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Singing Bengal into a Nation: Tagore the Colonial Cosmopolitan?

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This article argues that tracing Rabindranath Tagore's travels to Europe and America from 1913 to 1918, which coincide with his public disavowal of nationalism in Bengal, provides an insight into the limitations of nationalism. By offering a contextualization of Tagore's nationalist disillusionment through a reading of his personal relationships with scholars and artists often taken as the exemplars of literary modernism, the suggestion is made that Tagore should be read as a modernist author as well. Tagore's muscular critique of nationalism emerges as much out of local upheavals in Bengal post-1905 as out of a more global modernist landscape of war, revolution, and imperialism. Tagore models in his speeches and writing a locally rooted globalism, committed to a universal humanism and an avowed love of country, and it takes a form that is explicitly neither nationalist nor cosmopolitan.

Keywords: Rabindranath Tagore / cosmopolitanism / W.B. Yeats / world literature / nationalism

This is THE *Scoop*. Reserve space in the next number for *Tagore*. We'll be the only American magazine to print him, or even to know. I don't remember what I wrote to you. But he has sung Bengal into a nation, and his English version of his poems is very wonderful.

—EZRA POUND
(QTD. IN PARISI 46)

Writing to Harriet Monroe, editor of *Poetry Magazine*, on 3 October 1912, Ezra Pound breathlessly prepared to orchestrate Rabindranath Tagore's literary debut to an American public. For Pound, Tagore seemed to have been the voice of a far-flung place, his songs the inauguration of Bengal's nationhood; the present-perfect tense yoked the realization of Bengal as nation to the moment of Tagore's performance of it in song. Bengal was thus to be ushered onto a more global stage, beyond the imperial limits of England and India, and manifested into the legible form of a nation, on the wing of Tagore's

burgeoning celebrity. But to whom did Tagore sing? And for whom did Bengal *become* a nation?

In 1912, Bengal was a province of British India, which, nonetheless, persistently marked itself as a cohesive, if not homogenous, nation drawn together by common linguistic, cultural, and historical markers. At the same time, those ideological and affective ties that bound its nation-ness were also being deployed as part of an anticolonial strategy. Its nationhood, we might say, was at once nostalgic and aspirational. Despite the multiplicities of national imagination at work, Pound's articulation of Tagore's mythic power still took on an ironic truth over the course of the twentieth century.

Following the 1947 independence of India, the province of Bengal was divided into two regions: West Bengal enclosed within India, and East Bengal baptized in its annexation by Pakistan as East Pakistan (later made independent as Bangladesh). Neither Bengal today—the Indian state of West Bengal, nor the nation-state of Bangladesh—is the Bengal to whom Tagore penned his most famous national hymns. And by any geopolitical definition, Bengal has never been a nation even as it lingers in a lyric national form. Though the nationhood of which Pound wrote and Tagore sang in 1912 was geopolitically foreclosed three decades later, it still resurrected itself lyrically, a haunting voice from the past, a paean to a now-lost wholeness, once imagined but never realized. As the author of the national anthems of both India and Bangladesh (and the only person ever to pen the national anthem of more than one country), Tagore sang Bengal into being, but into a form that he could not have imagined.

In this article, I argue that, for all the songs Tagore wrote that have ideologically birthed nations, for all of the veneration of him as the singer of those nations, he was not the muscular nationalist that was historically constructed. In fact, he actively and vociferously opposed the structures of anticolonial nationalism, even as he wrote poems and songs in honor of the Bengal that was the ostensible object of that political strategy. This apparent irony, however, offers a direct testimony to the complex and sometimes contradictory relationship Tagore had to the country he so loved and to the political machinations he believed corrupted its affective force. Even in the most stalwart moments of his critique of nationalism, Tagore never swayed from articulating his attachment to Bengal. Indeed, it is precisely this love of country that caused him to resist the politicization of that attachment and what he saw as its artificial idolization.

In *Who Sings the Nation-State? Language, Politics, Belonging*, a discussion of nationalism turning on the potential political force of a non-English language version of “The Star-Spangled Banner,” Judith Butler and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak ask: “. . . what makes for a non-nationalist or counter-nationalist mode of belonging?” (58–59). They argue that the performative act of singing a national anthem lays claim to a particular mode of belonging to, and occasionally of opposing, the nation-state. We might say that Tagore's lyric and prose writings on Bengal modeled the ambivalences of a counter-nationalist national attachment. Indeed, they demonstrate, on the one hand, the normative violence of nationalism

as a disciplining political force, and on the other hand, the alive and charismatic pre-appropriative affects around which it was constellated. Out of this ambivalence, Tagore actively espoused an alternative model of attachment, what I will call a locally-rooted globalism, which sought to balance the affective commitment with humanist ideals.

If as Pound prophesied, Tagore has come to be the voice of Bengal, his songs and very body have been deployed in a variety of ways, from Pound's orientaling tokenism, to the global celebrity and acclaim of winning Asia's first Nobel Prize, to his state deification as national songwriter. Nonetheless, Tagore's own determined disavowal of nationalism, simultaneous with his unequivocal expression of attachment to the motherland, stands still as an insistence against nationalism as a satisfying form of local (and domestic) cathexis. It is particularly worth noting that, unlike other antinationalist figures of the period, Tagore did not uproot himself out of the nation into an intellectual diaspora. Martha Nussbaum and others have argued for reading Tagore as a model of cosmopolitan ethics and pedagogy, suggesting that his 1916 novel *The Home and the World* (*Ghare-Baire*) in particular demonstrates a humanist ideal of citizenship. Therein, the character Nikhil in the novel stands in for Tagore, and his "cosmopolitan stance" makes possible his primary "allegiance to what is morally good" (Nussbaum 2). However, the notion cosmopolitanism, in Nussbaum's account, that distanced Tagore from baser and more chauvinistic loyalties to nation and creed appears incongruous with Tagore's own explicit repudiation of both nationalism and cosmopolitanism as inadequate affective and communitarian ideals. Instead, in his writing and in his own relationships, he sought to negotiate local attachment with global engagement.

One might say that the title of *The Home and the World* encapsulates eloquently the discontents and discomfitures by which Tagore made himself at home in so many worlds. It also suggests the oft-dichotomous ways in which Tagore and his work are read today. He is seen either in a markedly local register, as the man who Gandhi venerated as "Gurudev" (Revered Teacher) and whose words gave lyric voice to the Bengal he so loved, or alternately, in a universalist vein, as the urbane and feted cosmopolitan whose writing now stands at the canonical center of that ever-capacious genre of "world literature," now more commonly and perhaps aptly taxonomized as "postcolonial." Indeed, to think of cosmopolitanism in the early twentieth century is to think of colonialism, its constitution, and its coercions.

The emancipatory conception of the cosmopolitan intellectual, though alluring, ignores a crucial historical and hermeneutic question of whether the colonial subject be can in fact be cosmopolitan. Empire's specter haunted not only the body politic and its conditions of possibility in the colonial moment, but also the intimacies and legacies produced therewith.

The ambivalence and plasticity of that subject position were particularly highlighted in the years around the First World War, as the very topography of the colonial world shifted underfoot. During this time, Tagore penned his two most famous works, *The Home and the World* and the collection of poems for which

he achieved global acclaim, *Gitanjali* (1913). As lyric and prose novel, the two texts represent the generic poles of Tagore's literary style. Furthermore, unlike *The Home and the World*, *Gitanjali* makes no explicit mention of Bengal, or of the nation as an object of attachment. It is a collection of poems intent upon the formless and fathomless spiritual ideal of Brahman, "the (nameless) unsearchable Eternal, Immutable Being who is the Author and Preserver of the Universe" (qtd. in Collet viii). And yet these two texts are undeniably linked by the common moment of their emergence, one during which Tagore was embedded in a community of scholars and artists who we now take as the exemplars of literary modernism. That he is not now read as part of that canon is, I argue, a product of Tagore's particular position as a colonial subject (albeit a highly privileged and celebrated one), his ambivalent self-fashioning as an inscrutable mystic, and his staunch refusal to endorse anticolonial nationalism in Bengal. Indeed, these factors too insured that he remained at the outskirts of that international community and his own national compatriots, even as they hallowed him and his work. Tagore's "worldliness" suggestively determined and contradicted his rootedness in Bengal such that his engagement with and influence in the West, when read alongside his deep affiliation to his motherland, modeled a structure of attachment to nation and to home that challenged the primacy of the ideological and affective forces that policed those boundaries.

This article follows along two convergent axes: a consideration of the historical-political factors that influenced both Tagore's turn away from political nationalism and his resistance to aesthetic cosmopolitan, and an anatomy of the intimate politics of friendship that marked his burgeoning celebrity in the years around the First World War. Reading those affective binds together with the texts that came to be seen as representative of his affiliations and motivations, we might come to see the ways in which Tagore himself theorized the inspirations and vicissitudes of the colonial intellectual.

THE ANCIENT ORIENTAL WIZARD

In a series of lectures delivered across America from 1916–1917, later published as *Nationalism* (1917), Tagore lambasted "the idea of the Nation" as "one of the most powerful anesthetics that man has invented. Under the influence of its fumes the whole people can carry out its systematic programme of the most virulent self-seeking without being in the least aware of its moral perversion—in fact feeling dangerously resentful if it is pointed out" (57). This is a strikingly different sentiment than the one he appeared to embody twenty years earlier as he stood on the steps in Beadon Square in Calcutta where the Indian National Congress was being held. There he sang publicly for the first time "Bande Mataram," the song that became an iconic statement of Indian nationalism during the freedom struggle, and remains the national song of India today.¹

Scholars have presented a variety of theories on what incited Tagore's turn away from a language of ardent nation-love to a systemic condemnation of

nationalism, ascribing his disillusionment to the growing sectarian violence in the region. Sumit Sarkar writes that Tagore was “considerably swayed by revivalism for several years, but then [broke] away sharply in mid-1907 under the impact of communal riots” (115). The 1907 riots in Comilla, East Bengal ignited communal violence across the region, gaining attention in the House of Commons. There, John Morley, Secretary of State for India, was interrogated about “whether, seeing that rioting or disturbance between Mahomedans and Hindus was of rare occurrence prior to the partition of Bengal, steps [would] be taken to prevent incitement to disorder by the Nawab of Dacca and those responsible for propartition demonstrations” (qtd. in Parliament 758). Colonial authorities ascribed the outbreak of violence to the Nawab of Dacca’s agitation in favor of the continued partition of Bengal. That the paucity of pre-partition communal violence was acknowledged in the House of Commons can scarcely go without note. The partition, which colonial rhetoric claimed reflected the impossibility of Hindu-Muslim coexistence in a unified Bengal, in fact retroactively set off the violence that justified its implementation. For Tagore, who set *The Home and the World* in 1907 against the backdrop of this violence, there was a lesson to be learned about the divisive potential of partisan nationalisms.

Other scholars trace Tagore’s disillusionment with nationalism to the partition of Bengal in 1905, even if his most vitriolic criticism does not become clear for a few years more. Tanika Sarkar writes that, “though he distanced himself from the nationalist mainstream at mid-point, he came out with an exhaustive and systemic critique—almost an existential refusal of its politics of nation-worship—only in 1915. Perhaps he could not express that kind of critique until the wound of the partition of Bengal was healed by its rescinding in 1911–12” (33). Sarkar astutely marks the time lag between Tagore’s clear distancing of himself from the nationalist movement and his most cogent critique of it.

The apparent contradictions of Tagore’s turn away from the *Swadeshi* movement, even as he penned some of the most famous songs ascribed to it, may indeed offer evidence of Tagore’s anguish at the division of his beloved Bengal and its traumatic traces. The self-rule of *Swadeshi* played out, in Tagore’s novel and in Bengal itself, as a kind of *unrule* in which communities turned against each other in communal riots, rather than together against imperial rule. According to Sarkar, it is not the partition that most affected Tagore, but the realization that Lord Curzon’s policy of “divide and rule” proved deeply efficacious, the temporary colonial division of the region a vestigial fracture that would eventually splinter irreparably. Tagore mourned Bengal’s inability to appropriately recover from the trauma of partition, to determinedly reconcile itself; his commitment to the ideal of a unified and united Bengal was shaken not only by the actual partition of the region, but also by the divisive forces it unleashed.

Tagore wrote the song “Amar Sonar Bangla (My Golden Bengal)” in 1906, immediately following *bangabhanga*, the 1905 partition of Bengal, during which the province of Bengal was divided into two sections: East and West. With a population greater than any other province in colonial India, Bengal was an

unruly charge for colonial administration. The line drawn by Lord Curzon's government bisected Bengal on the basis of religious difference: the region designated East Bengal had a majority Muslim population, while West Bengal was predominately Hindu. The decision was the result of a colonial policy intended to isolate the eastern portion of the province from the outspoken nationalist agitation that was largely centered in Calcutta (in West Bengal). However, the plan backfired when the partition unleashed a torrent of revived nationalist sentiment, outrage by the legal and symbolic violence that had lacerated the body of the Bengali motherland.

"Amar Sonar Bangla" was intended to rouse Bengalis to protest the division of Bengal by invoking the image of a once-whole mother whose very body was now endangered. The song is replete with images of a pastoral Bengal—her mango groves, paddy fields, riverbanks, and banyan trees. The golden Bengal to whom the song is dedicated is addressed as "Ma" (mother), the apostrophic object of the song who is also the central laborer in an affective and bucolic labor economy. She elicits powerful feelings not only through the beauty of her landscape but also through her suffering: "If sadness, O mother mine / Casts a gloom on your face / My eyes are filled with tears!" (Tagore, "Amar Sonar Bangla" 238). It is, in the end, a song of mourning, an elegy for the idyllic pastoral scene of the "true" Bengal that was partitioned off in East Bengal in 1905. In writing the song, Tagore had hoped that both the partition of Bengal and the divisive communal violence it unleashed might prove temporary and simultaneously confirm the need for anticolonial strategies that promoted local unity. It is fitting, then, that it would go on, some 70 years later, to become the national anthem of Bangladesh—the latter-day incarnation of colonial East Bengal.

The decision in 1972 by Bangladesh's first president Sheikh Mujibur Rahman to institute "Amar Sonar Bangla" as the national anthem reorients the song's subject. Rather than being read as an elegy of a bygone wholeness, the song is redeployed as a celebration and veneration of a liberated and reoccupied motherland. But this is hardly an artificial re-imagining of the terms of its lyrics; the song, like its author, was always already representative of the nation-state that would become Bangladesh. East Bengal represented for Tagore that originary idyllic pastoral motherland whose verdant body evoked in him such emotion.

In 1911, five years after writing "Amar Sonar Bangla," Tagore wrote "Jana Gana Mana," the song that became India's national anthem in 1947. Those lyrics trace the territorial limits of a nation that spans beyond Bengal, enumerating geographical referents of India as a whole:

Thy name rouses the hearts of Punjab, Sind,
Gujarat and Maratha,
of the Dravida and Orissa and Bengal.
It echoes in the hills of the Vindhya and Himalayas,
mingles in the music of Jamuna and Ganges and is
chanted by the waves of the Indian Ocean. (Tagore, "Jana Gana Mana")

The ambiguous object of this apostrophe poses something of an epistemological quandary. Who is “the dispenser of India’s destiny” to whom the song is directed? There was, at the time of its writing, speculation that it was written in honor of George V, who was crowned in the summer of 1911. However, in a letter to Pulin Behari Sen, Tagore offered a rebuttal of those rumors, writing:

A certain high official in His Majesty’s service, who was also my friend, had requested that I write a song of felicitation towards the Emperor. The request simply amazed me. It caused a great stir in my heart. In response to that great mental turmoil, I pronounced the victory in Jana Gana Mana of that Bhagya Vidhata [ed. God of Destiny] of India who has from age after age held steadfast the reins of India’s chariot through rise and fall, through the straight path and the curved. That Lord of Destiny, that Reader of the Collective Mind of India, that Perennial Guide, could never be George V, George VI, or any other George. (Qtd. in M. Chatterjee)

The song thus offers an alternate conception of sovereignty, one uninfluenced by the structures of either nation or empire, one uncontained by the temporal limits of monarchical genealogy. The apostrophic “Lord” in the song makes possible a timeless India and collectivity united by a more expansive power than the nation. The apostrophe further enables a nonsectarian collectivity, a particularly important feature of an anthem intended to unite the various religious groups of India. The ambiguous apostrophe marks the nation not as an object with onto-geographical priority—the nation is made relational and offered, from the affective point of view, a kind of personhood.

In the collected works of Tagore, *Rabindra Rachanabali*, “Amar Sonar Bangla” and “Jana Gana Mana” are anthologized under the category of “*Swadesh Gaan* (Songs of *Swadesh*).” The collection, compiled and edited by Pulinbehari Sen, employs the term “*Swadesh*” as a categorical marker of those songs by Tagore which took *desh*, country or Bengal, as their object. However, it is worth querying what the term meant for Tagore, whose categories of home, nation, and country were so vexed. In 1920, he defined *desh* and *swadesh* thus:

The certain knowledge that I have a *dés* comes out of a quest. Those who think that the country is theirs simply because they have been born in it are creatures besotted by external things of the world. But, since the true character of the human being lies in his or her inner nature imbued by the force of self-making (*ātmasakti*), only that country can be one’s *svadés* that is created by one’s own knowledge, intelligence, love and effort. (Qtd in P. Chatterjee 104)

The distinction between *dés* and *svadés*, country and my own country, is located in the imaginative power of the Sanskrit reflexive pronoun prefix *sva*: the reflexivity of self-making is itself country-making.

In *Lineages of Political Society*, Partha Chatterjee suggests that this notion of *svadés* for Tagore was that which made possible his critique of the nation as an organizing affective and political force. He writes, “Instead of looking for the nation, we must revive and reconstruct the *svadéssamāj*, establish the

collective power of self-making or *ātmāsakti*. The relation of every inhabitant of the country with the *svadés* must be personal and quotidian” (P. Chatterjee 104). *Swadeshi*—that which is of the country of one’s own—is thereby a kind of imaginative practice that is at once deeply personal and inherently dependent on collective will, on *samāj*, society. *Swadeshisamāj* is deterritorialized by the force of “one’s own knowledge, intelligence, love and effort,” even as its referent remains local and rooted.

Tagore first comes to the phrase *Swadeshi Samāj* in 1905, as an alternative to the nation that he had already begun to see as a foreign concept, ill-suited to Bengal and India. Partha Chatterjee has compellingly argued that for Tagore, *Samāj* effectively offered a non-statist alternative to the nation, one in line with his sense that the governing force of any collectivity ought to be spiritual, rather than material (107). *Samāj* was a collectivity, quite literally, that could travel, that would find its inspiration internally and yet produce itself in a larger world.

By the time *The Home and the World* was published, Tagore was not a just a public figure in Bengal but also a man of the world. After receiving the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1913 and being knighted by King George V in 1915, Tagore had become a something of an international celebrity, traveling through Europe, Asia, and America and in conversation with a variety of public intellectuals. In fact, his relationship with W.B. Yeats, cemented during his 1912 travels to England, is partially credited for his catapulting into the public sphere and into the Nobel Committee’s field of vision.

Therefore, to read Tagore’s disillusionment with nationalism solely in terms of the tumult in Bengal at the time—as many postcolonial scholars have—is to neglect the ways in which he imagined himself, and was reciprocally imagined, as part of a larger world of scholars, writers, and artists. Historians and critics have traced at length the ways in which World War I produced what Hemingway so famously called the “Lost Generation” in Europe, a disorientation also visible in Tagore’s literary production of the period.

Though Tagore’s travels and fame took him all over the world—he had, for example, a particular engagement with Japan—this article follows Tagore’s own episodic logic of attachment to scholars and writers in America and England to highlight the ways in which he traced his disenchantment with nationalism to what he saw were its most destructive offspring: imperialism and the first World War. At the intersection of imperial constraints, modernist aesthetics, and national attachment, Tagore’s locally-rooted globalism offers insight into not only the global terrain of modernism but also into the local cathexes of what we now consider “world literature.”

Rabindranath Tagore became the first Asian Nobel Laureate when he was awarded the Prize in Literature after the publication of *Gitanjali*, a collection of devotional poems.² In the prize citation, the committee remarked that prize had been given to Tagore “because of his profoundly sensitive, fresh and beautiful verse, by which, with consummate skill, he has made his poetic thought, expressed in his own English words, a part of the literature of the West” (Nobel

Committee). The committee had not felt compelled in the case of any of the previous thirteen laureates to mention the words “English” or the “West” in their citations; it is clear that the Nobel committee was acutely aware of Tagore’s non-Westernness and the fact *Gitanjali* was originally written in Bengali.

The committee lauded Tagore for his ability to convey that foreignness in terms comprehensible to the Western literary imagination and implicitly eschewed any suggestion that the translation of *Gitanjali* could be attributed to anyone but Tagore, even as the effect of Yeats’s introduction and editing of the text remained a subject of controversy. Indeed, the phrase “expressed in his own English words” would haunt Tagore for the rest of his life, not only on the global stage onto which the prize thrust him, but also in his personal relationships, especially with Yeats. Pound, in his letter to Harriet Monroe, also noted the wonder of the poems in English, careful to ascribe their translational provenance to Tagore.

For his fans and friends in the West, Tagore was the only person who could have translated *Gitanjali*; the sentiments contained therein signal flashes of a spiritual world to which they could have no direct access. Even as a man of the world, having won the Nobel Prize and been knighted, Tagore would remain for his entire life marked an almost unapproachable mystic, forever in translation, or, as Yasunari Kawabata, the first Japanese Nobel laureate in literature, would refer to him, an “ancient Oriental wizard” (qtd. in Sen 94).

Tagore’s mystical foreignness, seen as distinctly Oriental, was as much a product of the ways in which his supporters in the West wanted to imagine him as his intentional self-fashioning. As a cultural commodity, Tagore’s spirituality and its vivid “Eastern-ness” carried enthusiasm amongst the community of modernist scholars and writers in which he found himself.

Of all of the people who came to venerate and befriend Tagore during his stay in England in 1912, Yeats perhaps felt as though he was the most similar to the Bengali. Introduced in June by their mutual friend William Rothenstein, Yeats and Tagore are said to have taken to one another immediately, with Yeats vigorously championing *Gitanjali* and agreeing to collaborate on a new translation of the collection. He found himself deeply moved by Tagore’s poetry, remarking in a toast to Tagore at a dinner he hosted two weeks after they met, “To take part in honoring Mr. Rabindranath Tagore is one of the great events in my artistic life. I know of no man in my time who has done anything in the English language to equal these lyrics” (qtd. in Hurwitz 57). The poems that so moved Yeats, of which he had seen no equal in his time, were only available to him, and later the Nobel Prize Committee, via Tagore’s translation from its original Bengali into English, a process marked by Tagore’s oft-expressed anxieties about his fluency in English.³

In many ways, Yeats, the Irishman, was just the person to edit and introduce *Gitanjali*. He and Tagore were connected by more than just their literary endeavors; they represented the gravitational pull of the British Empire’s orbit, as they were drawn together in its metropole. Despite the fact that Ireland ceased to be officially designated a colony following the 1800 Act of Union, the parallels between it and India span beyond a common imperial center. It is no coincidence

that the Irish were so taken by India and vice versa, given the number of Irish who were posted there in the British service, and as missionaries.

Not only did colonial policy implicitly account for an imagined similitude between India and Ireland—including the parallel development of psychoanalysis as a colonial practice—the two countries also were crucial to the symbolic health of the British Empire.⁴ While India was proclaimed the crown jewel of the empire, Ireland's proximity to the colonial center gave it enormous symbolic value and both Irish and Indian anticolonial struggles ignited a firestorm of British anxiety.

In addition to their symbolic and material significance to the British Empire, Ireland and India were both conspicuously marked by feminine symbols of nation that were popularly embraced and in marked contrast to a masculinized body of the imperial center. Yeats writes of India in the *Gitanjali* introduction, "A whole people, a whole civilization, immeasurably strange to us, seems to have been taken up into this imagination; and yet we are not moved because of its strangeness, but because we have met our own image, as though we had walked in Rossetti's willow wood, or heard, perhaps for the first time in literature, our voice as in a dream" (9). The sense of uncanny familiarity that Yeats expresses may in fact be linked to Tagore's translation practice, to the instinctual and unconscious ways Tagore claims his editorial decisions were formed (Tagore, *Selected Letters* 132). The cognitive dissonance that so moved Yeats, the feeling of hearing "for the first time" his own voice but "as in a dream," seems to recommend to him a practice of reading that makes the reader accessible to the surprising, and perhaps disturbing, unconscious similarities that might be unearthed between these two seemingly disparate worlds.

However, despite the discursive defamiliarization that Yeats proclaims in the introduction, his influence on the published English editions of *Gitanjali* has been much debated, by scholars and between Yeats and Tagore themselves. In a letter to Edward Thompson in 1913, Tagore wrote,

The *Gitanjali* poems are intimately personal to me and the pleasure I have of polishing their English versions is of a different nature [from] that of an author revising his works for publication. Every line of these should be as closely my own as possible though I must labour under the disadvantage of not being born to your language. In such a case I have been guided by my instinct, allowing it to work almost unconsciously without being hindered by more than casual suggestions from outside. I think the method that Yeats followed while editing my book was the right one in selecting those poems that required least alterations and rejecting others in spite of their merits. (Tagore, *Selected Letters* 132)

For all these assertions, rumors persisted that Yeats in fact wrote *Gitanjali*, evidence, perhaps, of racist perceptions of the linguistic and literary abilities of an Indian.⁵ Controversy over authorship aside, the English *Gitanjali* that the Nobel committee read was an explicitly different text than its Bengali counterpart. Translation, in this case, is not revision but re-creation—repetition with a

difference. In the English translation of *Gitanjali*, Tagore produced a new text, one that sought to remain faithful to the original and yet came perilously close to disappointing that bid for fidelity. The translated text is both his own, “intimately personal,” and yet foreign. Tagore’s prescriptive similarity between the two texts—“Every line of these should be as closely my own as possible”—reminds us of the indissoluble difference between the Bengali and the English, a difference borne of both the (im)possibilities of translation and the liminality of the colonial condition (132). Echoes, we might say, of the self-making notion of *svades* to which Tagore was so attached.

In “The Politics of Translation,” Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak argues for a translation practice suffused with intimacy, intimacies between reader, translator, writer, and text, such that the translator “become[s] the intimate reader” and in so doing, “surrender[s] to the text” (183). Spivak assumes in her litany of intimacies that in addition to the writer and translator being different people, the translator exists in a dynamic and agential liminal linguistic space wherein she is able to move between and within the languages of translation, having “graduated into speaking, by choice or by preference, of intimate matters in the language of the original” (187). This is where, Spivak claims, the bilingual (post)colonial subject is at a distinct advantage, able to move seamlessly between mother-tongue and imperial-tongue (likely a virtue of colonial education). Implicit in Spivak’s call for an ethical translation practice is the belief that the metropolitan (or perhaps, cosmopolitan) postcolonial feminist subject, the “translator” of her argument, is able to move freely in that metropolitan world and language.

But what are the politics of having acquired such intimacy with the language of the colonizer? What violence and forgetting is implicit in its development? And perhaps most importantly, can the colonial subject ever be fluent *enough*? Spivak argues compellingly that the metropolitan feminist (“who is sometimes the assimilated postcolonial”) needs to tread lightly in her translation, lest she assume a shared feminist accessibility across language (191). The exhortation is surely apt, but risks producing a narrative hypnotized by a false unity between access and power. As much as the act of translation seeks to make the foreign accessible, it is determinedly selective in the access it provides, demarcating the untranslatable and catachrestic.

Tagore’s own translation practice offers a provocative corollary to Spivak’s caution to the postcolonial feminist, espousing an ethics of inexorable difference. Tagore chose to translate only those poems that require the fewest alterations in order to be intelligible to a Western audience, those which emphasize the universal over the particular. In so doing, he identified particular forms as available for consumption and rendered others as untranslatable. Tagore’s enigmatic mediation between the English and Bengali versions of *Gitanjali*, rather than recommending a populist politics of translation, embraced dexterous modes of concealment—retaining an aspect of that Oriental opacity for which some of the most prominent poets of the time sought him out. Despite their praise of him and the congeniality of their acquaintance with him, the modernist icons with

whom Tagore was so popular remained unable to access some of the poems of *Gitanjali*—even after it won the arguably most global of literary prizes.

Despite Tagore's anxieties about his English ability, or perhaps because of them, his supporters in the West determinedly reiterated the accessibility and beauty of the poems, often in deeply contradictory ways. Yeats's introduction to *Gitanjali* is conspicuously marked by a contradiction of desires: to know of Tagore's poetry and to have that poetry confirmed unknowable. He writes, "But though these prose translations from Rabindranath Tagore have stirred my blood as nothing has for years, I shall not know anything of this life, and of the movements of thought that have made them possible, if some Indian traveler will not tell me" (5). Compressing the poetry of Tagore into Tagore the man into Tagore the Indian, Yeats constructs a palimpsest of (un)knowability in his introduction to *Gitanjali*. The poems, Yeats suggests, call for a second interpreter—a sort of fictive native informant without whom actual biographical empathy must fail. However, Yeats also makes himself the means by which the Western audience might come to glimpse something of the poet, even if it is only a reminder of his unknowability. His use of the first person is deceptive. Yeats supplants the need for that "Indian traveler" by invoking a phenomenology of affective proximity, a stirring "of [his] blood as nothing has for years" that stands in stark contradistinction to any possible epistemic capture ("I shall not know anything of this life.") There is a subtle calculus of intimacy at work: if Yeats, so close to the text and its author, can only ever understand the text through this physiologized imagery, the text becomes marked for its Western audience too by that hermeneutic opacity.⁶

Yeats's connection to India began long before he made Tagore's acquaintance; literary evidence of it can be traced back to poems in *Crossways* (1889) and far outlasts their tumultuous epistolary relationship.⁷ Nonetheless, Tagore comes to represent for Yeats a version of India exceptionally rich in poetic and anticolonial possibility. Yeats imagined a powerful connection between India and Ireland, one which belied the 15,000 miles separating them, and one which was made possible only by an India of Orientalist fantasy with a history unbroken by colonial rule, a culture untarnished by imperial domination.⁸ It is, Yeats writes, "A tradition, where poetry and religion are the same thing, passed through the centuries, gathering from learned and unlearned metaphor and emotion, and carried back again to the multitude the thought of the scholar and of the noble" (8). Yeats projects onto Bengal a sense of cultural unification that ignored, or was unaware of, the religious conflicts that so embattled India, in seeming opposition to the sectarian conflicts that so marked his own Ireland. Tagore's poetry thus becomes the representative of an entire culture where spirituality need not be at odds with rationality, where "learned and unlearned metaphor and emotion" enable the masses to access the knowledge and faith of the scholar. It is a hardly a unique representation; Edward Said, in *Orientalism*, elaborates the ways in which Orientalism constructed the East as mystical and spontaneous against the rational West, a haven of the spiritualism that seemingly disappeared in the Occident with the death of Nietzsche's God.

Yeats's utopian vision of Bengal provided a template by which to imagine an alternate Irish history that might then fuel an anticolonial future. Ironically, in order to facilitate this vision of Irish futurity, Tagore and Bengal had to be relegated to the perpetual past—not unlike the pastoral images of Bengal that Tagore was so fond of portraying in his own songs and poems. It is therefore particularly apt that Tagore and Yeats met at the colonial center, each ideological and artistic representations of the long reaches of the British Empire.

At a dinner arranged in Tagore's honor in 1912, Rothenstein and Yeats asked Rabindranath to sing "Bande Mataram," Bengal's nationalist song. He hummed the tune, but could not remember more than a few words. Then, in succession, Yeats attempted the Irish anthem, Rhys the Welsh national anthem and Rothenstein "God Save the King." Each stumbled. "What a crew!" said Rothenstein (qtd in Tagore, *Selected Letters* 179). It is unlikely that Tagore actually forgot the words to "Bande Mataram." Rather, it seems he refused to perform for this group a ritual of the nationalism from which he continued to distance himself. Tagore simultaneously orientalized himself, staging the untranslatable kernel of his racial difference for an admiring group of modernists, and found himself within a community of men of who also performatively failed at nationalist attachment. His refusal to sing "Bande Mataram" instigated a kind of fleeting community, a cosmopolitan reading of which might argue that, in leaving behind nationalist affiliations, these men were able to commune in different terms. However, rather than an occasion for transnational identification, this moment is one of solitary performances of disenfranchisement and disavowal. Even within this community of collaborators and admirers, Tagore remained a man apart.

HOMESICKNESS FOR THE FARAWAY

In April 1918, just before his daughter Bela's death from a protracted illness, Tagore wrote to his close friend Amiya Chakravarty: "The fires of destruction are burning throughout the world. History is to be made anew—at this moment I too have some deeds to do, I can no longer remain here in my little corner" (*Selected Letters* 198). Tagore's personal losses were sutured to the violence taking place around the world, the moment one of simultaneous destruction and renewal. Writing at the end of the First World War and on the heels of the Irish Easter Rebellion of 1916 and the Russian Revolution, Tagore expressed a measure of hopefulness for a cleansing potential of that destruction, the possibility for regeneration. His desire to leave India at this moment, what he called in a letter to Rothenstein just days later "a homesickness for the far away," was constituted as an uncanny grief (Tagore, *Selected Letters* 206). The fires ablaze in his own home made the call of international tumult appealing in contrast—that destruction may have resulted in some change for the better, where the loss of his daughter never could. The uncanny homesickness that drew Tagore away from the site of his own loss figures here as a locally-*unrooted* globalism.

Tagore's repudiation of the nationalist movement in Bengal and his concurrent travels and fame abroad have led many scholars to identify him as a cosmopolitan. In her essay "Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism," Martha Nussbaum argues that what she calls a Tagorean cosmopolitanism should be incorporated into the American educational system to inculcate a notion of world citizenship in students who are always already world citizens. She writes, "I believe that Tagore sees deeply when he sees that at bottom nationalism and ethnocentric particularism are not alien to one another, but akin—that to give support to nationalist sentiments subverts, ultimately, even the values that hold a nation together, because it substitutes a colorful idol for the substantive universal values of justice and right" (2).⁹ Nussbaum's argument depends in part on the classification of Tagore, along with the Stoics, as one of those who primarily identified with the global rather than the local. In "Cosmopolitan and Vernacular in History," Sheldon Pollock astutely argues, "These thinkers [The Stoics] may have thought themselves to be *kosmoupoliteis*, citizens of the world (though they never actually said so in Latin), but this seems at least in part owing to the fact that they had been able to transform the *kosmos* into their *polis*, or, rather—as the poet Ovid put it on the eve of Augustus's eastern campaign—to transform the *orbis* into their *urbs*, the world into their own city" (602). The transformative will and power of a cosmopolitan ethics is of dubious efficacy for one not in the position of power, one not on the eve of a successful imperial campaign, one who is indeed subject to and a subject of imperial power. What does it mean to be a cosmopolitan colonial subject? I want to suggest here that for all of the trappings of wealth and celebrity, Tagore, who was not a citizen of any nation, and legally a subject of Britain, could not actually be a citizen of the world. The passport on which he traveled—both literally and figuratively—was a British one, just as the vehicle of his literary fame was the English language. Nussbaum's idyllic notion of cosmopolitanism is blind to the deeply vexed relationship between cosmopolitanism, imperialism, and citizenship rights. The refined statelessness of cosmopolitanism is not simply available to the already stateless.¹⁰

Certainly Tagore was not the average colonial subject, having the status, money, and class-position to move about the world and boasting global celebrity. But privilege alone does not a cosmopolitan make. While Tagore was anti-nationalist, he neither identified as cosmopolitan nor did he imagine such an outlook to be the answer to the quandary of factionalism and empire. To embrace cosmopolitanism would have taken him too far afield from the Bengal he so loved, even if he refused to hallow her as his idol. He writes in *Nationalism*, "Neither the colourless vagueness of cosmopolitanism, nor the fierce self-idolatry of nation-worship is the goal of human history" (15). WWI in particular, represented the hollow victory of nationalism over humanism. Tagore was devastated by the martialization of "not merely subject races, but you who live under the delusion that you are free, [who] are every day sacrificing your freedom and humanity to this fetich of nationalism, living in the dense poisonous atmosphere of world-wide suspicion and greed and panic" (Tagore, *Nationalism* 38). He

alludes not to a psychoanalytic notion of the fetish (a term at which Freud at not yet arrived in 1916), but to an older religious meaning, a derogative designating an idol mystically endowed with value and life.

We might hear echoes of Freud, who writes in “Reflections upon War and Death,” “the war in which [we] refused to believe” had broken out, not between the savage races or even as a conquest by the civilized of those races but between “the great ruling powers among the white nations” (111, 108). For Freud, World War I marked the realization that civilization had not cured what he called humanity’s death drive and aggression, a realization that was at once traumatic and illuminating. This “fetich of nationalism” for both Tagore and Freud represented the great failure of civilization as a humanizing project. Tagore diagnosed this attachment as fundamentally pathological, not because the object is unworthy, but because excessive attachment to that loved motherland mimicked freedom and produced strife. Rather than constructing a collectivity, a community of worship, the passionate fetish of nationalism, according to Tagore, was essentially divisive and desensitizing.

Further, the national form, for Tagore, was foreign to India, a construction of collectivity incongruous with India’s history and spirit. He writes, “India has never had a real sense of nationalism. Even though from childhood I had been taught that the idolatry of Nation is almost better than reverence for God and humanity, I believe I have outgrown that teaching, and it is my conviction that my countrymen will gain truly their India by fighting that education which teaches them that a country is greater than the ideals of humanity” (Tagore, *Nationalism* 127). Tagore’s argument for a global liberal humanism promoted a logic by which nations cease to provide the organizing principle of peoples, thereby denaturalizing nationalism. By describing the Nation in the capitalized form of the proper noun, Tagore disengaged the sign from the signified, a proper name which was not necessarily a natural one. Refusing the nation as an organizing principle, Tagore did not reject an affectively compelling vision of India; such a nationalist cathexis would re-form “India” according to an imperial structure. On the contrary, Tagore’s resistance to nationalism preserved a mode of affective attachment that nationalist ideology would snuff out. The “anesthetic” of nationalism, numbing what Tagore saw as the organic and congenial, produced a national unconscious that relied on diluting and destabilizing the structures of feeling underlying collective cathexis. Quite explicitly, this was not an eschewal of the idea of Indianness as a mode of identification, but rather a recognition that “India” need not refer to a nation: it might be imagined otherwise.

What, we might then ask, was this alternate conception of belonging? As he crisscrossed America delivering these lectures on nationalism, Tagore believed he was witnessing the death throes of the nation as a mode of collective political identification in the West and what he hoped would be the end of its grip on the Indian imagination. For him, the death of the Nation meant that, “man will have to exert all his power of love and clarity of vision to make another great moral adjustment which will comprehend the whole world of men and not

merely the fractional groups of nationality” (Tagore, *Nationalism* 122–3). Rather than espousing utter nationlessness, Tagore instead promoted an ethical community in which the spatial markers of the nation-state are replaced by a common spiritual engagement, and a Greater India where “inner truth” makes possible organic anticolonial ideologies rather than poor mimics of Western nationalism (Tagore, *Greater India* 70). Despite his engagement with scholars around the world and travels, despite even his calls for a pan-Asian anti-colonialism, Tagore was deeply entrenched in and loyal to the local—but a fungible, expansive localness not limited by physical geography. He saw the localness of his landholdings as inextricable from the localness that tied together the violences of World War I, and within this expanding locality, a greater India. This greater India, unbound by the geopolitical insistencies of borders, relied not on the dictates of the state as the organizing principle, but rather on *samāji*, an ethico-political collectivity dawned together out of intent and possibility.

AT HOME IN THE WORLD

In closing, I turn briefly to *The Home and the World*, in order to argue that the exclusion from what we call literary modernism of Tagore’s writings (both poetry and prose), which were as influenced by his personal and professional attachments to some of the most prominent artists and scholars of the time as by his *svadeshi* attachment to Bengal, betrays the provincializing myopia of the canon. Tagore was deeply engaged in a modernism of globalized affect, and a canon that denies Tagore’s inclusion effectively refuses the worldliness and mobility on which it so depends, as Rebecca Walkowitz and others have also recently argued. How might we read Tagore differently today if we were to (re)introduce him as part of that body of literature? In what ways do modernist aesthetics intersect and destabilize imperial possibilities? To read Rabindranath Tagore as local hero and global celebrity is to anticipate an alternate modernist hermeneutic that takes seriously imperial power-structures, and refuses to suffuse colonial literature with discourse of perpetual colonial belatedness, where the colonized world comes to modernity, and modernism, decades late. This is to say that reading modernism in terms of empire critically reminds us of the long histories of empire that bound together literature and lives in webs of persistent and frustrated intimacy.

Tagore’s literary legacy as the darling of that ever-capacious canon of “world literature” in part depends on a utopian vision of Tagore as cosmopolitan, able to move freely through the world and to remain unhindered by the trappings of provincial attachment. Dipesh Chakrabarty has argued that Tagore’s sense of world literature, *visvasahitya*, is indebted to a Goetheian definition of world literature (Ghosh and Chakrabarty 151). It is a distinctly cosmopolitanism formation of which Goethe wrote in 1827: “world literature develops in the first place when the differences that prevail within one nation are resolved through the understanding and judgment of the rest” (qtd. in Strich 349). This bears critically upon the way in which Tagore saw himself in the world and on his work during

that period, and is intimately related to precisely what appealed to his modernist admirers and interlocutors.

In *Cosmopolitan Style: Modernism Beyond the Nation*, Rebecca Walkowitz locates a crucial intersection between modernism and cosmopolitanism, wherein modernist thinkers engaged in cosmopolitan thinking and feeling, grappling with—or at least acknowledging living amongst—imperialism and the world war. Indeed, this is in part what drew Tagore into the inner circle of such prominent modernist figures as Yeats and Pound: their shared global imaginary. But unlike Yeats and Pound, Tagore today is not read as part of the modernist canon. Instead, he is relegated to that timeless space of “world literature” as though his work and his life were not deeply intertwined in the historical and social processes that formed other thinkers of his historical moment.

Tagore’s decathexis from a life abroad, his repudiation of his “homesickness for the far away,” drew him back to Bengal even as he recognized that the pastoral idyllic of the motherland he so loved too has been irreparably altered by the forces of imperialism and communal strife (Tagore, *Selected Letters* 206). Tagore’s oscillation between home and world is played out in *The Home and the World*’s refusal to abide by cosmopolitan identifications. It basks in the particular, even as what constitutes home and world sinusoidally expands and contracts from the *andarmahal* into the expanse of the British Empire and back again. Walkowitz argues, “the self-styled cosmopolitanism of *The Home and the World* ultimately depends on the uneasy encounter between one invested place and another, between public and private, between a conventional England and an invented ‘Motherland.’ [. . . It] is precisely that—the home, the world, the situation—which the narrative seeks to explore, in its plots of rising nationalism, modernization, and ethnic conflict” (*Cosmopolitan Ethics* 227). If cosmopolitanism in the novel depends on the encounter between these apparent affective positions, the inability to demarcate them sufficiently analogizes the breakdown of that cosmopolitan impulse.

The relationship between the seeming timelessness of *Gitanjali* and the modernity of *The Home and the World* can be understood, in part, generically. Many scholars, most notably Dipesh Chakrabarty, have suggested that for Tagore, the poetic was an organic and ahistorical form, a linguistic and aesthetic register that sidestepped historical time; in contrast, his prose work is thus demarcated as political and modern (153). However, as Amit Chaudhuri compellingly argues, Tagore’s poems are as intimately bound up with the same questions of history and modernity as their Western counterparts, perhaps precisely because of the force with which they discursively turn away from them. Tagore represented for many in the West a conduit to a place that remained somehow outside marginal to the relentless march of modernity, and India the timeless and ancient soil out of which *Gitanjali*’s hymns bloomed. But the place to which Tagore returned from his travels was no idyllic pastoral, as Bengal sat at the epicenter of artistic, political, and ideological faultlines which were determinedly modern.

This interplay structures the very movement between the familiar and the faraway in the novel, as the home, whether Bengal or the *andarmahal*—the

inner apartments of the home in which the women live, becomes a site of proto-modernity, available to the incursion of modernity's *ur*-incarnation: nationalism. Given the essentially modern crux of the novel's guiding themes and affects, it is particularly striking that the novel has been read by some, most famously Anita Desai in the introduction to the standard Penguin edition of the text, as a Victorian novel. She writes:

Bengalis are as given to impassioned and extravagant speech as they are to radical politics, and Tagore wrote political essays from which he took whole sentences to place in the mouth of the central character, Nikhil. Clearly it was to him a natural, not a contrived or literary, language. It belonged to its period, the Victorian. It was of a piece with such architecture as the Victoria Terminus in Bombay, and with the dark, looming furniture, fussy costumes and domestic trappings as of that age, and must be seen in this context. (Desai xxvi)

More than simply miscalculated literary periodization, Desai's problematic claim that *The Home and the World* must be read in the context of the Victorian period mimics and reifies the discourse of perpetual colonial belatedness — what Dipesh Chakrabarty calls “the imaginary waiting room of history” (8). Victoria Terminus in Bombay remains resolutely Victorian long after the rest of the world, especially Britain, has moved on. India, Tagore, and his novel are relegated in Desai's reading to an impossible game of historio-cultural catch-up.

It is particularly anachronistic to designate *The Home and the World* a Victorian novel given its distinctly modernist literary characteristics: three distinct narrators whose accounts overlap, diverge, and occasionally contradict one another; temporal disjointedness; fragmented narrative structure; and persistently incomplete perspectives. Other than Tagore's colonial subject position, and the localness of the novel to a place outside High Modernism's recognizable purview of the West, *The Home and the World* is very much a modernist novel.

Even before the novel explicitly becomes a triangulated romance between young wife Bimala, her benevolent husband Nikhil, and his libidinous friend Sandip, the boundaries of the marital space are already infringed upon. This infringement is not by a person or even an object as such, but by a distinctly modern historical moment. Bimala says, “My sight and my mind, my hopes and my desires, became red with the passion of this new age. Though, up to this time, the walls of the home—which was the ultimate world to my mind—remained unbroken, yet I stood looking over into the distance, and I heard a voice from the far horizon, whose meaning was not perfectly clear to me, but whose call went straight to my heart” (26). The “new age” that breaks through the once-inviolable space of the home is a contagion, physiologically and psychically tainting Bimala's world, even as it remains ontologically nebulous. The call of the new age, drawing Bimala out from behind the protective walls of the domestic space, is posited as a yet-unrealized promise, one that is able to move and fire Bimala despite still being indistinct. Its effect is at once destructive and constructive; it shatters Bimala's world, the *andarmahal*, but also avails to her a much larger world in which she

might exist. This new age is a nationalist age, and the voice at the horizon might as easily be Sandip's as Bimala's. The source of the voice is far less important than its ability to move Bimala beyond the inner apartments and beyond what she knows of herself. Even before Sandip offers up a political vision of nationalism for Bimala, she already *feels* the power of its logic.

Over the course of the novel, Bimala describes the effect of the idea of Bengal on her in terms of burning fires and broken walls within her, the nation becoming an object to be *felt bodily*. The phenomenology of nationalism is thus distinctly gendered; both men in the novel articulate their relationship to Bengal in terms of ideology. Nikhil, with “his fanaticism for truth” (32), refuses to ascribe to a patriotism that is steeped in partisanship, extrapolating a connection between the self-idolatry of Sandip's nationalism and tyranny. Tagore, like Nikhil in the novel, though shaken by the First World War and his loss of faith in the Enlightenment principles of rationality and humanism, still hoped for an affective anodyne.

Tagore's liberal humanism, unlike the secularity of Western humanist discourse, was steeped in the Brahma tradition central to his worldview. For him, humanism and spiritualism were not antithetical but rather productively synthetic. He wrote to Keshub Chandra Sen, the Brahma leader, “The problem of Europe is egocentric nationalism, a disease to be cured only by a universal ideal of humanity” (qtd. in Kopf 301). What is more, Tagore leaned heavily on the humanist pillars of Brahmaism to articulate his anti-nationalist stance in global terms. Tagore feared Western nationalism's viral degradation of the Enlightenment cornerstones of rationality and humanism, so vividly manifested through World War I, and yet remained steadfast in the universalist spiritualism of the Brahma Samaj.

In the end, the spirituality that brought Tagore into the global spotlight was what prevented him from remaining there. Tagore expressed an inkling of a larger collectivity of man that might be possible in a letter to Yeats in 1912: “What my soul offered to my master in the solitude of an obscure corner of the world must be brought before the altar of man where hearts come together and tongues mingle like the right and the left palms joined in the act of adoration” (*Selected Letters* 154). The mechanisms of empire that drew together these men are visible in the very language of their discourse with one another. For Tagore, *Gitanjali* marked a stylistic departure from many of his other poetry collections and his poems also widely diverged in style and content from his stories, novels and plays. The chasm between *Gitanjali* and *The Home and the World* could scarcely be wider.

In many ways, *Gitanjali* is a deeply cosmopolitan text in its spiritual universalism—allowing Yeats to feel uncannily, upon reading it, as though he had met his own image. But that image, Yeats reminds, is a strange one—familiar in its unfamiliarity, an alienness largely borne of the Brahma spiritualism that served as the poetry's inspiration.¹¹ Jean-Michael Rabaté has argued of Tagore's BrahmaSamaj faith that, “[It] was a religion which was an esthetic at the same time, and their fusion prevented Tagore from being a modernist, at least in the sense that modernism implies a questioning of these values and he steadily refused

the accolade of modernist masters that he felt too condescending. [. . .] Indeed, he embodied the Romantic ideal of the poet as priest and prophet with a vengeance” (126). Rabaté astutely identifies the importance of an inquisitive approach to thinking about religion and literature to the modernist tradition, and notes Tagore’s unwillingness to participate in that epistemological process. But in the end, he also excludes Tagore from the official history of modernism.

Rather, it seems Tagore was embraced in the West in the modernist heyday precisely because of the inexorability with which the sacred and the poetic cohered for him, even as his spiritualism may have rendered him seemingly anachronistic within a modernist literary tradition intent upon destabilizing any tacit coupling of the aesthetic and the spiritual. While he shared with Eliot, Pound, and Yeats a sense of despair at the state of the modern world, Tagore was separated from them (as much by their conceptions of him as his own) by his unwavering fidelity to his God.¹² Just as he refused to jettison that faith for the love of country, he safeguarded it from his own doubts and disillusionment with what he saw as a failed humanism in the West.

To consider Tagore a modernist writer, then, is to radically reconceive the organizing rubrics of modernism whereby Tagore’s unflagging Brahmo faith need not be at odds with his art. But to do so would also be to ignore his deliberate turn back to the local, back to Bengal and back to his beloved Shantineketan. The act of renouncing his knighthood in 1919 served as symbolic renunciation of that world for Tagore. Unable to bear the deaths of his countrymen at the hands of the imperial soldiers, and buffeted by his own family tragedies, Tagore retreated into himself, even as the world continue to seek him out. Though he continued to travel to the US and Europe and communicate with scholars, his earlier attachment died out with the nearly 400 Indians killed in the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre.

Though the world had need of him, so did his home; Tagore’s Nobel glory was India’s glory, just as his voice rising up to sing “Bande Mataram” in Beadon Square had once been the voice of Bengali nationalism. But he was no more content to simply be at home than he was to completely immerse himself in the Western literary world. His anti-nationalist stance alienated him from those around him, even as they venerated him. He turned inward to the university he inaugurated, *Viswabharati* at Shantineketan, which he hoped would be the “world centre for the study of humanity.” But the promise of universalist pedagogy would go unrealized, as it never became the global center of knowledge at the scale he had hoped (Tagore, *Selected Letters* 179).

For a man so able to move between places and languages, Tagore was never fully comfortable anywhere, a symptom of the (post)colonial condition. The difficulty of pinning down Tagore as cosmopolitan or modernist, the slipperiness of his anti-nationalist humanism, the often contradictory articulations of love for the motherland and repudiation of her siren song: these are glimpses into the vicissitudes of the colonial intellectual. Neither able to eschew an attachment and commitment to his home, to the Bengal to which he wrote odes, nor able reconcile his humanist values with the chauvinism of nationalism, Tagore’s

ideological liminality belies — or perhaps embodies — the ways in which his work both influenced and was influenced by a global scholarly community such that *The Home and the World*, despite being a novel so resolutely engaged with Bengal, is very much a text of the world.

In 1937, during the years in which Tagore installed himself at Shantiniketan and abjured the alluring (and persistent) calls of the world for his service, he became so desperately ill that a shaken Gandhi wrote to him, “You are not a mere singer of the world. Your living word is a guide and an inspiration to thousands” (qtd. in Tagore, *Selected Letters* 484). Twenty-five years earlier, Tagore had been hailed by Pound for singing Bengal into a nation; in the interim, he became the quintessential sign of Bengal and India abroad, found himself deeply disillusioned by the violence unleashed in the world by nationalism, and returned home to find it, too, shaken. Now, nearing the end of his life, Tagore once again found himself pulled in two directions: inwards, towards the God on whom he fixated in his later writings, and outwards, to the world of which Gandhi anointed him singer. In the meantime, the Bengal of which Pound had heard him sing was on the cusp of a newly iterated trauma, falling ever further from the holistic pastoral motherland he had helped imagined into being.

Notes

1. Tagore piped in on the controversy over the suggestion that the song “Bande Mataram” be made the national song, writing to Subhash Chandra Bose in 1937 that there could be no question about the inappropriateness of the song as a national anthem because it was so explicitly a hymn to the Goddess Durga: “Of course Bankim does show Durga to be inseparably united with Bengal in the song, but no Mussulman can be expected patriotically to worship the ten-handed deity as ‘Swadesh’” (Tagore, *Selected Letters* 487).
2. The word *Gitanjali* comes from *git*, meaning song, and *anjali*, meaning offering.
3. There was substantial controversy over Tagore’s Nobel Prize in terms of whether he was awarded the prize for *Gitanjali* alone or, like for the previous Laureates, a larger body of work. Critics claimed that he could not have been awarded for other work because the committee would not have been able to read it in Bengali. However, one of the members of the five-person committee, Esais Tegnér, could read Bengali and appeared to examine Tagore’s other work. Michael Collins examines this at more length; see Collins 71–84. Tagore wrote in a note William Rothenstein June 1912, upon his arrival in London, accompanying the first translation of *Gitanjali*, “I send you some more of my poems rendered into English. They are far too simple to bear the strain of translation but I know you will understand them though their faded meanings” (Rothstein and Tagore 49). Days later, he wrote to Kshiti Mohan Sen, after first meeting Yeats in June 1912, “I do not have much confidence in my own English — but he remarked that if someone were to say he could improve this piece of writing, that person did not understand literature” (Tagore, *Selected Letters* 90).
4. See, for example the work of British psychoanalysts C.D. Daly and Owen Berkeley-Hill, both officers in the British Army in India, who followed the work of Ernest Jones on Ireland to analogize Bengali nationalists to the Irish in their psychic infancy, and overweening attachment to the notion of a motherland.
5. Valentine Chirol was particularly vociferous in his insistence that Yeats in fact penned *Gitanjali* and should therefore be awarded the Nobel (Tagore, *Selected Letters* 138).

6. Elleke Boehmer notes that Yeats's introduction "forms a vehicle through which to express at once and the same time his long-standing involvement with the East, *and* his Europe-centered perspective. Within its triptych structure the Western poet attempts carefully to explicate the Bengali's mystical appeal in a way with which his English-speaking audience will be able to identify (an effort reflected also in Yeats's emendations of Tagore's literal translations)" (195).
7. In *Irish Orientalism*, Joseph Allen Lennon traces Yeats's engagement with India and Indian philosophy to his interest in Theosophy and his 1886 meeting with Mohini Chatterjee and its influence on *Crossways*, particularly in terms of the dialogue Yeats constructs with Kalidas's Shakuntala in his poem "Anashuya and Vijaya." He picks up the story of Anashuya where Kalidas leaves off.
8. Tagore and Yeats's relationship would largely fall apart over Yeats's belief that Tagore had become too spiritual and Tagore's sense that Yeats was too nihilistic. However, we cannot overemphasize the place of the Nobel Prize in this conflict.
9. See Saranindranath Tagore, 1070–1084; Sen 55–63; Jelnikar 1005–1024; and Friedman 1–32.
10. Notably, Kwame Anthony Appiah writes in "Cosmopolitan Patriots" that "the cosmopolitan patriot can entertain the possibility of a world in which everyone is a rooted cosmopolitan, attached to a home of one's own, with its own cultural particularities, but taking pleasure from the presence of other, different, places that are home to other, different, people" (91). For other influential work on colonialism and cosmopolitanism, see Breckenridge, Pollock and Bhabha, *Cosmopolitanism*; Chakrabarty; Van de Veer; R. Radhakrishnan; Kusch; Pollock; and Vishwanathan, among others.
11. Founded in 1828 by Raja Ram Mohan Roy in Calcutta, the Brahma Samaj is based on the belief that there is one God, who is omnipresent and omniscient. It emerged as response to what were viewed as widespread religious excess in early nineteenth century Bengal, including prevalence of priestly practices, polytheism, idolatry, sati, child marriage, polygamy, and caste.
12. What is more, Tagore's Brahmoism, so central to his psychic and public lives, would be at odds with the vision of poet as prophet put forth. According to the principles of the Adi Brahma Samaj, the only thing to be venerated is the limitless God.

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