a student of Tagore in English needs to develop an awareness of Bengali history and culture, and cultivate contacts with Tagore's following in the Bengali community worldwide.

One often encounters a view from Bengalis that no one can really appreciate Tagore who does not know his language, and who was not brought up in a Bengali environment, including the landscape, climate, people and culture.³⁴ I respect that. There will always be a Rabindranath which only Bengalis can know. The way the Poet

³¹ Uma Das Gupta, 'Rabindranath Tagore on Rural Reconstruction: The Sriniketan Programme, 1921-41', *Indian Historical Review*, 4 (1978), 354-78 (p. 364).

³² Christine Marsh, 'The Village and the World: A Political Reading of Rabindranath Tagore's Prose Fiction' (unpublished master's dissertation, Open University, 2006) I include the Synopsis and Introduction from this paper as Appendix 2 (p. 179). I also include one of a number of papers making a similar argument about the contemporary relevance of Tagore which I contributed to conferences and commemorative volumes for Tagore's 150th birth anniversary in 2011, as Appendix 3 (p. 184).

³³ Uma Das Gupta, personal communication.

³⁴ Amalendu Biswas wrote in the Editorial of *Rabindranath Tagore: A Timeless Mind* that Tagore's English 'was not blessed with such wizardry and flair as he displayed in Bengali', and that one can only fully appreciate 'Tagore's extraordinary power' if one reads him in his own language, and if one is 'born and bred a Bengali'. (Amalendu Biswas, Editorial, in *Rabindranath Tagore: A Timeless Mind*, pp. xix-xxiv (p. xx).)

used his language with music in his songs is a non-trivial case in point.³⁵

I also believe that one needs to get a feel for Tagore's total oeuvre, as it exists in Bengali, and also in English. The English Tagore scholar is able to judge the quality of Tagore's English writings for their linguistic merits. An issue that I have become aware of is that there is a considerable amount of poorly expressed Tagore writing in English, translated by Bengalis, most of whom have English as a second language, but with a wide range of fluency and skill.³⁶ It is well known that Tagore was unsure about his own competence in English, and yet he rendered into English selections of his own poems and plays to the detriment of his reputation. In the five books of essays Tagore's English is clear, correct and elegant – some say a little old-fashioned. If there is a weakness, it is only that the meaning seems obvious, too easily accepted or dismissed.

Part of the reason for the vastness of Tagore's oeuvre is that he is deeply revered and all his writings are treasured, and additions are still being made to the collections held in the Rabindra-Bhavana Archives at Santiniketan.³⁷ There is much repetition within this material, in Bengali and in English, partly due to Tagore having often resorted to cut-and-paste when meeting constant demands for public addresses and articles. It has also been said that he repeated endlessly the ideas he felt most strongly about. There is further duplication in his English writings because pieces are re-translated that have been translated before (one often sees 'translation mine' on pieces one recognises as already in print). Another issue is the variety of genres Tagore mastered and the breadth of his interests and activities. It is hard to get a reliable overall sense of what he was about – and anyway, on his own admittance, he was inconsistent.³⁸ What has happened is that a collection of everybody's favourite significant quotes has evolved which have

³⁵ Tagore's translator William Radice explains that 'Bengali is an inherently rhythmic language', producing 'subtleties of timbre and tone-colour'. Rhyme and assonance come more naturally to Bengali than to English. Radice comments that Tagore 'seems to give us the rhythms of Nature herself', and yet every poem that Tagore wrote 'had cogency of structure', and this is something which 'was not conveyed by his own translations into English', hence 'the fragility of Tagore's reputation abroad'. (William Radice, 'Tagore's Poetic Power', in *Rabindranath Tagore: A Celebration of his Life and Work*, ed. by Ray Monk and Andrew Robinson (Oxford: Rabindranath Tagore Festival Committee and Museum of Modern Art, 1986), pp. 39-41.)

³⁶ The struggles of Bengali youngsters to learn English, because of its importance for educational success, with very mixed results in terms of competence in the spoken and written language, is vividly conveyed in André Bétéille's memoir: *Sunlight on the Garden: A Story of Childhood and Youth* (New Delhi: Viking, 2012).

³⁷ Ashis Nandy has said that 'all works that even a transcendent genius produces do not and should not survive' and that he does not know of 'a single work of recent decades that tries to supply a critical frame that would help the next generation of [...] readers of Tagore [...] to know which Tagore to read and which Tagore to avoid'. (Ashis Nandy, 'Violence and Creativity in the Late Twentieth Century: Rabindranath Tagore and the Problem of Testimony', in *Rabindranath Tagore: Universality and Tradition*, ed. By Patrick Colm Hogan and Lalita Pandit (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 2003), pp. 264-81 (pp. 277-8).

³⁸ Krishna Kripalani, *Rabindranath Tagore: A Biography* (London: Oxford University, 1962), p. 176.

come to represent Tagore's views and insights.

The attitude that everything by Tagore is precious extends to his English writings. Sisir Kumar Das, Tagore Professor of Bengali Literature, University of Delhi, compiled three volumes of *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore* which he published between 1994 and 1996.³⁹ These cover Tagore's poems, plays, stories and essays, and a miscellaneous collection. Das died shortly after completing this herculean task. Tagore wrote several thousand letters, and 'more than a dozen volumes of his Bengali letters have been published', but it was not Das's policy to include all the correspondence in English, because of its unavailability in full.⁴⁰ Those of Tagore's letters which were published in edited volumes or as 'open letters' are included in Das's collection. Several books of Tagore's correspondence in English have been published: a *Selected Letters* and collections of Tagore's correspondence with particular friends.

From the Foreword to *Volume One: Poems*, it seems that Das began with a strict rule about what to include as a work by Tagore in English. Translations, even when authorised by Tagore, were ruled out.⁴¹ For *Volume Two: Plays, Stories, Essays*, an 'intermediary group' was identified, of translations which were done by Tagore's close associates, often under his supervision and with his very active collaboration, and it was decided that these should be included.⁴² After Das's death, a further mixed genre volume was produced by Nityapriya Ghosh and published in 2007.⁴³ The four hefty volumes of *English Writings* run to over three thousand quarto pages. They include the texts of the five books of English Essays, which occupy about ten to twelve per cent of the whole.

The published collections of Tagore's *English Writings* and correspondence do not include everything by Tagore in English. Das Gupta's estimate that forty per cent of the entire oeuvre is available in English includes *all* translations, not only those in the 'intermediary group' which Tagore authorised. In my judgement, of Tagore's works in English, some of the best in terms of ideas and style are in translations undertaken after Tagore's death.

Imtiaz Ahmed, Professor of International Relations at Dhaka University, has pointed to another relevant estimate, which is that 'some two-thirds of Tagore's writings [in

³⁹ Sisir Kumar Das, ed., *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore, Volume One: Poems* (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1994); *Volume Two: Plays, Stories, Essays* (1996); *Volume Three: A Miscellany* (1996)

⁴⁰ Sisir Kumar Das, Introduction, in *Volume Three: A Miscellany*, pp. 13-24 (pp. 14-15).

⁴¹ U.R. Anantha Murthy, Foreword, in *Volume One: Poems*, pp. 5-6 (p. 5).

⁴² Sisir Kumar Das, Introduction, in *Volume Two: Plays, Stories, Essays*, pp. 11-31 (p. 11).

⁴³ Nityapriya Ghosh, ed., *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore, Volume FOUR: Poems, Plays, Essays, Lectures and Addresses, Conversations and Interviews, Books and Writings, Open Letters, Messages and Tributes* (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2007)

Bengali and English] are serious essays, mostly on political and socio-economic problems of India and the crisis of civilization, and that this fact has been more or less ignored in Tagore scholarship'.⁴⁴ Ahmed has challenged the practice of '[m]aking use of Rabindranath's literary works, despite their creative reflection of reality, as something "real" and treating them as authentic for a social science discourse', given that he has been 'equally brilliant and prolific' as a writer of essays.⁴⁵ I can add to Ahmed's comments that it is in studies of Tagore's literary works that one finds that scholars have resorted to a set of 'favourite significant quotes', quite a number of these taken from the English essays. Looking back at my MA Dissertation on Tagore's prose fiction in translation, I am not innocent of this myself, since I use a very frequently encountered passage from *Nationalism*: 'Neither the colourless vagueness of cosmopolitanism ...' as an epigraph to one chapter.⁴⁶ William Radice is one scholar who is not guilty of this particular sin. He uses quotations from the English essays in his *Rabindranath Tagore: Selected Poems*, first published in 1985. In his extensive Notes he refers to the 'five main books of English lectures', and also Tagore's early autobiography *My Reminiscences*,⁴⁷ because 'these six books give a good and complete idea of Tagore's central ideas'.⁴⁸ Radice does not restrict himself to the usual quotes, and his selection seems helpful for understanding the poems.⁴⁹ One could adopt such a practice in reverse, using references to Tagore's poetry to illuminate the essays. That has not been my own approach, partly because I have not made a study of the poetry, and also because one can construct any argument from fragments of such a huge reservoir of material. Instead I use the history of Tagore's 'life's work' in education and rural reconstruction, which is more concrete and self-contained, in order to clarify the meaning and significance of the English essays. To identify Tagore, the social thinker and activist, as the author of these essays, goes a long way towards correcting his

⁴⁴ Imtiaz Ahmed, 'Contemporarising Rabindranath and the International', in *Contemporarising Tagore and the World*, pp. 15-28 (p. 16).

⁴⁵ Ahmed, p. 17.

⁴⁶ Christine Marsh, 'The Village and the World', p. 22. *Nationalism*, p. 5.

⁴⁷ Tagore, *My Reminiscences* (London: Macmillan, 1921 [1917]), a translation of Tagore's *Jibansmriti*, 1912.

⁴⁸ William Radice, Notes, in *Rabindranath Tagore: Selected Poems* (London: Penguin, 2005 [1985]), pp. 127-79 (p. 127). Radice added that he 'was not yet in a position to draw on the full range of Tagore's Bengali writings'. He did not remove, or obviously revise, his references to the English essays, when the book was reprinted several times over the years, up to a twentieth anniversary edition (with various revisions, new Prefaces, an extra Appendix and Further Reading). I imagine this is probably because it would have been a chore, rather than because Radice's understanding of Tagore's ideas changed when he eventually engaged with Tagore's Bengali essays.

⁴⁹ See, e.g., the note to 'Love's Question' which has references to *Sadhana*, *The Religion of Man* and then *Personality* (Radice, p. 137). Scattered selections like these do not provide an overall feel for the essays. In my chapter on *Personality* I show how an eminent scholar makes over sixty references to three essays in this one book and yet fails to find the very meaning he was seeking, which by my own reading is there.

reputation as a mystic, and actually de-mystifies the essays, showing how religion for Tagore was also his philosophy, science, culture and art.

‘Tagore is timeless’

I stated earlier that a student of Tagore in English needs to cultivate contacts with Tagore’s following in the Bengali community worldwide. An ideal opportunity for this occurred in 2011, when there were many international events around the world to mark Tagore’s 150th birth anniversary, and many (perhaps most) were conducted in English. At a commemoration held in New Delhi, the eminent political leader Sonia Gandhi paid tribute to Tagore as ‘one of the greatest and most accomplished geniuses of our time’. Towards the end of her address she said:

Tagore is timeless. He speaks to us even today, whether it is on the need to nurture communal harmony, to have empathy for the poor and tribal communities, to rejuvenate our artistic and cultural traditions, to make India economically prosperous while protecting its ecological wealth, to bring about gender equality, to impart a value-based education founded on the inter-relatedness of disciplines, to reach out to other Asian countries especially, and to the world.⁵⁰

Sonia Gandhi’s eulogy is an accurate summary, and provides a useful focus for discussing Tagore’s ideas on world change. Tagore’s aspirations are no less relevant today than during his lifetime. Tagore does still speak to India, Asia and the world in those terms, and is admired for his vision and faith in humankind, but presumably some of the same obstacles prevent his words being acted upon.

Tagore’s reception and reputation during his lifetime followed a complex and uncertain path. This was partly due to Tagore’s outspoken criticisms, and partly due to a downturn in his literary reputation caused by his bringing out a stream of books of his own inadequate renderings of his Bengali works into English. Edward Thompson comments in *Rabindranath Tagore: His Life and Work* (1921) that although there are ‘many passages of subtle thought and beautiful phrasing’ in Tagore’s English books of poetry, there is ‘a maddening monotony of tone and diction and a sameness of imagery [which] placed him far lower than his true rank as poet’.⁵¹ In an essay entitled ‘Translation as perjury’, Sujit Mukherjee provides examples of the dismal results of

⁵⁰ Sonia Gandhi, address at the ‘National Commemoration of 150th Anniversary of Rabindranath Tagore’ on 7 May 2011 at Vigyan Bhawan, New Delhi. <<http://rabindranathtagore-150.gov.in/upa-speech.html>> [accessed 27 February 2013]

⁵¹ E. J. Thompson, *Rabindranath Tagore: His Life and Work* (Calcutta: Associated, 1921), p. 49.

Tagore translating from his birth language into English, which for him was ‘an acquired language’.⁵² Nevertheless, many people in every part of the world have been interested, fascinated, devoted, intrigued and obsessed by this complex and challenging thinker and colourful personality. He left a vast legacy of writings: ‘more than one thousand poems and over two thousand songs in addition to a large number of short stories, novels, dramatic works and essays on religion, education, politics and literature’,⁵³ material for countless works of Tagore scholarship.

The desire to celebrate Tagore’s life, and address uncertainties about whether he has been properly appreciated, have resulted in enthusiastic celebrations of his significant birth anniversaries. There have been commemorative volumes, and international conferences and their published proceedings, from Tagore’s birth centenary in 1961, his 125th birth anniversary in 1986, and then his 150th in 2011.

At the centenary, only twenty years after Tagore’s death, there were still many people alive who had known him personally.⁵⁴ There seems to have been little anxiety then about whether he would continue to be seen as interesting and relevant. There was an important initiative to newly translate into English the best of ‘Tagore’s writings on contemporary social problems’, a project very generously funded by the Ford Foundation, and involving a team of eminent scholars from India, Britain and America. This resulted in the publication of *Towards Universal Man*, a collection of eighteen representative essays, ‘containing a message for humanity’, with a lengthy eulogy on Tagore’s genius by Humayun Kabir, India’s Minister for Scientific Research and Cultural Affairs.⁵⁵ A sizeable sum of money was left over after the book was released and so it was decided to bring out a companion volume, *One Hundred and One: Poems by Rabindranath Tagore*, the task of translation shared out amongst seventeen Indian writers.⁵⁶ This remarkable collection, and other books of new translations which have followed,⁵⁷ should have dispelled the myth of Tagore’s poems being either limited in range and style, or untranslatable.

By the time of the 125th birth anniversary, there were few people alive who had

⁵² Mukherjee, ‘Translation as perjury’, in *Translation as Discovery and Other Essays on Indian Literature in English Translation* (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 2006), pp. 101-24.

⁵³ Humayun Kabir, Introduction, in *One Hundred and One: Poems by Rabindranath Tagore* (London: Asia Publishing House, 1966), pp. xix-xxxii (p. xix).

⁵⁴ ‘Personal Memories’ (by Tagore’s son, his niece, two of his greatest friends, and an eminent professor who had been a student at Tagore’s university) in *Tagore: A Centenary Volume*, pp. 3-60.

⁵⁵ Humayun Kabir, Introduction, in *Towards Universal Man*, pp. 1-35.

⁵⁶ Humayun Kabir, Preface, in *One Hundred and One*, pp. v-vii.

⁵⁷ E.g. Rabindranath Tagore, *Selected Poems*, trans. by William Radice (London: Penguin, 2005 [1985]) and Rabindranath Tagore, *I Won’t Let You Go: Selected Poems*, trans. by Ketaki Kushari Dyson (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1991).

known Tagore at all well, and correspondingly more determination to emphasise Tagore's relevance. A weeklong international seminar was held at the Indian Institute of Advanced Study in Shimla, on the subject of 'Rabindranath Tagore and the Challenges of Today'. Mulk Raj Anand, renowned Indo-English novelist, gave the inaugural address and describes how Tagore was 'unlike the usual artists for art's sake of the late nineteenth century in the West', in that he 'lived in action'. Tagore 'wrote plays and acted in them', 'danced with his students and invited dancers from various parts of the country to [his school at] Santiniketan', he 'composed songs and made community singing part of the syllabus of the school', and he encouraged middle class teachers and pupils to interact with 'the tribal and village folk around'.⁵⁸ One of the themes covered was 'Rabindranath—Educator and Social Reformer', and in the discussion session at the end of the seminar, several participants echoed the view of one of the speakers, Binoy Bhattacharjee, teacher of sociology at Visva-Bharati, the university Tagore founded, whose concluding remark was:

Tagore wanted to lay the foundations for a transcendent rural life and not merely to construct a storehouse of benefits. His ideals have not been given a fair trial due to our own limitations. We therefore cannot say that Tagore is not relevant today. He still is; but we shall have to go a long way to realize his ideal of a creative society.⁵⁹

When Tagore's 150th birth anniversary came around in 2011, the emphasis on making Tagore relevant to present day challenges was even more in evidence than in 1986. International conferences, seminars and commemorative volumes were produced with titles and themes such as 'Contemporarising Tagore and the World' (Dhaka), 'Tagore's Relevance Today' (Dartington, Devon), 'Revisiting Tagore' (Tagore Centre, London) and 'Tagore: The Global Impact of a Writer in the Community' (Edinburgh).⁶⁰

These recent international events and projects have shown how multinational is Tagore's appeal today. I was privileged to be asked to co-edit the Tagore's Centre's *Rabindranath Tagore: A Timeless Mind*. My responsibility was to carry out light

⁵⁸ Mulk Raj Anand, 'Inaugural Address: Rabindranath Tagore in Retrospect', in *Rabindranath Tagore and the Challenges of Today* (Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1988), pp. 4-11 (p. 9).

⁵⁹ Binoy Bhattacharjee, 'Rabindranath's Ideals of Rural Reconstruction', in *Rabindranath Tagore and the Challenges of Today*, ed. by Bhudeb Chaudhuri and K.G. Subramanyan (Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1988), pp. 185-93 (pp. 189-90).

⁶⁰ I contributed a number of papers for these events: Christine Marsh, 'The Once and Future Village: From Tagore's Rural Reconstruction to Transition Towns', in *Contemporarising Tagore and the World*, ed. by Imtiaz Ahmed, Muchkund Dubey and Veena Sikri (Dhaka: University Press, 2013); 'Towards a Tagorean Utopia: From Rural Reconstruction to Transition Towns', submitted on request for future volume of proceedings from international conference: 'Tagore: The Global Impact of a Writer in the Community' at Edinburgh Napier University on 4, 5 and 6 May 2012; 'The Tagore Trinities and Holistic World Change', in *Rabindranath Tagore: A Timeless Mind*, ed. by Amalendu Biswas, Christine Marsh and Kalyan Kundu (London: Tagore Centre UK, 2011), pp. 191-202.

revisions for the sake of clarity on articles by authors for whom English was not their first language, and to work with all the authors to check and standardise their references. The twenty nine authors came from eighteen countries, with fourteen different languages.

From a number of the articles it becomes apparent that in several countries, in Eastern Europe especially, Tagore's literary reputation never took the dip that was so damaging for him in Britain and the United States. Part of the reason seems to have been that Tagore's inadequate renderings of his Bengali poems into English reached these countries initially through re-translation by European poets such as André Gide and Juan Ramon Jiménez.⁶¹ Today, translators from countries such as Poland, Latvia and Estonia, have learned Bengali in order to translate Tagore's works directly. English can then come into its own again, as a vehicle for scholars and admirers of Tagore to share their understanding and appreciation of his relevance to today's world, in a similar fashion to English having a role in constructing a 'link literature' in India, so that works written in different Indian languages can be shared.⁶²

'Crisis in Civilization'

I referred earlier to the suggestion by sociologist Sasadhar Sinha that Tagore's ideal of human unity 'could only come when the present possibilities of compromise and reform had been completely exhausted', and that this would involve 'the disappearance of one's own familiar world'. This brings to mind one of the most frequently quoted prose passages by Tagore, which is his *cri de coeur* at the end of his last address, 'Crisis in Civilization' (*Sabhyatar Sankat*).⁶³ The closing passage begins:

I look back on the stretch of past years and see the crumbling ruins of a proud civilization lying heaped as garbage out of history! And yet I shall not commit the grievous sin of losing faith in Man, accepting his present defeat as final. I shall look forward to a turning in history after the cataclysm is over and the sky is again unburdened and passionless.⁶⁴

Another version of the essay reads a little differently:

I would rather look forward to the opening of a new chapter in his history after the

⁶¹ Viktors Ivbulis, 'Tagore's Western Burdens', in *Rabindranath Tagore: A Timeless Mind*, pp. 154-62 (p. 155).

⁶² Sujit Mukherjee, 'A Link Literature in India', in *Translation as Discovery*, pp. 34-45.

⁶³ 'Crisis in Civilization', in *Towards Universal Man* (London: Asia Publishing House, 1961), pp. 353-9. This address was read out in his presence because he was too frail and ill to speak, on the occasion of his eightieth birthday anniversary (14 April 1941). (Notes, p. 382.)

⁶⁴ 'Crisis in Civilization', p. 359.

cataclysm is over and the atmosphere rendered clean with the spirit of service and sacrifice.⁶⁵

This suggests a more active role for ‘Man’, but two readings are possible. It was 1941, so is Tagore referring to the ‘service and sacrifice’ of those fighting in the second world war in order to purge the world of an enemy? Given that Tagore was appalled by any form of violence, it is surely more likely that he meant that once the war is over, people would get down to cleaning up the rubble and the waste in order to begin rebuilding. That idea is echoed in one of Tagore’s last poems, ‘They Work’.⁶⁶

In ‘They Work’ the poet surveys stretches of time and space and sees ‘myriad pictures’ of masses of men marching proudly victorious, the ‘empire-hungry’ Pathans come, then the Mughals, and both ‘have vanished without a trace’. So when the ‘mighty British’ come marching in, the poet knows that time will sweep them away too. Meanwhile, the people work to ‘meet daily needs of men who live and die’, their sorrows and joys ‘orchestrate life’s great music’. Finally the poet declares: ‘Empires by the hundred collapse and on their ruins the people work’.⁶⁷

The last line is reminiscent of the old saying: ‘Civilized man has marched across the face of the earth and left a desert in his footprints’.⁶⁸ In 1922 Tagore and Elmhirst addressed students at Calcutta University on the subject of ‘The Robbery of the Soil’. Elmhirst, the agriculturist, concentrated on how ‘[t]he city takes all and returns little or nothing of real value to the soil.’⁶⁹ Tagore, the humanist, added that ‘[w]e are as much the children of the soil as of the human society. If we fail to make commensurate returns for what society contributes to nurture our mind and spirit, then we shall only exploit, and, in time, exhaust what society gives us.’⁷⁰

‘Crisis in Civilization’ concludes:

Perhaps that dawn will come from this horizon, from the East where the sun rises. A day

⁶⁵ ‘Crisis in Civilization’, in *The Essential Tagore*, ed. by Fakrul Alam and Radha Chakravarty (Cambridge, MA: Belnap of Harvard University Press, 2011), pp. 209-16 (p. 215-6). Both translations were by Kshitish Roy and Krishna Kripalani. The note in the 1961 collection indicates that it appeared as a booklet in May 1941. The editors of the 2011 collection introduce the essay as the ‘authorized’ translation, completed under Tagore’s supervision. It is possible that Tagore took the opportunity to alter the sense of the first version, where his hope seems to be for a turning away from the turmoil of war, to a period of calm reflection.

⁶⁶ Tagore, ‘They Work’, 13 February 1941 trans. by Hiren Mukherji, in *One Hundred and One: Poems by Rabindranath Tagore*, pp. 176-7. This is no. 96 in a chronological collection.

⁶⁷ ‘They Work’, p. 177.

⁶⁸ Vernon Gill Carter and Tom Dale, *Topsoil and Civilization*, (University of Oklahoma Press, 1974 [1955]), p. 6.

⁶⁹ Elmhirst ‘The Robbery of the Soil’, in *Poet and Plowman* (Calcutta: Visva-Bharati, 1975), pp. 42-50 (p. 48).

⁷⁰ Tagore, speech following lecture by Elmhirst, in *Poet and Plowman*, pp. 168-73 (p. 169).

will come when unvanquished Man will retrace his path of conquest, despite all barriers, to win back his lost human heritage.

Today we witness the perils which attend on the insolence of might; one day shall be borne out the full truth of what the sages have proclaimed:

‘By unrighteousness man prospers, gains what appears desirable, conquers enemies, but perishes at the root.’⁷¹

Tagore never fully recovered from his bitter experiences during the agitation against Partition, when he was unable to persuade other leaders of the viability of ‘constructive swadeshi’, his preferred direction for India. In the last decade of his life he could see that his efforts to demonstrate that alternative on a small scale – but with input from many countries and cultures – was failing due to lack of funds and consequent compromises with his ideals. In between those two nodes of disappointment was a period of relative optimism, a major part of which was due to his sudden global celebrity, which enabled him to address the rest of the world. How that came about, and how Tagore used that opportunity, is the subject of the chapters which follow, each of which is focussed on one of the books in which the texts of lectures were published.

It was not quite chance which brought Tagore to England in 1912, with the collection of poems in English which became *Gitanjali*,⁷² and made him famous. Tagore’s claim is not quite true that he did not plan, but ‘began anyhow’ on the basis of an idea, as he told his friend Patrick Geddes.⁷³ But there was a haphazard – or creative – element to Tagore’s schemes at home and his journeys abroad. His son writes amusingly of repeated visits to the booking office when Father changed his mind about the itinerary.⁷⁴

The five chapters which follow accompany Tagore on his four foreign tours, relating his hopes and fears, his experiences and encounters, the deviations and frustrations, which gave rise to the five books of essays from *Sadhana* to *The Religion of Man*. The aim has been to add back the warm colour of the Poet’s charismatic presence to the record in cold print of his journey towards One World.

⁷¹ ‘Crisis in Civilization’, in *The Essential Tagore*, p. 216.

⁷² Tagore, *Gitanjali (Song Offerings)* (London: Macmillan, 1913)

⁷³ Tagore, letter to Geddes, 9 May 1922, in *A Meeting of Two Minds: Geddes Tagore Letters*, ed. by Bashabi Fraser (Edinburgh: Word Power Books, 2005), pp. 68-9.

⁷⁴ Rathindranath Tagore, *On the Edges of Time* (Calcutta: Orient Longmans, 1958), p. 139.

They Work

Lazily, floating on time's stream my mind gazes into infinity. And traversing through space I see myriad pictures drawn in light and shade.

Aeon on aeon, in the lengthening past have marched masses of men proudly, with victory's arrogant speed.

Here came Pathans, empire-hungry, and then the Mughals, waving storms of dust and flags of triumph.

I look, today, into the alleys of space. They have vanished without a trace, but from age to age sunrise and sunset have reddened the speckless blue.

Again, under that sky, have come marching columns of the mighty British, along iron-bound roads and in chariots spouting fire, scattering the flames of their force.

I know that the flow of time will sweep away their empire's enveloping nets, and the armies, bearers of its burden, will leave not a trace in the path of the stars.

I turn my eyes on this earth, and see multitudes moving with vibrant voices along many roads and in many groups, from age to age, working to meet daily needs of men who live and die.

Through eternity they pull the oars, hold the helm. In field after field, they sow and cut the corn. They work in town and country.

Royal sceptres break, War-drums cease, Victory towers gape, stupidly, self-forgetful. Bloodstained arms and blood-shot eyes are lost in children's tales.

The people work. In every country, go where you will. In Anga, in Banga, in Kalinga's seas and river-ghats, in Punjab, Bombay, and Gujrat.

The hum and the roar of their toil link nights and days, made vibrant by work. Sorrows and joys, from day to day, orchestrate life's great music.

Empires by the hundred collapse and on their ruins the people work.

13 February, 1941⁷⁵

⁷⁵ Rabindranath Tagore, 'They Work', 13 February 1941 trans. by Hiren Mukherji, in *One Hundred and One: Poems by Rabindranath Tagore*, pp. 176-7.

Chapter 2: *Sadhana* (1913)

The Upanishad says: *Knowledge, power, and action are of his nature*. It is because this naturalness has not yet been born in us that we tend to divide joy from work. Our day of work is not our day of joy—for that we require a holiday; for, miserable that we are, we cannot find our holiday in our work. The river finds its holiday in its onward flow, the fire in its outburst of flame, the scent of the flower in its permeation of the atmosphere; but in our everyday work there is no such holiday for us. It is because we do not let ourselves go, because we do not give ourselves joyously and entirely up to it, that our work overpowers us. (Tagore, ‘Realisation in Action’)⁷⁶

When one encounters the complaints of Tagore’s Bengali compatriots that their greatest author is now not read enough, even in his home state, that his great projects in Santiniketan or Sriniketan are not doing well, I always ask myself whether they do not demand too much from him, and whether they are unwilling to admit that some of his projects were too grand and idealistic to be implemented. Is it not enough to know that Tagore’s heritage, taking into account what he planned and realised – and almost everything he planned was at least partly realised – appears unique for any poet in the history of the modern world, and there is hardly any composer in any major language whose songs, in such numbers, are in continuous cultural use? (Viktors Ivbulis, ‘Tagore’s Western Burdens’)⁷⁷

The Latvian professor Viktors Ivbulis considers that Tagore was highly successful as a poet, and that even Tagore’s grandiose projects were partly realised. The Indian professor Uma Das Gupta says of Tagore’s rural reconstruction project at Sriniketan that it ‘must not be written off as a complete failure’, although his ideas ‘never received a fair trial’.⁷⁸ Similarly, she writes that Tagore’s school for boys ‘functioned beautifully’, but his university ‘destroy[ed] some of the founder’s basic hopes’ because it was obliged to ‘compromise with the country’s educational system’.⁷⁹ These two eminent Tagore scholars are implying, somewhat reluctantly, that Tagore failed at something which concerned him greatly. What that was, why it mattered to him, and how it is of interest to us today, is a theme running through the chapters of this thesis.

Tagore used the telling phrase ‘what has been my life’s work’ in a letter dated 28 February 1930 to Lord Irwin, the Viceroy, appealing for a grant for agricultural research.⁸⁰ The ‘life’s work’ he was referring to encompassed his practical endeavours in education and rural reconstruction over almost thirty years. Tagore had written to Lord Irwin two weeks earlier, referring to the apparently favourable impression the

⁷⁶ Tagore, ‘Realisation in Action’, in *Sadhana: The Realisation of Life* (London: Macmillan, 1915 [1913]), pp. 117-34 (p. 133).

⁷⁷ Viktors Ivbulis, ‘Tagore’s Western Burdens’, p. 161.

⁷⁸ Uma Das Gupta, ‘Rabindranath Tagore on Rural Reconstruction: The Sriniketan Programme, 1921-41’, *Indian Historical Review*, 4 (1978), 354-78 (pp. 377-8).

⁷⁹ Uma Das Gupta, *Santiniketan and Sriniketan: A Historical Introduction*, A Visva-Bharati Quarterly Booklet (Santiniketan: Visva-Bharati University, 1977), pp. 54-5.

⁸⁰ Tagore, ‘Letter RT to H.E., The Viceroy’, The Dartington Hall Trust Archive, Papers of Leonard Knight Elmhirst, LKE India, LKE/IN/25 Folder A, ‘Visva-Bharati correspondence’. Appendix 1, p. 178.

Viceroy had received of the value of the work, during his visit to Sriniketan. Tagore explained that they had been struggling ‘almost in isolation’, not understood by ‘either our countrymen or our Government’, on such funds as Tagore could raise with his own personal efforts.⁸¹

As we journey through Tagore’s books of English essays, details of the projects themselves, and the obstacles Tagore was faced with, will occasionally be mentioned, but the practicalities are less important than his vision, his understanding and his stubborn faith in humanity, which inspired Tagore to persist with his projects through fifty years of his life.

The present chapter is an account of the stage of Tagore’s journey which culminated in the publication of *Sadhana: The Realisation of Life* in 1913. The book itself is not the main subject of the chapter, in part because it seems that Tagore did not write it originally in English for his western audiences and readers.⁸² One could say that *Personality* (1917) is the first book of essays written by Tagore in English. He certainly uses English with greater ease and clarity in that book, a change which I attribute to the events of his third foreign tour in 1912-1913, and the lifelong friendships with Englishmen he formed at that time. I consider the essays in *Sadhana* towards the end of this chapter, and it is interesting to see how Tagore has moulded material from his addresses in the prayer hall at his school into lessons on life which would appeal to urban Americans. The lectures themselves had the effect of consolidating Tagore’s reception in Britain and America as an Indian saint and mystic, and I argue that Tagore’s initial reception effectively set up a barrier, such that the value of his practical work was not understood or appreciated, by his countrymen, by the British Government in India, or by the wider world, either during his lifetime or since.

The year 1912, when Tagore first delivered the *Sadhana* lectures in America, and 1913 when the book was published, marked a major turning point in Tagore’s life, largely due to the collection of devotional song lyrics published as the English *Gitanjali*, whence his award of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913 and his knighthood in 1915. Tagore enjoyed a few years of fame after that, but even those years were full of misunderstandings.

The most damaging area of misunderstanding arose from the public’s insistence on Tagore’s identity as Indian saint and mystic. This came about by a series of accidents,

⁸¹ Tagore, letter to Lord Irwin, 14 February 1930, in Krishna Dutta and Andrew Robinson, eds., *Selected Letters of Rabindranath Tagore* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 370-1.

⁸² Tagore explains in the Preface that the *Sadhana* essays were his own ‘renderings’ – including translations by others – of some of his Bengali sermons to his students. (Tagore, ‘Author’s Preface’, in *Sadhana*, pp. vii-ix (pp. viii-ix).)

such as Indian students in London claiming that Tagore was a ‘poet and saint of Bengal’, which was not without foundation but was misleading.⁸³ Tagore was not an Indian sannyasi, an ascetic who shuns a world he sees as *maya* (illusion). He had retreated to his father’s ashram in rural Bengal to set up a very lively school there, which did indeed have a spiritual basis, but with a spirituality which was fully engaged with active life.⁸⁴ The coincidences which reinforced the ‘saint and mystic’ identity include the way *Gitanjali* was received and became a popular bestseller, and the photographs and reporting of Tagore’s saintly image: his face, his clothing and his voice. The theological subject matter and the reception of the *Sadhana* lectures, and Tagore’s apparent acceptance of the Indian guru role, were further confirmation.

These superficial media events brought about one kind of misunderstanding of Tagore, which acts as a contextual thread running through the story of *Sadhana*. There were also wider, cultural misunderstandings affecting Tagore’s reception, such as references to ‘East’ and ‘West’ and their derivatives, including Tagore’s own usage of such terms, which I discuss next. Linked to that is the subject of reformed Hinduism, and Tagore’s family background in the Brahma Samaj, a monotheistic Hindu religious society, which came about due to western influences in the nineteenth century. Tagore moved away from organised religion towards his own universalist social and religious understandings, with *Sadhana* marking a turning point in that process. I discuss aspects of traditional Hinduism, and show how Hindu ‘modes of worship (*sadhana*)’ can help to account for differences in the way Tagore was perceived at home and abroad. Then I consider the effect of Tagore’s social and political commitments on his writings, such that he produced and reworked collections of short pieces of poetry and prose, of which *Gitanjali* and *Sadhana* are important examples. Lastly I come to the story of the *Sadhana* lectures themselves and the reception of the book. All the factors I discuss are touched on by Tagore in his ‘Author’s Preface’ to *Sadhana*, which provides intriguing details about the poet, his family and his school, and was the subject of many comments when the book appeared.

The writer has been brought up in a family where texts of the Upanishads are used in daily worship; and he has had before him the example of his father, who lived his long life in the closest communion with God, while not neglecting his duties to the world, or allowing his keen interest in all human affairs to suffer any abatement. So in these papers, it may be hoped, western readers will have an opportunity of coming into touch with the

⁸³ Kalyan Sircar, Introduction, in *Imagining Tagore*, pp. xi-lvi (p. xvii).

⁸⁴ W.W. Pearson, ‘Shantiniketan’, in *Shantiniketan: The Bolpur School of Rabindranath Tagore* (London: Macmillan, 1917), pp. 11-53.

ancient spirit of India as revealed in our sacred texts and manifested in the life of to-day.⁸⁵

Ideas of East and West

Krishna Dutta, one of Tagore's biographers, has written about her childhood in Calcutta a few years after Tagore's death, when the Poet was 'an ever-present, massive cultural icon'.⁸⁶ Fifteen years ago, Amartya Sen wrote of Tagore's 'commanding presence in Bengali literature and his near-total eclipse in the rest of the world'.⁸⁷ Since then, despite more and better translations of Tagore's works having appeared, Sen's comment that 'he is not much read now in the West' probably still holds true beyond Tagore enthusiasts and some academic and intellectual circles.⁸⁸ Tagore's English translator, William Radice has described Tagore as a 'one-man counter-culture [...] within his own society just as much, if not more so, than he was in the West'.⁸⁹ When Radice refers to 'the West' we know what he means, but he does not refer to 'the East', because Tagore's country was a 'complex hybrid culture' out of which Tagore chose only certain elements.⁹⁰

At the time of the *Gitanjali-Sadhana* episode, and also later in Tagore's international career, there was talk of him bringing Eastern spirituality as a remedy for Western materialism. In 1912-13 such an East-West binary, while simplistic, was not without foundation, and Tagore sometimes spoke in those terms, despite the criticism at home that he was too positively disposed towards the West.

Tagore relates in some of his autobiographical writings how, in their youth, he and his siblings had always cultivated the Bengali language, literature and culture,⁹¹ and were also enthusiastic about British literature. He describes how they schemed in a secret and ineffectual way to rescue India from British rule, and how they put on a Hindu festival with the song 'Victory to India'.⁹² In *Asian Ideas of East and West*, Stephen Hay writes about Tagore, when aged only fourteen, composing and reading poems at the Hindu Fair in 1875, which was organised by his older brothers and other 'cultural nationalists'. Hay then quotes an extract from an essay Tagore wrote three

⁸⁵ Tagore, 'Author's Preface', in *Sadhana*, pp. vii-ix (p. vii).

⁸⁶ Krishna Dutta, 'Journey with Tagore', in *A Timeless Mind*, pp. 84-92 (p. 84).

⁸⁷ Amartya Sen, 'Tagore and His India' (1997), in *The Argumentative Indian: Writings on Indian History, Culture and Identity* (London: Allen Lane, 2005), pp. 89-120 (p. 89).

⁸⁸ Sen (p. 89.) was making a general remark and using 'the West' in a loose sense. We know that Tagore has continued to be appreciated in Eastern Europe. (Ivbulis, p. 155.)

⁸⁹ William Radice, Introduction, in *Rabindranath Tagore: Particles, Jottings, Sparks: The Collected Brief Poems*, ed. and trans. by William Radice (London: Angel, 2001), pp. 1-33 (p. 26).

⁹⁰ Radice, pp. 27-8.

⁹¹ Tagore, 'Patriotism', in *My Reminiscences*, pp. 139-49 (pp. 139-40).

⁹² Tagore, *Of Myself (Atmaparichay)*, trans. by Devadatta Joardar and Joe Winter (London: Anvuil, 2006), pp. 80-1.

years later for the family magazine *Bharati*:

If the remnants of Indian civilization were to become the foundation on which European civilization is to be built, what a most beautiful sight that would be! The European idea in which freedom predominates, and the Indian idea in which welfare predominates; the profound thought of the Eastern countries and the active thought of the Western countries; European acquisitiveness and the Indian conservatism; the imagination of the Eastern countries and the practical intelligence of the West—what a fullness will emerge from a synthesis of these two. (Tagore, 1878)⁹³

To the end of his life Tagore pondered on such character differences between peoples of the East and the West, and theorised about how they came about. In the first essay in *Sadhana*, he suggests that the cause was the ‘city walls’ of western civilisation:

These walls leave their mark deep in the minds of men. They set up a principle of ‘divide and rule’ in our mental outlook, which begets in us a habit of securing all our conquests by fortifying them and separating them from one another. We divide nation and nation, knowledge and knowledge, man and nature. It breeds in us a strong suspicion of whatever is beyond the barriers we have built, and everything has to fight hard for its entrance into our recognition.⁹⁴

In contrast, the civilisation of India was born in the forests, and even when ‘wealthy cities sprang up’, India was inspired by the ideals rooted in its beloved forests:

Mighty kingdoms were established, which had communications with all the great powers of the world. But even in the heyday of its material prosperity the heart of India ever looked back with adoration upon the early ideal of strenuous self-realisation, and the dignity of the simple life of the forest hermitage, and drew its best inspiration from the wisdom stored there.⁹⁵

In 1912 when Tagore came to England, he was inclined to regard the West in positive and complementary terms – expecting the West in turn to appreciate what the East had to offer. The key phrase in the 1878 quotation where Tagore’s later practical projects are concerned is ‘the Indian idea in which welfare predominates’, but in 1912 he was not offering that idea for consideration by the West. He was bringing ‘the profound thought of the Eastern countries’.

Hay gives the impression in *Asian Ideas of East and West* that the people of Asia were more interested in the West, and in East-West relations, than the people of Europe and America were interested in the East. (There were of course individuals in the West

⁹³ Tagore, ‘*Bangalir asa o nairasya*’ (The hope and despair of the Bengalis), *Bharati*, [January-February, 1878], quoted in Stephen N. Hay, *Asian Ideas of East and West: Tagore and his Critics in Japan, China, and India* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1970), p. 21, Notes, p. 339.

⁹⁴ Tagore, ‘The Relation of the Individual to the Universe’, in *Sadhana*, pp. 1-22 (p. 3).

⁹⁵ Tagore, ‘The Relation of the Individual to the Universe’, pp. 3-5.

who were keenly interested in the East, and Hay goes on to show that there was no pan-Asian view of the West that Tagore hoped to find on his visits to Japan, China and India some years later.) One can make a corresponding generalisation from comments reported in the British press on the *Gitanjali* poems that the West was of the opinion that ‘the profound thought of the Eastern countries’ originated in the West, to such an extent that the comment has been made that Tagore was ‘robbed of his Indianness’, by being categorized by western critics as an Oriental profoundly influenced by European literature, Christianity and Western mysticism.⁹⁶

There was some truth in this. Hay points out that ‘cultural nationalists’ like the Tagore family, were inspired to reclaim and revive Indian culture by the interest British rulers had taken in it, initially for commercial reasons, to facilitate taking over administration from the Mughals, and then western orientalist scholars took an interest in Indian philosophy and religion too.⁹⁷ This powerful process has been called a ‘pizza effect’, whereby a cultural dish is exported and then returned home.⁹⁸

It was always Tagore’s hope that East and West should come together, but for such a hope to make any sense, there have to be complementary differences, with identifiable mutual benefits. This does not mean that Tagore always saw those differences in the positive terms of the 1878 quotation. To mark the last day of the nineteenth century, he wrote a poem which begins as follows:

The last sun of the century sets amidst the
 blood-red clouds of the West and the
 whirlwind of hatred.
The naked passion of self-love of Nations, in its
 drunken delirium of greed, is dancing to the
 clash of steel and the howling verses of vengeance.⁹⁹

Tagore did not reserve his critical passion for the West, as the next quotation from an address to a group of Brahma (reformed Hinduism) students shows:

At every turn—in her laws and customs, in her religious and social institutions—India today deceives and insults herself. That is why the meeting of East and West on our soil fails to attain fulfilment. The contact yields nothing but pain. Even if we succeed in pushing out the British by one means or another, this pain will be there; it cannot go until an inner harmony between the two is achieved. Then alone will East and West unite in India; country with country, race with race, knowledge with knowledge, endeavour with endeavour. Then alone will the present chapter of India’s history come to its end and a new one start—one of the noblest in the story of Man. (Tagore, ‘East and West’,

⁹⁶ Sircar, p. xvi.

⁹⁷ Hay, pp 13-14.

⁹⁸ Gavin Flood, ‘Sacred Writings’, in *Themes and Issues in Hinduism*, ed. by Paul Bowen (London: Cassell, 1998), pp. 132-60 (pp. 151-2).

⁹⁹ Tagore, ‘The Sunset of the Century’, in *Nationalism* (London: Macmillan, 1921), pp. 133-5 (p. 133).

1908)¹⁰⁰

In 1904 Tagore addressed a public meeting in Calcutta assembled to discuss a Government resolution on the problem of water scarcity in Bengal.¹⁰¹ The subject of his lecture, ‘*Swadeshi Samaj*’, published in English as ‘Society and State’, was how Indian rural society differed from the nation state as it operated in England. He began by making the point that in their own country, rulers waged wars and defended their territory, but everything else ‘from the supply of water to the supply of knowledge’ was traditionally provided by society operating at local community level. In contrast ‘England relegates to State care all the welfare services in the country; India did that only to a very limited extent’.¹⁰²

I have mentioned some of Tagore’s earlier writings on East and West to indicate that he had a well-formed understanding of the situation in India prior to 1912. Sisir Kumar Das, editor of the comprehensive collection of Tagore’s *English Writings*, provides an indication of the breadth of Tagore’s interests:

From the very beginning of his literary career Tagore took a great interest in political and social and religious activities in India and abroad, and by 1912, before his third visit to Europe, he had already assumed the stature of a seminal thinker in Bengal. His activities were not confined within the pensive citadels of art, they went beyond ‘poetry and his school’. International recognition did not change but only extended his activities. Most important is the fact that Tagore did not find any contradiction between his artistic activities and his other social commitments. Nonetheless they did create a tension, an unending one, in his life. From time to time he would cry out in exasperation: ‘I am only a poet.’ But the truth was he was not only a poet.¹⁰³

Because Tagore was seen as poet and mystic during that crucial third visit to the West, he missed what might have been an opportunity for presenting his critique of the nation and nationalism in knowledgeable and constructive terms.¹⁰⁴ Instead, when *Nationalism* was published in 1917, his critique was dismissed as ‘The Protest of a Seer’ who, according to the reviewer, gives no answer to the question: ‘what Sir Rabindranath would like to substitute for the present *regime* in India, or how the economic needs of

¹⁰⁰ Tagore, ‘East and West’, in *Towards Universal Man*, pp. 129-140 (pp. 139-40).

¹⁰¹ Tagore, ‘Society and State’, in *Towards Universal Man*, pp. 49-66. Notes, pp. 367-8.

¹⁰² Tagore, ‘Society and State’, pp. 49-50.

¹⁰³ Sisir Kumar Das, Introduction, in *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore, Volume THREE: A Miscellany*, pp. 13-24 (pp. 16-17).

¹⁰⁴ What Tagore meant by ‘nation’ and ‘nationalism’ has been a ‘bone of contention’ amongst Tagore scholars, some of whom want to narrow his critique of the nation to the nation-state, and others make Tagore a nationalist in his own special sense. Das Gupta writes that Tagore’s ‘lifelong endeavour with education in a remote corner of rural Bengal was intimately connected with his ideals of a non-parochial and “inclusive” nationalism’. (Das Gupta, Introduction, in *The Oxford India Tagore: Selected Writings on Education and Nationalism* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. xix-xxxvi (p. xxi.))

mankind are now to be supplied without a complex industrial organization'.¹⁰⁵

The essay 'Society and State' is particularly relevant to understanding the rationale behind Tagore's efforts to restore Indian society, through his rural reconstruction and education initiatives. His purpose was to set an example he hoped the rest of India would follow, such that its society would again be made up of self-reliant, thriving village communities, a form of social change which is today associated with the Transition Movement,¹⁰⁶ and can be aligned with postmodern Marxist analyses of the potential for reviving rural economies.¹⁰⁷ For Tagore in his lifetime this work was as much a religious mission as a social one, and so I now consider Tagore's religious background, before discussing the effect of the tension Das alludes to had on his writings, and then how his image as Indian mystic was reinforced by the reception of *Sadhana*, the lectures and then the book.

Reformed and Traditional Hinduism

Tagore liked to say that his background was a confluence of three cultures, Hindu, Mohammedan and British.¹⁰⁸ Tagore's father, the 'Maharshi' (great sage) Devendranath Tagore, was the spiritual heir of the visionary Raja Rammohun Roy, who developed the Brahma Samaj, a form of monotheistic reformed Hinduism, with Christian Unitarian and Sufi influences. Devendranath related in his autobiography that he sought a 'relation with God as that of worshipper and worshipped',¹⁰⁹ and he found that he had to devise new religious texts to support the Brahma Dharma, and he also reformed the Brahma Samaj, the society which administered the membership and congregational worship.¹¹⁰ A study of worship in Hinduism by Anuradha Roma Choudhury shows that traditional Hinduism is not formalised and regulated in that way. Hindu temples are not places for congregational worship: there are no specified places for worship, which takes place at shrines in the home, at roadside shrines and in sacred places.¹¹¹ Tagore himself delighted in and revered the natural world all his life, and saw his whole

¹⁰⁵ 'The Protest of a Seer', review, *The Times Literary Supplement*, 13 September 1917, *Imagining Tagore*, pp. 289-91.

¹⁰⁶ Rob Hopkins, *The Transition Companion: Making Your Community More Resilient in Uncertain Times* (Totnes, Devon: Green Books, 2011)

¹⁰⁷ See Anjan Chakrabarti and Stephen Cullenburg, 'Development and Class Transition in India', in *Re/Presenting Class: Essays in Postmodern Marxism*, ed. by J. K. Gibson-Graham, Stephen Resnick and Richard Wolff (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), as discussed in Christine Marsh, 'The Once and Future Village: From Tagore's Rural Reconstruction to Transition Towns', in Appendix 3, this thesis pp. 184-195 (pp. 190-2).

¹⁰⁸ Tagore, 'The Teacher', in *The Religion of Man*, pp. 165-80 (p. 170).

¹⁰⁹ Devendranath Tagore, *The Autobiography of Maharshi Devendranath Tagore*, trans. by Satyendranath Tagore and Indira Devi (London: Macmillan, 1916), p. 160.

¹¹⁰ Devendranath Tagore, pp. 66-7.

¹¹¹ Anuradha Roma Choudhury, 'Worship', in *Themes and Issues in Hinduism*, pp. 203-29 (pp. 219-23).

country as a sacred place:

The geographical entity, that is India, appears from the earliest times to have roused in its people the desire to realise the unity comprised within its natural boundaries. In the *Mahabharata* we find the bringing together of its traditional memories scattered over different times and places; and, in the institution of systematic pilgrimages to the various sacred places dotted over its entire expanse, we discern the process of capturing a complete picture of its physical features within the net of a common devotion.¹¹²

Tagore often reminisced about his boyhood and youth. He said that his childhood ‘was not regulated by any ancient sacramental laws’, and he recalled how his father having come ‘under the influence of Ram Mohan Roy’ helped him free himself from rigid sectarian barriers and traditions.¹¹³ In his later life Tagore insisted that he had been unaffected by any religion whatever: ‘It was through an idiosyncrasy of my temperament that I refused to accept any religious teaching merely because people in my surroundings believed it to be true’.¹¹⁴ This is perhaps an example of Tagore’s inconsistency, given that his biographers relate that Tagore was involved in the Brahma Samaj when he was a young man, and he composed hymns and wrote articles propagating his father’s faith.¹¹⁵ Tagore may have rejected organised religion, but he was interested in religious ideas, and by 1930 he had devised a set of understandings he called ‘The Religion of Man’.¹¹⁶ In *Sadhana*, he uses verses from the Upanisads, a collection of ancient spiritual texts which sets out a ‘system of intelligent monism’,¹¹⁷ from which Tagore derived his own personalistic variant of traditional Advaita.¹¹⁸

Tagore’s religious thought is an example of the ‘plastic nature’ of India’s spiritual culture, the ‘omnivorous capacity’ of Hinduism which ‘baffles all attempts at definition’,¹¹⁹ and one frequently encounters comments that Hinduism is not a religion at all. Govind Das stated in his book on Hinduism that it ‘is really an anthropological process to which, by a strange irony of fate, the name of religion has been given’,¹²⁰ a

¹¹² Tagore, ‘Mahatma Gandhi’, in *Tagore on Gandhi* (New Delhi: Rupa, 2008), pp. 8-18 (p. 8).

¹¹³ Tagore, ‘My Family and the Changing Times’, in Uma Das Gupta, *Rabindranath Tagore: My Life in My Words* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2010), pp. 3-14 (pp. 8-9).

¹¹⁴ Tagore, ‘On Religion’, in Uma Das Gupta, *Rabindranath Tagore: My Life in My Words*, pp. 319-27 (p. 319).

¹¹⁵ Kripalani, *Rabindranath Tagore: A Biography*, p. 117.

¹¹⁶ Tagore, *The Religion of Man*, p. 225.

¹¹⁷ ‘[A]ware of the underlying unity of all being [...] those early Indian thinkers elaborated a system of intelligent monism which has been accepted as most illuminating and inherently true by their descendents throughout the centuries’ (Robert Ernest Hume, ‘An Outline of the Philosophy of the Upanishads’, in *The Thirteen Principal Upanishads: Translated from the Sanskrit*, ed. by Robert Ernest Hume, (London: Oxford University Press, 1934), pp. 1-72 (pp. 1-2).)

¹¹⁸ P.T. Raju, ‘Contemporary Indian Thought’, in *History of Philosophy Eastern and Western, Volume One*, ed. by Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1952), pp. 526-36 (p. 532).

¹¹⁹ Raju, p. 526.

¹²⁰ M.P. Christanand, *The Philosophy of Indian Monotheism* (Delhi: Macmillan Company of India, 1979), p. 28. (Quote from Govinda Das, *Hinduism* (Madras: Natesan, 1924), p. 45.)

view which Tagore would have shared, given his interest in the evolution of man and society.¹²¹ Choudhury writes that: '[t]he concept of worship in Hinduism is as varied as the many facets of the religion itself. Hinduism cannot even be called a religion in the formal Western sense.'¹²²

Choudhury describes four 'modes of worship (*sadhana*)' in Hinduism, two of which are particularly relevant to understanding Tagore: '*karma-yoga*: the path of enlightenment through work' and '*jnana-yoga*: the path of enlightenment through knowledge or intellectual pursuit'.¹²³ (The term *yoga* means union of body and mind, and also the union of the individual soul with the Universal or Absolute Soul.¹²⁴) Tagore's practice can be understood as *karma-yoga* at home and *jnana-yoga* abroad, which has some correspondence to the different understandings of the role of religion in the East and in the West. This distinction is far from clear cut, however, due to the development of a Western-style variant of Hinduism in the nineteenth century. Reformed Hinduism shunned the rich iconography, ritual practices and oral tradition of the original Hinduism, in favour of a theistic religion focussed on written scripture. Western orientalist played a part in the Hindu Reformation, with their genuine interest as scholars overlaid by an assumed intellectual superiority, leading to their culpability in what Edward Said referred to as 'a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having an authority over the Orient'.¹²⁵

An Indian philosophical scholarship developed in response to the interest taken by orientalist from the West, thence a dialogue between Indian and western scholars. An outcome of that dialogue, timed to coincide with the Government of India Act of 1935, which was seen as a 'gigantic political experiment' towards the transfer of power to Indian nationals, was a volume of essays on *Contemporary Indian Philosophy* prepared for a prestigious international series on the History of Philosophy.¹²⁶ This was headed by contributions by Gandhi and Tagore, 'in consideration of their worldwide fame in fields other than that of technical philosophy', with further entries in alphabetical order. Gandhi was not 'tempted by the questionnaire sent to him' by the editors,¹²⁷ and his

¹²¹ I discuss Tagore's interest in the evolution of man and society in later chapters. I have adopted Tagore's practice of referring to human being as 'man' because the equivalent in Bengali (*manush*) is not gendered (the same is true of 'man(n)' in Old English) and substituting 'politically correct' alternatives is awkward.

¹²² Choudhury, p. 203.

¹²³ Choudhury, pp. 209-13.

¹²⁴ Choudhury, pp. 208-9.

¹²⁵ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 2003 [1978]), p. 3.

¹²⁶ *Contemporary Indian Philosophy*, ed. by S. Radhakrishnan and J. H. Muirhead (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1952)

¹²⁷ Foreword, in *Contemporary Indian Philosophy*, pp. 13-17 (pp. 15-6).

entry was a single page. In answer to the question ‘What is your Religion?’ he wrote: ‘My religion is Hinduism which, for me, is Religion of humanity and includes the best of all the religions known to me’.¹²⁸ Tagore might have said just the same as Gandhi. Instead he contributed a lengthy essay entitled ‘The Religion of an Artist’,¹²⁹ which bears no resemblance in style or substance to the learned contributions made by Swami Abhedananda, President of the Ramakrishna Vedanta Society in Calcutta, and other eminent Indian scholars. This is relevant to a subject I come to shortly, which is how Tagore’s identity as a poet and mystic, who is ‘neither a scholar nor a philosopher’,¹³⁰ is reflected in his method of writing.

After Independence, the Ministry of Education in India compiled its own *History of Philosophy Eastern and Western*. This has occasional references to Gandhi but no entry on his philosophy or religion. There is a short passage on Tagore’s metaphysics, which says that ‘Tagore is a monist, though he does not deny the reality of the world [...] and does not regard it as a product of *maya* or illusion’, and that Tagore considers that ‘Reality is best understood as the supreme Person [and] Tagore’s absolutism is, therefore, personalistic’.¹³¹

In 1912 when Tagore composed the *Sadhana* lectures, he had moved away from formal religion, and was not interested in reaching any clear theological position, not even on the key distinction in Hinduism between monism and theism.¹³² Some western observers may have been open to considering Tagore as an Indian intellectual, other commentators admired his poetry but were dismissive of his philosophy. Ezra Pound, in a private letter, wrote: ‘As a religious teacher he (Tagore) is superfluous [...] and] his philosophy hasn’t much in it [...] So long as he sticks to poetry he can be defended [...] but] there’s no use his repeating the Vedas and other stuff that’s been translated.’¹³³

I mentioned earlier the Hindu terminology for ‘modes of worship (*sadhana*)’, one of which is ‘*jnana-yoga*: the path of enlightenment through knowledge or intellectual pursuit’. That is the kind of path which western intellectuals who were interested in Tagore’s ideas would have expected him to be following. In the latter half of his life Tagore went on many lecturing tours around the world, but most of his time was spent at home, in his school and ashram at Santiniketan, where he had an active, productive

¹²⁸ ‘M.K. Gandhi’, in *Contemporary Indian Philosophy*, p. 21.

¹²⁹ Tagore, ‘The Religion of an Artist’, in *Contemporary Indian Philosophy*, pp. 25-45.

¹³⁰ Tagore, ‘The Vision’, in *The Religion of Man*, pp. 90-109 (p. 90).

¹³¹ P.T. Raju, ‘Contemporary Indian Thought’, p. 532.

¹³² ‘I have no special claim to knowledge of philosophy. If there is a debate about, say, monism and dualism, I will not respond.’ (Tagore, *Of Myself*, p. 22.)

¹³³ Ezra Pound, letter to Harriet Monroe, 22 May 1913, in *The Letters of Ezra Pound 1907-1941*, ed. by D.D. Paige (London: Faber and Faber, [n.d.]), p. 55.

life, engaged in ‘*karma-yoga*: the path of enlightenment through work’. He was teacher and preacher. He created the lyrics and the melodies for countless songs, and sang them with his students. He wrote plays and also acted in them, devised dance dramas and danced, wrote and told many stories, always involving his staff and students.¹³⁴

Tagore’s method of writing

It was probably not easy for Tagore to achieve a balance between his active work and the detachment needed for creative writing, as Tagore expressed in one of his many published ‘Thoughts’:

Just as it does not do to have a writer entirely removed from the feeling to which he is giving expression, so also it does not conduce to the truest poetry to have him too close to it. Memory is the brush which can best lay on the true poetic color. Nearness has too much of the compelling about it, and the imagination is not sufficiently free unless it can get away from its influence.¹³⁵

There is support for Tagore experiencing such a difficulty in Radice’s introduction to *Particles, Jottings, Sparks*, his translation of three books of Tagore’s ‘brief poems’. Radice begins by considering the question of why Tagore never wrote an epic, quoting Tagore as blaming this wittily on his essentially lyrical muse:

I had been toying
with the thought of writing
An epic —

Until,
Stumbling at the jingle
Of your anklets and bangles,
My musings were shattered
Into songs innumerable:
Through that mishap
My epic was scattered
As particles
Round your feet.

I had been toying
With the thought of writing
An epic....¹³⁶

Radice suggests that these lines reflect Tagore’s ‘desire to achieve *purṇata* or “fullness” on an almost cosmic scale [...] not in a single great work but in an endless stream of

¹³⁴ Tagore’s active life is described, for example, by Leonard Elmhirst in his Preface to *Rabindranath Tagore, Pioneer in Education: Essays and Exchanges between Rabindranath Tagore and Leonard Elmhirst* (London: John Murray, 1961), pp. 9-17 (pp. 9-10).

¹³⁵ ‘Thoughts from Rabindranath Tagore’, in *A Tagore Reader*, ed. by Amiya Chakravarty (London: Macmillan, 1961), pp. 276-9 (p. 276).

¹³⁶ Tagore, quoted in Radice, p. 2.

smaller ones'.¹³⁷ He goes on to describe the 'big in small' content in the poems which Tagore called *kabitika*, which would be 'poemlet' in English. Radice says that these fragments were Tagore's outbursts of feelings 'when he felt burdened by all the responsibilities and activities he took on to himself'.¹³⁸

Radice has voiced his opinion about Tagore scholarship today, which is that too much attention is paid to Tagore's ideas and not enough to his poetry.¹³⁹ Scholars who are more interested in Tagore's ideas and practical projects might counter Radice's view by wondering how it was that Tagore wrote so much poetry, a great deal of it in thousands of fragments. In 1904, in one of his rare autobiographical pieces, Tagore suggests he had 'no control' over his poetry writing:

When I look back on this process of my writing poetry for so long I can see this clearly – it's a business over which I have had no control. When I was writing, I thought, it is I who am writing, but now I know that's not true. Because these poems are fragments and in them the significance of the whole body of the poetry is incomplete. And what that significance was I had no idea. I had been adding one poem to another, blind to the consequence. The little meaning of each one I imagined I saw as a given point. Now taking them as a whole I see well enough that a single continuous significance flowed through them all.¹⁴⁰

As this piece continues, no point to it all emerges: 'the poetry remained a riddle and the life likewise'.¹⁴¹ It is as if poetry writing for him was a compulsive life-long habit. His colleague Leonard Elmhirst, who accompanied Tagore on his travels in 1924 and 1925, related in a journal entry how on one of the ocean voyages, he used to help the Poet, who had been unwell, to sit up in his bunk each morning to write a poem, before which he could not engage with any other matters.¹⁴² From Tagore's two autobiographies about his boyhood and youth, one can see that a child psychologist might say that this lonely child wrote poems to get attention. Radice hazards a counterpart to that, with his footnote about critics and biographers being 'shy of probing Tagore's psychology', and then referring to an exception to this in a book by Manasi Dasgupta 'which sees Tagore's unrelenting efforts in the practical sphere as stemming partly from fear of his father's disapproval of purely literary activity'.¹⁴³

Thousands of Tagore's poems in manuscript have been collected, originally by himself and by servants and staff, family members, colleagues, friends and

¹³⁷ Radice, p. 2.

¹³⁸ Radice, p. 25.

¹³⁹ William Radice, comment made during the Panel Discussion, at the conference 'Revisiting Rabindranath' organised by the Tagore Centre UK, 6-8 May 2011.

¹⁴⁰ Tagore, Part I, in *Of Myself*, pp. 17-35 (p. 17).

¹⁴¹ Part I, in *Of Myself*, p. 34.

¹⁴² From an entry in travel diaries in the 'Leonard Elmhirst Papers' in the *Dartington Archive*.

¹⁴³ Radice, p. 30.

acquaintances, and are now preserved in archives. An enormous number of his poems have been published in magazines and in books. Tagore's other literary writings were also collected, published and archived, as were his many addresses and lectures. There are also collections of his paintings and photo archives. Tagore scholars draw on these resources, and Das Gupta mentions in particular Visva-Bharati's Rabindra-Bhavana Archives, a 'national treasure trove', maintained by 'a great team of self-taught bibliographers'.¹⁴⁴

Some commentators have suggested that this hoarding of Tagore's work is not altogether a good thing, including the Poet himself, with a verse Radice quotes:

Why fill your bags with my every verbal scrap?
Things that belong to the dust should be left to drop.¹⁴⁵

Edward Thompson, commenting on Tagore's life and work in 1921, said that Tagore 'has written a great deal too much',¹⁴⁶ and Ashis Nandy wrote in 1999 that some of Tagore's work is mediocre and dated, and that a 'leaner and a less flabby Tagore has a better chance of survival as a relevant creative mind in the rest of the world in the twenty-first century'.¹⁴⁷

Tagore's copious output of short pieces of poetry and prose was a 'treasure trove' for his own use. Amiya Chakravarty wrote in his introduction to a section on 'Philosophical Meditations' in *A Tagore Reader* that the texts of the *Sadhana* lectures came from Tagore's collection of 'Thought Relics'. When a book of these prose fragments (103 in the first edition, 192 in the second) were published by Macmillan in 1921, it did not receive much attention from critics.¹⁴⁸ From the point of view of Tagore's literary reputation, it was probably a mistake to publish such a collection, and it may have appeared as part of the many efforts by Tagore and his colleagues to keep money from royalties coming in to help fund his projects.

It is possible that Tagore's method of composition for a religious work such as *Sadhana* is connected to him being primarily an indigenous Romantic in his thought processes and writing. This is born out by observations made by Ivbulis in an article entitled 'Only Western influence?: The birth of literary Romantic aesthetics in

¹⁴⁴ Das Gupta, Acknowledgements, in *Oxford India Tagore*, pp. xi-xii.

¹⁴⁵ Radice, p. 21.

¹⁴⁶ E.J. Thompson, *Rabindranath Tagore: His Life and Work*, p. 70.

¹⁴⁷ Ashis Nandy, 'Violence and Creativity in the Late Twentieth Century: Rabindranath Tagore and the Problem of Testimony', p. 278.

¹⁴⁸ Notes, in *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore, Volume THREE: A Miscellany*, pp. 967-1013 (p. 967).

Bengal'.¹⁴⁹ Ivbulis' argument links interestingly to Radice's comment about Tagore's country being a 'complex hybrid culture' out of which Tagore chose certain elements. Ivbulis suggests that Tagore's Romanticism derived from indigenous sources which may, by a circuitous route via Germany, have affected the English Romantics whom Western critics assumed had been influences on Tagore. In his conclusion Ivbulis writes:

[I]t is hardly possible to discuss 19th century Bengali literature without employing terms which originate in Europe. Using them, one can say that the century began with a struggle between the newly born rationalist (Enlightenment) tendencies and the traditional religious irrationalism, but beginning in approximately the 1870s new approaches could be seen. [...]

Even powerful outside influences alone do not make one a Romanticist or realist or modernist. We maintain that both Biharilal Chakravarty and Rabindranath Tagore and a few other lesser known poets became Romanticists due to historic circumstances of mainly indigenous character. Their imagination must have been unconsciously fed by traditional, very ancient Indian ideas on the status of art and the artist, on nature and a person's unity with it, and the unity of arts and of mythology, religion and philosophy.¹⁵⁰

This penetrating examination of the influences on Tagore suggests that he was not primarily a conceptual thinker or a rationalist. This is confirmed by Tagore himself, in his many statements in his essays that he is not a scholar or a philosopher, and by a much repeated quip he made about himself: saying that inconsistency was both his greatest intellectual weakness and his greatest intellectual strength.¹⁵¹ It may be that Tagore tended to write prose the way a poet does, by linking streams of thought fragments, including those gleaned from his notebooks, and was not inclined to rework these into arguments with complex structures.¹⁵² This could help explain why Tagore never wrote a book with a full and coherent account of his practical projects, so that, as Das Gupta has said, much of his thinking on this work has to be pieced together from occasional comments.¹⁵³ As well as piecemeal writings, there are substantial essays such as 'Society and State' and 'City and Village', in which Tagore describes the traditional village-based society of India which the British Raj disrupted and he worked

¹⁴⁹ Viktors Ivbulis, 'Only Western influence? The birth of literary Romantic aesthetics in Bengal', *Acta Orientalia Vilnensia*, 9.2 (2008) 145-157.

¹⁵⁰ Ivbulis, p. 156.

¹⁵¹ Kripalani, *Rabindranath Tagore: A Biography*, p. 176.

¹⁵² Studies have suggested that poets are affective rather than conceptual thinkers, and that feelings and emotions are closely associated with how the brain functions (David Gelernter, in *The Muse in the Machine: Computerizing the Poetry of Human Thought* (New York: Free, 1994); Antonio Damasio, *Looking for Spinoza: Joy, Sorrow and the Feeling Brain* (London: Heinemann, 2003)) These ideas are also relevant to the evolution of human cognition as studied by Merlin Donald and others, which I discuss elsewhere in this thesis, in the context of Tagore's interest in evolution and the sciences.

¹⁵³ Uma Das Gupta, 'Rabindranath Tagore on Rural Reconstruction: The Sriniketan Programme, 1921-41', p. 364.

to revive.¹⁵⁴

Tagore's interest in re-building self-reliance in the villages began in the 1890s when his father, the Maharshi Devendranath, put his dreamy, poetic youngest son in charge of the family estates in East Bengal. The next decision point was Tagore's own, when he decided, as K.R. Kripalani has put it: 'to adopt the vocation of a schoolmaster—the latest among the despised castes of India', and in 1901 established a small school at the place where the great sage, his father, 'used to sit and meditate on the One Eternal'.¹⁵⁵ Tagore had a short-lived adventure into the campaign against the Partition of Bengal in 1905, which distracted him briefly from his work at the school. In 1913 Tagore bought some land not far from his school with a view to resuming work on village welfare.¹⁵⁶ So in May 1912, it was simply as Bengali poet-schoolmaster that Tagore bid his students and staff farewell before his life-changing voyage to England.

It is a century since Tagore set out on that journey, with no incentive apart from his feeling that the world was inviting 'all two hundred' of them, and only he could go.¹⁵⁷ As Chakravarty explains, Tagore took with him a collection of short passages from his weekly discourses he had delivered at the prayer hall in Santiniketan, and started translating them when he was in the United States for his lectures, and they were published as *Sadhana* in 1913.¹⁵⁸

The Three *Sadhanas*

The book of essays, *Sadhana: The Realisation of Life*, was first published in October 1913,¹⁵⁹ but that was at least its third incarnation. Tagore's son, Rathindranath, describes his father writing the chapters of *Sadhana* in Urbana in America,¹⁶⁰ although we suspect that Tagore was actually translating from Bengali into English some of the short writings from the discourses at his school, and the idea of a book with that title came several months later.

According to the 'Chronicle' of Tagore's life, father and son arrived in New York on 28 October 1912, and in November and December, Tagore 'deliver[ed] a series of

¹⁵⁴ Tagore, 'Society and State', in *Towards Universal Man*, pp. 49-66; 'City and Village', in *Towards Universal Man*, pp. 302-22.

¹⁵⁵ K.R. Kripalani, 'The Poet as Educationalist', in *Tagore Birthday Number, Visva-Bharati Quarterly* Vol. VII, Parts I & II, May-Oct. 1941., pp. 225-234 (pp. 226-7).

¹⁵⁶ Kripalani, pp. 229.

¹⁵⁷ Tagore, 'On the Eve of Departure', in *Towards Universal Man*, pp. 158-74; Notes to essay, p. 373.

¹⁵⁸ Chakravarty, *A Tagore Reader*, p. 256.

¹⁵⁹ Notes, in *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore, Volume TWO: Plays, Stories, Essays*, pp. 763-75 (p. 770). There was no announcement of its publication, and no reviews in the British Press, until December 1913 (*Imagining Tagore*, pp. 622-3).

¹⁶⁰ Rathindranath [*sic*] Tagore, *On the Edges of Time*, pp. 123-4.

discourses on metaphysical topics at [the] Unity Club'.¹⁶¹ Krishna Dutta and Andrew Robinson, in their biography *Rabindranath Tagore: The Myriad-Minded Man*, make the intriguing observation that Tagore had been nervous of 'appearing comical speaking in English', but yielded to the request by the small club of Unitarians, which gave him the confidence to lecture at Harvard. They add that Tagore gave the same lectures in London the following May and June, and that after revision by Ernest Rhys (to whom the book is dedicated), they were published as *Sadhana: The Realisation of Life*.¹⁶²

In the 'Author's Preface' to *Sadhana*, Tagore says that the subject-matter of the book 'has not been philosophically treated [...] from a scholar's point of view', and that the papers were 'culled' from talks to the students from his school. Tagore's modesty may have contributed to the rather condescending reviews of the book, which we shall come to. But knowing that he took the lecture texts from talks to his beloved boys indicates that they had been moving and lively addresses.¹⁶³ Furthermore, despite Tagore's supposed insecurity about his speaking in English, his personality: 'his figure, his countenance, and the quality of his voice', as Amiya Chakravarty, Tagore's literary secretary from 1921 to 1933, put it, was very appealing to audiences.¹⁶⁴ In his *Biographical Study* of Tagore, Ernest Rhys describes Tagore's *Sadhana* addresses as follows:

Rabindranath Tagore has that unexplainable grace as a speaker which holds an audience without effort, and his voice has curiously impressive, penetrating tones in it when he exerts it at moments of eloquence.¹⁶⁵

Rhys then remarks how, in the book, the 'warm colour' of the lectures 'has faded in cold print', and observes that Tagore 'was like one drawing on a fund of ideas too fluid to be caught in a net, too subtle to be held except in a parable, or an analogy out of poetry'.¹⁶⁶ As well as dedicating the book to Rhys, Tagore offers his thanks to him in his preface 'for his kindness in helping [...] with suggestions and revisions, and in going through the proofs'.¹⁶⁷

From the comprehensive compilation of press reports published as *Imagining Tagore: Rabindranath and the British Press (1912-1941)*, we have the full texts of the

¹⁶¹ 'A Chronicle of Eighty Years', p. 469.

¹⁶² Krishna Dutta and Andrew Robinson, *Rabindranath Tagore: The Myriad-Minded Man* (New York: St. Martin's, 1996), p. 171.

¹⁶³ Such as the delightful 'Parting' by Tagore, in Pearson, *Shantiniketan*, pp. 107-111.

¹⁶⁴ Amiya Chakravarty, Preface, in A. Aronson, *Rabindranath Through Western Eyes* (Allahabad: Kitabistan, 1943), pp. v-viii (p. vii).

¹⁶⁵ Ernest Rhys, *Rabindranath Tagore: A Biographical Study*, p. 122.

¹⁶⁶ Rhys, p. 123.

¹⁶⁷ Tagore, 'Author's Preface', in *Sadhana*, pp. vii-ix (p. ix).

lectures Tagore gave in Caxton Hall in London from 24 May to 28 June 1913, as reported in the weekly papers *The Inquirer* and *The Westminster Gazette*.¹⁶⁸ The series of lectures Tagore gave under the auspices of the Quest Society was entitled ‘The Search for God’, rather than ‘Sadhana’. (*Sadhana* was also the name Tagore gave to a magazine he edited and contributed much of the material to in the 1890s, a feature of which was ‘its eager interest in the latest science of every kind’.¹⁶⁹) Not all of the six lectures were reported in full by both papers, but when there were two reports, we can see from the wording being identical in the main, that the texts must have been provided to the representatives from the press, who added their own introductions to Tagore, and observations about the events, for example, ‘a deeply attentive and crowded audience’ at the second lecture.¹⁷⁰

Comparing the reported lecture texts with the essays in *Sadhana* shows that the lectures correspond closely to six of the essays, the first to the fifth and the last. The only major difference in general is that the lecture texts were shorter than the essays, with portions of the ends curtailed, presumably to meet time constraints, but the beginnings are very much the same. The detailed differences between the lecture texts and the essays are interesting, because presumably they reflect the ‘suggestions and revisions’ made by Rhys during the interval between the May and June lectures and the publication of *Sadhana* later that year. In my judgement, the later wording is not an improvement on the original. For all Tagore’s shyness about speaking in public in English, all the indications are that his use of the language for this kind of extra-literary writing was fine. He obviously appreciated Rhys’s support and friendship, but he did not need his help.

Rhys may have been completely innocent of any condescension towards Tagore, but one is reminded of the rumours that *Gitanjali* was only made acceptable through the revisions made by W.B. Yeats,¹⁷¹ and also by Ezra Pound.¹⁷² Edward Thompson adds to this an anecdote about a woman who believed C.F. Andrews was joint author of *Gitanjali*.¹⁷³ Thompson praises the ‘extreme beauty and flexibility’ of Tagore’s English, notwithstanding the few slips he made with his use of the articles and prepositions, and

¹⁶⁸ *Imagining Tagore*, pp. 31-55.

¹⁶⁹ Thompson, *Rabindranath Tagore: His Life and Work*, pp. 20-1).

¹⁷⁰ *Imagining Tagore*, p. 35.

¹⁷¹ Dutta and Robinson discuss the rumour that ‘Yeats had rewritten *Gitanjali*’ (*Myriad-Minded Man*, pp. 183-4).

¹⁷² ‘God knows I didn’t ask for the job of correcting Tagore. He asked me to.’ (Ezra Pound, letter to Harriet Monroe, 22 May 1913, in *The Letters of Ezra Pound 1907-1941*, p. 55.)

¹⁷³ Thompson, *Rabindranath Tagore: His Life and Work*, p. 44. The notes to *Gitanjali* in *English Writings One: Poems* details Andrews’ slight involvement and Yeats’ annoyance over the alterations Andrews had made. (Notes, pp. 601-17 (p. 602).) See also *Selected Letters*, pp. 104-5.

occasional misuse of idiom. Thompson also says that, while the success of *Gitanjali* was well deserved, grave mistakes were made with other literary works subsequently translated into English for publication.¹⁷⁴

As we shall see from the account which follows, there is evidence from press reports and reviews that the ideas Tagore put forward in his lectures, and then in the printed essays of *Sadhana*, were not understood. In my view, this was not due to any inadequacy in Tagore's English, but to the way he was perceived. As Thompson wrote, after *Gitanjali* 'the word had gone round that [Tagore] was "a mystic"' and his fate was sealed.¹⁷⁵ His western audiences and readers seem to have insisted that there was mysticism in all Tagore wrote, and the preface to *Sadhana* may have contributed to such an expectation. The *Sadhana* essays are religious or spiritual discourses, but they are not 'mystical', if that is understood to mean mysterious and obscure. Tagore's 'religion of man' is bound up with his practical projects in education and rural reconstruction, and could interest readers today who would not generally be drawn to religious writings.

The perspective I am interested in now is how the ideas might have been understood by people 'from the West' in 1913 when the book was published. There is valuable information on the reception of Tagore and his works more generally in Alex Aronson's *Rabindranath Through Western Eyes* (1943). Chakravarty wrote a preface to Aronson's book, which provides some justification for using press reports as part of literary criticism:

New literary criticism, quickened by a social conscience, is turning to the context of daily events for a revaluation of creative work. Art is being tested as an expression of contemporaneous trends; the main emphasis is laid on the economic and political cross-currents which, according to this school, determine the products of a civilisation. Popular responses to an author, as revealed in the press of different countries, are regarded as serious evidence, rather than changing side-lights, in literary assessment.¹⁷⁶

The editors of *Imagining Tagore* add to that how the Press actually forms those popular responses, as follows:

[T]here is no doubt that the Press is important and influential. It is the accumulation of perceptions over time that their day to day columns survey, establish and get etched in the public mind and remain embedded in historical consciousness. Media, to a great extent, reflect and mould public policy, public understanding and public attitude. The press cuttings are historical documents of a particular time and milieu.¹⁷⁷

The Publisher's Note highlights what an opportunity the comprehensive collection

¹⁷⁴ Thompson, pp. 44-6.

¹⁷⁵ Thompson, p. 46.

¹⁷⁶ Amiya Chakravarty, Preface, in *Rabindranath Through Western Eyes*, pp. v-viii (p. v).

¹⁷⁷ Introduction, in *Imagining Tagore*, pp. lii-liii.

provides for ‘scholars and general readers alike’ to form their own views of Tagore’s encounter with the West.¹⁷⁸ What is valuable for the present study is to compare how *Sadhana* was reviewed in the British press with the enthusiastic reception of *Gitanjali* and Tagore himself.

There were no further press comments on Tagore’s lectures after the full reports in the two papers referred to earlier. After the last of these on 28 June, there were reports of performances of *The Post Office*, which was seen as a ‘barely definable’ allegory, not a drama but an elusive, symbolic ‘poetic and conversational fragment’ by the ‘Hindu author’, and also a ‘pathetic fantasy’,¹⁷⁹ expressions which are evidently a reflection of Tagore being seen then as the Indian mystic. This play has subsequently proved to be one of Tagore’s most loved works, and of enduring interest to scholars and dramatists.¹⁸⁰ After that, reviews of *The Gardener* appeared. Tagore had brought out the latter to present a different aspect of his work from the devotional collection which led to his designation as ‘poet and mystic’. The reviews are generally favourable, but with some concerns about prettiness, dreaminess and ‘the charm of the Oriental imagination’. A mention of the ‘meditative figure’ of the poet indicates that Tagore’s identity as the Indian mystic persists. One reviewer seeks a ‘spiritual intention’, and finds *The Gardener* reminding him of the ‘Song of Solomon’, for which ‘sanctity has discovered a theological interpretation’.¹⁸¹ The next reviewer takes the position adopted by many on *Gitanjali* that Tagore’s ‘inspiration derived from Western rather than Eastern sources – as would only be natural in one born into the Brahmo-Somaj – are fully justified by this new volume’.¹⁸²

The publication date of *Sadhana* was October 1913 but no reviews appeared in the British Press until December. On 14 November 1913 there were no less than sixteen press reports of Tagore’s award of the Nobel prize for Literature, with the first one included in *Imagining Tagore* headed ‘Nobel Prize for Bengali “Prophet”’.¹⁸³ Other reports of the Nobel prize award included reprises of Tagore’s life, work and reputation, including a lengthy piece by Rhys.¹⁸⁴ Reports of the Nobel continued appearing until

¹⁷⁸ Publisher’s Note, in *Imagining Tagore*, p. vii.

¹⁷⁹ *Imagining Tagore*, pp. 55-62.

¹⁸⁰ There are four articles on *The Post Office* in the recent collection of thirty articles in *Rabindranath Tagore: A Timeless Mind*.

¹⁸¹ *Imagining Tagore*, pp. 65-70.

¹⁸² *Imagining Tagore*, pp. 70-73.

¹⁸³ This report in *The Daily Chronicle* is the first of sixteen on the Nobel Prize which appeared on 14 November 1913, listed alphabetically by name of publication, in *Imagining Tagore*, pp. 76-89. Reports of the award continued up to 6 December when the first mention of *Sadhana* appeared.

¹⁸⁴ Reports of Nobel Prize award on 14 November, including ‘Rabindranath Tagore’ by Ernest Rhys, *Imagining Tagore*, pp. 76-89 (pp. 84-6).

the end of November when *The Crescent Moon* was reviewed appreciatively. Finally, on 6 December, in *The Birmingham Daily Post*, we have the first mention of *Sadhana*, the book, as one item in a lengthy survey of Tagore's English writings, which had 'overflowed to the European continent'.¹⁸⁵ Several more reviews and comments on *Sadhana* appeared in the press in 1914, the last on 14 August.

Sadhana*: a prose counterpart to *Gitanjali

A critic signing himself 'J.M.' wrote a lengthy article entitled 'Ex Oriente Lux' for *The Birmingham Daily Post* on 6 December 1913. He begins as follows:

During the last three or four months the Bengali poems of Rabindranath Tagore, translated by himself into English, have been attracting in an extraordinary manner the attention of the reading public. Their excellence has been praised again and again in newspaper and magazine, with no dissentient voice. Just when the readers of literary reviews were beginning to get over their surprise that translations of Asiatic poems should be greeted as masterpieces of English literature, the award of the Nobel prize to their author revealed the fact that his reputation was not confined within the limits of England, but had overflowed to the European Continent, where his poems must have been chiefly read in the form of translations of translations.¹⁸⁶

Later in the piece, J.M. writes that 'the "Gitanjali" is pervaded by the deeply religious spirit that came when advancing years brought the philosophic mind. A prose counterpart to the "Gitanjali" is provided by the "Sadhana," [...] so that it is well to study the two works side by side'.¹⁸⁷ After comparing *Gitanjali* to Wordsworth, Shelley and Tennyson, J.M. likens *Sadhana* to Tennyson's 'Palace of Art', but declares that 'it is above all with Wordsworth that Mr. Tagore is in agreement', with their 'extremely optimistic view of nature', and their sharing the same ideas on duty and on 'nature as Love'. But J.M. is careful to point out that this similarity is not due to imitation, 'for the poetical metaphysic of the "Gitanjali" is clearly traced in the "Sadhana" to its origin in the "Upanishads," the wisdom of which the poet at an early age imbibed from his father's teaching'. After this J.M. has nothing further to say on *Sadhana*, but continues his discourse with further comparisons between 'Mr. Tagore's translations of his Bengali poems' and examples of poetic form from America, the Bible and the Sanskrit epics. In conclusion he suggests that Tagore's success indicates that the English language may be the medium of 'a great renaissance of national literature [...] in

¹⁸⁵ J.M., 'Literature of the Day: Ex Oriente Lux', 6 December, *The Birmingham Daily Post*, *Imagining Tagore*, pp. 107-9. [It has not been possible to identify 'J.M.' from a search of newspaper archives.]

¹⁸⁶ J.M., p. 107.

¹⁸⁷ J.M., p. 108.

India'.¹⁸⁸

In subsequent press comments on *Sadhana*, the tendency continues whereby writers refer to Tagore's reputation for *Gitanjali* and the Nobel prize, and the 'revival of mysticism' associated with Tagore, and not to what he wrote in the essays in the book. Overall the comments on *Sadhana* were favourable but one can still detect in them what might be called a 'spectrum of condescension'. Even when a review contains quotations from the book for approving comment, the writer will then enlarge on his own opinion, not on what Tagore had to say, as if there was not – and could not be – anything new or important from such a source. The more obviously critical or dismissive commentators hark back to Britain's 'civilising mission' in the colonies, and scold Tagore for not showing his gratitude.

The coupling of *Sadhana* with *Gitanjali* has more to it than Tagore's image as poet and mystic and the opinions of reviewers. It also had a commercial aspect. A report appeared in the British press in April 1914 about the sales of Tagore's books:

Some remarkable figures have been reached by Messers Macmillan in the sale of the four translations they have published of works by Rabindranath Tagore. 'Gitanjali' is in its twenty-fourth thousand, and selling steadily; 'The Gardener' is in its ninth thousand; 'The Crescent Moon' is in its seventh; and the philosophical volume: entitled 'Sadhana' in its sixth. These would be notable sales for any books of pure literature. In all the circumstances they are probably without parallel.¹⁸⁹

Aronson writes that 12,000 books were published in England in 1913, a 'strange assortment' with politics, biography and light fiction predominating – and 'a solitary volume of poems translated into English by a writer practically unknown to the British public'. Aronson repeats a suggestion made at the time that, 1913 being an 'uneventful year', the reading public 'was ready to welcome any kind of exotic literary adventure', and then he discusses other possibilities, and also the shock to the intelligentsia of the Nobel Prize going 'to an Indian'. Then Aronson suggests that the key factor was Yeats' introduction to *Gitanjali*, and remarks how many editorials on the Nobel Prize reproduced Yeats' words, without any further comment on Tagore's work.¹⁹⁰ Aronson makes no mention of *Sadhana*, at this point, or later in his book, apart from listing in a bibliography its translations into seven other languages.¹⁹¹

Macmillan's figure of six thousand copies of *Sadhana* is impressive, but one would

¹⁸⁸ J.M., p. 109.

¹⁸⁹ 'Literary and Dramatic Notes', *Western Daily Press*, 11 April 1914, *Imagining Tagore*, p. 158.

¹⁹⁰ Aronson, pp. 1-4. (As a small piece of evidence of the 'Yeats factor', I can report that my copy of *Gitanjali* from the thirteenth printing in 1913 is unopened after the Introduction and the first few poems.)

¹⁹¹ The languages were Swedish (1914), Russian (1914), Italian (1915), Czech (1920), German (1921), Latvian (1939) and French (1940). (Aronson, Appendix B, pp. 137-53 (pp. 144-5).)

not expect it to match the sales achieved for *Gitanjali* in a single year. However Hay, in his work on Tagore's reception in Asia, writes that after the Nobel Prize made Tagore internationally famous, translations from his English writings poured from the presses in Japan and 'three thousand copies of *Sadhana* [...] were sold in the first two days of its publication'.¹⁹²

Returning to my theme of how Tagore was received in the West, particularly the way he was seen as the Indian saint and mystic, it is interesting to consider whether Yeats was instrumental in constructing such an image through his introduction to *Gitanjali*.¹⁹³ One might criticise Yeats for not being suitably scholarly: for including in his Part I so much hearsay (Yeats uses that word) about Tagore's life, literature and fame in his own country, then in Part II for musing on the qualities of the original lyrics and likening Tagore to European saints, although it is good that he mentions that Tagore was best known for his songs, and that there was music to these lyrics. In Part III Yeats observes how Tagore with these poems provides relief from western money and politics, and Yeats quotes from the poems to highlight their themes of humble lives, nature and children.

A report in *The Christian Commonwealth* of an interview with Tagore gives an indication of how Yeats' introduction was perhaps not the culprit:

Mr. W. B. Yeats writes a glowing appreciation of the poems, but, indeed, they need no commendation even from a brother poet; they are so transparently startlingly the product of genius that one cannot withhold homage. Few writers in English have achieved such perfect mastery of the rhythm and colour of words, or have succeeded so well in rendering the faint, far-off fragrance, the dream-like beauty and delicacy of what one feels to be the loftiest mysticism.¹⁹⁴

Much of the material for the report evidently came from 'a young Indian gentleman who chanced to be present' when Tagore was called away from the interview. 'With a gentle-voiced reverent enthusiasm', this informer provided more of the kind of 'hearsay' Yeats had picked up.¹⁹⁵ Then from what Tagore himself told him about his school, the reporter gathered that it was a kind of 'nature monastery' providing a training on spiritual lines and with no system, and so must be a 'schoolboys' paradise'.¹⁹⁶

¹⁹² Hay, p. 85.

¹⁹³ Yeats, Introduction, in *Gitanjali*, pp. vii-xxii.

¹⁹⁴ 'The Living Voice of India', *The Christian Commonwealth*, 12 May 1913, *Imagining Tagore*, pp. 25-9 (p. 27). [It was not possible to identify the author of this article from a search of newspaper and journal archives.]

¹⁹⁵ 'The Living Voice of India', p. 25.

¹⁹⁶ 'The Living Voice of India', p. 28.

It evidently did not come across to the writer that Tagore intended his school to be a model of an alternative to conventional education.¹⁹⁷ For Tagore, spirituality was an essential quality of human life. Spiritual verses, like those in *Gitanjali*, were songs with a purpose in Tagore's school, where they were sung in the mornings and evenings by groups of boys going around the school. Ramsay Macdonald paid a visit to the school which he described very fully in a report in *The Daily Chronicle* in January 1914.¹⁹⁸ Pearson's book with Tagore's introduction and Pearson's account similar to Ramsay Macdonald's was published several years later, in 1917.¹⁹⁹ Until the practicality and relevance of Tagore's educational initiatives could be understood, Tagore would continue to be seen as saint and mystic, and it would be a shock when the poet voiced his very adamant political opinions in *Nationalism* in 1917.

However, perhaps because of the misunderstandings, because the reading public 'was ready to welcome any kind of exotic literary adventure', Tagore had become a celebrity, and he would for some years have opportunities to address the world. Perhaps more importantly for him, he had the Nobel Prize money, and royalties were coming in, which all went towards funding and expanding his school.

Tagore's New Mission

I know that there is a call for me to work towards the true union of East and West. I have unconsciously been getting ready for this mission. When I wrote my *Sadhana* lectures, I was not aware that I had been fulfilling my destiny. All through my tour I was told that my *Sadhana* had been of real help to my Western readers. The accident which made me translate *Gitanjali* and the sudden and unaccountable longing which took me over to Europe at the beginning of my fiftieth year—all combined to push me forward to a path whose destination I did not clearly know when I first took it. This, my last tour in Europe, has made it definitely known to me.²⁰⁰

Reflecting on the *Sadhana* lectures nine years after he gave them, in July 1921, on board the steamer returning to India at the end of his fifth foreign tour, Tagore was clear about the mission that he felt he had been drawn towards. This was 'to invite students and scholars from different parts of the world to an Indian University to meet there our

¹⁹⁷ There is an extensive literature on alternative or 'real' education. Tagore's work is the focus of a study by Professor José Paz, *Tagore's Educational Model and its Relation with the New School Movement* (Ourense, Spain: Prof. José Paz, 2012). A book by David Gribble: *Real Education: Varieties of Freedom* (Bristol: Libertarian Education, 1998) includes Dartington Hall School, which was inspired by Tagore's work.

¹⁹⁸ J. Ramsay Macdonald, 'Mr. Rabindranath Tagore's School: The "Asram" of the Great Bengali Poet', *The Daily Chronicle*, 12 January 1914, *Imagining Tagore*, pp. 137-9.

¹⁹⁹ Pearson, 'Shantiniketan'; Tagore, Introduction, in *Shantiniketan*, pp. 1-7.

²⁰⁰ Tagore, letter to C.F. Andrews, 9 July 1921, in *Letters to a Friend*, ed. by C.F. Andrews (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1928), pp. 180-1. (This work consists of letters written by Tagore to Andrews in 1913-22, with a Preface and two essays by Andrews.)

students and scholars in a spirit of collaboration'.²⁰¹ In 1912 there was only his school, and as he writes in the Preface to the book, he had drawn the material for the *Sadhana* lectures from talks to his students.²⁰²

In the first essay in the book, 'The Relation of the Individual to the Universe', Tagore contrasts 'two different points of view': the Indian tradition of living in the forests and being in harmony with nature, and the western tradition of living in cities separated from nature. The former led to a 'spirit of sympathy, with a large feeling of joy and peace', the latter to 'scientific curiosity or greed of material advantage'.²⁰³ All through his life Tagore understood the world, and his own mission, through that simple story. He had told it to the boys from Calcutta families, sent from their urban homes to his school in the countryside, where they were allowed to run around and climb trees. Tagore saw it as equally relevant to his urban audiences in America.²⁰⁴

Tagore hoped his boys at his school would feel free to learn by exploring their surroundings, using their natural curiosity and creativity, instead of seeing school as a place to get qualifications for competing in the job market. Similarly, the idea was growing in Tagore's mind that he might liberate adults from their urban, industrial and institutional prisons. Stephen Hay writes that the happiest time Tagore spent in the U.S.A. was in a small university town, in the Midwestern plains, which may have inspired him to dream of founding his own university on the plains of Bengal – a plan which he put into effect in 1921.²⁰⁵ All he had to offer in 1912 was words of wisdom.

Edward Thompson has written that 'the necessity of the East to the West to each other' was 'a master-theme of [Tagore's] whole life'.²⁰⁶ Tagore saw this as a two-way exchange, but *Sadhana* can give the impression that he was simply bringing Eastern spirituality as a remedy for Western materialism. In the last part of 'The Relation of the Individual to the Universe' Tagore brings in several passages by the 'rishis' (sages) of ancient India, authors of the Upanisads.²⁰⁷ The sense of the esoteric, enhanced in the book with footnotes giving the passages in the original Sanskrit, evidently appealed to his 'Western readers', although it is hard to see how it provided the kind of 'real help'

²⁰¹ Tagore, letter to Andrews, 12 July 1921, in *Letters to a Friend*, pp. 183-4 (p. 184).

²⁰² 'Author's Preface', in *Sadhana*, pp. viii-ix.

²⁰³ 'The Relation of the Individual to the Universe', in *Sadhana*, pp. 1-22 (pp. 3-5).

²⁰⁴ Tagore wrote to Rothenstein about speaking at New York, Chicago and Boston, his talks being well received, and being urged to publish the papers in book form. (Tagore, letter to Rothenstein, 14 February 1913, in *Imperfect Encounter: Letters of William Rothenstein and Rabindranath Tagore 1911-1941*, ed. by Mary M. Lago, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972), pp. 98-9.)

²⁰⁵ Stephen N. Hay, 'Rabindranath Tagore in America', *American Quarterly*, 14 (1962), 439-63 (p. 441).

²⁰⁶ Edward Thompson, 'Juvenilia', in *Rabindranath Tagore: Poet and Dramatist* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991 [first pub. 1926, 2nd edn 1948]), pp. 27-34 (p. 30).

²⁰⁷ 'The Relation of the Individual to the Universe', pp. 14-22.

Tagore had in mind.

Tagore's religious thought and his practical projects are intimately connected. In the *Sadhana* essays as published, apart from his mention of his school in the Preface, Tagore makes no concrete connections between the religious ideas and social change, although we know he had strong ideas he had been trying to put into practice for twenty years. When Tagore established his university, the students and teachers were encouraged to make connections with people in the surrounding villages, and some of them participated in the rural reconstruction projects, but the only mention of village people in *Sadhana* is to the ascetics from a religious sect in a village of Bengal.²⁰⁸

The religious ideas are given in particularly concentrated form in the second essay, 'Soul Consciousness', and the one mention of society is: 'This principle of unity which man has in his soul is ever active, establishing relations far and wide through literature, art, and science, society, statecraft, and religion'.²⁰⁹

There are essays in the book which reward close study. 'The Problem of Evil' is particularly thought provoking, and could contribute to changes in attitudes, such as avoiding judgements, and accepting boundaries, obstacles and loss as aspects of the totality. These ideas bring to mind the short passage on Tagore's personalistic monism in *History of Philosophy Eastern and Western* referred to earlier.²¹⁰ Tagore wrote to Rothenstein about the lecture being 'enthusiastically received' by 'University people', and it was this talk which led to the suggestion of publication in a book.²¹¹

Tagore put each of his books of English essays together with some care, but without announcing the structure explicitly. With *Sadhana* we see from the titles and the sequence that there is a story. After the preamble about forests and city walls, the subject of the first two essays is the unity of the individual and the universe as understood from traditional teachings. The next two essays are entitled 'The Problem', one 'of Evil', the other 'of Self', both focussed on ideas which Tagore sees as problematic from a western point of view. Each of the remaining four essays provides some aspect of the solution, which is 'Realisation': of 'Love', 'Action', 'Beauty' and 'the Infinite'.

Nine years after *Sadhana*, Tagore would publish *Creative Unity*, with another version of the three part story: firstly the human potential for unity, secondly how 'the West' had divided and dehumanised the modern world, and thirdly how 'the East' is

²⁰⁸ 'Soul Consciousness', in *Sadhana*, pp. 23-44 (pp. 32-3).

²⁰⁹ 'Soul Consciousness', p. 28.

²¹⁰ P.T. Raju, 'Contemporary Indian Thought', p. 532.

²¹¹ Tagore, letter to Rothenstein, 14 February 1913, in *Imperfect Encounter*, p. 99.

bringing a message of hope for a return to One World. Just as with the ancient epics, there are stories within stories, and retellings of stories. The protagonists of the stories are not individuals but East and West, ancient and modern, city and village, but never good and bad, or right and wrong. Tagore writes in *Sadhana* that he ‘do[es] not for a moment wish to suggest that things should have been otherwise’.²¹² Tagore repeatedly says (until one is tired of hearing it) that he is not a scholar, and it is true that one does not find critical theories, formal arguments or debates in these books.

I suggested earlier that Tagore’s religious practice might be understood as *karma-yoga* at home in Bengal and *jnana-yoga* on his tours abroad. Tagore mentions in the Preface to *Sadhana* that one of the papers, ‘Realisation in Action’, was a translation by his nephew, Surendra Nath, of Tagore’s Bengali discourse on ‘Karma-yoga’.²¹³ A number of the reviewers of *Sadhana* wrote approvingly of this essay. Herbert G. Wood, in a sympathetic review entitled ‘The Gospel of Joy’ in the Quaker publication, *The Friend*, sees Tagore as being ‘unlike many Hindus’ in that ‘he appreciates the realisation of life in action’, and sees that man is not only active on compulsion and by necessity but finds joy in work.²¹⁴

‘Realisation in Action’ was not written by Tagore in English. The other essays in *Sadhana* were ‘culled’ from Tagore’s Bengali discourses, and include passages translated by his friends, and renderings into English by Tagore himself. As we move on to Tagore’s next book of English essays, *Personality: Lectures Delivered in America*, an important part of the story is Tagore’s friendships with two Englishmen, William Rothenstein and Charlie Andrews. It was through deep discussions and correspondence with these friends, and others he met during the ‘Third foreign tour’, that Tagore found his English voice. *Personality* may be the first book of essays by Tagore, the writer in English, and is in consequence more accessible, but this was a traumatic time for Tagore and the world, and the book is challenging and complex.

²¹² ‘The Relation of the Individual to the Universe’, p. 12.

²¹³ ‘Author’s Preface’, p. ix.

²¹⁴ Herbert G. Wood, ‘The Gospel of Joy’, review of *Sadhana: The Realisation of Life*, in *The Friend*, 13 February 1914, *Imagining Tagore*, pp. 153-5 (p. 154).

Chapter 3: *Personality* (1917)

The key word to these three volumes, and indeed to all Tagore's work, is freedom, or the free development of personality; their inspiration is that of all our greatest modern poets and thinkers, the brotherhood of man. All systems that create classes or castes, as in India, or nations, as the West, are non-spiritual, for they divide, not unite, men, and out of this division proceed all organised strikes and wars. Old barbaric conquerors passed over a land with all the glittering array of war, and were an evil which could be survived, but in the modern world the perfection of system has reduced even the conquerors to slavery, and trade unions, political parties, and peoples are moved by the touching of a button. (Review of *My Reminiscences, Personality, Nationalism*)²¹⁵

During this year 1915 we were so completely outside the range and area of the war, in our isolation in India itself, that its horrors gradually tended to recede into the background of our minds; but the greater thoughts which had been awakened so painfully during the previous year, owing to the war itself—such as the problem of human suffering; the possibility of complete human brotherhood; the meeting of East and West in common fellowship—these were more present than ever before. Our talks together, while I was in the nursing-home in Calcutta, were continually about these problems. They remained deep in the subconscious mind of the Poet all through this year. At the same time, the whole burden of the school work at Santiniketan fell upon his shoulders and he threw himself into every detail of it with his own characteristic energy and determination. (C.F. Andrews)²¹⁶

The second and third of Tagore's books of English essays, *Personality* and *Nationalism*, were published a few months apart in 1917.²¹⁷ Many biographies and other studies of Tagore ignore *Personality* altogether because it was overshadowed by *Nationalism*, the more controversial work. *Personality* is now regarded as 'a lesser known book of essays', the phrase used by Bengali painter and journalist, Barun Roy, who attended a major exhibition of Tagore's paintings in New York in 2011 and combined this with a visit to his daughter. He was struck by the coincidence of discovering that she owned a copy of Tagore's *Personality* published by 'Macmillan of New York in March 1917', with a stamp marking it as a review copy and the name J. Edgar Park on the flyleaf. She had picked the book up in a used-book store in Boston, and Roy found that Reverend Park was a popular preacher in the Boston area, and a writer of books and articles on religious topics, hence his receiving a review copy, which must now be very rare. There was a 1924 newspaper clipping inside the book headed 'People and Nation' and Roy observes that Park 'must have found in Tagore's observations echoes of his own spiritual beliefs'.²¹⁸

²¹⁵ Review, *The Glasgow Herald*, 20 September 1917, *Imagining Tagore*, pp. 292-4 (pp. 292-3). [It has not been possible to identify the author from newspaper archives.]

²¹⁶ Andrews, 'Chapter III', in *Letters to a Friend*, pp. 56-9 (pp. 56-7).

²¹⁷ *Personality: Lectures Delivered in America* in May 1917 and *Nationalism* in August 1917 (*Imagining Tagore*, p. 628.)

²¹⁸ Barun Roy, 'Tagore trail', <<http://www.business-standard.com/india/news/barun-roytagore-trail-inus/454311/>> [accessed 22/2/2012]

Roy's 'chance discovery' was my own chance discovery on the internet, and this is the first of the stories and anecdotes I weave into this chapter about *Personality*, to try to bring back the colour of Tagore's own personality into the cold print of the book. There are three main characters besides Tagore in these stories. Two of these are Tagore's close friends, William Rothenstein, who corresponded with Tagore for over thirty years, and Charles Freer ('Charlie') Andrews, who became Tagore's partner at Santiniketan for a similar period, and to whom *Personality* is dedicated. The third main character is F.B. Jevons (1858-1936), professor of philosophy at the University of Durham, who had a particular interest in how religious and philosophical conceptions developed from ancient times.²¹⁹ Jevons is of interest for the article he wrote about *Personality* in 1918 entitled 'Sir Rabindranath Tagore: Poet and Philosopher'.²²⁰ As we shall see, Jevons subjects the book to a meticulous analysis, despite Tagore saying early on in the book that abstract approaches cannot reach the 'world of reality' he is writing about.²²¹ The effect of Jevons' process is that he overlooks and discards the words for the feelings which Tagore puts into his writing.

In *Passage to America*, Sujit Mukherjee refers to a statement in the authorised Tagore biography that Tagore wrote the papers later to be collected in *Personality* on his way from India to Japan in May 1916, and the lectures of *Nationalism* during his stay in Japan.²²² Tagore went to Japan in 1916 following urgings from his friend Okakura Kakuzo, who had shared the poet's mission, as Stephen Hay put it, 'to revitalize their countries' cultural traditions at a time when Western influences seemed to threaten their very existence'.²²³ Both men thought that a pan-Asian collaboration was needed to restrain western ambitions.

Andrews accompanied Tagore on the voyage to Japan and stated that Tagore began writing the nationalism talks 'in Japan at a white heat'.²²⁴ During the voyage to Japan,

²¹⁹ Obituary Prof. F.B. Jevons, *Nature*, 137 (1936), 648.

²²⁰ F.B. Jevons, 'Sir Rabindranath Tagore: Poet and Philosopher', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 19 (1918-1919), 30-45.

²²¹ 'The world of science is not a world of reality, it is an abstract world of force. [...] But there is another world which is real to us. We see it, feel it; we deal with it with all our emotions. Its mystery is endless because we cannot analyse it or measure it. We can but say, "Here you are."' (Tagore, 'What is Art?', in *Personality*, pp. 3-38 (p. 4).)

²²² Sujit Mukherjee, *Passage to America: The Reception of Rabindranath Tagore in the United States, 1912-1941* (Bookland, 1994), p. 195. The authorised Tagore biography is: Prabhatkumar Mukhopadhyay, *Rabindrajibani o Rabindrashityaprabesak* (The life of Rabindra, and an introduction to Rabindra literature). 4 vols.; Calcutta: Bisvabharati, B.E. 1366 (1959). (Reference as in Stephen N. Hay, Bibliography, in *Asian Ideas of East and West: Tagore and his Critics in Japan, China, and India*, pp. 413-46 (p. 430).)

²²³ Stephen N. Hay, *Asian Ideas of East and West: Tagore and his Critics in Japan, China, and India*, p. 35.

²²⁴ *Letters to a Friend*, pp. 68-9.

their talks in 1915 about ‘the problem of human suffering; the possibility of complete human brotherhood; the meeting of East and West in common fellowship’ would surely have continued. Andrews was a devout Christian, whose tender hearted efforts to ease human suffering led him to being dubbed ‘the friend of the poor’.²²⁵ Tagore too wanted to bring an end to human suffering, not with short term remedies but by changing society. He was more interested in the causes of suffering through history, as we can see from a passage in the second essay ‘The World of Personality’:

[T]he one cry of the personal man has been to know the Supreme Person. From the beginning of his history man has been feeling the touch of personality in all creation, and trying to give it names and forms, weaving it in legends round his life and the life of his races, offering it worship and establishing relations with it through countless forms of ceremonial. This feeling of the touch of personality has given the centrifugal impulse in man’s heart to break out in a ceaseless flow of reaction, in songs and pictures and poems, in images and temples and festivities. This has been the centripetal force which attracted men into groups and clans and communal organizations. And while man tills his soil and spins his cloths, mates and rears his children, toils for wealth and fights for power, he does not forget to proclaim in languages of solemn rhythm, in mysterious symbols, in structures of majestic stone, that in the heart of his world he has met the Immortal Person. In the sorrow of death, and suffering of despair, when trust has been betrayed and love desecrated, when existence becomes tasteless and unmeaning, man standing upon the ruins of his hopes stretches his hands to the heavens to feel the touch of the Person across his darkened world.²²⁶

One thing to note in this typically rich passage is how Tagore uses the words ‘person’ and ‘personality’ to refer to the deity, to man’s relationships with the deity and with the world, to aspects of man’s soul or spirit, and his emotional needs. The first mention of the word ‘personality’ in the book occurs very early on in the first essay ‘What Is Art?’, where Tagore introduces one of the key ideas one encounters in many of his works, which he refers to elsewhere as ‘the surplus in man’.²²⁷

There is yet another man in me, not the physical, but the personal man; which has its likes and dislikes, and wants to find something to fulfil its needs of love. This personal man is found in the region where we are free from all necessity,—above the needs, both of body and mind,—above the expedient and useful. It is the highest in man, this personal man. And it has personal relations of its own with the great world, and comes to it for something to satisfy personality.²²⁸

²²⁵ Benarsidas Chaturvedi and Marjorie Sykes, ‘The Friend of the Poor’, in *Charles Freer Andrews: A Narrative* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1949), pp. 147-226.

²²⁶ ‘The World of Personality’, in *Personality*, pp. 39-74 (pp. 69-70). (It is somewhat surprising that the first explicit reference to human suffering occurs almost half way through the book. There is one earlier occurrence of the word ‘suffering’, where Tagore says: ‘Everywhere in man’s world, the Supreme Person is suffering from the killing of the human reality by the imposition of the abstract’ (specifically ‘abstractions, with such names as society, state, nation, commerce, politics and war’). (*Personality*, pp. 36-7.))

²²⁷ Tagore, ‘The Surplus in Man’, in *The Religion of Man*, pp. 51-64.

²²⁸ Tagore, ‘What Is Art?’, p. 4.

I have wondered if Tagore discussed his use of the word ‘personality’ with Andrews, since several pages later, Tagore writes:

I know I shall not be allowed to pass unchallenged when I use the word ‘personality’, which has such an amplitude of meaning. These loose words can be made to fit ideas which have not only different dimensions, but shapes also. They are like raincoats, hanging in the hall, which can be taken away by absentminded individuals who have no claim upon them.²²⁹

The raincoat illustration is surely an affectionate dig at Andrews who was notorious for going off with other people’s belongings, sometimes giving them away to someone needy. For example, Andrews gave away a friend’s valued thermos flask to a woman with a crying child.²³⁰

It is possible that Tagore adopts the word ‘personality’ in order to avoid the conventional religious wording he uses in *Gitanjali* and *Sadhana*, and so sound less like a ‘mystic’ to readers in the West. Bengali scholars have interpreted *Personality* as a continuation of the discourses in *Sadhana*. In *Passage to America*, Sujit Mukherjee cites the authorised Tagore biography which states that ‘The World of Personality’, which is the most obviously religious essay, is the core of the book, and is expanded upon in the other essays.²³¹ Similarly, Mukherjee’s own opinion is that the world-view Tagore was expressing in *Personality* is the same as that of *Sadhana*: ‘the integration of man and nature and God’, but applied to more specific areas of life, such as art and education.²³²

In my Introduction I referred to Tagore enthusiasts and scholars dipping into his books of essays to pick out particularly inspiring and insightful passages. This is fine in a way, given Radice’s observation that Tagore had a ‘desire to achieve *purvata* or “fullness” on an almost cosmic scale [...] not in a single great work but in an endless stream of smaller ones’.²³³ There are many cosmic fragments in *Personality*, such as a lovely (and much quoted) passage in the essay ‘My School’:

I believe in a spiritual world—not as anything separate from this world—but as its innermost truth. With the breath we draw we must always feel this truth, that we are living in God. Born in this great world, full of the mystery of the infinite, we cannot accept our existence as a momentary outburst of chance, drifting on the current of matter towards an eternal nowhere. We cannot look upon our lives as dreams of a dreamer who

²²⁹ ‘What Is Art?’, pp. 12-13.

²³⁰ Chaturvedi and Sykes, *Charles Freer Andrews: A Narrative*, p. 186.

²³¹ ‘See Rabindra-jibani, II, 482-483; III, 88’ (Mukherjee, p. 198 note.)

²³² Mukherjee, p. 198.

²³³ Radice, Introduction, in *Rabindranath Tagore: Particles, Jottings, Sparks: The Collected Brief Poems*, p. 2.

has no awakening in all time. We have a personality to which matter and force are unmeaning unless related to something infinitely personal, whose nature we have discovered, in some measure, in human love, in the greatness of the good, in the martyrdom of heroic souls, in the ineffable beauty of nature, which can never be a mere physical fact nor anything but an expression of personality.²³⁴

One can gain understandings of what Tagore believed and felt from passages like this, but it can be a mistake to piece together scattered fragments to try to make a bigger and clearer picture of what Tagore was saying – which is what Jevons attempted. (And obviously a scholar with an hypothesis of his or her own can contrive to support it with fragments from Tagore or anyone else.²³⁵) *Personality* is a complex and challenging work when studied as a whole – or taken essay by essay. I agree with the Bengali scholars that ‘The World of Personality’ is the most obviously religious essay, because of its many references to the Upanisads, but Tagore places it second, following ‘What is Art?’, which indicates that the latter is the most important essay, as this is Tagore’s practice in other books. I have found it helpful to interpret the first three essays as reflecting the Poet’s thoughts on philosophy, religion and science respectively. These designations are not strict. I observed earlier that Tagore’s religion is his philosophy and also his science, and everything he writes is permeated by the emotions and insights of the poet and artist, and this is especially true of the subject matter of *Personality*.

Mukherjee proposes that ‘the integration of man and nature and God’ is the world-view Tagore is expressing in both *Sadhana* and *Personality*. That phrase is suggestive of Hindu thought,²³⁶ and to relieve Tagore from his damaging reputation as a mystic, and read *Personality* more broadly, we need a different form of words which does not have mystical and religious connotations, and is more specific than ‘personality’. Consideration of Tagore’s commitment to social change suggests that the term ‘deep anthropology’ is appropriate. I use ‘deep’ here to qualify anthropology in a similar way to Arne Naess coining the term ‘*deep* ecology’ to add values and principles to the study of the interactions of species and their environment.²³⁷ ‘Deep anthropology’, then, is a

²³⁴ ‘My School’, in *Personality*, pp. 111-148 (pp. 126-7).

²³⁵ Isaiah Berlin makes reliance on ‘scattered erudition’ the mark of ‘imaginative genius’. (Isaiah Berlin, ‘Introduction: Vico and Herder’, in *Three Critics of the Enlightenment: Vico, Hamann, Herder*, ed. by Henry Hardy (London: Pimlico, 2000), pp. 5-20 (p. 17).

²³⁶ The phrase on its own is not especially Hindu. Berlin uses it of Hamann, for whom the ‘deep interrelationship of God, man and nature stems from the divine *Logos* which “was in the beginning” and by which the world came to be’. (Berlin, Hamann: Foreword, in *Three Critics*, pp. 249-52 (p. 251).)

²³⁷ Warwick Fox, ‘Arne Naess and the Meanings of Deep Ecology’, in *Toward a Transpersonal Ecology: Developing New Foundations for Environmentalism* (Boston, MA: Shambhala, 1990), pp. 81-118 (p. 102).

study of what mankind ought to be, as well as what we are.²³⁸

In parts of ‘What is Art?’ and centrally in ‘The Second Birth’, the third essay in *Personality*, Tagore approaches the subject I am calling ‘deep anthropology’ through a preamble on the evolution of life:

So, in man, a second birth has taken place. He still retains a good many habits and instincts of his animal life; yet his true life is in the region of what ought to be. In this, though there is a continuation, yet there is also a conflict. Many things that are good for the one life are evil for the other. This necessity of a fight with himself has introduced an element into man’s personality which is character. From the life of desire it guides man to the life of purpose. This life is the life of the moral world.²³⁹

A recent work which has resonances with Tagore’s thought is David Rothenberg’s *Survival of the Beautiful: Art, Science and Evolution*.²⁴⁰ All the topics of Rothenberg’s subtitle feature in *Personality*, and Tagore would have delighted in the key idea that a sense of beauty emerged very early in evolution, before there were humans to appreciate it. Rothenberg draws extensively on Darwin’s book *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex*,²⁴¹ in ways which emphasise the freedom of man and animals to make choices and develop creative behaviours, rather than the competitive ‘struggle for life’. Rothenberg is a professor of philosophy and music, ‘an actual polymath’ according to a reviewer who admires the ‘mixture of curiosity, intelligence, and playfulness’ in his writing²⁴² – rather like Tagore, then, if one can set aside the image of him as serene and saintly.

In *Survival of the Beautiful* Rothenberg recounts how he participated in an art work called ‘This Situation’ devised by Tino Sehgal, which was an encounter between a trained group of assorted intellectuals, and visitors to the art work. Rothenberg describes it as ‘a work composed out of philosophy’, which explores the creative potential of conversation. By Sehgal’s rules, no record is kept of his art works, but Rothenberg reports that being in ‘This Situation’ changed him, and forced him to examine how he situates himself in the world.²⁴³ *Personality* is a work composed out of the kind of philosophy which arises through conversations and situations, the

²³⁸ In *Sadhana* and elsewhere Tagore uses the Sanskrit word *dharma* for a virtuous way of life. I would not choose to use *dharma* here because the word does not occur in *Personality*, and because *dharma* is commonly used as an equivalent for religion. The wider implications of *dharma* are suggestive of what I am calling ‘deep anthropology’ and also ‘deep ecology’. (‘Some Basic Terms and Concepts, and Their Renderings’, in *Rabindranath Tagore: Selected Writings on Literature and Language*, ed. by Sukanta Chaudhuri and Sisir Kumar Das (New Delhi: OUP, 2001), pp. xi-xiii (p. xii).)

²³⁹ Tagore, ‘The Second Birth’, in *Personality*, pp. 77-107 (p. 80).

²⁴⁰ David Rothenberg, *Survival of the Beautiful: Art, Science and Evolution* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012)

²⁴¹ Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex* (London: John Murray, 1871)

²⁴² Rothenburg, back cover blurb.

²⁴³ Rothenberg, pp. 206-10.

participants in this case being Tagore and his English friends, and the work is mind-changing.

Mukherjee remarks on there being ‘greater ease and clarity in the use of language and terminology’ in *Personality* than in *Sadhana*, with ‘a greater willingness to meet [his foreign audiences] on common ground’.²⁴⁴ I agree with that comment, and because Tagore’s use of the English language has changed, *Personality* does not come across as having been written by an Eastern mystic, even when Tagore brings in passages from the Upanisads. I attribute the improvement to the deep discussions Tagore had with his English friends, and we come now to the story of Tagore’s life-changing encounter with William Rothenstein.

A Perfect Encounter – Tagore and Rothenstein

Mary M. Lago entitled her compilation of the correspondence between Tagore and Rothenstein ‘Imperfect Encounter’ because of the complexities and occasional difficulties of a thirty-year friendship between a collection of ‘forceful personalities’, those two and their ‘mutual acquaintances’ who were the ‘cultural movers and shakers’ of their day.²⁴⁵ However, one ‘*perfect* encounter’ between Tagore and Rothenstein took place, in the summer of 1912, without which the intense and affectionate terms of the correspondence would not have been sustained over such a long period. There is presumably no record available of what the two friends said to each other at that time, or Lago would have referred to it in her book. We do know that they were together from mid-August until mid-October 1912, and Rothenstein wrote to Tagore immediately after his departure for America as follows:

My dear Rabindra Babu—what can I say to you? For months I have had something no one else could give me but yourself & now it is going to be a memory. I can’t quite believe that when I come back on Sunday you will not be there. You have walked so quietly into my life, yet somehow you have filled it with a new essence & I don’t feel it will ever be quite the old life I shall live again. To me they have been wonderful days, these days I have spent with you. I have never I think been so near to another man, or looked so deep into the well of another’s soul.²⁴⁶

In the years of correspondence that followed, we find Rothenstein frequently referring

²⁴⁴ Mukherjee, p. 198.

²⁴⁵ Lago, Introduction, in *Imperfect Encounter*, pp. 1-24 (p. 1). An important insight we gain from Tagore’s letters to Rothenstein, which Lago deliberately transcribes unaltered, is that Tagore’s English was delightfully fluent and very largely correct. (Lago, Preface, in *Imperfect Encounter*, pp. vii-xiii (p. viii).)

²⁴⁶ Rothenstein, letter to Tagore, 18 October 1912, in *Imperfect Encounter*, pp. 53-4 (p. 53).

nostalgically to that summer, but seldom saying anything explicit about their talks. Five years later he wrote that Tagore's latest letter carried 'an almost bodily sense of [his] presence' so that he imagined that they were 'once more walk[ing] along the quiet Oakridge lanes, talking of life & death, of beauty & of India'. Later in this very long letter, Rothenstein says that he 'cannot hate' or 'see evil only in men's motives & actions', and how art can 'teach us respect for all men, a hatred of injustice & of meanness and an essential humility'.²⁴⁷ This echoes the earlier letter, which had continued:

What I have seen there will help me to respect & love my fellows more than ever before. So long I hope as I live this vision will remain with me. They were happy days, days I shall never forget. Your poems & your personality will bring you the love & admiration of many men & women, but somehow I feel that no one will ever know better than myself, that in loving & admiring you they are paying their homage to life itself. To have lived so closely to any one as I have been able to do to you & to have seen nothing but things that have given me faith & courage in mankind is the most wonderful of all my experiences. I can only send you all the love I have to give—this not for you alone, but for your dear son & his no less dear wife who has won the affection of all who have met her. Your name will ever be a household word among us & when you return you will I hope find as warm a fire burning in our hearth as when you left us. Ever your affectionate friend

William Rothenstein²⁴⁸

In a letter five years later he writes of 'resuming the intimacy which filled [his] life with a rich plenty, in the peace & quiet of this green haven', and urges Tagore to 'come back to us' because there is between them 'something more sacred & intimate than exists between many men'.²⁴⁹ Sadly there never was a repeat of their magic summer of 1912. Although they did meet again, circumstances were different, and between 1920 and 1922 there was a serious rift between them which Rothenstein in retrospect referred to as 'a passing breeze'.²⁵⁰

Three months of deep discussions with Rothenstein must have helped Tagore express his ideas in English, although this is not obviously reflected in the *Sadhana* lectures which he delivered a few weeks after he left for America in October 1912. Tagore sent Rothenstein the text of 'The Relation of the Individual to the Universe', telling him it was a translation from a talk to his boys,²⁵¹ and later told him about four more papers he had read at the Unity Club, and his difficulties with expressing himself in English.²⁵²

²⁴⁷ Rothenstein, letter to Tagore, 25 August 1917, in *Imperfect Encounter*, pp. 240-2.

²⁴⁸ Rothenstein, letter to Tagore, 18 October 1912, in *Imperfect Encounter*, pp. 53-4.

²⁴⁹ Rothenstein, letter to Tagore, 25 August 1917, pp. 240-2.

²⁵⁰ Lago, editor's introduction to '1920-1922 "A Passing Breeze"', in *Imperfect Encounter*, pp. 267-272 (p. 267).

²⁵¹ Tagore, letter to Rothenstein, 23 November 1912, in *Imperfect Encounter*, pp. 65-6.

²⁵² Tagore, letter to Rothenstein, 2 December 1912, in *Imperfect Encounter*, pp. 69-70.

Some months later, Rothenstein wrote to Tagore to say he was delighted to hear that Macmillan were to publish the lectures, which he regarded as ‘the most important contribution to religious-ethical thought we have had from East or West this century at least’.²⁵³

Tagore told Rothenstein just before his departure for Japan that he had been invited to America to lecture, but had not accepted the offer.²⁵⁴ There is nothing in the published correspondence prior to that to suggest that Tagore discussed with Rothenstein his thoughts and ideas for the lectures, which seems to support the view that Tagore did indeed write these on the boat to Japan. In June 1917 Rothenstein wrote a highly appreciative letter about Tagore’s latest book of essays.²⁵⁵ He says of ‘the one on Art’ that it ‘presents an entirely new view of its meaning, is most inspiring’, and goes on to say that ‘indeed the whole book is full of wisdom & a ripe and clear judgement’.²⁵⁶

Tagore’s discussions with Andrews took place much nearer the time when Tagore composed the *Personality* lectures. As Andrews observed in retrospect in *Letters to a Friend*, the two of them were isolated from the storm of war.²⁵⁷ They talked about how it might be possible to end human suffering and bring about ‘complete human brotherhood’, sentiments which reflect the compassion they felt for others and their own intense personalities. Their sensibility and deep feelings for each other is revealed by their correspondence, and in works by and about Andrews.

In his letter praising *Personality*, Rothenstein criticises the photographs of Tagore in the book, saying that they neither did him justice nor did they ‘throw light on the essays’. Mary Lago notes that ‘[p]hotographs of Tagore as tourist in America suggest that his is the personality under discussion’.²⁵⁸

In ‘What is Art?’ Tagore adopts the word ‘personality’ for an intense ‘power of feeling’ which ‘requires an outlet of expression’.²⁵⁹ It may be because of that need in himself that Tagore often declared he was primarily a poet, and ‘not a scholar’, and also ‘not a philosopher’. When Tagore was asked for a contribution to the scholarly collection, *Contemporary Indian Philosophy*, he contributed an essay on ‘The Religion of an Artist’, which is not unlike ‘What is Art?’, the first essay in *Personality*.²⁶⁰ Tagore

²⁵³ Rothenstein, letter to Tagore, 31 May 1913, in *Imperfect Encounter*, pp. 111-2.

²⁵⁴ Tagore, letter to Rothenstein, 28 April 1916, in *Imperfect Encounter*, p. 227.

²⁵⁵ *Personality* was published in May 1917.

²⁵⁶ Rothenstein, letter to Tagore, 20 June 1917, in *Imperfect Encounter*, pp. 236-7.

²⁵⁷ See epigraph, above (Andrews, introduction to Chapter III, *Letters to a Friend*, pp. 56-9 (p. 243).)

²⁵⁸ Lago, note, p. 237.

²⁵⁹ Tagore, ‘What is Art?’, p. 12.

²⁶⁰ Tagore, ‘The Religion of an Artist’, in *Contemporary Indian Philosophy*, pp. 25-45.

clearly was a philosopher, but again, one who expressed his philosophy with the emotional intensity of a poet and artist, and not with scholarly detachment.

Given the resemblance between ‘What is Art?’ and ‘The Religion of an Artist’, we can say that the subject of the first essay in *Personality* is ‘the Poet’s philosophy’. The second essay, ‘The World of Personality’ is, as the Bengali scholars point out, ‘the Poet’s religion’.²⁶¹ The third essay, ‘The Second Birth’, is also philosophical and religious, and in addition it concentrates on one of Tagore’s favourite themes, the biological evolution of the human animal, which has a surplus capacity or ‘abundance’ whereby we can be moral, cooperative and creative, and yet are liable to relapse into savagery. For symmetry, we can call ‘The Second Birth’, ‘the Poet’s science’.²⁶² (In the fifth book of English essays, *The Religion of Man*, Tagore enlarges on his theory of evolution, and also takes issue with the scientific conception that reality exists independently of human existence.²⁶³)

The Poet’s Philosophy

We might ask at this point, what is philosophy? One authoritative answer from an Indian perspective is:

Philosophy is an enquiry into the nature of life and of existence. We have two ways of dealing with reality. One starts and ends with revelation and tradition; we call it religion. The second depends on the free exercise of reason and thought and is called philosophy.²⁶⁴

The writer had earlier stated that in India philosophy and religion have pursued the same path.²⁶⁵ If there is a special ‘western’ approach to philosophy we might take that of William James, who says that philosophy is the ‘one Science of all things’.²⁶⁶ In *Personality* and elsewhere, Tagore takes issue with Science, not for its research and findings which interested him greatly all his life, but he questions Science’s assumption of pre-eminent authority over ‘all things’, which is also the domain of religion. Tagore would also take issue with James on his statement that Aesthetics is ‘the study of the

²⁶¹ The essay contains Tagore’s commentary on the ‘Isha Upanisat’ (*sic*). (‘Isha Upanishad’, in *The Thirteen Principal Upanishads: Translated from the Sanskrit*, pp. 362-3; ‘Isha Upanisad’, in *The Principal Upanishads*, ed. by S. Radhakrishnan (London: George, Allen & Unwin, 1953), pp. 565-78.)

²⁶² Tagore, ‘The Second Birth’, in *Personality*, pp. 77-107.

²⁶³ Tagore, ‘Man’s Universe’, in *The Religion of Man: Being the Hibbert Lectures for 1930*, pp. 13-24; ‘Appendix II: Note on the Nature of Reality’, pp. 222-5.

²⁶⁴ Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, (the first Education Minister of free India) ‘Introduction: The Meaning of Philosophy’, in *History of Philosophy Eastern and Western, Volume One*, pp. 13-28 (p. 21).

²⁶⁵ Azad, p. 19.

²⁶⁶ William James, *Psychology: Briefer Course / Text Book of Psychology* (London: Macmillan, 1920 [1892]), p. 1.

useless'. James couples Aesthetics with Psychiatry, 'the science of insanity', both of lesser interest to the science of psychology as James defines that.²⁶⁷ Tagore's mental makeup: shown in his relationships, his mood swings and restlessness, and his notorious inconsistency helps us to understand what it is that his being a poet adds to his thinking.

The distinction I make between Tagore's philosophy and his religion is a subtle one; the Bengali scholars I referred to earlier are not wrong, especially since Tagore regarded all life as spiritual. It becomes significant because in the English essays Tagore is writing for western readers, for whom a poet is understood as a writer of a certain kind of literature, and they knew Tagore as an Indian mystic. In terms of the definition of philosophy above, in these essays Tagore combines 'revelation and tradition' with 'reason and thought' – and a touch of poetry and wit – and so his style of writing does not lend itself to either contemplation or reasoning on its own. To show how reasoning fails, I include an examination of a study of *Personality*, carried out shortly after its publication by F.B. Jevons, the professor of philosophy. This sympathetic scholar approaches the book as if Tagore had defined his terms explicitly and applied logic methodically, and by doing so misses an essential message about reality, which Tagore conveys repeatedly in these essays. To take just one example: Tagore says that '[t]he infinite and the finite are one as song and singing are one. The singing is incomplete; by a continual process of death it gives up the song which is complete. The absolute infinite is like a music which is devoid of all definite tunes and therefore meaningless'.²⁶⁸

In 1914 Jevons published a little book called *Philosophy: What Is It?*, a collection of his lectures to a branch of the Workers' Educational Association. He defines philosophy as the attempt to answer the question, 'What does it all mean? What is the good of it all?', in contrast to all the sciences which deal with particular sets of facts.²⁶⁹ Everything, he says, comes from experience and the person who has the experience, making a binary of 'two sides of a line'. Physical science deals with abstractions on one side of that line, psychology with such abstractions as sensations, feelings, will, on the other side of the line.²⁷⁰ In his last chapter, 'Personality and the Whole', he concludes that only to God, the perfect Personality, can reality present itself as a whole, and we must love Him and love our neighbour as our self.²⁷¹ That conclusion would have

²⁶⁷ James, pp. 4-5.

²⁶⁸ 'The World of Personality', p. 57.

²⁶⁹ F.B. Jevons, *Philosophy: What Is It?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1914), p. 12. Jevons' definition is very similar to that of William James, noted earlier. (James, p. 1.)

²⁷⁰ Jevons, *Philosophy: What Is It?*, pp. 53-4. James treats psychology as a natural science. (James, p.1.)

²⁷¹ Jevons, *Philosophy: What Is It?*, pp. 130-1.

appealed to Andrews, a devout Christian and ‘friend of the poor’.²⁷² Interestingly, Jevons begins that chapter with an illustration from ‘a Hindu philosopher’ on the big question of philosophy: ‘what it *all* means’, which dismisses the possibility of abstraction, and makes the whole the only reality and available to every one of us.²⁷³ That was essentially Tagore’s belief.

It is clear from Jevons’ essay on *Personality* in 1918 that the same deliberations continued to preoccupy him, and also his colleague Theodore Merz,²⁷⁴ whose book he cites.²⁷⁵ The essay begins as follows:

I find that for myself the easiest way to approach Sir Rabindranath Tagore’s book on *Personality* is to start from Dr. Merz’s *Religion and Science*. Dr. Merz points out that there are two ways in which we may, and indeed do, consider the world, or two aspects which it wears: in one the world—everything of which I am, or can be, aware—falls within my consciousness; in the other I am surrounded by a world external to me. In one the experient is but a speck infinitesimally and inconceivably small in a world of reality external to him; in the other everything of which he is or may be aware must be part of his experience. [...] From the one point of view the world is within me; from the other, without. But the world, according to Dr. Merz, which wears these two aspects, is one world; philosophy he, following Plato, considers to be “synoptic”—its business is to see things in their “togetherness,” in their *ensemble*, to use Comte’s word—and yet the two aspects of things cannot be seen “synoptically,” in their *ensemble* or “togetherness,” for our thoughts can only “wander from one to the other” without even trying to unite them. Philosophy therefore, it would seem, is impossible: its business cannot be done.²⁷⁶

Jevons goes on to state Merz’s view that when science analyses things it never succeeds in exactly putting the pieces together again. Similarly, the dissection of reality into the two aspects of inner and outer may mean that the real is killed by the operation. ‘In that case,’ Jevons suggests, ‘the best thing will be to start not from abstractions, such as aspects, but from the one living reality, if we can find it. And the purpose of Tagore’s book precisely is to help us to find it.’²⁷⁷

From my reading of *Personality*, Tagore successfully conveys ‘the one living reality’, and brings Jevons’ ‘inner and outer’ aspects together as a unity. He does this in three different ways, in the first three essays of the book, which are the ones Jevons has examined closely, making over seventy references to them. Jevons does not mention the titles of the three essays, nor does he summarise their themes or treat them in turn. Instead he selects from them references to what he sees as the terms with which Tagore

²⁷² Chaturvedi and Sykes, ‘The Friend of the Poor’, pp. 149-226.

²⁷³ Jevons, *Philosophy: What Is It?*, pp. 102-3.

²⁷⁴ F.B. Jevons, ‘Theodore Merz: His Philosophy’, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 3 (1923), 1-14.

²⁷⁵ John Theodore Merz, *Religion and Science: A Philosophical Essay* (Edinburgh: William Blackwood & Sons, 1915)

²⁷⁶ Jevons, ‘Tagore: Poet and Philosopher’, pp. 30-1.

²⁷⁷ Jevons, p. 31.

operates, specifically ‘personality, reality, art’.²⁷⁸ Jevons does not refer to the very beginning of Tagore’s first essay which sums up ‘the one living reality’ in his deep anthropological, rather than formally philosophical, terms.

The first three paragraphs of ‘What Is Art?’ sets out Tagore’s reality as follows: the first states that we have material needs which are provided for by nature; the second says that we have a mental need to make sense of a bewildering multiplicity of facts, which we meet by finding laws of nature; the third paragraph is about the ‘personal man’, in the region above the needs of body and mind, which has likes and dislikes and the need for love and relations with the great world. All three paragraphs are about how close to nature we are, so that there is no boundary between man and nature, physically, mentally or emotionally.²⁷⁹

The third essay in the book, ‘The Second Birth’, takes the idea of needs being met by nature a stage further, by showing how each life form has ‘a dualism of relationship’: its identity separates it from its surroundings, and the stimuli of pleasure and pain guide its interaction with the world.²⁸⁰ In this and in other essays Tagore shows humankind as an advanced form of life, but he does not make us a special creation. He sees us as a gregarious species, settling the land and developing into complex societies, free to be creative and build on our knowledge of the world, whilst still being collectively part of nature physically, mentally and emotionally. He recognises that we are ‘free’ to wage war with nature, to be pessimistic and devalue the world. We are also free to experience unity²⁸¹:

The will, which is free, must seek for the realization of its harmony other wills which are also free, and in this is the experience of spiritual life. The infinite centre of personality, which radiates its joy by giving itself out in freedom, must create other centres of freedom to unite with it in harmony. Beauty is the harmony realized in things which are bound by law. Love is the harmony realized in wills which are free.²⁸²

Tagore’s understanding of evolution or ‘deep anthropology’ (my term, not Tagore’s) is one of his most repeated themes. One of the ways Tagore ‘writes like a poet’ is to repeat, like a chorus, the ideas which matter to him most.

I suggested earlier that Tagore’s declaration that he is ‘not a scholar’ serves to make the reader aware that he writes (and speaks) like a poet, with a poet’s emotional intensity. So to interpret his non-literary writings, rather than look for Tagore’s terms

²⁷⁸ Jevons, pp. 31-2.

²⁷⁹ ‘What Is Art?’, pp. 3-4.

²⁸⁰ Tagore, ‘The Second Birth’, pp. 77-107 (pp. 77-9).

²⁸¹ One is reminded of the entry on Tagore in *History of Philosophy Eastern and Western, Volume Two*, p. 532. ‘Tagore is a monist, though he does not deny the reality of the world.’

²⁸² ‘Second Birth’, p. 101.

and logical arguments (or employ any other rigorous method or theory), one needs to sense the rhythms, the repetitions, the particularly intense passages, like arias singing out above the recitative. The sense of some paragraphs comes out more clearly when set out like poetry and read aloud. The paragraph I have just quoted is a good example. Read this aloud and one can almost hear Tagore speaking:

The will, which is free,
must seek for the realization of its harmony
other wills which are also free,
and in this is the significance of spiritual life.

The infinite centre of personality,
which radiates its joy by giving itself out in freedom,
must create other centres of freedom
to unite with it in harmony.

Beauty is the harmony realized in things which are bound by law.
Love is the harmony realized in wills which are free.²⁸³

My reading of this ‘poem’ is that Tagore felt passionately about the idea that one is truly free only in relationship with others. He saw selfish, unconstrained individualism as a poor kind of freedom, even a delusion or *maya*, whereas harmonious engagement with others who are also free is the way to enjoy a ‘spiritual life’, where each one of us is the centre of an infinite ‘personality’. In the essay ‘The Second Birth’ from which this paragraph is taken, Tagore recognises that man can also be selfish and savage, bent only on meeting his own material needs. He tells how mankind was savage in early stages of evolution, and can become so again when society is broken up, as it has been by the machinery of the Nation.

Jevons begins his exploration of *Personality* by warning his audience at a meeting of the Aristotelian Society that Tagore ‘neither puts his trust in logic, nor defines the terms with which he operates, e.g. personality, reality, art’.²⁸⁴ Tagore’s reservations about logic are actually quite similar to those which Jevons and Merz have about science’s abstractions.²⁸⁵ In support of his criticism, Jevons paraphrases part of a sentence of Tagore’s: ‘Not by logic is every truth to be obtained (p. 67)’.²⁸⁶ Tagore’s actual sentence on that page is: ‘Through the help of logic we never could have arrived at the truth that the soul which is the unifying principle in me finds its perfection in its unity in

²⁸³ ‘The Second Birth’, p. 101.

²⁸⁴ Jevons, ‘Tagore: Poet and Philosopher’, pp. 31-2.

²⁸⁵ ‘When in its (reality’s) place we substitute law, then the whole world crumbles into abstractions; then it is elements and forces, ions and electrons; it loses its appearance, its touch and taste [...]’ (‘World of Personality’, in *Personality*, pp. 41-74 (p. 58).

²⁸⁶ Jevons, p. 32.

others'.²⁸⁷

I mentioned earlier that Jevons makes over seventy references to *Personality*. But his quotes are all very short, sometimes distorting the sense. Another example of this, also about Tagore's supposed distrust of logic, is where Jevons takes only the portion I show in italics of the following sentence:

The profound truth to which the poet of Isha Upanishat has given expression is the truth of the simple mind which is in deep love with the mystery of reality and cannot believe in the finality of that *logic* which *by its method of decomposition brings the universe to the brink of dissolution*.²⁸⁸

Jevons' point about Tagore not defining his terms is valid. As a poet, Tagore employs and enjoys the penumbra of nuances that surrounds words such as 'personality, reality, art'.²⁸⁹

Jevons is evidently uncomfortable without a strict terminology, but observes that other terms: life, religion, God, spirit, consciousness, are similarly indefinable, and Tagore's mission is that of the prophet: 'neither to define the truth nor prove it but to convey it'.²⁹⁰ What Jevons proceeds to do in his essay is to take each of the words: personality, reality and art, in turn, as if they were Tagore's terms, pulling together mentions of these in a sequence unrelated to Tagore's own structure or pagination, in order to discover what Jevons assumes is the truth of Tagore, the prophet. The result reads like mysticism, intriguing but vague, and Jevons ends not far from where he began with: 'In the Reality of which we are part, and in part aware, we know nothing but experient and experience—and them not apart, but only in the unity of Personality, and only in the variedness of its unity'.²⁹¹ This is not unlike Jevons' conclusion to his book, *Philosophy: What Is It?*, which was that only to God, the perfect Personality, can reality present itself as a whole.²⁹²

There is, however, an extra factor in Jevons' conclusion to the essay, which is about the 'variedness' of 'the unity of Personality'. This is his major point of disagreement with Tagore which he makes earlier as follows:

[Tagore] postulates an "apparent world"—which is "man's world"—a world which has

²⁸⁷ 'The World of Personality', p. 67.

²⁸⁸ Jevons, p. 32. 'The World of Personality', p. 73.

²⁸⁹ We noted earlier how Tagore adopts 'personality' because it is a word which can be made to fit different ideas. ('They are like raincoats, hanging in the hall [...] ('What Is Art?', pp. 12-3).)

²⁹⁰ Jevons, pp. 33.

²⁹¹ Jevons, p. 45.

²⁹² *Philosophy: What Is It?*, pp. 130-1. Jevons' conclusion is similar to Berlin's summary of the third of Vico's seven theses: 'Only God, because he has made nature, can understand it fully, through and through'. (Berlin, *Three Critics*, p. 9.)

“shape, colour, and movement” (13), but of which at first we are aware without any emotion. Only when emotion comes to supervene, or to suffuse it, does this apparent (or supposititious [*sic*]) world become “the more intimate world of sentiments,” *i.e.* the world which is real and not supposititious. Inasmuch as “the real is not that which is merely seen” (31), the world of which the shape, colours and movement are merely seen, without emotion, is not real.²⁹³

Here Jevons puts together fragments from two places in ‘What Is Art?’ It is true that Tagore seems to be saying at one point that we are able to perceive some kind of world with our senses and *without* our emotions, and that the world becomes *more* real to us when we engage our emotions. Interestingly, in the paragraph (unreferenced) from which Jevons takes the words ‘the more intimate world of sentiments’, Tagore refers to ‘*rasa*’, the word in Sanskrit poetics which, he says, ‘signifies outer juices having their responses in the inner juices of our emotions’.²⁹⁴ *Rasa* has a similar sense to the old meaning of the English word ‘humours’: the fluids of the body which determine our physical and mental qualities. Interestingly, there have been researches in neuroscience in the last ten years which indicate that our minds necessarily include our feelings and emotions, and that we think with our entire bodies, not only, or even primarily, with our brains.²⁹⁵

On the later page from which Jevons takes the words: ‘the real is not that which is merely seen’, Tagore says that man builds his true world through Art, then he comes to feel his infinity, ‘where he is divine, and the divine is the creator in him’.²⁹⁶ This idea is clearly expressed in ‘an old letter’ which Tagore includes in an essay called *Atmaparichay* (Of Myself):

I cannot rightly understand the endless mystery of a creative process within us – as when one has to spell out every word, one cannot understand the meaning and unity of emotion of an entire passage of poetry. But when the unbroken strand of unity of the creative power within oneself can once be felt, I can realise my own link with the endlessly created universe; I can see how the planets and stars, the moon and the sun are being created in their constant burning and circling. Just so in me from time without beginning a process of creation has been going on. Within it my joy and sorrow, desire and pain

²⁹³ Jevons, ‘Tagore: Poet and Philosopher’, pp. 34-5.

²⁹⁴ ‘What Is Art?’, pp. 14-5. Tagore exploits the full range of meanings of *rasa* in his essay, ‘The Philosophy of Literature’, in *Selected Writings on Literature and Language*, pp. 293-309.

²⁹⁵ Antonio Damasio has done much work in this area, his most evocative title being: *Looking for Spinoza: Joy, Sorrow and the Feeling Brain*. In his more recent book: *Self Comes to Mind: Constructing the Conscious Brain* (London: William Heinemann, 2010), he argues that ‘feelings are grounded in a near fusion of body and brain networks’ (pp. 20-8). An evolutionary perspective is provided by Merlin Donald, in *A Mind So Rare: The Evolution of Human Consciousness* (New York: Norton, 2002). Also of relevance is David Gelernter, *The Muse in the Machine: Computerizing the Poetry of Human Thought*. The author’s field is artificial intelligence. He makes a distinction between ‘affective cognition’, where concrete thoughts are associated according to remembered feelings, whence metaphor, and rational cognition, where memories are merged into concepts.

²⁹⁶ ‘What Is Art?’, p. 31.

accept their respective places.²⁹⁷

Jevons thinks he has to 'spell out every word', whence his procedure of threading together Tagore's mentions of his three (undefined) 'terms', in this case 'reality', and so he misses the 'meaning' and the 'unity of emotion' (the more juicy parts) of what Tagore is saying. Jevons' hope of finding 'the one living reality' is disappointed: 'we appear to be left with two worlds on our hands, a world which is real, and a world which is not'.²⁹⁸

In 1917 Tagore was at quite an early stage of working on his highly personal and original religious ideas, and how best to express them in the English language. In 1930 he felt the process was complete and brought out his book, *The Religion of Man*, about 'the true spirit of religion, about my idea of all different religions, what they mean. [...] I have tried to make it clear, which is difficult because every experience is difficult to express and to describe, yet I have tried my best to give it some expression'.²⁹⁹

In *The Religion of Man*, Tagore includes as an appendix a record of his discussion with Albert Einstein about truth, beauty and reality, and here he is very clear that there is only one world:

Einstein (E.): Do you believe in the Divine as isolated from the world?

Tagore (T.): Not isolated. The infinite personality of Man comprehends the Universe. There cannot be anything that cannot be subsumed by the human personality, and this proves that the truth of the Universe is human truth. [...] I have pursued this thought through art, literature and the religious consciousness of man.

E.: There are two different conceptions about the nature of the universe: (1) The world as a unity dependent on humanity. (2) The world as a reality independent of the human factor.

T.: When our universe is in harmony with Man, the eternal, we know it as truth, we feel it as beauty.

E.: This is a purely human conception of the universe.

T.: There can be no other conception. [...] We have to realize it through our emotions and activities. We realize the Supreme Man who has no individual limitations through our limitations. Science is [...] the impersonal human world of truths. Religion realizes these truths and links them up with our deeper needs; our individual consciousness of truth gains universal significance.³⁰⁰

Amartya Sen cites part of that conversation in his essay 'Tagore and His India', and observes that Tagore's heterodox line of reasoning about 'real truth' has been developed by scholars in recent years.³⁰¹

In the remainder of this chapter, we consider the first two essays separately

²⁹⁷ Tagore, *Of Myself (Atmaparichay)*, p. 24.

²⁹⁸ Jevons, p. 35.

²⁹⁹ Uma Das Gupta, 'On Religion', in *Rabindranath Tagore: My Life in My Words*, pp. 319-27 (p. 319).

³⁰⁰ Tagore, 'Appendix II: Note on the Meaning of Reality', in *The Religion of Man*, pp. 222-5.

³⁰¹ Amartya Sen, p. 104.

according to their themes and titles: the Poet's philosophy in 'What Is Art?', the Poet's religion in 'The World of Personality'.³⁰² I have suggested that Tagore honed his ability to communicate his ideas in English through discussions with Andrews, who was an important sounding board, and also a supportive friend. So I also discuss what Andrews brought to their encounter, and what we can learn about Tagore's personality from the record of their correspondence in *Letters to a Friend* and elsewhere.

The Poet's Philosophy in 'What Is Art?'

The first essay, 'What Is Art?', has much in common with 'The Poet's Religion' in Tagore's later book of essays *Creative Unity*.³⁰³ He brought out versions of the same ideas on various occasions when he was invited to speak or contribute to publications. 'The Meaning of Art', for example, is the lecture he delivered at Dacca University in 1926, and published in *Visva Bharati Quarterly*.³⁰⁴ That essay is repeated in the second section of 'The Religion of an Artist', which he submitted for inclusion in Radhakrishnan's *Contemporary Indian Philosophy*, first published in 1936.³⁰⁵ His contribution was quite unlike any of the essays by the impressively learned scholars in the rest of the collection. Tagore evidently considered 'The Religion of an Artist' to be his philosophy, and because of the common ground it shares with 'What Is Art?', I have suggested that we can identify the latter as also expressing the Poet's philosophy.

For Tagore, art and poetry, and a sense of beauty, come from mankind having additional needs and energies beyond meeting our basic necessities, and beyond needing to understanding the world we live in. Art, for Tagore, is beyond science and is indefinable, it is not something we engage in for its own sake, it is beyond mind and senses, and is transformed by our feelings into 'the life-stuff of our nature'. It is through art that we express our personality, transcending body and mind, becoming conscious of 'the infinite in the personal man', which is immortal due to its 'inexhaustible abundance'.³⁰⁶ The closest essay to 'What Is Art?' in *Sadhana* is 'The Realisation of Beauty', about feeling joy from seeing and knowing beauty in the world. 'What Is Art?', and the later essays on the same subject, are about representing the beauty found in nature: creating beauty from beauty, one might say; in other words they add an active artistic level.

³⁰² As mentioned earlier, I am leaving further discussion of 'The Second Birth' to a later chapter.

³⁰³ Tagore, 'The Poet's Religion' in *Creative Unity*, pp. 1-27.

³⁰⁴ 'The Meaning of Art', in *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore, Volume THREE: A Miscellany*, ed. by Sisir Kumar Das (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1996), pp. 580-8, Notes, p. 976.)

³⁰⁵ Tagore, 'The Religion of an Artist', in *Contemporary Indian Philosophy*, pp. 25-45.

³⁰⁶ 'What is Art?', p. 38.

It became clear from our study of Jevons' reading that what is different about a poet's philosophy is the vital role of emotions. We can understand this better by knowing something of Tagore's complex mental and emotional makeup from his two memoirs, *My Reminiscences* and *My Boyhood Days*,³⁰⁷ and from biographies by people who knew him in life. As Kripalani writes: Tagore's 'achievements in the various fields, important in themselves, gain further significance and human interest, if properly related to the various stages and moods of his development as a man'.³⁰⁸ A review of Kripalani's biography mentions the importance of the author's 'association with Tagore at Santiniketan as well as those open to him as a relative by marriage'.³⁰⁹ Another account from personal knowledge of the poet is the charming short biography of Tagore written for her students by Marjorie Sykes, a teacher at Santiniketan in his last years, and translator of *My Boyhood Days*.³¹⁰ Sykes depicts Tagore as a little boy very tenderly, and she ends with the lines of the song Tagore intended for the close of *The Post Office* as Amal, the child with the fearless, friendly heart, lies on his death-bed, and which, at his wish, were sung at Tagore's funeral service. Another revealing source, particularly relevant to *Personality*, is Tagore's correspondence with Andrews in *Letters to a Friend*.³¹¹

Tagore and Andrews met in 1912, Andrews joined the teaching staff at Santiniketan in 1914, and theirs became the most intimate of friendships. Andrews understood and appreciated the importance of creativity for Tagore, since art, music and poetry were very dear to him too. Andrews had treasured childhood memories of family singing; he had shown promise as a painter and was once offered a scholarship to art school; and the biography by Chaturvedi and Sykes includes a selection of his poems in an appendix.³¹² Art even had religious significance for both of them. Andrews had gone to India as a missionary and teacher, but soon renounced any desire to capture converts from Hinduism and Islam. He believed that Christianity had a role in India, but it had to come as a 'helper and a fulfiller, a peacemaker and a friend', and provide aid in troubled times.³¹³ In the book he was preparing before he met Tagore, he wrote: 'The naturalisation of the Christian message amidst Indian conditions of life and thought, will

³⁰⁷ Tagore, *My Boyhood Days*, trans. by Marjorie Sykes (London: Longmans, 1943)

³⁰⁸ Kripalani, p. 144.

³⁰⁹ Sasadhar Sinha, Review, *Rabindranath Tagore: A Biography* by Krishna Kripalani, *Association of Asian Studies*, 22 (1963), 235-6.

³¹⁰ Marjorie Sykes, *Rabindranath Tagore* (London: Longmans, 1943), p. 122.

³¹¹ Tagore was very open about his mood changes and restlessness in his letters to Andrews, which were published with Tagore's approval in 1928.

³¹² Chaturvedi and Sykes, pp. 2, 10, 324-7.

³¹³ Chaturvedi and Sykes, p. 63.

take place through the medium of *art, music and poetry*, more than through the channels of controversy and hard reasoning'.³¹⁴

Chaturvedi and Sykes say in their preface that they 'knew and loved Charlie Andrews', and they endeavoured to provide a 'truthful portrait' which is 'substantially accurate'. They describe in a most sympathetic way his deeply emotional and tender-hearted character, and the series of traumas and transitions he went through, as 'the Wandering Christian' who gave himself to everyone as a friend.³¹⁵ In his foreword to the biography, Gandhi describes Charlie Andrews as 'simple like a child, upright as a die and shy to a degree'.³¹⁶ The biographers add to this characterisation that Andrews had such an 'extreme and somewhat demonstrative sensitiveness' that friends of his remarked that he was 'half a woman'. This is thought to have come from his mother nursing him through rheumatic fever when he was six year old, and Andrews wrote that this accounted for there being a strong mother in him.³¹⁷ His tender heartedness led him to being dubbed 'the friend of the poor'.

These characteristics made Andrews in many respects an opposite to Tagore. The poet's use of the word '*rasa*' provides a clue to how they were different, and to Tagore's personality. *Rasa* is a word in Sanscrit *poetics*; it relates to ways of expressing human emotions in poetry, not to the feelings themselves. Through his poetry, his music, his dramas and his preaching Tagore represented life experience; he wrote, recited, and sang about emotions, evoking emotions in others. There is reason to suppose that he displaced his own lived feelings, which were sometimes intolerable, by being an artist. Andrews was different. He lived through his feelings as an outpouring of love and pity in action. Despite physical frailty and constant bouts of illness, religious searchings, criticism and obstruction, he strove to right wrongs: those of indentured workers, of people addicted to drink and drugs, to individuals seriously ill or persecuted, to anyone in need, particularly his friends, particularly Tagore.

It was a comfort to Tagore that he had at his disposal Andrews' motherly love and admiration. There were occasions when they actually mothered and nursed each other, many more when they expressed this nurturing in their letters. It is clear that Tagore found his friend – or any company – suffocating after a while, and had to get away. His restlessness was chronic, as one can tell from the addresses heading his correspondence and he wrote about it in his letters. Even in old age, when he seldom left Rabindra-

³¹⁴ Chaturvedi and Sykes, p. 65, their italics.

³¹⁵ Chaturvedi and Sykes, pp. xii-xii.

³¹⁶ M.K. Gandhi, Foreword, in Chaturvedi and Sykes, p. vi.

³¹⁷ Chaturvedi and Sykes, p. 2.

Bhavana at Santiniketan, his quest for new surroundings had the result that he ‘would first start rearranging the furniture, shift from one room to another and then finally send for [his architect] and request him to build a new house with his specifications’.³¹⁸

There is no mystery or secret about the source of Tagore’s emotional contradictoriness, his creativity, his ability to write poems and songs about his feelings and about nature. The source was his family, his childhood and early years, his bereavements, his idiosyncratic beliefs and philosophy, all of which he wrote about constantly, and he would share accounts of this life story with anyone who would listen sympathetically.

In ‘The Religion of an Artist’, his contribution to *Contemporary Indian Philosophy*, he provides in the first section a richly fascinating and lively version of his family background and cultural influences, how and why he began his artistic career ‘ridiculously young’, and about how his ‘poet’s religion’ followed the same ‘unseen and trackless channels’. In contrast, there is a tenderly moving version of the same events in an account by Andrews in his introductory essay in *Letters to a Friend*, which begins:

The temperament and character of Rabindranath Tagore may best be understood if I attempt to describe one memorable day in London, when he told me in outline the story of his own life in relation to his literary career.³¹⁹

Andrews tells us that on that day Tagore was weak and ill, his face pale and worn, and then Andrews relates Tagore’s story with all the poignancy possible. Part of the story is, of course, very sad. Andrews’ gives a tender account of the deaths of Tagore’s wife, daughter and young son,³²⁰ and then goes on:

As he spoke of these things that morning, the darkness of the London mists rolled away and the light shone through the clouds with a majestic radiance. This outward scene was but a faint symbol of the story that was being told to me quietly in that upper room.

The poet spoke of the days and hours wherein Death itself became a loved companion—no longer the king of terrors, but altogether transformed into a cherished friend.

You know (he said to me) this death was a great *blessing* to me. I had through it all, day after day, a sense of fulfilment, of completion, as if nothing were lost. I felt that if even an atom in the universe seemed lost, it could never actually perish. It was not mere resignation that came to me, but the sense of a fuller life. I knew then, at last, what Death was. It was perfection.³²¹

³¹⁸ Supriya Roy, *Attarayana Rabindra-Bhavana: An Introduction* (Santiniketan: Visva-Bharati University, 1989), p. 3.

³¹⁹ Andrews, ‘An Essay on the Personality of Tagore’, in *Letters to a Friend*, pp. 21-32 (p. 21).

³²⁰ The deaths in Tagore’s family were: his wife Mrinalini in 1902, his daughter Rani in 1903, his father in 1905 and his younger son Samindra in 1907. (Tagore did not make these part of the ‘lively version’ just mentioned.)

³²¹ Andrews, pp. 29-30.

Tagore's device for dealing with death was established many years earlier when his adored sister-in-law died, an experience of loss that affected him more deeply than the death of his mother before that. In *Jivan-smriti*,³²² Tagore wrote:

When death came and what had been there as part of life became suddenly a gaping void, I felt utterly lost. Everything else had remained the same, the trees, the soil, the sun, the moon and the stars; only she who was as real as they, indeed far more real than they, for I had felt her touch on every aspect of my being³²³—only she was not there, she had vanished like a dream. This terrible paradox baffled me. How was I to reconcile what remained with what had been?³²⁴

The account in *My Reminiscences* ends with: 'Death had given me the correct perspective from which to perceive the world in the fulness [*sic*] of its beauty, and as I saw the picture of the Universe against the background of Death I found it entrancing'.³²⁵ Kripalani's version has: 'Her death had given me the necessary distance and detachment to see life and world in their wholeness, in their true perspective, and as I looked at the picture of life painted on the vast canvas of death, it seemed to be truly beautiful'.³²⁶

Kripalani's rendering of the passage from *Jivan-smriti* puts the emphasis on 'the picture of life' being 'truly beautiful'. Just before that Tagore wrote: 'The human mind cannot understand absolute emptiness and imagines that what is not must be unreal and what is unreal is not. [...] But when one discovers that the way out of darkness is itself shrouded in darkness, what agony can equal this!'³²⁷ The other translation could seem to make Death itself 'entrancing', an idea which Tagore did come to adopt:

I have had so many experiences of loved ones who have died, that I think I have come to know something about death, something perhaps of its deeper meaning. Every moment that I have spent at the death bed of some dear friend, I have known this, yet it is very difficult to describe how for me that great ocean of truth, of existence, of life, from which life itself springs and to which all life returns, can never suffer diminution by death.³²⁸

Bereavement for many people means a prolonged emotional journey. For Tagore,

³²² Kripalani singles out this episode to retranslate from *Jivan-smriti*, evidently considering Surendranath Tagore's rendering in *My Reminiscences* inadequate, as is reflected in the preface. (Kripalani, pp. 114-6; Translator's Preface in *My Reminiscences*, pp. v-vii.)

³²³ *My Reminiscences* has 'through a thousand points of contact with life, mind and heart' (Tagore, *My Reminiscences*, p. 258).

³²⁴ Kripalani, p. 115.

³²⁵ *My Reminiscences*, p. 260.

³²⁶ Kripalani, pp. 115-6.

³²⁷ Kripalani, p. 115.

³²⁸ Tagore, 'On Death', transcribed and typed by Elmhirst. The essay derives from a conversation between Tagore and the Duke of Milan, Gallarati Scotti, during Tagore's visit to Italy in 1925. Scotti begins with the remark: 'I liked, very much, the translation I read of your play *The Post Office*. From it I received the impression that you felt about death as though it were a kind of revelation of the Divine'. 'On Death' is Tagore's reply. (The Dartington Hall Trust Archive, Papers of Leonard Knight Elmhirst, LKE India.)

perhaps his first loss was actually unbearable, and so he transformed this and his subsequent losses into life-changing revelation.³²⁹ Once he had turned it around in that way, it could be public property, safe to share with anyone to gain sympathy, and available to be built into his writing.

In *Letters to a Friend* there are indications of another need for Tagore to sublimate his feelings. From Andrews' introductions to chapters of that book, and in some of Tagore's letters, we learn that the poet went through extreme mood changes. He suffered from deep bouts of depression, which were sometimes long lasting and resulted in gaps in the correspondence. Then he would write that he was 'emerging once again into the air and light', out of the 'experience of the dark', and declare himself 'supremely happy'.³³⁰ Tagore's poetry can be understood as a product of his intense feelings, but not simply to repeat the trite notion of the 'emotional outpourings' of any creative person. 'What Is Art?' was Tagore's rhetorical question about what art and creativity are, how and why human beings are creative, which he answered in terms of his own process, art being the expression of his particular personality, a special case which always fascinated him, fully expecting it to be universally true.

There is no autobiographical section in the essay 'What Is Art?' Its content is more like the second part of 'The Religion of An Artist', an inspiring account of the potential for creativity in man arising from the overflowing surplus, 'needed only for self-expression and not for self-preservation', with some scolding from the author about what is lost in a 'man-made world [which] is less an expression of man's creative soul than a mechanical device for some purpose of power'.³³¹ The scolding in 'What Is Art?' is directed firstly at the architecture of the British capital in Delhi, reflecting abstract officialdom, and then at 'the mist of abstractions' in man's social world, with names such as 'state, nation, commerce, politics and war', with the vague idea of 'war' covering up 'a multitude of miseries', and 'nation' responsible for appalling crimes.³³² That this is Tagore's main and repeated message to the western world is evident from the notes to the essays on the same theme included in the major collection of Tagore's

³²⁹ There are many accounts of how Tagore's sister-in-law, Kadambari Devi, was a crucial influence on Tagore becoming a poet. She committed suicide shortly after Tagore's marriage. There has been much speculation about the nature of their relationship. (See e.g. Dutta and Robinson, *Myriad-Minded Man*, pp. 88-91.)

³³⁰ *Letters to a Friend*, pp. 35-47, 53-5, 68-70, etc. Elsewhere these episodes are referred to as 'nervous exhaustion', and it should not be assumed that Tagore suffered from some mental illness.

³³¹ Tagore, Part II, in 'The Religion of an Artist, in *Contemporary Indian Philosophy*, pp. 34-45 (pp. 34-5, 44).

³³² *What Is Art?*, pp. 18, 36.

Tagore personalised his creative process, calling it ‘*Jeevande-bata*’ (variously spelled and translated).³³⁴ Kripalani condemns ‘well-meaning critics’ who tried to explain this conception, pointing out that ‘even ordinary men’ have at times been aware of having two selves: one which acts and another which watches and judges.³³⁵ Prasanta Mahalanobis, Edward Thompson’s adviser on Tagore, explained ‘*Jibande-bata*’ as ‘the Inner Self of the poet’. Thompson recalls Tagore’s insistence that this is not to be identified with God, and then provides his own version of what the *jiban-debata* is: ‘He is the Lord of the poet’s life, is realizing himself through the poet’s work; the poet gives expression to him, and in this sense is inspired’. Thompson continues:

Rabindranath believed this to be true of all poets; and, presumably of all men, whatever their work. He had always taken his genius with intense seriousness; and this *jibande-bata* doctrine brought a very solemn sense of responsibility, as though God had put a Demiurge in watchful control of his effort. The mood escapes from morbidity, on the whole, because of the humility which saves the poet from mad self-exaltation.³³⁶

Tagore dismissed Thompson’s book as ‘one of the most absurd’ he had ever read, and declared that as a Christian missionary Thompson was incapable of understanding the ‘*Jeevan-devata*’.³³⁷ Nevertheless, there is an insight in Thompson’s interpretation of the creative process ‘of all men, whatever their work’. He comes close to articulating an uncomfortable truth known to each one of us, which is that our words, which emerge in the ‘stream of consciousness’,³³⁸ and in our speech and writing, are narratives, representations to ourselves or others of prior processes which have taken place unconsciously, deep within the ‘feeling brain’.³³⁹ Understood in that way, it is not so revolutionary that consciousness can be ‘explained’.³⁴⁰

³³³ See especially Notes to ‘The Meaning of Art’ and ‘The Religion of an Artist’ in *English Writings, Volume THREE*, pp. 976, 979.

³³⁴ The spelling of this word in English is complicated by ‘b’ and ‘v’ being the same character in Bengali, and the convention for writing vowels in Bengali having been adopted from that used for Sanskrit, and not reflecting phonetics, correctives being sometimes attempted, as in ‘ee’ for ‘i’, hence Tagore’s ‘*Jeevan-devata*’. There is no upper case in Bengali, and Tagore employed that to personalise (e.g. ‘Science’) or to indicate greatness (‘God’ etc.).

³³⁵ Kripalani, pp. 166-7. which one?

³³⁶ Thompson, *Poet and Dramatist*, p. 104.

³³⁷ Tagore, letter to Rothenstein, 20 April 1927, in *Imperfect Encounter*, pp. 320-2.

³³⁸ James, ‘The Stream of Consciousness’, in *Psychology*, pp. 151-75.

³³⁹ As in Damasio, *Joy, Sorrow and the Feeling Brain*.

³⁴⁰ See claims by philosopher Daniel C. Dennett in his book, *Consciousness Explained* (London: Penguin, 1993). A quotation on its cover from a review in *The Guardian* declares the book to be ‘Revolutionary’. Dennett’s approach has been much criticised, by scholars, e.g. ‘parts of the book [...] seem to me misguided’ (Michael Tye, ‘Reflections on Dennett and Consciousness’, Review of *Consciousness Explained* by Daniel C. Dennett, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 53 (1993), 893-898. ‘Nobody believes in such a Cartesian Theater’. (Anthony A. Derksen, ‘Dennett’s Rhetorical Strategies in “Consciousness Explained”’, *Journal for General Philosophy of Science*, 36 (2005), 29-48.) See also,

It is increasingly being recognised today that creativity is very dependent on processes taking place in the unconscious mind.³⁴¹ Tagore frequently intimates that the creative process is universal and beyond words. David L. Gosling sees ‘Tagore’s universal humanism’ as relevant to his support for his great friend, J.C. Bose, who carried out research into the possibility of pain in plants, and other Indian scientists, ‘for their ability to bridge the gap between the living and the non-living’.³⁴² In his study of *Alternative Sciences*, Ashis Nandy quotes from a letter Bose wrote in 1901 as follows:

There is no break in the life-processes which characterize both the animate and the inanimate world. It is difficult to draw a line between these two aspects of life. It is of course possible to delineate a number of imaginary differences, as it is possible to find out similarities in terms of certain other general criteria. The latter approach is justified by the natural tendency of science towards seeking unity in diversity.³⁴³

Such ideas – received with enthusiasm in the West at the time – extend well beyond today’s ‘normal science’ in Kuhn’s terms.³⁴⁴ However, the work by Rothenberg on how humans share with animals the capacity to appreciate beauty directly,³⁴⁵ could suggest that some ideas resembling those of Bose may be gaining legitimacy. Rothenberg does not refer to anything resembling the vitalist science of Bose. He does mention that Henri Bergson ‘won the Nobel Prize for Literature for his evocative, purple-prose philosophy on the march of consciousness toward a dimly visible finale of union with all creation’, but says that these kind of ideas have a only a “New Age” following.³⁴⁶

Tagore’s abilities as a poet began with his feelings of direct connection with nature in his childhood, and this provides part of the answer to Tagore’s question, ‘What Is Art?’, but the answer is ultimately religious. The concluding paragraph of the essay begins with Tagore’s answer phrased as another question: ‘What is it in man that asserts its immortality in spite of the obvious fact of death?’ He answers that it is a deeper unity than body and mind, which radiates into the wider world and ‘overflows its banks of the past and the future’; it is personality, man’s consciousness of the infinite. ‘In Art the person in us is sending its answers to the Supreme Person, who reveals Himself to us in

Merlin Donald, ‘Dennett’s Dangerous Idea’, in *A Mind So Rare: The Evolution of Human Consciousness* (New York: Norton, 2002), pp. 39-44.

³⁴¹ See for example, Jonah Lehrer, *Imagine: How Creativity Works* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2012)

³⁴² David L. Gosling, *Science and the Indian Tradition: When Einstein met Tagore* (London: Routledge, 2007), pp. 9, 31.

³⁴³ Ashis Nandy, *Alternative Sciences* (reproduced in the collection *Return from Exile: Alternative Sciences; The Illegitimacy of Nationalism; The Savage Freud* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004)), p. 49.

³⁴⁴ Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 3rd edn (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1996), pp. 5-6.

³⁴⁵ Rothenberg, ‘Come Up and See My Bower’, in *Survival of the Beautiful*, pp. 1-26, including Darwin’s writing about animals’ appreciation of beauty, pp. 12-14.

³⁴⁶ Rothenberg, p. 50.

a world of endless beauty across the lightless world of facts'.³⁴⁷

There were unfortunate circumstances behind Tagore's dismissive remark in 1926 about Thompson being incapable of understanding divinity in other than a Christian sense.³⁴⁸ Ten years earlier, when he composed *Personality*, Tagore clearly believed he would be able to explain his religious ideas in sensible, non-mystical terms to a western audience, having practised on Andrews while they were closeted together discussing 'the meeting of East and West in common fellowship'.

Andrews had the greatest respect and admiration for Tagore, and he was aware that religion was a cause of divisions and misunderstandings in India and in the world, so he must have been an ideal sounding board when Tagore was contemplating the lectures in America. Looking ahead to the lecture tour itself, only three of the six essays in *Personality* have titles corresponding to lectures Tagore gave in America.³⁴⁹ In November and December 1916, Tagore spoke on 'The World of Personality' four times, 'What is Art?' and 'The Second Birth' once each, and another title 'Personality in Art' (not a title in the book) once.³⁵⁰

Tagore wrote in 'What Is Art?': 'The West may believe in the soul of Man, but she does not believe that the universe has a soul. Yet this is the belief of the East, and the whole mental contribution of the East to mankind is filled with this idea.'³⁵¹ Tagore's 'poet's religion', which is discussed now, goes back to the basics and provides an alternative to the 'theosophistries' and other distortions of South Asian religion which are the subject of Aravamudan's *Guru English*.³⁵²

The Poet's Religion in 'The World of Personality'

Tagore's religion is individual and complex, and he struggled to put into words the 'unity of inspiration whose proper definition has often remained unrevealed' even to himself.³⁵³ In his letter to Rothenstein about Thompson being incapable of understanding his ideas, such as the *jiban-debata*, Tagore explains that concept:

³⁴⁷ 'What Is Art?', p. 38.

³⁴⁸ Tagore denounced Thompson's book vehemently, and 'wrote a savage pseudonymous critique' of it, encouraged by Andrews who said that Thompson showed 'a patronage and a superiority complex'. (E.P. Thompson, *Alien Homage: Edward Thompson and Rabindranath Tagore* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 91, 98)

³⁴⁹ Mukherjee notes (p. 210) that his itinerary of Tagore's visits to America may have minor gaps due to lack of information.

³⁵⁰ Mukherjee, pp. 212-3. (As noted earlier, Tagore gave 23 lectures on nationalism.)

³⁵¹ 'What Is Art?', p. 24.

³⁵² Srinivas Aravamudan, *Guru English: South Asian Religion in a Cosmopolitan Language* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006)

³⁵³ Tagore, Preface, in *The Religion of Man*, pp.7-8 (p. 7).

Jeevan-devata [is] the limited aspect of divinity which has its unique place in the individual life, in contrast to that which belongs to the universe. The God of Christianity has his special recognition as the God of humanity—in Hinduism in our everyday meditation we try to realise his cosmic manifestation and thus free our soul from its bondage of the limitedness of the immediate; but for us he is also individual for the individual, working out, through our evolution in time, our ultimate destiny.³⁵⁴

This seems to be the same idea for which in this book Tagore adopts the word ‘personality’, with the ‘Supreme Person’ as its ‘cosmic manifestation’.³⁵⁵ Radice introduces *jiban-debata* as Tagore’s ‘creative personality’, which ‘governed and penetrated and harmonized Tagore’s own varied creative activities’.³⁵⁶ Kripalani writes: ‘The same Spirit that suffused and ruled this vast universe dwelt within him and guided his life and genius. He called it Jivan-devata or Lord of my life’.³⁵⁷ In ‘The Religion of an Artist’, Tagore writes: ‘The fact that we exist has its truth in the fact that everything else does exist, and the “I am” in me crosses its finitude whenever it deeply realises itself in the “Thou art.”’³⁵⁸

Jevons observes that Tagore does not define ‘personality’ in ‘What Is Art?’, and he does seem to avoid this with his ‘raincoat in the hall’ quip, but then he takes from the ‘amplitude of meaning’ of the word ‘personality’ the following:

Man, as a knower, is not fully himself,—his mere information does not reveal him. But, as a person, he is the organic man, who has the inherent power to select things from his surroundings in order to make them his own. He has his forces of attraction and repulsion by which he not merely piles up things outside him, but creates himself. The principal creative forces, which transmute things into our living structure, are emotional forces.³⁵⁹

‘Personality’, then, is what we know as the ‘self’, perhaps the ‘I’ which Damasio, the neuroscientist, identifies as the ‘self-as-subject-and-knower’ stacked on top of the ‘self-as-object’.³⁶⁰ Damasio favours the writings of William James as an anchor for his thinking,³⁶¹ and Tagore’s process seems similar to that of James, who writes:

After discrimination, association! It is obvious that all advance in knowledge must consist of both operations; for in the course of our education, objects at first appearing as wholes are analyzed into parts, and objects appearing separately are brought together and appear as new compound wholes to the mind.³⁶²

Tagore, with Damasio, makes ‘emotional forces’ the magic ingredient which turns the

³⁵⁴ Tagore, letter to Rothenstein, 20 April 1927, in *Imperfect Encounter*, pp. 320-2 (p. 321).

³⁵⁵ ‘What Is Art?’, pp. 12, 38.

³⁵⁶ Radice, *Selected Poems*, p. 24.

³⁵⁷ Kripalani, p. 166.

³⁵⁸ ‘The Religion of an Artist’, p. 36.

³⁵⁹ ‘What Is Art?’, p. 13.

³⁶⁰ Damasio, *Self Comes to Mind*, p. 9.

³⁶¹ Damasio, p. 6.

³⁶² James, ‘Association’, in *Psychology*, pp. 252-79 (p. 253).

‘piles of things’ into life, but Tagore means more by the phrase than purely biological processes.³⁶³ This is reminiscent of Merz, cited by Jevons, saying that something is lost such that ‘reality disappears’, in the analytic and synthetic processes of science. Merz writes that this loss of reality is eminently the case with ‘that great region of feelings, desires, and volitions, of impelling motives, and reflections on past events and actions, which constitute our moral and religious life.’³⁶⁴ As the sciences have expanded to take in everything which can possibly be studied, including consciousness, religion seems to be left with a ‘God Delusion’,³⁶⁵ but in ‘The World of Personality’ Tagore takes issue with Science, and reclaims religion with the aid of the ancient texts of the Upanisads.

Tagore begins with a teasing reference to ‘Science’ insisting on an opposite view of the world from his own. When Tagore, the poet, sees night as ‘a dark child just born of her mother day’ with millions of stars ‘crowding round its cradle’, Science laughs at him, certain that the stars are really moving. After toying with this dispute at some length, Tagore quotes ‘the Indian sage of Ishopanishat’, who says ‘It moves. It moves not. It is distant. It is near.’³⁶⁶ Tagore gives the meaning of that verse as: ‘when we follow truth in its parts which are near, we see truth moving. When we know truth as a whole, which is looking at it from a distance, it remains still’, hence ‘[t]here is a point where in the mystery of existence contradictions meet’.³⁶⁷ Tagore goes on to present a similar anomaly with respect to time.

With his American audience in mind, Tagore refers to Walt Whitman as ‘your poet-seer’ and quotes Whitman’s poem ‘When I heard the learned astronomer’, to illustrate how the world ‘crumbles into abstractions’ due to science’s laws.³⁶⁸ Despite his life-long interest in astronomy, Tagore evidently understood his fellow poet being sickened at the ‘charts and diagrams, to add, divide and measure’ and would have glided out with

³⁶³ For a possible candidate for the non-reductionist, non-mystical extra ingredient of the self, see Danah Zohar ‘The Person that I am: Quantum Identity’, in *The Quantum Self* (London: Bloomsbury, 1990), pp. 89-106.

³⁶⁴ Merz, p. 162.

³⁶⁵ Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (London: Black Swan, 2007) and *The Greatest Show on Earth: The Evidence for Evolution* (London: Black Swan, 2010), interview with Wendy Wright (pp. 198-202), one of the ‘History-deniers’ (Appendix, pp. 427-37) in which, in my view, the denier wins, with her final comment: ‘And I would say open your eyes and see the communities that have been built on those who believe in a loving God who created each one of us ...’.

³⁶⁶ Interestingly, Radice uses this verse (the fifth) from the Isa Upanisad as a framework for his introduction to *Selected Poems*, to deal with ‘the complexity and contradictions of Tagore’s life and work’, and he retained that introduction for the edition he brought out in 2005, twenty years after the book’s first publication, because ‘readers found it helpful’. (*Selected Poems*, pp. 17-39 (p. 17). However, he removed the hostile letter from Tagore to Rothenstein I have referred to, which he had included as an appendix in an earlier edition, laying responsibility on Edward Thompson for ‘Tagore’s long misrecognition at his door’, as a foil for his own work. (‘The Bubble Reputation’, in *Alien Homage*, pp. 29-38 (pp. 29-30).)

³⁶⁷ ‘The World of Personality’, p. 44.

³⁶⁸ ‘The World of Personality’, p. 59.

him and ‘Looked up in perfect silence at the stars’.³⁶⁹ He also quotes Whitman’s ‘I hear it was charged against me that I sought to destroy institutions’, to show how that poet’s mental dexterity plays havoc with convention.³⁷⁰ Tagore deplored officialdom, so he would have relished Whitman’s mischievous notion of establishing everywhere, ‘Without edifices, rules or trustees or any argument, / The institution of the dear love of comrades’, and one thinks of the importance to Tagore of his English friends.³⁷¹

I referred earlier in this chapter to Bengali scholars considering ‘The World of Personality’ to be the core of *Personality*, and I noted that the essay includes Tagore’s commentary on the Isa Upanisad.³⁷² Tagore is attempting to put in a modern context the reconciliation of opposites achieved by the rhetoricians of old India. This was Tagore as poet-seer, an intermediary in this case between ancient wisdom and modern science. Tagore goes through the Isa Upanisad, quoting and providing original commentary on most of its eighteen verses. Tagore was very familiar with the Vedas and the Upanisads because he and his brothers were made by their father to recite verses from these as a daily ritual.³⁷³ In *Sadhana*, Tagore provides a number of such texts in English and in the original Sanskrit, but no specific references.³⁷⁴ In ‘The World of Personality’ he refers only to the Isa Upanisad, making it easy to locate the verses in published translations of the classical Upanisads, and take advantage of relevant commentaries and editorial apparatus.³⁷⁵

The Upanisads are a written record of spiritual lessons taught in the ancient forest hermitages.³⁷⁶ Radhakrishnan’s introductory paragraph to the Isa Upanisad gives its particular purpose as:

to teach the essential unity of God and the world, being and becoming. It is interested not so much in the Absolute in itself, *Parabrahman*, as in the Absolute in relation to the world, *Paramesvara*. It teaches that life in the world and life in the Divine Spirit are not incompatible.³⁷⁷

The Isa Upanisad was a favourite text with Tagore, as it had been for his father. When

³⁶⁹ *Walt Whitman: Complete Poetry & Selected Prose and Letters*, ed. by Emory Holloway (London: Nonsuch, 1938), p. 250. (Today’s poets struggle to see past smog and street lights at the far from still-and-silent thousands of satellites hurtling around the earth.)

³⁷⁰ ‘The World of Personality’, pp. 48-9.

³⁷¹ Whitman, p. 119. (Tagore respectfully quotes two complete short poems of Whitman’s rather than extracts.)

³⁷² This thesis, p. 58 and p. 58 n. 261.

³⁷³ Sabujkoli Sen, ‘Tagore’s Religion’, *India Perspectives*, 24 (2010), 60-65 (p. 60). Sen teaches philosophy and religion at Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan.

³⁷⁴ This reflects the fact that the *Sadhana* texts derived from Tagore’s addresses to his students.

³⁷⁵ ‘Isa Upanisad’, in *Upanisads*, ed. by Radhakrishnan, pp. 265-78. ‘Isa Upanishad’, in *Upanishads*, trans. by Hume, pp. 362-5.

³⁷⁶ Radhakrishnan, p. 19.

³⁷⁷ Radhakrishnan, p. 265.

carrying out research for the monotheistic Brahma Dharma, Devendranath had examined 147 Upanisads, and rejected most of them and some of the teachings, and he was particularly ‘disappointed’ in those focussed on the monistic Sanskrit phrase *tat tvam asi* or ‘Thou art That’.³⁷⁸ Theologians have seen Tagore’s position as a personalistic monism,³⁷⁹ but having gone through a long process of religious searching and change,³⁸⁰ he disdained debate about monism and dualism,³⁸¹ and one can see both theological positions when he writes in ‘What Is Art?’:

The world and the personal man are face to face, like friends who question one another and exchange their inner secrets. The world asks the inner man,—“Friend, have you seen me? Do you love me?—not as one who provides you with foods and fruits, not as one whose laws you have found out, but as one who is personal, individual?”³⁸²

Hume provides an introductory essay to his translation of the Upanisads. He points out that the doctrine of ‘the loss of finite individuality in the real Self that is unlimited’ is not known consciously, and is contrary to ‘common-sense realism which views all things as really existing just as they are seen to exist’.³⁸³ Andrews found this idea troubling, as he indicates in the preface he wrote to the collected writings of Swami Rama Tirtha:

With the philosophy of the Advaita Vedanta I confess I have only a faint and distant sympathy ... The West insists on the eternal quality of human personality and rebels against the thought of the loss of personal identity, as in the noble sorrow and faith of Tennyson’s *In Memoriam*. I recognise the danger of this emphasis of self-assertion and selfish individualism; I recognize that it may need some balance and correction from the East; but the West will never accept as finally satisfying a philosophy which does not allow it to believe that love between human souls may be an eternal reality.³⁸⁴

Chaturvedi and Sykes note that Andrews’ mention of Tennyson’s tribute to his friend Arthur Hallam is significant, because of friendship being such a central part of Andrews’ life. The mainstay of Andrews’ own faith was his relationship with Christ, his ‘Friend of friends’,³⁸⁵ which survived the tormenting doubts which eventually caused

³⁷⁸ Tagore’s father had led a reformed Hindu church, the Brahma Dharma, influenced by Christianity and hence monotheistic. He found the Upanisads as a religious foundation ‘shaky and built upon sand’. (*The Autobiography of Maharshi Devendranath Tagore*, pp. 160-1.)

³⁷⁹ ‘Tagore is a monist, though he does not deny the reality of the world [...] and denounces the negative attitude towards the world. [...] Tagore’s absolutism is [...] personalistic’. (Dr. P. T. Raju, ‘Metaphysical Currents’, in *History of Philosophy Eastern and Western, Volume One*, pp. 532-6 (p. 532)).

³⁸⁰ Sabujkoli Sen, pp. 61-2.

³⁸¹ Tagore, *Of Myself*, p. 22.

³⁸² ‘What Is Art?’, p. 22.

³⁸³ Hume, ‘An Outline of the Philosophy of the Upanishads’, in *Upanishads*, pp. 1-72 (pp. 50-1).

³⁸⁴ Charles Freer Andrews, Preface to Swami Rama Tirtha collected writings, quoted in Chaturvedi and Sykes, p. 65.

³⁸⁵ C.F. Andrews, *What I Owe to Christ* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1932), p. 19.

him to renounce the exercise of his clerical orders.³⁸⁶ There are certainly passages in the Upanisads which would not appeal to someone hoping to meet loved ones again after death, such as the Brihad-Aranyaka, which declares that '[a]fter death there is no consciousness' because in life, where there is a duality (*dvaita*), one can see, smell and hear someone else, but when 'everything has become just one's own self' (*advaita*), then there is no other to see and be seen, and one could not even 'understand the understander'.³⁸⁷

Sabujkoli Sen notes that Tagore never clung to any one doctrine but was open to all, and that in 1910 he instituted 'Christotsava', celebration of Jesus' Birthday, in Santiniketan's prayer hall, and Sufism, Buddhism and the Baul tradition were studied at the school.³⁸⁸ In the article included as an appendix to Radhakrishnan's *Upanisads* Tagore expressed his satisfaction that Radhakrishnan was explaining their spirit to English readers.³⁸⁹ Radhakrishnan includes many commentaries with Christian elements, and in his introduction he refers to an article on 'Christian Vedantism', whose author, writing in 1913, considers that missionaries in India need Vedanta, which he suggests might be incorporated into an 'Ethnic Old Testament' to provide more 'terms and modes of expression wherewith to express the more immanent aspects of Christianity'.³⁹⁰ Before he met Tagore, Andrews was writing in similar enigmatic terms: 'The final victory of the Christian faith in India depends upon [...] the union of the Hindu and the Musalman, as Christians'. However, both Tagore and Gandhi evidently saw Hinduism as the religion which could absorb all others. Tagore acknowledges the difficulty of the philosophy of the Upanisads for English readers, because of distortions due to translation and severance from the people of the period for which they had meaning.³⁹¹ He goes on to say:

[T]he Upanisads are based not upon theological reasoning, but on experience of spiritual life. And life is not dogmatic; in it opposing forces are reconciled—ideas of non-dualism and dualism, the infinite and the finite, do not exclude each other. Moreover the Upanisads do not represent the spiritual experience of any one great individual, but of a great age of enlightenment which has a complex and collective imagination, like that of the starry world. Different creeds may find their sustenance from them, but can never set sectarian boundaries round them.³⁹²

These sentiments are similar to those voiced by Gandhi, in his contribution to

³⁸⁶ Chaturvedi and Sykes, p. 323.

³⁸⁷ Brihad-Aranyaka Upanisad, in *Upanishads*, trans. by Hume, pp. 73-176 (pp. 101-2).

³⁸⁸ Sabujkoli Sen, pp. 63-4.

³⁸⁹ Tagore, Appendix A, in *Upanisads*, ed. by Radhakrishnan pp. 939-944 (p. 939).

³⁹⁰ Radhakrishnan, Introduction, in *Upanisads*, pp. 17-145 (p. 19).

³⁹¹ Tagore, Appendix A, pp. 939-40.

³⁹² Tagore, Appendix A, p. 940.

Contemporary Indian Philosophy (to which Tagore sent 'The Religion of an Artist'). Gandhi offered just one page in answer to the questions the contributors were given. To the first question 'What is your religion?', Gandhi replied: 'My religion is Hinduism which, for me, is Religion of humanity and includes the best of all the religions known to me'.³⁹³

Andrews took the grave step of resigning his ministry because he was deeply troubled by Christian creeds, particular the phrase in the Athanasian Creed: 'which Faith except every one do keep whole and undefiled, without doubt he shall perish everlastingly', whereby even Tagore would be 'shut out from the mercy of God',³⁹⁴ and clearly, the worst kinds of dogma should be avoided. Even so, disputes about which religion is most true or most universal in its message are divisive, and Andrews followed Gandhi, who said: 'To be true to [one's] religion one has to lose oneself in continuing and continuous service of all life'.³⁹⁵ Tagore's essay in *Sadhana* 'Realisation in Action' shows that active work was central to his religion too, and that essay in particular impressed reviewers.³⁹⁶ In 'The World of Personality' he repeats the verse from the Upanisads used there: 'Doing work in this world thou shouldst wish to live a hundred years. Thus it is with thee and not otherwise. Let not the work of man cling to him.'³⁹⁷

The commentary given in Radhakrishnan's translation on this verse refers to the New Testament: 'Wisdom is beautiful but barren without works. St James: "Faith, apart from works, is dead." II. 26,' and goes on to explain that the meaning of the verse is that one need not choose between the active or the contemplative life, as did Martha and Mary.³⁹⁸ Tagore's commentary immediately after he quotes that verse focuses on the part which says 'Let not the work of man cling to him.' He suggests that the aim is to outgrow life by living it to the full, because 'death is the gate of immortality', hence: 'Do your work, but let not your work cling to you'.³⁹⁹

³⁹³ *Contemporary Indian Philosophy*, p. 21.

³⁹⁴ Chaturvedi and Sykes, p. 84.

³⁹⁵ Gandhi, his contribution to *Contemporary Indian Philosophy*, p. 21. (We know how passionately Gandhi believed in Hindu-Muslim unity, and that he died at the hands of a reactionary Hindu zealot. (Stanley Wolpert, *Gandhi's Passion: The Life and Legacy of Mahatma Gandhi* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 100, 132, 256.))

³⁹⁶ 'The most beautiful and most significant of all the chapters in "Sadhana" is that which describes this "Realization in Action" [... about] joyous, eager work, a glad self-dedicated striving, a partnership with God'. (Review in *Nation*, 13 December 1913, *Imagining Tagore*, pp. 115-8 (p. 117).) 'Tagore asserts most emphatically the worth of "this grand self-expression of humanity in action," [... and that at] the heart of work is the joy of creation.' (Herbert G. Wood, 'The Gospel of Joy', review in *The Friend*, 13 February 1914, p. 109, *Imagining Tagore*, pp. 153-5 (p. 154).)

³⁹⁷ 'The World of Personality', p. 64.

³⁹⁸ Isa Upanisad, verse 2, commentary by Samkarananda, *Upanisads*, trans. by Radhakrishnan, p. 569.

³⁹⁹ 'The World of Personality', pp. 64-5.

There is the sense all though the essay of enjoyment and then renunciation, of the universal poet joyfully pouring himself out in his poems, urging all of us to ‘express our infinity’ in works and relationships with others, but warning that when work clings it becomes a disease which would kill a man’s soul. This is a reminder of Tagore’s mood swings and periods of nervous exhaustion which we know of from his correspondence with Andrews. E.P. Thompson mentions this too in his introduction to the 1991 edition of *Nationalism*. Thompson quotes a letter which his father received from Prasanta Mahalanobis about Tagore’s ‘dual personality’, by which he alternated between ‘a mad incessant whirlpool of activity’ and suddenly giving up everything to retire into solitude.⁴⁰⁰

The sense of Tagore careering about permeates Thompson’s account, not only when the subject is Tagore’s moods, but also where Thompson is writing of Tagore’s views and aspirations for India and the world. It would, however, be a mistake to regard Tagore’s polemics and impatience as just a reflection of his psychology. It can also be interpreted as his idealism and refusal to compromise. Looking again at how Tagore was different from Andrews, the latter was a Christian socialist determined to engage in the ongoing fight for better treatment for the poor, whereas Tagore believed in ‘the harmony of completeness in humanity’ and he wanted ‘our civilisation [to] take its firm stand upon its basis of social co-operation’.⁴⁰¹ Thompson quotes another ‘remarkable’ letter from Mahalanobis, which explains that Tagore did not believe in seeking favour from Government, or dependence on Government ‘for education, sanitation, nor even for peace and order or justice’, but instead he said: ‘We must awaken our own deep-seated springs of action for good’.⁴⁰² To interpret the next two books, *Nationalism* and *Creative Unity*, one needs to relate the ideas Tagore expresses in the essays to his practical contributions to achieving these goals, through his work on education and rural reconstruction.

Conclusion: Tagore’s ‘Song of Myself’

I began this chapter with two quotations, one from a review of *My Reminiscences*, *Personality* and *Nationalism* combined, the other from *Letters to a Friend* where Andrews is describing how he and Tagore were isolated from the war discussing ‘the problem of human suffering; the possibility of complete human brotherhood; the meeting of East and West in common fellowship’. The history of *Personality* is

⁴⁰⁰ E.P. Thompson, Introduction, in *Nationalism* (London: Papermac, 1991), pp. 1-16.

⁴⁰¹ Tagore, ‘Nationalism in India’, in *Nationalism* (1917), pp. 95-130 (pp. 129-30).

⁴⁰² Thompson, pp. 12-3.

entangled with that of *Nationalism*, both published in 1917, with the latter getting most attention. My aims for this chapter were to show how Tagore was able to express his ideas in English in *Personality* because of his ‘dear love of comrades’, his intimacy with two English friends, and also to prepare for reading *Nationalism* with some knowledge of Tagore’s feelings and ideas, expressed in *Personality*, which is Tagore’s ‘Song of Myself’.

I have also looked at how Tagore being a poet affects the way he expresses his ideas, and how he was misunderstood by an interested professor of philosophy. There is a parallel between Jevons on Tagore and William James on Whitman. The professors look for a formula for ‘life in its completeness’ in some ‘Goldilocks zone’ between rationalism and mysticism, but were unprepared to allow the poets to demonstrate how crucial a role our emotions play in our engagement with ‘man and nature and God’.

James made Whitman the epitome of ‘healthy-mindedness’,⁴⁰³ citing the latter’s celebratory ‘Song of Myself’⁴⁰⁴ and disregarding ‘Drum Taps’,⁴⁰⁵ his vehement denunciation of war, the propaganda, patriotism and ‘sickening slaughter’.⁴⁰⁶ Jevons makes a similar error when he insists that Tagore’s phrase ‘unreasoning faith’ is the poet-prophet’s alternative to logic. In fact it is Tagore’s equivalent to Marx’s much misquoted remark about genuine suffering: ‘Religion is the sign of the oppressed creature, the feeling of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless circumstances. It is the opium of the people.’⁴⁰⁷ It is because we are free, Tagore says, that we can ruin this wonderful world, so that ‘the crime against man and God [will] carry its own punishment’. He likens the suffering caused to ‘the infancy of helpless falls and bruises’ of the ‘spiritual world, which is being built of man’s life and that of God’. Then in the paragraph from which Jevons takes his quote, he says ‘our greatest hope is in this, that suffering is there’. Like the ‘baby’s cry which would be dumb, if it had no faith in the mother’, man’s suffering reveals his faith in the divine, ‘his deepest instinct, his unreasoning faith in the reality of the ideal,—the faith shown in the readiness for death, in the renunciation of all that belongs to the self.’⁴⁰⁸

⁴⁰³ William James, ‘The Religion of Healthy-Mindedness’, in *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (New York: Penguin, 1985 [1902]), pp. 78-126 (pp. 84-5)

⁴⁰⁴ Whitman, pp. 26-85.

⁴⁰⁵ Whitman, pp. 256-99.

⁴⁰⁶ John Tessitore, ‘The “Sky-Blue” Variety: William James, Walt Whitman, and the Limits of Healthy-Mindedness’, *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 62 (2008), 493-526 (p. 505). (I would add ‘Song of the Redwood-Tree’ and, as an example of Whitman’s prose, the essay ‘Wicked Architecture’. (*Poetry & Prose*, pp. 191-95, 607-12.))

⁴⁰⁷ Karl Marx, ‘Towards a Critique of Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*: Introduction’, in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, ed. by David McLellan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp. 63-74 (p. 64).

⁴⁰⁸ ‘The Second Birth’, pp. 104-5.

We can understand Jevons' predicament. This is not ordinary logic, it is Tagore's idiosyncratic poet's logic. In a similar way, *Nationalism*, which we focus on in the next chapter, is a poet's polemic, coupled with Tagore's unreasoning faith that:

there is such a thing as the harmony of completeness in humanity, where poverty does not take away his riches, where defeat may lead him to victory, death to immortality, and where in the compensation of Eternal Justice those who are the last may yet have their insult transmuted into a golden triumph.⁴⁰⁹

The review I quoted in my epigraph is unusual for the sympathetic way it considers *Personality* and *Nationalism* together, and also Tagore's autobiography of his boyhood and youth. The reviewer observes how the poet's story in *My Reminiscences* of his escape from the harsh system under which he was raised, ended in him running his own school in a way that encouraged moral self-development. *Personality* is described as a longer discourse on the same matters, with a method focussed on Tagore's 'attack on the one-sidedness of science'. The writer is struck particularly by the essays on Art as the escape from the utilitarian, and on Woman as the passive soil of humanity. Having identified a theme of spiritual growth from the first two books, the reviewer is able to perceive the same theme in *Nationalism*, where Tagore warns that the nation of 'power-lust' and jealousy denies the 'noble ideas and ideals' which men would die for. The reviewer concludes from this that the nation is a political entity, with no spiritual goal or sympathy for man, consigning him to an uncertain future.⁴¹⁰

This reviewer was unique at that time with his insight that Tagore's lonely upbringing and resistance to conventional education led to his establishing a spiritual forest school for boys, which has a connection to him attacking nationalism in the West, in Japan and in India, which one can understand through the subject matter of *Personality*. The role of *Personality* in that trajectory is, in effect, to reinterpret Tagore's religion, which has a strong basis in Hinduism,⁴¹¹ as a deep anthropology, a study of how man might live in society.

E.P. Thompson says that '*Nationalism* is a prescient, even prophetic, work whose foresight has been confirmed by sufficient evidence – two world wars, the nuclear arms race, environmental disasters, technologies too clever to be controlled', and he says that its 'assertive denunciations of the Nation' can seem repetitious and over familiar.⁴¹² My

⁴⁰⁹ *Nationalism*, p. 130.

⁴¹⁰ *Imagining Tagore*, pp. 292-4.

⁴¹¹ The work has many direct references to the Upanisads, especially in 'The World of Personality' as noted above.

⁴¹² E.P. Thompson, p. 8.

belief is that, read with an understanding of *Personality*, read with an understanding of Tagore's emotional intensity, *Nationalism* is a newly relevant work.

Chapter 4: *Nationalism* (1917)

And we of no nations of the world, whose heads have been bowed to the dust, will know that this dust is more sacred than the bricks which build the pride of power. For this dust is fertile of life, and of beauty and worship. We shall thank God that we were made to wait in silence through the night of despair, had to bear the insult of the proud and the strong man's burden, yet all through it, though our hearts quaked with doubt and fear, never could we blindly believe in the salvation which machinery offered to man, but we held fast to our trust in God and the truth of the human soul. And we can still cherish the hope that, when power becomes ashamed to occupy its throne and is ready to make way for love, when the morning comes for cleansing the blood-stained steps of the Nation along the highroad of humanity, we shall be called upon to bring our own vessel of sacred water—the water of worship—to sweeten the history of man into purity, and with its sprinkling make the trampled dust of the centuries blessed with fruitfulness. (Tagore, 'Nationalism in the West')⁴¹³

Nationalism, Tagore's third book of 'English essays', has been much discussed and debated, from 1917 when it was first published to the present. According to Tagore's biographer, Kripalani, the *Personality* lectures were 'greatly appreciated', whereas Tagore's 'forthright denunciation of nationalism as a cult provoked violent attacks in the American press'.⁴¹⁴ Romain Rolland was one of the few at that time who applauded Tagore's lectures on nationalism. He saw Tagore's denunciation of 'the monstrous abuse which Europe makes of her power' as a call to (pacifist) arms, and asked him to sign the Declaration of the Independence of the Spirit, which he duly did.⁴¹⁵

In an essay entitled 'The Poet's Anxiety', Gandhi insightfully remarks that Tagore 'has a horror of everything negative'.⁴¹⁶ This observation can be used as a 'litmus test' to apply to any account of what Tagore wrote or said. Any suggestion that he was being negative means that one probably needs to read him again. There is very powerful rhetoric in *Nationalism*, which shows that Tagore manipulated the emotional responses of his audiences with great skill, but this work is more than anti-nationalist or anti-war polemics. More constructive meanings are to be discovered by reading the essays as discourses on history – not history as chronicle, but as patterns of continuity and change.

To read *Nationalism* as history, and also to see why Tagore employs such passionate language in this work, we need to bring in a particular episode in his own history as background. In this chapter I argue that Tagore's involvement in the Swadeshi

⁴¹³ Tagore, 'Nationalism in the West', in *Nationalism* (London: Macmillan, 1921 [1917]), pp. 1-46 (p. 46).

⁴¹⁴ Kripalani, 'A World Citizen', in *Rabindranath Tagore: A Biography*, pp. 235-66 (p. 257).

⁴¹⁵ Kripalani, 'World in One Nest', pp. 267-301 (p. 277).

⁴¹⁶ Gandhi, 'The Poet's Anxiety', in *The Mahatma and the Poet: Letters and Debates between Gandhi and Tagore 1915-1941*, ed. by Sabyasachi Bhattacharya (New Delhi: National Book Trust, 1997), pp. 65-8 (p. 66).

Movement of 1903-8 is the precursor to *Nationalism*, and the essays he wrote then reveal Tagore as passionate poet and politician.

Tagore played a major role in the Swadeshi protests at the announcement of the plan by the British Government to partition Bengal, and he looked beyond the particular grievance to the opportunity to put forward a constructive national programme.⁴¹⁷ Like others, he had been critical of the limited ambitions of the Indian National Congress, and the fact that they represented only the educated, English-speaking elite. He urged leaders to forge links between city and countryside, with a view to reviving the whole social fabric and unifying the country. As part of this, local enterprise would be supported, linked to the boycott of foreign goods as part of the protest against Partition.

Addresses by Tagore from the Swadeshi period are available in English translation in the Tagore centenary volume, *Towards Universal Man*. The distinguished historian of ideas, Isaiah Berlin, was one of the scholars involved in preparations for that collection, and he came to admire Tagore's initiative as a form of nationalism such as Herder, the 'father of nationalism', would have approved. Although the Swadeshi episode is not mentioned explicitly in *Nationalism*, the ideals behind Tagore's efforts are present. In particular, one can draw parallels between a famous address given by Tagore in 1904 and 'Nationalism in the West', the original first essay in *Nationalism*.

The Swadeshi background helps us to look beneath the rhetoric of the *Nationalism* essays to see Tagore's vision for unifying the world. He was able to see a way through the problems of the modern world by taking a long term view, an extension to the world of his understanding of India's history of continuity and change. Tagore had failed to persuade the other leaders to adopt the approach he believed was right for their country, and he must have been deeply disappointed and distressed, even angry.

A central finding in the chapter on *Personality* was how crucial the emotions were for Tagore, not only for him as a poet, but as a person and as a thinker. Tagore argues in *Personality* that direct experience and emotional engagement are fundamental to truth and reality.⁴¹⁸ We saw the evidence of Tagore's mood swings in his letters to Andrews, and it was Andrews who stated that Tagore began writing the nationalism talks 'in Japan at a white heat' because he had lost hope of uniting Asia to resist western influences.⁴¹⁹

⁴¹⁷ Sarkar, 'The Gospel of Atmasakti—Constructive Swadeshi', in 'Trends in Bengal's Swadeshi Movement', in *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal 1903-1908*, pp. 31-91 (pp. 53-63).

⁴¹⁸ We have seen how this idea proved to be perplexing for Jevons, the eminent professor of philosophy, despite his being eager to discover Tagore's truth in *Personality*. Jevons relied too much on the western scholar's systematic approach to his subject.

⁴¹⁹ Introduction to Chapter IV, in Tagore, *Letters to a Friend*, pp. 68-70 (p. 69).

Tagore's History of Continuity and Change

In preparation for re-reading *Nationalism* as history, curiously enough, one needs to make sure the text is the right way round. Due to the intense interest in the book, several new editions of *Nationalism* have appeared since Tagore's death, including a paperback with an introduction by E.P. Thompson in 1991.⁴²⁰ This book was part of a series edited by Andrew Robinson, so it was presumably his decision to switch the order of the first two essays, and leave out the poem 'The Sunset of the Century' which Tagore had included at the back. The 1991 edition has 'Nationalism in Japan' first, followed by 'Nationalism in the West'. ('Nationalism in India' is last, as it was in Tagore's 1917 original.) The thinking behind this rearrangement was presumably that Tagore first lectured on nationalism in Japan, and then in America (over twenty times).⁴²¹ It appears that later editions of *Nationalism* adhered to the new sequence, since a Penguin edition was published in 2010 with 'Nationalism in Japan' first.⁴²²

The sequence matters. Having studied all the books of English essays very closely, I know that Tagore was careful and deliberate over the contents of all of them. In particular, one finds that he puts the most important essay first, and although he does not introduce or explain the sequence, there always is a structure. This is most marked in *Creative Unity*, which has an interesting narrative form, as we see in the next chapter. In *Nationalism*, the original sequence of the essays reflects the history, not of Tagore's tour, but of the world. Nationalism originated in the West, then it was emulated in Japan, and Tagore hopes to deter the adoption of nationalism in his own country. The place to start reading *Nationalism* as history is the original first essay, 'Nationalism in the West', which begins: 'Man's history is being shaped according to the difficulties it encounters. These have offered us problems and claimed their solutions from us, the penalty of non-fulfilment being death or degradation'.⁴²³

Two key phrases recur in 'Nationalism in the West': 'no nation(s)' and 'Nation of

⁴²⁰ Tagore, *Nationalism* (London: Papermac, 1991)

⁴²¹ Robinson may well have begun working on his biography of Tagore: Krishna Dutta and Andrew Robinson, *Rabindranath Tagore: The Myriad-Minded Man*, and this may have led to his adopting a biographical sequence for the 1991 edition of *Nationalism*. According to the helpful appendix giving the chronology of Tagore's visit to America in 1916-17, most of the lectures were entitled either 'Nationalism' or 'The Cult of Nationalism', and then, near the end of his tour, Tagore gave three of the lectures later published in *Personality*, followed by 'Nationalism in the West' and 'Nationalism in India', in Urbana, Illinois. The audience in Urbana may have been the Unity Club, the select group who were the first to hear the *Sadhana* lectures five years earlier. (*Nationalism* (1991), pp. 100-102 (p. 102).)

⁴²² Tagore, *Nationalism* (London: Penguin, 2010) (I have not hunted out every edition of *Nationalism* after 1991 to check that the 'mistake', as I see it, is present in all of them.)

⁴²³ 'Nationalism in the West', p. 3.

the West'.⁴²⁴ Neither of these appears in the other essays.⁴²⁵ A major theme throughout is the Poet's account of India as a people of 'no nations', which was crushed by 'the Nation of the West driving its tentacles of machinery deep down into the soil'.⁴²⁶ The last occurrence of 'no nation' is in the final paragraph, reproduced in my epigraph above: 'And we of *no nations* of the world' etc. In the 2010 Penguin edition, the phrase is printed as 'No-Nations', for emphasis or for clarity.

Nabaneeta Dev Sen has singled out the same conceptual binary in her forthright interpretation of *Nationalism* as Tagore 'rubbishing' the whole idea of the Nation:

Tagore was rubbishing the concept of the Nation as a selfish product of western technology that harmed peace by promoting difference. Instead of spreading cooperation, communication and consideration, it promoted suspicion, competition and coercion, and instigated violent passions and hostilities. Like nation, the concepts of race, religion and ethnicity also divide mankind into warring groups and we urgently need a loose, broad state structure, the concept of 'No-Nation', to accommodate all in their own space. Any civilization that rests upon dividing up people carries the seed of its own destruction within itself.⁴²⁷

Tagore associates 'Nation' with a dangerously divisive phase the world is going through, and 'No-Nation' as the alternative, which Dev Sen describes as 'a loose, broad state structure'. My understanding of Tagore's use of these two phrases is that they echo the title in English of one of the most admired of Tagore's essays 'Society and State'.⁴²⁸ It is evident from this Swadeshi period essay that Tagore was opposed to state structures of any kind, with 'society' his preferred 'No-Nation' opposite. Tagore explains that their country has traditionally had a society, but not a state in the English sense:

What in English concepts is known as the State was called in our country *Sarkar* or Government. This Government existed in ancient India in the form of kingly power, but there is a difference between the present English State and our ancient kingly power. England relegates to State care all the welfare services in the country; India did that only to a very limited extent.⁴²⁹

Tagore goes on to explain that in India, 'social duties were specifically assigned to the

⁴²⁴ Both occur five times, but not together.

⁴²⁵ There is one occurrence of the words 'No nation' in 'Nationalism in India' but not as a phrase: 'No nation looking for a mere political or commercial basis of unity will find such a solution sufficient.' (p. 106.)

⁴²⁶ 'Nationalism in the West', pp. 7-8.

⁴²⁷ Nabaneeta Dev Sen, 'Crisis in Civilization, and a Poet's Alternatives: Education as one alternative weapon', quoted in Ahmed, 'Contemporarising Rabindranath and the International', p. 23.

⁴²⁸ Tagore, 'Society and State', in *Towards Universal Man*, pp. 49-66. The Bengali original, *Swadeshi Samaj* (1904), was first translated into English by his nephew Surendranath Tagore, and published in 1921 with the title 'Our Swadeshi Samaj'. A much later translation, in 1947 by Lila Majumdar, was given the title 'Society and State' (Notes, in *Towards Universal Man*, p. 367.)

⁴²⁹ 'Society and State', p. 50.

members of society’, and the king made his contribution, like any other wealthy member of society,⁴³⁰ and the word for social duties is *dharma*, which ‘permeated the whole social fabric’.⁴³¹ One can read ‘Nationalism in the West’ as an extension of the key idea of ‘Society and State’ to the world, and it is helpful to examine the original Bengali title of that essay, *Swadeshi Samaj*. The word ‘Swadesh’ is from Sanskrit, a conjunction of *Swa* meaning ‘self’ or ‘own’ and *desh* meaning country, and the adjectival form ‘Swadeshi’ means ‘of one’s own country’.⁴³² The definition of ‘Samaj’ is: ‘society building’.⁴³³ So ‘Swadeshi Samaj’ means building a society of one’s own country, which suggests that the equivalent in English might well be ‘Nationalism’. Tagore’s idea of nation as society and not state is similar to that of Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803), ‘father of nationalism’, as explicated by Isaiah Berlin:

He believed in kinship, social solidarity, *Volkstum*, nationhood, but to the end of his life he detested and denounced every form of centralisation, coercion and conquest, which were embodied and symbolised both for him, and for his teacher Hamann, in the accursed State. Nature creates nations, not States. [...] He vies with Justus Möser in his tenderness towards long-lived traditions and institutions embodied in particular forms of life that have created unity and continuity in a human community.⁴³⁴

Tagore’s way of clarifying his interpretation and critique of nationalism with the use of ‘no nation(s)’ and ‘Nation of the West’ is typically poetic.⁴³⁵ His translators’ English is quite different, and the essays in translation, in *Towards Universal Man* and elsewhere, come across with more objectivity, which can make them more convincing. This is also an effect of those essays having been addresses by Tagore when he was engaged in practical concerns in his own country. *Swadeshi Samaj*, in particular, was prompted by the need to address problems with the water supply in Bengal.⁴³⁶ The recurring pattern of the two phrases in ‘Nationalism in the West’ gives the essay poetic depth and

⁴³⁰ Wealthy members of society were responsible for infrastructure projects such as digging tanks. This address by Tagore was to a public meeting on the problem of water scarcity in Bengal. (Notes, in *Towards Universal Man*, pp. 367-83 (p. 367).)

⁴³¹ ‘Society and State’, pp. 50-1.

⁴³² ‘Swadeshi Samaj’ blog, <http://swadeshisamaj.blogspot.co.uk/2012/03/swadeshi-movement.html> [accessed 1 June 2012]

⁴³³ ‘Definition of Samaj (Society Building)’

http://www.facebook.com/note.php?note_id=107976842593683 [accessed 1 June 2012] The definition continues: ‘it is a socio-economic movement based on anti-exploitation sentiment. Its aim is to create a congenial socio-economic environment for economic security, cultural freedom, and political harmony’

⁴³⁴ Berlin, ‘Herder and the Enlightenment’, in Isaiah Berlin, *Three Critics of the Enlightenment: Vico, Hamann, Herder*, pp. 168-242 (pp. 168, 181-2). Möser praised ancient Saxons and medieval Europe at a time when Voltaire and the Encyclopaedists were writing contemptuously about the Dark Ages. (Berlin, p. 172.) (The word ‘nation’ and its derivatives is complex in the German language, bringing in the ideas of people, birth and state (*Langenscheidts Taschenworterbucher*).)

⁴³⁵ In the *Personality* essays I pointed out the rhythmic repetitions, and how one sometimes needs to read passages aloud to get the full sense.

⁴³⁶ Notes, in *Towards Universal Man*, p. 367.

ambiguity, and indicates that there are other semantic possibilities.

In my Introduction, I refer to a late poem by Tagore called ‘They Work’. The poem is about successive empires arriving in India in grand military style, only to vanish without a trace, and the poem makes a prediction that the British Empire too will disappear. All the while, in every country, wherever you go, the people who do the work to supply everyone’s needs carry on, toiling from day to day. The poem touches on an actual historical sequence: Pathans, Mughals and British, but concludes with the line: ‘Empires by the hundred collapse and on their ruins the people work’. The poem gives a sense of repeating patterns and continuity. The parasitical empires come and go, but through eternity the multitudes work in town and country, and with their sorrows and joys ‘orchestrate life’s great music’.⁴³⁷

In ‘Nationalism in the West’ we find the same historic sequence, but expressed more positively:

[T]he history of India does not belong to one particular race but to a process of creation to which various races of the world contributed — the Dravidians and the Aryans, the ancient Greeks and the Persians, the Mohammedans of the West and those of central Asia. Now at last has come the turn of the English to become true to this history and bring to it the tribute of their life, and we neither have the right nor the power to exclude this people from the building of the destiny of India. Therefore what I say about the Nation has more to do with the history of Man than specially with that of India.⁴³⁸

Tagore brings in another crucial aspect of many races arriving in India into all three of the *Nationalism* essays. In ‘Nationalism in India’ he writes that ‘from the earliest beginnings of history India has had her own problem constantly before her—it is the race problem’, and Tagore claims that, in finding the solution to this, India will have ‘helped to solve the world problem as well’.⁴³⁹

We see that Tagore recounts the history of his country in different ways, but in each case the ‘various races of the world’ arrived and brought challenges. In ‘They Work’ he describes the succession of parasitic conquerors who vanished without a trace, and the idea of violent exploitation features particularly strongly in ‘Nationalism in Japan’, for example: ‘The political civilization which has sprung up from the soil of Europe [...] is carnivorous and cannibalistic in its tendencies, it feeds upon the resources of other peoples and tries to swallow their whole future’.⁴⁴⁰ Elsewhere Tagore suggests that the

⁴³⁷ Tagore, ‘They Work’, in *One Hundred and One: Poems*, pp. 176-7.

⁴³⁸ ‘Nationalism in the West’, pp. 15-6.

⁴³⁹ ‘Nationalism in India’, in *Nationalism*, pp. 95-130 (pp. 98-9). Tagore delivered an address entitled ‘Race Conflict’ in New York in 1912. (Tagore, ‘Race Conflict’, in *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore, Volume THREE: A Miscellany*, pp. 359-63. Notes, p. 973.)

⁴⁴⁰ ‘Nationalism in Japan’, in *Nationalism*, pp. 47-93 (pp. 59-60).

‘no nation’ of India absorbed those peoples, and others who came more peacefully, to form ‘a basis of unity which is not political’.⁴⁴¹

Tagore’s history includes critical examination of the concept of progress. Early on in ‘Nationalism in Japan’, he remarks:

It was said of Asia that it could never move in the path of progress, its face was so inevitably turned backwards. We accepted this accusation, and came to believe it. In India, I know, a large section of our educated community, grown tired of feeling the humiliation of this charge against us, is trying all its resources of self-deception to turn it into a matter of boasting. But boasting is only a masked shame, it does not truly believe in itself.⁴⁴²

Later in the essay he relates how, to the world’s astonishment, ‘Japan broke through her walls of old habits in a night and came out triumphant’,⁴⁴³ but that, as an eastern nation, it has responsibilities:

[Y]ou (Japan) cannot with a light heart accept the modern civilization with all its tendencies, methods and structures, and dream that they are inevitable. You must apply your Eastern mind, your spiritual strength, your love of simplicity, your recognition of social obligation, in order to cut out a new path for this great unwieldy car of progress, shrieking out its loud discords as it runs. You must minimize the immense sacrifice of man’s life and freedom that it claims in its every movement.⁴⁴⁴

Tagore questions progress in another way in one of his ‘Talks in China’ entitled ‘Civilization and Progress’.⁴⁴⁵ He begins by asking what is meant by the European word ‘civilization’: ‘Has it the same meaning as some word in our language which denotes for us the idea of human perfection?’ He suggests that the Sanskrit word *dharma* may be the nearest synonym, and there is no other word unless one is newly-coined. He then relates several anecdotes to illustrate traditional *dharma*, which is ‘that principle which holds us firm together and leads us to our best welfare’. In contrast, as he observes, ‘today progress is considered to be characteristic of civilization, and because progress goes on gathering an unending material extension, money has established its universal sovereignty’. In conclusion, he quotes a ‘sage in India’ (his phrase for a writer of the Upanisads) who says that ‘by the help of *anti-dharma* men prosper, they find what they desire, they conquer enemies, but they perish at the root’, hence, ‘[t]he wealth which is not welfare grows with a rapid vigour, but carries within itself the seed of death [and t]his wealth has been nourished in the West by the blood of men and the harvest is

⁴⁴¹ ‘Nationalism in India’, p. 99.

⁴⁴² ‘Nationalism in Japan’, p. 49.

⁴⁴³ ‘Nationalism in Japan’, p.

⁴⁴⁴ ‘Nationalism in Japan’, p. 57.

⁴⁴⁵ Tagore, ‘Civilization and Progress’, in ‘Talks in China’, in *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore, Volume TWO: Plays, Stories, Essays*, pp. 621-9.

ripening’.⁴⁴⁶

In recounting his history of India and the world, Tagore seems to be saying that the West’s pursuit of wealth and power will ultimately lead to failure. His phrase ‘Nation of the West’ refers to civilization understood as material progress, or economic growth, which is destined to disappear, like the empires in the poem ‘They Work’, and Tagore’s mission is to do what he can to make sure that the people of ‘no nation’, the farmers, fishermen and craftsmen of India, will survive to build on the ruins. However, Tagore did not tell his audiences in America about his efforts towards reviving India’s rural society, perhaps assuming that this work would not be of interest to members of an urban industrial nation.

This lack was evidently felt by E.P. Thompson when he was writing his Introduction to the 1991 edition of *Nationalism*. Thompson quotes from a letter to his father which ‘clarifies the issues in so many ways’. The letter is about Tagore’s belief ‘in serving one’s country in constructive work. Hence his emphasis on village work, mass education, sanitation and social reform’.⁴⁴⁷ Without something explicitly constructive and practical being included, readings of *Nationalism* are bound to fail the ‘litmus test’ I derived from Gandhi’s remark about Tagore having ‘a horror of everything negative’. The mere fact that Tagore gave lectures with the title ‘The Cult of Nationalism’ makes negative readings difficult to avoid, and Tagore’s debates with Gandhi in the early 1920s adds to the impression that Tagore was anti-nationalist.⁴⁴⁸ *Nationalism* was understood by its first reviewer in the British Press as ‘The Protest of a Seer’, who ‘indicates evils and dangers in the present system’, but cannot say what he ‘would like to substitute for the present *regime*’.⁴⁴⁹ Tagore does in fact bring out in the book what his alternative would be. In practical terms, it is the ‘constructive work of social cooperation’, which is a theme throughout. Tagore’s conclusion to the last essay, ‘Nationalism in India’, is a resounding call for universal harmony, equality and justice:

⁴⁴⁶ ‘Civilization and Progress’, pp. 621, 627-9.

⁴⁴⁷ E.P. Thompson, Introduction, in *Nationalism* (London: Papermac, 1991), pp. 1-16 (p. 12).

⁴⁴⁸ ‘The fact is that by 1912 Tagore had explicitly rejected nationalism [... and] a close friend of the Tagore family has claimed that Tagore “never supported nationalism, not in any form or guise”’. (Michael Collins, ‘On Nations and Empires: Tagore’s Debates with Gandhi’, in *Empire, Nationalism and the Postcolonial World: Rabindranath Tagore’s Writings on History, Politics and Society* (London: Routledge, 2012), pp. 70-98 (p. 70).) Other Tagore scholars have disagreed. Uma Das Gupta makes Tagore a ‘world-embracing and inclusive nationalist’. (‘A Self-Respecting Nationalism as Our Salvation’, in *The Oxford India Tagore: Selected Writings on Education and Nationalism*, pp. 337-408 (p. 339).) Louise Blakeney Williams makes him a ‘cosmopolitan nationalist’. (‘Overcoming the “Contagion of Mimicry”’: The Cosmopolitan Nationalism and Modernist History of Rabindranath Tagore and W.B. Yeats’, *The American Historical Review*, 112 (2007), 69-100.)

⁴⁴⁹ ‘The Protest of a Seer: [Review] *Nationalism*. by Sir Rabindranath Tagore’, in *The Times Literary Supplement*, 13 September 1917, *Imagining Tagore*, pp. 289-91 (p. 291).

I am willing to acknowledge that there is a law of demand and supply and an infatuation of man for more things than are good for him. And yet I will persist in believing that there is such a thing as the harmony of completeness in humanity, where poverty does not take away his riches, where defeat may lead him to victory, death to immortality, and in the compensation of Eternal Justice those who are the last may yet have their insult transmuted into a golden triumph.⁴⁵⁰

In his essay ‘The Illegitimacy of Nationalism’, Ashis Nandy refers to Tagore’s ‘starting point in the matter of nationalism’ being his ‘brief, well argued—though at places uncomfortably purple—book on nationalism’, in which he ‘distinguishes between government by kings and human races (his term for civilization) [*sic*] and government by nations (his term for nation-states) [*sic*’.⁴⁵¹ Nandy recognises that Tagore, the ‘dissenter among dissenters’,⁴⁵² advocated no form of hierarchical government, but ‘looks back to the real tradition of India, which is to work for “an adjustment of races, to acknowledge the real differences between them, and yet seek some basis of unity”’.⁴⁵³

Tagore describes a similar scenario to Nandy’s in his essay ‘The Soviet System’, in which he refers to the early ‘*Kshatriya* or Warrior Age’ passing away, and the ‘*Vaishya* or Merchant Age’ being ushered in; obviously a reference to the advent of the East India Company. Tagore tells how India was once famous throughout the world for her immense wealth, but the new arrivals excelled at ‘the art of pilfering’. ‘By and by’, he says, ‘the foreign merchants superimposed the royal throne on their seat of trade’, at a propitious time when the Mogul empire was in decline, and ‘was finally dismembered and destroyed by British hands’.⁴⁵⁴ When Nandy redefines ‘government by kings and human races’ as Tagore’s term for ‘civilization’ this implies that Tagore wanted a return to the Warrior Age – to feudalism, in effect. As we have seen, Tagore suggests in ‘Society and State’ that a king in India used to carry out his duties, like having water tanks dug, ‘but he did hardly more than any other wealthy member of society’.⁴⁵⁵ For the future, Tagore wanted a society of local cooperation, not one preyed upon by any ruling class or institution, however benign and responsible.

In his essay *Bharat-Itihas Charcha* (‘On Studying Indian History’), Tagore writes

⁴⁵⁰ ‘Nationalism in India’, p. 130.

⁴⁵¹ Ashis Nandy, ‘The Illegitimacy of Nationalism’, in *Return from Exile: Alternative Sciences; The Illegitimacy of Nationalism; The Savage Freud* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 5. The words in parentheses are Nandy’s own.

⁴⁵² Nandy, pp. vii.

⁴⁵³ Nandy, p. 6. Quotation from Tagore, ‘Nationalism in India’, in *Nationalism* (1917), pp. 97-130 (pp. 98-9).

⁴⁵⁴ Tagore, ‘The Soviet System’, in *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore, Volume FOUR*, pp. 419-26.

⁴⁵⁵ ‘Society and State’, pp. 50-1.

that India's history is not political history, and that 'what British historians regard as Indian history gets a start only from the period of Muslim rule'.⁴⁵⁶ Ranajit Guha describes how histories of India were written in English in the years between the accession to *Diwani* in 1765 and the Permanent Settlement Act of 1793, the political purpose of the Company Raj being to determine land ownership and the details of its revenue gathering entitlements.⁴⁵⁷ Tagore says that India's history has never been missing, but exists in the form of epics. India's goal has been to achieve unity, to reconcile 'conflict over caste, language, religion and custom'. There were gaps in such knowledge and understanding, and the objective of finding out the truth has been hindered by social and religious concerns, and 'our history mystified'.⁴⁵⁸

The history which Tagore recounts in *Nationalism* is also about conflicts and differences, and finding solutions to India's problems of disunity. As I have discussed earlier, it was Tagore's 'life's work' to revive traditional society, strip off its outdated cultural constraints, and bring in the best modern technology, but without 'the greed of profit'. Tagore criticises the nation because he sees it as a serious obstacle to that goal. Having destroyed the ancient society, government by the nation prevents any revival by seeming inevitable and unstoppable; it is the race India must join or be defeated. In 'Nationalism in the West', Tagore says:

I know what your advice will be. You will say, form yourselves into a nation, and resist this encroachment of the Nation. But is this the true advice? that of a man to a man? Why should this be a necessity? I could well believe you, if you had said, Be more good, more just, more true in your relation to man, control your greed, make your life wholesome in its simplicity and let your consciousness of the divine in humanity be more perfect in its expression. But must you say that it is not the soul, but the machine, which is of the utmost value to ourselves, and that man's salvation depends upon his disciplining himself into a perfection of the dead rhythm of wheels and counterwheels? that machine must be pitted against machine, and nation against nation, in an endless bull-fight of politics?⁴⁵⁹

Tagore goes on to challenge the idea that the violence of 'nation against nation' can be avoided through international agreements, calling that 'a conspiracy of fear'.⁴⁶⁰ More importantly for his argument, if these machines 'become riveted into one organized gregariousness of gluttony, commercial and political', there will be no hope for the 'countries of No-Nation'. Tagore then challenges the idea that the unfit countries must

⁴⁵⁶ From 'On Studying Indian History' first draft of translation, kindly provided by Uma Das Gupta, who is currently translating Tagore's history essays from Bengali.

⁴⁵⁷ Ranajit Guha, *Dominance Without Hegemony: History and Power in Colonial India* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), pp. 1-2.

⁴⁵⁸ From 'On Studying Indian History' and 'A Vision of India's History', from one of Tagore history essays, *Bharatbarser Itihaser Dhara* (1912), trans. by Jadunath Sarkar (1913), in *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore, Volume THREE: A Miscellany*, pp. 439-58.

⁴⁵⁹ 'Nationalism in the West', p. 31.

⁴⁶⁰ 'Nationalism in the West', p. 32.

‘go to the wall—they shall *die*, and this is science’, declaring ‘No, for the sake of your own salvation, they shall *live*, and this is truth’.⁴⁶¹ Tagore goes on to look back at the ‘mediaeval age in Europe’, when ‘the simple and the natural man, with all his violent passions and desires, was engaged in trying to find out a reconciliation in the conflict between the flesh and the spirit’. He then discusses ‘the age of intellect, of science [which] is impersonal’, and eventually led to a ‘process of dehumanizing [...] in commerce and politics’, which is spreading to Japan and even to India.⁴⁶² The climax to this very rich historical discourse is the powerful passage I quoted in my epigraph, which is all about sacred dust, hope, love and worship. Tagore does not offer here any practical alternative, despite having dedicated his life to a succession of projects involving education and rural revival. As Radhakamal Mukherjee wrote in his tribute to Tagore for his eightieth birthday:

One who has seen at work [Tagore’s] rural education and reconstruction programme at Sriniketan cannot but appreciate the nobility, certitude and comprehensiveness of his *political vision*, in which agricultural co-operation and education, folk art, festival and pageant recreate themselves along with a free creative and self-governing peasantry that does not surrender itself to either bureaucratic inspection or socialistic regimentation.⁴⁶³

Mukherjee calls Tagore’s life’s work a ‘political vision’, with ‘vision’ suggesting a projection into the future which may turn out otherwise. ‘And so it turned out to be,’ one might say, given the levels of poverty in India today.⁴⁶⁴

‘Rabindranath Tagore and Nationality’

‘And so it turned out to be’ is a quotation from Isaiah Berlin’s essay ‘Rabindranath Tagore and Nationality’.⁴⁶⁵ It relates to Berlin’s view that the approach Tagore took was to strengthen his country internally, ‘forging [...] the national links without which there is no great chain of all mankind’. Berlin says that ‘Tagore stood fast on the narrow

⁴⁶¹ ‘Nationalism in the West’, p. 32.

⁴⁶² ‘Nationalism in the West’, p. 37.

⁴⁶³ Radhakamal Mukherjee, ‘The Social Philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore’, in *Tagore Birthday Number, Visva-Bharati Quarterly* Vol. VII, Parts I & II, May-Oct. 1941, ed. by K.R. Kripalani, 95-99 (p. 96). (my emphasis)

⁴⁶⁴ Reports from the World Bank refer to official Government of India estimates that poverty is on the decline, but expresses concerns about India being able to deal with the massive urban transformation. (<http://worldbank.org/en/country/india/overview> [accessed 10 December 2012]) According to the most recent census about ‘one in six Indian city residents lives in an urban slum with unsanitary conditions that are “unfit for human habitation”’. (*Huffington Post*, 22 March 2013, <<http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/03/22/>> [accessed 29 March 2013])

⁴⁶⁵ Isaiah Berlin, ‘Rabindranath Tagore and Nationality’, in *The Sense of Reality: Studies in Ideas and their History*, ed. by Henry Hardy (London: Pimlico, 2000), pp. 249-66. The essay was ‘unpublished’ prior to the 1996 collection. Berlin himself ‘with considerable forbearance’ read and approved Hardy’s edited text of all the pieces, and Andrew Robinson read the Tagore essay. (Hardy, p. xi.) But no one was likely to have picked out the sentence: ‘And so it turned out to be’ as a subtle anachronism.

causeway’, between ‘the hungry wolves, in the clothing of sincere internationalism, preaching to the sheep the evils of petty and destructive small-power chauvinism’, and the sheep longing to be swallowed by the wolves, ‘to merge themselves in what they imagine to be a wider unity’. Berlin praises Tagore for not betraying his ‘vision of the difficult truth’, for the sake of India’s millions, who ‘will win in the end’, and this, according to Berlin, ‘turned out to be’.⁴⁶⁶

Berlin’s first mention of Tagore is to announce the essay topic: ‘Tagore and the consciousness of nationality’, and he goes on to say that amongst the many elements of nationhood, the most powerful is language.⁴⁶⁷ Berlin makes a number of references to Tagore’s ‘Presidential Address to Congress’ in the collection, *Towards Universal Man*.⁴⁶⁸ Berlin’s point is borne out by a note to this essay, to the effect that the original, *Sabhapatir Abhibhasan*, was Tagore’s address to the Bengal Provincial Conference in 1908, and Tagore was the first President to address this audience in Bengali.⁴⁶⁹ It has been suggested that some of the confusion about Tagore’s ‘politics’ may be because, like other ‘true-blooded Bengalis’, Tagore did not distinguish between ‘Mother India’ and Bengal.⁴⁷⁰

It is clear from another essay by Berlin in the same collection,⁴⁷¹ that Berlin would also have seen Tagore as a ‘peace-loving internationalist’ who does not subscribe to any ‘pathological form’ of nationalism which ‘proclaims the supreme value of the nation’s own culture, history, race, spirit, institutions, even of its physical attributes, and their superiority to those of others, usually of its neighbours’.⁴⁷² This is borne out by Tagore’s lectures in the West, the first of which, back in 1912, was about India’s race problem,⁴⁷³ although he seems to be trying to present that in constructive terms in *Nationalism*.

The context is interesting, and adds authority to Berlin’s understanding of Tagore’s position on nationalism.⁴⁷⁴ Berlin’s essay is the text of his lecture at a conference in

⁴⁶⁶ Berlin, p. 265.

⁴⁶⁷ Berlin, p. 250.

⁴⁶⁸ Berlin, p. 262, referring to: Tagore, ‘Presidential Address’, in *Towards Universal Man* (Berlin’s notes to *Towards Universal Man* are to pp. 121, 117, 123.)

⁴⁶⁹ *Towards Universal Man*, p. 370.

⁴⁷⁰ Ashis Nandy, *Alternative Sciences*, p. 55. This book is included in Ashis Nandy, *Return from Exile: Alternative Sciences; The Illegitimacy of Nationalism; The Savage Freud* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004)

⁴⁷¹ *The Sense of Reality* is a collection from Berlin’s ‘extensive unpublished work’ assembled by Henry Hardy, who has edited many works by Berlin. (‘Editor’s Preface’, pp. ix-xii (p. ix).)

⁴⁷² Berlin, ‘Kant as an Unfamiliar Source of Nationalism’, in *The Sense of Reality*, pp. 232-248 (pp. 232, 248).

⁴⁷³ ‘Race Conflict’, in *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore, Volume THREE: A Miscellany*, pp. 359-63. Notes, p. 973.

⁴⁷⁴ Berlin does not refer to *Nationalism* in his essay, and perhaps never read it.

Delhi celebrating Tagore's birth centenary in 1961.⁴⁷⁵ Prior to that, Berlin was personally involved in the production of *Towards Universal Man*, the major collection of Tagore's essays in Bengali translated into English, many for the first time.⁴⁷⁶ Although this would have given Berlin an unusually full exposure to Tagore's ideas, his discussions at such a time, with political leaders and scholars in India who were great admirers of Tagore, may have led to Berlin's optimistic conclusion that Tagore's middle way for building a strong India between western modernism and traditionalism, was well on the way to success. To say anything else on that occasion would have been unnecessarily undiplomatic and discourteous.

In her article on 'The "Foreign Reincarnation" of Rabindranath Tagore', Nabaneeta Dev Sen reports on an analysis she carried out of the subject matter of Tagore's essays in Bengali and in English. She found that there was a bias towards religious and East-West questions in the English books of essays (and in books translated from English into other European languages), whereas the majority of his Bengali books 'deal with other things and touch upon religion only very incidentally'.⁴⁷⁷ This view echoes that of Edward Thompson in his letter of 1917 to the *Calcutta Statesman* in response to 'Anglo-India [being] astounded when Tagore seemed to turn political' with his lectures on nationalism, due to their 'ignorance of huge currents of thought [which] rush past their very doors':

The character of a political novice ascribed to Sir Rabindranath rests on similar ignorance. The average Englishman knows him as the mystic poet and philosopher of the *Gitanjali*, *The Gardener*, *The Crescent Moon*, the *Chitra*, *The King of the Dark Chamber*, i.e. as much as he has chosen to give to Western readers. But ... they have no idea of what a powerful pen he wields in matters social and political; what noble, sound, inspired and irresistible ideas ... he has given utterance to. In fact, he is the greatest leader in Bengalee thought, the mightiest fashioner of modern Bengal.⁴⁷⁸

Dev Sen does not specify the 'other things' which are the subjects of Tagore's essays in Bengali,⁴⁷⁹ and she is using the word 'religion' in the ordinary, narrow sense. The word 'spirituality' is often preferred for Tagore's holistic understanding of religion. He regarded all of life as spiritual, but under threat of being broken up by human activities

⁴⁷⁵ Hardy, p. xi.

⁴⁷⁶ Humayun Kabir, Preface, in *Towards Universal Man*, pp. vii-xi. 'Sir Isaiah Berlin, All Souls College, Oxford' is second in the list of 36 names in Appendix V: 'Scholars in India, Europe and America who helped in the final selection', pp.365-6.

⁴⁷⁷ Nabaneeta Dev Sen, 'The "Foreign Reincarnation" of Rabindranath Tagore', *Journal of Asian Studies*, 25 (1966), 275-286 (pp. 284-5).

⁴⁷⁸ E.P. Thompson, *Alien Homage: Edward Thompson and Rabindranath Tagore* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 31. (Quoting E.J. Thompson, 'Sir Rabindranath and Politics', letter to *Calcutta Statesman*, 6 October 1917; ellipses in EPT quotation.)

⁴⁷⁹ 'His essays [...] ranged over literature, politics, culture, social change, religious beliefs, philosophical analysis, international relations, and much else.' (Amartya Sen, p. 91.)

in the modern world: by competition and greed, and mechanistic systems of administration. His aim was to reintegrate society, and one can read all his English essays – and many of those translated into English – as vehicles for what was for him an essentially religious message.

The essays in *Towards Universal Man* were chosen as being the best of ‘Tagore’s writings on contemporary social problems, a field in which this celebrated patriot-poet played a pioneering part and contributed to India and the world new lines of social thought’.⁴⁸⁰ Berlin read thirty of these essays, the original long-list from which he and others chose eighteen for the book,⁴⁸¹ and such a thorough induction gives special authority to his analysis. More authority still is added if we turn to Berlin’s essay on Herder, first published in 1960 and reproduced in *Three Critics of the Enlightenment: Vico, Hamann, Herder*. I cited above a passage showing Berlin’s understanding that Herder believed in social solidarity and nationhood, but detested and denounced ‘the accursed State’.⁴⁸² Berlin also says of Herder that he ‘condemns the very wish to resurrect ancient ideals [... which] live and die with the social wholes of which they form an intrinsic part’.⁴⁸³ Patrick Gardiner, in his introduction to the collection of Berlin’s essays, suggests that Berlin would have seen Tagore’s nationalism as a benign example of ‘Counter-Enlightenment’ doctrine.⁴⁸⁴ According to Berlin, Tagore believed that his country had to build up its internal strength, and only then seek sovereign status and join the community of nations. Tagore’s ‘political vision’ of the process, and the eventual goal is reflected in his final words in *Nationalism*:

Let our life be simple in its outer aspect and rich in its inner gain. Let our civilization take its firm stand upon its basis of social co-operation and not upon that of economic exploitation and conflict. [...] I will persist in believing that there is such a thing as the harmony of completeness in humanity, where poverty does not take away his riches, where defeat may lead him to victory, death to immortality, and where on the compensation of Eternal Justice those who are the last may yet have their insult transmuted into a golden triumph.⁴⁸⁵

Tagore did not have high hopes in 1916 of this ‘golden triumph’, as is evident from the words I have replaced with an ellipsis above, which are:

How to do it in the teeth of the drainage of our life-blood by the economic dragons is the task set before the thinkers of *all oriental nations* who have faith in the human soul. It is a sign of laziness and impotency to accept conditions imposed upon us by others who have

⁴⁸⁰ Douglas Ensmenger, Foreword, in *Towards Universal Man*, pp. v-vi (p. v).

⁴⁸¹ Appendix II, *Towards Universal Man*, pp. 362-3.

⁴⁸² Berlin, ‘Herder and the Enlightenment’, in *Three Critics*, pp. 168-242 (pp. 181-2).

⁴⁸³ Berlin, p. 238.

⁴⁸⁴ Patrick Gardiner, Introduction, in *Sense of Reality*, pp. xiii-xx. (p. xx).

⁴⁸⁵ ‘Nationalism in India’, pp. 129-30.

other ideals than ours. We should actively try to adapt the world powers to guide our history to its own perfect end. [...]⁴⁸⁶

One can see emerging from those words Tagore's ambition for 'An Eastern University', which he describes in *Creative Unity*, the next book of English essays.⁴⁸⁷ In 'An Eastern University', Tagore describes how he plans to combine an Indian and Asian intellectual centre with a technically proficient, not-for-profit, peasant life:

Our centre of culture should not only be the centre of the intellectual life of India, but the centre of her economic life also. It must co-operate with the villages round it, cultivate land, breed cattle, spin cloths, press oil from oil-seeds; it must produce all the necessaries, devising the best means, using the best materials, and calling science to its aid. Its very existence should depend upon the success of its industrial activities carried out on the co-operative principle, which will unite the teachers and students and villagers of the neighbourhood in a living and active bond of necessity. This will give us also a practical industrial training, whose motive force is not the greed of profit.⁴⁸⁸

Tagore was devastated when he saw in 1916 that Japan was apparently going the way of the West. As Andrews reports, the poet was in despair, and he disappeared for two weeks to write the *Nationalism* essays 'at a white heat'.⁴⁸⁹ We see this from 'Nationalism in Japan':

The ideal of 'maitri' (unity) is at the bottom of your culture,—'maitri' with men and 'maitri' with Nature. And the true expression of this love is in the language of beauty, which is so abundantly universal in this land. This is the reason why a stranger, like myself, instead of feeling envy or humiliation before these manifestations of beauty, these creations of love, feels a readiness to participate in the joy and glory of such revelation of the human heart.

And this has made me all the more apprehensive of the change, which threatens Japanese civilization, as something like a menace to one's own person. For the huge heterogeneity of the modern age, whose only common bond is usefulness, is nowhere so pitifully exposed against the dignity and hidden power of reticent beauty, as in Japan.⁴⁹⁰

In the climax to the essay, Tagore declaims:

My brothers, when the red light of conflagration sends up its crackle of laughter to the stars, keep your faith upon those stars and not upon the fire of destruction. For when this conflagration consumes itself and dies down, leaving its memorial in ashes, the eternal light will again shine in the East,—the East which has been the birth-place of the morning sun of man's history. And who knows if that day has not already dawned, and the sun not risen, in the Easternmost horizon of Asia? And I offer, as did my ancestor rishis, my salutation to that sunrise of the East, which is destined once again to illumine the whole world.⁴⁹¹

⁴⁸⁶ 'Nationalism in India', p. 130. (my italics)

⁴⁸⁷ Tagore, 'An Eastern University', in *Creative Unity*, pp. 167-203.

⁴⁸⁸ 'An Eastern University', pp. 200-1.

⁴⁸⁹ *Letters to a Friend*, p. 69.

⁴⁹⁰ 'Nationalism in Japan', pp. 73-4.

⁴⁹¹ 'Nationalism in Japan', p. 92. Tagore's 'ancestor rishis' could include his father, Devendranath Tagore, who was known as the Maharishi, or great sage.

If we compare the style of the *Nationalism* essays with those in *Towards Universal Man*, we find passion, anger and frustration in the former and generally more measured language in the latter, as if Tagore – understandably – feels he will not be taken seriously in the West (or in Japan), whereas he has an influential voice in his own country. In his recent lecture entitled ‘Rabindranath Tagore and the International’, Imtiaz Ahmed, Professor of International Relations at the University of Dhaka, asks why scholars critiquing Tagore on social issues reflect on his literary works, rather than on his serious essays, which make up some two-thirds of his writing.⁴⁹² Ahmed is right that studying Tagore’s lectures and essays takes us directly to his feelings and experiences, as well as his ideas and goals – and to how he has been received, at home and abroad.

Berlin discovered from his readings of several essays in *Towards Universal Man* that Tagore had a more subtle politics, which the great historian of ideas found admirable. Tagore advocated internal emancipation, building a strong country from within. Although Tagore ‘understood the British character and British achievement and admired them’, he saw that ‘the relationship with England [...] was a morbid one: the English had come first as traders, then as masters,’ and Indians had to emancipate themselves.⁴⁹³ Berlin states that internationalism is ‘a noble ideal’, which can be achieved only when ‘every nation is strong enough to bear the required tension’. In Berlin’s view it is ‘one of Tagore’s greatest merits, and a sign of that direct vision and understanding of the real world with which poets are too seldom credited, that he understood this’.⁴⁹⁴

I referred earlier to the final statement in Berlin’s essay on Tagore and nationality: ‘And so it turned out to be’,⁴⁹⁵ being inappropriate now because we cannot say that Indian’s millions ‘won in the end’. Despite India’s rapidly growing economy in recent years, there are vast numbers of people living without proper sanitation and safe water, with only fifteen per cent of the rural population having access to a toilet.⁴⁹⁶ However, Berlin was writing at an optimistic time for India, in 1961, as a participant in the celebrations of Tagore’s hundredth birthday anniversary, when the country was led by

⁴⁹² Imtiaz Ahmed, ‘Contemporarising Rabindranath and the International’, in *Contemporarising Tagore and the World*, p. 16. Dipannita Datta, another speaker at this conference used Tagore’s novel *The Home and the World* to study ‘the dehumanising effects of “the soul-stifling discipline and the savage greed of the modern nation-state”.’ (Dipannita Datta, ‘In Search of Fairness and Justice: Contemporarising Tagore and *The Home and the World*’, in *Contemporarizing Tagore and the World* (Dhaka: University Press, 2013), pp. 439-68.)

⁴⁹³ Berlin, ‘Rabindranath Tagore and Nationality’, pp. 261-2.

⁴⁹⁴ Berlin, p. 264.

⁴⁹⁵ Berlin, p. 265.

⁴⁹⁶ Report by the charity Water Aid. (<http://www.wateraid.org/uk> [accessed 10 December 2012])

such as Nehru, Radhakrishnan and Humayun Kabir, who had known and admired Tagore, and probably believed they were taking his vision forward.

Berlin confesses to being ‘shamefully ignorant of Indian civilisation’,⁴⁹⁷ but after being thrust into his involvement with *Towards Universal Man* and the Tagore centenary celebrations, he makes Tagore a nationalist much in the mode of Herder, whom Berlin identifies as ‘the father of cultural (and ultimately every kind of) nationalism in Europe’. Herder talked about ‘the uniqueness of each national tradition, of the strength that a man draws from being a member of an organic community’, and he hated ‘cosmopolitanism, universalism, anything which flattened out the differences between one community and another in favour of universal principles’.⁴⁹⁸ It is pointed out in the notes to Tagore’s ‘Presidential Address’ to the Bengal Provincial Conference in 1908, that this ‘was the only political conference over which Tagore ever presided’, and as we have noted he made a point of addressing the Conference in Bengali.⁴⁹⁹ This indicates that if campaigning for nationalism had related to independence for Bengal, Tagore would have more easily engaged with it, as in fact he did during the ‘Swadeshi Movement’ in 1903-8.⁵⁰⁰

Tagore begins his essay ‘Nationalism in India’ by saying:

Our real problem in India is not political. It is social. This is a condition not only prevailing in India, but among all nations. I do not believe in an exclusive political interest. Politics in the West have dominated Western ideals, and we in India are trying to imitate you. We have to remember that in Europe, where *peoples had their racial unity from the beginning*, and where natural resources were insufficient for the inhabitants, the civilization has naturally taken the character of political and commercial aggressiveness. For on the one hand they had no internal complications, and on the other they had to deal with neighbours who were strong and rapacious.⁵⁰¹

Tagore’s friend Geddes insisted that ‘the Poet doesn’t know the West’, referring to Tagore having claimed that Europe never had a race problem, or had its rural life disrupted by nationalism.⁵⁰² Geddes tells Tagore of the work which is being done on ‘village renewal’ in France, including horticulture, agriculture and afforestation.⁵⁰³ Geddes may have been right that Tagore did not understand that the ‘constructive work of social cooperation’ was as much needed in the West as in India, which was why

⁴⁹⁷ Berlin, p. 249.

⁴⁹⁸ Berlin, ‘Kant as an Unfamiliar Source of Nationalism’, in *The Sense of Reality*, pp. 232-48 (p. 233).

⁴⁹⁹ *Towards Universal Man*, Notes, p. 370.

⁵⁰⁰ Sumit Sarkar, ‘The Gospel of Atmasakti—Constructive Swadeshi’, in *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal 1903-1908*, pp. 47-63.

⁵⁰¹ Tagore, ‘Nationalism in India’, in *Nationalism* (1917), pp. 97-30 (p. 97). (my italics)

⁵⁰² Andrews, letter to Tagore, 20 December 1922, about Andrews’ ‘long and extremely interesting talks with Professor Geddes’, in *A Meeting of Two Minds*, pp. 75-82 (p. 76).

⁵⁰³ Geddes, letter to Tagore, 12 June 1926, in *A Meeting of Two Minds*, pp. 130-1 (p. 131).

Tagore did not talk about his work in the villages of Bengal to audiences outside India. The closest he approaches to this is in the essay 'An Eastern University' in *Creative Unity* in 1922, in which he writes of students and teachers 'sharing life with the tillers of the soil and the humble workers in the neighbouring villages'.⁵⁰⁴

From the point of Tagore's wake-up call in the 1890s, and then throughout his extraordinarily varied career as an artist and thinker, the Poet's practical work for the village people was a constant. He tried many schemes, involved many helpers, but his efforts never ceased over half a century, for most of his adult life.⁵⁰⁵

Patterns of Failure; Faith in Renewal

Berlin's optimism in 1961, when he addressed a conference to celebrate Tagore's birth centenary, was shared by Kripalani, writing his biography at about the same time, beginning with the words:

In the hundred years that have passed since Rabindranath Tagore was born, the face of India has undergone such radical changes as no optimist living in 1861 could have envisaged. [...] It is as though a tired and over-timid pony which needed a lash to move at all has turned into a spirited charger that has to be tightly reined in to hold it back from running too fast.⁵⁰⁶

By conventional economic measures, post-Independence India has been a huge success. But when broader social criteria are also taken into account, it is evident that Tagore's efforts had little impact in the long term. This leads on to another aspect of *Nationalism*, which is its connection with Tagore's own history, which I see as one of 'patterns of failure to meet idealistic goals, and faith in renewal'. This aspect, I believe, is the root cause of the forthright denunciation of nationalism to which his biographer refers.

Throughout this study we have referred to the importance for Tagore of his practical projects in education and rural reconstruction, which he described as his 'life's work'.⁵⁰⁷ To read *Nationalism* as part of that aspect of Tagore's life, we need to understand how

⁵⁰⁴ 'An Eastern University', p. 202. In Kabir's introduction to *Towards Universal Man*, he writes that the typical village in India has a population of several thousands, like a small town, with a combination of agriculture and industry, and was 'until the advent of the modern age largely self-sufficient and the home of a contented community' (Kabir, p. 13.) Tagore's starting point of 'one or two villages' ('City and Village', p. 322.) may not have been as modest as it sounds. If the researches by interested scholars are examined in detail we find that Tagore's pioneering work affected dozens of villages to varying degrees.

⁵⁰⁵ See, e.g., Uma Das Gupta's many works on Santiniketan and Sriniketan; Tapati Dasgupta and Sasadhar Sinha on Tagore's 'Social Thought/Thinking'; Section IV: 'Rabindranath—Educator and Social Reformer' in Chaudhuri, ed., *Rabindranath Tagore and the Challenges of Today*, pp. 153-201; Ahmed Rafique, 'Tagore's Thoughts on Village Development and Rural Reconstruction', in *Contemporarising Tagore and the World*, pp. 375-93.

⁵⁰⁶ Kripalani, Introduction, pp. 1-13 (p. 1).

⁵⁰⁷ Tagore's letter to the Viceroy, Appendix 1, this thesis p. 178.

emotionally involved he was as an activist. We know that Tagore's desire to help village people originated from his period as a landlord in the 1890s, when he witnessed their suffering and helplessness.⁵⁰⁸ Tagore did not witness the suffering of combatants in the Great War. Nehru writes of this time in his *Autobiography* saying that India never felt the full horror of the War, and felt little sympathy for the British.⁵⁰⁹ Tagore hoped that the War would show the West that national divisions lead to competition for resources and conflict:

Has not this truth already come home to you now, when this cruel war has driven its claws into the vitals of Europe? when her hoard of wealth is bursting into smoke and her humanity is shattered into bits on her battlefields?⁵¹⁰

During Tagore's foreign tour in 1920 he visited some of the battlefields in France 'devastated by war'. These brought to his mind 'the vision of a huge demon' which 'was a purpose, which had a living body, but no complete humanity to temper it'. He drew a parallel with the effect of the West upon Eastern life:

Something of the same sense of oppression in a different degree, the same desolation in a different aspect, is produced in my mind when I realise the effect of the West upon Eastern life—the West which, in its relation to us, is all plan and purpose incarnate, without any superfluous humanity.⁵¹¹

Tagore was lecturing in America in 1916 at a time when President Woodrow Wilson was hoping to keep the US out of the European War, and Tagore was so impressed by Wilson's efforts that he asked permission to dedicate *Nationalism* to him.⁵¹² Tagore's dedication request was declined because he was under suspicion of conspiring with the Germans.⁵¹³ Nehru writes that the nationalists in India made a show of loyalty but 'learnt with satisfaction of German victories'.⁵¹⁴

The War itself was not the main reason for Tagore's passionate denunciations of nationalism. The cause, I believe, was his consciousness of failure, going back to when

⁵⁰⁸ In 1894 Tagore wrote a poem entitled 'Call Me Back to Work' in which he writes: 'While the world was busy with a hundred chores, / you played O Poet upon your flute the livelong day / [...] Shake off your sleep and rise, / There is fire around. / Who blows the conch to wake the people of the world?' (See this thesis pp. 176-7.)

⁵⁰⁹ Nehru, Jawaharlal, 'Back Home and War-time Politics in India', in *An Autobiography: With Musings on Recent Events in India* (London: John Lane, 1936), pp. 27-36 (p. 31).

⁵¹⁰ 'Nationalism in the West', p. 33.

⁵¹¹ 'East and West', in *Creative Unity*, pp. 91-112 (pp. 96-7).

⁵¹² Pankaj Mishra, 'The United States and its Promises of Self-Determination', in *From the Ruins of Empire: The Revolt Against the West and the Remaking of Asia* (London: Allen Lane, 2012), pp. 187-93 (pp. 187, 192).

⁵¹³ Dutta and Robinson, 'Anti-Imperialist (1917-1919)', in *Rabindranath Tagore: The Myriad-Minded Man*, pp. 209-18 (pp. 211-2).

⁵¹⁴ Nehru, p. 31.

his way forward was not adopted during the Swadeshi Movement of 1903-8. His aim when he journeyed to Japan and then America, hoping the war would be over and he could carry on to Europe, was to bring the influence of a united Asia to restrain western ambitions, and finding Japan going the way of the West was devastating to him, and brought on an episode of deep depression – and the *Nationalism* talks.

In her selection of Tagore's writings on education and nationalism, Das Gupta describes Tagore's nationalism as deriving from his idea 'that the history of the growth of freedom is the history of the perfection of human relationships'.⁵¹⁵ During the Swadeshi Movement against the Partition of Bengal, Tagore had encouraged other leaders from the Calcutta *bhadralok* (middle classes) to adopt constructive ways to resist this 'divide and rule' measure by the British authorities. Das Gupta writes that Tagore failed in his efforts because 'Indian nationalism had [...] turned the country's attention away from its primary problem which was social: in other words, the domination of the caste system and the lazy habit of relying upon the authority of traditions that were unsuited to the new age'.⁵¹⁶ We can certainly see in *Nationalism* how critical Tagore is of the caste system and reliance on traditions,⁵¹⁷ but he can also see their benefits. He defends the caste system as a way of solving India's race problem, and points out that this is better than the way America has treated the Red Indian and the Negro.⁵¹⁸ And Tagore clearly favours some traditions. Das Gupta includes a passage from the essay 'Our Swadeshi Samaj' in which Tagore writes of the melas, or fairs, which are 'a natural growth in our country', and expresses the hope that 'the leaders of the country will abjure empty politics, and make it their business to give new life and objective to these melas'.⁵¹⁹

The Swadeshi period was hugely important for Tagore. His more colourful contributions are well known: his bold idea for challenging religious and caste divisions on Partition Day in 1905 with a Rakhi-bandhan (exchange of wristbands) ceremony, and his composing many patriotic songs.⁵²⁰ It is also often said that he 'retired' or 'escaped' back to Santiniketan in 1907 when the protests became violent, but it should

⁵¹⁵ Das Gupta, 'A Self-Respecting Nationalism as Our Salvation', in *The Oxford India Tagore: Selected Writings on Education and Nationalism*, pp. 337-408 (p. 339).

⁵¹⁶ Das Gupta, pp. 339-40.

⁵¹⁷ Tagore criticises members of the educated community in India for boasting about living in the past. ('Nationalism in Japan', p. 49.)

⁵¹⁸ 'Nationalism in India', pp. 97-8.

⁵¹⁹ 'Our "Swadeshi Samaj"', in *Oxford India Tagore*, pp. 276-8. Das Gupta has taken this passage from the collection: *A Tagore Reader*, ed. by Amiya Chakravarty, pp. 202-3, and we noted earlier that this was the title of the first translation of the essay included in *Towards Universal Man* as 'Society and State'.

⁵²⁰ Sarkar, 'The Appeal to the Imagination', in *The Swadeshi Movement*, pp. 287-316 (pp. 287, 289, 292, 295-6).

also be noted that Tagore wrote ‘a series of immensely important essays during 1907-8’, urging Hindus to modify their traditional attitude of regarding Muslims as inferiors.⁵²¹ His most important contribution was to establish the ‘Constructive Swadeshi’ trend in the nationalist movement.⁵²² Tagore writes in ‘Nationalism in India’ of his lack of enthusiasm for the Congress’s faith in ‘mendicancy’, whereby India would gradually progress to Home Rule by constitutional means:⁵²³

[The Congress] had no real programme. They had a few grievances for redress by the authorities. They wanted larger representation in the Council House, and more freedom in the Municipal government. They wanted scraps of things, but they had no constructive ideal. Therefore I was lacking in enthusiasm for their methods.⁵²⁴

Tagore goes on to describe the alternative political programme he had put forward at that time:

It was my conviction that what India most needed was constructive work coming from within herself. In this work we must take all risks and go on doing our duties which by right are ours, though in the teeth of persecution; winning moral victory at every step, by our failure, and suffering. We must show those who are over us that we have the strength of moral power in ourselves, the power to suffer for truth. Where we have nothing to show, we only have to beg. It would be mischievous if the gifts we wish for were granted to us right now, and I have told my countrymen, time and time again, to combine for the work of creating opportunities to give vent to our spirit of self-sacrifice, and not for the purpose of begging.⁵²⁵

In 1907, Tagore had delivered a speech about what he saw as the ‘real work’ which lies in ‘coming into touch with the masses’. He was not the only one putting forward this alternative to political agitation for swaraj, and the initiative was reported in the editorial of the journal *Bande Mataram*:

The reaction against mendicancy [...] had taken two forms: ‘One, thoughtful, philosophic, idealistic, dreamed of ignoring the terrible burden that was crushing us to death, of turning away from politics and dedicating our strength in the village and township, developing our resources, our social, economic, religious life regardless of the intrusive alien; it thought of inaugurating a new revolution such as the world had never yet seen, a moral, peaceful revolution, actively developing ourselves but only passively resisting the adversary.’ This was the ideal of ‘peaceful ashrams and swadeshism and selfhelp’, noble

⁵²¹ Sarkar, ‘The Shift to Terrorism’, in *The Swadeshi Movement*, pp. 75-91 (pp. 82-7).

⁵²² Sarkar, ‘The Gospel of Atmasakti—Constructive Swadeshi’, in *The Swadeshi Movement*, pp. 47-63.

⁵²³ The rise and fall of the hopes of Indian nationalists that self-government could be achieved by constitutional means is described in R.J. Moore, *Liberalism and Indian Politics, 1872-1922* (London: Edward Arnold, 1966), pp. 117-9.

⁵²⁴ ‘Nationalism in India’, p. 112.

⁵²⁵ ‘Nationalism in India’, pp. 112-3.

but unpractical as the British were sure to interfere with such efforts sooner or later.⁵²⁶

The suggestion is usually made that the Swadeshi period was the only time in Tagore's life that he got involved in politics. This view is based on the conventional understanding of what being political means. If it refers to having a career as a party or campaign leader, then it is true that Tagore was political only briefly. If it means being a public intellectual holding forth on his challenging opinions, then on the usual readings of *Nationalism*, and some of the lectures from *Creative Unity*, Tagore was sometimes political in that sense too.

Marjorie Sykes, an early biographer of Tagore who had the advantage of knowing him personally, conveys a sense of his political passion extending throughout his life, and rising to a peak during the Swadeshi period. She writes of Tagore seeking ways to give practical service to the needy before he began the school at Santiniketan, and concludes her section on 'The Poet and Politics' as follows:

In politics, when strong feelings are aroused, it is easy to exaggerate one half of the truth, the half which is most pleasant from our own point of view, until it becomes a falsehood. As we shall see from other examples later in his life, Rabindranath never did this, even when his own feelings were strongest. He tried always to see the whole truth of any situation. We might say of the poet's political work, as was said by Arnold of the famous Greek poet, Sophocles, "He saw life steadily and saw it whole".⁵²⁷

Kripalani, a biographer who also knew Tagore in life, seems not to have seen the political Tagore. He writes in his introduction that 'Tagore was not a politician', on the basis that '[h]e was not interested in wielding power over the lives of others, for good or for evil'.⁵²⁸ It may seem strange that Kripalani includes the Swadeshi episode in a chapter entitled, 'A Man of God', but it makes sense following his remark that for Tagore '[l]ove of God and love of the people are complementary and justify and fulfil each other'.⁵²⁹ Kripalani gives a short and lively account of how Tagore 'jumped into the fray, making fiery speeches, composing patriotic songs and leading huge processions' to protest about Lord Curzon, with his partition proclamation, 'beginning the process of driving a wedge between the two major religious communities in the country'. Then Kripalani remarks that 'Tagore was no Gandhi' and lacked his 'unrivalled gift of leadership'. But this is a mistaken comparison, based on judging

⁵²⁶ Sumit Sarkar, 'Trends in Bengal's Swadeshi Movement', in Sumit Sarkar, *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal 1903-1908*, pp. 31-91 (pp. 86-7). (Sarkar's quotations are taken from 'From Phantom to Reality' (editorial), *Bande Mataram*, 13 July 1907.)

⁵²⁷ Marjorie Sykes, 'The Poet and Politics', in *Rabindranath Tagore*, pp. 55-60 (pp. 59-60).

⁵²⁸ Kripalani, Introduction, p. 11.

⁵²⁹ Kripalani, 'A Man of God', pp. 176-212 (pp. 200-1).

Tagore's politics retrospectively, in the knowledge of how Gandhi became one of world's best known political leaders. It is also unhelpful for understanding the connection between Tagore's sense of failure over the way the Swadeshi Movement turned out and the *Nationalism* lectures.

In 1916, when Tagore delivered the *Nationalism* lectures, Gandhi had not begun his non-cooperation campaign involving the famous Swadeshi boycott, although he had arrived back in India, staying at first at Santiniketan at the suggestion of Andrews.⁵³⁰ He was aware of Tagore's protests over Partition, and that a Swadeshi boycott had been part of that campaign. Tagore would have read Gandhi's book, *Hind Swaraj*, published in English in 1909, where he writes that the Partition of Bengal brought about 'the real awakening' of the desire for Home Rule.⁵³¹ Tagore had already written his famous novel *The Home and the World* (the Bengali original *Ghare Baire* was serialised in 1915), which is about the corrupt form of nationalism which emerged during the Swadeshi period.⁵³²

In his passionate outpourings in 1916 Tagore is making another attempt to warn of the dangers of the false form of nationalism. He struggles to get this across in the English language, knowing that he had not been able to communicate this message any more successfully in Bengali a decade earlier. At that time, the problem was not only that 'nationalism' in the western sense did not mean the same thing as 'swadeshi samaj', it was also that 'swadeshi' had been reduced to a symbol during the anti-Partition protests. It was a label on cloth: 'swadeshi or Indian' is good, so wear it, 'foreign or British' is bad, so burn it.⁵³³ Tagore was not against swadeshi enterprise. Marjorie Sykes writes in her biography of how Tagore supported his nephews in swadeshi business ventures, and paid their considerable debts when these failed.⁵³⁴

In their biography, Dutta and Robinson include a section on Tagore's engagement in 'The Swadeshi Movement (1905-1907)', in which they paint a picture of him as something of a dilettante, who 'stood apart', staying in Santiniketan much of the time.⁵³⁵ They say that '[h]is vision had little appeal in Calcutta', and that 'Rabindranath,

⁵³⁰ *Letters to a Friend*, p. 55.

⁵³¹ M. K. Gandhi, 'The Partition of Bengal', in *Hind Swaraj or Indian Home Rule* (Madras: Natesan, 1921 [1909]), pp. 8-11.

⁵³² Tagore, *The Home and the World*, trans. by Surendranath Tagore (London: Penguin, 1985)

⁵³³ Swadeshi in this context simply means 'made in India from Indian-produced materials', the definition given in the English dictionary.

⁵³⁴ Sykes, pp. 55-6.

⁵³⁵ Krishna Dutta and Andrew Robinson, 'The Swadeshi Movement (1905-1907)', in *Rabindranath Tagore: The Myriad-Minded Man*, pp. 141-150 (p. 143).

having inspired the Swadeshi Movement, had rejected it'.⁵³⁶ They end with a reference to Nirad Chaudhuri's view of Tagore as 'The Lost Great Man of India', who 'challenged all their (the majority's) political, social, cultural, and religious superstitions, and was therefore regarded as an apostate'.⁵³⁷ This gives a misleading impression of what Chaudhuri wrote because, although the quotation is exact, he does not refer simply to 'the majority' of Calcutta society, but to 'the popular Hindu Conservatism of the majority of educated Bengalis [which] was a mixture of chauvinism with crude and often superstitious religious belief and cultural obscurantism',⁵³⁸ a 'majority' which Tagore takes on in his great novel, *Gora*, albeit moving the setting to the 1870s.⁵³⁹

According to the Marxist historian Sumit Sarkar, Tagore was a major player in the Swadeshi Movement,⁵⁴⁰ and not a lone voice against the 'majority' of Calcutta society. It is also clear that Sarkar regarded Tagore as a radical politician,⁵⁴¹ and understood that when he 'withdrew' after the shift to terrorism, it was to continue his 'constructive swadeshi' at the Santiniketan school and with the life of the common people – as Das Gupta implies in her biography by including a section entitled "Constructive Swadeshi" and Santiniketan'.⁵⁴² My sense is that when Tagore discovered how rashly and stupidly adults could behave, he determined to try to raise a new generation in an atmosphere of cooperation and creativity. He was handicapped by a severe lack of resources, and by his students' parents' conventional expectations of what education should deliver. Sarkar writes about Tagore's contributions to efforts directed at a 'National Education', saying that 'few among its leaders shared Tagore's passion for the mother-tongue or his agony of alienation': a reference to Tagore's commitment to

⁵³⁶ Dutta and Robinson, p. 149.

⁵³⁷ Dutta and Robinson, p. 149-50.

⁵³⁸ Nirad Chaudhuri, 'Tagore: The Lost Great Man of India', in *Thy Hand, Great Anarch! India: 1921-1952* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1987), pp. 595-636 (p. 610).

⁵³⁹ Tagore, *Gora*, trans. by W.W. Pearson (London: Macmillan, 1924). When Dutta and Robinson come to mention *Gora* they dismiss its setting as 'completely alien'. They say that *Gora* 'presents major problems' for most western readers, especially in its 1924 'unsatisfactory English translation' – the edition which I prefer to the 1997 translation (*Gora*, trans. by Sujit Mukherjee (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1997)), with its retained terms and editor's and translator's paratext, which, in my view, distances the western reader from this fascinating novel.

⁵⁴⁰ A glance at the index entry for Tagore is telling, with some fifty references, covering about a fifth of the book.

⁵⁴¹ Sarkar's own radicalism is indicated by the fact that he was one of the founding members of the Subaltern Studies Collective, but left because the school degenerated from its initial concern with the subaltern and radical social transformation, which he is committed to as a Marxist intellectual. (Review of Sumit Sarkar, *Writing Social History* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), in *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, <http://ier.sagepub.com/content/35/2/222.extract> [accessed 14 December 2012].

⁵⁴² Das Gupta, pp. 16-24.

forging links between urban and rural communities.⁵⁴³

I suggested at the start of this section that Tagore's consciousness of failure, going back to when his way forward was not adopted during the Swadeshi Movement, was the cause of his passionate denunciations of nationalism. We can see Tagore struggling to find the right words for what he is trying to say in 'Nationalism in the West', using his expressions 'no nation(s)' and 'Nation of the West' several times over. 'Nation of the West' is nationalism as an empty label, adopted by rootless, alienated people as an identity they would fight and die for. To use phrases like 'we of no nations of the world' or 'people of no nation' is unsatisfactory, a form of double negative, meaning: those people who have not adopted the empty identity label of nationalism.

In recent years, the form of identity Tagore was challenging has been the subject of scholarship. Patrick Colm Hogan, Professor of English and Comparative Literature, has coined a pair of terms which map precisely onto the point Tagore was trying to make. Tagore's 'Nation of the West' is an example of Hogan's 'categorical [*sic*] identity', identity by 'vacuous' label. Tagore's 'No nation' is 'practical identity', which Hogan regards as 'far from vacuous, for it is a set of concrete, active knowledges that enable our interactions with others'.⁵⁴⁴ He defines 'practical identity' as follows:

Practical identity is the entire complex of habits, expectations, abilities, routines that integrate one's daily activities with those of a community. One's practical identity encompasses everything from table manners and greeting customs to unreflective expectations of how others will act in any sort of communal recreation or labor. [...] It is a set of concrete, active knowledges that enable our interactions with others. Finally, practical identity is insistently local and proximate. It is a matter of being able to do things with people here and now. This is not to say that it necessarily contradicts global relations or that it cannot be extended across regions. Indeed, many aspects of practical identity are necessarily transportable [...]. However, even when it is transported to another region, practical identity always involves networks of direct interconnectedness.⁵⁴⁵

Hogan mentions Tagore in relation to the politics of practical identity:

This was the impulse behind "constructive swadeshi"—the nonconfrontational fostering of local industry—advocated by Tagore as an alternative to the nationalist, anti-British (and, in Tagore's view, anti-Muslim) "negative" swadeshi of boycotting foreign goods.⁵⁴⁶

Sarkar writes about Tagore's comment in 1907 that 'the peasants were expected to buy inferior and costly goods and face Gurkha lathis into the bargain for the sake of a cause that must have seemed rather distant and abstract to them, and that they were being

⁵⁴³ Sarkar, 'National Education', in *The Swadeshi Movement*, pp.149-81 (p. 153).

⁵⁴⁴ Patrick Colm Hogan, 'Practical identity against categorial identity', in '*Midnight's Children: Kashmir and the Politics of Identity*', *Twentieth Century Literature*, 47 (2001), 510-544 (pp. 518-9).

⁵⁴⁵ Hogan, pp. 518-9.

⁵⁴⁶ Hogan (citing Sarkar, pp. 32-3.), p. 520. Words in parentheses are Hogan's.

asked to do all this by “babus” who had treated them so long with contemptuous indifference or at best with condescension’.⁵⁴⁷

Hogan contrasts practical identity with categorial identity, which he defines as follows:

One’s categorial identity is, fundamentally, one’s self-concept. It is the hierarchized series of categories that one takes as definitive of one’s self. These categories include sex, ethnicity, race, religion, and many others—nationality and economic class among them. These categorizations are not, for the most part, the result of introspection. Rather, they derive primarily from explicit or implicit imputation. A child cannot look into a mirror or into his or her heart and discover that he or she is Indian or Pakistani, Hindu or Muslim. These are categories he or she learns from others, directly or indirectly.⁵⁴⁸

Hogan refers to Benedict Anderson’s thesis that the nation is an imagined community,⁵⁴⁹ and then points out that *national* imagination is just a special case of the imagination required for *any* categorial identity.⁵⁵⁰ He explains that categorial identities define communities in ways that necessarily include people who do not and cannot enter into contact with one another, so to categorize oneself as Indian involves an imagination of a community of Indians, but to imagine oneself as Muslim or Christian, male or female, white or black or Asian, does so too.⁵⁵¹

Tagore’s Passionate Polemics

I have argued that Tagore’s passionate polemics in *Nationalism* is rooted in the memory of his failure to persuade other leaders of his way forward for the country during the Swadeshi campaign, and to his failed hopes of a pan-Asian collaboration to restrain western ambitions.⁵⁵² It will have added to his agony to know that he had no concrete solution to offer his western audiences. As we have seen, Tagore was a poet and a man of action, with the emotions and empathy of a poet, drawn more to *karma-yoga* ‘realisation in action’ than to *jnana-yoga* scholarship. This seems often to be reflected

⁵⁴⁷ Sarkar, pp. 78-9.

⁵⁴⁸ Hogan, p. 517.

⁵⁴⁹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983)

⁵⁵⁰ I referred earlier to a similar observation by Nabaneeta Dev Sen: ‘Like nation, the concepts of race, religion and ethnicity also divide mankind into warring groups’. (this thesis, p. 88.)

⁵⁵¹ Hogan, pp. 518-9. Hogan’s terminology proves to be particularly useful when we come to the next chapter on *Creative Unity* (1922), in which I contrast Tagore’s book with works by Gandhi and Nehru.

⁵⁵² The latter is most evident in ‘Nationalism in Japan’: ‘The political civilization which has sprung up from the soil of Europe and is overrunning the whole world, like some prolific weed’, ‘cannibalistic’, ‘hungry jaws’, huge machines for turning great portions of the earth into mincemeat’, ‘terrible jealousies with all their ugly teeth and claws ready for tearing open each other’s vitals’, ‘weaves its meshes of lies without shame’, ‘it enshrines gigantic idols of greed in its temples, taking great pride in the costly ceremonials of its worship, calling this patriotism’.

in the style of Tagore's writing in his essays.

Where Tagore's subject matter relates to progress being made towards reviving community life, as in his 1928 essay 'City and Village' in *Towards Universal Man*, Tagore expresses himself with calm authority, as in this example:

In their natural state—that is, when the community does not incline too much to one side—the village and the town have harmonious interactions. From the one flow food and health and fellow-feeling. From the other return gifts of wealth, knowledge and energy.⁵⁵³

In his last essay 'Crisis in Civilization', when he had almost lost faith in mankind, he uses emotive language such as: 'the spectre of a new barbarity strides over Europe, teeth bare and claws unconcealed in an orgy of terror'.⁵⁵⁴ This is similar to expressions Tagore uses in *Nationalism*, such as:

This commercialism with its barbarity of ugly decorations is a terrible menace to all humanity. Because it is setting up the ideal of power over that of perfection. It is making the cult of self-seeking exult in its naked shamelessness.⁵⁵⁵

The way Tagore expresses himself in the English essays is highly significant. The essays were originally lectures, so he could have been using emotive language simply to emphasise the points he makes and to engage his audiences. In his biographical study of Tagore, Ernest Rhys writes that 'the speaker himself was the argument; his homily took fire from his own emotion'.⁵⁵⁶ More importantly, as we discovered in *Personality*, Tagore saw the emotions as essential to experiencing and evaluating truth and reality. Attempts to ignore the emotive language in order to analyse a work by Tagore systematically, as did Professor Jevons with his study of *Personality*, are bound to miss some of the meaning and even be quite wrong.

In studies of Tagore's poetry and plays in English, it is often pointed out that Tagore did not 'translate' the Bengali originals, but 'rendered' them into English. In his Introduction to the fourth book of Tagore's *English Writings*, the editor Nityapriya Ghosh discusses how and why Tagore took to translating his own works, quoting from the Poet's correspondence with the editor of *The Modern Review*.⁵⁵⁷ In 1917 Tagore wrote: 'I can't translate, I always write it anew. Because if I have to correctly translate I

⁵⁵³ 'City and Village', in *Towards Universal Man*, pp. 302-22 (p. 304).

⁵⁵⁴ 'Crisis in Civilization', p. 358.

⁵⁵⁵ 'Nationalism in India', p. 129.

⁵⁵⁶ Rhys, p. 123.

⁵⁵⁷ Nityapriya Ghosh, Introduction, in *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore, Volume FOUR*, pp. 11-18.

can't afford to forget myself. But if I can't forget myself I forget the words, the grammar, the style'.⁵⁵⁸

Tagore's process of 'rendering' (writing a poem anew) in English, starting from his sense of the essence of an original Bengali poem, often resulted in there being little resemblance between the two, either in subject matter or style. Tagore seems to have had a reservoir of thoughts and feelings which recur in his works in different forms, and this is as true of his lectures and essays as it is with his poetry and prose fiction – and indeed with his correspondence, especially his belles-lettres.

It is also true to say that Tagore's non-literary writing contains poetry and story telling, some of which can be discovered by 'adding back the colour into the cold print' using the rich palette of his experiences. This brings the risk of attributing meaning to a text which Tagore did not intend, and which other readers, scholars and critics do not recognise.

As we have seen in the chapter on *Personality*, the first essay 'What is Art?' is one of several essays on the same theme. With the *Nationalism* essays the parallel I have drawn with 'Society and State' in particular is not so direct, but it is interesting to take samples of the text for comparison, despite the fact that we seem not to be comparing like for like. 'Society and State'⁵⁵⁹ ('Society') is a translation so the language is a combination of Tagore's and the translator's Bengali and English. If one can stretch the point about Tagore's 'rendering' to his essays, and to 'Nationalism in the West' ('West') in particular, there is a mix of languages in this too.

The resemblance between the two essays is not straightforward and linear. There is some of the same subject matter in both, but with differences of emotional tone and context. Taking one detailed comparison to illustrate this, here are passages from 'West' and 'Society' respectively:

[H]ere is India, of about fifty centuries at least, who tried to live peacefully and think deeply, the India devoid of all politics, the India of no nations, whose one ambition has been to know this world as of soul, to live here every moment of her life in the meek spirit of adoration, in the glad consciousness of an eternal and personal relationship with it. It was upon this remote portion of humanity, childlike in its manner, with the wisdom of the old, that the Nation of the West burst in. ('West', p. 7.)

In our country the king waged wars, defended his territory and dispensed justice, but society attended to all else, from the supply of water to the supply of knowledge. This was done with such great competence that the repeated floods of new sovereignty through the centuries could neither destroy our spiritual life and reduce us to brutes, nor break up our society and turn us into destitutes. ('Society', p. 49.)

⁵⁵⁸ Tagore, letter to Ramananda Chatterji, editor of *The Modern Review*, 28 October 1917, in Ghosh, p. 16.

⁵⁵⁹ Tagore, 'Society and State', in *Towards Universal Man*, pp. 49-66.

In terms of style, 'West' can be understood as a re-working of 'Society' which involved some of the same kind of treatment which E.J. Thompson complained of with Tagore's translations of his poetry, where the Poet carefully selected such things as he thought his Western public would understand, and then prettied up the result.⁵⁶⁰ As with the poetry, what is missing is the real life. 'West' is not by any means just 'a handful of careless words thrown together',⁵⁶¹ but it lacks concreteness.

The passage from 'West' has been romanticised. Tagore writes sentimentally of a meek and childlike India. There is a 'once upon a time' feel to 'fifty centuries at least' – although in terms of history this is not inaccurate.⁵⁶² As we know from *Sadhana* and *Personality*, Tagore drew on the Upanisads in his sermons and writing. In his Appendix to a translation of the Principal Upanisads, he refers to the people of the period when these texts were written, when the ideas were not abstract but concrete, and realised through life, which is why 'generations of men in our country, no mere students of philosophy, but seekers of life's fulfilment, may make living use of the texts, but can never exhaust them of their freshness of meaning'.⁵⁶³ Interestingly, Tagore concludes the Appendix by saying that the teaching of the Upanisads is needed in the present age 'for those who boast of the freedom enjoyed by their nations [...] having for their allies deceitful diplomacy and a widespread propaganda of falsehood, where the soul remains caged and the self batters upon the decaying flesh of its victims'.⁵⁶⁴ Tagore writes in similar terms in his newly translated history essay, when he says that 'every one living in America has to behave like an American. This is not integration, it is domination'.⁵⁶⁵

In contrast to the pathetic language in 'West', in the 'Society' paragraph Tagore writes of a strong and capable people, who took responsibility for all their needs, 'from the supply of water to the supply of knowledge'. This was Tagore's address at a public meeting held to discuss a Government resolution on the problem of water scarcity in Bengal, hence his mention of water.⁵⁶⁶

Later in the essay, Tagore writes of the difference between kingly power in India and the role of the English State. The obligations of a king in India are 'hardly more than any other wealthy member of society', and the 'reservoirs of the country did not run dry

⁵⁶⁰ Thompson, *Rabindranath Tagore: His Life and Work*, pp. 48-9.

⁵⁶¹ Thompson, p. 51.

⁵⁶² According to Wendy Doniger, 'fifty centuries', around 3000 BCE, would take us back to some point in the period of the Indus valley Civilization, some time before the arrival of the Indo-Europeans. (Wendy Doniger, *The Hindus: An Alternative History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 85.

⁵⁶³ Tagore, Appendix A, in *The Principal Upanisads*, trans. by, ed. by S. Radhakrishnan, pp. 939-43.

⁵⁶⁴ Tagore, Appendix A, p. 944.

⁵⁶⁵ 'On Studying Indian History', p. 1.

⁵⁶⁶ *Towards Universal Man*, Notes, p. 367.

if the king alone was negligent'. In contrast, because English people are so dependent on the State, 'the overthrow of the State might mean peril for the nation—that is why politics there is such a serious affair'. In traditional India, 'social duties were specifically assigned to members of society' and there would be 'danger only when the social body, *samaj*, became crippled'.⁵⁶⁷

The equivalent in 'West' is as follows:

Through all the fights and intrigues and deceptions of her earlier history India had remained aloof. Because her homes, her fields, her temples of worship, her schools, where her teachers and students lived together in the atmosphere of simplicity and devotion and learning, her village self-government with its simple laws and peaceful administration—all these truly belonged to her. But her thrones were not her concern. They passed over her head like clouds, now tinged with purple gorgeousness, now black with the threat of thunder. Often they brought devastations in their wake, but they were like catastrophes of nature whose traces are soon forgotten.⁵⁶⁸

Again this passage is romantic, emotional, dramatic – literally 'purple' – and consigned to the past, the 'once upon a time'. In contrast, in 'Society' Tagore appeals to his audience to revive traditional culture, its hospitality, its play acting, by putting on fairs and reaching people in that way:

All over Bengal fairs are held at different times of the year. We must make a list of these fairs and get to know our countrymen through that open door.

If the educated classes make it their business to give the fairs in their own localities a new life and objective, if through those fairs they bring together the Hindu and the Muslim, and avoiding empty politics, ascertain the real needs of the people—schools, roads, water reservoirs, pasture-land and the like—then the country will indeed be filled with new stirrings.⁵⁶⁹

There is concreteness in that call to action. In contrast, in 'West', Tagore writes in general terms, in the following passage which is very often quoted:

A nation, in the sense of the political and economic union of a people, is that aspect which a whole population assumes when organized for a mechanical purpose. *Society as such has no ulterior purpose. It is an end in itself. It is a spontaneous self-expression of man as a social being. It is a natural regulation of human relationships, so that men can develop ideals of life in cooperation with one another.* It has also a political side, but this is only for a special purpose. It is for self-preservation. It is merely the side of power, not of human ideals. And in the early days it had its separate place in society, restricted to the professionals.⁵⁷⁰

⁵⁶⁷ 'Society', p. 51.

⁵⁶⁸ 'West', p. 7.

⁵⁶⁹ 'Society', p. 55. (my italics)

⁵⁷⁰ 'West', p. 9.

I suggested earlier that Gandhi's remark that Tagore 'has a horror of everything negative' can be used as a 'litmus test' to apply to any account of what Tagore wrote or said. Any suggestion that he was being negative means that one probably needs to read him again. Tagore was certainly negative about the 'Nation of the West', with its dehumanising systems of government and industry, and its education factories geared to gaining grades for places in the hierarchy. His polemics in *Nationalism* are misleading. This is far from the single issue work it may appear to be. Reading it in depth and in context reveals layers of meaning related to what Tagore wanted for India, Asia and the world. The polemics reflects Tagore's frustration at not knowing what to do.

'What Then Must We Do?'

I imagine that I pity people and wish to help them. I sit on a man's back, choking him and making him carry me, and yet assure myself and others that I am very sorry for him and wish to ease his lot by all possible means—except by getting off his back.⁵⁷¹

This well-known quotation from Leo Tolstoy's *What Then Must We Do?* refers to his discovery that 'poverty, exploitation and greed seem to be perennial aspects of the human condition'.⁵⁷² As a wealthy man concerned about conditions in the Moscow slums, Tolstoy realised that giving to the poor did not solve their problems. He saw how various cultural barriers have evolved to separate rich from poor, and city from village, and this alienation has to be addressed. We know that Tagore would have agreed with Tolstoy about alienation, so much so that he felt that if people knew each other and worked together in local communities, there would be no need for drastic measures, such as 'renouncing land ownership' and 'renouncing money'.⁵⁷³ During the Swadeshi period, the Congress Socialists and the Workers and Peasants Party demanded changes in land ownership, but Tagore did not see the land problem in institutional terms.⁵⁷⁴ He advocated cooperation between cultivators to gain and share economic benefits.⁵⁷⁵

Earlier in the passage quoted, Tolstoy writes of his rich man's 'magic purse':

I belong to the class who by various devices deprive the working people of necessities, and who by these devices have provided a magic purse for themselves which is a

⁵⁷¹ Leo Tolstoy, *What Then Must We Do?*, trans. by Aylmer Maude (Bideford, Devon: Green Books, 1991), pp. 62-3.

⁵⁷² From back cover blurb of the Green Books 1991 paperback.

⁵⁷³ Ronald Sampson interprets Tolstoy's solution in radical terms in his Introduction, in *What Then Must We Do?*, pp. vii-xvi (p. xvi).

⁵⁷⁴ Das Gupta, 'Rabindranath Tagore on Rural Reconstruction: The Sriniketan Programme' (1978), pp. 361-2.

⁵⁷⁵ Tagore, 'Cooperation', in *Towards Universal Man*, pp. 323-40 (p. 326).

temptation to those same unfortunates. I want to aid people, and therefore it is clear, above all, that I should not pluck them as I am doing, and on the other hand I should not tempt them.

It was Tagore's view too that people should not be tempted to seek material wealth: 'by the help of *anti-dharma* men prosper, they find what they desire, they conquer enemies, but they perish at the root'. However he was more concerned about the state's 'magic purse' than the rich man's, having seen how people became impoverished by taxation, restricted by laws, policing and regulations, and become helplessly dependent on what little is given back in services and education. Tagore voices such concerns in the *Nationalism* essays, but at that time he had no way of changing the systems he criticised. Once he had initiated the Sriniketan programme in 1922, he was content with an evolutionary approach, and made no apology for starting with 'two or three villages'.⁵⁷⁶ But in 1917 he had nothing concrete to offer to change the minds of people in the West who see economics and state systems as beneficial and inevitable:

This narrowness of freedom is an evil which is more radical not because of its quantity but because of its nature. And we cannot but acknowledge this paradox, that while the spirit of the West marches under its banner of freedom, the Nation of the West forges its iron chains of organization which are the most relentless and unbreakable that have ever been manufactured in the whole history of man.⁵⁷⁷

Tagore's ideas on society: *swadeshi samaj*, and his creative and sympathetic experiments in education and rural reconstruction, show him to have been a surprisingly consistent and challenging thinker, whose work is highly relevant to the problems of today's world. *Nationalism* shows another aspect to Tagore's prevailing belief, which we have seen expressed in *Sadhana* and *Personality*, in 'the integration of man and nature and God', whereby the Nation could only be a temporary hindrance to a return to 'life in its completeness'. By 1922, when *Creative Unity*, the next book of English essays was published, Tagore had established 'An Eastern University' at Santiniketan where he could invite the whole world to meet.

⁵⁷⁶ Das Gupta, p. 355.

⁵⁷⁷ 'Nationalism in the West', pp. 24-5.

Chapter 5: *Creative Unity* (1922)

Tagore opposed any narrow identification with a group. Whether that group was religious or racial, whether it was a caste or nation. For Tagore, the function of such identification was invariably exclusion, hierarchy—and violence. That is why Tagore contrasted national independence with a deeper and more encompassing freedom that eschews the categories of what we now call ‘the politics of identity’. Drawing on the idioms of Hindu metaphysics—according to which all individual souls are ultimately identical in brahman, according to which all material differences are a web of *maya*, mere illusion—Tagore wrote that ‘Our fight’ is not a battle for a new political entity, which can despise all other political entities. Rather, it is a struggle ‘for Man. We are to emancipate Man from the meshes that he himself has woven round him—these organizations of national egoism’. (Hogan, 2003)⁵⁷⁸

[T]his institution should be a perpetual creation by the co-operative enthusiasm of teachers and students, growing with the growth of their soul; a world in itself, self-sustaining, independent, rich with ever-renewing life, radiating life across space and time, attracting and maintaining round it a planetary system of dependent bodies. Its aim should lie in imparting life-breath to the complete man, who is intellectual as well as economic, bound by social bonds, but aspiring towards spiritual freedom and final perfection. (Tagore, ‘An Eastern University’, 1922)⁵⁷⁹

Creative Unity, Tagore’s collection of lectures and essays, was published in 1922, a year after Tagore’s university, Visva-Bharati, was formally inaugurated. After the 1914-18 War, Tagore determined to create ‘an institution for East-West fellowship and the study of cultures’, and on 22 December 1918 he called a meeting of students, teachers and well-wishers at his school to explain his idea.⁵⁸⁰ He began promotional tours in southern India in 1919, then in western India, giving a lecture entitled ‘The Centre of Indian Culture’.⁵⁸¹ In 1920 it was decided that Tagore should ‘go to the West to speak about Visva-Bharati and raise funds for it’, and he left India in May 1921 for his ‘fifth foreign tour’.⁵⁸² Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, professor of history and former vice chancellor of Visva-Bharati, has said that the experiment of founding the university was essential to Tagore’s ‘ideal of universalism’, and he became a travelling missionary whose aim was ‘to mobilize scholars who were willing to support and visit Santiniketan to teach and to make it truly a place where all cultures of the East and West would

⁵⁷⁸ Hogan, ‘Introduction: Tagore and the Ambivalence of Commitment’, in *Rabindranath Tagore: Universality and Tradition*, ed. by Patrick Colm Hogan and Lalita Pandit (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 2003), pp. 9-23 (p. 16). Hogan quotes a letter to Andrews.

⁵⁷⁹ Tagore, ‘An Eastern University’, in *Creative Unity*, pp. 169-203 (p. 203).

⁵⁸⁰ Uma Das Gupta, ‘“A World in One Nest”: Visva-Bharati University Santiniketan’, in *Rabindranath Tagore: My Life in My Words*, pp. 194-203 (p. 194).

⁵⁸¹ Tagore, ‘The Centre of Indian Culture’, in *Towards Universal Man*, pp. 202-30. His talks in South India were received enthusiastically, according to his biographers. (Krishna Dutta and Andrew Robinson, ‘The Founding of a University (1918-1921)’, in *Rabindranath Tagore: The Myriad-Minded Man*, pp. 219-36 (p. 221).)

⁵⁸² ‘A Chronicle of Eighty Years’, p. 476.

meet'.⁵⁸³

In 'Rabindranath Tagore in America', Stephen Hay refers to Tagore's lectures from 1920 and 1921, which were 'later collected in the volume *Creative Unity*', saying that they were essentially the same as those of his two previous visits. Hay observes that Tagore's American addresses have two main themes. There was 'his prophetic warning against the mechanical and soul-destroying forces of modern industrialism and nationalism', first in *Nationalism* and again in the essays 'East and West', 'The Modern Age' and 'The Nation' in *Creative Unity*. There was also a positive message about an alternative, higher path: 'the path to individual liberation and self-realization through creativity, love, beauty, harmony with nature and union with the divine spirit in the universe', set out in his lectures in *Sadhana* in 1912-13, in *Personality* in 1916-17, and in *Creative Unity* in 1920-21.⁵⁸⁴

Hay's analysis of *Creative Unity* into 'two main themes' is confirmed by the way the essays are arranged within the book. Tagore relates the 'positive message' first, in the four essays: 'The Poet's Religion', 'The Creative Ideal', 'The Religion of the Forest' and 'An Indian Folk Religion'. The 'prophetic warning' essays follow. I would add the essay 'The Spirit of Freedom' (in which Tagore tells his compatriots that 'the people of the West [...] are flattered into believing that they are free'⁵⁸⁵) to Hay's list, making a run of four in the negative set. Hay names and comments upon the warning essays first, presumably because he had noticed how Tagore's language in these is highly charged and anguished – in places even more 'purple' than in *Nationalism*.

In the previous chapter I attributed the passion Tagore exhibits in the *Nationalism* essays to his regrets and feelings of failure over his involvement in the Swadeshi movement, and also to his frustration at having no practical solution to offer his western audiences. The university was to be his new start. Tagore invited scholars and supporters from around the world to participate in the venture, and he was able to found an Institute of Rural Reconstruction as part of the university, thereby resurrecting 'constructive swadeshi', and bringing new resources and expertise to help put his ideals into practice.⁵⁸⁶ Tagore's optimistic scenario features in the final essay in *Creative Unity*, 'An Eastern University', which begins: 'In the midst of much that is discouraging

⁵⁸³ Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, 'New Directions 1919-1929', in *Rabindranath Tagore: An Interpretation* ((New Delhi: Penguin, 2011), pp. 132-71 (p. 133).

⁵⁸⁴ Hay, 'Rabindranath Tagore in America', p. 453.

⁵⁸⁵ 'The Spirit of Freedom', p. 131.

⁵⁸⁶ Tagore scholar, Viktors Ivbulis, who has spent many years at Santiniketan, has said that 'Tagore's idea was that you light a lamp of enlightenment and progress in one village and it should start burning in other villages. Absolutely the same was the background for his educational institutions'. (Viktors Ivbulis, personal communication, 22/9/2011.)

in the present state of the world, there is one symptom of vital promise. Asia is awakening.⁵⁸⁷

Creative Unity is a story in three parts: Tagore first describes the natural assets of humankind and our traditional religious thought, then he condemns the industrialism and nationalism of the modern age, and ‘An Eastern University’ makes the happy ending. Tagore’s remedy is an invitation to the world to join him in the ‘world in one nest’ at Santiniketan, and participate in teaching and learning about the ideal of ‘unity through diversity’. Tagore sees diversity as potentially enhancing social cohesion. He believes that ‘the harmony of the many’ should operate on a global scale as in a small local community, which thrives on having people with different personalities and capabilities.⁵⁸⁸

In this chapter I first examine the provenance of ‘An Eastern University’, because Tagore was using the ideas and sections of the text for an extended period to explain to urban audiences in India and abroad his alternative politics, which his friend Patrick Geddes succinctly called ‘Education’ and ‘Forest’.⁵⁸⁹ I then discuss how Tagore was a ‘lone voice’, whereby even his most supportive friends were unable fully to understand or share his aims. Tagore was misunderstood – rather than not understood at all, as is evident from press reports of *Creative Unity*. To show how Tagore challenged prevailing ideas with this book, I draw on an idea by Bhattacharya in his short study entitled *Talking Back*, in which he compares the writings of Gandhi, Tagore and Nehru. I combine Bhattacharya’s approach with Patrick Colm Hogan’s work on ‘deconstructing the nationalist narrative’. Because Tagore was misunderstood, his initiatives towards putting his vision into practice eventually brought disappointment.⁵⁹⁰ There was one positive outcome of the tour associated with *Creative Unity*: Tagore’s recruitment of Leonard Elmhirst, and so I conclude this chapter with an account of ‘constructive swadeshi’ at Sriniketan, which was the most optimistic time for Tagore, when he was able to put his vision into practice.

‘An Eastern University’

⁵⁸⁷ ‘An Eastern University’, p. 169.

⁵⁸⁸ ‘To give perfect expression to the One, the Infinite, through the harmony of the many; to the One, the Love, through the sacrifice of self, is the object alike of our individual life and our society.’ (*Creative Unity*, p. vi.)

⁵⁸⁹ Geddes, letter to Tagore, 1 April 1919, in *A Meeting of Two Minds*, pp. 60-1.

⁵⁹⁰ Das Gupta suggests Tagore’s failure is due to his dispensing with clear directions and systems of reporting, and relying at all levels on ‘the individual and what he made of the job’. Das Gupta, ‘Rabindranath Tagore on Rural Reconstruction: The Sriniketan Programme’ (1978), pp. 377.

Hay's first mention of Tagore's university is not in relation to the essay in *Creative Unity* but about the tour, and how 'Tagore arrived in New York City in October, hoping to raise as much as five million dollars through direct contributions to a new academic enterprise, the Visva-Bharati, or International University, which he was planning to inaugurate at Santiniketan'.⁵⁹¹ In this thesis I have taken each tour which culminated in a book of English essays as part of the story of the book. With *Creative Unity* the tour is in a sense included in the book, as the final essay 'An Eastern University', which has some of the same content as 'The Centre of Indian Culture', and evidently had a role in his fundraising and promotional efforts.

It is uncertain whether or not Tagore gave public lectures in Europe or America using the text of 'An Eastern University', but it would seem that Tagore spoke on the subject at social functions, and had one-to-one conversations with potential funders whom he met at events such as formal dinners. After one night in New York when he had 'a reception and a speech and a dinner and a discussion', he wrote to Andrews of feeling 'empty, like a burst balloon with no gas left in it!'⁵⁹²

Several quotations from the essay, introduced as 'an unpublished pamphlet about his school at Bolpur', are included in an article in a British weekly journal in April 1921, which is prior to the publication of *Creative Unity*.⁵⁹³ There is mention of a 'leaflet about the scheme of an International University in India' in an interesting 'invitation letter' sent by Tagore to Geddes from Geneva in May 1921:

You will know from the accompanying leaflet about the scheme of an International University in India with the object of paving the path to a future when both the East and West will work together for the general cause of human welfare. It has been decided formally to open this institution on the 15th of January, 1922, and to invite for the occasion a meeting of representative men and women of culture from the different countries of the West and from those in Asia which are likely to respond. Such a meeting of the best thinkers and workers who are interested in bringing about international good feelings and fellowship is sure to facilitate the communication of sympathy between these Continents which for various causes remain mutually alienated.⁵⁹⁴

I have wondered if 'the accompanying leaflet about the scheme of an International University in India' was (some part of) 'An Eastern University', which Tagore later included in *Creative Unity*. It could have been 'The Centre of Indian Culture', the lecture Tagore gave when touring India in 1919.

⁵⁹¹ Hay, p. 452.

⁵⁹² Tagore, letter to Andrews, 23 January 1921, in *Letters to a Friend*, p. 117.

⁵⁹³ 'A League of Spirit', anonymous article in *The Nation and The Athenaeum*, 9 April 1921, *Imagining Tagore*, pp. 329-31 (p. 330).

⁵⁹⁴ Tagore, 'Draft copy of invitation letter', sent to Patrick Geddes with letter, 5 May 1921, quoted in *A Meeting of Two Minds*, p. 63.

In her introduction to *A Meeting of Two Minds*, Bashabi Fraser mentions a letter from Geddes in 1919 congratulating Tagore on his ‘lectures on “Education” & on “Forest”’.⁵⁹⁵ Geddes wrote to Tagore from Calcutta, addressing him as ‘Sir Rabindranath’, which suggests that Geddes attended the two lectures, but did not meet Tagore at that time. Fraser suggests that the lecture texts were ‘probably’ the essays ‘The Centre of Indian Culture’ and ‘The Religion of the Forest’.⁵⁹⁶ She includes several quotations from those essays to illustrate how ‘[w]hat Tagore is advocating is the centre of learning in an atmosphere of secluded openness, where teacher and students live together in simplicity and close to nature and education is tied with life’s creative tasks, as in the *tapovana*’.⁵⁹⁷

Fraser’s quotations from ‘The Centre of Indian Culture’ are taken from the text as published in *Towards Universal Man*, where a note states that this was a ‘[l]ecture delivered in course of Tagore’s tour of South India in 1919’.⁵⁹⁸ Geddes wrote to Tagore from Calcutta, which suggests that Tagore also delivered the lecture in that city. For ‘The Religion of the Forest’ Fraser takes the essay of that name in *Creative Unity*.⁵⁹⁹ That collection was not published until 1922, so it would seem that Tagore did not write the essay for the book – and we do not know if he delivered it as a lecture.⁶⁰⁰

We discussed Tagore’s method of writing in Chapter 2 on the *Sadhana* lectures and book, and saw the extent to which Tagore relied on collections of material, which he recycled, rearranged and modified for different occasions and purposes.⁶⁰¹ One gets the impression that the ideas which were most important to Tagore crop up most frequently. There is a considerable amount of similar subject matter, including some almost identical passages, in both ‘The Centre of Indian Culture’ and ‘An Eastern University’. In the article in the British press, all but one of the passages taken from the ‘unpublished pamphlet’ about Tagore’s school are absent from ‘The Centre of Indian Culture’. Interestingly, Das Gupta quotes from a *Visva-Bharati* bulletin published in 1927 entitled ‘An Eastern University’.⁶⁰² Das Gupta has said that she has found in her research

⁵⁹⁵ Geddes, letter to Tagore, 1 April 1919, in *A Meeting of Two Minds*, pp. 60-1. Geddes’ underlining.

⁵⁹⁶ Fraser, Introduction, in *A Meeting of Two Minds*, pp. 12-51 (p. 30).

⁵⁹⁷ Fraser, pp. 30-4.

⁵⁹⁸ *Towards Universal Man*, p. 375. The note also states that the essay was ‘[f]irst published by the Society for Promotion of National Education, Adyar, Madras (1919)’.

⁵⁹⁹ ‘The Religion of the Forest’ in *Creative Unity*, pp. 43-66. Fraser actually quotes from that essay reproduced in *English Writings II*, pp. 511-19.

⁶⁰⁰ *Creative Unity* appears in the promotional lists of Macmillan and Co., Limited, London as ‘Essays’. *Sadhana* and *Personality* are listed as ‘Lectures’, *Nationalism* with no designation. (*The Religion of Man* was first published in London by George, Allen & Unwin.)

⁶⁰¹ ‘Chapter 2: *Sadhana*’, in this thesis, pp. 33-7.

⁶⁰² Uma Das Gupta, *Rabindranath Tagore: An Illustrated Life* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 86.

‘occasionally but definitely that some of these separate sources with similar titles are different in places – nothing too significant – but which would go to show that he might have reused the material with a few changes in expression depending on the occasion or depending on his mood at that moment’.⁶⁰³

The ideas which Tagore was expressing at this time are obviously of interest, but the significance of the differences one finds in the way Tagore was expressing his thoughts in an essay or in a lecture or in a flyer is less obvious. They matter because they enable us to see how Tagore expressed himself to different audiences, including which topics he tried most persistently and insistently to get across. And sometimes we can also find from correspondence evidence of the extent to which he succeeded.

Comparing ‘The Centre of Indian Culture’ with ‘An Eastern University’ we can see that the last third of the former essay is very similar to the last third of the latter, in places almost word for word.⁶⁰⁴ The resemblance is closest in passages where Tagore is describing in detail his expectations for the ‘economic life’ of the University, which would be a cooperative society, where students and teachers would be ‘supporting themselves with the work of their own hands’, using good materials and ‘practical industrial training’, but not motivated by profit. This is ‘constructive swadeshi’ for everyone, not only in a Department for Rural Reconstruction, with experts providing aid and advice for local village ‘tillers of the soil’. Tagore was communicating different things to his urban audiences in India and in the West, and then taking both in the same direction – towards the village.

Tagore: ‘A Lone Voice’

Fraser asks a question about ‘The Twain’: Geddes and Tagore: ‘What made their thoughts so similar?’⁶⁰⁵ Paul Henderson Scott, in his review of Fraser’s book, picks up on that question, having quoted Philip Boardman, in his book on Geddes, saying that there was ‘a strong affinity between these two utterly different minds and personalities’.⁶⁰⁶ Scott seems to find Fraser’s explanation for this affinity persuasive, but he ends his review with a comment on the one-sidedness of the friendship:

⁶⁰³ Uma Das Gupta, personal communication, 30 March 2013.

⁶⁰⁴ ‘The Centre of Indian Culture’, pp. 220-28 (out of 29 pp.); ‘An Eastern University’, pp. 191-201 (out of 35 pp.).

⁶⁰⁵ Fraser, p. 20.

⁶⁰⁶ Paul Henderson Scott, ‘Review: Patrick Geddes and Rabindranath Tagore’, *Scottish Affairs*, 57 (2006), 143-4 (p. 143).

The feelings of Geddes towards Tagore are evident from the tone of his letters. He does not explain them at length but, as he says in one letter, his 'expression is lacking'. In spite of this mutual regard, the correspondence gives the impression that Tagore was not as keen as Geddes in arranging to meet. Geddes was in India from 1914 to 1923 and Tagore travelled widely, and frequently but, in spite of all the efforts of Geddes, they seem to have met very seldom. They met once in Bombay, where Geddes was professor of sociology and civics, but Tagore failed to keep an appointment for 'a long talk'. When Geddes was established in Montpellier towards the end of his life, he made Tagore President of his Indian College and wrote repeatedly to press him to visit and speak to the students. All such plans failed with Tagore blaming the state of his health. Perhaps he felt that it was better to enjoy the inspiration and the enthusiasm of Geddes from afar.⁶⁰⁷

We have seen this kind of difficulty before, in the chapter on *Personality*. Tagore often found himself unable to meet his western friends, giving reasons, but one begins to suspect that he was ambivalent about these relationships, even about Andrews, his closest friend and partner at Santiniketan. It seems that even his friends were unable fully to understand or share his aims. He was indeed 'a lone voice',⁶⁰⁸ a 'dissenter among dissenters', because everyone else, even amongst Tagore's closest friends and supporters, had other influences and concerns.

In the chapter on *Nationalism* I referred to Das Gupta's comment that Tagore failed in his efforts to persuade other leaders of the Swadeshi Movement to support his alternative because 'Indian nationalism had [...] turned the country's attention away from its primary problem which was social'.⁶⁰⁹ Tagore failed despite the fact that 'constructive swadeshi' was a viable alternative for India at that time. Gandhi's Swaraj ideal, his 'true civilisation' based on '[p]erformance of duty and observance of morality' was in practical terms very similar to Tagore's 'constructive swadeshi'.⁶¹⁰ Gandhi made a major contribution to attaining 'Parliamentary Swaraj', the compromise he settled for because he considered that India was not ready for the full Hind Swaraj ideal;⁶¹¹ he failed to lead India towards what he saw as the true way advocated by the forefathers.⁶¹² Nehru took the country in the direction of a modern industrial nation state, because that was the way the global tide was running.

As we saw with *Sadhana*, at this time Tagore was *misunderstood* – rather than not understood at all. That this continued is evident from press reports. *Creative Unity* was received with considerable interest on both sides of the Atlantic.⁶¹³ Given that Tagore, and later Gandhi, failed to persuade leaders of the urban middle classes in India of the

⁶⁰⁷ Scott, p. 143.

⁶⁰⁸ Kripalani, 'A Lone Voice', in *A Biography*, pp. 356-389.

⁶⁰⁹ Das Gupta, *Oxford India Tagore*, pp. 339-40. Chapter 4: *Nationalism*, this thesis, p. 104.

⁶¹⁰ Gandhi, 'What is True Civilisation?', in *Hind Swaraj*, pp. 53-7 (p. 54).

⁶¹¹ Gandhi, Foreword, in *Hind Swaraj*, [pp. 1-4 (pp. 2-3)].

⁶¹² Gandhi, 'What is True Civilisation?', pp. 54-5.

⁶¹³ *Imagining Tagore*, pp. 357-74. Mukherjee, *Passage to America*, pp. 207-10.

faults and dangers of the direction being taken by the West, it is hardly to be expected that Tagore's criticisms of the Nation, the Modern Age and the false conception of Freedom, would be accepted in the West itself. The essays on the more positive topics were commented on approvingly, as 'thoughtful', 'wise and exhilarating', 'sympathetic and penetrating', 'insightful' and as beautifully or musically written. To the extent they were criticised, it was for being more of Tagore's usual sentiments, or because the beauty of his language hid revolutionary content. Mukherjee comments that American critics complained that in these essays Tagore 'extolled "the East" with as little validity that he reviled "the West"'.⁶¹⁴ Fraser comments on Geddes appreciating *Creative Unity*, particularly the essay 'The Religion of the Forest'.⁶¹⁵ Geddes wrote to Tagore in 1929 saying:

Last night I was reading again your "Creative Unity", and with fresh interest and renewed pleasure. How I wish I could put ideas as you do! We have ideas, that need also to be expressed, but (for lack of the Love-Unity, I fear) expression is lacking!⁶¹⁶

In *Creative Unity*, Tagore's aim seems to have been to find as many ways as possible to express his message about 'an ideal of unity in its endless show of variety', as if he were determined to get this one idea across. In the four essays with the positive message, Tagore introduces and explains what he means by unity, in himself, in society, in creativity. He conveys the idea that poets who worship beauty are delighting in the theatre of life, rather than the greenrooms of analysis, logic and the mechanics of stagecraft.⁶¹⁷ He explains that creativity arises from ideals, which are revealed and authenticated by the joy experienced in the creative process and its outcome. By using western romantic poetry to illustrate his points, he joins hands across the boundary between East and West. He identifies the origins of ancient Indian teachings and literature in the benign landscape of northern India and its forest schools, and considers sympathetically how more hostile landscapes may have given rise to western attitudes as acted out in life and depicted in drama. He reclaims Buddhism from western scholars who see it as a 'philosophy of suicide' to redefine it as a religion of 'sympathy for all creatures, and devotion to the infinite truth of love'.⁶¹⁸ He reveals that recognising the 'Beloved of my heart' in every living thing is the natural religion of simple rural people,

⁶¹⁴ Mukherjee, p. 56.

⁶¹⁵ Fraser, p. 47.

⁶¹⁶ Geddes, letter to Tagore, 22 August 1929, in *A Meeting of Two Minds*, p. 145.

⁶¹⁷ *Creative Unity*, pp. 13-4.

⁶¹⁸ *Creative Unity*, pp. 70-1.

and he offers an alternative to hierarchical beliefs and social structures.⁶¹⁹

As the *Creative Unity* narrative moves on to the negative set,⁶²⁰ we can see reflected Tagore's concern over the changes taking place in the crucial period of 1919 to 1922. In his fascinating book about the remaking of Asia, Pankaj Mishra devotes a chapter to the crucial year 1919, when nationalists in Asia were demanding self-determination, expecting rewards for their loyalty and sacrifices in the Great War, inspired by the new moral vision of American president Woodrow Wilson.⁶²¹ Mishra's next chapter is entitled 'Rabindranath Tagore in East Asia', and it provides further evidence of Tagore as the 'dissenter among dissenters',⁶²² not sharing Asians' high hopes of 1919. Mishra, quoting Hay, writes that 'Tagore saw no reason for Asians to believe that the "building up of a nation on the European pattern is the only type of civilization and the only goal of man"'. In 1914, Gandhi had arrived in India. Disappointment with the constitutional reforms of 1917, fury at the Rowlatt Acts and the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, had destroyed Congress's faith in 'mendicancy' and gradual progress to Home Rule. In 1920 Congress launched a non-violent, non-cooperation movement guided by Gandhi.⁶²³ Tagore's criticisms of Gandhi's approach were mocked and disparaged as the 'ludicrous opinions of the Poet'.⁶²⁴ Tagore's reputation abroad had plummeted after he renounced his knighthood. He must have been very sure about his ideal of global cooperation, as he prepared his lectures and set out on his world-saving mission in 1921.

To show how Tagore challenged prevailing ideas with this book, I draw on an idea by Bhattacharya in his short study entitled *Talking Back*, in which he takes selections of the writings of Gandhi, Tagore and Nehru and shows how these three 'thought-leaders' reacted to the 'adverse evaluation of Indian civilization' by British colonial historians by setting out their own conceptions.⁶²⁵ For Gandhi and Nehru, Bhattacharya takes one work each as a central focus: Gandhi's *Hind Swaraj* and Nehru's *The Discovery of India*. Bhattacharya takes a different approach to Tagore, whom he regards as so inconsistent and changeable in his views that to follow his 'evolving perspective' on

⁶¹⁹ *Creative Unity*, p. 77.

⁶²⁰ 'East and West', 'The Modern Age', 'The Spirit of Freedom and 'The Nation'.

⁶²¹ Mishra, Chapter Four: 1919 'Changing the History of the World', in *From the Ruins of Empire*, pp. 184-215.

⁶²² Nandy, 'The Illegitimacy of Nationalism', p. vii.

⁶²³ Jehangir P. Patel and Marjorie Sykes, *Gandhi: His Gift of the Fight* (Rasulia, Hoshangabad, India: Friends Rural Centre, 1987), p. 16.

⁶²⁴ Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, Introduction, in *The Mahatma and the Poet: Letters and Debates between Gandhi and Tagore 1915-1941*, pp. 1-37 (p. 23).

⁶²⁵ Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, Introduction, in *Talking Back: The Idea of Civilization in the Indian Nationalist Discourse* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 2.

civilization, one needs to consider every essay ‘scattered in twenty-six volumes of his collected works’ in Bengali and in English.⁶²⁶

I respect Bhattacharya’s scholarship, shown in particular in his compilation of letters and debates between Tagore and Gandhi,⁶²⁷ but I take a different view of Tagore’s ‘inconsistency’. Tagore famously quipped that inconsistency was both his intellectual weakness and strength. It is a strength which comes from his having been deliberately raised by his father, Devendranath, and other family members, to learn to think for himself.⁶²⁸ Furthermore, his mind was changed by circumstances, with the major turning points being, firstly, his encounters with rural life when managing the family estates in the 1890s, then his efforts to promote a ‘constructive Swadeshi’ in 1903 to 1908, and then his horror at the war coupled with his shock over the Jallianwala Bagh massacre. These are milestones which Bhattacharya also points to, and they form part of his argument for considering many of Tagore’s works, rather than just one.

My approach is to take *Creative Unity* as the focal point of Tagore’s thought, to be compared with the works of the other two luminaries, not to contrast their ideas on Indian civilization, but to bring out what is revealed about their goals and approaches by examining the stories they tell and the narrative prototypes they employ. For this purpose I draw on the work of Patrick Colm Hogan, professor of comparative literature, cultural studies and cognitive science, particularly his book *Understanding Nationalism: On Narrative, Cognitive Science, and Identity*.⁶²⁹ In this work, Hogan studies the ‘techniques of nationalization’, some of which are used self-consciously by activists to foster patriotism, others arise spontaneously when the national category is becoming preeminent.⁶³⁰

Like Tagore in *Nationalism* and in *Creative Unity*, Hogan pays particular attention to how nations are belligerent, and how patriotism operates such that people support their nation at war. Rather than taking a moral stance and deploring this, Hogan seeks to explain it. There is a crucial element to his explanation in *Understanding Nationalism*, for which Hogan takes advantage of his knowledge of recent research in cognitive science.⁶³¹ Studies have revealed a tendency in the human species to be suspicious and

⁶²⁶ Bhattacharya, ‘The Concept of Civilization: Rabindranath Tagore’s Evolving Perspective’, in *Talking Back*, pp. 67-84 (pp. 67-8).

⁶²⁷ *The Mahatma and the Poet*, ed. by Sabyasachi Bhattacharya.

⁶²⁸ Marjorie Sykes, ‘The Training of a Poet’, in *Rabindranath Tagore*, pp. 18-27 (p. 22).

⁶²⁹ Patrick Colm Hogan, in *Understanding Nationalism: On Narrative, Cognitive Science, and Identity* (Columbus: Ohio State University, 2009)

⁶³⁰ Hogan, ‘Hierarchizing Identities’, in *Understanding Nationalism*, pp. 66-123 (p. 66).

⁶³¹ In her review of *Understanding Nationalism*, Anne Stiles (Professor of medical humanities and Victorian literature, and a section-editor of the journal *Literary Compass*) describes Hogan as ‘one of the

hostile towards the ‘other’, defined as a member of an out-group.⁶³² This tendency can be thought of as ‘innate’, but it is more likely to be a thought habit acquired very early in life.⁶³³ It is generally unconscious and automatic, and manifests irrespective of how innocuous the criteria for determining who is ‘in’ and who is ‘out’.⁶³⁴ Tagore’s central goal in establishing Visva-Bharati was to bring people together from different cultures, beliefs, aptitudes, skills and interests to bring about mutual understanding. By this means he was addressing the tendency Hogan describes, which is the root cause of suspicion and hostility. Tagore had witnessed this tendency in destructive operation during the Swadeshi period, and later warned Gandhi about it:

The idea of non-cooperation [...] has at its back a fierce joy of annihilation, which at best is asceticism, and at its worst is that orgy of frightfulness in which human nature, losing faith in the basic reality of normal life, finds a disinterested delight in an unmeaning devastation, as has been shown in the late war and on other occasions which came nearer to us. ‘No’, in its passive moral form is asceticism, and in its active moral form violence. The desert is as much a form of *himsa*, violence, as is the raging sea in storm; they are both against life.⁶³⁵

Hogan: Deconstructing the Nationalist Narrative

I referred in the previous chapter, on Tagore’s *Nationalism*, to Hogan’s theory of identity, in which he distinguishes between ‘practical identity’, a person’s sense of self based on his or her role in life, particularly in relation to others, and ‘categorical identity’, which is a label, essentially ‘vacuous’, a named in-group most of whose members never even meet.⁶³⁶ In the essay by Hogan I referred to then, this distinction

leading theorists of cognitive cultural studies’ and the book as an ‘engrossing’ and ‘formidably well-researched’ addition to that growing interdisciplinary field. (Anne Stiles, Review of Hogan, *Understanding Nationalism*, in <http://ravnjournal.files.wordpress.com/2011/11/revstiles.pdf> [accessed 31 August 2012])

Hogan published *Cognitive Science, Literature, and the Arts: A Guide for Humanists* (New York: Routledge, 2003) in order to ‘provide adequate background for readers (scholars in the humanities) to participate in and contribute to a research program in cognitive science and the arts’. (Hogan, ‘Introduction: The Dustheap of History: Why Cognitive Science Now?’, in *Cognitive Science*, pp. 1-6 (p. 3).)

⁶³² Hogan suggests in a footnote that we might ask: ‘What made an individual feel she or he was part of Group A other than being assigned to that group?’ He then says: ‘This is an excellent question, for it gets to the heart of these studies. The answer is *nothing*.’

⁶³³ We should not assume that hostile othering is innate, ‘in our genes’, perhaps due to an evolutionary tendency which was advantageous for primitive human groups. With knowledge of the work of Paul Griffiths and others, we can see that it could be an effect of very early socialisation. (see Paul. E. Griffiths, ‘What is Innateness?’, *The Monist*, 85 (2002), 70-85.)

⁶³⁴ Hogan, ‘Understanding Identity: What it Is and What It Does’, in *Understanding Nationalism*, pp. 23-65 (pp. 29-32).

⁶³⁵ Tagore, letter to Andrews, 5 March 1921, in *Letters to a Friend*, pp. 128-3 (p. 131). (A version (with a few typos) is in *Mahatma and the Poet*, pp. 57-8.)

⁶³⁶ ‘Nationalism’, in this thesis, pp. 109-10. ‘A second important characteristic of categorical identity is that it is vacuous. As the social psychological research indicates, the robust motivational and other effects

relates to a contrast, and ongoing shift, between traditional village society and modern urban society. Traditional society is rooted in the land, is largely self-reliant, socially and economically, and people's identity roles are vocational and probably inherited. In modern urban society, that kind of secure identity is lost, and people increasingly come to define themselves by labels such as nationality, ethnicity, or religion, which constrain their conduct, activities and social engagement. Tagore observes in his essay 'The Nation' how professionalism and specialisation have similar defects and dangers, bringing a narrow, impersonal rigidity to the modern world.⁶³⁷

In *Understanding Nationalism*, Hogan is not using the term 'practical identity' in the context of traditional society, but deploys it to refer to present-day America, defining it as 'the total of our capacities, propensities, interests, routines—most important [*sic*], those that bear on our interactions with others'. By contrast, '[c]ategorial identity is our inclusion of ourselves in particular sets of people, our location of ourselves in terms of in-group/out-group divisions'.⁶³⁸ Hogan's theory of identity is set out in the first main chapter entitled 'Understanding Identity: What It Is and What It Does', in which he points to a dangerous tendency associated with these two forms of identity: 'Contrary to our intuitions, the labels are the more consequential of the two'.⁶³⁹

Hogan's book has an introductory chapter entitled 'Nationalism and the Cognitive Sciences', which begins with the author's reflections on the views of historians on nationalism as a social force. He dissociates himself from confining the idea of the nation to the nation state, and explains that he is 'referring to a sense of identification rather than a political structure'.⁶⁴⁰ As Hogan uses the term, 'nationalism has been around as long as there have been complex, hierarchically structured, nonnomadic societies', and 'it has always followed the cognitive and affective principles of in-group/out-group division'.⁶⁴¹

Each of us has several categorial identities: labels for who we are, which are part of our lives and unavoidable. These labels are words, present in our everyday lexicon, and do not come with health warnings, although perhaps they should; it is other people's identities we tend to regard as dangerous. Not all these labels have equal salience, and the central assertion in Hogan's book, which he explores in a chapter entitled

of categorial identity operate independently of any shared properties those categories might be seen as implying'. (Patrick Colm Hogan, 'Practical identity against categorial identity', pp. 517-22.)

⁶³⁷ 'The Nation', pp. 145-6.

⁶³⁸ Introduction, in *Understanding Nationalism*, p. 8.

⁶³⁹ 'Understanding Identity: What It Is and What It Does', in *Understanding Nationalism*, pp. 23-65 (p. 24).

⁶⁴⁰ Introduction, in *Understanding Nationalism*, p. 4.

⁶⁴¹ Introduction, in *Understanding Nationalism*, pp. 4-5.

‘Hierarchizing Identities: Techniques of Nationalization’, is that nationality is the preeminent categorial identity in society, particularly in present day America, and that nationalism is the cause of war.⁶⁴² Tagore would certainly agree.

In the rest of the book Hogan applies his theory of identity, his involvement in ‘cognitive science as a research program’ and his contacts in the sciences of human cognition and neuroscience,⁶⁴³ and his extensive studies of narrative prototypes,⁶⁴⁴ to consider how we imagine or conceptualise the nation. He asks how it is that we understand ‘the unity of diverse individuals, widely dispersed in space and time [...] as part of a single, exclusive entity’. Hogan begins with the use of ‘conceptual metaphors’, and then considers ‘narrative structure’. The latter half of the book is taken up by detailed examinations of six main sample texts, chosen to illustrate three major nationalist narrative prototypes: heroic, sacrificial and romantic tragicomedy.⁶⁴⁵ Hogan’s choice of texts includes several works dating from Tagore’s lifetime, including Gandhi’s commentary on the *Bhagavad Gita*.

I see Hogan’s scheme as valuable for understanding Tagore’s *Creative Unity* contrasted with Gandhi’s *Hind Swaraj* and Nehru’s *The Discovery of India*. Two of Hogan’s observations drawing on cognitive science are relevant to my analysis: firstly, the studies which demonstrate unconscious, negative and even violent, reactions towards members of out-groups, and, secondly, the human tendency to blame attacks directed at one’s in-group on the immediate culprit, rather than recognising the reality of complex chains of cause and effect, operating backwards and forwards in time. Hogan’s study of nationalism as an identity which leads to conflict can be applied to Tagore’s comparable views on ‘The Nation’ in *Creative Unity*.⁶⁴⁶ Hogan’s insightful observation on Tagore, which I quoted in an epigraph to this chapter, has strong resonances with the concluding case study in *Understanding Nationalism*, which is Hogan’s reading of anarchist Emma Goldman’s essay ‘What I believe’, as romantic tragicomedy.⁶⁴⁷ Hogan’s book ends, not with a summary and conclusion, but with the final section on

⁶⁴² Introduction, p. 2. ‘2: Hierarchizing Identities: Techniques of Nationalization’, in *Understanding Nationalism*, pp. 66-123.

⁶⁴³ Introduction, pp. 5-6. Hogan, ‘Is It Cognitive Science Yet? Some Basic principles’, in *Cognitive Science, Literature, and the Arts: A Guide for Humanists*, pp. 29-58 (p. 29).

⁶⁴⁴ ‘Emplotting the Nation’, in *Understanding Nationalism*, pp. 167-219 (pp. 197-9).

⁶⁴⁵ Introduction, in *Understanding Nationalism*, p. 12. Chapters ‘5: Heroic Nationalism’, pp. 213-63; ‘6: Sacrificial Nationalism’, pp. 264-304 and ‘7: Romantic Nationalism’, pp. 305-37.

⁶⁴⁶ ‘The Nation’ in *Creative Unity*, pp. 141-53. See also ‘East and West’, pp. 91-112.

⁶⁴⁷ Emma Goldman, ‘What I Believe’, in *Red Emma Speaks: An Emma Goldman Reader*, ed. by Alix Kates Shulman (New York: Schocken, 1983), pp. 48-60. Hogan, ‘7: Romantic Love and the End of Nationalism: Walt Whitman and Emma Goldman’, in *Understanding Nationalism*, pp. 305-37 (pp. 324-37).

Emma Goldman.⁶⁴⁸ Hogan's ending – or lack of it – suggests that his positive political leanings might be towards anarchism, and it has been suggested that the same applies to Tagore and Gandhi.

The Anarchist Thinking of Tagore and Gandhi

In *The Mahatma and the Poet*, Bhattacharya writes that on the basis of the essay 'Swadeshi Samaj' ('Society and State'), where Tagore 'put forward an anti-statist position that he never resiled from', there is 'no doubt that there is an element of anarchist thinking in Tagore as much as in Gandhi'.⁶⁴⁹ This comment relates to both Tagore and Gandhi advocating a future India based on a network of villages, although they disagreed about the means to that end. Hogan's study of Gandhi's commentary on the *Bhagavad Gita* as a 'sacrificial tragicomedy' shows Gandhi as not opposed to violence directed against himself or his own supporters,⁶⁵⁰ whereas Tagore's commitment to 'the true meeting of East and West' means that for him 'the idea of non-co-operation unnecessarily hurts that truth' and is spiritual suicide.⁶⁵¹

In a foreword added to *Hind Swaraj* in 1921, Gandhi refers to having 'come into contact with every known Indian anarchist in London', being impressed by their bravery but feeling that their zeal was misguided.⁶⁵² He felt that 'violence was no remedy for India's ills' and that India needed a 'higher weapon' for which in South Africa he had adopted the word *Satyagraha* (truth force).⁶⁵³ During a speech in 1916, Gandhi said 'I myself am an anarchist, but of another type', than the 'army of anarchists' in India who are impatient to 'conquer the conqueror'. On that occasion, he was addressing an audience mainly of students, but the meeting was also attended by 'an illustrious gathering of notables' including the viceroy and several maharajas. Towards the end of his speech, Gandhi declared: 'If we are to receive self-government we shall have to take

⁶⁴⁸ The Goldman section is followed by a blank page and then the bibliography.

⁶⁴⁹ Bhattacharya, *The Mahatma and the Poet*, p. 25.

⁶⁵⁰ 'Gandhi's politics manifest an implicit sacrificial tragicomedy, in its collective self-punishment version'. (Hogan, p. 268.)

⁶⁵¹ Tagore, letter to Andrews, 5 March 1921, in *Letters to a Friend*, pp. 128-33 (pp. 131-3).

⁶⁵² Gandhi, foreword, in *Hind Swaraj*, [p.1.] Anarchism is popularly associated with the targeted act of violent protest, or *attentat*. Goldman writes that those who have studied the character and personality of the *attentater* have found that 'theirs was the attitude of the social student, of the man who knows that beyond every vital act is a vital cause'. (Goldman, 'The Psychology of Violence', in *Red Emma Speaks*, pp. 256-79 (p. 257).)

⁶⁵³ Gandhi, foreword, in *Hind Swaraj*, [pp. 2-3.]

it. We shall never be granted self-government'.⁶⁵⁴ (Shortly afterwards the meeting was adjourned when the dignitaries left the platform.) To 'take self-government' implies open confrontation, and to do that without acts of violence, or collective protests liable to lead to violence, may be impossible, as Tagore saw during the Swadeshi period.⁶⁵⁵

Tagore's philosophy has marked similarities with that of the anarchist Herbert Read, who wrote that 'the social virtues necessary for a free life are more likely to be encouraged by developing an aesthetic sensibility in the young rather than by inculcating knowledge and science'. Read advocated a form of education where 'the good teacher is not a dictator, but rather a pupil more advanced in technique than others', who gives children 'that priceless possession which is self confidence'.⁶⁵⁶ As Tagore put it:

A most important truth, which we are apt to forget, is that a teacher can never truly teach unless he is still learning himself. A lamp can never light another lamp unless it continues to burn its own flame. The teacher who has come to the end of his subject, who has no living traffic with his knowledge, but merely repeats his lessons to his students, can only load their minds; he cannot quicken them. Truth not only must inform but inspire. If the inspiration dies out, and the information only accumulates, then truth loses its infinity. The greater part of our learning in the schools has been wasted because, for most of our teachers, their subjects are like dead specimens of once living things, with which they have a learned acquaintance, but no communication of life and love.⁶⁵⁷

Tagore's anarchism was unacknowledged, whereas Read published a pamphlet entitled, *The Philosophy of Anarchism*, in which he writes that to bring about a new world:

we must prefer the values of freedom and equality above all other values—above personal wealth, technical power and nationalism. In the past this view has been held by the world's greatest seers, but their followers have been a numerically insignificant minority, especially in the political sphere, where their doctrine has been called *anarchism*. It may be a tactical mistake to try and restate the eternal truth under a name which is ambiguous—for what is 'without ruler', the literal meaning of the word, is not necessarily 'without order', the meaning loosely ascribed to it.⁶⁵⁸

Read was 'primarily a man of letters',⁶⁵⁹ unlike Tagore, whose 'constructive swadeshi'

⁶⁵⁴ Gandhi, address at the opening ceremony of the Hindu University Central College in Benares, 4 February 1916, in *The Essential Gandhi: An Anthology of His Writings on His Life, Work, and Ideas* (New York: Vintage, 2002), ed. by Louis Fischer, pp. 111-5 (pp. 114-5).

⁶⁵⁵ Tagore learned his pacifism during the Swadeshi period, when he first encouraged and led collective protest against partition, but then saw how readily that leads to violence, thus witnessing the mindless hostility towards members of the out-group which Hogan passes on from experimental evidence in cognitive science.

⁶⁵⁶ Peter Marshall, 'Herbert Read', in *Demanding the Impossible: A History of Anarchism* (London: Harper Perennial, 2008 [1992]), pp. 587-93 (p. 589).

⁶⁵⁷ Tagore, 'An Eastern University', pp. 186-7.

⁶⁵⁸ Herbert Read, *The Philosophy of Anarchism* (London: Freedom, 1940), p. 6.

⁶⁵⁹ Marshall, p. 587.

was a practical programme, anarchistic in that it was to be organised and run locally, rather than controlled and administered centrally.

Read's comment that anarchism 'is not necessarily "without order"' is crucial if the term is to be applicable to Tagore's philosophy and practice. In the essay 'Nationalism in the West', Tagore refers to 'those who call themselves anarchists' saying that they 'resent the imposition of power, in any form whatever, upon the individual', but he understands their opposition to the power of the nation state which causes the 'dissolution of personal humanity'.⁶⁶⁰ In the essay 'Realisation in Action' in *Sadhana*, Tagore writes that 'joy expresses itself through law' so that '[t]he freed soul delights in accepting bonds, and does not seek to evade any of them, for in each does it feel the manifestation of an infinite energy whose joy is in creation'. He goes on to say that 'where there are no bonds, where there is the madness of license, the soul ceases to be free'.⁶⁶¹

In 'The Spirit of Freedom', in *Creative Unity*, Tagore warns his own countrymen against being taken in by the western notion of freedom, where people are 'flattered into believing that [...] they have the sovereign power in their hands', while their thoughts are being 'fashioned according to the plans of organised interest'.⁶⁶² Tagore goes on to denounce the 'commercial and political treadmill' of the West, the 'inhumanity and injustice', where those who have 'sacrificed their souls to the passion of profit-making and the drunkenness of power' are 'morally incapable of allowing freedom to others'. He tells how his experience in the West made him realise 'the immense power of money and of organised propaganda', whereas the truth is that 'real freedom is of the mind and spirit; it can never come to us from outside', and so someone 'only has freedom who ideally loves freedom himself and is glad to extend it to others'.⁶⁶³

In 'East and West' he writes of his visit to the battlefields of France, where 'ugly ridges' retained an impression of pain and death and brought a vision to his mind:

of a huge demon, which had no shape, no meaning, yet had two arms that could strike and break and tear, a gaping mouth that could devour, and bulging brains that could conspire and plan. It was a purpose, which had a living body, but no complete humanity to temper it. Because it was passion—belonging to life, and yet not having the wholeness of life—it was the most terrible of life's enemies.⁶⁶⁴

In 'The Nation' Tagore refers to being asked by western friends 'how to cope with this

⁶⁶⁰ 'Nationalism in the West', p. 11.

⁶⁶¹ Tagore, 'Realisation in Action', in *Sadhana*, pp. 119-34 (p. 119).

⁶⁶² Tagore, 'The Spirit of Freedom', in *Creative Unity*, pp. 131-40 (p. 134).

⁶⁶³ 'The Spirit of Freedom', pp. 135-6.

⁶⁶⁴ 'East and West', in *Creative Unity*, pp. 91-112 (pp. 96-7).

evil', the evil being the 'inflammatory contagion all over the world' of an 'aberration of a people, decked with the showy title of "patriotism"'.⁶⁶⁵ His answer is that he does not put his faith in 'any new institution' but that he puts his faith in 'the individuals all over the world who think clearly, feel nobly and act rightly, thus becoming the channels of moral truth'.⁶⁶⁶ These words, together with the cautionary letter to his own people in 'The Spirit of Freedom', show again how Tagore was a non-violent anarchist.

In order to understand the timing and the urgency behind Tagore's *Creative Unity* we need to bring in Nehru's *The Discovery of India* and Gandhi's *Hind Swaraj*, because the post-war period from 1919 to 1921 is a crucial turning point in all three works.

Nehru and Gandhi: Heroism and Sacrifice

Nehru's book includes a chapter on 'Nationalism Versus Imperialism',⁶⁶⁷ which begins by contrasting the palaces of India's new millionaires, enriched by the demand for jute and cotton during the war, and the 'slums and hovels of industrial workers'. Nehru writes that the peace brought 'repressive legislation and martial law in the Punjab', and a 'bitter sense of humiliation and a passionate anger filled our people'.⁶⁶⁸ They felt 'helpless in the grip of some all-powerful monster'. Peasantry and industrial workers were 'servile and fear-ridden'. The middle classes, many of them unemployed, were 'helpless, hopeless [and] sank ever deeper into the morass', clinging to 'dead forms of the past' or 'made themselves ineffectual copies of the west'.⁶⁶⁹

Suddenly the mood changes with the sentence: 'And then Gandhi came.' He was 'a current of fresh air'. He told those who live by exploitation to '[g]et off the backs of these peasants and workers'. He brought new shape and content to political freedom, a psychological change, 'a desire to submit no longer (to alien rule) whatever the consequences might be'.⁶⁷⁰ From this point on Nehru is well set up to tell a typical heroic narrative of the nation, with himself, Gandhi and Congress as India's champions against the usurping British Raj, and also tackling interference by communalist groups, the Moslim League and the Hindu Mahasabha.⁶⁷¹

All three narratives we are discussing contain accounts of India's glorious past.

⁶⁶⁵ 'The Nation', p. 152.

⁶⁶⁶ 'The Nation', p. 152-3.

⁶⁶⁷ Nehru, Chapter Eight: The Last Phase (2): 'Nationalism Versus Imperialism', in *The Discovery of India*, pp. 334-92.

⁶⁶⁸ Nehru, p. 335.

⁶⁶⁹ Nehru, pp. 334-6.

⁶⁷⁰ Nehru, pp. 336-7.

⁶⁷¹ Nehru, 'The Question of Minorities. the Moslem League. Mr. M.A. Jinnah', pp. 358-72.

Nehru's account comes before the 'Nationalism Versus Imperialism' chapter, and emphasises how India once had a thriving economy.⁶⁷² His own contribution to bringing about India's future economic triumph is his participation in the 'National Planning Committee',⁶⁷³ and his championship of 'Big Business Versus Cottage Industry'.⁶⁷⁴

Gandhi was a successful champion in Nehru's epic tale of Indian nationalism, with his weapons of non-violent resistance, self-sacrifice, and bringing the classes together with khadi clothing and spinning. However, his own story of *Hind Swaraj or Indian Home Rule* can be understood as a sacrificial tragicomedy, in which Gandhi sets aside his own cherished principles for the sake of a 'Parliamentary Swaraj', which inevitably meant the sacrifice of the kind of future which Gandhi wanted for India. The turning point for *Hind Swaraj* is again that crucial post-war period, and the sacrifice Gandhi is prepared to make is best understood from his own words, in the foreword he added in 1921:

The booklet is a severe condemnation of 'modern civilization.' It was written in 1908. My conviction is deeper to-day than ever. I feel that if India would discard 'modern civilization,' she can only gain by doing so.

But I would warn the reader against thinking that I am to-day aiming at the Swaraj described therein. I know that India is not ripe for it. It may seem an impertinence to say so. But such is my conviction. I am individually working for the self-rule pictured therein. But to-day my corporate activity is undoubtedly devoted to the attainment of Parliamentary Swaraj in accordance with the wishes of the people of India. I am not aiming at destroying railways or hospitals, though I would certainly welcome their natural destruction. Neither railways nor hospitals are a test of a high and pure civilization. At best they are a necessary evil. Neither adds one inch to the moral stature of a nation. Nor am I aiming at a permanent destruction of law courts, much as I regard it as a consummation devoutly to be wished for. Still less am I trying to destroy all machinery and mills. It requires a higher simplicity and renunciation than the people are to-day prepared for.

The only part of the programme which is now being carried out in its entirety is that of non-violence. But I regret to have to confess that even that is not being carried out in the spirit of the book. If it were, India would establish Swaraj in a day. If India adopted the doctrine of love as an active part of her religion and introduced it in her politics, Swaraj would descend upon India from heaven. But I am painfully aware that that event is far off as yet.⁶⁷⁵

Gandhi's compromise over his deepest convictions was not added to the pamphlet for tactical reasons thirteen years after publication. The need for some such expediency was already indicated in the main text of 1908; Gandhi simply brought it to the fore in 1921.

⁶⁷² There are many references to India's once thriving and then usurped economy, e.g. 'India's Foreign Trade' (pp. 193-4), 'The Economic Background of India. The Two Englands' (pp. 261-6) and 'The Destruction of India's Industry and the Decay of her Agriculture' (pp. 276-80).

⁶⁷³ Nehru, pp. 372-80.

⁶⁷⁴ Nehru, pp. 380-87.

⁶⁷⁵ Gandhi, foreword, in *Hind Swaraj*, [pp. 1-4 (p. 1)]. This text was also published in *Young India* in 1921, as noted by Bhattacharya in *The Mahatma and the Poet*, p. 33.

The book is set out as a dialogue between a 'Reader' and Gandhi, the 'Editor'. In the first section on 'Congress and its Officials', the Reader is impatient with the Editor's references to Congress, saying that 'Young India seems to ignore the Congress [which] is considered to be an instrument for perpetuating British Rule'. The Reader does not want to hear about men such as Dadabhai and Professor Gokhale who have encouraged cooperation with the 'English Governors',⁶⁷⁶ or about Englishmen who are supportive of India's self rule ambitions.⁶⁷⁷ But Gandhi explains that Congress did serve to bring the country together as a Nation.⁶⁷⁸

Gandhi next tells his impatient young Reader that the 'real awakening' to the need for Home Rule was the concerted opposition to the Partition of Bengal, and a realisation that it was futile to 'approach the Throne' for the redress of grievances, and so petitions had to be backed up by force and people 'must be capable of suffering'.⁶⁷⁹ Partition led to discontent and unrest, and impatience for Swaraj, but a lack of understanding about what Swaraj would be, so then Gandhi tells his Reader what Swaraj is *not* by describing at some length the pitiable 'condition of England'.⁶⁸⁰ The Reader next asks what civilisation means, and Gandhi refers to a work called, 'Civilization: Its Cause and Cure' by a 'great English writer' (Edward Carpenter).⁶⁸¹ He goes on to condemn the belief that civilisation consists of improvements in housing, clothing, technology, printed books and newspapers, factories and mines enriching millionaires, doctors curing previously unknown diseases, irreligion, intoxication, women labouring in factories and demanding suffrage.⁶⁸²

Next, in 'Why Was India Lost?' the Reader asks: 'If civilisation is a disease, and if it has attacked England[,] why has she been able to take India, and why is she able to retain it?'⁶⁸³ Gandhi's reply is: 'The English have not taken India; we have given it to them.' India did this by assisting the officers of the 'Company Bahadur' (East India Company as ruler), being tempted by their silver and buying their goods, also by relying

⁶⁷⁶ In a section about various struggles and disagreements entitled 'Heavy Industry Begins. Tilak and Gokhale. Separate Electorates' (pp. 330-1), Nehru mentions 'the old patriarch of the Congress, Dadabhai Naorji', 'father of the nation', being 'brought out of retirement', and also Gopal Krishna Gokhale, a very able young leader.

⁶⁷⁷ Gandhi, 'Congress and its Officials', in *Hind Swaraj*, pp. 1-8.

⁶⁷⁸ 'Congress and its Officials', pp. 7-8.

⁶⁷⁹ 'The Partition of Bengal', pp. 8-11.

⁶⁸⁰ 'Discontent and Unrest', pp. 11-12. 'What is Swaraj?', pp. 12-16. 'The Condition of England', pp. 16-20.

⁶⁸¹ 'Civilisation', pp. 20-5 (p. 20). Gandhi provides an appendix to the pamphlet, 'Some Authorities: Testimonies by Eminent Men', with firstly a list of works including Carpenter's essay, also Ruskin's 'Unto This Last', and works by Tolstoy and Thoreau, followed by several extracts, all by western writers, showing that Gandhi's ideas are not taken exclusively from Indian thought. (*Hind Swaraj*, pp. i-viii.)

⁶⁸² 'Civilisation', pp. 21-5.

⁶⁸³ 'Why Was India Lost?', pp. 25-9 (p. 25).

on the Company to resolve conflicts between warring princes or Hindus and Mahomedans at daggers drawn.⁶⁸⁴

Several sections follow this, on aspects of the ‘Condition of India’ which Gandhi would change, saying that ‘[r]ailways, doctors and lawyers have ruined the country’. Then the question arises ‘How can India become Free?’, and at this point we see the reason for Gandhi’s sacrifice of all his desired goals for the sake of ‘Parliamentary Swaraj’. The Editor says: ‘I do not expect my views to be accepted all of a sudden [... but] the removal of the cause of a disease results in the removal of the disease. Similarly, if the cause of India’s slavery be removed, India can become free.’⁶⁸⁵

Gandhi’s ‘Mistake’

In *The Discovery of India*, Nehru writes that it is instructive to compare and contrast Tagore and Gandhi, ‘the two outstanding and dominating figures of India in this first half of the twentieth century’, because ‘[n]o two persons could be so different from one another’. Tagore is ‘the aristocratic artist, turned democrat with proletarian sympathies, representing essentially the cultural tradition of India, the tradition of accepting life in the fullness thereof and going through it with song and dance’. Gandhi, on the other hand, is ‘more a man of the people, almost the embodiment of the Indian peasant, represented the other ancient tradition of India, that of renunciation and asceticism’.⁶⁸⁶

We find an opposite view expressed in 1986, during a symposium to mark the 125th anniversary of Tagore’s birth, focussed on ‘Rabindranath Tagore and the Challenges of Today’. In her paper on ‘Tagore and Gandhiji on Village Reconstruction’, Nandini Joshi, economics teacher and social worker, declares that ‘there is a remarkable affinity between the thoughts, visions and actions of these two great contemporary leaders of India’.⁶⁸⁷ Her sources include Tagore’s essay ‘The Cult of the Charkha’, his essays on the village and on cooperation, mainly from *Towards Universal Man*, and Gandhi’s *Hind Swaraj*. Joshi’s argument centres on a key text, which is Gandhi’s contribution to the discussion at a ‘Conference of the Charkha Sangh’ in 1944, in which he declared that he had made a mistake with ‘the way the Charkha and Khadi were introduced’:

⁶⁸⁴ ‘Why Was India Lost?’, pp. 26-7.

⁶⁸⁵ Gandhi, ‘How can India become Free?’, in *Hind Swaraj*, pp. 57-61.

⁶⁸⁶ Nehru, pp. 318-9.

⁶⁸⁷ Nandini Joshi, ‘Tagore and Gandhiji on Village Reconstruction’, in *Rabindranath Tagore and the Challenges of Today*, ed. by Bhudeb Chaudhuri, and K.G. Subramanyan (Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1988), pp. 194-201.

I first introduced Khadi and only later studied its implications and experimented with it. I find that I have been deceiving myself. What I gave to the people was money but not the real substance—self-reliance. I gave them money in the form of wages and assured them that it contained Swaraj. People took me at my word and believed me, and continue to believe me. But I have now my own misgivings as to how far such Khadi can lead to Swaraj. I am afraid that Khadi has no future if we continue it as today.⁶⁸⁸

Joshi writes that it is ‘a testimony to Tagore’s genius and greatness that he detected something wrong with the prevailing concept of the Charkha and also protested against it consistently, even though Gandhiji and his Charkha doctrine had an overwhelming influence in the country’. She indicates that Tagore failed at that time to make Gandhi see the deficiencies he only came to realise much later in his life. She mentions that at Sriniketan Tagore introduced ‘training in pottery, basket-making, paper-making, leatherwork, woodwork, weaving and other crafts’.⁶⁸⁹ We know that Tagore’s goal was to help villages achieve cooperative self-reliance, and was mortified when his son turned these crafts into commercial ventures. Joshi found in her own work that to use the Charkha to produce cloth by their own effort gives joy and dignity to the poorest village people.

In fact, Gandhi was very committed to village work himself, and pursued what he called a ‘Constructive Program’ which included encouraging many essential village industries, including home-spinning and weaving.⁶⁹⁰ Gandhi’s ‘mistake’, if we can call it that, was to use Khadi and the Charkha as political tools in the interest of achieving ‘Parliamentary Swaraj’, having resigned himself to waiting for Hind Swaraj proper. In the political turning point of 1919 to 1922 which we have been examining, Gandhi gave the Charkha a particular symbolic role. It was the ‘Karma Yoga of our age’, as Gandhi told Nehru in a letter in February 1922, urging him whilst in jail not to ‘be disgusted with the spinning wheel’ on which ‘we have pinned our faith’,⁶⁹¹ hence Tagore’s essay ‘The Cult of the Charkha’.⁶⁹²

Writing to Nehru in 1945, a year after Gandhi confessed the ‘mistake’ Joshi refers to in her paper, Gandhi sets out his view that ‘the unit of society should be a village, or call it a small and manageable group of people who would, in the ideal, be self-reliant (in the matter of their vital requirements) as a unit and bound together in bonds of

⁶⁸⁸ Joshi, p. 196.

⁶⁸⁹ Joshi, pp. 197-8.

⁶⁹⁰ *The Essential Gandhi*, pp. 258-63.

⁶⁹¹ Gandhi, letter to Nehru, 19 February 1922, in *A Bunch of Old Letters: Written mostly to Jawaharlal Nehru, and some written by him*, ed. by Jawaharlal Nehru (Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1958), pp. 23-5.

⁶⁹² Tagore, ‘The Cult of the Charkha’, in *The Mahatma and the Poet*, pp. 99-112. Tagore raised further questions on the subject in ‘Striving for Swaraj’, pp. 113-21.

mutual cooperation and inter-dependence'.⁶⁹³ Joshi is correct that on this Tagore and Gandhi were in accord, but we can see from Bhattacharya's assembly of their letters and debates, that when events catapulted Gandhi into leadership of a mass movement, Tagore became 'uncomfortably at variance' with him on his methods.⁶⁹⁴

Gandhi believed from 1908, through 1921 and beyond, that having ousted the British and achieved parliamentary control of the country, the disease of 'modern civilisation' could be cured and the true civilisation of India revived. Bhattacharya points out that, although Gandhi regarded Nehru as his heir, the latter was opposed to Gandhi's vision of a future India as expressed in *Hind Swaraj*.⁶⁹⁵ Nehru's aims for India emerge in his book as he relates discussions with Gandhi, Congress members and others. He was an enthusiast for 'modern civilisation' and progress: attaining national self-sufficiency to meet domestic needs of food, raw materials and manufactured goods, building infrastructure and public utility services, with a large measure of regulation and state ownership, and basic education to fit people for work.⁶⁹⁶

If, as Nehru wrote, Tagore and Gandhi were 'the two outstanding and dominating figures of India in this first half of the twentieth century', how is it India took Nehru's path and not theirs? There is perhaps no history more complicated and fascinating than that of India – and of the major players in the drama – between the end of World War One and Independence. Ironically, the 'revolt against the West' revealed by Pankaj Mishra in *From the Ruins of Empire*, eventually (after a period of Japanese imperialism and a second World War) remade Asia according to western models: either American representative democracy, or Soviet Communism, or combinations of the two.⁶⁹⁷ On the failure of western ideals, Mishra quotes a poem by American educated poet, Yonejiro Noguchi, once a friend of Tagore:

America and England in the old days were for me countries of Justice:
America was the country of Whitman,
England the country of Browning:
But now they are dissolute countries fallen into the pit of wealth,
Immoral countries, craving after unpardonable dreams.⁶⁹⁸

Mishra believes that a turning point for Asian nationalists was when they were refused participation in the Paris Peace Conference in 1919, after 'President Woodrow Wilson

⁶⁹³ Gandhi, letter to Nehru, 13 November 1945, in *A Bunch of Old Letters*, pp. 359-60.

⁶⁹⁴ Bhattacharya, Introduction, in *The Mahatma and the Poet*, pp. 5-6.

⁶⁹⁵ Bhattacharya, *Talking Back*, p. 113.

⁶⁹⁶ Nehru, *The Discovery of India*, pp. 372-92.

⁶⁹⁷ Mishra, 'Chapter Six: Asia Remade', in *From the Ruins of Empire*, pp. 242-297.

⁶⁹⁸ Mishra, p. 247.

made plain his regard for weaker nations and the principle of national self-determination'.⁶⁹⁹ Hay observes that Tagore put forward a 'dichotomy between ruralism and urbanism [as] a full-blown opposition between the peaceful village-centred society of India and the aggressive nation-states of the West'.⁷⁰⁰ To express Tagore's aims and ideals as a 'full-blown opposition' does not seem right, since, as Gandhi insightfully remarks: 'Tagore has a horror of everything negative'.⁷⁰¹ Eminent Tagore scholar, Viktors Ivbulis, describes Tagore's fond hopes for the future of his experiments:

Tagore's idea was that you light a lamp of enlightenment and progress in one village and it should start burning in other villages. Absolutely the same was the background for his educational institutions. He had to struggle with enormous financial difficulties and with very little support even from his country's best minds. Now his institutions are well financed (in the situation of India) and still they move farther and farther away from Tagore's ideals.⁷⁰²

Tagore's vision was of a world where every university is also a village, and every village a university, as he implies in 'An Eastern University':

Educational institutions, in order to obtain their fulness of truth, must have close association with this economic life. The highest mission of education is to help us to realise the inner principle of the unity of all knowledge and all the activities of our social and spiritual being. Society in its early stage was held together by its economic co-operation, when all its members felt in unison a natural interest in their right to live. Civilisation could never have been started at all if such was not the case. And civilisation will fall to pieces if it never again realises the spirit of mutual help and the common sharing of benefits in the elemental necessities of life. The idea of such economic co-operation should be made the basis of our University. It must not only instruct, but live; not only think, but produce.⁷⁰³

As Ivbulis observes, Tagore's university lost its way after it was absorbed into the Indian educational system, but this was happening before Tagore died. In 1941, Krishna Kripalani wrote a paper entitled 'The Poet as Educationalist', in the special issue of *Visva-Bharati Quarterly* to mark Tagore's eightieth birthday.⁷⁰⁴ Kripalani almost breaks with the hagiographic tendency of the rest of the volume when he mentions critics who dismissed Tagore's educational experiment at Santiniketan as 'a mere poet's fancy', and 'a haunt of lotus-eaters', and then says that it undoubtedly is a poet's dream and could

⁶⁹⁹ Mishra, 'Chapter Four: 1919, Changing the History of the World', in *From the Ruins of Empire*, pp. 184-215 (p. 187).

⁷⁰⁰ Hay, p. 32.

⁷⁰¹ Gandhi, 'The Poet's Anxiety', in *The Mahatma and the Poet*, pp. 65-8 (p. 66).

⁷⁰² Latvian Tagore scholar, Prof. Viktors Ivbulis, who studied for many years at Visva-Bharati, personal communication, 22/9/2011.

⁷⁰³ Tagore, 'An Eastern University', pp. 199-200.

⁷⁰⁴ K.R. Kripalani, 'The Poet as Educationalist', pp. 225-234.

become a haunt of lotus eaters, for its beauty will attract many idlers. But he blames ‘its defects and imperfections’ on us, ‘we who have failed to justify the trust he has left to us’.⁷⁰⁵

When Tagore wrote the essay ‘An Eastern University’, and included it in *Creative Unity*, it was meant to be the happy ending for humankind. In the first four essays he describes us as a species full of creative potential. Then he recounts a major obstacle to our coming together: a great rift has opened up as the East, dominated by the West, becomes demoralised, lured into the cult of the nation, and tempted by an illusory freedom. And then, at last, we do come together, and the great mind of man becomes one.

‘The Great Mind of Man Is One’⁷⁰⁶

We have seen already in Tagore’s books of English essays how interested Tagore was in science. His fascination began when his father introduced him as a boy to astronomy, and it continued on to when Einstein and Heisenberg talked to him about particle physics. Along the way he developed a particular interest in human evolution and anthropology. He challenged any fixity of scientific ideas and attitudes, especially if they seem to deny humanity and spirituality. We examine Tagore and science in the next chapter, focussed on the last of the book of essays, *The Religion of Man*.

As a poet Tagore was keenly observant and curious. As an amateur scientist he observed the world and people, and speculated about the causes of phenomena and patterns of behaviour. Although he carried out no controlled experiments or systematic surveys, he accumulated a vast amount of data, particularly about how people lived and how they acted, normally and under pressure. This came from his involvement over several decades with village people, trying to establish new systems to solve their problems, also from his observations of rural and urban discontent and unrest in Bengal, and from his travels around India and the world. With his vocation as a poet, and his disdain for the hurly-burly of politics, he did have a degree of detachment. Nevertheless, Gandhi’s rejoinder to Tagore’s criticism of the ‘Cult of the Charkha’, that the ‘Poet lives in a magnificent world of his own creation’, so his words can be dismissed as ‘a poet’s licence’, is quite wrong.⁷⁰⁷ Bhattacharya having assembled their letters and debates, one can see how often they were at cross-purposes, and how insecure and

⁷⁰⁵ Kripalani, p. 225.

⁷⁰⁶ ‘An Eastern University’, p. 172.

⁷⁰⁷ Gandhi, ‘The Poet and the charkha’, in *The Mahatma and the Poet*, pp. 122-6 (p. 123).

inconsistent Gandhi was during the 1920s, as is also shown by his disagreements with Nehru and others in that period.⁷⁰⁸

As we have seen, cognitive science is a major theme of Hogan's book *Understanding Nationalism*. Tagore cannot be called a cognitive scientist (he disliked professional labels anyway) but in 'An Eastern University' he sets out, with extraordinary clarity, a workable solution to a problem identified in the recent cognitive science experiments to which Hogan refers. Tagore knew from countless observations from life that people are prone to being suspicious and hostile towards anyone who is not of their own kind. From his interest in evolution he would have known that such tendencies must have had survival value in primitive societies: when an intruder appears, whether wild beast or raiding party, driving it off is the best response. Tagore also knew that situations where people encounter different others were becoming unavoidable in the modern world, and that people were actually being encouraged to identify with their own groups and to compete with others, and even fight them. He recognised that if an attitude or behaviour seems part of human nature,⁷⁰⁹ and is undesirable, the solution is to teach another way:

In the beginning of man's history his first social object was to form a community, to grow into a people. At that early period, individuals were gathered together within geographical enclosures. But in the present age, with its facility of communication, geographical barriers have almost lost their reality, and the great federation of men, which is waiting either to find its true scope or to break asunder in a final catastrophe, is not a meeting of individuals, but of various human races. Now the problem before us is of one single country, which is this earth, where the races as individuals must find both their freedom of self-expression and their bond of federation. Mankind must realise a unity, wider in range, deeper in sentiment, stronger in power than ever before. Now that the problem is large, we have to solve it on a bigger scale, to realise the God in man by a larger faith and to build the temple of our faith on a sure and world-wide basis.⁷¹⁰

Constructive Swadeshi at Sriniketan and 'Creative Unity' in Practice

There is a plethora of information on Tagore's travels, lecture tours and fundraising efforts in 1920-21: in biographies,⁷¹¹ in Stephen Hay's and Sujit Mukherjee's studies of Tagore in America,⁷¹² in British press reports,⁷¹³ in his son Rathindranath's memoir of

⁷⁰⁸ E.g. letters Gandhi to Nehru, January 4 and 17, 1928, in *A Bunch of Old Letters*, pp. 55-8.

⁷⁰⁹ 'Human nature' in this context could be innate or acquired very early in life – see footnote 633 above, this thesis, p. 127.

⁷¹⁰ 'An Eastern University', pp. 170-1.

⁷¹¹ For example, in Kripalani, 'World in One Nest', in *Rabindranath Tagore: A Biography*, pp. 267-301 (pp. 278-85).

⁷¹² Hay, 'Rabindranath Tagore in America', pp. 452-5. Sujit Mukherjee, *Passage to America: The Reception of Rabindranath Tagore in the United States, 1912-1941*, pp. 214-5.

⁷¹³ *Imagining Tagore*, pp. 327-41.

the European tour,⁷¹⁴ and in his correspondence.⁷¹⁵ Bhattacharya provides accounts of Tagore's financial circumstances, including archival evidence of how he was under surveillance by the authorities, who warned potential funders against him. Tagore's letters to Andrews and Rothenstein shed light on Tagore's feelings at the time.⁷¹⁶ Many commentators, with the fundraising efforts in mind, judge the results of his tour of Europe and America to have been disappointing at best, with the compilers of his *Selected Letters* reporting that 'he left America with a feeling of angry failure'.⁷¹⁷

Despite these setbacks, in 1922, Tagore was full of optimism for his Santiniketan Institution. As he wrote to Geddes shortly after *Creative Unity* was published:

My first idea was to emancipate children's minds from the dead grip of a mechanical method and a narrow purpose. This idea has gone on developing itself, comprehending all different branches of life's activities from Arts to Agriculture. [...] Lately it has come to us, almost like a sudden discovery, that our Institution is to represent that creative force which is acting in the bosom of the present age; passing through repeated conflicts and reconciliations, failures and readjustments, while making for the realisation of the spiritual unity of human races.⁷¹⁸

A major boost to Tagore's hopes was the arrival at Santiniketan in late 1921 of the agricultural economist, Leonard Elmhirst, personally funded by the American heiress Dorothy Straight. Elmhirst was to take a leading role in the work to bring together the educational enterprise and the surrounding villages, at the same time investigating and finding remedies for their state of decay.⁷¹⁹ Early in 1922, a start was made on establishing a university department for rural reconstruction, which was later given the name 'Sriniketan', which means 'an abode of wellbeing'.⁷²⁰

The site of Sriniketan was a farm which Tagore had bought near the village of Surul, about a mile and a half from Santiniketan.⁷²¹ Two little books: *Poet and Plowman* and *Rabindranath Tagore: Pioneer in Education*, containing contributions by Elmhirst and by Tagore, bring vividly to life the close working relationship which developed between them for a few years. In his chapter on 'The Foundation of Sriniketan' in *Pioneer in*

⁷¹⁴ Rathindranath Tagore, 'A Travel Diary' (and other relevant sections), in *On the Edges of Time*, pp. 128-65.

⁷¹⁵ 'The founding of a university (1920-1921)', in *Selected Letters of Rabindranath Tagore*, pp. 233-84.

⁷¹⁶ *Letters to a Friend*, Chapters V-VIII, pp. 81-197. '1920-1922 "A Passing Breeze"', in *Imperfect Encounter*, pp. 267-97.

⁷¹⁷ *Selected Letters*, p. 233.

⁷¹⁸ Tagore, letter to Geddes, 2 May 1922, in *A Meeting of Two Minds*, pp. 68-9 (p. 69).

⁷¹⁹ Leonard Elmhirst, 'Personal Reminiscences', in *Poet and Plowman*, pp. 15-31 (pp. 15-17).

⁷²⁰ Uma Das Gupta, 'Using a Poet's Archive to Write the History of a University: Rabindranath Tagore and Visva-Bharati', *Asian and African Studies XIV*, 1 (2010), 9-16 (p. 12).

⁷²¹ Elmhirst, 'Personal Reminiscences', in *Poet and Plowman*, pp. 15-31 (pp. 15-18). Sriniketan is first mentioned in the Contents, with Elmhirst's 'Sriniketan Diary', pp. 51-162.

Education, Elmhirst includes a number of extracts from Tagore's letters to him during the 1920s. These reveal how this work embodied Tagore's conception of reality, in a human and earthy sense, and also in a deeply philosophical and religious sense. Two of these letters will suffice to show what Sriniketan meant for the poet:

You know my heart is with Surul. I feel that it has life in it—it does not deal with abstractions, but has its roots deep in the heart of living reality. You may be absolutely certain that it will be able to weather all storms and spread its branches wide.⁷²²

I believe I have the power of vision which seeks its realisation in some concrete form. Unless our different works in Visva-Bharati are luminous with the fire of vision, I myself can have no place in them. That is why all the time when Sriniketan has been struggling to grow into a form, I was intently wishing that it should not only have a shape, but also light; so that it might transcend its immediate limits of time, space and some special purpose.⁷²³

These letters show how optimistic for the eventual realisation of his vision Tagore felt during the 1920s. In 1930, Tagore wrote to Elmhirst, reflecting on the time when they were in Argentina together in 1924:

I was young and old at the same time, when my aspirations had the sureness of maturity and, not having passed through the buffetings of experience, were youthful in their ferment of unbounded expectancy. Since then the burden of responsibility has grown heavy and its path intricate. I have come to know the inevitable limitation of ideas when solidified in an institution.⁷²⁴

Tagore was delighted with Elmhirst's down to earth approach, illustrated by the way Elmhirst contrived to persuade the students at Surul to be their own sweepers, by initially emptying the latrine buckets himself.⁷²⁵ Tagore wrote to Elmhirst of the 'filmy web of respectability that shuts me off from intimate touch with Mother Dust' and that '[i]t is something unclean like prudery itself to have to ask a sweeper to serve that deity who is in charge of the primal cradle of life'.⁷²⁶

One also sees Tagore's shrewdness over his deployment of the American-trained English agriculturalist. He discouraged Elmhirst from learning Bengali, warning him not to 'make the same mistake that so many missionaries have made [and] go out and

⁷²² Tagore, letter to Elmhirst, 13 November 1922, in Elmhirst, 'The Foundation of Sriniketan', in *Rabindranath Tagore, Pioneer in Education: Essays and Exchanges between Rabindranath Tagore and Leonard Elmhirst* (London: John Murray, 1961), pp. 18-43 (p. 33).

⁷²³ Tagore, letter to Elmhirst, 25 June 1924, in Elmhirst, p. 34. Both these letters are reproduced in full in 'The Tagore-Elmhirst Correspondence', in *Purabi*, pp. 72-121 (pp. 77-8, 83-4).

⁷²⁴ Tagore, letter to Elmhirst, 10 July 1930, in *Purabi*, pp. 106-7.

⁷²⁵ Elmhirst, 'Sriniketan Diary', pp. 119-20.

⁷²⁶ Tagore, letter to Elmhirst, 31 March 1922, in Elmhirst, 'Sriniketan Diary', pp. 145-6.

visit a village alone'. Elmhirst recalls Tagore's words of instruction to him:

I hope you will never visit a village alone, or ask questions of villagers without using a member of your staff or one of your students as an interpreter. The task of getting to know and to understand the village and its people must be carried out by Indians, but from you and other visitors they should learn what kind of questions to ask and how to ask them.⁷²⁷

There were two problems and two solutions behind this advice. Tagore knew that villagers either accepted any difficulties they experienced apathetically and fatalistically, or looked to officials to resolve them. Tagore wanted the villagers to learn to help themselves cooperatively, with the help of local advice centres, for which Sriniketan was to be a model. Tagore also knew that young people brought up in an urban environment, like his students, had lost touch with how village people lived, and he wanted them to engage with villagers and their difficulties in a constructive and sympathetic way.

Tagore withdrew Elmhirst from his leadership position in 1923 'to give the Indian staff of the young Institute a chance to find its own feet', and took him travelling in China, Japan, Argentina and Italy.⁷²⁸ Then in 1925, in Elmhirst's words: 'He agreed to release me so that I could marry Dorothy Whitney Straight, who had financed the enterprise at Surul from the outset and who continued to do so until 1947'.⁷²⁹ Then the Elmhirsts embarked on their own 'Experiment in Rural Reconstruction' at Dartington Hall.⁷³⁰

Tagore and Elmhirst kept up a lively and intimate correspondence until Tagore's death in August 1941. Fifty years later, their letters were brought together from the archives at Santiniketan and Dartington, for publication in *Purabi: A Miscellany in Memory of Rabindranath Tagore*.⁷³¹ One very lengthy letter from Elmhirst suggests another motive for Tagore's cautionary approach to employing a foreigner to launch Sriniketan. Elmhirst refers to having received 'a good letter' from Charlie Andrews in which the latter refers to having discussed an article by Elmhirst with Gandhi, who had said:

⁷²⁷ Elmhirst, 'The Foundation of Sriniketan', in *Rabindranath Tagore, Pioneer in Education*, pp. 18-43 (p. 21).

⁷²⁸ Elmhirst, 'The Foundation of Sriniketan', p. 33.

⁷²⁹ Elmhirst, 'The Foundation of Sriniketan', p. 33.

⁷³⁰ Peter Cox, 'The Background', in *The Arts at Dartington 1940 – 1983: A Personal Account* (Totnes: Peter Cox with Dartington Hall Trust Archive, 2005), pp. 6-14 (p. 6).

⁷³¹ 'The Tagore-Elmhirst Correspondence, 1921-1941', in *Purabi*, pp. 72-126.

He [...] is relying on too many props. The ultimate problem is how to do away with every prop and yet get through, and that is why I insist on khaddar, not for its economic value but for its moral significance as a test of character and endurance. Strip the experiment of Elmhirst, of funds from America and of Government support and – what then? Will it stand! He has not realised how hard it is to get to bedrock in India, the people have become so dependant.⁷³²

One way to read this statement is that Gandhi's approach was every bit as reliant on 'props' as that of Elmhirst and Tagore, just different ones: the imposition of khaddar and the associated moral testing and ascetic rules. Tagore would have agreed that village people had lost the ability to help themselves, and he intended the work at Sriniketan to provide them with the skills to become self reliant.

I mentioned in the chapter on *Personality* how there was a rift between Tagore and Rothenstein in 1920 to 1922 which Rothenstein would recall as 'a passing breeze'. The issue they quarrelled over was Tagore's 'feeling of irritation' with Rothenstein's 'suggestion that a board should be appointed in England with the object of selecting the students and teachers who were to come to us (Santiniketan) from the West'.⁷³³ Tagore was afraid of his university being 'dominated over by bureaucrats'.⁷³⁴ He was averse to all structures, whether for administration, planning or control, even when proposed by friends and colleagues. Tagore's correspondence with Geddes, Andrews and Elmhirst shows this. And yet Tagore was perfectly capable of being systematic and organised. Das Gupta provides an example when she sets out Tagore's scheme for staff and students at Visva-Bharati:

Four different categories of people were associated with Visva-Bharati as an institution. First, there were the professors or the *acharyas*, men of scholarly learning such as Professor Levi to whom every opportunity was to be given for pursuing their research. Second, there were the advanced students or the *chhatra* who had already attained proficiency in a particular field elsewhere but came to Visva-Bharati for research; the famed Indian linguist Suniti Kumar Chattopadhyaya, then a young scholar at Calcutta University, was one such advanced student of Visva-Bharati who commuted between Calcutta and Santiniketan. Rabindranath personally identified such individuals and invited them to join the institution and enrich the classes. Within the student category was included the teachers of the Santiniketan school who became the students of the visiting professors. Third, there were the teachers or the *adhyapaka* recruited by Visva-Bharati as regular faculty. Fourth, there were the *bandhab*, or 'friends of Visva-Bharati', an outside support group who would occasionally come to Visva-Bharati on invitation as resident scholars. This included writers and artists. The British sociologist-philosopher Patrick

⁷³² Elmhirst, letter to Tagore, 22 August 1924, in 'The Tagore-Elmhirst Correspondence', pp. 85-7 (p. 86). I have put an ellipsis at the point where 'Elmhirst' in parentheses has been added by the editors. My sense from the published debates between Tagore and Gandhi in 1925, is that Gandhi was referring to Tagore 'relying on too many props'. (Gandhi, 'The Poet and the charkha', in *The Mahatma and the Poet: Letters and Debates between Gandhi and Tagore 1915-1941*, pp. 122-6 (p. 125).)

⁷³³ Tagore, letter to Rothenstein, 13 July 1922, in *Imperfect Encounter*, pp. 292-3 (p. 292).

⁷³⁴ Tagore, p. 292.

Geddes came as one such ‘friend’ to Santiniketan. Some ‘friends’ were donors themselves, some were raising funds in India and abroad.⁷³⁵

It is evident from this that Tagore was not averse to hierarchies at a local level, so one would not call him an ‘anarchist’ in a strictly literal sense.⁷³⁶ Das Gupta goes on to list some of the visiting professors in different fields who came to Visva-Bharati from different parts of the world during the 1920s and 1930s, showing that Tagore’s hard work was fruitful.⁷³⁷ Tagore wrote to Rothenstein saying that Santiniketan was ‘poor in resources and equipment but it has the wealth of truth that no money can buy’ and that he was ‘proud of the fact that it is not a machine-made article perfectly modelled in [a Western] workshop—it is our very own’.⁷³⁸

Reading *Creative Unity* as a story has opened up rich seams of meaning. This collection of lectures and essays is not ‘essentially the same’ as Tagore’s earlier books, as Hay and the American critics cited by Mukherjee claimed. The specifics about the community economy set out in ‘An Eastern University’ have added substance to the general social solutions which Tagore indicated in *Nationalism*.

Tagore wrote in ‘An Eastern University’ that the institution was originally conceived as a ‘centre of Indian learning’ which would ‘provide for the co-ordinate study of all these different cultures,—the Vedic, the Puranic, the Buddhist, the Jain, the Islamic, the Sikh and the Zoroastrian’, but its aspirations grew:

The Chinese, Japanese, and Tibetan will also have to be added; for, in the past, India did not remain isolated within her own boundaries. Therefore, in order to learn what she was, in her relation to the whole continent of Asia, these cultures too must be studied. Side by side with them must finally be placed the Western culture. For only then shall we be able to assimilate this last contribution to our common stock. A river flowing within banks is truly our own, and it can contain its due tributaries; but our relations with a flood can only prove disastrous.⁷³⁹

Tagore wrote to Andrews in December 1921, following the rapturous welcome he had received in continental Europe, saying that he now saw his mission as ‘the mission of the present age. It was to make the meeting of East and West fruitful in truth’.⁷⁴⁰

⁷³⁵ Das Gupta, ‘From School to an International University: Visva-Bharati’, in *An Illustrated Life*, pp. 77-90 (82-3).

⁷³⁶ Tagore’s description in ‘Society and State’ of the role of a responsible king or rich man in a traditional society is also indicative of his view that local structures are acceptable.

⁷³⁷ Das Gupta, p. 83.

⁷³⁸ Tagore, letter to Rothenstein, 24 April 1921, in *Imperfect Encounter*, pp. 283-4 (p. 283).

⁷³⁹ ‘An Eastern University’, p. 195. A very similar passage occurs in ‘The Centre of Indian Culture’. p. 224.

⁷⁴⁰ Tagore, letter to Andrews, quoted in Das Gupta, *An Illustrated Life*, p. 79.

I began this chapter with a discussion of the provenance of ‘An Eastern University’, which was probably a leaflet or pamphlet before it was the final essay in *Creative Unity*. I compared ‘A Centre of Indian Culture’ which Tagore had used for his tour of Indian cities, with ‘An Eastern University’ which he took to cities in Europe and America, and drew the conclusion that ‘Tagore was communicating different things to his urban audiences in India and in the West, and then taking both in the same direction – towards the village’. Visva-Bharati was real life, with real people, many of them eminent academics from many parts of the world or aspiring students, but it seems that only those who were part of the work at Sriniketan had contact with surrounding villages, or were involved in food growing or other activities concerned with local self-reliance. For Tagore, the principle of ‘common sharing of life’ was the practical manifestation of the Creative Unity that is the subject of this book. It is ‘the One, the Infinite, through the harmony of the many’ which ‘is the object alike of our individual life and our society’.⁷⁴¹ Given his extensive knowledge of village people and how they lived and thought, we can say Tagore was a physical anthropologist. He was also a philosophical anthropologist, or ‘deep anthropologist’, as we have seen in the *Personality* essays in particular. Given his interest in science, Tagore might have likened the elaborate systems of relationships and duties in a traditional society to the immune system of the social body, applying social sanctions to rectify any lapses in responsible conduct, rather than having formal law and order imposed by the institutions of some remote government, or moral testing and ascetic rules paring life down to the basic necessities. We see in the next chapter how Tagore takes some of these ideas further in his last book of English essays, *The Religion of Man*.

⁷⁴¹ Introduction, *Creative Unity*, p. vi.

Chapter 6: *The Religion of Man*

His estimates of western civilization are searching and some of them written in acid — one reads much between the lines — but Tagore recognizes the true strength of the west and the faults of the east. The lectures are actually a superb and haunting criticism and evaluation of life from the viewpoint of an immemorial philosophy by a wise man. — *Christian Century*

This is a book for everyone: a book whose human interest and pervading charm assure it a wide appeal and lasting value. It is not a philosophical work, as its author repeatedly warns us; in fact, its one semiphilosophical chapter (the first) may well be omitted. Its value is religious and poetical: like the essays of Emerson, it is primarily a document of the spiritual life. — *Journal of Religion*⁷⁴²

The quotations above, from reviews of *The Religion of Man* in two religious journals, were reproduced on the back cover of the birth centenary paperback edition of the book. They suggest that the reputation Tagore acquired from 1912 to 1917, as the mystic poet who occasionally blurted out vitriolic criticisms of the materialistic West, was very persistent. It has been a central aim of this thesis to look at why Tagore was perceived in this way, and to enlarge upon what Tagore actually said in his addresses to audiences in Europe and America, by bringing in contextual information about Tagore's experiences and encounters during the foreign tours, and, where necessary, from his activities in India. The English essays were products of the twenty years of Tagore's life when he was most involved with bringing his ideas to the West. *Sadhana* and *The Religion of Man* make the opening and closing brackets around this period.

The 1920s had been a time of progress and optimism – with an extraordinary travel itinerary. Between the publication of *Creative Unity* and that of *The Religion of Man*, Tagore went on seven foreign tours to over thirty countries: China, Japan and Argentina in 1924, twelve European countries in 1926, nine parts of South East Asia in 1927, plus others in 1929, and China and Japan again, plus Canada and the USA, then in 1930 eight European countries including Russia, and also the USA.⁷⁴³

The Religion of Man was published ten years before Tagore's death in 1941, and the 1930s were to be a decade of disappointment where his educational ideal was concerned:

I have no special love for the school and college department of Santiniketan, a borrowed cage that treats the student's minds as captive birds whose sole human value is judged according to the mechanical repetition of lessons prescribed by an education dispensation

⁷⁴² Quotations from reviews, back cover, *The Religion of Man: Being the Hibbert Lectures for 1930* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961 [1931]).

⁷⁴³ 'A Chronicle of Eighty Years', pp. 479-92.

foreign to the soil.⁷⁴⁴

In each of the earlier chapters focussed on one of Tagore's books of English essays, I have discussed Tagore's relevant activities during and also prior to each particular tour. The immediate background to *The Religion of Man* itself was Tagore's visit to England in May and June 1930 to deliver the Hibbert lectures, which were enthusiastically received and reported. Between this event and the publication of *The Religion of Man*, Tagore spent two weeks in Russia, 'a dream fulfilled' after years when Tagore showed considerable interest in developments in Russia following 1918, especially the work being carried out in education and collective farming.⁷⁴⁵ *The Religion of Man* was published in June 1931, and has since been seen by Tagore scholars and enthusiasts as a valuable summary of his philosophy.⁷⁴⁶ The book has also excited interest in Tagore's insights into science, particularly due to the inclusion, as an appendix, of a record of a conversation Tagore had with Albert Einstein.⁷⁴⁷ In this thesis, we have seen evidence of other aspects of Tagore's science: his interest in evolution and anthropology. Tagore spoke on all these topics in his Hibbert Lectures.

The Hibbert Lectures

The first of Tagore's three Hibbert lectures at Manchester College, Oxford, on 19 May 1930, was addressed to a very large audience of 'almost every [C]hristian denomination' and 'many Indians who had come up from London'. It was reported fully and sympathetically the next day in the *Oxford Mail*.⁷⁴⁸ The report is in two parts, firstly a summary of the lecture Tagore gave, in which one can see the subject matter which found its way into 'Man's Universe', the first essay in the book, about the origin of the universe, the course of evolution culminating in man, and his power of adaptation and

⁷⁴⁴ Tagore, 'Shantiniketan School', quoted by Das Gupta, in *Santiniketan and Sriniketan*, pp. 53-4. Das Gupta writes: '[T]he decline of the Santiniketan ideal was in evidence even during Rabindranath's life. He himself was disappointed, disillusioned and by the thirties he was pinning his hopes on Sriniketan becoming "a centre of ideal education" leaving behind the results of Santiniketan'. (p. 53.)

⁷⁴⁵ A. P. Gnatyuk-Danil'chuk, *Tagore, India and Soviet Union: A Dream Fulfilled* (Calcutta: Firma KLM, 1986)

⁷⁴⁶ There is a short entry on Tagore 'Indian philosopher and poet' whose 'best-known book in the West is *The Religion of Man*, delivered as the Hibbert lectures in Oxford and published in 1931'. (Simon Blackburn, *Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 358.)

⁷⁴⁷ Tagore, 'Appendix II: Note on the Meaning of Reality', in *The Religion of Man*, pp. 222-5. Discussed in 'Chapter 3: *Personality*', this thesis, p. 65.

⁷⁴⁸ 'The Evolution of Religion: Rabindranath Tagore's Oxford Lecture', *Oxford Mail*, 20 May 1930, *Imagining Tagore*, pp. 465-7.

unlimited progress.⁷⁴⁹ The second part of the report is a description of the event. The hall was packed. The ‘venerable figure’, with his ‘mass of white hair and sweeping beard, the dark, deep-sunken shining eyes, the black robe with white facings’, ‘drew the whole audience, with an irresistible magnetic force, to its feet’. There was no applause, and Tagore ‘remained absolutely impassive before the silent tribute’, the image of ‘the Eastern seer of pictorial tradition’. He spoke for about an hour, in fluent English, ‘his modulation of his voice singularly beautiful in its flawless rise and fall’.⁷⁵⁰

This style of reporting, which we see again in the description of the third lecture in *The Manchester Guardian* of 27 May,⁷⁵¹ is similar to the account of one of the lectures Tagore gave in Caxton Hall in London in May 1913 to ‘a deeply attentive and crowded audience’.⁷⁵² The earlier series was entitled ‘The Search for God’, later published as *Sadhana*. We noted in the chapter on *Sadhana* how, in his *Biographical Study* of Tagore, Ernest Rhys describes Tagore’s *Sadhana* addresses as follows:

Rabindranath Tagore has that unexplainable grace as a speaker which holds an audience without effort, and his voice has curiously impressive, penetrating tones in it when he exerts it at moments of eloquence.⁷⁵³

Rhys then remarks how, in the book, the ‘warm colour’ of the lectures ‘has faded in cold print’, and observes that Tagore ‘was like one drawing on a fund of ideas too fluid to be caught in a net, too subtle to be held except in a parable, or an analogy out of poetry’.⁷⁵⁴ The same comment could well have been made of *The Religion of Man*, since the book received only one brief, lacklustre review.⁷⁵⁵ The reviewer, Edward Shillito, who was a pastor and a poet, notes that the reader will be intrigued to ‘follow the track of evolution under the guidance of a Bengali poet’, but that one needs to seek out what distinctive contribution this poet makes to religion, not to science or philosophy, and the religion described ‘is too abstract to make a wide appeal’.

There are fifteen essays in the book, and there were only three Hibbert Lectures. Tagore states in the Preface that he has also included ‘the gleanings of my thoughts on

⁷⁴⁹ ‘The Evolution of Religion’, *Imagining Tagore*, pp. 465-6. ‘Man’s Universe’, in *The Religion of Man*, pp. 13-24.

⁷⁵⁰ ‘The Evolution of Religion’, *Imagining Tagore*, p. 466.

⁷⁵¹ ‘Tagore’s Hibbert Lectures; His Personal Religious Experience; The Buddhist Faith; Sir Michael Sadler’s Tribute to the Indian Poet’, *The Manchester Guardian*, 27 May 1930, *Imagining Tagore*, pp. 471-2.

⁷⁵² ‘Mr. Tagore on “Soul Consciousness”’, in *The Inquirer*, 31 May 1913, *Imagining Tagore*, pp. 35-7 (p. 35).

⁷⁵³ Ernest Rhys, *Rabindranath Tagore: A Biographical Study*, p. 122.

⁷⁵⁴ Rhys, p. 123.

⁷⁵⁵ Review of *The Religion of Man*, Edward Shillito (poet and Free Church minister), in *The Listener*, 10 June, 1931, *Imagining Tagore*, p. 505.

the same subject from the harvest of many lectures and addresses delivered in different countries of the world over a considerable period of my life'. He observes that his writings have carried a trace of the history of this growth from his 'immature youth' to the present, and only now is he seeing that they are 'deeply linked by a unity of inspiration whose proper definition has often remained un-revealed to me'.⁷⁵⁶ Shillito's dismissal of the work as 'too abstract' could suggest that the words – like the text of a play – are incomplete without the living presence of Tagore in performance.

It may seem relevant to criticisms of *The Religion of Man*, by the reviewer in 1931 and by Tagore scholars today, that the report of Tagore's second Hibbert lecture in the *Oxford Mail* begins with a quotation from him saying: 'I dare not to claim to be a philosopher, even with the precarious help of misinformation'.⁷⁵⁷ Tagore frequently made such 'disclaimers', as we have seen in the earlier books.⁷⁵⁸ In fact, in this instance, Tagore was not issuing an apology for not being a philosopher; the quoted words were part of an evolution 'story'. In the essay, Tagore begins by saying that he has no idea how his needs are provided, and yet he is respected as a poet or *perhaps* a philosopher, but that if a blackbird were similarly irresponsible: forgot how to feed and build its nest but specialized in singing, it would not survive – and that Tagore himself not being 'treated in a similar fashion is the evidence of an immense difference between the animal existence and the civilization of man'.⁷⁵⁹

The report of Tagore's second Hibbert lecture is quite short, and apart from a mention of 'a crowded audience' and two unhelpful subheadings, is entirely made up of quotations from what Sir Rabindranath Tagore said. There are sufficient clues, such as mentions of the blackbird and of 'mountain peaks', to recognise material which went into 'The Artist' and 'The Surplus in Man', the ninth and third essays in the book.⁷⁶⁰ Both these essays are variations of Tagore's much-repeated story about the evolution of animals and man. If there is a 'unity of inspiration' in Tagore's writings, it is surely his insights into the evolution of human nature – and how we have got onto the wrong track in the modern age. My sense is that audiences and readers have found some of Tagore's writings, including his English essays, unimpressive, obscure or difficult because they did not expect a poet to be talking about evolution.

⁷⁵⁶ Tagore, Preface, in *The Religion of Man*, pp. 7-8.

⁷⁵⁷ Tagore, 'Man – The Eternal Rebel': Sir Rabindranath Tagore in Oxford', *Oxford Mail*, 22 May 1930, *Imagining Tagore*, p. 467.

⁷⁵⁸ The first of Tagore's 'disclaimers' is in *Sadhana*: 'Perhaps it is well for me to explain that the subject-matter of the papers published in this book has not been philosophically treated, nor has it been approached from the scholar's point of view.' (Author's Preface, in *Sadhana*, pp. vii-ix (p. vii).)

⁷⁵⁹ Tagore, 'The Artist', in *The Religion of Man*, pp. 129-142 (pp. 129-30).

⁷⁶⁰ Tagore, 'The Surplus in Man', in *The Religion of Man*, pp. 51-64.

The subject matter of the third lecture was obviously more acceptable than that of the second, and the report in *The Manchester Guardian*, is effusive in its appreciation.⁷⁶¹ Knowing the book, we can easily recognise ‘The Vision’, in which Tagore relates his early spiritual experiences.⁷⁶² The ‘special correspondent’ who wrote the report was moved by the intimacy of Tagore’s personal account of his religious life, and how Tagore ‘endeavoured to show his audience how our own inner religion may suddenly well up and give us surprises, unexpectedly appearing from the unknown realm of our personal consciousness’.

If we examine what Tagore writes in ‘The Vision’, we find the contrasts he makes between science’s view of the universe and the knowledge which came to him from his own ‘poet’s religion’:

That which merely gives us information can be explained in terms of measurement, but that which gives us joy cannot be explained by the facts of a mere grouping of atoms and molecules. Somewhere in the arrangement of this world there seems to be a great concern about giving us delight, which shows that, in the universe, over and above the meaning of matter and forces, there is a message conveyed through the magic touch of personality. This touch cannot be analysed, it can only be felt. We cannot prove it any more than the man from the other planet could prove to the satisfaction of his fellows the personality which remained invisible, but which, through the machinery, spoke direct to the heart.⁷⁶³

The report of the third lecture, unlike the second, is not made up of verbatim quotes, making it less easy to map the material onto particular essays in *The Religion of Man*. In the next part of the lecture, subtitled ‘Songs of Bengal Villagers’ in the report, Tagore talked about the wandering singers called the Bauls, which is a recurring subject in the book. The next part is on ‘Buddhism and the Ideal Man’, themes which Tagore touches on in ‘Spiritual Union’, an essay expressing his ideas in terms familiar to us from the earlier books of English essays. Indeed, much of the book contains variations – sometimes scarcely changed – on themes which Tagore lectured on many times.

The next section, with the sub-heading ‘Buddhism and the Ideal Man’, includes a point about ‘true human progress’ being obstructed by ‘irreligion’, and we find these ideas expressed in the essay ‘Man’s Nature’.⁷⁶⁴ The key passage in that essay about irreligion (adharma), likens the philosophy of the ‘great Chinese sage Lai-tze’ to a saying from the Upanisads: ‘Through adharma (the negation of dharma) man prospers,

⁷⁶¹ ‘Tagore’s Hibbert Lectures [the third]’, *Imagining Tagore*, pp. 471-2.

⁷⁶² Tagore, ‘The Vision’, in *The Religion of Man*, pp. 90-108.

⁷⁶³ Tagore, ‘The Vision’, p. 104.

⁷⁶⁴ Tagore, ‘Man’s Nature’, in *The Religion of Man*, pp. 143-155.

gains what appears desirable, conquers enemies, but he perishes at the root'.⁷⁶⁵ This means that material and competitive success is transient, whereas 'true human progress' is immortal.

Tagore includes the same idea in his essay 'Civilization and Progress' which is recognisable from the three anecdotes he relates in it, which also appear in 'Man's Nature'. 'Civilization and Progress' was published in *Talks in China*, and Tagore delivered a talk with the same title and anecdotes to a public meeting organised by the Quakers at Woodbrooke, where he stayed for a few days before the Hibbert Lectures.⁷⁶⁶ The two essays are not the same. Tagore has added a section in 'Man's Nature' about the contrasting cultures he saw in Japan in 1916:

When I first visited Japan I had the opportunity of observing the two parts of the human sphere strongly contrasted; one, on which grew up the ancient continents of social ideal, standards of beauty, codes of personal behaviour; and the other part, the fluid element, the perpetual current that carried wealth to its shores from all parts of the world. In half a century's time Japan has been able to make her own the mighty spirit of progress which suddenly burst upon her one morning in a storm of insult and menace.⁷⁶⁷

These are echoes of what Tagore wrote in 'Nationalism in Japan', and if there are any searching 'estimates of western civilization' which are visibly 'written in acid', not 'between the lines',⁷⁶⁸ they are in 'Man's Nature'.

At Tagore's third Hibbert lecture, Sir Michael Sadler, Master of University College, Oxford, delivered a tribute to the poet, after the several minutes of applause had subsided, expressing their joy at listening 'to the perfect cadence of your voice and feel the spell of your presence'. The 'Special Correspondent' for *The Manchester Guardian* closes his account of the subject matter by observing that without Tagore's style of delivery and personality his thoughts are hard to understand:

Though the subject was difficult to follow yet it was rendered luminous throughout by bright gleams of humour and remarkably lucid illustrations. Above all, the personality of the poet as he spoke with the sunshine falling on his white head and lighting up his beautiful face made comparatively easy even his most difficult thoughts. Indeed they would have been often hard to understand if they had not been thus interpreted by his living voice and glowing spirit.⁷⁶⁹

⁷⁶⁵ Tagore, 'Man's Nature', p. 145.

⁷⁶⁶ 'Rabindranath Tagore at Woodbrooke', in *The Friend*, 23 May 1930, *Imagining Tagore*, pp. 467-70 (p. 469).

⁷⁶⁷ Tagore, 'Man's Nature', pp. 152-3.

⁷⁶⁸ See epigraph to this chapter, quotation from review in *Christian Century*, back cover, *The Religion of Man* (1961).

⁷⁶⁹ 'Tagore's Hibbert Lectures', *Imagining Tagore*, p. 472.

A key thread running through this thesis has been my belief that, although the journey Tagore took towards One World ended in failure for him, he left behind a legacy of inspiring and practical ideas for those who are seeking alternatives today. I have suggested that *The Religion of Man* is Tagore's Testament to his 'faith in Man', put together at a time when he could not see any way of drawing India away from following the same path as Japan, or of setting an example of a different course which even the West might follow. But is this right? Scholars have argued that Tagore achieved a great deal. At the beginning of the chapter on *Sadhana* I quoted the Latvian professor, Viktors Ivbulis, as saying that:

Tagore's heritage, taking into account what he planned and realised – and almost everything he planned was at least partly realised – appears unique for any poet in the history of the modern world, and there is hardly any composer in any major language whose songs, in such numbers, are in continuous cultural use?⁷⁷⁰

Tagore would surely have regarded 'partly realised' as failure. During the 1920s, he had been the travelling missionary promoting his 'ideal of universalism', hoping thereby to interest scholars and raise funds. Although he had been encouraged by having drawn Elmhirst to the work at Sriniketan, together with funding, it looked likely that Gandhi's 'Constructive Program' based on Khadi and the Charkha would be the version of rural reconstruction which would be replicated widely in India. Tagore was never content with rescuing 'even one village from the shackles of helplessness and ignorance'.⁷⁷¹ It is evident from his interest in what had happened in Russia that he wanted to see a widespread movement to elevate the peasant masses.

Tagore amongst Friends

The enthusiastic reception of Tagore's Hibbert Lectures has shown that he was recognised in England in 1930 as 'the famous Indian poet'. Although press reports suggest that his talks were not understood, we cannot know what was in the minds of members of the large audiences when they stood in stunned silence or applauded him for several minutes. Before going to Oxford to deliver the lectures, Tagore stayed for a few days at Woodbrooke, the Quaker study centre in Birmingham. Like everyone else, the Quakers were impressed with Tagore's image, which is perhaps a little surprising, given that Friends are urged not to judge by 'outward forms':

⁷⁷⁰ Viktors Ivbulis, 'Tagore's Western Burdens' p. 161.

⁷⁷¹ Tagore, 'City and Village', in *Towards Universal Man*, pp. 302-322 (p. 322).

[I]t was a memorable sight to see his striking and venerable figure, clothed in a long flowing brown garment, like a Franciscan habit, framed in the railway-carriage door. The poet's great stature, his long white beard, and his clear olive-tinted complexion, make him a joy to behold.⁷⁷²

The account of Tagore's stay at Woodbrooke shows that Tagore felt very much at home amongst Friends. The poet attended the Quaker devotional meeting, which was held almost entirely in silence, and Tagore spoke briefly towards the end, about his sense that the surest means of realising the deepest unity of man is this serenity of silence, 'when the dust subsides from our mental atmosphere and the air becomes translucent'. Tagore later told his hosts about 'the comfort and strength which had come to him, when in New York, from attending a Friends' meeting in that city: and emphasised his belief in the sacramental value of silence'.⁷⁷³

For the benefit of readers of *The Friend*, a short introduction to Tagore is provided. It begins with Tagore's literary achievements: his vernacular writings as 'the finest fruit of the Bengali Literary Renaissance' and his English works which 'made him famous to the ends of the earth'. There is then a mention of how Tagore has revived the spiritual message of some of the greatest of India's saints and thinkers, also that he is a 'distinguished political philosopher', who 'stands unshakably for Reconciliation between East and West', for which cause he has 'sacrificed without compunction his popularity and position of leadership amongst his own fellow-countrymen'. There is no 'relative neglect' of Tagore's practical work in this summary, which mentions his 'most interesting and important' school at Santiniketan, the 'famous College of International Studies', 'where he and his colleagues are hammering out the guiding principles of the new synthesis between the incompatible too-often hostile cultures of East and West'. The report then says that Tagore 'has felt the aching need of his own peasant-neighbours, in their ignorance, poverty and sickness' and he has embarked on 'a great work for the improvement of agriculture, for the combating of malaria and other diseases, and for the improvement of conditions in the villages generally', and in conclusion:

[Tagore] is one who by his work for reconciliation and of the lightening of the burdens of humanity stands in the front rank of the world's great men. His message to our Society is a gesture of friendship from India at a time when Indians find it very hard to be friendly towards Englishmen. It is a message to be received with respect and veneration, and to be

⁷⁷² 'Rabindranath Tagore at Woodbrooke', *Imagining Tagore*, pp. 467-8.

⁷⁷³ 'Rabindranath Tagore at Woodbrooke', *Imagining Tagore*, pp. 468.

pondered with attention.⁷⁷⁴

One gets the impression from this introduction, and from Tagore's evident feeling of ease and comfort amongst Friends, that there was a mutual understanding between them. One can see parallels between Tagore's 'faith in Man' and the Quaker sense of 'that of God' within each of us. Quakers emphasise both faith and practice, their faith deriving from personal and also shared religious experience, their practice being a commitment to caring for others, and all without any formal creedal basis.⁷⁷⁵ This is a similar pattern to Tagore's early spiritual experiences, followed by his concern for village people on the family estates, and then his work to revive the Indian tradition of social duties permeating the whole social fabric, which he describes in 'Society and State'.⁷⁷⁶ A further point of comparison is that Quaker faith is personal, emphasising 'the essentially inward nature of communion' together with a commitment to 'the ideal of unity in diversity'.⁷⁷⁷ Although there is a 'Society' of Friends, with an organisational structure and some paid staff at its headquarters, the basis lies in 'personal witness', and the experiences of George Fox and Robert Barclay in the seventeenth century, and those of individual Friends through to the present day, form the basis of the guidance which is given instead of 'a rule or form to work by'.⁷⁷⁸

Tagore was not unique in being inspired by personal spiritual experience to commit himself to serving society and uniting the world. This is not a path with any East-West divide. It can be a journey for an individual to take alone, or it can lead to friendship and collaboration, even to the foundation of a 'mystical church'. Another individual whose life was completely changed by his spiritual experiences is Tagore's friend and correspondent, Romain Rolland. His biographer devotes a lengthy chapter to Rolland's 'Oceanic Sensibility', but its essence is as follows:

The oceanic feeling was connected with an energy that surpassed traditional categorizing of time, space, and causality. It transcended limits, empirical boundaries, and scientific definitions. It had nothing to do with organized religion or faith in personal salvation. It promised to be a spontaneous source of action and thought that might regenerate decadent Europe and the underdeveloped nations of the world.⁷⁷⁹

⁷⁷⁴ 'Rabindranath Tagore at Woodbrooke', pp. 468-9.

⁷⁷⁵ Introduction, in [Quakers], *Christian Faith and Practice in the Experience of the Society of Friends* (London: London Yearly Meeting, 1960) [no page numbers]

⁷⁷⁶ 'Society and State', pp. 50-1.

⁷⁷⁷ *Christian Faith and Practice*, § 196-7.

⁷⁷⁸ *Christian Faith and Practice*, § 199-204, 392

⁷⁷⁹ David James Fisher, 'An Oceanic Sensibility', in *Romain Rolland and the Politics of Intellectual Engagement*, pp. 8-37 (p. 10).

Someone who has been inspired by that kind of spiritual experience to believe they can save the world can get carried away, as Rolland's biographer goes on to discuss in his case. Rolland was instrumental in warning Tagore of this danger, when the poet was taken in by Mussolini on a visit to Italy in 1926.⁷⁸⁰ Some biographers have seen Tagore's interest in Soviet Russia as similarly naive.⁷⁸¹ They also point to his positive views on the German Youth Movement,⁷⁸² which Rolland seems not to have cautioned him about. There is a record of a conversation between Tagore and Rolland from their meeting in Geneva in August 1930, when Tagore tells his friend: 'Now in 1930 I have noticed in the German youth two great qualities; hope and the spirit of service and self-denial', and he goes on to criticise the other nations after the War, which 'could have treated Germany with generosity and helped its rising young generation'.⁷⁸³

Seeing that Tagore had a tendency to trust his feelings about the issues of the day helps explain the talk he wrote specially 'about a subject which I have in my heart and which is of serious importance today', to deliver to the twelve hundred Friends at London Yearly Meeting on 24 May 1930. *The Friend* of 30th May includes a summary of the event and also the verbatim report of the Meeting by Friends' Service Council. In the summary, Tagore's talk was described as follows:

What this gentle, beautiful and saintly figure had to say entered into the heart of the meeting with a sharp edge, for it was a cry from the heart of India, a cry for release from the iron bands of a machine-like system of government that was fettering her soul and her body. The address, courteous in manner but very direct, levelled an accusing finger at the Government of India, speaking of pride and power and self-aggrandisement [...]⁷⁸⁴

The verbatim version of Tagore's lecture shows it to have been even more polemical and critical than any of the *Nationalism* lectures, with something of the sense of his Bengali lecture *The Small and the Great* in 1917, with its disparagement of the 'small Englishman' who is a 'bureaucratic administrator', in contrast to the distant 'great Englishman' who 'can see India with a breadth of vision'.⁷⁸⁵ In his address to the Quakers, Tagore mentions altercations between Gandhi and the Viceroy, Lord Irwin,

⁷⁸⁰ Fisher, 'Intellectual Antifascism', in *Romain Rolland*, pp. 147-76 (p. 150).

⁷⁸¹ 'Tagore made some painfully misguided statements praising aspects of Russian Communism', Krishna Dutta and Andrew Robinson, 'Farewell to the West (1930-1931)', in *Rabindranath Tagore: The Myriad-Minded Man*, pp. 287-301 (p. 297).

⁷⁸² Dutta and Robinson, 'Farewell to the West', p. 293; 'War, Tagore and the West (1939-1940)', in *Myriad-Minded Man*, pp. 343-53 (p. 343).

⁷⁸³ Alex Aronson and Krishna Kripalani, 'Conversations', in *Rolland and Tagore* (Calcutta: Visva-Bharati, 1945), pp. 77-104 (p. 102).

⁷⁸⁴ *The Friend*, 30 May 1930, *Imagining Tagore*, pp. 474-80 (p. 474).

⁷⁸⁵ Tagore, *The Small and the Great*, trans. by Surendranath Tagore, *Modern Review*, December 1917, 593-604.

who in Tagore's view is 'the best type of English gentleman'. He then says that those who 'live across a far-away sea' are morally responsible for the sufferings of the people of India under the 'machine government [which] lets loose its fury of wholesale suspicion'. Tagore closes with a short passage recognisable from 'The Meeting' in *The Religion of Man*, in which he writes:

[L]et us, the dreamers of the East and the West, keep our faith firm in the Life that creates and not in the Machine that constructs, in the power that hides its force and blossoms in beauty, and not in the power that bares its arms and chuckles at its capacity to make itself obnoxious. Let us know that the Machine is good when it helps, but not so when it exploits life; that Science is great when it destroys evil, but not when the two enter into unholy alliance.⁷⁸⁶

The final sentence in the address is: 'There are bleeding hearts, but their lamps of sacrifice will burn through this storm along the great pilgrim tract of the future when the truth will be triumphant'.⁷⁸⁷

Many of the Friends present were disturbed and some were outraged at Tagore's address.⁷⁸⁸ It was an extraordinary thing for Tagore to have done, perhaps explicable as a release of the anger and frustration which he had bottled up to be the Indian mystical poet expected by those attending the Hibbert Lectures. It is my belief that Tagore's ambitions to change the world could not be achieved at any time of political upheaval: during the Partition protests, or when war was being waged, or during the campaign for Independence. His ideas on 'constructive Swadeshi' were political, but this is not the kind of politics which needs to engage central government:

Our aim must be to restore to the villages the power to meet their own requirements. We should combine a number of villages to form a regional unit. Self-government will become real only if the leaders of these units can make them self-reliant and capable of coping with the needs of their component villages. They must have their own schools, workshops, and granaries, their own co-operative stores and banks which they should be assisted to found and taught to maintain. Each community unit should have its common meeting place for work and play where its appointed headmen may hear and settle local disputes and differences.⁷⁸⁹

⁷⁸⁶ Tagore, 'The Meeting', in *The Religion of Man*, pp. 156-164 (pp. 163-4).

⁷⁸⁷ *Imagining Tagore*, p. 479.

⁷⁸⁸ As a result of Friends' concerns, Horace Alexander was sent as a representative for the Quakers to attempt a reconciliation between the Viceroy and Gandhi. (Anon, 'Horace Gundry Alexander', <http://examinindia.blogspot.co.uk/2008/12/182.html> [accessed 31 December 2012])

⁷⁸⁹ Tagore, 'Presidential Address', in *Towards Universal Man*, pp. 101-28 (pp. 118-9).

This suggests that the alternative which Tagore put forward would require the ‘withering away’ of the state.⁷⁹⁰ His political vision is connected to the interest Tagore took in the changes which had taken place in Russia since 1918.

Tagore’s ‘Proletarian Sympathies’

We noted in the previous chapter how Nehru makes a comparison between the aesthetic Tagore and the ascetic Gandhi. Nehru describes Tagore as ‘the aristocratic artist, turned democrat with proletarian sympathies, representing essentially the cultural tradition of India, the tradition of accepting life in the fullness thereof and going through it with song and dance’. Gandhi, on the other hand, is ‘more a man of the people, almost the embodiment of the Indian peasant, represented the other ancient tradition of India, that of renunciation and asceticism’.⁷⁹¹

Nehru’s reference to Tagore having ‘proletarian sympathies’ seems inappropriate if we understand that to mean that Tagore actually had communist leanings. Nehru is more likely to have been alluding to Tagore’s curiosity about the revolution in Russia, which is evident from the essay ‘At the Crossroads’, published in 1918,⁷⁹² and continues through in the contacts and connections Tagore made with Russian scholars and artists,⁷⁹³ to his long-desired and frequently postponed visit to Russia which took place in 1930.⁷⁹⁴ In 1918, Tagore observed that information about the new regime was scanty, and so it was not the time to make judgements. This was evidently a reference to the British colonial powers suppressing or distorting news of the October Revolution.⁷⁹⁵ Tagore expressed concern that the revolution would flounder due to adhering to its ideals and missing the ‘sure foothold of the stern logic of Real Politik’, and he predicts that ‘[i]t is not unlikely that, as a nation, she (Modern Russia) will fail; but if she fails with the flag of true ideals in her hands, then her failure will fade, like the morning star, only to usher in the sunrise of the New Age’.⁷⁹⁶ Of his visit in 1930, Tagore wrote that

⁷⁹⁰ Richard Adamiak, ‘The “Withering Away” of the State: A Reconsideration’, *The Journal of Politics*, 32 (1970), 3-18.

⁷⁹¹ Chapter 5: *Creative Unity*, this thesis, p. 136. Nehru, *The Discovery of India*, pp. 318-9.

⁷⁹² Tagore, ‘At the Crossroads’, in *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore, Volume THREE: A Miscellany*, pp. 380-4. (Note on date of publication, p. 974.)

⁷⁹³ A. P. Gnatyuk-Danil’chuk provides a detailed account of the journey of mutual discovery which took place between Tagore and the old and new Russias in his book: *Tagore, India and Soviet Union: A Dream Fulfilled*.

⁷⁹⁴ ‘9 September 1930. Berlin. A special train is ready to steam off from the railway station. The train deputed by the Soviet government [...] is for the great Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore and his entourage’. (Gnatyuk-Danil’chuk, ‘Tagore Discovers Russia’, pp. 187-387 (p. 187).)

⁷⁹⁵ Gnatyuk-Danil’chuk, pp. 196-7.

⁷⁹⁶ Tagore, ‘At the Crossroads’, pp. 383-4.

‘[i]n Soviet Russia I have seen endeavours to replace the very base of civilization. It seemed to me, we could yet be saved, if they could change this cannibalistic tendency of the state power. Else, freedom will not be won by the weak’.⁷⁹⁷ Tagore was impressed with the mass education programmes and collective farming in Russia, and evidently saw parallels with the national programmes for Bengal he had championed during the Swadeshi period.⁷⁹⁸

Nehru did have communist leanings, as we see in *The Discovery of India*, written over five months in 1944, towards the end of his imprisonment in Ahmadnagar Fort.⁷⁹⁹ He describes the writing as a ‘thousand hand-written pages with this jumble of ideas’, when he ‘travelled in the past and peeped into the future’. There is a romantic and heroic feel to the journey, which ends with a quote from Lenin: ‘All my life and my strength were given to the first cause of the world—the liberation of mankind’.⁸⁰⁰ In a chapter on ‘Nationalism versus Imperialism’, Nehru considers the direction India might take after independence. He looks to the United States of America and other countries which were ‘forging ahead’, but he was most impressed by the ‘tremendous progress’ made by the Soviet Union in its ‘prodigious effort to create a new world out of the dregs of the old’.⁸⁰¹ Then Nehru writes:

Even Rabindranath Tagore, highly individualistic as he was and not attracted towards some aspects of the communistic system, became an admirer of this new civilization and contrasted it with present conditions in his own country. In his last death-bed message he referred to the ‘unsparing energy with which Russia has tried to fight disease and illiteracy, and has succeeded in steadily liquidating ignorance and poverty, wiping off the humiliation from the face of a vast continent. Her civilization is free from all invidious distinction between one class and another, between one sect and another. The rapid and astounding progress achieved by her made me happy and jealous at the same time’.⁸⁰²

This passage, worded a little differently, is present in the translation of Tagore’s last address, ‘Crisis in Civilization’, in *Towards Universal Man*.⁸⁰³ In that essay, Tagore goes on to contrast ‘the two great Powers, the British and the Russians’, saying that while the British have ‘trampled on the manhood of the subject races under their rule’, Soviet Russia has tried to harmonise the interests of all its peoples, including the many

⁷⁹⁷ Gnatyuk-Danil’chuk, p. 348.

⁷⁹⁸ Sumit Sarkar, ‘National Education’, in *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal 1903-1908*, pp. 149-81. Sarkar, ‘Swadeshi Organisation – Associations and Samities’, in *The Swadeshi Movement*, pp. 336-404 (pp. 345-52).

⁷⁹⁹ Nehru, ‘Postscript’, in *The Discovery of India*, pp. 541-2.

⁸⁰⁰ Nehru, ‘Epilogue’, in *The Discovery of India*, pp. 536-40.

⁸⁰¹ Nehru, ‘Chapter VIII: The Last Phase—(2) Nationalism versus Imperialism’, in *The Discovery of India*, pp. 334-392 (p. 350).

⁸⁰² Nehru, p.350.

⁸⁰³ Tagore, ‘Crisis in Civilization’, in *Towards Universal Man*, pp. 353-9 (p. 355).

Muslim tribes in its territory'.⁸⁰⁴

When Nehru remarks that Tagore was individualistic and not drawn to communism, he may have been referring to the incongruity of the aristocratic Tagore engaging in the class struggle. One thinks of Tagore's sympathies as being for peasant labourers, rather than for the proletariat, but he spoke up for the strikers of 1905-8, including the 'long-suffering impoverished clerks who have suddenly decided not to tolerate insults any longer'.⁸⁰⁵ Tagore shows a similar sympathy and understanding of the class struggle when, in *Nationalism*, he asks: 'And what is the meaning of these strikes in the economic world, which like the prickly shrubs in a barren soil shoot up with renewed vigour each time they are cut down?', and then he answers his own question as follows:

What, but that the wealth-producing mechanism is incessantly growing into vast stature, out of proportion to all other needs of society,—and the full reality of man is more and more crushed under its weight? This state of things inevitably gives rise to eternal feuds among the elements freed from the wholeness and wholesomeness of human ideals, and interminable economic war is waged between capital and labour. For greed of wealth and power can never have a limit, and compromise of self-interest can never attain the final spirit of reconciliation. They must go on breeding jealousy and suspicion to the end — the end which only comes through some sudden catastrophe or a spiritual re-birth.⁸⁰⁶

We can see here something of the same confidence in the endurance and eventual triumph of those who labour as we saw in Tagore's late poem 'They Work'. We also see that Tagore does not put the blame for the evils of the modern world onto members of the capitalist class, but on the 'wealth-producing mechanism' which crushes 'the full reality of man'. It is the system itself that he criticises, not the people who govern and benefit from the system, let alone those who are made into 'neatly compressed bales of humanity' by the 'national machinery of commerce and politics'.⁸⁰⁷

In *The Religion of Man*, as with most of Tagore's other English essays, Tagore writes next to nothing about his politics, and nothing on his practical experiments in Santiniketan or Sriniketan. The political position Tagore sets out in the *Nationalism* essays is present, right at the end of *The Religion of Man*, in the last of the four appendices he added to the Hibbert lectures material. This is the text of an address Tagore gave in the Chapel of Manchester College, Oxford, in which Tagore writes about the *Karma* of Nations, which are 'never tired of uttering the blasphemy that warfare is eternal, that physical might has its inevitable right of moral cannibalism

⁸⁰⁴ Tagore, 'Crisis in Civilization', p. 356.

⁸⁰⁵ Sarkar, 'Labour Unrest and Trades Unions', in *The Swadeshi Movement*, pp. 182-251 (p. 189).

⁸⁰⁶ Tagore, 'Nationalism in the West', in *Nationalism* (London: Macmillan, 1921 [1917]), pp. 1-46 (pp. 11-12).

⁸⁰⁷ 'Nationalism in the West', p. 6.

where the flesh is weak. The wrong that has been done in the past seeks to justify itself by its very perpetuation, like a disease by its chronic malignity, and it sneers and growls at the least proposal of its termination'.⁸⁰⁸ The people of India, he says, are different:

We in India are unfortunate in not having the chance to give expression to the best in us in creating intimate relations with the powerful nations, whose preparations are all leading to an enormous waste of resources in a competition of brow-beating and bluff. Some great voice is waiting to be heard which will usher in the sacred light of truth in the dark hours of the nightmare of politics, the voice which will proclaim that 'God is over all', and exhort us never to covet, to be great in renunciation that gives us the wealth of spirit, strength of truth, leads us from the illusion of power to the fullness of perfection, to the *Santam*, who is peace eternal, to the *Advaitam* who is the infinite One in the heart of the manifold. But we in India have not yet had the chance. Yet we have our own human voice which truth demands. The messengers of truth have ever joined hands across centuries, across the seas, across historical barriers, and they help to raise up the great continent of human brotherhood from *avidya*, from the slimy bottom of spiritual apathy. We individuals, however small may be our power and whatever corner of the world we may belong to, have a claim upon us to add to the light of the consciousness that comprehends all humanity. And for this cause I ask your co-operation, not only because co-operation gives us strength in our work, but because co-operation itself is the best aspect of the truth we represent; it is an end and not merely the means.⁸⁰⁹

As we have seen, the essays taken directly from his Hibbert lectures contain Tagore's thoughts about evolution and his philosophical anthropology. Their value for future political change lies in the way he understands humankind, our origins and strengths and weaknesses, and this has been recognised by scholars interested in Tagore's contemporary relevance.

Tagore's Science and Religion of Man, in Retrospect and Prospect

In 1986, a weeklong seminar took place on the theme of 'Rabindranath Tagore and the Challenges of Today'.⁸¹⁰ Mulk Raj Anand, renowned Indo-English novelist, then aged eighty one, was a major contributor and a lively presence at the event.⁸¹¹ One of his contributions was a paper entitled: 'Tagore's Religion of Man: An Essay on

⁸⁰⁸ Tagore, 'An address in the Chapel of Manchester College, Oxford, on Sunday, May 25, 1930', in *The Religion of Man*, pp. 231-7 (p. 235).

⁸⁰⁹ 'An address in the Chapel of Manchester College, Oxford', pp. 235-6.

⁸¹⁰ The seminar was hosted by the Indian Institute of Advanced Study in Shimla to mark the 150th birth anniversary of Tagore's birth.

⁸¹¹ The book of the 1986 seminar proceedings: *Rabindranath Tagore and the Challenges of Today*, includes all the papers received, organised into six themes, and also a condensed account of the discussions (Editors' Preface, pp. v-vi.). Mulk Raj Anand gave the 'Inaugural Address' (pp. 4-11), read a paper on Tagore's Humanism (pp. 83-92.), was co-contributor to a paper on Tagore's paintings (pp. 140-3), and he made many contributions to the discussions ('Report of Discussions' (pp. 309-34.).

Rabindranath Tagore's Humanism', in which he traces Tagore's journey from being misunderstood as an other-worldly mystic and philosopher-sage,⁸¹² towards being 'a Brahmin who joined the fraternity of the humble and the lowly, of the outcastes'. He identifies two key stages of this process: firstly, the down-to-earth evolution of his school at Santiniketan; secondly, the time when the 'poet-laureate of India suddenly began one day to paint pictures, like a child'.⁸¹³

About half way through the essay, Anand quotes almost verbatim the first two pages of 'Man's Universe', the first chapter of *The Religion of Man*:⁸¹⁴

Light, as the radiant energy of creation, started the ring-dance of atoms in a diminutive sky, and also the dance of the stars in the vast, lonely theatre of time and space. The planets came out of their bath of fire and basked in the sun for ages. They were the thrones of the gigantic Inert, dumb and desolate, which knew not the meaning of its own blind destiny and majestically frowned upon a future when its monarchy would be menaced.

Then came a time when life was brought into the arena in the tiniest little monocycle of a cell. With its gift of growth and power of adaptation it faced the ponderous enormity of things, and contradicted the unmeaningness of their bulk. [...]

But the miracle of creation did not stop here in this isolated speck of life launched on a lonely voyage to the Unknown. A multitude of cells were bound together into a larger unit, not through aggregation, but through a marvellous quality of complex inter-relationship maintaining a perfect co-ordination of functions. This is the creative principle of unity [...]

Before the chapter ended Man appeared and turned the course of this evolution from an indefinite march of physical aggrandisement to a freedom of a more subtle perfection. This has made possible his progress to become unlimited, and has enabled him to realize the boundless in his power.

The fire is lighted, the hammers are working, and for laborious days and nights amidst dirt and discordance the musical instrument is being made. We may accept this as a detached fact and follow its evolution. But when the music is revealed, we know that the whole thing is a part of the manifestation of music [...]⁸¹⁵

Anand prefaces the reading by saying that Tagore 'interprets the world with pristine insight and wonder'. Ending the reading at a point with a music metaphor, Anand says: 'Thus Rabindranath Tagore seems to regard the development of rhythm in the body as important as the body in which it is created'. Anand then sums up the next several pages of Tagore's essay (not very coherently), bringing in man's 'luminous imagination', and his need to engage in 'disinterested works, in science and philosophy, in literature and arts, in service and worship', and concludes that the whole ethos of Tagore's life is

⁸¹² Anand attributes the other-worldly mystic reputation to Tagore's *Gitanjali/Sadhana* reception and Radhakrishnan's *Philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore* (London: Macmillan, 1919).

⁸¹³ Anand, 'Tagore's Religion of Man: An Essay on Rabindranath Tagore's Humanism', in *Rabindranath Tagore and the Challenges of Today*, pp. 83-92.

⁸¹⁴ Anand, pp. 87-8. He quotes the passage more fully than my extract above, and his reading of over four hundred words would have taken him about three minutes.

⁸¹⁵ Rabindranath Tagore, 'Our Universe', in *The Religion of Man*, pp. 13-24 (pp. 13-5).

‘based on the idea of creative evolution’.⁸¹⁶

For the purposes of Anand’s argument, the fact that Tagore ‘interprets the world with pristine insight and wonder’, is a symptom of him moving on from being (seen as) a mystic to taking an interest in man’s relationship with the real world. That does not seem sufficient reason to read out such a long passage from ‘Man’s Universe’, in which Tagore relates the drama and mystery of a wide spectrum of the sciences: cosmology, atomic physics, the origin of the solar system, the emergence of single living cells and then multi-cellular life forms with specialised organs, the evolution of species via the ‘physical aggrandisement’ of the dinosaurs, through to man’s ‘freedom of a more subtle perfection’. My sense is that Anand read out the passage because it is a superb piece of writing, best read aloud, with its combination of poetry and science. The audience probably enjoyed hearing something other than Tagore’s poetry being recited as part of the reading of a paper.

Tagore was always modest about his knowledge of science, as we see from his introduction to the science primer he wrote in 1937, *Visva Parichay*, translated as ‘Our Universe’, where he goes through an impressive list of scientific topics and works that he has ventured into, but then admits that much of what he has read is still beyond his understanding.⁸¹⁷ ‘Man’s Universe’ shows that Tagore actually had a considerable depth of understanding of the sciences. The more one reads the essay, the more there is to discover. One needs to attune oneself to the intensity and economy of Tagore’s poetic style of writing to see how much he has packed in. Tagore’s famous conversation with Einstein about truth and reality have always fascinated scholars,⁸¹⁸ but Tagore makes the same argument about all truth inevitably being collective human truth more interestingly in ‘Man’s Universe’.⁸¹⁹ He writes of man continuing to evolve beyond the body, extending his limited senses with instruments to explore within the atom and out to the stars, and also joining with others in collaborative ventures. Read in that way, the essay resonates strongly with a recent book by astrophysicist, Caleb Scharf, *Gravity’s Engines: The Other Side of Black Holes*.⁸²⁰

⁸¹⁶ Anand, p. 88.

⁸¹⁷ Tagore, *Our Universe*, trans. by Indu Dutt (Mumbai: Jaico, 1999)

⁸¹⁸ Tagore included a version of their recorded conversation as an appendix to *The Religion of Man* (‘Note on the Nature of Reality’, pp. 222-5).

⁸¹⁹ Some scholars interpret the Tagore/Einstein conversation in terms of Tagore’s mystical religion. (‘Tagore bridges the gap between atomic physics and God in an original way [...]’ (David L. Gosling, ‘The God of Humanity’, in *Science and the Indian Tradition: When Einstein met Tagore*, pp. 132-5 (p. 132).), but there are dangers there of linking Tagore to the Western fascination with Indian gurus and New Age science. (Srinivas Aravamudan, ‘New Age Enchantments’, *Guru English: South Asian Religion in a Cosmopolitan Language*, pp. 220-64.)

⁸²⁰ Caleb Scharf, *Gravity’s Engines: The Other Side of Black Holes* (London: Allen Lane, 2012)

The first section of Tagore's essay resembles a passage in *Gravity's Engines* in which the author traces the twelve billion year journey of X-ray photons from a black hole in the young universe to a spot on his computer screen, in which he points to what is taking place over the aeons during the course of the particle's passage across time and space: 'When they set out there is no star called the Sun, no planet called Earth'. Once the photons have traversed most of their journey, Scharf maps their time travel onto the emergence of microbes, then multicellular life, the dinosaurs, ice ages, Eastern astronomers witnessing a supernova, the Norman conquest.⁸²¹

Tagore would have enjoyed Scharf's book, particularly for the way it illustrates the sharing of human knowledge, with a multiplicity of crucial but relatively tiny contributions being made over a considerable period of time by individual researchers from all around the world. He would have noted how many of the key discoveries were made in his own lifetime, some by scientists whom he met and corresponded with. That is not to say that the journey to discover the cosmos undertaken by all these scientists was wholly one of collaboration, cooperation and mutual appreciation. There was an amount of all these things, but there was also fierce competition: for recognition, career advancement, to get to publish first, to win Nobel prizes. There was also a major crossover between cosmological research and the military-industrial complex, with the latter a source of funding biased towards technology with potential for military and defence applications. One can see in the sciences today, especially in the 'new biology', further causes for Tagore's 'agony of disenchantment' at the casting aside of 'civilized values',⁸²² in this case the ideal of disinterested science.⁸²³ But none of this changes Tagore's point that all these scientists are or were human beings. Even when technology extends their senses beyond the visible spectrum and what can be seen and experienced on Earth – and the instruments Scharf describes are extraordinary – nevertheless, behind every pixilated image on a computer screen, behind every word and mathematical expression in a published paper, is a human being. That is utterly and completely inescapable. However objective and analytical a scientist may be, this is an attitude only, a perspective on human reality, as Tagore wrote in *Personality* when he compared his own view of a solid table with the scientist seeing atoms full of empty space, and his seeing the stars as still and distant, the scientists looking out there and observing the

⁸²¹ Scharf, 'Dark Star', in *Gravity's Engines*, pp. 3-37 (pp. 3-10).

⁸²² Tagore, 'Crisis in Civilization', p. 355.

⁸²³ Hilary Rose and Stephen Rose, 'The Changing Production System of Scientific Knowledge', in *Genes, Cells and Brains: The Promethean Promises of the New Biology* (London: Verso, 2012), pp. 11-17.

stars in furious motion.⁸²⁴

Tagore would have delighted in the poetry of Scharf's writing.⁸²⁵ Many Tagore scholars have written about Tagore's lifelong personal and practical interest in science and technology, and some point intriguingly to poems of his which seem to express some of the most challenging ideas to come out of new science. Rajat Chanda, professor of theoretical physics, contributed an article entitled 'A Synthesis of Arts and Science – Rabindranath's Poetic Vision' to the commemorative volume published by the Tagore Centre in London.⁸²⁶ A precursor to this is the article by Monish R. Chatterjee, professor of electrical engineering, entitled 'Poetic Intuition and Cosmic Reality: Tagore as Preceptor of Scientific Rationalism', which Chanda cites, and Chatterjee cites an earlier paper by Chanda.⁸²⁷ Both articles provide examples of how Tagore's understanding of science is revealed in his poetry, and that these insights resonate with some of the latest understanding in theoretical physics.⁸²⁸

Chatterjee begins his article with an observation that, whereas there is a 'deeply mystical quality' to Tagore's poetry and music, 'it would be a mistake to assume that the label *mystical philosopher* defines with any degree of completeness his personality or his role as a major figure in education and national reconstruction'.⁸²⁹ He goes on to trace the history of Tagore's interest in science, his friendship with J.C. Bose, his sending his son to America to learn scientific agriculture, his bringing science teaching into his school. He then mentions Tagore's conversations with Einstein, which reflect that 'Tagore believed in the symbiosis between human consciousness and universal consciousness. Thus, the natural world to him was not dissociated from the human, and from this perspective, the existence of the one justified the existence of the other'.⁸³⁰ Later Chatterjee observes: 'It is evident that the well-known Tagore-Einstein conversations are lately finding curious reevaluation by leading figures in science, including Ilya Prigogine, Roger Penrose, and Brian Josephson'.⁸³¹

Chanda begins his article with a reference to the well-known remark by C.P. Snow in the 1960s about 'the dangerously wide gap between scientists and literary

⁸²⁴ 'The World of Personality', pp. 41-74.

⁸²⁵ A reviewer from *Nature* is quoted on the dust cover mentioning Scharf's 'rich language and a brilliant command of metaphor [as he] takes on some of the most intricate topics in theoretical and observational astronomical research'.

⁸²⁶ Rajat Chanda, 'A Synthesis of the Arts and the Sciences', in *Rabindranath Tagore: A Timeless Mind*, pp. 37-47.

⁸²⁷ Monish R. Chatterjee, 'Poetic Intuition and Cosmic Reality: Tagore as Preceptor of Scientific Rationalism', in *Rabindranath Tagore: Universality and Tradition*, pp. 83-94.

⁸²⁸ Chatterjee, pp. 92-3. Chanda, pp. 44-6.

⁸²⁹ Chatterjee, p. 83.

⁸³⁰ Chatterjee, p. 91.

⁸³¹ Chatterjee, p. 92.

intellectuals'.⁸³² In the chapter on *Personality*, I refer to David Rothenberg's book *Survival of the Beautiful*, in which the author counters Snow's argument about the 'two cultures' very firmly, saying: 'We no longer think that way, and I am trying to show that we never really did. Art has been at the heart of science, and science at the heart of art, for centuries'.⁸³³ Chanda ends his article with a translation by Chatterjee of Tagore's celebrated poem 'I'.⁸³⁴ The poem begins:

Coloured by my own consciousness
The emerald turned green,
And the ruby doused itself in scarlet.
I turned my gaze up to the sky
And there was light
To the East and to the West.
To the rose I declared, 'Beautiful',
And beautiful it was.
'This is theology,' you will say,
'It befits not the words of a poet.'
And I will assert, 'This is the Truth
Hence it is poetry.'

Before closing with the poem, Chanda writes about a well-known thought experiment by Einstein and two junior colleagues, known as the 'Einstein, Podolsky, Rosen (EPR) Paradox', by which Einstein showed that *if* quantum mechanics were right, 'an unacceptable "spooky action-at-a-distance" will show up', which is impossible, hence quantum mechanics is incomplete. It was soon after the publication of the EPR paper that Tagore composed 'I', as if to declare that, in his view quantum mechanics is right. And indeed, as Chanda points out, fifty years later, it was shown experimentally that '*quantum mechanics is complete and Einstein was wrong!*'; the spooky action is now called 'quantum entanglement'.⁸³⁵

Tagore declares in his poem that the entanglement between his consciousness and everything he sees and knows in the world is 'Truth/ Hence it is poetry'; it is not theology; it may be a mystery but it is not mysticism. In his massive book *The Road to Reality: A Complete Guide to the Laws of the Universe*, Roger Penrose refuses to

⁸³² Chanda, p. 37. C P Snow, 'The Two Cultures', <<http://www.newstatesman.com/cultural-capital/2013/01/c-p-snow-two-cultures>> [accessed 14 January 2013]

⁸³³ Rothenberg, *Survival of the Beautiful: Art, Science and Evolution*, p. 190. 'Chapter 3: *Personality*', this thesis, p. 54.

⁸³⁴ Chanda, pp. 45-6. This poem has also been translated, a little differently, for the English translation of *Viswa Parichay*, 'Our Universe', in which it was very appropriately included before the first chapter. (Tagore, *Our Universe*, pp. 7-9). Another translation, entitled 'This I', is included in *One Hundred and One: Poems by Rabindranath Tagore*, pp. 147-8.

⁸³⁵ Chanda, p. 45. (his italics)

pander to the reader's distaste for mathematics.⁸³⁶ In a chapter on 'The entangled quantum world', Penrose takes us through the particle physics and mathematics of the EPR effect, and tells us that entanglement is such an 'ubiquitous phenomenon' that perhaps all particles in the universe are entangled with each other.⁸³⁷ 'Quite!' we can hear Tagore say.

Tagore's 'Unclarities'

In my Introduction to this thesis, in relation to *The Religion of Man* in particular, I claimed that 'Tagore's religion is his philosophy and also his science, and everything he writes is permeated by the emotions and insights of the poet and artist'.⁸³⁸ If this is the case, it must make difficulties for academic specialists, and may shed light on criticisms of *The Religion of Man* voiced by two eminent Tagore scholars. Sabyasachi Bhattacharya complains about Tagore's extensive elaboration of the three Hibbert lectures into a book of twenty-five chapters and several appendices with 'after-thoughts and incidental reflections'.⁸³⁹ William Radice says that Bhattacharya 'is candid about the unclarities in Tagore's attempts to define his philosophy, rightly saying of *The Religion of Man*, "This book is not one of his best"'.⁸⁴⁰

Tagore makes no apology for including in *The Religion of Man* thoughts he has spoken about many times before.⁸⁴¹ Tagore was a genius and a polymath, he was 'myriad-minded' and a 'universal man', but he is not thought to have been a philosopher in an intellectual sense, a system-builder.⁸⁴² He was not a systematic theologian either, or indeed a professional scientist. Tagore was not attempting to 'define his philosophy' in *The Religion of Man*, and the 'unclarities', the digressions and musings, contribute to making the book fascinating and revealing.

I discussed in the Chapter on *Sadhana* how Tagore drew on his collections of fragments of writing to put together the lectures published in that book. The same

⁸³⁶ Roger Penrose, Preface, in *The Road to Reality: A Complete Guide to the Laws of the Universe* (London: Vintage, 2005), pp. xv-xxi (p. xv).

⁸³⁷ Penrose, '23: The entangled quantum world', in *The Road to Reality*, pp. 578-608 (p. 591).

⁸³⁸ Introduction, this thesis, p. 9.

⁸³⁹ Bhattacharya, 'The "Religion of Man"', in Chapter Six: Towards the Religion of Man: 1930-1941', in *Rabindranath Tagore: An Interpretation*, pp. 184-8 (p. 185). (There are in fact only fifteen chapters, but Bhattacharya's point is still well made.)

⁸⁴⁰ William Radice, 'Revisiting Tagore', *Frontline*, 29 (2012)

<http://www.frontline.in/fl2910/stories/20120601291007400.htm> [accessed 9 September 2012].

⁸⁴¹ Tagore, Preface, in *The Religion of Man*, pp. 7-7/

⁸⁴² Ramananda Chatterjee, Foreword, in *The Golden Book of Tagore: A Homage to Rabindranath Tagore from India and the World in Celebration of his Seventieth Birthday* (Calcutta: The Golden Book Committee, 1931), pp. iii-xii (p. iv).

applies to *The Religion of Man*, where several chapters have the sermon-like quality we saw in *Sadhana*. There is little in either of these books of direct relevance to my own particular interest in Tagore's 'life's work' in rural reconstruction. However, *The Religion of Man* is dedicated to Dorothy Elmhirst, perhaps in gratitude for her financial support for Sriniketan from 1921 onwards. Leonard Elmhirst saw Dartington as 'a mingling of the activities of Santiniketan and Sriniketan', with 'the rural reconstruction element [...] the core of the enterprise, not peripheral and a later addition as with Sriniketan'. I like to think that Tagore's dedication of his book to Dorothy is also acknowledging her passionate commitment to promoting the arts – especially the performing arts – at Dartington, to balance Leonard's groundbreaking work on the application of science and technology to rural enterprise.⁸⁴³

⁸⁴³ Cox, Appendix 2: 'Dartington, the Arts and India', in *The Arts at Dartington*, pp. 377-96 (pp. 377-80).

Chapter 7: Conclusion

In this thesis I have related the story of how and why Rabindranath Tagore journeyed to the West between 1912 and 1931, and delivered the lectures published in his five books of English essays. Knowing the story and his motivations helps to bring out the meaning of the texts Tagore left us as a record of his mission and message. It was Tagore's intention to reach out to the West at that time, as the biographical approach I have adopted makes clear. The five books provide a foundation for further studies into Tagore's understanding of human potential, the dangers presented by 'progress' in the modern age, and the local community alternative which he tried to put into practice.

The approach I have adopted has presented a number of challenges. In order to discover Tagore's attitudes and motivations regarding the West I needed to draw in sufficient background material on his activities in his own country; and it was sometimes difficult to judge where to stop. Another problem was how to deal with Tagore's insistence on not being a scholar or philosopher, which manifests as his not adopting positions in opposition to other thinkers, and not using formal terminology. Tagore's emotions, and his understanding of the importance of the emotions, are fundamental to his creativity, and to his ideas and practice, and it has been difficult to find ways of incorporating this area of his personality and philosophy in discussions. Perhaps the hardest challenge has been to avoid reading into Tagore's English essays what I wanted him to have said or implied, given my interest over ten years or more in his work on rural reconstruction, which is urgently needed in today's world to address problems of land degradation, as well as those of social inequality and exclusion.⁸⁴⁴ For all these challenges it has been helpful to concentrate on the lectures themselves: the background and immediate circumstances, how Tagore himself was received, and the reports and criticism of what he had to say, aiming thereby to 'bring back the colour into the cold print'.

In the course of this study, I discovered that some of the English essays have counterparts amongst the essays Tagore delivered in India. In particular, the counterpart to 'An Eastern University' in *Creative Unity* is 'The Centre of Indian Culture' in *Towards Universal Man*. In those two essays 'Tagore was communicating different things to his urban audiences in India and in the West, and then taking both in the same

⁸⁴⁴ We can see that Tagore recognises problems of land degradation in the Introduction and speeches by him entitled 'The Robbery of the Soil' included in Elmhirst's *Poet and Plowman*, pp. 32-41, 163-173.

direction – towards the village’.⁸⁴⁵ Another corresponding pair of essays is ‘Nationalism in the West’ in *Nationalism* and ‘Society and State’ in *Towards Universal Man*. Tagore’s message is the same as in *Creative Unity*, except that the direction ‘towards the village’ is detailed and explicit in ‘Society and State’, but referred to in general terms in ‘Nationalism in the West’ as ‘society’, which Tagore describes as a ‘natural regulation of human relationships, so that men can develop ideals of life in cooperation with one another’.⁸⁴⁶ One can conclude that, just as Tagore urged his compatriots to work for a future for India based on networks of self-reliant villages, rather than an urban industrial ‘nation’ or ‘state’, so he advocated – albeit tentatively – a similar direction for the world.

In addition to pairings linked to Tagore’s political solution, one finds essays on his understanding of the origin of creativity, relationships and moral responsibility, which he saw as deriving from the ‘surplus’ capacity of mankind compared with other animals. This links to Tagore’s ideas about anthropology and the causes of differences between peoples – which are again repeated in different essays, including those Tagore wrote originally in Bengali, for addresses or for publication. Essays in different books of English essays can also be compared with this subject in mind, in particular ‘The Relation of the Individual to the Universe’ in *Sadhana* shares ideas and themes with ‘Man’s Universe’ in *The Religion of Man*.

One can see from certain of Tagore’s essays originating in India, and from studies such as those by Uma Das Gupta,⁸⁴⁷ that his prolonged involvement with village people on the family estates, and also with students and adults from urban backgrounds, qualifies him as an experienced physical anthropologist. Knowing this about Tagore, we can read the English essays as showing us that through his sympathy and his values he developed what I have called a ‘deep anthropology’, a sense of what mankind ought to be, as well as what we are.

There are, of course, essays in the five books on themes which are taken to be religious, due to Tagore’s many references to the Upanisads. But once one is alert to Tagore’s political solution and to his values, one can see that his religion is part of his

⁸⁴⁵ This thesis, pp. 122, 147.

⁸⁴⁶ ‘Nationalism in the West’, p. 9.

⁸⁴⁷ I refer especially to: Uma Das Gupta, *Santiniketan and Sriniketan: A Historical Introduction, A Visva-Bharati Quarterly Booklet* (Santiniketan: Visva-Bharati University, 1977) and ‘Rabindranath Tagore on Rural Reconstruction: The Sriniketan Programme, 1921-41’, *Indian Historical Review*, 4 (1978), 354-78. Das Gupta has concentrated on Tagore’s work in and around Santiniketan. For the full picture on his work in East Bengal (now Bangladesh), we have the impressive account by Ahmad Rafique, ‘Tagore’s Thoughts on Village Development and Rural Reconstruction’, in *Contemporarising Tagore and the World*, pp. 375-93.

‘deep anthropology’. As Tagore writes in an appendix to Radhakrishnan’s translation of the Upanisads, the ancient writings are based ‘not upon theological reasoning, but on experience of spiritual life’.⁸⁴⁸ Tagore writes about this in his preface to *Sadhana*:

For western scholars the great religious scriptures of India seem to possess merely a retrospective and archaeological interest; but to us they are of living importance, and we cannot help thinking that they lose their significance when exhibited in labelled cases—mummied specimens of human thought and aspiration, preserved for all time in the wrappings of erudition. The meaning of the living words that come out of the experiences of great hearts can never be exhausted by any one system of logical interpretation. They have to be endlessly explained by the commentaries of individual lives, and they gain an added mystery in each new revelation.⁸⁴⁹

In the English essays, Tagore returns time and again to how mankind evolved by the same path as other species, but then emerged from the world of nature into the world of humanity, through a ‘second birth’ made possible by our surplus mental capacity or ‘abundance’. Tagore writes of how ‘the surplus in man’ means he is free to be responsible, cooperative and creative, but can also revert to the savage animal’s fight for survival.⁸⁵⁰ Tagore saw the coercive and competitive government and commerce of the modern age as such a relapse, and he sought to raise a new generation with some of the old ways, but taking advantage of beneficial aspects of scientific approaches and the latest technology.

We have seen that Tagore was unable in his lifetime to persuade people at home or abroad that he was offering a viable alternative to the decadent individualism, communalism and identity politics of the modern world.⁸⁵¹ That he had a viable alternative is recognised by some, in the context of nationalism in former East Bengal and East Pakistan, now Bangladesh, where some can see that:

Tagore had an alternative understanding of Indian civilisation and history that inspired him to think beyond nationalist discourse. His complex understanding of religion, the self, freedom, creativity and the ‘mechanical’ features of state should be taken into consideration if we want to grasp his vision of Indian society and explore why he gave society primacy over the state. [... A]n appreciation of Tagore’s philosophical vision of the grand harmony of all human races may enable us to recognise his passion for social commitment and his desire not to see the world fragmented by nationalist states built

⁸⁴⁸ Tagore, Appendix A, in *Upanisads*, ed. by Radhakrishnan pp. 939-944 (p. 940).

⁸⁴⁹ Preface, in *Sadhana*, p. viii.

⁸⁵⁰ Tagore, ‘The Surplus in Man’, in *The Religion of Man*, pp. 51-64. In this essay, Tagore writes of the freedom of bipedalism as well as the diversity of cultures and beliefs arising from our mental flexibility.

⁸⁵¹ Regenia Gagnier, ‘Decadent Individualism’, in *Individualism, Decadence and Globalization: On the Relationship of Part to Whole, 1850-1920* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 9-11.

through violence.⁸⁵²

For most people in the English speaking world, Tagore is either quite unknown or a remote historic figure. And yet, as Tagore said, ‘in the present age, with its facility of communication, geographical barriers have almost lost their reality’.⁸⁵³ One way of bringing the ‘long ago and far away’ Tagore to the people he would want to speak to today is to remember him as a performance artist.

Tagore, the Performance Artist

In his keynote address on ‘Rabindranath Tagore: the next 50 years’ to the conference in Edinburgh in May 2012, William Radice suggested that the key to Tagore’s future lies in performance. Radice was referring mainly to Tagore’s obviously performable works: his songs, plays and dance dramas, and he said that studies of Tagore should be inseparable from actual performance, and through performance ‘the prophet and thinker is not dead’.⁸⁵⁴

The English essays were originally lectures: lively performances by a gifted speaker, which still come across best when read aloud. During the reading of his paper on ‘Tagore’s Religion of Man’, Mulk Raj Anand recited two pages of Tagore’s essay ‘Man’s Universe’, in effect saying to his audience: ‘Just listen to this!’⁸⁵⁵ One can tell from his comments on the book that Anand had studied *The Religion of Man* closely. Before reading his paper, Anand delivered his inaugural address to the 1986 seminar in Shimla, with the title ‘Rabindranath Tagore in Retrospect’.⁸⁵⁶ He was probably the only person present who had actually met Tagore, and he begins by describing one of his visits to Santiniketan in 1938, and finding the poet ‘in a sombre mood’ due to ‘Hindu-Moslem quarrels’ which were threatening to disrupt a united India. As a parting gift, Tagore gave Anand a copy of *The Religion of Man*, which he treasured until his small library was destroyed in the London bombing.⁸⁵⁷ One can imagine that Anand would have found another copy as soon as he could, and read it again and again, perhaps out

⁸⁵² Mohammad Sajjadur Rahman, ‘Bangladesh: State, Nation and Tagore’, in *Contemporarising Tagore and the World*, pp. 143-54 (pp. 143-4).

⁸⁵³ Tagore, ‘An Eastern University’, in *Creative Unity*, pp. 167-203 (p. 171).

⁸⁵⁴ William Radice, ‘Rabindranath Tagore: the next 50 years’, Keynote address 4 May 2012, to international conference: ‘Tagore: The Global Impact of a Writer in the Community’ at Edinburgh Napier University on 4, 5 and 6 May 2012.

⁸⁵⁵ Anand, ‘Tagore’s Religion of Man: An Essay on Rabindranath Tagore’s Humanism’, pp. 87-8.

⁸⁵⁶ Anand, ‘Inaugural Address: Rabindranath Tagore in Retrospect’, in *Tagore and the Challenges of Today*, pp. 4-11.

⁸⁵⁷ Anand, pp. 4-5.

loud, because he obviously discovered that Tagore's English essays are deeply meaningful prose poetry.

In Martin Kämpchen's book on Tagore and Germany, there is a superb description by Moriz Winternitz of Tagore being 'a most extraordinary actor'.⁸⁵⁸ Winternitz saw Tagore in performance at the Madan Theatre in Calcutta on 25 February 1923, in 'a spring play' which is 'really a cycle of spring songs'. He describes the antics of the sixty-two year old Poet as follows:

He jumped about with the others like an adolescent, and at the end, after the King had cast away his crown and the Poet his cap, all those on the stage danced around in a wild whirl. Finally when the Poet seized by the arm the Finance Minister, portrayed by one of our European teachers, and danced around with him, thus symbolising the union of "East and West", the ideal of Visva-Bharati, a thunderous storm of applause burst forth from the audience.⁸⁵⁹

Winternitz points out that Tagore came on stage only in his own plays and only if the performance served to generate money for a charitable purpose, especially for his school in Santiniketan. Winternitz also remarks that in this gorgeous but also serene piece of theatre there was 'still no lack of those subtle, serious and deep thoughts we are used to receiving from the Poet'. The framework for the play is a dialogue between King and Poet, and Winternitz illustrates the serious point of the play as follows:

At the very beginning, the King relates that he had fled the Council and the country because the treasury was empty and the ministers of various portfolios continued to pester him. The Poet said: "That is quite all right." The King (astonished): "Why?" The Poet: "If the King disappears from time to time, the people will get used to governing themselves." The King: "What do you mean by that?" The Poet: "When the King's treasury is empty, the people will find their own means, and that is the deliverance of the people."⁸⁶⁰

We see Tagore's politics here, as we have seen it in his performances on the lecture platform. In effect Tagore advocates anarchism without terrorism, or communism without the dictatorship of the proletariat.⁸⁶¹

Tagore Studies for a Changing World

I mentioned in my Introduction that Sasadhar Sinha, Bengali sociologist and economist, suggests that Tagore's ideal of human unity 'could only come when the present

⁸⁵⁸ Martin Kämpchen, 'Moriz Winternitz on "Rabindranath Tagore as Actor and Dancer"', in *Rabindranath Tagore and Germany: A Documentation* (Calcutta: Max Mueller Bhavan, 1991), pp. 85-8.

⁸⁵⁹ Winternitz, p. 87.

⁸⁶⁰ Winternitz, p. 87.

⁸⁶¹ Tagore's non-violent anarchism was discussed in the chapter on *Creative Unity*, this thesis, pp. 130-3, and his 'proletarian sympathies' in the chapter on *The Religion of Man*, pp. 159-62.

possibilities of compromise and reform had been completely exhausted'.⁸⁶² There are signs that the world of today is changing, mainly below the political parapet, with activists preferring to sideline the powerful governmental and economic systems rather than confront them, and to cherry pick what is advantageous from new technologies. As Tagore knew, good change has to be gradual. In their challenging discussion of bioethics and human rights, Hilary and Stephen Rose expose grave problems for the weakest in society. They note that 'solidarity for the common good' might require 'an overturning of the existing social order', 'as with Marx in the nineteenth century, or the Occupy movement now'.⁸⁶³ We cannot expect that to happen, with the strong shift taking place from the old collectivism of the welfare state to a new individualism characteristic of the neoliberal economy. Instead, change is bubbling up at a local community level. This is Tagorean world change, which is friendly, joyful, imaginative and highly diverse, fulfilling Tagore's faith in an ideal of that Paradise which is 'the ultimate reality towards which all things are moving' and which 'is to be seen in the sunlight, and the green of the earth, in the flowing streams, in the beauty of spring time, and the repose of a winter morning'.⁸⁶⁴

Tagore wrote in the final paragraph of his 'Presidential Address' in 1908:

We of today shall be gone tomorrow. Who will then remember our petty jealousies, quarrels and disputes? But our deeds with their endless sequence of cause and effect will under God's mysterious guidance accumulate from generation to generation and give substance and form to the emergence of a progressive nation. In the midst of our poverty and squalor, let us dream of that bright and cloudless day when our grandsons may be able to say with pride: "All this is ours, all this we have built up. We have made these fields fertile, these waters clear and this atmosphere pure. All this knowledge we have spread abroad and from our hearts cast out fear. [...] All our land is filled with our life and glad with our songs. Wherever we cast our eyes, we see at work our ideals and our efforts and the earth aquiver with the unwearied tread of pilgrims journeying along numberless paths towards the Promised Land."⁸⁶⁵

'Call Me Back to Work'

Writers on Tagore's life and work often remind themselves and their readers that Tagore was primarily a poet, and that his ideas and his actions arise from that identity. Abu Sayeed Ayyub explains that the ideal poetical experience according to the Indian *rasavadins* (scholars of aesthetics) was due to their discovery of its close kinship with

⁸⁶² Sinha, 'The Ideal of Human Unity', in *Social Thinking of Rabindranath Tagore*, pp. 43-53 (p. 53). This thesis, p.10.

⁸⁶³ Hilary Rose and Stephen Rose, *Genes, Cells and Brains*, p. 109.

⁸⁶⁴ Tagore, 'Paradise', in Pearson, *Shantiniketan*, pp. 101-4 (p. 102).

⁸⁶⁵ 'Presidential Address' (1908), in *Towards Universal Man*, pp. 101-28 (pp. 127-8).

mystical experience.⁸⁶⁶ Ayyub quotes an interpreter of Vedantic aesthetics who say that the value of art is more than ‘as a means to secure for man a temporary escape from the imperfections of common life; art is an “intimation” to him of the possibility of rising permanently above these imperfections’.⁸⁶⁷ Ayyub goes on to say that ‘[s]uch an instrumental valuation of art as a pointer to and aid in the attainment of a higher form of experience, is alien to Tagore’. Ayyub quotes a report of a conversation between Edward Thompson and Tagore where the poet says that from a young age he had ‘had the idea, which was to grow with [him] all along, of realizing the infinite in the finite, and not as some of our Indian metaphysicians do, of eliminating the finite’. Ayyub states that ‘[t]he central theme of Tagore’s philosophy of art thus emerges as the notion that art is a bridge across the chasm which normally separates the individual from the world around’.⁸⁶⁸ For Tagore, the individual, the self or personality, crosses that bridge with responsible social engagement.

This study has concentrated on the twenty years of Tagore’s life when he journeyed to the West and delivered the lectures published in the English essays. To understand the ideas Tagore expresses, we have looked selectively at Tagore’s activities over fifty years of his life, from the 1890s through to his death. I began this thesis with ‘They Work’, a poem Tagore wrote in the last year of his life. It seems appropriate to end with a poem from the beginning of his period of active social engagement, a poem published in 1894 entitled ‘Call Me Back to Work’ which shows vividly the Poet’s political passion and compassion.

Call Me Back to Work

While the world was busy with a hundred chores,
 you played O Poet upon your flute the livelong day
 like a truant boy who has fled from home:
 alone in the fields under the sad shade of trees,
 the hot midday wind heavy with distant forest scents.

Shake off your sleep and rise,
 There is fire around.
 Who blows the conch to wake the people of the world?
 Whence come the wails that resound in the sky?
 From what dark dungeon do forsaken women cry for help?

Bloated insolence with million snouts
 sucks the heart-blood of the weak.
 Proud injustice mock[s] at pain.

⁸⁶⁶ Abu Sayeed Ayyub, ‘The Aesthetic Philosophy of Tagore’, in *Rabindranath Tagore: A Centenary Volume 1861-1941*, pp. 78-87.

⁸⁶⁷ Ayyub, p. 79.

⁸⁶⁸ Ayyub, p. 81.

The cringing slaves hide in borrowed robes.
They stand dumb with heads bent low.
On their face is writ the age-old tale of woe.
Toiling under mountain loads
they drag their steps and slowly march
till the last breath of life
and then hand down the burden to their heirs.
They do not revile their fate nor curse their God,
they blame no man, they know no pride,
they only seek to live their dreary life
by picking crumbs of food.
When these crumbs are snatched away,
when blind insolence strikes with cruel blows,
they know not where to seek redress.
One long sigh rises towards the poor man's God
and then they die in silence.

We must bring speech to these dumb denuded lips.
We must light with hope these weary empty hearts,
we must call to them and say:
'Hold your heads high and together stand.
The wrong-doer whom you fear is more afraid than you
and will flee in haste if you challenge him.
If you face him with dauntless heart
he will slink away in fear and shame
like a cringing cur.
Accursed of God and bereft of friends,
he brags loudly but in his heart of hearts
he knows his utter emptiness.'

Gather yourself, O Poet and arise.
If you have courage bring it as your gift.
There is so much sorrow and pain,
a world of suffering lies ahead,—
poor, empty, small, confined and dark.
We need food and life, light and air,
strength and health and spirit bright with joy
and wide bold hearts.
Into the misery of this world, O Poet,
bring once more from heaven the light of faith.⁸⁶⁹

⁸⁶⁹ Rabindranath Tagore, sections I and II of 'Call Me Back To Work' (*Ebar Phirao Morey* from *Chitra*), March, 1894, trans. by Humayun Kabir, in *One Hundred and One: Poems by Rabindranath Tagore*, pp. 29-30.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Tagore's Letter to the Viceroy

Letter RT to H.E., The Viceroy

Your Excellency,

It is with profound satisfaction and encouragement that I learn from Mr. Elmhirst of the chance which Your Excellency has been pleased to give us of drawing up a scheme of Agricultural Research to be placed before you through Mr. Finlow, for the purpose of considering the Imperial grant. Mr. Elmhirst's telegram reached me on the eve of my departure, so I have decided to leave the matter of drawing up and submitting the scheme to a committee with Dr. N. Gangulee C.I.E. as one of its members which I have appointed for the purpose. I feel assured that when the scheme reaches your hands, it will receive generous consideration from Your Excellency's Government.

I hope I shall have the opportunity on my return for another talk with Your Excellency in regard to what has been my life's work and in which I feel you take genuine personal interest.

Yours etc. Sd. Rabindranath Tagore 28.2.30

Letter from Sd. Robert S. Finlow, Dept. of Agriculture, Bengal. 3 March 1930. to RT
Dear Dr. Tagore,

Many thanks for your letter dated the 28th February 1930. I note you are leaving for Europe immediately, but I write this in the hope that it may reach you before you leave and to say that I will help your Committee as far as possible to prepare its scheme.

I am glad that Lord Irwin and Sir Stanley Jackson have seen Sriniketan, also that Government have at last been able to give you a grant of Rs. 3,000/-; because it is a good thing to encourage all genuine unofficial endeavour to improve Agriculture and the conditions of life in the countryside.

I hope you will enjoy your visit to Europe, and that you may have as pleasant summer weather there as we had last year.

Yours sincerely,

The Dartington Hall Trust Archive, Papers of Leonard Knight Elmhirst, LKE India, LKE/IN/25 Folder A, 'Visva-Bharati correspondence'

See also: *Selected Letters of Rabindranath Tagore*, ed. by Krishna Dutta and Andrew Robinson, eds., (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) pp. 370-1.

Appendix 2: ‘The Village and the World: A Political Reading of Rabindranath Tagore’s Prose Fiction’⁸⁷⁰

SYNOPSIS

This dissertation is the end product of research into the prose fiction of the Bengali writer, Rabindranath Tagore, who is best known for his poetry. The works chosen for analysis are short stories and novels in English translation, written between 1890 and 1915. The study involved a political reading of these texts in order to explore how, in the 1920s, Tagore came to establish a centre for rural reconstruction and an international university, as his practical contribution to bringing into reality his vision of a world of cooperation and community. Recognising Tagore’s identity as Poet and Reformer is crucial to interpreting his stories and longer fiction, and leads to questioning criticism of the work according to established Western models.

The Introduction puts the chosen texts in the context of Tagore’s life and the historical background, in particular looking at how the British Empire disrupted village life, and created an urban middle class of landlords and administrators, who became Westernised due to their having benefited from the Raj.

The first main chapter is focussed on the Village, and the short stories Tagore wrote during the 1890s whilst he was managing the family estates. One particular short story, ‘Punishment’, is examined closely to reveal the layers of meaning underlying Tagore’s method of story-writing. The study revealed Tagore’s particular interest in the role of women in traditional domestic and village life, and introduced the idea of ‘dharma’ as the duty of a wife towards her husband and her family.

The second main chapter is focussed on the World and how the novel form brought from the West developed in India. Three of Tagore’s novels are examined: *The Wreck* (1906), *Gora* (1909) and *The Home and the World* (1915). Tagore employed the technique of allegory to challenge urban values and social divisions, and to show that the individual has a responsibility to shun group identity and embrace universal understanding, tolerance and cooperation. The novels take the Western reader further into the Indian concept of ‘dharma’, as the means by which the individual in relationship with others can become a practical reality.

The concluding chapter summarises how the study has demonstrated the need to question Western assumptions, in literature studies, and in the dominant model of world economics and politics, in order that Tagore’s alternative vision may be appreciated by the wider world.

1. INTRODUCTION: RABINDRANATH TAGORE, HIS PROSE FICTION IN CONTEXT

England, it is true, in causing a social revolution in Hindustan, was actuated only by the vilest interests, and was stupid in her manner of enforcing them. But that is not the question. The question is, can mankind fulfil its destiny without a fundamental revolution in the social state of Asia? If not, whatever may have been the crimes of England she was the unconscious tool of history in bringing

⁸⁷⁰ Christine Marsh, ‘The Village and the World: A Political Reading of Rabindranath Tagore’s Prose Fiction’ (unpublished master’s dissertation, Open University, 2006)

about that revolution. (Karl Marx, June 25, 1853)⁸⁷¹

I look back on the stretch of past years and see the crumbling ruins of a proud civilization lying heaped as garbage out of history! And yet I shall not commit the grievous sin of losing faith in Man, accepting his present defeat as final. I shall look forward to a turning in history after the cataclysm is over and the sky is again unburdened and passionless.

Perhaps the new dawn will come from this horizon, from the East where the sun rises; and then, unvanquished Man will retrace his path of conquest, despite all barriers, to win back his lost heritage. (Rabindranath Tagore, April 14, 1941)⁸⁷²

Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) saw himself primarily as a poet,⁸⁷³ and as a poet he is still well-known and highly regarded in historic Bengal (approximately Indian West Bengal and Bangladesh) and in the Indian subcontinent. From early boyhood almost to his dying day, Tagore composed poetry constantly, as if he was afflicted with a form of synaesthesia, whereby his mind turned all his observations and experiences into poetry. In anniversary and commemorative volumes, Tagore is described as also being a short story writer,⁸⁷⁴ and a novelist,⁸⁷⁵ but it is more true to say he was a poet who turned to short stories and novels during particular periods of his life. Unsurprisingly, therefore, his prose writing is idiosyncratic and resists categorisation and comparison. Tagore's various translators, including himself, have struggled with the fundamental differences between the Bengali language and English, and it becomes clear that Tagore's prose in the original is more poetic, with more word-play, including punning,⁸⁷⁶ and more humour, than it has in translation.

Tagore was not only a poet but also a visionary and a reformer. The focal point of this study of Tagore's life and work is the 1920s, when he established at Santiniketan ('abode of peace', formerly his father's ashram), a centre for rural reconstruction, Sriniketan ('abode of plenty'),⁸⁷⁷ and an international university, Visva-Bharati (from the Sanskrit for universe and the name of a Hindu goddess of learning)⁸⁷⁸. After this he travelled the world propagating his vision. Tagore's prose fiction provides insights into how and why 'the village and the world' became Tagore's life's work. The texts which are the subjects of this study are a selection from the short stories which Tagore wrote during the 1890s,⁸⁷⁹ and three of Tagore's novels which he wrote between 1906 and

⁸⁷¹ Karl Marx, 'The British Rule in India', in *The First Indian War of Independence 1857-1859*, by K. Marx and F. Engels (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, [n.d.]), pp.14-21, (p.20). (Originally published in the *New-York Daily Tribune*, June 25, 1853)

⁸⁷² Rabindranath Tagore, 'Crisis in Civilization' in *Towards Universal Man* (London: Asia Publishing House, 1961), pp.353-9 (p.359).

⁸⁷³ Amartya Sen, 'Foreword', in *Selected Letters of Rabindranath Tagore*, ed. by Krishna Dutta and Andrew Robinson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp.xvii-xxv (p.xvii).

⁸⁷⁴ Diwan Chand Sharma, 'The Short Stories of Rabindranath Tagore', in *Tagore Birthday Number, Visva-Bharati Quarterly*, ed. by Krishna Kripalani ([Santiniketan], Bengal: 1941), pp.137-42 (p.138).

⁸⁷⁵ Ghulam Murshid, 'Tagore's Novels', in *Rabindranath Tagore: A Celebration of his Life and Work* (Oxford: Rabindranath Tagore festival Committee, 1986), pp.42-43 (p.42).

⁸⁷⁶ P.K. Saha, 'Translating Indian Literary Texts into English', in *Literary India: Comparative Studies in Aesthetics, Colonialism and Culture*, ed. by Patrick Colm Hogan and Lalita Pandit (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), pp.175-87 (p.177).

⁸⁷⁷ 'Santiniketan' and 'Sriniketan' are sometimes spelt 'Shantiniketan' and 'Shriniketan'.

⁸⁷⁸ Krishna Dutta and Andrew Robinson, eds., *Purabi: A Miscellany in Memory of Rabindranath Tagore 1941-1991* (London: Tagore Centre, 1991), p.220

⁸⁷⁹ Rabindranath Tagore, *Selected Short Stories*, trans. by William Radice (London: Penguin, 2005).

1915.⁸⁸⁰

This study has involved a ‘political reading’ of these works partly to contrast Tagore’s vision of a future world with the Marxist conception of a progression through stages of the economic basis of society, their class divisions and superstructure, towards the ultimate classless, property-less society. It has not become a ‘Marxist reading’, reflecting the concern postcolonial theorists have expressed as Marxism being Eurocentric,⁸⁸¹ and not a good model of the progression which took place in the colonised regions of the world. The quotation heading this Introduction comes from an article Marx wrote for publication in an American newspaper, one of a series later published in book form as *The First Indian War of Independence 1857-1859*. Marx’s analysis of the Revolt shows it to be ‘a product of socioeconomic conditions and the resistance of an oppressed people’,⁸⁸² leading to the period which followed, the Crown Raj and Tagore’s lifetime.

Tagore’s practical projects to bring his vision into reality can be linked to a well-known saying of Marx: ‘The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it.’⁸⁸³ But writing can change the world. Jean-Paul Sartre asserts that ‘the prose-writer is a man who has chosen a certain method of secondary action which we may call action by disclosure,’ and he proposes asking such a writer the question: ‘What aspect of the world do you want to disclose? What change do you want to bring into the world by this disclosure?’⁸⁸⁴ Tagore was a ‘committed writer’ in Sartre’s sense, in that his prose fiction discloses a different way of living in the world, of potential benefit to people of the East and the West. However, Tagore was not addressing readers in the West in this literature, and so the ‘message’, if we can call it that, has to be decoded, picked out from what he is saying more directly to his own intended audience. Tagore is ‘political’ in the sense that he had a vision of how people could and should live in the world, a vision that he worked to bring into reality, but seldom ‘political’ in the sense of engaging with the systems of government, and he was not a nationalist and not anti-British, whilst he loved his country and desired its freedom from oppression. One can sum up the different way of life he advocated as ‘culture and community’, which lies between individualistic and competitive materialism, of which Tagore was critical, and the individual spiritual search, which he saw as not incompatible with engaging with one’s culture and taking an active part in one’s community.

A set of difficulties comes with studying a writer and writing from a foreign country. Tagore wrote most of his work in Bengali, but the texts in English translation come with special paratexts,⁸⁸⁵ introductions and translators’ notes, which are helpful for making sense of the translated works, and bring them part of the way towards the Western reader, but one has to be alert to them going too far such that some of the

⁸⁸⁰ Rabindranath Tagore, *The Wreck*, [trans. by J.G. Drummond] (London: Macmillan, 1944) first published 1906;

Rabindranath Tagore, *The Home and the World*, trans. by Surendranath Tagore (London: Penguin, 1985) first published 1915; and

two editions of the novel: Rabindranath Tagore, *Gora*, [trans. by W.W. Pearson] (London: Macmillan, 1924) first published in Bengali, 1909, and Rabindranath Tagore, *Gora*, trans. by Sujit Mukherjee (New Delhi: Sahita Akademi, 2003).

⁸⁸¹ Crystal Bartolovich, ‘Introduction’, in *Marxism, Modernity and Postcolonial Studies*, ed. by Crystal Bartolovich and Neil Lazarus (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp.1-17 (p.1).

⁸⁸² Pranav Jani, ‘Karl Marx, Eurocentrism, and the 1857 Revolt in British India’, in *Marxism, Modernity and Postcolonial Studies*, pp.81-97 (p.90).

⁸⁸³ Karl Marx, ‘Theses On Feuerbach’, (1845)

<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/theses/theses.htm> [accessed 25 July 2006]

⁸⁸⁴ Jean-Paul Sartre, *What is Literature?*, trans. by Bernard Frechtman (London: Methuen, 1950), p.13.

⁸⁸⁵ Gérard Genette, ‘Introduction to the Paratext’, *New Literary History*, Vol. 22, No. 2, (Spring, 1991), 261-272.

original meaning is lost.

Putting Tagore's stories and novels in historical context led to further difficulties. Context matters for most approaches to serious literature studies, perhaps least for studies such as those carried out by F.R. Leavis, the pioneer in literature studies as an academic subject, where he is concerned with form, originality, and the identification of genius in literary art.⁸⁸⁶ Even here, context matters, and we find Leavis saying of Jane Austen, 'Without her intense moral preoccupation she wouldn't have been a great novelist,' and that greatness and matters of aesthetics are closely tied to 'an unusually developed interest in life' and 'a vital capacity for experience'.⁸⁸⁷ Another important literary critic, Dorothy Van Ghent, makes a different, but equally crucial, link between life and art, when she expresses her two convictions: 'First, that novels have their primary interest in the illumination they cast upon life, not life somewhere else and at another time, but immediately here, immediately now. And second, that novels are able to cast illumination upon life only insofar as they are coherent works of art.'⁸⁸⁸

Fictional works from another country, not written to be read here, bring a further dimension to the 'life and art' connection, in that the culture and the environment may not be described in the texts as fully as one needs in order to understand the characters and situations depicted. One is very dependent on material such as biographies, histories, and contemporary writing about the author or his works, but that material brings with it a host of contradictions and disagreements, and a labyrinth of paths one could pursue to try to resolve them. A key question is helpful here: 'Was the British Raj good or bad for India?', which links back to the quotation by Marx above, and leads on to the summary below of key points in the historical background to Tagore's writing.

Marx is saying, not that the Raj was 'good', indeed he says it was 'vile' and 'stupid', but that it was necessary to India and the world, since it forced a backward, feudal country through its bourgeois revolution into capitalism and the modern world. Tagore's biographer, Krishna Kripalani, says that '[t]he (Tagore) family ... fortunes were from the beginning linked with the rise of the British power in India,' and that Rabindranath's grandfather, Dwarkanath Tagore, amongst many impressive entrepreneurial and charitable achievements, founded the first modern bank with Indian capital.⁸⁸⁹ One could categorise Kripalani's position as 'the Raj was good'.

Jawaharlal Nehru, who became the first Prime Minister of India, argues the opposite. In his extraordinary book, *The Discovery of India*, written with the help of eleven erudite companions over five months in 1944 while they were incarcerated in Ahmadnagar Fort prison, Nehru shows how India was, up until the eighteenth century, a highly developed country. There were business and financial houses, and powerful merchant and manufacturing classes, engaged in trade in Asia and in Europe. The middle classes, however, had no political power, and in that sense the bourgeois revolution had not happened in India.⁸⁹⁰

For this study, one needs to understand the makeup of the classes in Britain and the West, and in India, from which came Tagore's readership, but this is a huge subject. An idea of Nehru's provides a useful starting point. He wrote of there being 'Two Englands' in the eighteenth century and into the nineteenth: the entrepreneurial bourgeoisie at home who brought in the industrial revolution at India's expense, and the

⁸⁸⁶ F.R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition: George Eliot, Henry James, Joseph Conrad* (London: Penguin, 1962), p.17.

⁸⁸⁷ Leavis, pp.16-18.

⁸⁸⁸ Dorothy Van Ghent, *The English Novel: Form and Function* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1961), p.vii.

⁸⁸⁹ Krishna Kripalani, *Rabindranath Tagore: A Biography* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), pp.17-20.

⁸⁹⁰ Jawaharlal Nehru, *The Discovery of India* (London: Meridian, 1951), pp.262-3.

feudal rump who went to India and ran the Raj.⁸⁹¹ To these one may add a 'third England', made up of 'traditional intellectuals',⁸⁹² the English scholars and sympathisers who participated in an equal exchange of cultural and religious ideas, with such great Indian intellectuals as Rammohan Roy and Tagore.

Nehru described how India's thriving indigenous economy was destroyed by the Raj.⁸⁹³ As Marx put it, 'The devastating effects of English industry [on] India, a country as vast as Europe ... are palpable and confounding.'⁸⁹⁴ But the devastation really began at village level. Throughout Nehru's journey of discovery of the cultural and material aspects and stages in India's culture and development, and his account of the waves of conquest and assimilation, there are repeated mentions of India's self-governing village systems, which were treated with respect by all new rulers until the British utterly destroyed them.⁸⁹⁵ Many writers on Indian history, including Marx in the article from which I quoted above,⁸⁹⁶ identify the 1793 Act of Permanent Settlement, when the British East India Company acquired the right to tax the revenue from the peasantry collected by the zamindars, as the turning point for the village system. Romesh Chunder Dutt, a distinguished lawyer, writing in 1874 about the peasantry of Bengal, said that: 'zemindars (sic)⁸⁹⁷ still (since moves to reform the system) possess to an indefinite extent the power to oppress, harass and ruin their ryots (peasants) in a variety of ways against which the law offers no redress, and that therefore in most places ryots are still held in a sort of moral servitude, and comply, without thinking of resistance, with the most unjust demands and orders of their masters ... [and] make it simply impossible for ryots to save anything, or to learn to be prudent, provident, thinking beings, or better their condition.'⁸⁹⁸

The Tagore family were zamindars, their income deriving from family estates, remnants of the once colossal wealth of Rabindranath's grandfather, Dwarkanath Tagore, put in trust for their security shortly before his fortune collapsed.⁸⁹⁹ In 1889 Rabindranath took over the management of the family estates,⁹⁰⁰ and it was a life-changing experience for him and he came to see that in village culture was 'an ideal for the whole of India',⁹⁰¹ which was the unique political vision which he sought to bring to the world through his rural university. During the 1890s he wrote many short stories about the humble people whose lives he witnessed in rural Bengal, which leads on the first set of texts which are the subject of this study.

⁸⁹¹ Nehru, pp.261-6

⁸⁹² Antonio Gramsci, 'The Intellectuals', in *Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, http://www.marxists.org/archive/gramsci/prison_notebooks/problems/intellectuals.htm [accessed 27 August 2006], 'The Formation of the Intellectuals', para. 3 of 20

⁸⁹³ Nehru, pp.276-8

⁸⁹⁴ Marx, p.38.

⁸⁹⁵ Nehru, pp. 120, 125, 292, 297-8.

⁸⁹⁶ Marx, pp.33, 216.

⁸⁹⁷ Note: In this essay I have generally standardised the spelling of this term as 'zamindar', but the word can also be spelt 'zemindar', as here.

⁸⁹⁸ Romesh Chunder Dutt, *The Peasantry of Bengal: being a View of their Condition under the Hindu, the Mahomedan, and the English Rule, and a Consideration of the Means Calculated to Improve their Future Prospects* (Calcutta: Thacker, Spink & Co., 1874), p.x.

⁸⁹⁹ Kripalani, p.28.

⁹⁰⁰ *Selected Letters*, p.15.

⁹⁰¹ Tagore, 'City and Village', in *Towards Universal Man*, pp.302-22 (p.322).

Appendix 3: Article for *Contemporarising Tagore and the World*

The Once and Future Village: From Tagore's Rural Reconstruction to Transition Towns⁹⁰²

He is there where the tiller is tilling the hard ground and where the path-maker is breaking stones. He is with them in sun and in shower, and his garment is covered with dust. Put off thy holy mantle and even like him come down on the dusty soil! (*Gitanjali*, 1912)⁹⁰³

Mother Earth has enough for the real needs of all her children ... but she has not nearly enough for a whole generation of greedy children who know no limit to their desires. ('City and Village', 1928)⁹⁰⁴

Everyone who discovers Rabindranath Tagore has a story to tell. Twenty years ago the author of this paper was told by Marjorie Sykes, who had worked with both Tagore and Gandhi, that it was *not* Gandhi who originated the well-known saying: 'The Earth has enough for everyone's need but not for anyone's greed.' It was Rabindranath Tagore who said that, she insisted, and wrote his words about Mother Earth and her children in my copy of her book on Gandhi.⁹⁰⁵ Rabindranath was a deep ecologist, she added, knowing my interests. I found a copy of 'City and Village' in a collection of Tagore's essays,⁹⁰⁶ – but then forgot about him. Many years later, when I was a volunteer working on the Elmhirst Papers at the Dartington Hall Trust Archive, the name Rabindranath Tagore came to my attention again, and I learned of Leonard Elmhirst's work in India for Tagore on rural reconstruction. Finally, while studying Literature with the Open University, I encountered *Gitanjali*, which is most Westerners' first (and often only) experience of Tagore's writing, while studying W.B. Yeats, whose blood was stirred by this collection of 'song offerings'.⁹⁰⁷ And I have to confess, that the Tagore who wrote 'City and Village' appealed to me then far more than the Indian mystic, of whom the Latvian scholar, Viktors Ivbulis, recently wrote:

He seems to have brought to the West something missing there: the belief in ideals and high morality, and something like an historic optimism, the lack of which was felt even before World War I. After the carnage was over, people were eager to learn genuine internationalism and cooperation, and Tagore's spiritual idealism, his religion free from dogmas and priesthood, was also well received. (Ivbulis, *A Timeless Mind*)⁹⁰⁸

After *Gitanjali*, Tagore was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. The celebrity he enjoyed for a few years provided Tagore with opportunities to speak to the western

⁹⁰² This article, 'The Once and Future Village: From Tagore's Rural Reconstruction to Transition Towns', is published in *Contemporarising Tagore and the World*, ed. by Imtiaz Ahmed, Muchkund Dubey and Veena Sikri (Dhaka: University Press, 2013), pp. 407-22.

⁹⁰³ Rabindranath Tagore, 11, in *Gitanjali (Song Offerings)* (London: Macmillan, 1913), pp. 8-9 (p. 9).

⁹⁰⁴ Personal communication by Marjorie Sykes (not as in 'City and Village' in *Towards Universal Man*, 1961).

⁹⁰⁵ Jehangir P. Patel and Marjorie Sykes, *Gandhi: His Gift of the Fight* (Rasulia, Hoshangabad, India: Friends Rural Centre, 1987).

⁹⁰⁶ Rabindranath Tagore, 'City and Village', in *Towards Universal Man* (London: Asia Publishing House, 1961), pp.302-22.

⁹⁰⁷ W.B. Yeats, Introduction, in *Gitanjali*, pp. vii-xxii (p. vii).

⁹⁰⁸ 'Tagore's Western Burdens', in *Rabindranath Tagore: A Timeless Mind* (London: Tagore Centre UK, 2011), pp. 154-62 (p. 155).

world through his lectures, subsequently published as collections of essays: *Sadhana* (1913), *Nationalism* (1917), *Personality* (1917), *Creative Unity* (1922) and *The Religion of Man* (1931). The ‘English essays’ are not the only works which Tagore wrote in, or rendered into, English,⁹⁰⁹ and translations abound from his vast literary and non-literary oeuvre in his native language of Bengali. But these five books are important because they represent what Tagore was able to communicate to the West at that time, not to protest about India’s treatment by the British Empire, but out of concern for the direction in which western nations were taking their own people.

In the English essays, Tagore wrote about bringing the East and the West together, adding to that polemical criticisms of nationalism as a dehumanizing apparatus of power and greed. This paper argues that another reading is possible, and that in the essays Tagore articulates an alternative direction for world change, which has the potential to bring about a major ‘transition’, defined as a revolutionary change from one mode of production to another, and the consequent transformation of society as a whole.⁹¹⁰ The essays, read in sequence as published,⁹¹¹ do not describe such a transition, and Tagore’s alternative was not received or understood in his lifetime. Hence it is necessary to pick out passages containing the elements which make up Tagore’s positive alternative and reassemble them.

The analysis which follows is organised into three themes: reconnection with nature and deep ecology; transition and relocalisation; and spiritual unity and personalistic monism. These themes reflect current initiatives for desirable world change which a new focus on Tagore could encourage. Parallels are drawn between Tagore’s programme for rural reconstruction and the idea of transition adopted in the ‘Transition Initiative’, which began with ‘Transition Town Totnes’ in 2005-6,⁹¹² and is spreading widely in Britain and in other countries.⁹¹³ Transition in scholarship considered here is a theory of class put forward in *Re/Presenting Class: Essays in Postmodern Marxism* by J. K. Gibson-Graham and others.⁹¹⁴ Their approach draws on studies of overdetermination and transition in works by Louis Althusser and Étienne Balibar.⁹¹⁵ My work on the English essays has followed on from a study I undertook of Tagore’s prose fiction in translation, for my master’s dissertation, which was a political reading also focussed on Tagore’s advocacy of a transition to a re-localised, cooperative, society in close touch with the land.⁹¹⁶

Reconnection with Nature: Deep Ecology

Deep ecology arises from the personal intuition that one’s self is part of the world’s environmental wholeness. This awareness may be constructed upon scientific foundations

⁹⁰⁹ In particular, we have the four books entitled *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore* (New Delhi: Sahita Akademi, 1994, 1996, 2007).

⁹¹⁰ Louis Althusser and Étienne Balibar, *Reading Capital* (London: Verso, 2009), p. 70.

⁹¹¹ Tagore was under pressure to publish in order to capitalise on his celebrity (Sisir Kumar Das, Introduction, in Rabindranath Tagore, *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore, Volume TWO: Plays, Stories, Essays*, ed. by Sisir Kumar Das (New Delhi: Sahita Akademi, 1996), pp. 11-31 (p. 12).)

⁹¹² It is no coincidence that the movement started in Totnes, given that Dartington Hall Trust, set up by Tagore’s colleague Leonard Elmhirst, is near Totnes, and gave rise to a community sympathetic to alternative ideas.

⁹¹³ Rob Hopkins, *The Transition Handbook: From Oil Dependency to Local Resilience* (Totnes: Green Books, [2007])

⁹¹⁴ J. K. Gibson-Graham, Stephen Resnick and Richard Wolff, *Re/Presenting Class: Essays in Postmodern Marxism*, ed. by (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001).

⁹¹⁵ Louis Althusser, *For Marx*, trans by Ben Brewster (London: Verso, 1982) and Louis Althusser and Étienne Balibar, *Reading Capital* (London: Verso, 2009).

⁹¹⁶ Christine Marsh, ‘The Village and the World: A Political Reading of Rabindranath Tagore’s Prose Fiction’ (unpublished master’s dissertation, Open University, 2006).

but it is more commonly thought a spiritual concept (Martin Haigh, 2006).⁹¹⁷

The Norwegian professor of philosophy, Arne Naess coined the term ‘deep ecology’ in the early 1970s, intending the concept as a remedy for man-nature dualism. Since then the mass of literature on the theoretical and popular versions of deep ecology,⁹¹⁸ and the political platform built to support the movement, have brought in other dualisms: between deep ecology as opposed to anthropocentrism, and deep ecology as superior to shallow ecology or environmentalism. But some see deep ecology as a spiritual concept, and in this sense we can see Tagore as a deep ecologist:

Have I not known the sunshine to grow brighter and the moonlight deeper in its tenderness when my heart was filled with a sudden access of love assuring me that this world is one with my soul? When I have sung the coming of the clouds, the pattering of rains has found its pathos in my songs. From the dawn of our history the poets and artists have been infusing the colours and music of their soul into the structure of existence. And from this I have known certainly that the earth and the sky are woven with the fibres of man’s mind, which is the universal mind at the same time (Tagore, *Personality*, 1917).⁹¹⁹

Naess was only eighteen, in 1930, when he discovered Spinoza’s monism: the idea that there is only one substance which one can call ‘God’ or ‘Nature’, and also Gandhi’s idea of ‘self-realisation’, for whom it meant ‘to lose oneself in continuous and continuing service of all life’.⁹²⁰ Despite theological arguments about the precise meaning of *advaita*, or non-dualism,⁹²¹ it has been argued that Tagore was a monist, and positively engaged with the material world.⁹²² Self-realisation, variously expressed, is a theme running through Tagore’s English essays, but with less suggestion of self-sacrifice, as in this example:

The will, which is free, must seek for the realization of its harmony other wills which are also free, and in this is the significance of spiritual life. The infinite centre of personality, which radiates its joy by giving itself out in freedom, must create other centres of freedom to unite with it in harmony. Beauty is the harmony realized in things which are bound by law. Love is the harmony realized in wills which are free (Tagore, *Personality*, 1917).⁹²³

Tagore alone could have provided Naess and his followers with philosophical and theological inspiration, and a direction for holistic world change, but Gandhi was internationally known for his principled stance and leadership, whereas Tagore was, by

⁹¹⁷ Martin Haigh, ‘Deep Ecology Education: Learning from its Vaisnava Roots’, *Canadian Journal of Environmental Education*, 11 (2006), 43-56 (p. 43).

⁹¹⁸ Warwick Fox, *Toward a Transpersonal Ecology: Developing New Foundations for Environmentalism* (Boston, MA: Shambhala, 1990), pp. 103-18.

⁹¹⁹ Rabindranath Tagore, ‘The World of Personality’, in *Personality* (London: Macmillan, 1919 [1917]), pp. 41-74 (pp. 73-4).

⁹²⁰ M.K. Ghandi, [His answer to three questions], in Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, ed., *Contemporary Indian Philosophy* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1952 [fp 1936]), p. 21.

⁹²¹ Some theologians argue that Hindu non-dualism or *advaita* is not the same as monism, for example, M.P. Christanand states that translation of *advaita* by ‘monism’ shows a failure to express the idea of absolute transcendence. (*The Philosophy of Indian Monotheism* (Delhi: Macmillan Company of India, 1979), p. 92. One can pursue this argument satisfactorily for Tagore’s religion, but this is beyond the scope of this paper.

⁹²² ‘Tagore is a monist, though he does not deny the reality of the world [...] and denounces the negative attitude towards the world’. (Dr. P. T. Raju, ‘Metaphysical Currents’, in *History of Philosophy Eastern and Western, Volume One*, ed. by Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1952) pp. 532-6 (p. 532)).

⁹²³ Tagore, ‘The Second Birth’, in *Personality*, pp.77-107 (p. 101).

that time, less of a public figure. The difference between these two great men of India is significant for the direction the deep ecology movement took.

Gandhi and Tagore were close friends who supported each other through challenging times,⁹²⁴ but they were very different people. In *The Discovery of India*, Nehru compares and contrasts ‘the two outstanding and dominating figures of India’, saying they represent two different traditions. Tagore ‘the aristocratic artist, turned democrat with proletarian sympathies’, embodied the cultural tradition of ‘accepting life in the fullness thereof and going through it with song and dance’. Gandhi, ‘the man of the people’, represented the other tradition of ‘renunciation and asceticism’.⁹²⁵

In the basic principles of deep ecology, which have scarcely changed over the thirty years of the movement, there are points which seem to reflect the Gandhian tradition: ‘3. Humans have no right to reduce this richness and diversity [of life forms] except to satisfy *vital* needs.’ and ‘4. The flourishing of human life and cultures is compatible with a substantial decrease in the human population. The flourishing of nonhuman life requires such a decrease.’⁹²⁶ The tone of the entire set is towards renunciation and asceticism. This attitude has led deep ecologists to have a stronger commitment towards addressing ecological threats than that shown by environmentalists concerned mainly about human welfare, but the tendency of the movement towards being judgemental, exclusive and prescriptive has lessened its impact. While Tagore condemned greed, this was from his critique of dehumanising systems, with no suggestion that humans should restrict themselves to meeting only *vital* needs.

We can see in Tagore’s essay ‘The Cult of the Charka’ how the richness of his concept of self-realisation contrasts with Gandhi’s asceticism. Tagore warns against ‘the ominous process of being levelled down to sameness’, including binding people to caste-based functions, so that despite ‘this age of self-assertion’ they expect to be told what to do and willingly submit to ‘some guru’s injunction’. He argues that Swaraj, or independence, would not benefit the people of India unless ‘that most lively sprightly thing called Mind’ is allowed to rebel against uniformity of attitudes and machine-like employment. He advocates the co-operative principle which, applied by innumerable methods, gets rid of poverty and ‘communes with our spirit’. Thereby ‘the goddess of plenty herself’ would come bringing food and much else, in ‘an essential moral oneness’.⁹²⁷

In another work, Tagore relates how in the past India had accommodated ‘a succession of aggressors’, but that the British were ‘a new impersonal empire, where the rulers were over us but not among us, who owned our land but could never belong to it’.⁹²⁸ Tagore describes the traditional India which was wantonly disrupted:

The geographical entity, that is India, appears from the earliest times to have roused in its people the desire to realise the unity comprised within its natural boundaries. In the *Mahabharata* we find the bringing together of its traditional memories scattered over different times and places; and, in the institution of systematic pilgrimages to the various sacred places dotted over its entire expanse, we discern the process of capturing a complete picture of its physical features within the net of a common devotion (Tagore,

⁹²⁴ E.g. see 30 mentions of Gandhi in *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore, Volume THREE: A Miscellany*, ed. by Sisir Kumar Das (New Delhi: Sahita Akademi, 1996) and Marjorie Sykes, ‘Gandhi and Tagore: The Double Sadhana’, in Patel and Sykes, pp. 52-70.

⁹²⁵ Jawaharlal Nehru, *The Discovery of India* (London: Meridian, 1951), pp. 318-9.

⁹²⁶ Bill Devall and George Sessions, *Deep Ecology: Living as if Nature Mattered* (Layton, Utah: Peregrine Books, 1985), p.p. 70-3.

⁹²⁷ Rabindranath Tagore, ‘The Cult of the Charka’, in *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore, Volume THREE: A Miscellany*, ed. by Sisir Kumar Das (New Delhi: Sahita Akademi, 1996), pp. 538-48.

⁹²⁸ Rabindranath Tagore, ‘Mahatma Gandhi’, in *Tagore on Gandhi* (New Delhi: Rupa, 2008), pp. 8-25 (pp. 12-3).

‘Mahatma Gandhi’).⁹²⁹

Tagore’s vision of self-realisation involved reviving the multiplicity of local communities within India’s geographical boundaries, and for India to combine with the unity in diversity of Asia and lead the West towards the self-realisation of the world.

We are seeing a new surge of interest in Tagore, which may indicate that his time has come again. If so, the focus of attention should include Tagore’s rural reconstruction experiments, his version of a social initiative which, in Gandhi’s case, was called the ‘economics of Khadi’.⁹³⁰ Gandhi’s model reflects the tradition Nehru saw him as representing, that of ‘renunciation and asceticism’. To be true to the tradition Tagore represented, his rural society would be much richer, more diverse: ‘accepting life in the fullness thereof and going through it with song and dance’.⁹³¹

Revival of Village Systems: Relocalisation

England, it is true, in causing a social revolution in Hindustan, was actuated only by the vilest interests, and was stupid in her manner of enforcing them. But that is not the question. The question is, can mankind fulfil its destiny without a fundamental revolution in the social state of Asia? If not, whatever may have been the crimes of England she was the unconscious tool of history in bringing about that revolution (Karl Marx, ‘The British Rule in India’).⁹³²

Enclosure, indeed, was the culmination of a long secular process by which men’s customary relations to the agrarian means of production were undermined. It was of profound social consequences because it illuminates, both backwards and forwards, the destruction of the traditional elements in English peasant society (E.P. Thompson, ‘The Field Labourers’).⁹³³

The intention of this section is to relate Tagore’s philosophy and practice to new waves of rural reconstruction, or ‘relocalisation’, initiated in England and spreading worldwide. I begin with the historical background, including an example of a project in England directly inspired by Tagore’s experiments. This is followed by an examination of Tagore’s essay ‘An Eastern University’ to show how he sought to bring the peoples of the world together to avert the ‘world-wide spiritual disaster’ brought about by the ‘political and commercial adventures’ of the West. Tagore’s ideas were radical and practically based, so it should not be surprising that they are compatible with the work of postmodern Marxist scholars who are studying new developments in locally based economies. The discussion then comes full circle back to changes taking place in Britain, to Transition Towns and their connection with Tagore.

Arguably, the Indian village system and the English village community were both victims of the British Industrial Revolution and the British Empire. The 1793 Permanent Settlement Act and the 1801 General Enclosure Act formally replaced traditional common ownership of land with private ownership, and few members of the top castes or classes (or political philosophers) saw any harm in that. Tagore was no revolutionary,

⁹²⁹ ‘Mahatma Gandhi’, p. 8.

⁹³⁰ Khadi is cloth made from yarn spun with the charka. See Gandhi on ‘the economics of Khadi’ in Anjan Chakrabarti and Stephen Cullenburg, ‘Development and Class Transition in India’, in Gibson-Graham et al, pp. 182-205 (p. 182).

⁹³¹ Nehru, pp. 318-9.

⁹³² Karl Marx, ‘The British Rule in India’, in *The First Indian War of Independence 1857-1859*, by K. Marx and F. Engels (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, [n.d.]), pp.14-21, (p.20). (Originally published in the *New-York Daily Tribune*, June 25, 1853).

⁹³³ E.P. Thompson, ‘The Field Labourers’, in *The Making of the English Working Class* (Harmondsworth, Middx: Penguin, 1968), pp. 233-58 (p. 239).

and accepted the necessity of private property,⁹³⁴ at the same time regarding his rural reconstruction projects as his ‘life’s work’.⁹³⁵

If we could free even one village from the shackles of helplessness and ignorance, an ideal for the whole of India would be established. That is what occurred to me then and that is what I still think. Let a few villages be rebuilt in this way, and I shall say they are my India. That is the way to discover the true India (Tagore, ‘City and Village’).⁹³⁶

In *English Earth*, a history of farming in England, Marjorie Hessel Tiltman includes an enthusiastic description of Dartington Hall Trust in south Devon, brainchild of Leonard Elmhirst, inspired by his work with Tagore at Sriniketan. Tiltman tells how Elmhirst established the Trust as a research institution and self-contained village, based on a new form of ownership of the land, buildings, equipment and stock. Tiltman considered that ‘[t]he implications of such a scheme are political, economic, and social, and to prove its soundness and fundamental workability many, many years would—or will—be needed.’ She sums up Dartington as ‘an attempt to strike at the very root of agricultural decay, by a return to the self-contained rural community, where handicrafts flourish and the younger members do not find life so dull that they are anxious to escape to the towns.’⁹³⁷

British Government historical statistics help us understand the context within which the Dartington project operated. There had been a tremendous decline in agricultural workers since official statistics were first published in 1884, reflecting increases in mechanisation. Overall yields may have increased, presumably through the use of agrochemicals, but farm income has seen booms and slumps and an overall decline. Public expenditure on agriculture has been erratic, crop acreages and livestock numbers have fluctuated, and one graph shows a steep decline since 1950 indicating the sad loss of orchards. The statistics indicate how agriculture has changed in response to events over the last one hundred years: the two world wars, the depression of the 1930s, the post-war boom and entry into the European Community, and the dramatic fall in prices and farm incomes in the late 1990s.⁹³⁸

The Dartington experiment was designed to respond to the fall in rural job prospects, which was already evident in the 1920s, by establishing rural industries, expanding education and reviving local culture. It achieved great things for some years but, one by one, its enterprises succumbed to competition, its progressive school closed, and recently the Dartington Arts College was moved away. The buildings and land remained: the Great Hall which the Elmhirsts had restored, the little cinema, the gardens designed by Dorothy Elmhirst, and farming on the Trust land went the way of all farming. Today Dartington Hall is a conference centre and a tourist destination, and the Trust is a charity with aims concerning ‘the arts, sustainability and social justice’.⁹³⁹

Those struggling to keep what remains of Dartington economically viable, since the founder’s death in 1972, have lost sight of the ‘inspiration’ for Elmhirst’s ambitious experiment: Tagore’s rural reconstruction work in Bengal. As a symptom of that, twenty years ago a progressive college was established on Dartington land and

⁹³⁴ ‘City and Village’, pp. 306-8.

⁹³⁵ ‘I hope I shall have the opportunity on my return for another talk with Your Excellency in regard to *what has been my life’s work* and in which I feel you take genuine personal interest.’ Letter from Tagore to His Excellency, The Viceroy, dated 28th February 1930, applying for an Imperial grant for agricultural research. (The Dartington Hall Trust Archive, Papers of Leonard Knight Elmhirst, LKE India, LKE/IN/25 Folder A, ‘Visva-Bharati correspondence’.) (my emphasis).

⁹³⁶ ‘City and Village’, p. 322.

⁹³⁷ Marjorie Hessel Tiltman, *English Earth* (London: Harrap, 1935), pp. 297-302.

⁹³⁸ Matthew Keep, ‘Agriculture: historical statistics’ (London: House of Commons Library, 2009).

⁹³⁹ <<http://www.dartington.org/about>> [accessed 16/03/11].

premises, and named 'Schumacher College'. Given that its mission is to facilitate the sharing of ideas internationally, and to address current and future problems, the college could have been seen as a continuation of the tradition of Tagore's university, founded in 1921, and one would have thought the new college should have been named after Tagore.

The final essay in *Creative Unity* entitled 'An Eastern University' sets out Tagore's programme for world change and reflects the principles of relocalisation, whereby changes in the world are achieved by efforts put in at the local level.

Our centre of culture should not only be the centre of the intellectual life of India, but the centre of her economic life also. It must co-operate with the villages round it, cultivate land, breed cattle, spin cloths, press oil from oil-seeds; it must produce all the necessaries, devising the best means, using the best materials, and calling science to its aid. Its very existence should depend upon the success of its industrial activities carried out on the co-operative principle, which will unite the teachers and students and villagers of the neighbourhood in a living and active bond of necessity. This will give us also a practical industrial training, whose motive force is not the greed of profit.⁹⁴⁰

Tagore's aspirations for his self-reliant university employing the best materials, and taking advantage of modern science and technology, is in marked contrast with Gandhi's project of resisting industrialism by restoring the ancient cottage industry of handspinning.⁹⁴¹ A case study in *Re/presenting Class* by Anjan Chakrabarti and Stephen Cullenburg, looks at 'Development and Class Transition in India', post-Independence, and begin by contrasting Gandhi's 'economics of Khadi' with Nehru's project of catching up with the West. They go on to write of the hopes of the Marxian subaltern studies school that capitalism could accommodate precapitalist elements of society, in particular a continuation of village-based agriculture, leading to a transition to 'a socialism of communities'.⁹⁴² The authors' analysis continues with an innovative 'Disaggregated Class Analysis', which re-examines the social arrangements for appropriation of surplus labour and includes independent and communal producers who access the wage and non-wage output of their labour on their own account. They suggest that these class sets could co-exist with capitalist appropriation of surplus labour to give rise to a heterogeneous class structure.⁹⁴³ Chakrabarti and Cullenburg go on to use their framework to interpret the transition resulting from the liberalization policies introduced by the Indian government in 1991. As one might expect the result has been to bring about what the authors regard as a crisis in the agricultural sector, increasing concentration of capital in that sector, alongside growing rural unemployment and rural and urban poverty.⁹⁴⁴

In England from Tudor times onwards, the village community was progressively destroyed by the enclosure movements,⁹⁴⁵ and the dispossessed cultivators and artisans 'liberated' from the rural economy became the urban proletariat which enabled capitalism and the Industrial Revolution to take over so comprehensively and so rapidly here.⁹⁴⁶ There are still British villages, small settlements in the countryside, but they

⁹⁴⁰ Rabindranath Tagore, 'An Eastern University', in *Creative Unity* (London: Macmillan, 1922), pp. 169-203 (pp. 200-1).

⁹⁴¹ Fischer, Louis, ed., *The Essential Gandhi: An Anthology of His Writings on His Life, Work, and Ideas* (New York: Vintage, 2002), p. 250.

⁹⁴² Chakrabarti and Cullenburg, pp. 184-5.

⁹⁴³ Chakrabarti and Cullenburg, pp. 186-9.

⁹⁴⁴ Chakrabarti and Cullenburg, p. 194.

⁹⁴⁵ W. E. Tate, *The English Village Community and the Enclosure Movements* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1967).

⁹⁴⁶ E.J.Hobsbawn, *Industry and Empire: An Economic History of Britain Since 1750* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1969).

have lost their rural role. Some have become pleasant dormitories for commuters supplied by big supermarkets, others are ghostly relics of the feudal or big-industrial eras. In this country, a town and its hinterland has more potential for relocalisation, as is shown by Transition Town Totnes, the first transition experiment.⁹⁴⁷ Dartington Hall is near Totnes, and the town absorbed some of the ethos of Elmhirst's rural reconstruction project, inspired by his work with Tagore.

The Transition Initiative is aiming at 'a heterogeneous class structure', with a mixed economy, where new forms of communal and small-scale local production, designed to meet some local needs, especially for food, co-exist with conventional businesses and services run by large capitalist enterprises or government agencies.⁹⁴⁸ The geographical unit of any transition initiative will be as varied as its local ecology and the challenges and opportunities provided by the social, political and economic starting point. Such a transition goes against the supposed 'universalizing tendency of capital' identified by Marx, which is subjected to challenge by the postmodern Marxist scholars in their studies in India:

Unlike orthodox Marxism where the progressive evolutionary order of society must be maintained, in the micro-approach to transition, capitalist class structures can, for example, be transformed into feudal or independent class structures. From this perspective, such cases of transition would not be understood as historical aberrations, but rather as possible outcomes of society's multi-faceted and uneven development processes. [...] What is lost in this approach to transition is the eschatological, diachronic, and systematic ordering of societies according to a dominant notion of "progress" (Chakrabarti and Cullenburg).⁹⁴⁹

In his study of 'history and power in colonial India', Ranajit Guha describes the period of nationalist agitation in India as the 'rivalries of two bourgeoisies', which nevertheless shared the belief in the 'universalizing tendency of capital'. When Guha examines Marx's analysis of the historical unreliability of that tendency, he picks out the contrast Marx made between the revolutions in 1789 in France and in 1848 in Germany, where French success was due to the fact that the bourgeoisie 'never left its allies, the peasants, in the lurch', whereas the German bourgeoisie betrayed theirs. The Indian urban middle class absentee landlords, established by the British through the Permanent Settlement Act of 1793, in effect betrayed and exploited their peasants, hence the ruin of the village communities which Tagore endeavoured to rectify. We can see from Guha's analysis why the Marxian subaltern studies project, of which he was a leading participant, hoped for a transition to 'a socialism of communities' from a capitalist stage which accommodated the village economies.

Anisur Rahman of the Action Research Movement provides an impressive account of Tagore's 'experiments of self-reliant village development' on the family estates in the 1890s:

He advocated, in writing and through his speeches, the formation of one or more village communities (*pallishamaj*) to take charge of co-operative-based collective self-development. Among other tasks, the co-operatives were to take charge of literacy for all; development of local industries; community health care and recreation; safe drinking water; model farming; collective paddy stores; domestic industry-based work for women; campaigns against drinking of liquor; developing fellow-feeling and solidarity among the

⁹⁴⁷ Robert John Hopkins, 'Localisation and Resilience at the Local Level: The Case of Transition Town Totnes' (Devon, UK) (doctoral thesis, University of Plymouth, 2010).

⁹⁴⁸ Intriguingly, at the time of writing, the British government is promoting what it calls 'localism', more to enable cuts in expenditure rather than empower local people.

⁹⁴⁹ Chakrabarti and Cullenburg, p. 188.

villagers; and the collection of demographic, economic and social statistics for every village. The experiment with self-reliant village development was initiated in three places – Shilaidaha, Kaligram and Sriniketan.⁹⁵⁰

Rahman goes on to describe in similarly impressive detail the rural reconstruction initiatives carried out under the management of Leonard Elmhirst. In his biography of Tagore in the ‘Builders of Modern India’ series (1971), Hiranmay Banerjee too describes Elmhirst’s experiments, saying that ‘[i]n the process he evolved an effective programme for rural development and also developed a method which in many ways anticipated the Community Development Programme (CDP) introduced in [India] several years after in the First Five Year Plan under the direct supervision of the Planning Commission.’ Chakrabarti and Cullenburg report that the liberalization policies introduced by the Indian government in 1991 have meant that subsidies for such as the CDP (replaced in 1980 by the Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP)) are being withdrawn, leaving small farmers terribly vulnerable.⁹⁵¹ As Tagore anticipated in 1922:

The whole of the human world, throughout its length and breadth, has felt the gravitational pull of a giant planet of greed, with concentric rings of innumerable satellites, causing in our society a marked deviation from the moral orbit. In former times the intellectual and spiritual powers of this earth upheld their dignity of independence and were not giddily rocked on the tides of the money market. But, as in the last fatal stages of disease, this fatal influence of money has got into our brain and affected our heart (Tagore, ‘The Modern Age’).⁹⁵²

There are alternatives to ‘The Modern Age’, which could come about through a reconnection with nature and a transition to a new form of rural economy. Tagore always insisted that what is needed is a spiritual transformation, so in the final part of this paper we come to an examination of what that might mean for today’s world.

Tagore’s Spiritual or Personalistic Monism

Light, as the radiant energy of creation, started the ring-dance of atoms in a diminutive sky, and also the dance of the stars in the vast, lonely theatre of time and space. The planets came out of their bath of fire and basked in the sun for ages. They were the thrones of the gigantic Inert, dumb and desolate, which knew not the meaning of its own blind destiny and majestically frowned upon a future when its monarchy would be menaced’ (Tagore, ‘Man’s Universe’, *The Religion of Man*).⁹⁵³

It is curious that Tagore’s book about religion begins with ‘creation’ in the absence of God. Tagore explains the apparent anomaly in his discussion with Albert Einstein: ‘This world is a human world—the scientific view of it is also that of the scientific man.’⁹⁵⁴ A few years before the book was published, in 1925 and 1927, Georges Lemaître published papers on relativistic cosmology which proposed that the universe was expanding. This raised the possibility that, extrapolating back in time, there was an initial ‘creation-like’ event, which Lemaître was to call ‘The Primeval Atom’ (later

⁹⁵⁰ Rahman, Anisur, ‘Roots of action research and self-reliance thinking in Rabindranath Tagore’, *Action Research*, 4 (2006), 231-45 (p. 232).

⁹⁵¹ Chakrabarti and Cullenburg, pp. 189-90.

⁹⁵² Rabindranath Tagore, ‘The Modern Age’, in *Creative Unity*, pp. 115-40 (p. 120).

⁹⁵³ Rabindranath Tagore, ‘Man’s Universe’, in *The Religion of Man: Being the Hibbert Lectures for 1930* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1931), pp. 13-24 (p. 13).

⁹⁵⁴ Appendix II: Note on the Nature of Reality, in *The Religion of Man*, pp. 222-225 (p. 222).

dubbed ‘The Big Bang’),⁹⁵⁵ which our Poet-scientist called ‘the ring-dance of atoms in a diminutive sky’.

Tagore’s primeval universe is dancing, it is animated, or animate; it has a dancing soul as well as material atoms. For Spinoza, the monist philosopher, those are modes of a single substance which one can call Nature or God. For Tagore, a personalistic monist, this is Man’s Universe, and so the primeval universe is matter or soul *for us*, made so by our perception and understanding. For Tagore, ‘soul’ is not – or is not only – an inward experience, a contemplation of the ineffable mystery of creation, it is the urge to dance, not alone but in a ring with others of our kind.

‘Man’s Universe’ continues with the evolution of life:

Then came a time when life was brought into the arena in the tiniest little monocycle of a cell [...] conscious not of the volume but of the value of existence, which it ever tried to enhance and maintain in many-branched paths of creation.⁹⁵⁶

Tagore traced the paths of evolution, describing the process as: ‘a marvellous quality of complex-inter-relationship maintaining a perfect co-ordination of functions’, which is ‘the divine mystery of existence, that baffles all analysis’, the latter being an allusion to his objection to scientific reductionism. Man’s first appearance occurs in a powerful passage: ‘The fire is lighted, the hammers are working [...] The process of evolution, which after ages has reached man, must be realized in its unity with him [...] and we must acknowledge that the evolution which Science talks of is that of Man’s universe’.⁹⁵⁷ Having developed this theme further, he begins a new subsection with: ‘The idea of the humanity of our God, or the divinity of Man the Eternal, is the main subject of this book.’⁹⁵⁸

Tagore’s accommodation of science’s truths within his ‘religion of Man’ was remarkable for its time, given the history of irreconcilable conflicts between science and religion,⁹⁵⁹ which continues today in disputes between creationists and those who study and teach Darwinian evolution, and on aspects of research and medical practice. Religions today are about personal and group identity and difference, rather than binding together a society. This is an area where Tagore’s ideas have contemporary relevance, and his essay ‘Man’s Nature’ is particularly relevant:

From the time when Man became truly conscious of his own self he also became conscious of a mysterious spirit of unity which found its manifestation through him in his society. [...] Man’s reverential loyalty to this spirit of unity is expressed in his religion [...]. In the Sanskrit language, religion goes by the name *dharma*, which in the derivative meaning implies the principle of relationship that holds us firm, and in its technical sense means the virtue of a thing, the essential quality of it [...]. Religion consists in the endeavour of men to cultivate and express those qualities which are inherent in the nature of Man the Eternal, and to have faith in him (‘Man’s Nature’).⁹⁶⁰

Tagore connects these principles to down-to-earth realities with a number of stories. One of these is about when he was being driven to Calcutta in a faulty motor car which needed water every few miles. When they were passing through small villages, water

⁹⁵⁵ John Farrell, *The Day Without Yesterday: Lemaitre, Einstein, and the Birth of Modern Cosmology* (New York: Thunder’s Mouth, 2005), pp. 76-91, p. 231.

⁹⁵⁶ ‘Man’s Universe’, p. 13.

⁹⁵⁷ ‘Man’s Universe’, pp. 14-15.

⁹⁵⁸ ‘Man’s Universe’, p. 17.

⁹⁵⁹ John Theodore Merz, *Religion and Science: A Philosophical Essay* (Edinburgh: William Blackwood & Sons, 1915).

⁹⁶⁰ Rabindranath Tagore, ‘Man’s Nature’, in *The Religion of Man*, pp. 143-55 (Initial sentences of first four paragraphs, pp. 143-4).

was freely provided. The villagers could have made a business out of this but, in a hot country where water is scanty in summer, they considered it their *dharma*, their duty, to offer water to whoever needed it.⁹⁶¹

Those villagers were part of the ancient social system which was under threat, and which Tagore tried to revive. They were probably not conscious of a ‘mysterious spirit of unity’, but of tradition and learned habits they did not think to change. In his influential book, *Provincializing Europe*, Dipesh Chakrabarty wrote about Tagore having two ‘ways of seeing’ his country of Bengal, as ‘a land of arcadian and pastoral beauty’, the ‘golden Bengal’ of the song later adopted as the national anthem of Bangladesh, at the same time knowing the ugly side of village life: the ‘[j]ealousy, rivalry, fraudulence and trickery between people’ and the ‘deep roots of corruption’, and documenting the social problems: the scarcity of water, the disease and malnutrition.⁹⁶² Tagore’s ‘religion of Man’ is not only about shared truths and tolerance of different views, but unquestioning joy and love, which he found through religious experiences, as he describes in ‘The Vision’:

The man whose inner vision is bathed in an illumination of his consciousness at once realizes the spiritual unity reigning supreme over all differences. His mind no longer awkwardly stumbles over individual facts of separateness in the human world, accepting them as final. He realizes that peace is in the inner harmony which dwells in truth and not in any outer adjustments. He knows that beauty carries an eternal assurance of our spiritual relationship to reality, which waits for its perfection in the response of our love (‘The Vision’).⁹⁶³

It may be that ‘our spiritual relationship to reality’ can be revived, and made universal, through the deep ecology movement. In his book, *Animate Earth*, the ecologist, Stephan Harding, relates his own and others’ deep experiences of the living planet, a process he calls ‘being *Gaia*’ed’.⁹⁶⁴ Tagore has evidently had such experiences, as the following poem illustrates:

When I lay in your womb for ages,
Mother Sea,
one with the unborn earth,
your life-throbs left their rhythm
upon the atoms
that have built my body.
I have in my being
the memory of a lonely mother-heart
nourishing in its secret the fruitful future.
In my life I carry the same mystery
of a great expectation
of unknown fulfilment.
It is hidden in the dark unproved,
yet it grows into certainty every day
without being known.⁹⁶⁵

Conclusion

⁹⁶¹ ‘Man’s Nature’, p. 149.

⁹⁶² Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2008), pp. 152-3.

⁹⁶³ Rabindranath Tagore, ‘The Vision’, in *The Religion of Man*, pp. 90-108 (p. 108).

⁹⁶⁴ Stephan Harding, *Animate Earth: Science, Intuition and Gaia*, 2nd edn (Totnes: Green, 2009), p. 49.

⁹⁶⁵ ‘25’, in ‘I: Poems’, in *English Writings IV*, p. 28.

In the first section of this paper, on reconnection with nature, I considered the influences on the formation of the deep ecology movement, and suggested that a Tagorean deep ecology would be a deeper, richer and more joyful sense of connection with the community of life forms and the land. Tagore's examination of our universe from its beginning shows the 'primeval atom' as a unity, a singularity, which expanded in size and complexity to arrive at the world we know. Tagore maintains that our experience of the world is a human conception, our collective truth, hence his insight that 'the earth and the sky are woven with the fibres of man's mind, which is the universal mind at the same time'. Tagore's thought presents a vital challenge to deep ecologists, to embrace the human, to recognise that this is Man's world.

The second section covered the history of breakdown and the potential for revival of village community systems. New class theory shows the feasibility of heterogeneous economies, to include communal expropriation of surplus labour. This model could be applied to the Transition Initiative movement, which has spread rapidly since Transition Town Totnes in 2005-6, and there are now hundreds of local initiatives in Britain and many other countries. The early adopters struggle to scale up any initiative from being a niche interest for environmentalists, concerned about human induced Climate Change and Peak Oil. Fear and guilt over these future threats, whose effects are not yet apparent day-to-day, is not a helpful incentive for the bulk of the population to get involved, which is where Tagore's positive influence could be very valuable. Tagore's ideal was a synthesis of local village and global university, without dehumanising cities and nations and profit systems in between. A Tagorean Transition Initiative would embrace his personalistic monism, and be focussed on rediscovering human nature as united in mutual aid, in symbiotic social unity, in the Universal Being, the Super-personal Man.

Appendix 4: Marjorie Hessel Tiltman on Dartington Hall

In her Preface to *English Earth* (London: Harrap, 1935), Marjorie Hessel Tiltman describes the crisis in British farming which peaked in 1929, causing bankruptcies and rural unemployment, and how this was followed by the Agricultural Marketing Act of 1931, which was opposed bitterly by farmers, but the Government persisted and the farming industry rallied. Tiltman goes on to describe farming and farmers in most branches of the industry, their history, how they have been under threat, and how they have responded or been helped, by entrepreneurs, the Government, by science and by visionaries. This is a valuable and fascinating book about a crucial turning point in the history of farming in England, and helps to explain how new ideas which seemed right at the time, were exploited and distorted in subsequent decades.

In 'Chapter XIX. How Science Helps the Farmer' (pp.284-302) (pp.297-302)), Tiltman describes a major social experiment in Dartington, Devon, inspired by Rabindranath Tagore.

To inspect the third example of agricultural research which I have selected you must travel to the ancient town of Totnes, in the south of Devonshire. There, if you go in summer, you will see holidaymakers sailing up and down the beautiful green waters of the river Dart or strolling round and picnicking on its leafy banks. Among the many attractions in the neighbourhood of that lovely river perhaps none is more significant than Dartington Hall, which people come from all parts of the world especially to visit. So numerous, indeed, are these visitors that in June 1934 they numbered 1000.

The pattern, or, rather, the inspiration, of Dartington Hall lies in that bare, level region of Bengal about a hundred miles north-west of Calcutta. At this spot is situated the famous settlement of the Indian poet and philosopher Rabindranath Tagore. It is Tagore's ancestral property. In the middle stands the glass *asram* where every week a religious gathering is held. Near by rises a group of educational buildings. There is, too, in that almost barren district, a smiling oasis, where vegetables and fruits of all sorts are grown and flowers blossom, where a sugar mill is operated, and where the people all seem happy and moved and inspired by one emotion—love and respect for their venerated master.

One of those who took this patch of desert in hand and brought it into cultivation was a young Englishman named Elmhirst; and it was he who, with his American wife, came to England and looked for an estate where they could build up a rural community.

They found it, and in 1927 began operations in it. Their ambitions were so profound, and fixed so deeply in the past, present, and future, and in the people of 'the land' (in the sense that politicians use the term), that it is difficult, if not impossible, to describe them in a thousand words or two and do justice to all their implications.

Yes, the Elmhirsts found their estate. They found it in Dartington Hall and the 800 acres of rolling hills and fields and farms and cottages which went with it. For over a thousand years those hills and fields had been part of one essential whole. When Mr and Mrs Elmhirst arrived the estate, undermined by the heaviest taxation that England had ever known, was showing signs of disintegration. The continuous burden had already divided many of the finest estates. Great landlords who had been prepared to accept low interest on their money because of the social position which landownership gave them found the small credit sum replaced by a debt, and their position economically untenable.

What, then, was to happen ?

Nationalization of the land, such as is in vogue in Russia, is an alternative which many experts in England consider would be a tremendously disruptive solution, unless applied gradually and carefully.

Owner-occupancy by single farmers is another solution, but hampered by the difficulty of working the land without big capital.

At Dartington Hall Mr and Mrs Elmhirst are trying to evolve some scheme of 'revolving flow,' and to replace systems of both State ownership and private ownership by a trust. Gerald Heard, the well-known scientific writer, says, "Dartington aims at the new manorial nucleation."

Under such a scheme land, buildings, equipment, stock—everything would belong to the trust, and be controlled by it through an efficient staff, from managers down to the newest cowboy. The committee of the trust would be men capable of dealing on equal terms with the committee members of other great industries. They could buy and sell on the tremendous scale which has been rendered necessary in modern organization.

The implications of such a scheme are political, economic, and social, and to prove its fundamental soundness and workability many, many years would—or will—be needed. During the short time which I was able to spend at Dartington it was made clear to me that Dartington regards itself strictly as a research institution, and it is one of the essential rules of such institutions that success must not be presupposed. Dartington has had successes—striking ones—in its separate departments, but such triumphs contribute to, rather than prove, the success of the plan as a whole. The time for final conclusions to be drawn has not yet been reached.

Dr Slater, who is the managing director of Dartington Hall Limited, and who is demonstrating very effectively that scientists can also be business men, outlined to me four of the more obvious advantages of such a trust.

First, if profits can be shown money can be borrowed for the 'business' on the Stock Exchange, and therefore death duties can be paid by the sale of shares. Second comes centralization of buying and selling. Third comes rationalization of management. Fourth—and this is one of the really 'modern' aspects of a trust—it should give the opportunity for men of character and intelligence and efficiency to rise to the top in a profession whose upper reaches are almost entirely closed to the man without capital or inheritance. Under a trust the lowest labourer could work up to the position of farm-manager, helped by the continuation schools which would be a feature of the community of which the trust would be the centre; for the trust is, after all, only the head, and no head is complete without a body. The body, in the view of the Elmhirsts, should be formed by a self-contained village (township, community—call it what you will), in which the pulse of life beats as strongly as it does in the town, and which can offer as many attractions, entertainments, as well as intellectual pursuits, to first-class minds.

And so at Dartington there grew from the 800 acres purchased in 1925, and the estate taken over with eight employees—there grew, in only nine years, a holding of 3047 acres, on which, in December 1933, nearly a thousand people were employed.

The two farms on this holding are run on the most up-to-date lines, and constantly carry off prizes for their stock and farm produce. There are laboratories for applied research, which can observe the agricultural developments on the estate. There are departments for research in economics whose business is to analyse the results of the experiment and to interpret their significance. There is a magnificent sawmill which stands, an industrial colossus, among the great leafy Devon woods. There is a Gardens Department, which has two years running carried off the first prize for stone-work at the Chelsea Flower Show. There is a 'firm,' calling itself

Staverton Builders Limited, which carries out important contracting work.

There are schools for children from six to sixty, for the Elmhursts consider that every man and woman, whether leaving an elementary school at fourteen, or a university at twenty-two, has too many possibilities in his or her mental make-up to justify leaning back and considering that education is over once schooldays are over. Besides the primary, junior, and senior schools (co-educational affairs discussed all over the world for their bold modern methods), and a Teacher-training Department with pupils from America, Germany, Austria, and Hungary, there is an extremely live branch of the Workers' Educational Association, which has attracted no less than 160 adult students to twenty-seven different classes—classes on such subjects as modern history and modern science, and with such amusing off-shoots as classes for tap dancing and ballroom dancing.

Of course, there is a cinema, where intelligent films attract an intelligent audience. The superb open-air theatre, seating 4000 people, is worth going from the other end of England merely to see—empty or full. I have not yet been fortunate enough to be part of the audience during a show.

There is, too, a cider factory, the work of which is described in another chapter. By the side of a clear stream, against a background of woods, rises a weaving-mill of local stone. Built within the last few years, it will surely go down to posterity as a perfect architectural gem. There is a craftsman's studio as well. The work which it turns out is in eager demand. I was in the shop while people were buying hand-made tiles, pottery, rugs, pieces of carving in wood and stone and ivory, and pieces of iron- and steel-work that were exquisite in their practicability and workmanship. Some of the buildings—from cottages to the magnificent Dartington Hall itself—are masterpieces of antique architecture; others are whitewashed, geometrically shaped houses, with a plenitude of glass-window space, which have been designed by such modern architects as the Swiss Lescaze.

For nothing, if it be good of its kind and suitable for its purpose, is excluded by mere conservatism from Dartington Hall estate. The very keynote of the place is not tradition, but progress, built upon that which was best in the past, and always mindful that, in its turn, it must go to form the foundations of the future.

Dartington may perhaps be regarded as an omen—an attempt to strike at the very root of agricultural decay by a return to the self-contained rural community, where handicrafts flourish and the younger members do not find life so dull that they are anxious to escape to the towns.

Viewed from another angle, the estate is but part of a great whole—the entire field of agricultural research, which has its technical, its economic, and its social aspects. Some of the organizations engaged in that great task are directly supported by the Government. Others, like Dartington, are inspired by idealists. Others again have sprung from the beliefs of a single earnest seeker after the truth. Behind many of them stands that body, mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, which may be described as the godfather of research in Great Britain—the Agricultural Research Council.

Whether receiving official aid or not, all of these organizations are, in the words of *The Times*, “directed to helping man in his age-long struggle to gather the fruits of the earth with as little sweat of his brow as may be.” And all of them are of sufficient importance to the city-dweller, and to the housewife who sallies forth with her shopping-basket, to deserve the interest and gratitude of the country.

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