

Pioneering a Tagore Revival: William Radice and Others

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Abstract: Amidst the fanfare and spate of Tagore-related publications prompted by the poet's sesquicentenary, it may be of some interest to recall slightly earlier attempts to revive his reputation in the Anglophone world in general. From the mid-eighties onwards William Radice, Andrew Robinson and Krishna Dutta brought out translations and studies of Tagore that attracted considerable attention, and also highlighted a problem that has always bedevilled Tagore studies: the contrast between good translations and bad, and between astute and slipshod scholarship.

It has become customary to begin a disquisition on Rabindranath Tagore by mentioning how his international reputation took a nose dive after an initial bout of enthusiasm and the award of the Nobel. The purpose of this essay is not to go into the reasons behind that but to present a note on the attempts of a few translators and commentators to revive interest in the greatest Bengali writer of all time. Such attempts seem to have a link with commemorative events. The Tagore centenary saw the appearance of a number of Tagore-related volumes, and the sesquicentenary has produced and continues to produce many more. The fact that Tagore is now out of copyright is also a factor in the appearance of translations. Roughly around the time of Tagore's fiftieth death anniversary, which also brought forth its share of commemorative writings, William Radice, Andrew Robinson, Krishna Dutta began to attract attention with their translations and commentaries. Their books are also instructive because they highlight a problem that has always bedevilled Tagore studies: the contrast between good translations and bad, and between astute and slipshod scholarship.

A winner of the Newdigate Prize for poetry, William Radice read English at Oxford before acquiring a diploma and a doctorate in Bengali, which he has been teaching for over three decades at London University's School of Oriental and African Studies. He quickly established himself as the major contemporary translator of Tagore into English following the appearance in 1985 of his *Selected Poems of Tagore* (Penguin), which won him the most prestigious literary award of West Bengal, the Ananda Purashkar. Though allowing a glimpse of only a tiny fraction of Tagore's poetic output, the book showed the Western reader that it contains things of interest that do not fall into the category

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of spiritual or mystic literature. Of particular value is the book's substantial introduction, which covers both texts and contexts and successfully explicates the peculiarly Tagorean notion of *jivan-devata* (Personal deity).

Fifteen years later, in 2000, Radice published another book of translations of Tagore's verse, *Particles, Jottings, Sparks: The Collected Brief Poems of Rabindranath Tagore* (London: Angel Books and Delhi: Harper Collins). The work of several years, it puts together all of Tagore's output in what is commonly regarded as a minor genre. Like Radice's other books of translation, it carries a long introduction (32 pages), most of which is textual history and will interest only a Bengali scholar. But towards the end there are large claims made that deserve a careful look. In attempting to provide a context for Tagore, in literary and intellectual history, Radice argues that Tagore was more modern than most readers think. One aspect of his modernity was his interest in science, which he valued as a source of knowledge about the cosmos and also "because the scientific stance of detachment matched his own poetic ideal." This detachment marks the epigrammatic "brief poems."

Tagore's modernity, however, is distinct from literary modernism, of which he was dismissive; witness his 1932 essay on modern poetry, a translation of which is appended to the book. Rejecting modernism's emphasis on the "confused, dark side of life – with its tensions and conflicts," Tagore "chose to go . . . forward to a new reconciliation of religion and rationalism, poetry and science" (30-31).

Profoundly inspired by Tagore's example, Radice himself launches into a vatic flight: "Which way do we now want poetry and literature to go? On with the collapsed romantic confusion and chaos of the twentieth century? Or forward to a new kind of classicism, a sense of order and unity supported by science and the ever-increasing interconnectedness and 'globalization' of our world? On with forms of artistic expression radically divorced from Nature, or brought into harmony with our growing sense that we are responsible for the health and future of the natural world – a sense that has been enriched by science, but has also been stimulated by shame at science's misuse?" (31)

Several things need to be pointed out here. Both Tagore and his translator limit themselves to a lop-sided view of modern literature, which is not all about the caries behind a beautiful smile (to use an image from Tagore's essay). One has only to think of the poetic range of major twentieth century figures like Eliot, Auden (note in particular their reconciliation with religion or the latter's use of science and technology), Yeats, Heaney, Walcott, Rilke, Montale, Paz, Neruda, etc. Even in 1932, when Tagore wrote his essay, there was more to modernism than he makes out – in Yeats and Rilke, for instance. What is the "new kind of classicism?" Eliot made much of classicism, one recalls, but is he now to be seen as a confused romantic? And if twentieth century writing is romantic how come its forms are "divorced from Nature" – isn't the romantic associated with fealty

to Nature? The order of science and “globalization” are fine things, but one mustn’t forget the flip side – new conflicts, ethnic strife, terrorism. Or, in scientific terminology, entropy. As Stephen Hawking puts it, “disorder, or entropy, always increases with time. (153)”

All this, however, does not detract from the pleasure of Tagore’s poetry. Radice takes the craft of verse seriously, and has spent several years polishing these English versions. The results are most satisfying when the rhymes come happily. Flicking through the book’s pages I find myself tripping along from one such poem to another. Here, picked almost at random, is one from each of the three sections:

The arrow thinks, ‘I fly, I’m free,
Unlike the wretched, restricted bow.
Bow laughs and says, ‘But don’t you know,
Your freedom, arrow, is subject to me!’

(“Freedom,” *Particles*)

171.

In the razor-blade,
What glittering scorn,
Mocking the light
Of the sun at dawn!

(*Jottings*)

112.

A flower is hiding somewhere:
Its fragrance gives it away.
In dreams, a life is hidden
That songs convey.

(*Sparks*)

Wit and suggestiveness are nicely blended in all three. The philosophical and psychological underpinnings produce a resonance that teases the mind. Take the last verse; how subtly and sweetly it brings home to us the connection between the unconscious and art!

Translations where there are no rhymes, or partial or weak rhymes read less happily, I’m afraid. But there are enough felicitous ones to justify the labour that has gone into the whole book. These, I hope, will find their way into future editions of Radice’s *Selected Poems of Tagore*.

Unquestionably, Radice’s finest books of Tagore translations are the *Selected Short Stories*, first published by penguin in 1991 and subsequently revised; and

The Post Office, set as a play-within-a-play by Jill Parvin, and published in 1996 by the Tagore Society, London. Interestingly, the appearance of both these books coincided with that of rival translations that serve as a foil to Radice's excellence. Macmillan brought out Tagore's *Selected Short Stories* translated by Krishna Dutta and Mary Lago; and St. Martin's Press, New York, brought out *The Post Office*, translated by Krishna Dutta and Andrew Robinson. Both these books sport introductions by Anita Desai.

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"Tagore's novels and stories, which in Bengali are the highest literary expression of our contemporary life, fell completely flat in English," Nirad Chaudhuri once complained, because their world "would have seemed incredible or odd" to British readers, who wanted books on India to be either "wildly romantic" or a "realistic treatment of Anglo-Indian life"(14). It doesn't convince: novels and stories are the most accessible literary forms and Western readers readily enter Mishima's Japan or Neguib Mahfouz's Egypt. The quality of translation matters. What Western readers don't need is exemplified in *The Home and the World* (Penguin 1985) and the Macmillan *Selected Short Stories*. Anita Desai has done her reputation no service by introducing these egregious translations, though her critical appreciation of Tagore is otherwise intelligent.

"We believe," Krishna Dutta ("From a distinguished Calcutta family . . . a graduate of Calcutta and London Universities," the blurb announces) and Mary Lago ("Emeritus and Catherine Paine Middlebush Professor of English at the University of Missouri") prefatorily declare, "that translating Tagore demands the collaboration of a native speaker of Bengali with a native speaker of English, until such time as a prodigy fluent in both languages from birth decides to tackle the task afresh." Their pathetic performance and contrast with the eminently readable Radice prove both points wrong. (And, by the way, who is fluent in any language from birth?) Their graceless prose is peppered with spectacular howlers: "emeritus post-master" for one who has resigned from the job; "bone-burning" (a literal translation) as an epithet for a character who gets on one's nerves; "doubt" is substituted for "suspicion," a feature of Indian Vernacular English; departure from habit becomes "the subversion of his style of living" and elsewhere, incomprehensibly, we have "the subversion of his good name"; we see one character "braiding a hair fastener," whatever that is, and at another time doing "whatever additional tasks Amal caused her"; a root given by a sadhu as a charm becomes a "prophylactic root." Even whole sentences make little sense. The book is handsomely produced but deserves pulping nonetheless.

Radice's versions in the Penguin *Selected Short Stories*, on the other hand, combined for the first time fidelity to the sense of the original with the "fluidity of movement" so important in a poet's prose. Tagore was the first Bengali writer who seriously explored the artistic potential of the short story and,

characteristically, he didn't shy away from taking risks. As a result not all his stories are fully realized, but at their best they bear comparison with the great Western masters of the form. Of a total of 94, 59 were written in the 1890s, against the backdrop of an Arcadian vision inspired by rural Bengal, where he'd been sent by his father to look after the family estates. Radice has wisely restricted his selection to 30 of these early stories, generally considered more satisfying than the later ones. They aren't restricted to peasant themes – city people and the gentry figure too, and there are forays into the historical and the praeternatural – nor are they idyllic. Indeed, tragedy and pathos are much in evidence, albeit leavened with irony and humour. Sociologically-inclined critics will find plenty of naturalism, though more significant is what Radice in his well-researched and sensitive introduction calls “realism of feeling”: witness how a tale of “dehumanizing poverty” (“Punishment”) gains power from the psychopathology of sexual relations.

Radice has done well to append translations of some letters giving Tagore's impressions of country life, and of a poem setting out his manifesto as short story writer. He wants to write simple, clear, straightforward narratives about “simple lives, humble distress . . . humble grief and pain,” without “elaborate description . . . theory of philosophy,” till finally we are left with

No story quite resolved,
Not ending at the end,
But leaving the heart uneasy (270-271).

Which is as good a definition of the modern short story as any.

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The Post Office [*Dākghar*] is Tagore's best-known play, and one for which he himself had a special fondness. It was written in 1911 in a mood of profound *Weltschmerz* brought on by a series of bereavements and distress at a violent turn in the nationalist movement. Tagore himself described the mood of the play as “a passionate feeling of wanting to go somewhere far away combined with thoughts of death – the writing of *Dākghar* was an expression of that restlessness” (5). It took the form not of a story but of what he called a “prose-lyric.” For good measure Tagore threw in a few songs in the productions he had a hand in. What there is of a story-line is simplicity itself. Confined indoors on doctor's orders, the fatally ill Amal yearns for freedom and open spaces, engages passersby in eager conversation from the vantage of an open window and, fascinated by a new Post Office visible in the distance, develops a fancy that he will receive a letter from the King, an obviously allegorical personage. In an impressive denouement the King's physician literally crashes into the sickroom to announce his royal master's imminent arrival and as the boy slips into unconsciousness, orders that the starlight be let in. “Amal represents the man whose soul has received the call

of the open road,” Tagore explained to a friend: “. . . that which is ‘death’ to the world of hoarded wealth and certified creeds bring him awakening in the world of spiritual freedom” (Dutta and Robinson 1995, 154).

It doesn’t take much thought to see that Eliot’s charge regarding *Hamlet*, that its “objective correlative” is not commensurate with its emotional freight, can be cogently applied to *The Post Office*. Tagore conflates two distinct themes. First there is “the call of the open road,” which we know tugged at Tagore’s heart-strings from childhood, and manifests here as a Whitmanesque urge to encounter life in all its variegatedness. Then there is the mystical notion of death as “awakening in the world of spiritual freedom,” which implies the individual soul’s merger into the universal spirit and the disappearance of the distinctions that add variety to this world. Instead of relating the two themes in a comprehensible manner, Tagore collapses the distinction between them, and the play is consequently an inadequate “objective correlative” for the two of them combined.

In spite of this the play has never failed to touch a sympathetic chord in its audience. Yeats was moved by its “emotion of gentleness and peace” and Janusz Korczak had it performed in 1942 at his orphanage in the Warsaw ghetto because it taught that “eventually one had to learn serenely to accept the angel of death.” But Yeats was responding to a writer who still possessed the virtue of novelty, and Korczak was seeking solace in an extreme situation. To be of continuing interest, at least in the Anglophone world, it requires imaginative productions (a subject beyond the scope of this review) and a good English version that is idiomatic and true to the original to replace Devabrata Mukerjee’s dated 1914 translation. Radice’s is just such a version, and Dutta and Robinson’s is not.

It is amusing to go through the Dutta-Robinson version of *The Post Office*, blue pencil in hand. “Oh cease with your ‘this, that and the other,’” expostulates Madhav, Amal’s adoptive father (incidentally, in the Tagore biography Dutta and Robinson describe him as Amal’s stepfather!) though there is nothing in the original to justify such a studied quaint expression. Then, after two sentences of colloquial English Madhav rounds off with a curious mixture of sentimental rhetoric and officialese: “it breaks my heart to see how your prescription makes him suffer further” (4). Further comment is unnecessary but I cannot help adding that the use of the words “prescription” and “further” is not warranted by the Bengali text.

Dutta and Robinson give us an impossibly acrobatic squirrel “balancing on its tail” (6) when the Bengali simply has the animal – as Radice accurately puts it – “sitting on his tail” (25). This is a visually accurate image, as anyone who takes a walk in the park will know.

In their Glossary Dutta and Robinson correctly define *chātu* as “fine flour made of maize, barley, etc.” (50) (The Radice-Parvin book doesn’t have a glossary and

could have done with a brief one.) *Chātu* is poor man's fare and consequently something of little value is called *chātu* in Bangla slang. Thus we may say that Dutta and Robinson make *chātu*" (9) of the bit where *chātu* occurs in the text. They make Amal say, "Then he opened his sack, took out some maize flour, kneaded it with water, and ate *chātu*." Now, maize-flour is *chātu*, whether in its dry state or as a ready-to-eat paste. But in this awkward sentence it seems either that the flour has to be mixed with water to get *chātu*, or, more amusingly, that after kneading the flour with water the man ate something else called *chātu*.

We have only come to the end of Act One in a three-act play. But enough is enough. Let students be set the task of comparing the three English translations of the play as a tutorial assignment.

Combing through the whole of Radice's translation I found only two sentences that could be called a little clumsy:

- i. "The Kabiraj says that with three humours at once in his young body so badly disturbed – wind, bile, phlegm – there isn't much hope." (24)
- ii. "Rain or shine, rich or poor – going round all the houses delivering letters – a grand job." (40)

As for other aspects of the two rival editions, Radice's introduction is more informative and critically sound than Anita Desai's brief comments and the Dutta-Robinson preface put together; and the photographs from two productions of the play and Wajda's film on Korczak in the Radice-Parvin book are more telling than McCurdy's woodcuts, which are unimaginative and give the play a small-town setting, complete with neatly paved streets; the presence of the *moral* ("village headman") clearly indicates a rural setting. I have one complaint against the Radice-Parvin book, though. It is based on a 1993 Oxford/London production and sets down the complete play-within-the-play arrangement used then. To the reader this may appear to be an appropriation (or misappropriation, rather) of Tagore's text. Better if the bits added by Parvin were provided in an appendix.

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Rabindranath Tagore: The Myriad-Minded Man by Krishna Dutta and Andrew Robinson (London: Bloomsbury, 1995) is the first full-length biography of Tagore in English since Krishna Kripalani's *Tagore: A Biography* (1962). This impressive-looking volume aroused much controversy. London reviewers, none it seems with any Bengali, were generally commendatory towards the book and retailed hand-me-down ideas about Tagore the poet-guru and idealistic dreamer. Tagore specialists and Bengali critics, the Calcutta press reported, blamed the book's "deficiencies" for the reviewers' sneers. The Calcutta *Telegraph* trenchantly detailed factual errors, uncalled-for scurrilous attacks, disregard of a large body of Tagore criticism in both Bengali and English, unsubstantiated conjectures, critical gaffes. Worse still, Ketaki Kushari Dyson and William

Radice charged that Dutta and Robinson had plagiarized their translations of Tagore's poetry. Comparison reveals a number of common titles, even though they aren't literal translations, shared words and phrases and a quatrain (129) that is identical with Dyson's version. The dispute led to an inconclusive exchange between publishers, the biographers having firmly rejected the charge. In the book they proudly claim to have translated most of the poems quoted, "with an attempt to preserve . . . the rhymes in Tagore's original," modestly add that they aren't "fully satisfied," and "take some comfort from the fact that Nirad C. Chaudhuri and Satyajit Ray . . . both thought Tagore's poetry virtually untranslatable" (xiv-xv). I concur with these two luminaries but cannot excuse the wooden verses Dutta and Robinson serve up; getting the rhyme "right," no more than a mechanical exercise, hardly improves matters.

Curiously, there is total silence on the nature of the collaboration between the two authors. Who did what in dealing with the multi-lingual material, and how did they put their pens together? We are told nothing about Robinson's acquaintance with Bengali, but the *Calcutta Telegraph* reports a bizarre telephonic exchange on the subject: "Robinson said he read Bengali and spoke it slowly. Asked to elaborate, the author responded: "How well do you read French?" He then said that he read Bengali slowly, with the help of a dictionary," and added, "I am prepared to talk about it, but not in this context."

Despite the adverse publicity I read the book with an open mind and did find something to approve, but the diverse blemishes far outweighed it. Besides lapses in scholarship and critical judgment, as in the jaundiced view of modern Bengali literature, there are instances of bad writing that reminded me of critics like George Steiner who warn of the erosion of literary in our time. Just a few examples: Tagore spent the 1880s "searching for himself in Calcutta and in various places in India, winding up in London in September 1890" (92). Oblivious of any absurdity, the writers go on to describe Tagore's increasing restlessness, till we find him in old age "moving within the Adobe of Peace from small house to small house" (350). Even death didn't bring peace, for he was called upon to perform at his memorial service, "a simple one, beginning, naturally, with a song by the deceased" (369).

Focusing primarily on "the man, not the oeuvre" (15) is questionable policy for a literary biography, and it's worth noting that Nirad Chaudhuri, who is acknowledged as an inspiration behind the book, reportedly refused to read it because he considers "personal biographies" to be "nothing but scandal-mongering." The writers have even failed to make adequate use of the work to realize their avowed aim of illuminating Tagore's state of mind; there are references to only a handful of poems, a few plays and stories, a couple of novels, hardly enough to illustrate myriad-mindedness.

The title, incidentally, seems to have been chosen in total ignorance of its rich etymological history. The epithet in it is to Dutta and Robinson "Oxford's fine word when giving Tagore a degree," since he was described as "the myriad-minded poet and writer" (15) when he was made an honorary doctor in 1940. But it had already been used, had in fact been coined, with reference to another writer, the greatest ever in the general view. Coleridge dubbed Shakespeare "The myriad-minded man" and the label stuck. In 1954 H. Reed in a lecture later collected in *Lectures on British Poets* mentioned "The myriad mind of Shakespeare." In 1909 Mark Twain in *Is Shakespeare Dead?* commented, "The man who wrote the plays was not merely myriad-minded, but also myriad-accomplished." And the following year, Frederic Manning in an anonymous review, "Milton," in *The Spectator* (16 April) averred, "If Shakespeare be myriad-minded, Milton, in the phrase of Tennyson, is the 'mighty-mouthed.'" The transference of the attribute invites a comparison of Tagore's myriad-mindedness with Shakespeare's which we do not find here.

So what we have is a badly-researched, badly written book tricked out with over a hundred pages of notes and acknowledgements to over a hundred individuals to look like a respectable work of scholarship, and with lavishly reproduced photographs to catch the general reader's eye. The only successful part deals with the epic debate with Gandhi, in which Tagore is rightly awarded a convincing points victory. The authors are right, too, in pointing out that modern India owes more to Tagore's ideal of an East-West synthesis than to Gandhi's "cult of the Charka." But on the whole, it seems we will have to wait a while before an adequate literary biography of Tagore appears in English.

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A Tagore painting