

Sir Rabindranath Tagore

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Let me make confession of a personal prejudice. It would be an indeed unhappy home that I would leave to revel in even the best kind of Oriental poetry. The trail of the pedant is over it all. Its formalities, its affectations, its redundancies stifle the cries of the babe genius. The spirit of poetry cannot live in the air of the inhumanities of the grammarian. All Indian arts are peculiarly tainted with precision and precosity. Indian music must be composed in an approved "rag" or (to them) "it is not music." Indian art is mostly ancestor worship; Indian religion is more rigid than Presbyterianism. Originality has been crushed under the stone of a petrified civilization. Such new art — in every branch — as has been created in India in the last thousand years is definitely due to the influence of some invading civilization, and even this imitative stuff has been seized on by the frozen perfections of classicism, its life vampirized by the suction of atavism, and its throat caught by the dead hand of tradition.

Now far be it from me to utter a word in dispraise of one who has received the rare and ineffable honor of knighthood from so gracious and discerning a sovereign as the latest — perhaps, if Providence in its inscrutable wisdom so decree, the last — of the Georges, but the poetry of Sir Rabindranath Tagore is certainly Oriental poetry, and I must plead prejudice and incapacity in excuse of my failure to admire it.

The people of New York are doubtless more fortunate than I in being able to read his works in the original Bengali, which I am unable to do. Their rapture is thus easily explicable. But some persons, even in New York, share my ignorance of Bengali, and these (so it seems to

me) are possibly a little perfervid in their enthusiasms, a shade obsequious in their genuflexions.

As to the originals, though, one may remark that the people of Bengal are themselves as insensible as I myself to the beauties of Sir Rabindranath. His popularity in that great but unpleasant province depends upon a few popular "nationalistic" songs. The work on which he makes his American appeal is totally unknown in his own country. It consists principally of what appears to me to be a type of mysticism as spineless and amateurish and affected as Maeterlinck's, a collection of pious phrases tricked out with the tinsel of conventional similes. Ladies of a certain age are prone to weep when warmed with sherry and this kind of poetry, for the transference of the emotional stimulus from sex to religion is often accompanied by serious instabilities of mind. It is apparently to such individuals that Sir Radindranath Tagore makes his most effective bow. Besides, he is a polite person; he says nothing, and he says it very nicely; he has a most noble and venerable beard, and the royal sword has been laid upon his shoulder. Keats, Shelley, Swinburne, Chaucer, Shakespeare himself — none of these attained that height.

But then they were not colored. There is something about the mere fact of color which appeals irresistibly to a certain type of female. This country in particular has been overrun with "Yogis," who have all succeeded beyond wonder, disputing the favors of idle women with Pekinese dogs and dancing masters. At least the Indian poet is on a higher level than these; but, for all that, he owes much, if not all, of his popularity to some such itch of odleness, as accounts for the vogue of the others. It is an indignity for the artist to allow himself to be exploited in the salons of the nouveau riche; a man of virility and self-respect does not consent to be treated like a bearded lady of an ossified wonder. The true artist has then yet one more handicap in America; for if the devotees of culture learned to tolerate him, they would desire

to pet him. Mrs. Leo Hunter never yet bagged a real lion; it is the straw-stuffed models, breathing by dint of bellows, that roar to order in the gaudy junk-shops which in this country pass for "artistic homes."

However, we will quote a little of Sir Rabindranath's poetry, and leave the reader to judge whether it be the lyre of Apollo, or the voice of Bottom; in any case, the style is W. B. Yeats, who varnished these poems from a "crib."

I.

I was walking by the road, I do not know why, when
the noonday was
past and bamboo branches rustled in the wind.
The prone shadows with their outstretched arms
clung to the feet of the hurrying light.
The *koels* were weary of their songs.
I was walking by the road, I do not know why.
{Nor do I. — A.C.}

II.

The hut by the side of the water is shaded by an
over-hanging tree.
Some one was busy with her work, and her bangles
made music in the corner.
I stood before the hut, I do not know why.
{Tired, possibly? — A.C.}

III.

The narrow winding road crosses many a mustard
field, and many a mango forest.
It passes by the temple of the village and the mar-
ket at the river landing place.
I stopped by this hut, I do not know why.

{Nearly stopped by this stanza; I do not know why. — A.C.}

IV.

Years ago it was a day of breezy March when the murmur of the spring was langourous, and the mango blossoms were dropping on the dust.

The rippling water leapt and licked the brass vessel that stood on the landing step.

I think of that day of breezy March, I do not know why.

{Memory is indeed a strange thing! How profound is this thought! — A.C.}

V.

Shadows are deepening and cattle returning to their folds.

The light is grey upon the lonely meadows, and the villagers are awaiting for the ferry at the bank.

I slowly return upon my steps, I do not know why.

{Closing time? — A.C.}

It is faint, intangible stuff.