

Mystic Modernity: Tagore and Yeats

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Abstract

This thesis looks at the interpenetration of mysticism and modernity in the writings of Rabindranath Tagore and William Butler Yeats. The relationship of these poets from Ireland and India, and their analogous ambivalence about the nationalist politics of their respective countries have received some critical attention. My thesis, by contrast, explores their involvement in mystical spirituality of both orthodox and heterodox kinds, arguing that in both of these poets' works mysticism is not put to the service of their modern(ist) poetic projects, but deeply forms and informs those as well as their modern sensibilities. While this study revises tired readings of these poets' relationship and offers some comparative insights into their mystic modernity, after the introductory chapter I deal with them separately in individual chapters in order to offer some in-depth reading of their works.

Chapter 1 historicises the formation of Tagore's mystic-modern orientation by studying his complex engagement with Brahmoism, Hinduism, and Western humanist ideas, while concentrating on his pre-*Gitanjali* poetic development. Chapter 2 examines Yeats's early mystical associations with particular emphasis on his foundational engagement with Indian spirituality, both philosophically and poetically understood, as well as its repercussions in and relevance to the creative, mystical, and cultural-political activities of his early career.

Returning to Tagore in Chapter 3, I focus on his mid to late career works in order to analyse the development of his mystic-modern notion of the spiritual evolution of man. The chapter particularly examines his complex engagement with astronomical and evolutionary sciences and his attempt to synthesise them with his eclectic mystical vision. Finally, Chapter 4 shifts to Yeats's antithetical vision, as expressed in his mystical system and related poetry. This chapter also explores the congruity between Yeats's later interest in Eastern Christianity and his revived enthusiasm for Indian mysticism.

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Declaration

I declare that this thesis presents original work, of which I am the only author. All the sources used, quoted, and drawn upon are properly acknowledged. Part of chapter 2 has been published under the title of “India in Yeats’s Early Imagination: Mohini Chatterjee and Kālidāsa” in *International Yeats Studies* 2.2 (2018): 20-39. No other part of my thesis has been submitted for publication or for any other award at this or any other institution.

Note on the Presentation of Text

Considering Bengali and Sanskrit languages as not “foreign” to this project, I have not used diacritical marks and italics for those languages unless when they are necessary for making some fine distinctions useful for my poetic analysis or otherwise. In citing from the Bengali texts, when it has been impossible to ascertain the exact Common Era equivalent to any Bengali year given the information available in the texts used, I have given two alternative years in the Common Era. I have quoted several times from Tagore’s *My Life in My Words*, selected and edited by Uma Das Gupta, which contains excerpts from Tagore’s own English writings as well as Das Gupta’s translations from Tagore’s Bengali. In order to prevent confusion, I have indicated in footnotes when I use Das Gupta’s translation. Otherwise, all quotations from this text are in Tagore’s English. Finally, all italics in the quotations from Yeats’s *A Vision*, both 1925 and 1937 versions, are Yeats’s.

Introduction: “where poetry and religion are the same thing”

Meeting in London in 1912, Rabindranath Tagore and William Butler Yeats found in each other poets with profoundly mystical temperaments setting them apart from the mainstream of Western modernist literature. “Mr Tagore, like the Indian civilization itself, has been content to discover the soul and surrender himself to its spontaneity”, wrote W. B. Yeats in his introduction to Rabindranath Tagore’s *Gitanjali* (1912). Yeats contrasts this soulful, spontaneous style of Tagore’s poetry with what he considers to be the mechanical and joyless way of writing in the contemporary West (*Gitanjali* xx). In a Bengali essay titled “Kabi Yeats” or “The Poet Yeats” (1912), written in England around the same time as Yeats’s introduction, Tagore views Yeats’s poetry as an expression of “the heart of Ireland”, and draws upon unnamed critics who emphasised the “Druid[ic]” and “Celtic” qualities of Yeats’s early poetry (321, 325).¹ He also credits Yeats with a direct, intuitive relationship with the world which, rather than being “mere matter” to him, is alive with the presence of “a being that we can approach only through contemplation. If we try to express it by the customary methods of modern literature, we destroy its life and spirit” (323). Yeats’s essay matches this mystical note by tracing Tagore’s poems to “[a] tradition, where poetry and religion are the same thing, [and which] has 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” (*Gitanjali* xiv). That these poets from Ireland and India, meeting in London in early 1910s, were praising each other’s poetry for its cultural rootedness and spiritual orientation reflects shared poetic interests and inclinations.

Tagore came to London for the third time on 16 June 1912 with his English translation of a selection of his Bengali mystical songs, *Gitanjali* (*Song Offerings*), left England for the

¹ Sirshendu Majumdar detects one of those critics to be James H. Cousins and his essay Tagore quotes from as “William Butler Yeats: The Celtic Lyrist”, published in *The Poetry Review* of April 1912 (156).

USA on 19 October of the same year, returned to England again in April 1913, and departed finally for India that September (Dutta and Robinson 163, 171; *My Life* 160). In November 1913 he was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature mostly, though not exclusively, for *Gitanjali*,² which had been published with Yeats's introduction, first, by the India Society in November 1912 and then by Macmillan in March 1913 (Dutta and Robinson 166-67, 185). Having met the Bengali poet through their common friend the English painter William Rothenstein,³ Yeats strongly promoted Tagore in London and Dublin. Apart from *Gitanjali*,⁴ he also facilitated the publication of Tagore's second poetic volume in his own translation *The Gardener* and *The Post Office*, a symbolic play by Tagore which was also produced by the Abbey Theatre in 1913 at Yeats's behest (Dutta and Robinson 157-58; Foster 1: 472; Kelly and Schuchard 4529). After this high point of their enthusiastic encounter, the paths of these two poets diverged and the intensity of Yeats's interest in Tagore's literary works abated, although they maintained a respectful correspondence throughout, however intermittently.

This introductory chapter focuses on and around the English *Gitanjali* phase of 1912-1913, while the thesis itself ranges over, albeit selectively, the whole career of these two poets in order to illuminate their parallel mystic-modern literary (and, by extension, cultural) enterprises. In what follows, I will, first, introduce my approach in this project, pitting it against the general tendency of the existing criticism on these poets. This will be followed by a discussion of my core concepts, namely modernity and mysticism, as they apply to each poet, as well as of the significance of coupling these terms in my study. In the third section, I will concentrate on the differences and divergences between the mystical interests and aptitudes of the poets in question. The last two sections look at their relationship and mutual reading or misreading of each other's work and personality; the fourth section focuses on their empathic

² For an account of the background stories of Tagore's winning of the Nobel Prize, see Michael Collins's second chapter called "England and the Nobel Prize: Tagore at Home in the World", particularly the section "The politics of the prize" (53-58).

³ For the Tagore-Rothenstein relationship and their long correspondence over three decades, see Mary M. Lago, *Imperfect Encounter*.

⁴ William Radice's introduction to his new translation of *Gitanjali* offers a detailed analysis of the nature and background of the poems in the volume as well as a critical account of Yeats's editorial contribution to its published version.

fascination for each other in the “Gitanjali” years, while the fifth provides a brief overview of their relationship beyond those years. Both these sections deal with materials which are much discussed in comparative studies of these poets, but my approach being different from much of those studies, I hope to offer fresh insights into certain aspects of the literary-historical account of their relationship.

A poetic approach

Whereas Tagore in “The Poet Yeats” compares the political situation in Ireland to that in India and self-reflexively stresses Yeats’s alternative cultural-revivalist stance in the affair (323), Yeats in his *Gitanjali* introduction dehistoricises Tagore’s Bengal by imagining it as “unbroken”, and dissociates himself from the Bengali poet and his world by his use of first person plural—“we”, “us”, “our”—to identify with a generalised modern, Western selfhood (*Gitanjali* xii, xiv). Such representational problematics in Yeats’s introduction as well as in Tagore’s promotion in the West in general have received a variety of critical interpretations. Amartya Sen (1997) regrets the “narrowness” in the Western image of Tagore “as ‘the great mystic from the East’”—an image which, he argues, “[t]o some extent [...] was the West’s own creation, following a tradition of message-seeking from the East, particularly from India” (xviii). While Ana Jelnikar (2008), too, finds such a representation troubling, she maintains that “Tagore to some extent played the part of a willing accomplice in acquiescing to the false mask imposed by the Occident” (1008-09). Finding the “imagery” of Yeats’s introductory essay analogous to those used by Leonard Woolf and Joseph Conrad in order to capture their initial impression of cultural others, Elleke Boehmer (2002) notes “an unmistakable Orientalism” betrayed by Yeats’s “language” keeping Tagore’s “East suspended at an earlier, simpler, and more intuitive stage of civilization” (*Postcolonial* 194). Joseph Lennon (2004) views Yeats’s Indian associations as part of a long-established network of “Celtic-Oriental connections” and observes that “Yeats’s hybrid position as an Anglo-Irish poet allowed him access to the narratives of both the colonizer and the colonized”, adding that “these narratives are best understood in a

postcolonization and decolonizing context” (248-49). While both Michael Collins (2012) and Sirshendu Majumdar (2013) are also observant of what Majumdar calls Yeats’s ambiguous “double personae” (150-51), Collins accuses Yeats of “instrumentalis[ing]” Tagore “for the purposes of a project of cultural revival that was in fact wholly Eurocentric [...] and often culturally chauvinist” (103, 113).

Much of the above critical positions works within a postcolonial theoretical paradigm, particularly the Orientalist one of Edward W. Said. As I have argued elsewhere,⁵ for all its great insights into the workings of power in literature and other cultural formations, Said’s *Orientalism* (1978) as well as the theoretical perspectives it lends often restrict the scope of studies of human relationship across cultural, racial, and national boundaries. However, Said himself does not view Yeats as a proto-imperialist poet, but in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) he considers both Yeats and Tagore as “poets of decolonization”, viewing Yeats’s 1920s “mysticism” among other aspects of his writing as symptomatic of a liberationist transnational “consciousness” (278, 280-81). Reading Yeats as a postcolonial poet, Jahan Ramazani (2001) draws upon Declan Kiberd to read Yeats’s continued Eastern connections as signs of “postcoloniality by association”. However, Ramazani observes that Yeats’s transcultural identification with India is far from being a straightforward affair but combines such contradictory attitudes as idealised admiration, Eurocentric patronisation, and anticolonialism (*Hybrid* 33-35). In her essay on Tagore and Yeats, Louise Blakeney Williams (2007) attends to their shared stake in “cosmopolitan nationalism”, a term she coins in order to cover their complex relationships with both nationalism and cosmopolitanism (73). In his 2015 study of Yeats’s engagement with “world literature in English”, Barry Sheils views the Irish poet’s relationship with the English translations of Tagore’s work and Japanese Noh material as epitomising “the commodification of ‘the East’”, serving the cause of “the creation of a global literary space in English” (109).

⁵ A. Dutta, “Transnationalist Spirituality of Rabindranath Tagore” 4.

As this brief survey of critical responses to Yeats and/or Tagore demonstrates, for all its validity a politically implicated reading (Orientalist, anti-Orientalist, postcolonial, or global-cosmopolitan) of these two poets is often doomed to end in an interpretative impasse which stifles any positive understanding of the creative engagement of these poets. More relevant to the present project is the kind of approach adopted by Abinash Chandra Bose in his 1945 study *Three Mystic Poets: A Study of W. B. Yeats, A. E. and Rabindranath Tagore*, introduced by the Irish poet and Theosophist James H. Cousins. While this monograph offers some insightful readings of these authors' engagement with mysticism, much of its analysis is inevitably dated. Moreover, although his Yeats chapter spans, however cursorily, the poet's whole career, it leaves out such important works of mystical interests as *A Vision* and "Supernatural Songs". His Tagore chapter self-admittedly discusses mainly his nineteenth-century poetry, and hence does not cover the later major developments of his mystical ideas. Serwer Murshed Khan's Bengali essay "Yeats o Rabindranath" (Yeats and Rabindranath, 1961) explores the causes of the cooling of Yeats's interest in Tagore after 1913 and offers some valuable insights into the nature and development of their poetic and spiritual aspirations, pointing out some essential differences between them. In *W. B. Yeats and Occultism: A Study of his Works in Relation to Indian Lore, the Cabbala, Swedenborg, Boehme and Theosophy* (1965), Harbans Rai Bachchan dedicates one of his chapters to Mohini Chatterjee and Tagore. While dwelling upon the differing spiritual views of Yeats and Tagore, Bachchan exaggerates their differences at the expense of Tagore by claiming that "Tagore has the calmness and serenity of the 'Hermits upon Mount Meru'" (73). Bachchan portrays Tagore as merely a traditional theistic thinker of India while reading Yeats's *A Vision* as "a personal formulation" taking shape throughout his life (74). Being a non-Bengali Indian scholar, his knowledge of Tagore was understandably limited to the poet's writings then available in translation and he quotes only from the English *Gitanjali* to make his points. In *W. B. Yeats: An Indian Approach* (1968), Naresh Guha has offered a constructive reading in his chapter on Yeats and Tagore (76-99), where he maintains that Yeats "himself shared" Tagore's views and convictions about poetry and politics as well as his "deep religious instinct" (80-81). Dwelling on the relationship between these two poets, Guha also gestures towards the possible

reasons for its quick waning, particularly from Yeats's side, putting it down to their different attitudes towards mystical spirituality (88-92, 95-96). More recently, Boehmer in *Indian Arrivals 1870–1915: Networks of British Empire* (2015) includes Tagore's 1912 arrival in England as one of her case studies in Chapter 4. Despite viewing Yeats and Ezra Pound as adopting a "wise imperialis[t]"⁶ attitude in representing Tagore (as opposed to Rothenstein's more "genuine" collaboration), she nevertheless avers that "far from cynically using the Bengali poet, [Yeats] believed, for a time at least, to have found in him an interlocutor on shared questions of cultural retrieval and spiritual renewal, which for Yeats was never merely a Eurocentric project" (228).⁷

Taking its cue from such critically enabling readings as well as complicating and extending them to cover wider swaths of these poets' careers than they offer, this thesis examines the intersection of mysticism and modernity in the works of Tagore and Yeats. Of all the works mentioned above, Majumdar's is the only monograph-length study of these two poets while the other books and essays have either a chapter or sections on them or on Tagore's representation in the West by Yeats and others. Furthermore, as suggested already, most of these works, including Majumdar's, look at these writers from Orientalist, postcolonial, and/or global-cosmopolitan perspectives. The present thesis, on the other hand, takes a poetic approach

⁶ The term "wise imperialism" was used by Yeats in a letter to Edmund Gosse (dated 24 November 1912) as part of his attempt to get Tagore elected to the Academic Committee of the Royal Society of Literature. Stressing the cultural-political significance of electing Tagore, which "would be an imaginative and notable thing for us", he continued that "from an English point of view too it would be a fine thing to do, a piece of wise imperialism for he is worshipped as no poet of Europe is" (Kelly and Schuchard 2024). While adopting an ambiguous, undifferentiated "us", Yeats clearly dissociates himself from the "wise imperialism" he mentions by ascribing it to "an English point of view". Further, Boehmer also exaggerates the Yeats-Pound coalition in the affair. For a more nuanced reading of Yeats and Pound's different motivations in their promotion of Tagore, see Longenbach, *Stone Cottage* 24-25.

⁷ Apart from the works already mentioned in reviewing the scholarship on Yeats and Tagore, some important works have also been done on the topic of Yeats's relationship with Indian spirituality paving the way for projects like the current one. Shankar Mokashi-Punekar's essay on "Shri Purohit Swami and W. B. Yeats" (1971) analyses the significance of the Swami as well as India in general for Yeats's creative imagination. More recently, P. S. Sri's 1994 essay on "Yeats and Mohini Chatterjee" offers some valuable insights into the Yeats-Chatterjee connection, while the monograph by Shalini Sikka, *W. B. Yeats and the Upanishads* (2002) deals quite extensively with the role played by the Upanishads in Yeats's life and works. W. David Soud's chapter on Yeats in his *Divine Cartographies: God, History, and Poesis in W. B. Yeats, David Jones, and T. S. Eliot* (2016) focuses on the poet's 1930s cooperation with the Swami and its repercussions. The 1930s also remains the focal point of Charles I. Armstrong's chapter, "'Born Anew': W. B. Yeats's 'Eastern' Turn in the 1930s" (2016).

in order to demonstrate how a syncretic mystical spirituality is central to the modern poetic projects of both Tagore and Yeats.

Mystic modernity

My intention in using the title phrase “mystic modernity” (and its related formation “mystic-modern”) is not so much to treat the former term as qualifying the latter, as to put equal emphasis on both. Contrary to the critical unease about marrying mysticism and modernity that will be discussed in this section, this thesis takes inspiration from the belief that keeping these systems of thought, experience, and attitude separate undermines the shared premises of both these authors and thereby limits a fuller understanding of their works. My coupling of these concepts is intended to revise a complex of critical positions regarding the various distributions of the ideas associated with these terms when applied to these poets. As we have seen, the ascription of mysticism to Tagore by Western writers and critics has been deemed problematic by critics who are mostly of Indian background, betraying their preference for modernity, particularly of a rational, logical, and secular-humanist orientation. It is with this modernity that they often associate Tagore in order to see him as on a par with the great modern writers and thinkers of the West. For all the validity of such connections, they are often made at the expense of Tagore’s deeply felt mystical orientation, which is written off as, if not completely secular, then at least ambiguous enough to make a secular reading of his works possible in most cases. Wondering how an atheist reader like himself can identify with the Tagore of *Gitanjali*, Abu Sayeed Ayyub states that “[t]hose which may be called poems of absolute devotion [...] do not touch me in terms of content. [...] But fortunately these are few in number”. More important for him is the universal and secular appeal of Tagore’s book wherein “no particular point of view or theory or conclusion about god is pronounced but simply one poet’s emotions have been expressed” (“Gitanjali Period” 336-37). Drawing upon Ayyub, the modern Bengali poet and Tagore critic Sankha Ghosh argues that, despite the overt religiosity of most of its poems, *Gitanjali* has much to offer its modern readers who are not comfortable with devotional

sentiments (*Amir* 38-39). The “you” or “thou” in Tagore’s poetry, maintains Ghosh, can refer to a wide variety of nouns which can be read as indicative of a syncretic state of consciousness where the lover, God, and the self merge into one another (*Amir* 24). Emphasising the relentless self-exploration in Tagore, Ghosh compares Tagore to Søren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Franz Kafka (*Amir* 20-21, 25). True, the inclusion of Kierkegaard complicates the case, yet Ghosh’s apparent demysticising objective certainly undermines Tagore’s mystical spirituality by seeing it metaphorically as emblematic of a modern self-exploration. Amit Chaudhuri takes a more radical stance in maintaining Tagore’s “poetry and imagination” to be “radically secular”, despite the poet “himself” being “translated as a public figure into the realm of mythology and mysticism” (137). While my indebtedness to these critics will be evident in the course of this thesis, especially in discussions of Tagore’s modernity, I argue that in Tagore mysticism and modernity are so deeply interspersed that considering any of these aspects in isolation from the other gives at best a partial picture of the poet’s “poetry and imagination”.

To some extent, the Indian scholarly unease about Tagore’s mysticism is a reaction to the reductive Western reading of the “myriad-minded man” (to use the title phrase of Krishna Dutta and Andrew Robinson’s biography of the poet) as an unmodern Oriental mystic, as has been outlined above. While Yeats’s modernism, on the other hand, is less debatable⁸ than Tagore’s in Western scholarship, there is nevertheless a dominant critical tendency to suppress or bypass Yeats’s life-long engagement with transcultural mystic-occultist materials, by reading it not as a matter of belief but of metaphor hunting. As Timothy Materer has put it, given Yeats’s oscillation between or conflation of occultism and aestheticism, critics find themselves at liberty to stress either of these two concerns “[d]epending on their orientation” (*Modernist* 1, 7). Materer takes particular issue with scholars such as Richard Ellmann and Helen Vendler who attempt to interpret Yeats’s “mysticism as in reality an aesthetic vision”, maintaining that it is one thing to choose to read “Yeats’s system as an aesthetic rather than a religious construct”

⁸ For works on Yeats and modernity or modernism, see Daniel Albright’s “Yeats and Modernism”; Laura O’Connor’s “W. B. Yeats and Modernist Poetry”; James Longenbach, “Modern Poetry”; and Edna Longley’s *Yeats and Modern Poetry*.

and another to “assume that Yeats, or any creator of an occult system or religion, was solely engaged in an aesthetic creation” (*Modernist* 26). Besides Materer, critics like Helen Sword, Paul Murray, David Soud, and Erik Tønning have explored the connection between modernism and mysticism, occultism, magic, or Christianity in Yeats and/or some other major Anglophone modernist writers, opening up newer regions of their authors’ creative and intellectual explorations. In Yeats scholarship in particular, scholars like George Mills Harper, Margaret Mills Harper, Catherine E. Paul, Neil Mann, Matthew Gibson, and Claire Nally have illuminated Yeats’s involvement in mysticism or occultism with special emphasis on the development of his own Visionary system. While fitting in these critical frameworks, my thesis complicates them by bringing in the non-Western case of Tagore and reading him alongside, rather than against, Yeats’s parallel creative endeavour. Instead of viewing Tagore as an object of Western modernity, this reading shows him as well as Yeats to be a subject of an alternative, transnational mystic modernity which is different from and often resistant to imperialist, metropolitan, and exclusionary conceptualisations of modernity.

In doing so, this project shares some degree of commonality with the contemporary categorisations of “alternative” or “multiple modernities” theorised by S. N. Eisenstadt, Andrew Feenberg, Bill Ashcroft, and others. As Ashcroft has argued, “[t]he so-called classical theories of modernization (Marx, Durkheim, Weber) all posited a cultural program of modernity, which had its origins in Europe but was expected to become universal in time”. What is more, Ashcroft views this “Western modernity [...] as coterminous with both imperialism and capitalism” (82, 86). It is undeniable that Tagore and Yeats’s similar reservations about Western modernity have inevitable postcolonial or anti-imperialist implications. However, my focus remains on these poets’ mystic-poetic take on modernity. It is important to observe that both of them often express their strong abhorrence for the kind of Western modernity mentioned above from a mixed perspective of aestheticism and asceticism, betraying their preference for an alternative mystical modernity. In his poem “The Statues” (1938), Yeats distinguishes the “ancient [Irish] sect” from the “filthy modern tide” and its “formless[ness]”, preferring a simultaneously mystical and aesthetic “[c]limb to our proper dark, that we may trace | The

lineaments of a plummet-measured face” (*Variorum* 611). In a 1937 essay “A General Introduction for My Work”, he writes of “a vague hatred com[ing] up out of my own dark” while contemplating from “upon O’Connell bridge [...] that discordant architecture, all those electric signs, where modern heterogeneity has taken physical form” (*Essays and Introductions* 526). As for Tagore, in his 1932 essay “Modern Poetry” he asserts, in writing about Western or English modernist avant-gardism, that he does not “take this aggressiveness and iconoclastic bluster for modernity” (288). “Modernity”, for him, “is more about ideas than about periods” (280). Emphasising the importance of form and beauty, he goes on to argue that “[i]f excessive respect for the world-as-object is *sentimentalism*, an unbidden hostility to it can be called by the same name” (292; emphasis in original). Unlike both, “pure modernity is [...] to see the world with dispassionate absorption, free of personal attachment” (288). This idea of detachment from a quotidian, biological personality, we will see in more detail in Chapter 3, is essentially connected with his mystical theory of the spiritual evolution of Man. Both of them thus tend, however differently, towards a profound subjectivity of a mystical kind indicated above by Yeats’s “my own dark” and “our proper dark”.

As with their appropriations of modernity, Tagore and Yeats’s employments of mysticism are also not straightforward but sites of eclecticism, eccentricities, and idiosyncrasies. In outlining the “essentials of mysticism”, Evelyn Underhill describes “the central fact of the mystic’s experience” as “an overwhelming consciousness of God and of his own soul”. Of course, we should be open to the fact that “the widest latitude is possible in the mystic’s conception of his Deity. At best this conception will be symbolic; his experience, if genuine, will far transcend the symbols he employs”. What is more, “pantheistic” or “absolutist”, the mystic’s “communion with God is always personal in [...] that it is communion with a living Reality, an object of love, capable of response, [...] a self-giving on the divine side answering to the self-giving on the human side” (*Essentials* 2-4). In trying to define the essential characteristics of Indian mysticism common to the “devotional communion or [...] rapture of various kinds”, S. N. Dasgupta arrives at “a keen sense of the necessity of purity of mind, contentment, ever alert striving for moral goodness, self-abnegation, and one-pointedness

to God” (viii). He also points out that in India “there are types of religious or mystical experience other than that of an intimate communion with God”. Speaking of mysticism more generally, Dasgupta adds that it “is not an intellectual theory; it is fundamentally an active, formative, creative, elevating and ennobling principle of life” (ix).⁹ Mysticism thus entails a God- or spiritual consciousness which is not theoretical but experiential and personally realised—qualities that are crucial to our understanding of Tagore and Yeats’s complex engagements with mysticism in their lives and works.

Tagore “has his own direct communion with the divine life & is to multitudes a sacred being”, wrote Yeats to his trusted medium and automatic writer Elizabeth Radcliffe on 20 July 1913 (Kelly and Schuchard 2215). Rothenstein would later recollect of 1912 in *Men and Memories* that he found Tagore’s poetry to be “on a level with that of the great mystics” (262). Charles Darwin’s granddaughter Frances Darwin Cornford in her letter to Rothenstein expressed her admiration for “the beauty [and] dignity of [Tagore’s] whole being” which made him appear “like a saint” and helped her “imagine a powerful and gentle Christ, which I never could before” (Paul 6: 320; Lago 19). Even the scholar of mysticism Underhill would find in Tagore “a Master in the things I care so much about but know so little of as yet[.] [...] It has been like hearing the language of which I barely know the alphabet, spoken perfectly”.¹⁰ In her anonymously published *Gitanjali* review “An Indian Mystic”, in *The Nation* on 16 November 1912, she compared Tagore to such Catholic mystics as Jacopone da Todi and John of the Cross as well as to the Persian mystic poet Jalal ad-Din Muhammad Rumi (321). Tagore wrote to Rothenstein that “she has written it with true understanding” (Lago 82).

However, for all his mystical sentiments and appearance as well as the devotional vein of his *Gitanjali* lyrics, Tagore had his oscillations between the simultaneous claims of mystical credulity and what he would call a modern rationality. Although he is prone to synthesising these two conflicting sensibilities within him, yet the struggle leaves its marks in his work,

⁹ See also Sidney Spencer, *Mysticism in World Religion*.

¹⁰ See her 19 August 1913 letter to Tagore in *The Making of a Mystic* 209-10. She had known Tagore since October 1912.

however overshadowed by the mood of piety that often prevails over it. By embodying such pious moods, *Gitanjali* belies the conflicts and contradictions that at times accompanied his theistic faith. As Chapter 1 will elaborate, Tagore was born into a family with religious allegiance to the reformist movement of Brahmoism—an eclectic faith system founded on Upanishadic philosophy with inspirations taken from different monotheistic creeds. From the Brahmo wing his family was associated with, Tagore inherited a moderate attitude towards Hinduism and Hindu cultural traditions. To this was added an interest in Islamic mysticism, particularly that of Sufism, which had its roots in his father’s deep admiration for the fourteenth-century Persian Sufi poet Shams-ud-din Muhammad Hafiz (Paul 6: 162). Further, despite his father’s antipathy for Christianity, Tagore admired the Jesus of the New Testament for his love of humanity (Paul 6: 188). At the same time, adapting tales from Dr. Rajendralal Mitra’s edited collection *The Sanskrit Buddhist Literature of Nepal* (1882), he composed stories and plays, including his 1910 play *Raja* (translated as *The King of Dark Chambers*)¹¹ which was based on “The Story of Kusa” from the same collection (Paul 6: 179).

For a couple of years prior to his 1912 trip to England, Tagore was engaged in exploring the deeper unity of different religious thoughts and mystical practices in India. It was at his behest that his Santiniketan colleagues Ajitkumar Chakravarty and Kshitimohan Sen started to collect devotional sayings and the songs of medieval saints of India respectively. He also undertook a project of publishing the fifteenth-century Indian mystic poet Kabir’s poems or epigrams in Sen’s translation. Four volumes of *Kabir* were published in 1910-1911, at and around the time when he was also composing the Bengali originals of the *Gitanjali* poems (Paul 6: 163). As an editor of the Brahmo journal *Tattvabodhini Patrika* (Tagore took up the editorship in 1911 for a year [Paul 6: 198]), he published articles written by Sen, Dinendranath

¹¹ This play, too, gained some fame in the West in 1913, especially in a select (mystical) circle. In her 9 May 1913 letter to Tagore, Underhill expresses her “joy” to have heard the play read the previous night (*Making* 207). Tagore also read the play on 27 May at a dinner thrown by Sir Richard Stapley, the founder of the New Theology movement, in the presence, among others, of Underhill and Edmond Holmes, the writer of Tagore’s favourite book *The Creed of Buddha* (Paul 6: 405-06). For the full text of the play, published in Kshitish Chandra Sen’s translation in 1914, see *English Writings* 2: 687-724.

Tagore, Jnanendranath Chattopadhyay, and others on Sufi, Babi, Bahai, and other religious faiths and practices (Paul 6: 230). Tagore's editorial footnote to Dinendranath Tagore's 1911 essay "Sufi Dharma" (Sufi Religion)—based on an essay by E. G. Browne—defines the terms "mystic" and "mysticism" in ways that are helpful for our purposes:

In India, religion of such profound feelings is called "marami" and those who hold such feelings are called "maramiya". The religion which is rooted in one's heart [marma] rather than in scriptural knowledge can only be appreciated through our heart. That is why its language and content remain obscure to the uninitiated public. We will use these Indian terms "marami" and "maramiya" as synonymous with the English words *mysticism* and *mystic*. (Paul 6: 221; translation mine; italicised words originally in English)

The emphasis here is on "profound feelings", "heart", and a non- or extra-"scriptural" orientation. In another editorial note to a similar *Tattvabodhini* publication, he emphasises "the commonality between Sufi praxis and the devotional practices of our country" (Paul 6: 229; translation mine). The "devotional practices" he would have in mind are the Hindu cult of Vaishnavism as well as the heterodox mysticism of the Baul communities of Bengal. As Chapters 1 and 3 will dwell on the influence of these mystical traditions on Tagore, it suffices here to observe that they provided him with models of spiritual systems founded on heartfelt emotions and personal feelings that suited his own mystical temperaments.

In a self-scrutinising piece (*Atmaparichay*) written in 1904 or 1905, Tagore defines his religion as "a feeling of mystery, not a dogma, it is a distinct awareness in the mind. [...] Whenever I feel the unity of the creative power within myself I also feel connected to the infinite creativity of the universe". He then calls this inner unifying "creative power" his "*jiban debata*" or the deity of his life (*My Life* 322-23; emphasis in original).¹² This self-observation reveals his indifference to dogma and his emphasis on a mystical "creative unity" (to use the title-phrase of one of his English collection of essays) of his life and the universe. Rather than

¹² Das Gupta's translation.

being a mere abstraction, this sense of unity is realised through his lived experience: his “joys”, “sorrows”, and “personal losses” (*My Life* 322).¹³ In poem no. 15 of his 1936 volume *Patraput*, Tagore identifies with the Baul seekers who “seek God in His real place | Beyond all fences” and walk the “most solitary way” looking for their “maner manush” or “Inner Man”: “A poet, I am of their sect— | I am an outcaste, uninitiated”. He also reveals that the God whom he wanted to worship all along, heard about all around, and read about in scriptures of different languages, has not been realised in his life. At the poem’s end, he brings his “worship” down “from the sphere of the Gods | to that of Man, [...] To the Inner Man and the intimate joy of my heart” (*Rabindra-rachanabali* 20: 42-43, 48; translation mine). Tagore thus carefully distinguishes his syncretic mystical sentiment from any particular doctrine or established religion. As suggested by the poem above, his mystical faith evolved through continuous adaptations and reorientations.

Yeats’s relationship with mysticism is more complicated than Tagore’s. In his biography of Yeats Terence Brown writes that “although he had been baptised and confirmed and had been taken to church by his mother, religion played little part in his upbringing, despite the clerical tradition of the Yeats family”. As regards the importance of religion in Yeats’s career, Brown maintains that “religious speculation and system-building are inseparable in Yeats’s mature intellectual processes, in a way which makes his spiritual nature not at all one that deals in piety, faith or good works, but in systematic knowledge, structured ritual and organized power” (31-32). His first serious “religious speculation” was of an eclectic mystical nature predominated by Eastern thoughts, particularly Indian philosophy as taught by Mohini Mohun Chatterjee. An exponent of the Classical Indian philosophy of Advaita (non-dualist) Vedanta, Chatterjee’s 1886 teaching in Dublin left a lasting impression in the mind and works of Yeats, which will be explored in Chapter 2. Already attracted by Theosophy, Yeats would then join the Theosophical Society in 1887 (Ellmann 62; Foster 1: 62). However, as his biographer R. F. Foster shows, given his “inclination towards magical experimentation” he soon

¹³ Das Gupta’s translation.

tired of the “mystical credulity” of the Society in general, and helped form and joined the Esoteric Section of the Society with ritualistic priorities (1: 102). In October 1890, he would be compelled to resign from the Society, because of his involvement in some “experiments” to verify the truth of some of the Society’s teachings (Foster 1: 103; Graf 52). He had already joined the Order of the Golden Dawn earlier that year and would remain with it until 1923 (Graf 52-53). Richard Ellmann notes that although in “its presupposition about God, the universe, and man” this Order was similar to the Theosophical Society, there were nonetheless crucial differences between them: the Golden Dawn “emphasized the European tradition of Kabbalistic magic rather than the wisdom of the East”. The Order also stressed “occult rituals and progressive initiation” (86).¹⁴ These differences in approach, we will see, are crucial to Yeats’s mystical thoughts and works.

His marriage with a fellow Occultist and a Golden Dawn junior Georgina Hyde-Lees in October 1917 launched a newer phase of his spiritual activities. Since their honeymoon, the Yeatses became involved in an automatic-writing affair with George Yeats functioning as a medium, which would continue in full force through the mid-1920s (Brown 222, 248, 252-53; Margaret Mills Harper, *Wisdom* 3-5).¹⁵ By January 1918, the “Automatic Script” contained in “broad outline” the “system” that would later be published as *A Vision* (Brown 263). In a letter to Lady Gregory of 4 January that year, Yeats describes the automatic influx as “[a] very profound, very exciting mystical philosophy”, adding that “[i]t is coming into my work a great deal & makes me feel that for the first time I understand human life. [...] I live with a strange sense of revelation & never know what the day will bring” (Kelly and Schuchard 3384). Coming out as *A Vision* (1925), this modernist book of “mystical philosophy” would be revised over the years until the publication of its 1937 version. As is suggested in the above letter, this revelatory philosophy gave him the confidence of wisdom and found its way into his poetry,

¹⁴ For a fuller account of Yeats’s long-standing involvement in the Golden Dawn, see George Mills Harper, *Yeats’s Golden Dawn*.

¹⁵ For a description of the Yeatses’ shared spirit-communication and its biographical and artistic repercussions, see Margaret Mills Harper, *Wisdom of Two*; Brown 246-66; and Matthew Campbell, “The Gift of George Yeats”.

among other works. Starting from early 1930s, Yeats would dig deep, once again, into Indian philosophy and mystical practices, inspired by and with the assistance of a visiting Indian “monk” Shri Purohit Swami. Lasting through to at least 1937, this final phase of his intellectual and spiritual engagement with Indian mystical wisdom would inform his creative, critical, and philosophical works, including the revised version of *A Vision*, which will feature, along with other topics, in Chapter 4 of this thesis.

These diverse spiritual engagements and activities of Yeats are hard to cover under any umbrella term such as “mysticism”. In an *In Our Time* panel discussion on “Yeats and Mysticism”, Foster makes a rather sharp distinction between Yeats’s early- and late-career investments in mysticism (times also of his most ostensible engrossment in Indian spirituality) and his mid-career commitment to (Western) magic (n. pag.). Another general term that is often used to cover these various enterprises is “occult” or “occultism”, employed in monographs and edited volumes from Bachchan (1965) and G. M. Harper (1975) to Matthew Gibson and Neil Mann (2016). In her essay “Yeats and the Occult”, Margaret Mills Harper uses the term to categorise the different enterprises of Yeats’s life outlined above (151). While drawing upon her categorisation in his chapter “Occultism”, Materer admits a terminological problematic as regards Yeats’s late work on Indian Upanishads which “are no more an occult or hermetic text than the Bible” (241). Further complications arise if one notes, as we will do in Chapter 4, that alongside the Upanishads, in the 1930s Yeats also worked on other Indian materials (Tantra and Yoga) that blur the distinctions between mysticism and magic, the esoteric and the occult. In his webpage on “Esotericism and Occultism”, Mann distinguishes the terms in the following manner: “Occultism is linked to the world, natural and supernatural, and based upon a view of hidden forces and practices to reveal or harness these” while “esotericism is linked more closely with mysticism and the personal experience of divine presence and can be accommodated to a greater or lesser extent within the major religions of the world” (*System* n. pag.).¹⁶ Esotericism and occultism are thus mystically and magically tilted respectively. Like “occultism” or

¹⁶ For more on the differences between occultism and esotericism, see Eliade 48-49.

“magic”, the term “mysticism” also needs to be stretched or adapted to incorporate Yeats’s multifarious spiritual/spiritualist¹⁷ interests. In this thesis I use the term “mysticism” in such a liberal and loose sense.

Yeats himself does not make sharp distinctions between the “mystical” and the “magical”, using the terms quite synonymously, most famously in his exasperated response to John O’Leary’s postcard which, Yeats suspects, was inspired by his father’s disapproval of his “magical pursuits”:

It is surely absurd to hold me “weak” [*sic*] or otherwise because I chose to persist in a study which I decided deliberately four or five years ago to make next to my poetry the most important pursuit of my life. [...] If I had not made magic my constant study I could not have written a single word of my Blake book nor would “The Countess Kathleen” have ever come to exist. The mystical life is the centre of all that I do & all that I think & all that I write. It holds to my work the same relation that the philosophy of Godwin held to the work of Shelley & I have all-ways [*sic*] considered my self [*sic*] a voice of what I believe [*sic*] to be a greater renaissance [*sic*]—the revolt of the soul against the intellect—now begining [*sic*] in the world. (*Letters* 1: 303; 23 July 1892)

Apart from the interchangeability of the terms “mystical” and “magical”, this letter eloquently expresses the centrality of mysticism (loosely understood) in his life and work which, he believes, have a pioneering role to play in the imminent spiritual renaissance, as opposed to the earlier, historical one with a secular and intellectual orientation.

Furthermore, the two Romantic poets mentioned in the above letter are of crucial importance to Yeats’s mystical thinking. In the 1893 essay “The Writings of William Blake”, he not only calls Blake “a great mystic” but finds the “form” of his “mysticism [...] in every way

¹⁷ Margaret Mills Harper defines “Spiritualism” as “an energetic religious movement that claimed to be a new and scientific form of Christianity, [and] swept the United States, Great Britain, and parts of continental Europe beginning in the mid-nineteenth century and waning early in the twentieth (with a late resurgence during and immediately after the Great War). For the sake of simplicity, its doctrines may be reduced to two: the continuance of the human personality after death (whether through one or many incarnations) and the ability of human spirits to communicate from beyond the grave through sensitive individuals in this world” (*Wisdom* 4n7).

more beautiful than the form chosen by Swedenborg or Boehme” (*Prose* 1: 282). In his 1900 essay “The Philosophy of Shelley’s Poetry”, Yeats attributes to *Prometheus Unbound* the status of “a sacred book” and endorses Mary Shelley’s observation that “[i]t requires a mind as subtle and penetrating as his [Shelley’s] own to understand the mystic meanings scattered throughout the poem” (*Early Essays* 52).¹⁸ However, unlike Blake, Shelley is credited with having had the “experience of all but the most profound of the mystical states, and known that union with created things which assuredly must precede the soul’s union with the uncreated spirit” (*Early Essays* 61). This adumbrates the 1933 essay on *Prometheus Unbound* (written in 1932), wherein Yeats declares that “Shelley was not a mystic, his system of thought was constructed by his logical faculty to satisfy desire, not a symbolical revelation received after the suspension of all desire”. He then self-revealingly relates that “[w]hen in middle life I looked back I found that [Shelley] and not Blake, whom I had studied more and with more approval, had shaped my life” (*Later Essays* 120-22). As for the self-reflexive elements in his reading of Shelley’s mysticism, it needs to be noted that while Yeats’s Visionary “system of thought” may well have been “constructed by [...] a symbolical revelation” it is far from having been achieved by “the suspension of all desire”.

Written in the same year as the essay, the final section of the poem *Vacillation* is a vital case in point:

Must we part, Von Hügel,¹⁹ though much alike, for we

Accept the miracles of the saints and honour sanctity?

[...]

I—though heart might find relief

Did I become a Christian man and choose for my belief

¹⁸ He refers to this observation of Mrs. Shelley in a note to the Book 2 of *A Vision* 1937: 155.

¹⁹ Friedrich Von Hügel was a Roman Catholic writer whose *Mystical Element of Religion as Studied in St. Catherine of Genoa and Her Friends* Yeats had read (Foster 2: 431; Albright, *Poems* 726). Much earlier, in his 2 December 1912 letter to Tagore, Rothenstein wrote quite at length of this book by von Hügel which he was then reading, commending it as “the profoundest I have read on the subject” but taking issue with the writer’s “putting the teaching of Christ so far above that of any other teacher” (Lago 71).

What seems most welcome in the tomb—play a predestined part.

Homer is my example and his unchristened heart.

The lion and the honeycomb, what has Scripture said?

So get you gone, Von Hügel, though with blessings on your head. (*Variorum* 503)

The above section pithily captures the deep-rooted ambivalence of the poet about a wholesome mystical self-surrender. Expressions like “Must we part [...]?” and “get you gone [...] though with blessings” embody a subtle and intimate divide, pulling apart, as it were, two parts of the same self. (Note also the rhyming of “part” with “heart”.) Given that he believes in “the miracles of the saints and honour[s] sanctity”, he realises that he is “much alike” a mystic but for the conflict between a Christian soul and a pagan “unchristened heart”. It is useful to note that in *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse* (1936), Yeats places this section of the poem immediately before “Sailing to Byzantium”, seemingly suggesting his predilection for Eastern Christianity of the early Christian era, for its organic mix of paganism and Christianity. (Chapter 4 will discuss this topic more fully.) Writing to Olivia Shakespear about the penultimate section of “Vacillation” which demonstrates a dialogue between the Soul and the Heart, Yeats gives us another clue to the cause of his ambivalence about any orthodox mystical life: “I shall be a sinful man to the end, & think upon my death bed of all the nights I wasted in my youth” (Kelly and Schuchard 5556; 3 January 1932). The source of his anxiety, then, has to do largely with what he accused Shelley of not having: “the suspension of all desire”. A great deal of the dynamism of his mystic-modern poetry and poetics is created, as this thesis will illustrate, by the conflict between his simultaneous self-surrendering and self-assertive drives. As already pointed out, Tagore too was riven by these conflicting drives. However, for all their essential similarities, Tagore’s approach and attitude to mysticism are significantly different from Yeats’s.

“Pure” versus “perverted” spirituality

Writing to Ajitkumar Chakravarty from the USA on 15 February 1913, Tagore expresses his exasperation about the misrepresentations of Indian spirituality advanced by a class of fake Indian “Swami[s]” in America. Drawing upon the account of “many thoughtful persons here”, he relates that, coming in the wake of Swami Vivekananda, those false Swamis cater to “a class of women here who are ready to entertain any amount of charlatanism in the name of spiritualism” (Paul 6: 361; translation mine). Further, in a letter of the previous day, he writes to Rothenstein about his feeling that he has helped his kind hostess in Chicago Mrs. Harriet Moody, the widow of poet William Vaughn Moody, in a deeper way: “she was gradually drifting towards the vague region of Christian Science and its allied cults which are in vogue here and which are so destructive of spiritual sanity and health” (Lago 98-99). Taken together, the above opinions epitomise Tagore’s serious reservations about the kind of spirituality or mysticism that Yeats was deeply invested in.

This brings us to a major point of divergence between Tagore and Yeats’s views of and relationships with mysticism. Tagore in this regard would be in sympathy with Underhill who maintained that “in every period of mystical activity we find an outbreak of occultism, illuminism, or other perverted spirituality” including among her examples “the Rosicrucians [and] the Christian Kabalists” (*Mysticism* 179). Like Tagore in the above letters, Underhill too adopts here a purist mystical perspective viewing the magically aligned spiritual methods and schools as “perverted spirituality”. She, however, notes an essential similarity between these two types of approaches to man’s spiritual endeavours in that “magical” or “occult activities”, like mysticism, originate in “man’s inextinguishable conviction” of the existence of extra-sensual “planes of being” (*Mysticism* 180). Yet, despite this basic connection, mysticism and magic differ in their respective drives for “I want to be” and “I want to know”:

The true “science of ultimates” must be a science of pure Being [...] but magic is merely a system whereby the self tries to assuage its transcendental curiosity by an extension of the activities of the will beyond their usual limits, obtaining by this means

experimental knowledge of planes of existence usually—but inaccurately—regarded as “supernatural”. (*Mysticism* 181)

We will see in Chapter 3 how Tagore prioritises man’s moral self-development or spiritual evolution over what Underhill here calls “transcendental curiosity”. However, whereas Underhill (as well as Tagore) would privilege the former over the latter, from a less purist perspective both will to be and will to know, both the search for one’s “pure Being” and the desire for “experimental knowledge” would be viewed equally as part of man’s higher spiritual ambitions. As Mircea Eliade points out, “[i]t is primarily the attraction of a *personal* initiation that explains the craze for the occult. [...] [I]n most of the occult circles, initiation also has a superpersonal function, for every new adept is supposed to contribute to the *renovatio* of the world” (64-65; emphasis in original). We have noticed in his 1892 letter to O’Leary how Yeats viewed himself as the voice of a spiritual renaissance that he believed was imminent in the world. For facilitating the advent of that renaissance, he would look for alternatives to the “modern”, institutionalised forms of Christianity in what Tagore above repudiates as “Christian Science and its allied cults”, among other cults and ideas from East and West. Reflecting upon his preference for “popular spiritualism” to “popular Christianity”, Yeats writes in his introduction to the 1937 version of *A Vision* that “Muses resemble women who creep out at night and give themselves to unknown sailors and return to talk of Chinese porcelain—porcelain is best made [...] where the conditions of life are hard—or of the Ninth Symphony”. Rather than being merely a stylistically motivated quest for poetic inspiration, these heterodox ventures have also an affective, personal dimension, as he adds: “the Muses sometimes form in those low haunts their most lasting attachments” (18-19). This nicely sums up his free, unscrupulous movements between “high” and “low” forms of mysticism, unlike Tagore’s proclivity for the former type.

That said, Tagore also had his “I want to know” phases of “transcendental curiosity”. It is true that despite drawing upon and appropriating the anthropocentric deities of popular Hindu cults in his works (see Chapter 1), he remained critical of the Tantra-leaning cultist rituals of

some of them, particularly of the Shakta cult (worshippers of the Goddess as Shakti or power),²⁰ betraying a high-cultural elitism that would have come naturally with his Brahmo inheritance. However, that did not keep him from taking part, albeit occasionally, in spiritualist experiments. Early in life, during his first visit to England (October 1878-February 1880), Tagore stayed for a time “with the Scotts, a doctor’s family” in Bloomsbury. There, with the Scott daughters, he tried “table-turning seance”. This may have been, as Dutta and Robinson describe, merely “[o]ne of the games he and the girls played” (67, 75-76). Later on, by the account of Yeats’s 20 July 1913 letter to the automatic writer Elizabeth Radcliffe, Tagore “spoke of your work [...] and asked if you would write for him”. Yeats tries to persuade her by saying that Tagore “is a great saint & great man so perhaps you would care to” (Kelly and Schuchard 2215). No such session seems, however, to have taken place.²¹ But, towards the end of 1929, Tagore took some serious interest in the mediumistic power of the 25-year-old daughter of his late friend Mohitchandra Sen,²² Uma Sen, also known as Bula, a poet herself. In the presence of others, Tagore and Bula would communicate with the spirits of the poet’s deceased family members as well as intimate friends and disciples who would often come voluntarily without being “called”. Tagore would ask the questions and Bula, in a trance, would write down the answers from the visiting disembodied souls (Chowdhury 10, 34-35). Tagore’s questions were noted down by some of those present during those sittings. Many of Bula’s scripts having been lost, the complete dialogues of only a few days from November-December 1929 are properly preserved. Amitabha Chowdhury’s invaluable book on the subject has published many such exchanges and Tagore has quoted, paraphrased, and summarised parts from some in his letters to Nirmalkumari

²⁰ In a 1919 newspaper article “Shaktipuja” (The Worship of Shakti) he discusses his mixed opinions about the cult. Despite acknowledging the symbolic “higher ideals” that might be found in the scripture and reflected “in the life and works of some religious figure”, he emphasises that “Sakti would be the revered ideal for dacoits, thugs, and *kapaliks*” (emphasis in original). See Amiya P. Sen’s abridged translation of the article as “Interpreting the Worship of Sakti” in Tagore, *Religion and Rabindranath Tagore* 74-77.

²¹ Yeats brings the matter up in a couple more of his August 1913 letters to Miss Radcliffe, too. In a letter of 16 August, he informs her of Tagore’s imminent departure making it difficult to organise a meeting with her, however hoping that “if you wrote for Tagore you might get some Eastern tongue” which, as he suggests in a letter of 24 August, would allow him to test some theory he was formulating about the spirit’s use of language (Kelly and Schuchard 2240, 2246).

²² Sen was an academician, teaching at different colleges and working as the Principal of Tagore’s school for a while. He was the first editor of Tagore’s poetry.

(Rani) Mahalanobis, the wife of the scientist and statistician Prasanta Chandra Mahalanobis who counted among the sceptics present in some of those sessions (Chowdhury 10-11; N. Ghosh 106-07). Like the critical response to the Yeatses' spirit communication (some of which will be touched upon in Chapter 4), this Tagore-Bula undertaking has also received a mixed reaction. Given the short-lived nature of the phenomenon as well as the fact that it left few ostensible marks on the poet's literary and philosophical works, though, this aspect of Tagore's career has not caused any remarkable critical stir as has happened in the case of the Yeatses. The general tendency is to explain away the affair as the thoughts of Tagore's mind being reflected somehow on Bula's.²³

The questions Tagore asked the spirits and his personal opinions on the matter, however, reveal a different side to his otherwise largely rational personality with a sanitised, philosophically charged take on spiritual matters. When in 1920 he was interviewed in the USA about Thomas Edison's machine to communicate with the spirits, Tagore said that although he believed in an eternal existence beyond death, he did not see the necessity of any machine to prove that (N. Ghosh 105). (Note the telling contrast here with the curious susceptibility of Yeats who, just three years ago, had strongly endorsed David Wilson's similar invention, considering it "the greatest discovery of the modern world" [Foster 2: 80].) Yet, in many of the 1929 exchanges via Bula, Tagore betrayed his curiosity about the nature and power of human consciousness hereafter, the possibility of reincarnation, and of the spirits taking physical form at their will, by asking them such questions as: "Should we count you people among the great creation that encompasses all men? Including this world and the next?"; "Does reincarnation depend on one's wish?"; "Is it possible for you people to take physical forms and manifest yourselves?";²⁴ "Can you go to other stellar regions outside of the solar system?"; and so forth

²³ Both Tagore's biographer Prabhatkumar Mukhopadhyay and the poet, scholar, academician, and Tagore's literary secretary for a time Amiya Chakravarty are of this opinion. Chowdhury in his preface quotes the moderately critical letter that he received from Chakravarty (who was present during those sessions, taking note of Tagore's questions) after the book was first published in the *Anandabazar* (Chowdhury 7; N. Ghosh 106).

²⁴ Asked to what he believed to be the soul of his elder brother Jyotirindranath Tagore, this question would lead to the one about whether his wife, Kadambari Devi would be able to materialise herself in his front. This beloved sister-in-law of Rabindranath had committed suicide in 1884 for undisclosed reasons

(Chowdhury 101, 55, 97, 123; translation mine). He also asked questions relating to the process of such communications. For example, “conversing” with the supposed spirit of his nephew the artist Abanindranath Tagore’s son-in-law Manilal Gangopadhyay (who was himself invested in mediumistic activities when alive), Tagore asks him if he can speak through Bula rather than making her write, and if he can make her do something that she has no flair for, such as painting.²⁵ Speaking to what he took to be the soul of the writer and Brahmo leader Sukumar Ray, he further asks whether the intimations Arthur Conan Doyle purports to gather from the other world are true (Chowdhury 82-83; 73).²⁶ These questions and some others express both his credulity and his desire to verify the truth of the matter, much like Yeats.

Also analogous to Yeats is Tagore’s ambivalent justification of spiritualist phenomena. In his 6 November 1929 letter to Rani Mahalanobis, Tagore narrates his “conversations” with a few spirits and, trying to make sense of the experience, writes that he certainly felt like speaking with different people and in languages that are neither Bula’s nor his own. He then attempts a logical explanation: “Had my mind, unknown to me, given the answers, they would have been different. Of course, if you say that I hardly know what my unconscious mind believes or says, then there is no point of argument” (*Neejer* 246; translation mine). The poet and novelist Maitreyi Devi recollects that while staying with her in Mungpoo in 1939, Tagore gave her some Theosophical journals so she could read some miraculous stories in them. When she expressed her doubts about those, Tagore told her of Bula’s clairvoyant powers. Finding Maitreyi still unconvinced, he told her that just because the sphere of our knowledge is very limited, it does not mean that there is nothing beyond that. “We should keep our minds open about a subject

and left a profound impression in Tagore’s poems and songs (Dutta and Robinson 88-91). Like this one, many other questions are of deeply personal and psychological imports. He also asked lots of practical questions pertaining to the future of his Santiniketan school and University and its different departments, and many others (Chowdhury 103).

²⁵ The answers received are in the negative because, in the former case, “we have no *Control* over spoken words” since the medium’s imagination will intersperse, and in the latter, “there is a limit to this too. [...] [W]e cannot give her any new skill” (Chowdhury 83; translation mine and italicised word originally in English).

²⁶ The answer comes that there are truths mixed with imagination (Chowdhury 73).

which can neither be proved nor disproved. To take any one side in such matters is to be a bigot” (N. Ghosh 103-05; translation mine).

Yeats also takes a similar stance on the matter in the following passage from “Swedenborg, Mediums, and the Desolate Places” (written in 1914):

Certain things had happened to me when alone in my own room which had convinced me that there are spiritual intelligences which can warn us and advise us [...] And yet I do not think I have been easily convinced, for I know [...] that if we deny the causes of doubt we make a false faith, and that we must excite the whole being into activity if we would offer to God what is, it may be, the one thing germane to the matter, a consenting of all our faculties. (*Later Essays* 47-48)

Whereas in this excerpt scepticism eventually serves the purpose of perfect “faith” and confirmed conviction, in his introduction to *The Words Upon the Window-Pane* (1931), he sounds less certain and more tentative:

Because mediumship is dramatisation, even honest mediums cheat at times either deliberately or because some part of the body has freed itself from the control of the waking will, and almost always truth and lies are mixed together. But what shall we say of their knowledge of events, their assumption of forms and names beyond the medium’s knowledge or ours? (*Explorations* 365-66)

One notes the similarity of this unresolved proposition with the tone of Tagore’s observations in the letter to Rani Mahalanobis cited above. In an oft-quoted excerpt from the introduction to *A Vision* (1937), Yeats strikes a rationalist note by writing that if asked about his belief in the actuality of “my circuits of sun and moon”, he would “answer that if sometimes, overwhelmed by miracle as all men must be when in the midst of it, I have taken such periods literally, my reason has soon recovered” (19).²⁷ (This is what the majority of Tagore scholars would want to say about the spiritualist phase of Tagore’s mysticism.) This oscillation between faith and

²⁷ For accounts of the Yeatses’ automatic writing, see G. M. Harper, *The Making of Yeats’s A Vision* (2 vols.) and *Yeats’s Vision Papers* (4 vols.).

doubt, credulity and reason, as well as this desire to keep an open mind about the validity of spiritualist activities adds an important dimension to the mystical modernity of these two poets.

Yet, as mentioned earlier, this mediumistic aspect of Tagore's mysticism remains isolated from the general tendency of his spirituality, partly because, unlike Yeats, he did not want to dogmatise about the truths garnered from his spirit communications. What we could call his books of "mystical philosophy", *The Religion of Man* (1931) and its Bengali version *Manusher Dharma* (1933), offer a largely philosophical account of man's upwardly mobile journey from a lower to a spiritually higher state of being, drawing freely upon scientific theories of life's evolution as well as his fund of eclectic mystical concepts and personal epiphanic experiences, but not upon any otherworldly or supernatural phenomena (see Chapter 3). As he writes in a 1918 letter to Hitendranath Nandi, he believes in a continuous existence beyond death which, he is intuitively convinced, does not halt the flow of life. (This conviction is also borne out in the queries he made to the spirits.) However, despite this faith, Tagore continues in the letter, he thinks it imperative not to stipulate any definitive theory regarding the existence beyond death. "I don't believe even a single syllable of those who claim such knowledge and attempt to give the details of the afterlife in a chart". This is because, he maintains, "the chick within cannot have any clue to what will happen to it after the egg hatches" (qtd. in Chowdhury 32; translation mine). Nothing can be farther from Yeats's inclination for charts and diagrams pinpointing the details of the soul's states hereafter,²⁸ occasionally verging on dogmatism.

We have seen in the above excerpt from Yeats's 1914 essay that for all his personal mystical conviction about the existence of "spiritual intelligences", he wants to keep alive the "causes of doubt" and "excite the whole being into activity" in order to "offer to God [...] a consenting of all our faculties". In other words, his faith is reached through a (continuous) passionate struggle with doubt—an idea that foreshadows the following statement in a lyric of his "Supernatural Songs": "Hatred of God may bring the soul to God" (*Variorum* 558). The God

²⁸ See in particular Book 3, "The Soul in Judgment", of *A Vision* 1937: 162-71.

in this lyric, of course, is the God of the speaker Ribh, a fictional early Christian Irish mystic. With some rare exceptions to be examined in Chapter 2, Yeats hardly writes about any personal relationship with God. His mystical discourse is peopled with such supernatural figures and entities as gyres and spheres, spirits and Daimons.²⁹ As Chapter 4 will discuss, God is mostly kept out of his system and, when included, takes the highly impersonal symbolic form of the Thirteenth Cone. This contrasts sharply with Tagore's conceptually personalised and poetically personified Jibandebata or Life-Deity to be analysed in Chapter 1.³⁰

Meeting one's own image

Despite these points of contrast between them, as indicated by the opening paragraph of this introduction, Tagore and Yeats were profoundly empathetic towards each other's image as a mystic modern poet in the first couple of years of their acquaintance. When in August 1912 Yeats was working on his introduction to *Gitanjali* in Normandy as a guest of Maud Gonne, he was also joined there by James Cousins and his wife. Here is James recalling how Yeats "had gone on fire with the fullness" in Tagore's poems: "From poem to poem Yeats went from hour to hour, annotating, expatiating, rejoicing, till we were all afire with a new revelation of spiritual beauty" (qtd. in Paul 6: 334). In his 28 June 1912 letter to Kshitimohan Sen, Tagore writes about Yeats's recitation of some poems from the *Gitanjali* manuscript at a gathering at Rothenstein's place the previous evening (the occasion of his first meeting with Yeats), endorsing that "[i]t was a very beautiful reading in the right tone" (*Selected Letters* 90). Yeats also read three verses from the manuscript at the India Society Dinner on 10 July in the presence of Maud Gonne and H. G. Wells among many others. Arthur Fox Strangways, who was an organiser of the meeting and would soon be Tagore's "unofficial literary agent", noted with

²⁹ Daimon is a mystical term in Yeats's system which evolves over time, but generally means some kind of archetypal eternal self. More on this in Chapter 4.

³⁰ Khan, too, contrasts the lack of any intimate personal relationship with God in Yeats with Tagore's profoundly intimate feeling of the divine within himself. However, as Chapter 2 will reveal, Yeats was not, as Khan has claimed, "an absolute monist in the manner of Shankaracharya" (343-44; translation mine).

amused admiration, as he expressed in writing to Rothenstein, Yeats's "mystic waving of arms over the victim of the evening" (Dutta and Robinson 165). The "victim" himself, as we have just seen, approved of Yeats's "right tone" on a similar occasion and so would more likely have appreciated the "mystic" gesture of his fellow poet without irony.

Looking at a couple of poems Yeats read on this occasion (Paul 6: 318) gives us some clues to the causes of Yeats's empathic enthusiasm. One of them, collected as poem no. 95 in the English *Gitanjali*, is worth quoting in its entirety:

I was not aware of the moment when I first crossed the threshold of this life.

What was the power that made me open out into this vast mystery like a bud in the forest at midnight!

When in the morning I looked upon the light I felt in a moment that I was no stranger in this world, that the inscrutable without name and form had taken me in its arms in the form of my own mother.

Even so, in death the same unknown will appear as ever known to me. And because I love this life, I know I shall love death as well.

The child cries out when from the right breast the mother takes it away, in the very next moment to find in the left one its consolation. (*Gitanjali* 87)

The self-surrendering reliance on an impersonal "unknown" "power"—"the inscrutable without name and form"—adopting the personal "form of my own mother" as well as the immortal existence of the self beyond the dichotomy of life and death symbolised by the mother's breasts would strike a sympathetic chord with Yeats's own dichotomous inclinations as well as remind him of his 1880s exposure to Indian mysticism and literature through Theosophy, Mohini Chatterjee, and Kalidasa's text (to be discussed in Chapter 2). Poem no. 22, for another, begins with "In the deep shadows of the rainy July, with secret steps, thou walkest, silent as night, eluding all watchers", and ends by pleading with the invisible "friend" and "beloved" not to "pass by like a dream" (*Gitanjali* 18). With the ghostly, secretive, and dream-like presence of the divine addressee, this poem would go even closer to Yeats's heart than the other one.

Read with Yeats's own mystic-modern preoccupations in mind, statements like the following from his *Gitanjali* introduction appear more sincere than they do seen from an exclusionary cultural-political perspective: "These lyrics—which are in the original, my Indians tell me, full of subtlety of rhythm, of untranslatable delicacies of colour, of metrical invention—display in their thought a world I have dreamed of all my life long" (*Gitanjali* xiii). Although Yeats's introduction, by his own admission, is impressionistic,³¹ in this excerpt he acknowledges the linguistically and culturally specific details which did not travel across in translation. Apart from the dreaminess in the contents and moods of the *Gitanjali* poems themselves that we have noted, an additional layer of dreaminess is added to them by the fact that in their English renditions these lyrics are mere shadows of the "subtlety" and "untranslatable delicacies" of the original. Part of these *original* delicacies, again, has to do with their formal, linguistic, and cultural uniqueness; but, for Yeats, there must have been another and more intuitively gratifying aspect to the untranslatable suggestiveness of these translated mystical lyrics, an aspect corresponding to "[t]he half-read wisdom of daemonic images" (as he would later phrase it in "Meditations in Time of Civil War", *Variorum* 427). Hence his oft-quoted observation:

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 [...] heard, perhaps for the first time in literature, our voice as in a dream. (*Gitanjali* xvii)

This sentence is often read as indicative of Yeats's Orientalising attitude inducing him to homogenise Indian civilisation, overriding its diversity. However, for all its stigma this is a protean sentence for our purposes if read in the context of Yeats's contemporary mystical activities. After a long hiatus following a fearsome séance in the late 1880s, Yeats re-immersed himself in spiritualist activities from 1909 triggered by his intimacy with Everard Fielding of the Society for Psychical Research as well as the exploration of "the connection between [Irish]

³¹ Yeats writes to Rothenstein on 7 September 1912: "My essay is an impression. I give no facts except those in the quoted conversation" (Kelly and Schuchard 1973).

folklore and spiritualism” (Foster’s phrase) that he and his patron and friend Lady Augusta Gregory had jointly undertaken. This renewed interest gained momentum after his encounter with a famous US medium in September 1911. In January 1912 he lectured on “A New Theory of Apparitions”, dwelling upon the value of dreams in linking one up with the “[d]isembodied souls”, and wrote to Lady Gregory about his being “deep in my ghost theory” (Foster 2: 462-64; Sword 104-06). Therefore, the ideas of hearing one’s “voice as in a dream” and meeting one’s “own image” would have mystical reverberations in Yeats’s usage.

Tagore, too, evaluated Yeats in accordance with his own mystical propensities. In “The Poet Yeats”, he compares the simplicity and innocence of Yeats’s vision to those of “[t]he Vedic poets” of ancient India (322). This matches Yeats’s comparison of Tagore to Blake, St. Francis, Geoffrey Chaucer, and his “forerunners” (*Gitanjali* xiv-xv, xix). Like Yeats’s self-admittedly impressionistic reading of Tagore, the latter too confesses in his essay that “I have not yet had full opportunity to learn by reading his poetry that he is a poet; but simply by entering his presence, I have realised that he animates his environment by the touch of a heart illumined by his imagination” (325). Thus each of them was equally attracted to the mystical aura of the poetry and the personality of other. Marking off Yeats’s poetry from “the poetry of his time”, Tagore writes that the former “manifests the feelings of [the poet’s] own heart”, and then goes on to clarify what he means by “his own heart” with the help of a metaphor:

A diamond manifests itself by manifesting the light of the heavens. So also with the human heart. It cannot manifest itself within its own self alone[.] [...] But when it reflects something greater than itself, it manifests itself in that greater light and also makes that light manifest. (321)

This quasi-mystical view of the poetic self as a medium for reflecting some higher, spiritual “light” is intuitively in accord with Yeats’s conception of the visionary role of the poet and his theory of the divine expressiveness of symbol, which will be examined in Chapter 2. Tagore here also stresses that the “heart” “cannot manifest itself within its own self alone”. The “self” he refers to here is the temporal, material self which, for both of our poets, needs to be animated

by the inspiration of some divine or semi-divine double, variously called Jibandebata, Inner Man, Daimon, or anti-self. A slightly later poem by Yeats is pertinent to this discussion.

In 1914 Yeats would have “schemed out a poem, praying that somewhere upon some seashore or upon some mountain I should meet face to face with the divine image of myself” (Foster 2: 518). This plan would materialise in a poem “Ego Dominus Tuus” (1915) which would eventually be included in the first exposition of his mystical system, *Per Amica Silentia Lunae* (1917-1918). In that poem, written in the form of a dialogue between Hic and Ille, the latter would mouth Yeats’s doctrine of the anti-self, announcing in his concluding speech:

[...] I seek an image, [...]

I call to the mysterious one who yet

Shall walk the wet sands by the edge of the stream

And look most like me, being indeed my double,

And prove of all imaginable things

The most unlike, being my anti-self, (*Variorum* 371)

Importantly for the relationship of our poets as well as for the interconnection of mysticism and modernity in their works, Ille’s search for “my double” or (“divine”) “image” in order to complete himself embodies an internal dualism, between what we might call the mystical and modern halves of his self. In calling to his mystical double, Ille or Yeats adopts what we might call a mystic-modern perspective, rather than that of any rationalist modernity which is disparaged by Ille at another moment in the poem. When Hic invokes the exclusionary self/other split in saying “I would find myself and not an image”, Ille disapprovingly replies with “[t]hat is our modern hope” (*Variorum* 367-68). This adds a non-exclusionary dimension to the wavering between the mystical and the modern that informs the thoughts and works of Yeats and Tagore as well as their relationship. Each of them partly saw in and partly read into the other an image of his “own self”. It is this self-image which, among other factors, is largely responsible for the misunderstanding and misreading involved in their relationship beyond the epiphanic moments of the “Gitanjali” phase.

Gitanjali and after

When Thomas Sturge Moore in 1912 “told Yeats that I found [Tagore’s] poetry preposterously optimistic he said, ‘Ah, you see, he is absorbed in God’” (qtd. in Lago 17-18). This tone of sympathetic tolerance as regards Tagore’s immersion in God is remarkably altered in his 1937 contention about Tagore writing “too much about God”. The observation was made when the Bengali professor Bose visited him along with Wilbraham Trench of Trinity College Dublin in the summer of 1937.³² Yeats, according to Trench’s version used by Joseph Hone,³³ added that “I have fed upon the philosophy of the Upanishads all my life, but there is an aspect of Tagore’s mysticism that I dislike. I find an absence of tragedy in Indian poetry” (Hone 458-59).

Interestingly, Yeats here distinguishes Tagore’s “mysticism” from the Upanishads which, as mentioned earlier, he at that time was deeply immersed in along with other branches of Indian mysticism such as Tantra and Yoga, as part of his collaborative works with Purohit Swami. In Bose’s account, complaining of Tagore’s “vagueness” and India’s obsession with “peace—Shanti”, as opposed to his own preference for “conflict”, Yeats picked up from his shelf the typed manuscript of a Shakta text, *Devi-Gita*, which Bose thinks was a translation by Purohit Swami. Showing this book to the Bengali professor, the poet told him that one can “find the philosophy of conflict in this” (“Interview” 18, 22).³⁴ At some point in the conversation, he also brought out another Asian symbol of conflict—the Japanese sword gifted by Sato, which he had immortalised in “A Dialogue of Self and Soul” (*Variorum* 477-78) written a decade earlier (Bose, “Interview” 20; Hone 459). This dramatic episode is indicative of Yeats’s revision of his earlier fascination for the self-contented serenity of the *Gitanjali* verses, triggered by his exposure to more energetic types of Indian mysticism which he found better attuned to his own mystical system.

³² There is an anomaly about the date of the meeting. While Bose gives June 1 in his account of the interview, Foster dates it to June 3 (Bose, “Interview” 18; Foster 2: 585).

³³ Foster 2: 757n36

³⁴ It is intriguing that, when talking about the centrality of “conflict” in his own poetry Yeats said that “[n]obody in the west has yet made a philosophy of it”, it was Bose who had to remind him of Nietzsche and the poet agreed with “Yes, Nietzsche has” (“Interview” 22).

In analysing Yeats's post-1913 dwindling of interest in Tagore, this 1937 observation of Yeats is often invoked in ways³⁵ that might give one the impression that Yeats changed his mind about the poet of *Gitanjali* as quickly as did Pound, for example, who opined in a letter to Harriet Monroe in April 1913 that Tagore's "philosophy" has little to offer to "a man who has 'felt the pangs' or been pestered with Western civilization" (qtd. in Hurwitz 57-58). Unlike this Eurocentric and modernist rejection of Tagore's mystical "philosophy" by Pound, Yeats's 1937 reservations, we have seen, are made on the grounds of his different attitude towards mysticism. Yet, as noted earlier, Yeats is often viewed as serving the cause of a "wise imperialism" in trying to promote Tagore. Since this thesis does not address the relationship between these poets comprehensively, it is important to consider here their correspondence with and about each other beyond 1912-1913 to put things in perspective.

To begin with Yeats, his letters to different addressees testify to his admiration for Tagore's first three poetic volumes in English—*Gitanjali*, *The Gardener* (1913), and *The Crescent Moon* (1913), published under careful supervisions of Yeats and Sturge Moore—at least until 1931. Despite revealing his frustration about Tagore publishing more badly translated and insufficiently edited volumes of poems after those three books, Yeats in his letters expresses admiration for Tagore's play *The Post Office* (1914), his autobiography *My Reminiscences* (1917), and his novel *The Home and the World* (1919).³⁶ In a letter of 12 September 1914, Yeats writes to Tagore that he "had planned to go to India this winter [...] to hear some minstrel sing your poems & to study the world out of which you have made them", and sends "my only religious poem [*sic*] The Hour Glass" (Kelly and Schuchard 2513). (Although Yeats's visit did not materialise, during Tagore's 1920 tour he would have another chance to hear Tagore himself—rather than "some minstrel"—sing a *Gitanjali* poem in its original song form after

³⁵ See, for one example, Guha 90.

³⁶ See his letters to Macmillan & Co. dated 14 April 1916 and 28 January 1917 (Kelly and Schuchard 2928, 3137); to Edward J. Thompson on 27 April 1924 (Kelly and Schuchard 4529); to Rothenstein on 22 September 1931 (Kelly and Schuchard 5512). *The Post Office* was translated by Devabrata Mukherjea and the other two books by Surendranath Tagore (Rabindranath's nephew). *My Reminiscences*, though published by Macmillan in 1917, had been serialised in *Modern Review* in January-December 1916 (Tagore, *Selected Letters* 173n4.).

Yeats's reading of the English version of the same at a gathering at Rothenstein's [Dutta and Robinson 225].) Hearing about Tagore's possible trip to England (which would not happen) Yeats writes to Rothenstein on 12 August 1926 to ask the details thereof and know whether Tagore's itinerary includes Ireland. "I would like to see that some notice is taken of his visit" (Kelly and Schuchard 4910). On 7 September 1931, after an interval of many years, Yeats writes to Tagore apologising for having not been able to contribute to *The Golden Book of Tagore* (1931), initiated by Romain Rolland on the occasion of the Indian poet's seventieth birthday. In that letter Yeats lets Tagore know that "I am still your most loyal student & admirer" and that in his "imagination" Tagore's books were still associated with "an Asiatic form" which he also found "afterwards in certain Chinese poetry & Japanese prose writing. What an excitement it was that first reading of your poems which seemed to come out of the fields & the rivers & have their changelessness" (Kelly and Schuchard 5509). These letters demonstrate Yeats's continued personal admiration for Tagore and some of his works as well as his sincerity about maintaining the public image of Tagore that he helped immortalise in the Western world.

Apart from the quality of translation, Yeats's frustration mentioned above about Tagore's later published poetry in English was also caused by some misleading information he received, as he writes to Macmillan on 31 January 1917, "that Tagore is no longer translating but writing in English" (Kelly and Schuchard 3144). This must have come as a shock to him given that in some of the letters referred to above he emphasises the cultural and political significance of those works from Tagore in which he appears to be "talking to his own people", as he writes to Rothenstein in a letter of February 1916 dwelling on the importance of Tagore's autobiography being published prior to any other work by him. He also gives his logic: "when the war is over England will think differently about India, whether better or worse", and in that context "it is important that she come to understand that India has a public life of its own". He is aware of the possibility of his being "biassed" [*sic*] about this book, he adds, "because I believe it to point a moral that would be valuable to me in Ireland" (Kelly and Schuchard 2871). He also suggests to Frederick Macmillan "to add to Tagore's new book of verse a short essay on his

prose” [*sic*] in order to “remind readers and reviewers that they were reading translations of poems, which in the original had very exact and difficult forms” (Kelly and Schuchard 2995; July 1 1916). Writing to the same addressee on the same topic on 9 July, he further emphasises that Tagore should not appear to be “a writer of facile English for English religious readers but a master of very arduous measures” (Kelly and Schuchard 2998). These 1916 letters show his genuine cultural-political concerns about the Bengali poet and his world as well as his determination to make Tagore be appreciated as a modern poet from a different culture, writing fine verses of formal sophistication in the original which, for all their mystical contents, are translated for a wider readership of English poetry than mere “English religious readers”.

It is in this context that we should read his oft-quoted 7 May 1937 epistolary outburst to Rothenstein:

Damn Tagore. We got out three good books, Sturge Moore & I & then, because he thought it more important to seem to know English than to be a great poet, he brought out sentimental rubbish & wrecked his reputation. Tagore does not know English, no Indian knows English. Nobody can write with music & style in a language not learned in childhood & ever since the language of his thought. I shall return to the question of Tagore but not yet—I shall return to it because he has published in recent [*sic*] & in English prose books of great beauty & these books have been ignored because of the eclipse of his reputation as a poet. (Kelly and Schuchard 6925)

This criticism is clearly not directed towards *Gitanjali* or the couple of poetry translations that followed it, for reasons discussed earlier. The prime reason for Yeats’s resentment is his assumption that instead of seeming to “speak to his own people”, as he wanted him to, Tagore, he thinks, chose “to seem to know English” by continuing to publish poorly translated poetry, due to which his “prose books of great beauty” have not been properly appreciated. It is important to mention here that three years prior to this vehement reaction of Yeats, while going through his hitherto-published translated works in response to Macmillan’s proposal to bring out a collected edition of his poems and plays in English (which would come out in 1936), Tagore himself was of similar opinion regarding his books that Yeats alludes to in this and the

other letters mentioned above. Writing to Amiya Chakravarty on 28 November 1934, he expresses his “shame” about “most of the poems in *Fruit Gathering* and *Lover’s Gift*” for their bad quality of translation, regretting his “carelessness” in translating them (*Chithipatra* 122-23; translation mine). Further, in a letter of 26 November 1932, Tagore writes to Rothenstein while reminiscing about the English *Gitanjali* days that “I am no such fool to claim an exorbitant [*sic*] price for my English which is a borrowed acquisition coming late in my life”. Not only that, he even regrets that he ever wooed foreign fame, having achieved greatness in “our own world of letters”: “it is never the function of a poet to personally help in the transportation of his poems to an alien form and atmosphere” (Lago 344-46). Therefore, Yeats’s criticism of Tagore’s intention is unjustified, if not his judgement on Tagore’s clumsily published translations of verses.

One might, however, wonder why this frustration about “the eclipse of [Tagore’s] reputation as a poet” returned after all these years in 1937. One possible reason, also surmised by Dutta and Robinson, is that he had recently been compelled to hunt through Tagore’s verse translations in choosing his samples for *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse: 1892-1935* (1936) which includes seven poems by the Bengali poet, “five from *Gitanjali* and two from *The Gardener*” (Dutta and Robinson 380n). This brings us to the irony, as R. K. Dasgupta has also observed, that a volume covering “modern verse” of 1892-1935 could not go beyond 1913 so far as Tagore’s poems were concerned (33). We have also seen in Yeats’s last letter to Tagore written on 7 September 1931 that, despite calling himself “still your most loyal student & admirer”, in tracing the cause of his admiration Yeats has to go back to the “excitement” of his *Gitanjali* days when Tagore’s lyrics appeared to have emerged from “the fields & the rivers”, retaining their “changelessness”. For all Yeats’s loyalty to this changeless purity of the *Gitanjali* lyrics, Tagore’s poetry, as we will see in Chapter 3, took quite a few significant turns after 1913, the first one being documented by his 1916 volume *Balaka* which takes as its very theme the energy and dynamism of change and motion. The next major shift has to do with his coming to terms with the “intellectual experience” in his poetry. Chapter 1, on the other hand, will

demonstrate the ever-changing moods and modes of Tagore's pre-*Gitanjali* poems, despite my selection being limited to those of mystical nature or interest.

If Yeats had no clear idea of Tagore's pre- and post-*Gitanjali* poetical works, Tagore, too, does not seem to have properly updated himself on Yeats's works. During his 1912-1913 tour, he had occasions to read and watch some of Yeats's plays. In January 1913 he writes to Ajitkumar Chakravarty about having "read two small plays by Yeats" and thought of his play *Sharadotshab* (The Autumn Festival) (Paul 6: 372; translation mine). If he merely implies his admiration here for a couple of Yeats's unnamed short plays by intuitively comparing them to his own play, in another letter of the same month he writes from Urbana, Illinois to Yeats about having been "deeply moved" by watching the "Irish Theatre" performance of *Kathleen Ni Houlihan* whose "effect is still haunting me" (B. Chakravarty 163). Although he remains mysteriously silent about Yeats's later works, Tagore certainly read some of Yeats's poems which Amiya Chakravarty copied in his letters between 1935 and 1939 to the elder poet, such as "A Prayer for Old Age", the fourth section of "Vacillation" ("My fiftieth year had come and gone"), "The Second Coming", and "On Being Asked for a War Poem" (112, 226-27, 259, 260). In Tagore's letters to Chakravarty, he eschews mentioning those poems or his thoughts on them, except for the letter of 23 February 1939 which seems to be a response to Chakravarty's 15 February letter from Lahore in which the writer sent Day Lewis's "Behold the Swan" and Yeats's "Vacillation" section mentioned above. There Chakravarty also comments that to his mind "Yeats is at the top of [contemporary] European literature" (226; translation mine). Although Tagore does not mention Yeats in his letter, he writes that "I enjoy reading the samples you have been sending of contemporary English poetry" which, he adds, gives him the confidence that he is not falling too far behind (*Chithipatra* 239; translation mine). Tagore's self-defensive ambivalence about and complex response to the question of modernist poets of Europe as well as their followers among the younger generation of Bengali poets will be discussed in Chapter 3. What is important to observe for now is his reticence about and apparent lack of interest in Yeats's later works. Yet, I do not see any foundation for Dutta and Robinson's claim that "Tagore did not really like Yeats's poetry, despite wanting to" (225).

Given his familiarity with at least some of Yeats's later poems, it is nevertheless striking that in his tribute to the Irish poet after his death, Tagore does not have anything to say about the poetry of the deceased poet, but "goes back to the time when I first met Yeats, full of exuberant life and youthfulness. The same picture of the glowing genius of a magnificent personality will [...] remain unfaded in memory of all time" (*English Writings* 3: 845). This note, though magnificent, echoes the same idealistic and impressionistic tone as we heard in the 1912 essay.

Therefore, although Tagore and Yeats maintained a tenuous connection till late in their lives, the period of their serious mutual interest in each other's works and poetical ideologies is limited to 1912-1913. As we have seen, this period and its after-effects have attracted the bulk of scholarly attention in the comparative studies of these poets, more often than not from cultural-political and cultural-materialist perspectives. As stated before, this thesis investigates instead these poets' analogous transcultural poetic projects of mystic modernity. This will demonstrate how, for all their differences in terms of mystical faiths and/or sensibilities, they both situate mysticism at the heart of their modern/modernist poetic programmes. That said, this study does not cover all the diverse genres and moods their poems involve, but works with a small selection from each in order to illustrate the overlap of mysticism and modernity in their works, leaving out, among other aspects, their love lyrics and political, patriotic, or occasional poems. While poetry remains the life force of the current project, it also discusses some related prose writings of these poets which illuminate certain aspects of their poems discussed.

With a view to introducing the non-Bengali readership to a wider variety of Tagore's works than are usually taken into account, in both of my Tagore chapters I draw upon a few selections of Tagore's works available in English translations done by different scholars, as well as using my own translations from the original Bengali. While using others' translations of Tagore's poems, I insert my own comments, where necessary, in order either to take issue with the translators on certain points, or simply to provide additional details to make the meaning clearer and/or give a closer sense of the original. Moreover, as I have done in this introductory chapter, I take advantage of my bilingual expertise to engage with a large number of Bengali critical works on Tagore from both West Bengal and Bangladesh (my home country) which

will, I believe, mark a significant addition to the field of Western scholarship on this subject, shedding fresh light not only on Tagore and his works, but on Yeats's creative and critical engagements with that as well. My Yeats chapters, as already suggested, demonstrates how his early- and late-career interactions with different varieties of Indian mysticism and literature are continuous with, not breaks from, his other related poetic, mystical, and cultural interests.

Although my focus on the individual chapters will be on the parallel mystic-modern poetry and poetics of these poets, I will occasionally pause while discussing one poet to draw analogy with the other. In this process, aspects of these poets' lives and careers will be mutually illuminating.

Chapter 1

The Formation of Tagore's Mystic-Modern Consciousness

This chapter historicises Tagore's complex cultural and ideological inheritances with particular attention to Hinduism, Brahmoism, and Western humanism, before critically exploring his evolving mystic-poetic self fashioning. Rather than giving a comprehensive historical account of the Bengal Renaissance, Orientalism, and the Brahmo movement, the first section that follows concentrates on two of the key Renaissance men in Bengal, Raja Rammohan Roy and Maharshi Debendranath Tagore (the poet's father), because of their shared and complementary contributions to the formation of the mystic-modern disposition of Tagore's personality. This leads to a thumbnail account of aspects of Hinduism that are relevant to this and the other chapters of the thesis. The two subsequent sections then read a range of poems from Tagore's early career in order to trace the poet's search for and construction of a personalised form of divinity as well as its various manifestations. What this chapter suggests is that Tagore's idiosyncratic mystical spirituality gradually forms itself in response to and often discursive reaction against a variety of traditional cultural modes of India: mythological, religious, philosophical, and literary. This process is imbued at times with the aura of English Romantic poetics. Towards the end of the chapter, suggestions will also be made as to the cultural political repercussions of this spiritual development of Tagore.

I

Spanning the late eighteenth to the early nineteenth century, the Bengal Renaissance was a socio-cultural and intellectual phenomenon closely associated with the rise of Orientalism in India. In *British Orientalism and the Bengal Renaissance*, David Kopf refers to the period between 1773 and 1828 as the time for the most radical transformation taking place in the city

of Calcutta,¹ which was made the capital city of British India by the Governor-General Warren Hastings. As part of his radical “Indianization” of the Company administration—with a view, albeit, “to rul[ing] effectively”—Hastings inspired “love for Asian literature” among a group of newly arrived Company officials, the most remarkable of whom was William Jones who came to India in 1783. Hastings also established the Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1784, and thus gave birth to British Orientalism in India (Kopf, *British* 17, 19, 20-21). In the spirit of Hastings’s policy, later Governor-General Richard Wellesley in 1800 established the College of Fort William in Calcutta, which was the first higher education institution in India founded by a European (Kopf, *British* 6). Coordinating with the Asiatic Society and the Serampore Mission, the college played a vital role in the printing and popularising of Indian classics and vernacular languages (Kopf, *British* 70-71). Kopf contrasts this “sympathetic Orientalist period” with the later “Anglicist” one, when “Westernizers” like Thomas B. Macaulay pushed forward a thorough assimilation of the “natives” into the culture of their British rulers (*British* 7-8). This conceptual differentiation is useful in contextualizing the complex relationship with Western modernity of such precursors of Tagore as Rammohan Roy and Debendranath Tagore. Both Roy and Debendranath were the founders of the reformist Brahma Samaj, the religious faith Tagore was born into, and massively influenced his sense of modernity as well as his religious perspectives. Brief considerations of the relevant aspects of these two personalities might therefore be helpful for our understanding of Tagore’s mystic modernity.

Dubbed by Tagore as “[t]he greatest man of modern India” (*My Life* 8), Roy played a crucial role in the abolition of the Hindu tradition of widow immolation or sati and initiated the modern reformist Brahma movement by founding the Brahma Sabha or Brahma Samaj in 1828 (Kopf, *Brahmo* xxi; Collet 239). So far as his religious faith was concerned, it was an eclectic monotheism influenced by diverse religious traditions popular in India of his time, such as Upanishadic Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity (Robertson 26). At an early age, Roy was sent to

¹ The Governor-General of the East India Company Warren Hastings made Calcutta the capital of British India in 1773 and the Governor-General Lord Bentinck “challenged Orientalist cultural policy” in 1828 (Kopf, *British* 4).

Patna, the nerve centre of Islamic learning in India at that time, to learn Persian and other Arabic languages (Sastri 16). During his stay there, Roy studied the Qur'an, the life and teachings of Prophet Muhammad, and the rationalist philosophy of the Mu'tazila school of Islamic theology. He also read in Arabic translation such Greek scholars as Euclid, Plato, and Aristotle, as well as the poetry of Hafiz, Rumi, and others, rich in Sufi thought. These studies laid the foundation for his conversion to a monotheistic faith. He is also believed to have travelled to Tibet on foot in order to study Buddhism, which was followed by a journey to Benares where he learnt the Sanskrit language and Hindu scriptures for some years. He also began to learn English on his own around that time. Roy's debut Persian tract, published with an Arabic introduction, was called *Tuhfat-ul-Muwahhiddin* meaning "A Gift to Monotheists", wherein he repudiated the idolatrous and superstitious practices of all religions and spoke for a "universal religion" with faith in the unity of God (Sastri 16-20; Su. Dasgupta 14-15). Starting in 1815, Roy published a series of translations of Vedanta and different Upanishads in Bengali, English, and Hindustani (Sastri 28). This began, in Brian A. Hatcher's words, "[t]he genealogy of modern Vedānta" (4). Furthermore, before establishing the Brahmo movement, he ardently supported the cause of Unitarian Christianity in India and helped founding the Calcutta Unitarian Committee in 1821. (Tagore's grandfather Dwarkanath Tagore, a friend and supporter of Roy, also held a membership position in the Committee) (Collet 131-33). While the Unitarian influence on it was inevitable, Roy's Brahmo Samaj based its monotheistic "worship" on Vedic authority and its dress code had recognisable Muslim associations (Collet 230, 246-47). This theistic and cultural eclecticism disappointed Roy's Unitarian friends while his staunch monotheism antagonised the Christian missionaries (Trinitarians) and Hindu orthodoxy alike (Collet 145, 246-47).

Roy's particular theological as well as cultural-political position problematises any neat theorisation. Kopf argues that for all his ideological "contradictions and inconsistencies", Roy belonged to "the camp of the Orientalist modernizers" because of "his preoccupation with an authentic Hindu tradition or golden age which he sharply set off against a dark age of popularized religion and social abuses" (*Brahmo* 11). On the other hand, Partha Chatterjee

makes a “conceptual distinction [...] between the early modern and the colonial modern” in India, arguing that it is from the “liberal” perspectives of the former that we should judge the more controversial aspects of Roy’s career, such as his moderate stance on British rule and the European settler community in India (151-52, 156). Chatterjee proposes considering Roy not as an originator of the “nationalist and democratic modernity” of the latter half of the nineteenth century, but as a key figure of the “short-lived early modern antiabsolutist formation” appearing in the earlier part of the century (153).

Kopf’s Orientalist modernity and Chatterjee’s indigenous early modernity point to a fundamental ambiguity in trying to define the form of modernity represented by such complex cultural figures as Roy and (by extension) Tagore. However, Chatterjee’s “early modern antiabsolutist formation” overlaps in part with Kopf’s notion of the benevolent Orientalist phase and does not contradict the latter’s claim about the influence of Orientalist scholarship on Roy’s ideological mould. Both Kopf and Chatterjee tend to see Roy’s vision of modernity as one that freely combines the local and the West-borne ideas and discursive traditions. What is more important, this model of modernity is less oppositional and coercive than the later Anglicist, Westernising, or nationalist model. This also significantly foreshadows Tagore’s mystic-humanist model of modernity that combined the liberating, rationalist, and universalist tendencies of Western humanism with the local mysticisms of the Upanishads and other popular spiritual sects and practices of India.

If Roy was the idol of Tagore’s vision of modernity, his father Debendranath’s spirituality made a lasting impression on the poet’s mystical sensibilities. Debendranath played a crucial role in promoting the cause of a monotheistic faith rooted in the ancient Hindu scriptures after the untimely death of Roy in 1833. In his autobiography, Debendranath narrates the story of his conversion to an Upanishad-based monotheism, the process of which began at the deathbed of his beloved grandmother who was a practising Hindu. Having had his first spiritual revelation there in the form of an “unworldly joy”, he fell into a state of detachment from materialist living and, gradually, from the image-worshipping popular Hinduism. Becoming attracted to the infinitude of the God “without form”, he found inspiration in the life

and works of Roy, whose religious books had been kept at the personal library of Debendranath's father. This was followed by a more dramatic conversion experience for Debendranath, issuing from the sudden discovery of a torn scrap of paper with some inscription in Sanskrit. Not being able to "decipher" its meaning with the help of his family Pandit, he sought help from Pandit Ramchandra Vidyabagish who had been taking care of the Brahmo Samaj since Rammohan's death. With Vidyabagish's help, Debendranath learnt that the piece of paper contained a verse from the *Isa Upanishad* the import of which was the omnipresence of God and the value of detachment from materialist gain (De. Tagore 3, 10, 12-16; Hatcher 36-38, 40-41).

Taking that as a divine message, Debendranath immersed himself in a deep study of the Upanishads and founded the Tattvabodhini Sabha in 1839 with a view to "gain[ing] the knowledge of God" (De. Tagore 16-17). Hatcher thinks that the importance of Tattvabodhini Sabha is generally overshadowed by the scholarly focus on Rammohan Roy and the Brahmo Samaj. Although the Tattvabodhini Sabha and the Brahmo Samaj eventually merged into one entity, the former had been born out of Debendranath's personal spiritual quest and initially ran as a parallel institution to the latter (5, 11).² Officially initiated into the Brahmo faith in 1843, Debendranath founded the journal *Tattvabodhini Patrika* a few months later under the editorship of Akshay Kumar Datta (Sastri 90-91). According to Hatcher, the founding of the Tattvabodhini Sabha and its contribution to "the further interpretation of Vedānta for the modern world [...] mark a second crucial moment in the emergence of modernist Hinduism" (5). In order to evaluate the foundational influence of all this on Tagore's idiosyncratic spirituality, it is helpful to further unpack the complex cultural-political underpinnings of this "modernist Hinduism", which will also be useful for the discussions of Yeats's evolving relationship with Hinduism in Chapters 2 and 4.

² Hatcher explores the texts of *Sabhyadiger vaktīrtā* or the discourses of some members of the Tattvabodhini Sabha in the first year of its foundation, published in Calcutta in 1841, finding in them "concrete evidence that Sabhā has independent origins" rather than "being a mere spin-off of Rammohan's work" (11). For a "complete English translation" of these discourses, see chapter 8 of Hatcher's book (141-73).

Philosophical, speculative, or mystical in nature, the Upanishads or Vedanta (literally “the end of the Veda”) refer to the final sections of the four Vedas, the other sections being full of rituals and hymns to a plethora of Vedic gods (Radhakrishnan and Moore 37; Radhakrishnan, *Indian* 430). The Upanishads, therefore, represent a shift in Vedic Hinduism from polytheism towards monotheism taking place between 800 and 500 BCE (Radhakrishnan, *Indian* 430; N. Chaudhuri 88; K. Sen, *Hinduism* 19, 46-49). Shankaracharya’s Advaita (non-dualist) Vedanta, often confused with Vedanta as such, consists of his later eighth-century commentary on the Vedanta system, existing alongside other alternative interpretations of the same (Radhakrishnan and Moore 506-09). What Nirad C. Chaudhuri calls the “polymorphous monotheism” of popular Hinduism emerged later in the form of the cults of Shiva, Vishnu-Krishna, and Durga-Kali, known as Shaivism, Vaishnavism, and Shaktism respectively (88). These as well as numerous other popular cults have a predominance of image worship and their deities are held to be of “non-Aryan” origin (K. Sen, *Hinduism* 58-59). In his chapter entitled “‘Mystic Hinduism’: Vedānta and the Politics of Representation”, Richard King considers the notion of “Hinduism” as a homogenous religion to be “a Western explanatory construct”, resulting from the Western Orientalists’ attempts to canonise certain Sanskrit texts as the sourcebooks of “Hinduism” as well as their “tendency to define Indian religion in terms of a normative paradigm of religion based upon contemporary Western understandings of the Judaeo-Christian traditions” (100-01). King points out the early Orientalists’ ahistorical generalisation of Vedanta, or rather Shankaracharya’s school of Advaita Vedanta, as the key doctrine to stand for Hinduism as a whole. Following their lead, Indian reformers such as Roy and others found in Vedanta “an overarching theological framework for organizing the confusing diversity of Hindu religiosity” (128, 132, 134).

Vedanta, of course, did not mean the same thing for all the Indian reformers of the nineteenth century. For Rammohan Roy it meant the Upanishadic teachings, and he often took issues with the later interpretations of them (Hatcher 24-25). We have already seen how he contributed to the popularisation and modernisation of Vedanta as part of his reformist agenda. In his autobiography, Debendranath echoes Rammohan’s attitude to Vedanta by describing the

objective of the Tattvabodhini Sabha as “the diffusion of the deep truth of all our *shastras* and the knowledge of *Brahma* as inculcated in the *Vedanta*. It was the *Upanishads* that we considered to be the *Vedanta*” (18; emphasis in original). With a more personal and affective approach to religious truths than Rammohan’s, Debendranath would later prioritise heart over head in his version of Brahmo faith. Growing more and more sceptical about the authenticity of the Vedas and the Upanishads, he eventually founded Brahmoism on “the pure heart, filled with the light of intuitive knowledge[.] [...] *Brahma* reigned in the pure heart alone. [...] We could accept those texts only of the Upanishads which accorded with that heart” (De. Tagore 74-75). We will see how Rabindranath would have a similar approach to the Upanishadic wisdom he draws upon. As for Shankara’s absolute non-dualism, Debendranath considered it incompatible with Brahmoism which, he maintained, was essentially dualist: “Our relation with God is that of worshipper and worshipped” (De. Tagore 75). It is worth noting here that Debendranath’s eldest son, the philosopher Dwijendranath Tagore wrote in an article of 1886 or 1887 (“*Dvaitavad ar Advaitabader Samanvay*” or synthesising dualism and non-dualism, Paush 1293 Bengali year): “I subscribe to the separation of God and the world on the one hand, and a deep union between them on the other;—if asked to define my position, I would call myself a dualist-nondualist” (98-99; translation mine).³ And here is our poet Tagore defining his personal faith in an autobiographical piece written in 1904 or 1905 (1311 Bengali year):

I am not a theorist. I won’t take part in any battle of words over dualism and non-dualism. I can merely speak of my own feelings—deep within me, I feel my indwelling God’s joy of expression. That delight, that love pervades all my limbs, my intellect, my perception of this universe, my immemorial past and my endless future. Without understanding, I can feel this love-play [“premer lila”] within my very being.

(*Atmaparichay* 14; translation mine)

³ This article was a response to Mohini Chatterjee’s criticism of an earlier article by Dwijendranath on the dualism-nondualism question.

The liberal, non-dogmatic approach to the Upanishads/Vedanta in the above comments by the Tagores as well as the intuitive and affective attitude of Debendranath and Rabindranath is revealing in terms of the latter's formative theological orientation.

So far as its cultural and ideological temperaments are concerned, Adi Brahma Samaj—as Debendranath's wing of the Brahma Samaj came to be known—as well as Tagore's family environment did not let its reformist attitude undermine its organic ties with Hinduism. Nor did their belief in universalism cause them to shy away from the cause of cultural nationalism (Kopf, *Brahmo* 289-90). Kopf uses the term “Hindu Brahmoism” to distinguish “the Adi Brahma idea of Hindu modernism” from a more universalist and confessedly or combatively non-Hindu version of modernity, upheld by the Keshubite and Sadharan sects of Brahmoism (*Brahmo* 288).⁴ Neither breaking away from Hinduism nor protecting “status-quo traditionalism”, Adi Brahma Samaj attempted “to modernize the Hindu tradition through Brahmoism” (Kopf, *Brahmo* 290). In the question of social reform, Adi Brahma Samaj was comparatively conservative and believed in gradual introduction of changes—an attitude which Tagore seems to have criticised in an essay entitled “Ak-chokha Sangskar” (one-eyed reform), published in late 1881 or early 1882 (Paul 2: 129). He would also be critical of the neo-Hinduist promotion of traditional Hindu religious rituals and idolatrous practices (Paul 2: 219-22). That said, culturally speaking, he would not consider Brahmoism to be independent of Hinduism. Brahma Samaj, for Tagore, is merely an expression of whatever is “creative” and “universal” in Hinduism (“Atmaparichaya” 204). Further, the term “Hindu” does not mean for him any religion or creed, but, much like the term “Celt” for early Yeats, connotes the deeply engrained social, cultural, and traditional identity of the people of greater India (Bharatbarsha)—some kind of quasi-mystical bond holding them together irrespective of their differences

⁴ In 1866, due to a conflict between the “liberal younger Brahmos” and the “conservative older” ones, the Brahma Samaj was split into Adi (old) Brahma Samaj, led by Debendranath Tagore, and what became known as “the Brahma Samaj of India”, led by Keshub Chandra Sen who had joined the Samaj in 1857. This new formation split further in 1878, when another “liberal” segment, finding some of Sen's tendencies “conservative”, formed the Sadharan (common or general) Brahma Samaj (Kopf, *Brahmo* XXI-XXII). Rabindranath Tagore would become the secretary of the Adi Brahma Samaj in 1884 (Kopf, *Braho* 291).

(“Atmaparichaya” 200, 207). Against this background, the following sections will explore how, remaining indebted to the mythopoetical traditions of India as found in the Vaishnava poets and Kalidasa, Tagore appropriated and often revised them in his own works, thereby making something new out of these received traditions. Despite his familial and social orientation towards the rarified mysticism of the Upanishadic tradition, he borrowed selectively from the popular Hindu religious cults of India (mainly Vaishnavism and Shaivism) as well as the indigenous mystical tradition of the Baul community of Bengal to form his own idiosyncratic mystical faith in a personalised divinity whom he often calls Jibandebata or Life-Deity.

II

In 1877, at the age of sixteen, Tagore published some lyrics in the newly launched family magazine *Bharati* under the pseudonym Bhanusingha (Dutta and Robinson 64). Modelled, rather derivatively, on Vaishnava padavali or lyrics, *Bhanusingha Thakurer Padavali* or lyrics by Bhanusingha Thakur⁵ was composed in a language called Vrajabuli. Literally the language of *Vraja*, the mythological location for the Radha-Krishna lore, Vrajabuli was a lyrical language concocted by the fifteenth-century Vaishnava poet Vidyapati by fusing Maithili (the language of Mithila) and other languages (Goswami 9-10). Fascinated by that half-understood mixed language, Tagore felt an urge to cover his own poems “in just such a wrapping of mystery” (*Reminiscences* 137). In this project, Tagore’s inspiration was the eighteenth-century British poet Thomas Chatterton, who as a boy produced old-fashioned verses, claiming them to be the works of a medieval monk—an act of forgery which eventually culminated in humiliation and suicide (Dutta and Robinson 64). This tale of creative fraudulence, bridging the distance between ancient and modern literatures, moved Tagore deeply. Tagore’s attempt, unlike his model’s, yielded a less bleak and more fruitful outcome. As he humorously recollects, having composed the poems, he claimed to a friend of his that he had found them in a “tattered old

⁵ “Bhanusingha” has the exact same meaning as the poet’s first name, “Rabindranath”—“the lord of sun” (Kripalani 70-71)—and “Thakur” is his surname in Bengali, the anglicised version of which is “Tagore”.

manuscript” of some ancient Vaishnava poet called Bhanusingha in the library of the Adi Brahma Samaj. Inspecting the works, the friend judged them superior in quality to the works of such eminent Vaishnava lyricists as Vidyapati and Badu Chandidasa (to be introduced later). Then, after Tagore had revealed himself as the real author, his “friend’s face fell as he muttered, ‘Yes, yes, they’re not half bad’” (*Reminiscences* 138).⁶

That in this project of local antiquarianism Tagore was inspired by a British poet is no mere coincidence. According to *My Reminiscences*, Tagore came to know about Chatterton from his family friend Akshay Chowdhury, who was an M.A. in English literature and a passionate reader of the same, while having “an equal fondness for our older Bengali authors and Vaishnava Poets. He knew hundreds of Bengali songs of unknown authorship” (125, 137). Far from being an isolated example, Akshay Chowdhury epitomises a type of Bengali intelligentsia to which Tagore’s family belonged. Although Tagore was never comfortable with formal schooling and finally quit going to school in 1875, he received a polyglot education at home from tutors and was absorbed in the rich cultural atmosphere of his family house in Calcutta (Dutta and Robinson 58-59). As he recollects about childhood and early boyhood, initiated into literature through the Bengali versions of such Sanskrit texts as the ancient Indian epic *Ramayana*, he made his way through the fifth-century Sanskrit writer Kalidasa’s epic poem *Kumarsambhava* or *Birth of the War-God*, and his play *Shakuntala*, the twelfth-century Bengali poet Jayadeva’s Sanskrit song-collection *Gita Govinda* “in Bengali character”, and the more modern Bengali epic by Michael Madhusudan Dutt, *Meghnadbadh Kabya*. He also imbibed his elder siblings’ readings of English writers like William Shakespeare and Sir Walter Scott, and, as part of his home education, translated Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* from English (publishing the “Witches’ Scene” in his family magazine in 1880), read Thomas Moore’s *Irish Melodies*, Dante

⁶ Tagore continued to write the Bhanusingha poems until 1884, composing twenty such poems. Set to tunes by him a few years later, nine of the Bhanu Singha pieces remain, to this day, among the most admired of the Rabindrasangeets (Songs of Rabindranath) (Goswami 62). In *My Boyhood Days*, Tagore also remembers how at the age of “sixteen or seventeen”, staying one rainy day at his elder brother’s “garden house on the bank of the Ganges”, he was struck by Vidyapati’s verses “*e bharā bādara māha bhādara sunya mandira mor*” and “[m]oulding them to my own melody and stamping them with my own musical mood, I made them my own” (85-86).

Alighieri in translation, and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe with inadequate German, among other texts of world literature (*My Life* 4, 21-22, 24, 66-67, 72; *My Reminiscences* 74-75; Dutta and Robinson 59).⁷ To this would be later added, we will see, an engaging reading of the English Romantic poets. This brief (and by no means comprehensive) list is intended to give an impression of the transnational intellectual and cultural orientation available for someone born amidst the living legacy of the Bengal Renaissance, and at the very heart of the Brahmo movement.

In spite of this exposure to transnational and polyglot literary traditions, one of the texts Tagore remembers to have been deeply moved by at an early age was the Fort William College edition of Jayadeva's *Gita Govinda*. Although he did not fully understand the import of the Sanskrit verses due to his incompetence in Sanskrit at that time, yet, he stresses, "the sound of the words and the lilt of the metre filled my mind with pictures of wonderful beauty, which impelled me to copy out the whole of the book for my own use". The same was the case with Kalidasa's *Meghaduta* and *Kumarsambhava* (*My Reminiscences* 73-75). Tagore elsewhere remembers having stealthily read his elder brothers' collection of some erotically charged Vaishnava lyrics,⁸ which mesmerised him—then on the verge of his teens—by "the beauty of their forms and the music of their words" (*My Life* 73). This passion for metred verse and musical words propelled, we have seen, his first serious poetic self-fashioning as Bhanusingha Thakur.

The subject matter of Jayadeva, Vidyapati, and other Vaishnava lyricists as well as of Tagore's own Bhanusingha lyrics was the love affair of the divine couple Radha and Krishna, the deities of the Vaishnava cult. While it is debatable whether or to what extent Tagore identified with Vaishnava piety and devotion at that time, he was certainly drawn by the way these medieval poets of the Vaishnava padavali humanised the mythological episodes of the

⁷ Tagore, of course, admits having "utterly failed" to appreciate Dante in translation and gone, with the "ambitious" *Faust* project, no farther than "some guest room" like a "casual visitor" (*My Life* 72).

⁸ These are probably the "series" of Vaishnava poetry compiled by Sarada Mitter and Akshay Sarkar, of which his "elders were subscribers, but not very regular readers" (*My Reminiscences* 116).

divine love affair and used them as a medium for writing secular love poems or songs. Tagore wrote two essays in 1882 and 1892 on Vaishnava poetry, in which he analyses the works of Vidyapati and Badu Chandidasa, the writer-composer of *Shri Krishna Kirtana*. Coming after Jayadeva and Vidyapati, Chandidasa completed the trio of secular Vaishnava poets whose “non-spiritual” lyrics would later be “spiritualized” by Shri Chaitanya’s Bhakti movement that popularised the Kirtana music (Goswami 9-11). In the essay “Vidyapati’s Radhika” (1892), Tagore conducts a comparative study of Vidyapati and Chandidasa to observe that in their works “we have two expressions of the same power of love. In Vidyapati love is sportive, dancing, restless; in Chandidas it is intense, burning, luminous”. While in Vidyapati one finds “either sadness or joy, either union or separation, clearly categorized”, in Chandidasa, these categories are “interwoven with each other. Thus in Vidyapati love has the freshness of youth, and in Chandidas the depth of mature years” (203). In both essays, Tagore goes on in this fashion to make nuanced distinctions between the emotions of love expressed by these two poets of Vaishnava padavali. This suggests that Tagore’s early interest in the Vaishnava poets was literary and humanist, rather than devotional and theological.

In a poem that he wrote in the same year, entitled “Vaishnava Kabita” (Vaishnava Poem), he starts by wondering if the “songs of Vaishnava” are meant “only for Baikuntha” (Heaven), and goes on piling up a series of rhetorical questions or statements:

This delightful musical succulence,
 Is it not to quench the fiery love-thirstiness,
 The daily experience
 Of the humble, earthly women and men? [...]
 Tell me truly, O Vaishnava poet,
 Where found you these love-images
 Who taught you these songs amorous
 With pangs of separation burning. Whose tearful eyes
 Were behind those of your Radha? [...]
 Of these songs forever

Will you deprive her

Whose woman's heart did lend them tongue! (*Rabindra-rachanabali* 3: 40-42,
translation mine)

Here he seems to view the content ("love"), inspiration ("tearful eyes", "woman's heart"), and purpose ("to quench the fiery love-thirstiness [...] [o]f the humble, earthly women and men") of Vaishnava poetry to be secular. That said, it does not mean that he did not have any spiritual interest in all this. Rather, he was drawn by the blending of the human and the divine in Vaishnava lore which gave him, to use the words of Krishna Kripalani, "an idealized picture of love half-human, half-divine" (qtd. in Chunkapura 276). Further on in this poem, Tagore argues that we give our beloveds what we can give to the gods and vice versa, thereby "making a beloved of our god and a god of our beloved" (*Rabindra-rachanabali* 3: 42, translation mine). This last expression is crucial to Tagore's mysticism which is informed by his anthropocentric approach to divinity or spirituality.

Writing to his future biographer Prabhat Kumar Mukhopadhyay in November 1895, Tagore dwells on the distinctive quality of Vaishnavism that he finds most attractive. Taking up the clichéd idea that Vaishnava theology allegorises the love between "the human soul (atma) [and] the Divine (paramatma)", Tagore extends it to suit his own mystical temperament. This is how he describes the "underlying essence" of Vaishnavism:

He (God) requires me just as much as I require Him. It is because He simply cannot do without me that He draws me so powerfully to His presence. It is thus that the Divine flute keeps calling my name so enchantingly. It is thus that the sky above me is so bewitchingly blue, the autumn moon so alluring, and the garden at spring time so attractive. It is thus that in the smile of the beloved we catch a glimpse of heaven and our affection knows no bounds when a child breaks out in laughter. All beautiful things take me away from myself and bring me closer to my dearest friend who sits with a smile on his face. No matter who I love on this earth, I love Him. (*Religion and Rabindranath* 190)

This love relationship as well as the mutual interdependence between God and man disrupts, adds Tagore, any formalised and hierarchical structure of the “Infinite” and “finite”, the “Creator” and the “created”, and the “Almighty” God and “powerless” humanity (*Religion and Rabindranath* 191). There is a pantheistic and symbolic strain in the above excerpt, which is typical of Tagore’s songs of Puja (worship or devotion). Moreover, such a creative reading of Vaishnava philosophy is consonant with his own mystical notion of a personal God, epitomised in his concept of Jibandebata or Life-Deity, which also took recognisable shape in the 1890s. In fact, the poem “Jibandebata” was written in February 1896, some three months after the date of the letter above. We will return to this poem later in this chapter. It suffices for now to note how Tagore took the traditional form of Vaishnava padavali and stretched its doctrinal and imaginative potentialities in such a way that made it new while remaining rooted in the age-old tradition of Bengal.⁹ A similar pattern is notable in his engagement with another major source for the mythical mode of his poetry.

As we have already observed in his autobiographical ruminations, apart from the Vaishnava poets, another strong influence on Tagore’s formative years was the fifth-century Sanskrit poet and playwright, Kalidasa. The latter, we will see, was a major Indian influence on the young Yeats, too. The poems and essays Tagore wrote on or about Kalidasa and his works, reveal his indebtedness to this ancient North Indian poet. “The Meghduta” (Cloud Messenger), a poem published in the 1890 volume *Manashi*, encapsulates his deep admiration for Kalidasa whom he gives a quasi-archetypal status as the highest Indian poet:

Ah, supreme poet, that first, hallowed day
 Of Āṣāṛh on which, in some unknown year, you wrote
 Your *Meghduta*! Your stanzas are themselves
 Like dark-layered sonorous clouds, heaping the misery

⁹ As Karunamaya Goswami has noted, although Tagore “did not write songs on Radha-Krishna love lore any loner [in the manner of Bhanusingha lyrics,] [...] *Kirtana* music had always remained an integral part of his compositional pursuits [...] in [so] many creative ways”. Goswami also sees the “image of flute”, a recurrent one in Tagore’s poems and songs, as an influence of Vaishnava poetry where Krishna often appears as a flute-player (62-63; emphasis in original).

Of all separated lovers throughout the world

Into thunderous music. (*Selected Poems* 50)

The vague, indefinite tone of these opening lines—“that first hallowed day”, “some unknown year”—adds to the mythical mood of the poem and also ascribes to it an eternal dimension. In the original, this mood is heightened by a highly ornate, Sanskritised diction, the weight of which is captured in William Radice’s translation above by the phrases “dark-layered sonorous clouds” and “thunderous music”.

The opening verses, quoted above, also introduce the poem’s key theme: separation. The central concern of the source poem, Kalidasa’s *Meghaduta*, was the predicament of its protagonist, Yaksha—a dweller of the mythical Himalayan city of Alaka. Exiled for a year and separated from his wife because of a curse, Yaksha requests the first cloud he spies at the advent of monsoon to carry his love-message to his beloved wife in Alaka (13-17; “Purvamegha”, verses 1-7). In Tagore’s re-rendering of the ancient poem, Yaksha’s pang of separation (biraha) gains a symbolic suggestiveness. At a general level, Yaksha’s biraha encapsulates the pain of “all separated lovers”. More specifically, this motif of the poem also symbolises the separation between ancient and modern literatures, or the mythical and the modern India, as suggested in a Bengali essay on the *Meghaduta*. In that essay, written a few months after the poem concerned, though published later in 1907, Tagore laments the fact that:

Not merely a temporal but an eternal gulf seems to separate us from the great slice of ancient India—stretching from the Rāmagiri to the Himalayas. [...] Therefore the Yakṣa’s cloud as it flies above mountains and rivers and cities is accompanied by the reader’s long sigh of distress at separation. We are cut off from the poet’s India. [...]

We cannot send a messenger other than the poet’s cloud to anyone there now. (*Selected Poems* 180-81)¹⁰

His own poem seems to act like “the poet’s cloud” to connect the ancient India with the modern. In the following verses, Tagore claims an imaginative continuity from the fifth century Kalidasa

¹⁰ This is in Radice’s translation included as Appendix A to Tagore, *Selected Poems* 180-82.

through the twelfth-century Bengali Sanskrit poet Jayadeva to himself, a modern poet of Bengal:

In the easternmost part of India,

In verdurous Bengal, I sit.

Here too the poet Jayadeva watched on a rainy day

The blue-green shadows of distant *tamāl*-trees,

The density of a sky in full cloud.

[...]

In a gloomy closed room I sit alone

And read the *Meghadūta*. My mind leaves the room,

Travels on a free-moving cloud, flies far and wide. (*Selected Poems* 48-52; emphasis in original)

Taking the “I” in the above excerpt to represent the speaker as both the reader of Kalidasa’s *Meghaduta* and the author of the poem concerned, we could argue that Tagore here is also trying to bridge the gulf between the ancient and modern India by imaginatively reclaiming the rich ancient traditions for modern Bengali literature. This appropriative rewriting is emphasised by the very title of Tagore’s poem which is also called “The Meghdūta”.

So far as the poem takes an imaginative flight into the ideal realm of perfection or beauty while at the same time staging the disruption thereof, it is comparable to John Keats’s “Ode to a Nightingale”. In Tagore’s poem, the ideal world is located in “Alakā— | Heavenly, longed-for city” decked by “the woods of undying spring-flowers | Forever moonlit” and “the golden-lotus-lake” (*Selected Poems* 52). As Keats’s speaker imaginatively flies to the ideal world “on the viewless wings of Poesy” (527), the poet-speaker of the Bengali poem travels on the vaporous wings of Kalidasa’s cloud-messenger to the world of eternal beauty: “Who but you, O poet, | Revealer of eternal worlds fit for Lakṣmī¹¹ to dally in, | Could take me there?” (*Selected Poems* 52). What is more, much like in Keats’s poem, in Tagore’s too the final stanza

¹¹ The Goddess of wealth, goodness, and beauty (shree).

shows the passing of the fleeting “vision” of the heavenly Alaka, and hence the cry of the poet: “Who has cursed us like this? Why this gulf?” (*Selected Poems* 52). However, while Keats’s poem ends with an unresolved interrogation involving the status of vision (“Was it a vision, or a waking dream?”) and the visionary subject (“Do I wake or sleep?”) (532), Tagore’s one concludes with an affirmation of the power of mind or imagination: “It is something not of the body that takes us there, | To the bed of pining by the Mānasa lake” (*Selected Poems* 52). As Tagore maintains in the above-quoted excerpt from his essay on the *Meghaduta*, the only messenger we could send there is “the poet’s cloud”. Therefore, for all its nostalgia for the lost ancient world of the Sanskrit poem, in Tagore’s, the breach between the ideal and the real, or the ancient and the modern is less absolute than in that of Keats which foreshadows a modernist scepticism about artistic agency to reclaim the ideal.

However, the unifying ending—rather typical of Tagore—does not underrate the preceding existential questions quoted above. In the essay on Kalidasa’s poem, Tagore writes that “[t]here is a profound human unity connecting us, but a cruel temporal gulf. [...] [W]e send our own imaginary *Meghaduta* there [the past] from our present, alienated, mortal world”. Then, translating the temporal breach (between what seems to be India’s past and present) into an essential and universal human condition, he argues that:

in each of us there is an unfathomable sense of separation. That Person with whom we long to be united dwells on the unreachable shore of her own Mānasa lake; only our imagination can be dispatched there. [...] Here I am and there you are; there is an infinite gulf between us—who can cross it? Who can gain a sight of that most beloved, indestructible Being dwelling at the centre of infinity? (*Selected Poems* 181; emphasis in original)

Talking about this essay, Simona Sawhney observes that in it “modernity is presented as a state of exile and homelessness”, although, she adds, that “modernity, with its constitutive and ‘historical’ sense of loss, might [...] be the true and natural ‘home’ of humanity, the state most able to represent something essential about the fact of being human” (46). What needs to be added, however, is that rather than being merely a modern human condition, this ever-exilic

status of existence also has strong mystical undertones in Tagore. As some other poems to be considered below will illuminate, Tagore was essentially a dualist in his preoccupation with man's double selves, one material or biological and the other ideal or spiritual. Although he believes that man's essential tendency is to reach beyond his mere biological self towards the spiritual one, Tagore does not suggest that this process of reaching beyond is ever complete, but sees it as a perpetual sadhana or spiritual endeavour that gives life its meaning. However, instead of being a futile Sisyphean venture, Tagore's sadhana, we will see in Chapter 3, bears fruit in a continuous spiritual growth or evolution. This is what keeps Tagore's vision here as well as elsewhere from being "modern" in the sense Sawhney implies above, making it mystic-modern instead. The Person who is ever "unreachable" in our external, physical condition, can nevertheless be reached by the power of "imagination".

What is more, as we will see in the case of Yeats, imagination is not only a literary device but has a strong mystical dimension as well in Tagore. Again like Yeats, Tagore too seems to have found this view corroborated in the Romantic poetic tradition I have already suggested above by the analogy with the Keats poem. In his formative years, he came under the influence of the Bengali poet of a strong romantic vein: Biharilal Chakrabarti. As Sankha Ghosh has put it, among his immediate predecessors, it is Chakrabarti who most "appealed to Rabindranath" and was "his acknowledged model". Ghosh also points out that from as early as the late 1870s, one traces the influence of the English Romantic poets, most notably Percy Bysshe Shelley, in his poetry (Introduction 6). In a 1922 essay on Shelley, written on the centenary of the English poet's death, Tagore writes of Shelley's *Alastor* in a manner that contains striking parallels with the above essay on Kalidasa's poem. Reading the English poem as an expression of "the pain of a quest", he writes:

The soul seeks a companionate soul. If there is no such soul, if everything is entirely material, there can be no end to its state of love-separation [...] When the beauty of nature could no longer delight him, [...] he discerned the imaginary form of a beautiful woman: she seemed to move before his heart like the outer embodiment of the world's

innermost joy [...] That anguish, that quest, prove that there is a soulful Being of supreme beauty at the heart of the world. (qtd. in Ghosh, Introduction 6-7)

Although this essay is written at a later date than we are considering here, *Alastor*, Ghosh informs, was “one of the favourite poems of Rabindranath’s youth” (Introduction 6). One notes that in both these essays on Kalidasa and Shelley’s poems the very mundane feelings of desire, “pain”, and “anguish” are seamlessly translated into a mystical craving for the “most beloved, indestructible Being” or “a soulful Being of supreme beauty”. This resembles the inextricable connection between the human and the divine that he appreciated in the Vaishnava literature where the pangs of separation felt by man or the created world for his divine Self or the Creator was allegorised by Radha’s love for Krishna.¹² Tagore himself fuses these two major trends of his mythical inheritance in his 1890 essay on the *Meghaduta*, by quoting three verses from the Vaishnava poetry in order to compare their sense of “eternal separation” to the biraha of Yaksha in Kalidasa’s poem (*Selected Poems* 182).¹³

III

Yeats, we remember, highly admired Tagore’s autobiography *My Reminiscences* (1917). In response to Yeats’s letter praising the book and asking him to write a sequel of the same, Tagore wrote back on 17 June 1918 mentioning the English translation of a collection of his Bengali letters¹⁴ written “in [his] young days” to his niece Indira Devi. Translated by his nephew and Indira’s brother Surendranath Tagore (who had also translated the autobiography),

¹² Radha, in Vaishnava doctrine, is held to be both a part of Krishna, the Supreme, and an allegorical embodiment of the love and desire of the created world for Him. Consider, for example, the following analysis of Radhakrishnan: “The chief character of God is love and the power of joy. [...] Kṛṣṇa, when identified with the Supreme, has three chief powers, cit, māyā and jīva. By the first he maintains his nature as intelligence and will, by the second the whole creation is produced, and by the third the souls. The highest manifestation of the cit power of Kṛṣṇa is the power of delight (hlādinī). Rādhā is the essence of this delight-giving power” (*Indian* 762). Note also: “By the development of love (ruci) for Kṛṣṇa, we can have intuition of the divine. God’s affection for his creatures is said to be brought out in his love for Rādhā” (*Indian* 763-64).

¹³ For more on Tagore’s reading of Kalidasa’s works, see the essays, “*Kumarasambhavam* and *Shakuntala*” and “*Shakuntala*” in S. Chaudhuri, *Language* 226-51. See also Radice’s essay “Tagore and Kālidāsa”, for a discussion on Tagore’s career-long creative appropriation of Kalidasa.

¹⁴ *Chhinnapatra*, meaning “torn leaves” or “torn letters”, punning on the homonymic word “patra”.

these letters would be published as *Glimpses of Bengal* in 1921. Here is an excerpt from what Tagore wrote to Yeats about those letters:

They cover those very years which were most productive for me and therefore they act like a footpath in my life history, unconsciously laid by the treading of my thoughts. I feel sure these letters, when published, will present to you pictures and ideas concerning me and my surroundings more vividly and truly than anything that I have yet written.

(*Selected Letters* 208-09)

The period of his life that he refers to here was the 1890s. At the start of that decade, Tagore was given responsibility for running his family estates in East Bengal (now Bangladesh) living mostly in rural Shelidah (Shilaidaha) in Kushtia from 1891 to 1901. Although this would of course be punctuated by his visits to Calcutta, the experience of living amidst rural Bengal, close to the river Padma, proved indeed to be highly “productive”. The fresh inputs resulted in a creative outburst of songs and poems, plays and essays, and most significantly in the new medium of short story (Dutta and Robinson 108-09). This East Bengal phase is remarkable also for the development of his mystical conception of Jibandebata, a personalised view of God.

In one of the above-mentioned letters to Indira Devi, written in June 1892, the second day of the Bengali monsoon, Tagore invokes Kalidasa’s *Meghaduta* in connection with the advent of the rainy season in Bengal and moves on to reflect on the transience of human existence in this world. If he “were of saintly character”, he writes, he would consider it imperative to prepare for the afterlife through religious practice. “But”, he continues, “that is not my nature—and so from time to time I ask myself, why can’t I gather all those enchanting days and nights that are vanishing from my life!” Regarding some ascetic reservations about worldly beauty, he scoffs: “Only those who are really unable to immerse themselves in beauty scorn beauty merely as a wealth of the senses. But those who have plumbed its indescribable depths know that beauty is something that lies beyond the ultimate power of the senses” (*Torn* 71-72).¹⁵ This celebration of beauty—sensuous or extra-sensuous—is fundamentally contradictory

¹⁵ For Surendranath Tagore’s translation of this letter, see *Glimpses of Bengal* 73-77. That one being slightly truncated, I chose to use Syed Manzoorul Islam’s translation included in *The Essential Tagore*.

to the doctrine of Advaita Vedanta which views earth to be an illusory construct formed by the power of “maya” (Radhakrishnan, *Indian* 565-66). (This philosophical position will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter in connection with Yeats’s revision of Chatterjee’s Advaita Vedantic teaching.) Such a view of existence comes under attack in some poems of this phase.

“On the Doctrine of Maya” from his 1894 volume *Sonar Tari* (the golden boat), is particularly relevant in this regard. Ketaki Kushari Dyson’s English translation renders the poem in 14 lines in the spirit of its original English sonnet form. Starting with a sharp attack directed at the “[j]oyless country, in tattered decrepitude dressed”, the poem closes with the following lines:

Birds and beasts, creatures of many species,
bereft of fear, have breathed here for ages.
To them this created world is a mother’s lap,
but you, old dotard, have faith in nothing! And this
cosmic concourse, fairground of millions, billions
of living things is to you child’s play. (*I Won’t* 104)

This poem, if not one of his best, gives expression to a few of Tagore’s key concerns: his romantic-mystic love for the “created world” or mother earth; his sheer antipathy to those religious theorists who not only do not share this love but also disregard this world as an illusory playground of maya (“child’s play”); his growing indifference to any other-worldly spiritual concerns; and, finally, his delight in a form of spirituality that takes the wholeness of existence (“cosmic concourse [...] of living things”) into consideration. Poems like this one¹⁶ problematise any consideration of Tagore as Vedantic. In his 1919 *The Philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore*, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan contends that there is a deep affinity between Vedantic philosophy and the philosophy of Tagore, and traces in the poet an intellectual recognition and an artistic translation of the “Vedantic Absolute” (53-54). Tagore, however, is

¹⁶ For more poems with similar contentions, available in English translation, see: “Renunciation” (1896), *I Won’t* 113; “The Poet’s Science” (first publ. 1901), S. Chaudhuri, *Poems* 171.

too much into this world to be after any transcendental Absolute. Although he would make his boldest statements about this point in the 1930s, his poems of this time make his predilections clear.

The bitterness betrayed in the above poem covers a deeply felt affinity with mother earth, which finds expression in many of his poems, songs, and other writings. The poem “Basundhara” or “Earth” (1893) is one such poem. Dyson’s translation captures the fluidity and vitality of this long poem of varying stanzas (of rhyming couplets in the original):

Earth, take me back,
your lap-child back to your lap
in the shelter of your sari’s voluminous end.
Mother made of earth, may I
live diffused in your soil; spread
myself in every direction like spring’s joy;
burst this breast-cage, shatter this stone-closed
narrow wall, this blind dismal jail
of self; swing, hum, shake,
flop, radiate, disperse,
shudder, be startled by
sudden lights and thrills,
flow through the whole globe—
edge to edge, north to south,
east to west (*I Won’t* 97)

As soon as the thought of freedom from the “blind dismal jail | of self” is articulated in line 8 above, the succession of bare infinitives creates a suggestion of uncontrollable energy, flooding every corner of the earth. As the poem progresses, the speaker imaginatively identifies with a desert-born “Arab child”, a “polite | and vigorous [...] Japanese”, or a hardworking Chinese person from ancient times (*I Won’t* 99). This romantic wanderlust and equally romanticised views of other cultures are partly inspired by his reading: “The more I study the names of new

countries | and their varied accounts, the more my mind | rushes forward, wanting to touch all” (*I Won’t* 98). This desire to “touch all” offers a concrete alternative to the noumenal *All* or *One* of Advaita Vedanta or other such philosophies.

From such adventurous tone, the poem again shifts to a more intimate identification with mother earth:

My earth, you are
so many years old; with me mixed in your clay,
unwearied in the limitless firmament,
you have orbited the sun; and for nights and days
spanning millennia within me your grass has grown,
[...]

Hence in the present time,
maybe one day, sitting alone with a drifting mind
on Padma’s bank, gazing with charmed eyes,
with all my limbs and awareness I can sense
how grass-seeds sprout with shivers within your soil,
how, inside you, streams of vital fluids
circulate night and day, how flower-buds
appear with blind ecstatic delight (*I Won’t* 100-01)

One notes here a seamless movement from the cosmic and the universal to the human, the particular, and the local (“Padma’s bank”). This movement also indicates a progression from an organic unity with earth to a dualistic separation which induces him to sit apart and reflect on an imaginative oneness with earth (much in the same pattern that we noted in “The Meghduta”). Time and again in the poem, he laments the severed link with mother earth, as in the following expression: “Could you, motherland, | abandon me altogether?” (*I Won’t* 103). In the block quotation above, there is a predominance of sensuous imagery, verging almost on sensuality, which is more audible in the original. However, Dyson’s apt choice of “streams of vital fluid” for the original’s “jibanrasadhara”—which is also translatable as “streams of life”—makes up

for much of the lost vitality of the original and rightly recaptures the mood of a baby with an intuitively remembered sense of its foetal pleasure. The above lines are soon followed by an image of “infants [...] suckling at mothers’ breasts” (*I Won’t* 101). Such a quasi-Oedipal fantasy of Tagore for mother earth is compatible with his apathy about—if not antagonism for—the intellectual, philosophical Brahma of Vedanta—a detached father figure in many ways.

We have noted above Tagore’s reference to the river Padma which was his almost constant companion in the Shelidah days. He spent a large amount of his time floating on the river on his family boat which he named “Padma” after the river (Dutta and Robinson 110). A letter written from Shelidah on 20 August 1892 reads as a prose version of the poem “Earth” written a year later: “It seems like the throb of some current flowing through the artery connecting me with the larger world. I feel as if dim, distant memories come to me of the time when I was one with the rest of the earth; when on me grew the green grass, and on me fell the autumn light” (*Glimpses* 86). This is a quasi-mystical account of an imaginatively realised and passionately felt organic union with mother earth.

Composed in 1892, the poem “Sonar Tari” or “The Golden Boat” encapsulates the natural bounty and the mystical charm of the Shelidah life. Tagore in this poem imaginatively confuses two seasons of Bengal—the monsoon or rainy season, called Barsha, and the harvesting season, called Hemanta:

Clouds rumbling in the sky; teeming rain

I sit on the river-bank, sad and alone.

The sheaves lie gathered, harvest has ended,

The river is swollen and fierce in its flow.

As we cut the paddy it started to rain. (*Selected Poems* 53)

Combining the fullness of the river in Barsha with the ripeness of Hemanta, the poem symbolically speaks for the poet’s reflection on his artistic fecundity. However, fullness or ripeness is not the sole concern of the poem. The second stanza develops the mood of smallness and isolation of the speaker’s and his paddy field in the context of what first seems to be something vast and indifferent, symbolised by the surging and swirling river: “One small

paddy-field, no one but me—| Flood-waters twisting and swirling everywhere” (*Selected Poems* 53). This coexistence of a sense of pride and confidence on the one hand, and that of a cosmic indifference and existential insignificance on the other is further accentuated by the coming of a mysterious female figure who, requested by the speaker, “moor[s her] boat for a while” only to “[t]ake away my golden paddy” while refusing to take the speaker on board. Hence the dismal end of the poem: “On the bare river-bank, I remain alone—| What I had has gone: the golden boat took all” (*Selected Poems* 53).

Given the feminine traits of the concept of “Manasi” (the mind-dwelling or mind-conceived female), the title of the poetic volume that preceded *Sonar Tari*, one might read the female figure of this poem in that light. Tagore’s own words regarding *Manasi* have theistic implications: “She whom I have portrayed in *Manasi* dwells in my imagination—she is the first incomplete idol of Iswar [God] made by the hands of the artist. Will it eventually be completed?” (qtd in Ayyub, *Adhunikata* 42; translation mine). Although Ayyub traces that completion in a few of Tagore’s later volumes (*Adhunikata* 42), I argue that by Tagore’s own definition of his religion as an ever-evolving psychic phenomenon (discussed earlier), the answer to the above question should be in the negative. What matters to Tagore is the *sadhana* (endeavour) itself, not its end-purpose.

There are, of course, other ways to interpret this feminine personality in Tagore’s poetry around that time. Talking about “the female figure” which “takes on many guises” in Tagore’s poetry, Sankha Ghosh observes that “[h]er presence casts a defamiliarizing spell on the familiar world. [...] At such moments, the touch of interiority transforms customary beauty into alien guise”. So far as “the fair helmswoman of a golden boat” is concerned, Ghosh also points out the similar tropes in *Epipsychidion* by Shelley, “The Voyage” by Alfred, Lord Tennyson, and “Barcarolle” by Théophile Gautier—all of which Tagore was intimately familiar with, partly translating the one by Shelley. Ghosh thus reads the mysterious female character as an externalised form of an interior presence, and goes on to note that in Tagore “[t]he inward being is male no less than female [...] When the stress was on composing poetry, the deity was usually female; when it turns to constructing one’s life, the deity is commonly perceived as

male” (Introduction 15-16). Maintaining that the female figure in “The Golden Boat” might be viewed as the first poetic manifestation of Jibandebata, Rajat Kanta Ray suggests in his introduction that the feminine form of the deity in this and other poems might have been faintly inspired, among other factors, by the haunting memory of Tagore’s beloved sister-in-law Kadambari Devi who had killed herself in 1884 (Tagore, *Jibandebata* 16).¹⁷ As for the woman of the poem concerned, given that she comes “steering close to the shore” and looks half-familiar to the speaker (“I feel that she is someone I know”), she seems to be some kind of an “inward being” or the poet’s inner self, as Ghosh has noted. And we will see how this dual self becomes a repeated trope in Tagore’s poetry from this period onwards.

There is nonetheless a significant ambiguity in the image of the female helmswoman. Despite the merit of the above reading, there is also an element of aloofness and indifference attached to her that makes her seem more than just interiority externalised: “she gazes ahead | Waves break helplessly against the boat each side”. The speaker also assumes that she is sailing to some unknown “foreign land”. What is more, although she takes the life’s harvest of the speaker, she seems to be completely unconcerned about his individuality, as she is to the helpless waves beating against her boat. Significantly, there is no conversation between them, except for the illusion of a dialogue in stanza 5: “Is there more? No, none, I have put it aboard”, which reads more like a monologue. Even when the speaker implores her to kindly “take me aboard”, the reply is a factual statement given by the speaker himself: “No room, no room, the boat is too small. | Loaded with my gold paddy, the boat is full”. Although Radice renders the above excerpt in two sentences, in the original it is one running sentence: “ṭhnāi nāi, ṭhnāi nāi—choto se tarī | āmāri sonār dhāne giyeche bhari” (*Rabindra-rachanabali* 3: 8). Hence it is clearly the speaker’s monologue given the personal possessive pronoun in the second line. This cruel silence of the other figure, combined with the speaker’s pangs of being rejected, intensifies the gloom of the poem, epitomising the poet’s craving for a more personal and less universal soulmate who would care for his individual existence.

¹⁷ See Introduction 31n24.

Such a need is fulfilled by his Life-Deity or Jibandebata. A poem of that name, translated by Sukanta Chaudhuri as “The Lord of Life” (1896), strikes a more intimate note than the previous poem:

Lord of my inmost part,
Has all your thirst been slaked at last on coming to my heart?
I've filled your cup with all the flow
Of a hundred thousand joys and woes
Wrung from my breast like juice of grapes with cruel torment pressed. (111)

In sharp contrast with the indifference of the female figure of the last poem, here his Jibandebata takes a personal interest in the poet's life. While the poet had to call the helmswoman to “come to the bank” in the previous one (*Selected Poems* 53), here “You freely chose me—[...] freely sought and wooed” (“Lord” 111). The stress in this poem is unambiguously on the lived experience of the poet-speaker as well as his deeply personal union with his Jibandebata. In line with the sexually suggestive diction of the block quotation above, the speaker declares, a couple of lines down: “Your marriage-bed I've woven with long care” (“Lord” 111).

In his introduction to *Chitra*, the volume which contains the poem, Tagore proclaims that the emotion expressed in the volume is different from that of a devotee who relies completely on his Lord. Illuminating the notion of Jibandebata, though not directly referring to it, Tagore writes in that introduction:

I felt within me the existence of a twin self of mine [...] which is but a part of my own personality [...] It is his or her resolution that is being accomplished through me, through my happiness and sorrow, weal and woe. In this endeavour, one ‘me’ may be the instrument and the other the instrumentalist, but the music that is being created partakes also of the peculiar traits of the instrument. At every step of the creative process, the instrumentalist has to negotiate with these characteristic temperaments of the instrument to bring the creation into being. (*Rabindra-rachanabali* 4: 18; translation mine)

The connection of this “twin self” to his Jibandebata is suggested by the fact that the same metaphor of the musical instrument is used in the poem concerned:

How often did my lyre descend

Below the note that you had tuned:

O poet, can I ever sing the music of your verse? (“Lord” 112).

Like the instrumentalist inner self of the volume’s introduction, here it is his Jibandebata who is setting the tune of the “lyre” of his life. However, it is important to note that whoever plays it—the twin self or Jibandebata—has to compromise with “the peculiar traits of the instrument”, which is his external, worldly self. This satisfied his need for a personal God without divesting his own self of all agency in the composition of his life. Jibandebata is thus closely related to the poet’s “own personality”, or even a “part of” it.

In a later talk, given at Santiniketan in 1921, he makes a revealing distinction between “Jibandebata” and “Viswadebata”, the deity of the universe (*viswa*): “The *realization* of my life has been of two types—one involving the personal feeling and the other that of the supra-sensuous world of the Upanishads, beyond all personalities. [...] Similarly, there are two sides to the union with God—where the union with Him is externally realised, He is Viswadebata. And where it is internal, He is Jibandebata”. This is a clear enough distinction. But confusion occurs when he offers threefold “*aspect[s]*” of God. In the first, He is “the Lord of the supra-sensuous kingdom”; in the second, “the centre of me and my world, the Lord of the whole universe”; and in the third, “He is personally and exclusively mine [...] That is to say, there are His *transcendental* or *abstract*, *subjective*, and *objective* forms” (*Jibandebata* 137; translation mine and italicised words in English in original). The summative adjectives here are not put in the order of the divine “aspects” that precede them. The first “aspect” is “transcendental or abstract”, the second “objective”, and the third “subjective”. His Jibandebata is a personal deity of *his* life, and hence constitutive of subjective mystical experience. The second category must be that of the Viswadebata, who connects him with the external world or universe, the domain of the objective. The first one, the aspect of the noumenal Brahma, seems to be that of the God of the Upanishads given that Tagore above has associated the Upanishads with the realm of the

“supra-sensuous”. We will see in Chapter 3 how he would later disregard any extra-sensuous entity or realm of experience, while trying to accommodate the Upanishadic God in his revised, more expressly anthropocentric categorisation.

However, even in this phase, the relationship between the self and the world, the Jibandebata and the Viswadebata does not always seem to be as neat as in the above categorisation. In the final stanza of the poem “Jibandebata”, the poet asks his Life-Deity to “shatter this tryst”, to give him “new form and new array”, and to bind him “[i]n a new marriage [...] the bonds of a new life” (“Lord” 112). This movement from what sounds like the nuptial bliss of the bridal chamber to the unknown adventure of the “new life” foreshadows his fin-de-siècle poem “The End of the Year”, composed on the last day of the Bengali year 1305 or 12 April 1899 (S. Chaudhuri, *Poems* 395). Taking its inspiration from a seasonal storm, the poem envisions the deity in the form of a violent, all-shattering storm.

Come like an eagle, snatch me, pluck me up
Out of this pit of slime,
And in the gleam of lightning-flashes, face me
With death sublime.
[...]
And with dead leaves, torn branches, fallen flowers,
These where you fling,
Your passing toys, debris of what you snatched
In ruthless robbery—
Throw me at last into that endless gloom,
Land of lost memory. (143)

This is a call for rejuvenation, for being freed from a meagre, mundane existence: “Only to live, only to tell the days—| O load of shame!” (143). He strives for something nobler and “higher”: “Strike a harder strain upon your harp-strings, | A higher key” (139). In the long excerpt above,

the echo of Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind" is unmissable.¹⁸ In both cases, the storm wind symbolises some spirit of rejuvenation and revolution. In a later essay entitled "The Poet's Religion" (1922), Tagore would write about Shelley that:

Religion, in Shelley, grew with his life; it was not given to him in fixed and ready-made doctrines; he rebelled against them. He had the creative mind which could only approach Truth through its joy in creative effort. For true creation is realization of truth through the translation of it into our own symbols. (*Creative Unity* 23-24)

This excerpt makes it clear that Tagore saw in Shelley a kindred spirit in his own creative approach to "truth" and "religion", breaking free of the shackles of reified "doctrines".

One should not, however, overemphasise the influence of Shelley in this poem. The Shelleyan "Spirit"—both "Destroyer and Preserver" (412)—here seems to be fused with the rebellious figure of an Indian mythological god, Shiva, whom Tagore often invokes as Rudra or Bhairab in his poems and songs.¹⁹ This deity of the Shaivist cult is popular in Indian art in his pose as Nataraj (the master-dancer), which is also a common image in Tagore.²⁰ In a later prose reflection, Tagore maintains that this poem epitomises the spiritual revolution that was happening within him at that time, dividing his past from his future (*Atmaparichay* 53).

Comparison with an early poem of 1883, "Srishti Sthiti Pralay" ("Creation, Preservation, and Apocalypse") might be helpful here. Translated by Radice with the title "Brahmā, Viṣṇu, Śiva", after the Indian trinity of gods responsible for creation, preservation, and destruction respectively, this poem stages the individual functions of these gods. With the opening of the eight eyes and four mouths of the "Four-faced Brahmā", the creation begins. Then to contain the "frenzy" of the over-"exultant" creation, Vishnu appears with "[h]is four-handed blessing" and his holy "conch" (*Selected Poems* 45). As an effect, "[t]he roar of Creation | Resolves into

¹⁸ Compare, for example, these lines from Shelley's poem: "Oh! lift me as a wave, a leaf, a cloud! | I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed!"; and "Drive my dead thoughts over the universe | Like withered leaves to quicken a new birth!" (413-14). Manjubhash Mitra has also compared these poems in her *Ingrej Romantic Kabisangha o Rabindranath* 63-64.

¹⁹ See songs like "Rudrabeshe kemon khela", "Sarbakharbatara dahe taba krodhdaha", "Bnadhan chneḍar sadhan habe" (*Gitan* 211, 102-03, 84).

²⁰ See songs like "Nriyer tale tale", "Pralaynachan nachle jakhan", "Pinakete lage tangkar" (*Gitan* 543-44, 545, 103-04).

music”, and “[f]orms cover power”. However, enslaved for ages to this “mighty rhythm” of forms, the universe eventually groans in weariness and invokes the god Shiva for giving it “new form” and “new life”. With the opening of Shiva’s “three eyes” and the pounding of “his tread” “[t]he bonds of nature are ripped” and “[t]he sky is rocked by the roar | Of a wave of ecstatic release” (*Selected Poems* 46). Having destroyed the rule-oppressed, rhythm-measured creation, Shiva resumes “his great trance” (*Selected Poems* 47). Now, while in this early poem Tagore keeps distinct the roles of the divine trinity of Hinduism, in his more sophisticated poems these three roles are often blended into the image of Shiva, variously addressed or invoked. In “The End of the Year”, the storm is hailed as a destroyer and robber, clearing the world of the “debris” of rottenness. Just as the rule-bound world invokes Shiva for making it new through destruction in the 1883 poem, in this poem the storm is also addressed as “indomitable” and “cruelly new” (141). The apocalyptic dance (pralaynachan) of Shiva is a recurrent symbol of creative rejuvenation and revolutionary change in Tagore’s writings and is used even in his prose analysis of “The End of the Year” referred to above (*Atmaparichay* 56-57).

In the chapter entitled “The Man of My Heart” of *The Religion of Man* (1930), Tagore sheds light on the revolution that took place at that time in the world of his faith. He relates that although he had embraced the “organized belief” of the Brahmo Samaj and gladly taken up the role of the secretary of the Adi Brahmo Samaj at the behest of his father (which he did in 1884), he gradually became tired of that creed when he realised that “I was not strictly loyal to my religion, but only to the religious institution”, which “represented an artificial average, with its standard truth at its static minimum” (63). This apparently means the overabundance of reason and logic in the institutional form of Brahmoism, which created little space for the intuitive imagination of his mind. He also dwells on the popular deities of Hinduism, some of whom “may have their aesthetic value to me and others philosophical significance overcumpered [*sic*] by exuberant distraction of legendary myths”. However, severing his “connection with our church”, he continues, he found inspiration in the mystical faiths of the Baul community in rural Bengal. Hearing the song of a Baul beggar, he was “struck” by its “religious expression that was neither grossly concrete, full of crude details, nor metaphysical in its rarefied

transcendentalism” (63). Clearly, this gave him a golden mean between Brahmoism and popular Hinduism.

Coming from often the lower “strata” of both Hindu and Muslim societies, the Bauls (literally “madcap[s]”) follow what is called “the *sahaj* [simple] cult” and “believe only in living religious experience”. The God they worship is called “the Man of the Heart” or “Maner Manush” (K. Sen, “Baul” 117-18, 122; emphasis in original). This simple, affective, and symbolically humanised form of faith greatly influenced Tagore’s mystical thoughts and creative works, as he admits in a 1928 essay “Baul-gan” or “Baul Songs”:

While in Shelidah, I used to meet and converse with groups of Bauls on a regular basis. I have used the melody of Baul songs in many a song of mine, while, in many others, Baul tunes have blended with various raga tunes [of Hindustani classical music] often without my knowing. (Hossain 25: 587-88; translation mine)²¹

We have already noted in the Introduction Tagore’s indebtedness to the Bauls as well as other medieval mystics of India. Chapter 3 will further consider the significance of Baul mysticism in Tagore’s “religion of man”.

Aside from its poetic outcomes, the spiritual revolution that took place within Tagore during this East Bengal phase had its socio-political manifestations as well. Written in the same year as “Jibandebata”, the poem “Now Turn Me Back” (1896) embodies Tagore’s anxiety about his inward-looking self, unable to respond to the call of reality:

Now turn me back to the shores of the world,
My sportive fancy! Do not from wave to wave,
From breeze to breeze, draw me deceptively
Or seat me in the melancholy shade
Of the heart’s lonely bower. (96)

²¹ For an earlier example of Tagore’s interest in “Baul Songs”, see his 1883 article of that name, which was a review of an anthology *Sangit Sangraha: Bauler Gatha* (an anthology of Baul songs), in S. Chaudhuri, *Language* 42-48.

This powerful self-questioning puts in conflict the demands of his poet's calling and that of the workaday world. The details in the long first stanza of the poem are rooted in the rural reality of East Bengal farmers:

See, standing with bowed heads
A silent crowd, long centuries' tales of pain
Writ on their faded faces [...]
They neither carp at fate, nor chide the gods (95)

The speaker then resolves:

They must be told,
"Stand together a moment, heads held high["]". (96)

This reflects Tagore's abiding reliance on the individual's inner spiritual strength (*atmashakti*), more than any merely external socio-political change.

As Dutta and Robinson observe, the exposure to the stark reality of his East Bengal tenants, the majority of whom were Muslims, "bred in Rabindranath two unshakeable convictions: that Indians must help themselves, not wait for the government to help them; and that India could not regenerate itself without regenerating its villages" (119-20). These "convictions" inspired him to undertake many rural development projects, such as setting up an alternative judiciary system, inspiring the farmers to run a cooperative programme, establishment of agricultural banks, and introduction of modern techniques of farming in his estates in the 1890s and beyond. He would also establish the Institute of Rural Reconstruction in Sriniketan, West Bengal²² in 1922 (Rahman 367-70; Dutta and Robinson 119-20, 146). These developmental programmes constituted his alternative *swadeshi* (of one's own country) movement. Of course, he would be initially involved in the political campaign of that name which flared up in 1905 as a protest against Lord Curzon's proclamation of the Partition of Bengal based on apparent communal differences between the Hindus and the Muslims. Tagore played an active role in the movement by writing inspirational patriotic songs and designing a

²² Near his Santiniketan school, established in 1901. For more on this, see Dutta and Robinson 133-40.

symbolic protest. However, recognising the militant gesture of communal rivalry and anti-British violence in the swadeshi movement, he soon became disillusioned with it (Dutta and Robinson 149), turning more and more towards social-reconstruction works.

In a 1905 letter, Tagore betrays his complex attitude towards the whole swadeshi affair and dwells on his family as well as the Adi Brahma Samaj's pioneering role in what he considers to be a truer swadeshi. At a time when "the English-educated Bengali[s]" were turning more and more towards Western culture, writes Tagore:

Debendranath Tagore, a follower of Ram Mohan Roy, started exploring the shastras [Hindu scriptures] with a view to presenting them in a scientific manner. Although Debendranath had abandoned the customary Hindu rituals through the Brahma Movement, he [...] insisted that the Brahma Dharma was an integral part of the Hindu Dharma. [...] In Debendranath's family, there was a synthesis between swadeshi sentiment and modernity. [...] Dwijendranath and Ganendranath helped Nabagopal Mitra to establish the Hindu Mela for the display of swadeshi art and craft, swadeshi wrestling, and swadeshi games, also swadeshi songs and swadeshi poetry.²³ [...] As in religion so also in politics, the Adi Brahma Samaj tried to draw the people's attention to their country. (*My Life* 149-50)²⁴

Although the letter was written at the height of the swadeshi movement, Tagore here is notably emphasising the non-political swadeshi activities that his family has been involved in for a long time. In this project, the indigenous (swadeshi) tradition and modernity seamlessly mingle with one another. What is more relevant to our purposes, however, is that Tagore here sees the Adi Brahma Samaj as a platform for the spiritual as well as cultural-political self-realisation of the Bengali people, thereby collating the mystical and the national.

²³ Discussing Tagore and Yeats's respective involvements in the "Bengal Renaissance" and "Irish Renaissance", Louise Blakeney Williams has referred to "the activities of the Gaelic Athletic Association and the Gaelic League in 1884 and 1893" in comparison with the Hindu Mela activities of Tagore family (76). For Williams's comparative analysis of these poets' cultural nationalist engagements, see 74-80.

²⁴ Das Gupta's translation.

Even in the poem “Now Turn Me Back”, the poet’s external social commitment does not come at the cost of his mystical faith. This poem, too, contains a mysterious female figure: “[w]ho she may be | I cannot say”. The poet, however, knows that it is at her “summoning” that people have dared the most difficult ventures in their lives: “[t]he proud has shed his pride”, “the rich man [his] wealth, [and] the hero [his] life” (98). In describing her, he blurs the distinction between the universal and the personal, or the Viswadebata and the Jibandebata. At one moment she seems to be a universal ideal—and hence a “world-beloved” (“viswapriyā”²⁵)—while at another a source of personal inspiration for the poet-speaker who, “holding her to my heart, | Must walk life’s thorny path silent, alone” (99). Whoever she may be, this female entity inspires the poet to come out of the cocoon of his limited self and identify himself with the greater world through an endless process of self-sacrifice.

We saw earlier that Tagore in this poem wanted the underprivileged farmers to “[s]tand together a moment, heads held high”. This foreshadows a poem, written five years later in 1901, the translation of which would be included in the English *Gitanjali* as poem no. 35:

Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high
 Where knowledge is free;
 Where the world has not been broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls;
 Where words come out from the depth of truth;
 Where tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection;
 Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way into the dreary desert sand of dead habit;
 Where the mind is led forward by thee into ever-widening thought and action-
 Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake. (27)

Its inclusion in *Gitanjali* gives the poem a mystical dimension. However, as in “Now Turn Me Back”, here, too, it is hard to draw the line between the poet’s personal mystical priorities and his public concerns for his “country” and countrymen. The “heaven of freedom” he asks for

²⁵ *Rabindra-rachanabali* 4: 36.

implies neither purely political nor otherworldly religious liberation, but a set of ideals to be realised through lived experience. By the time of the poem's composition, many of those ideals would have already constituted the development of his personal mystical faith, which we have traced in this chapter, combining a "free", transnational "knowledge" with "words" coming out of an inner "depth of truth" (in the original, he had used the word "hriday" meaning "heart" instead of "truth"²⁶). Further, that faith was inspired by a high ideal of moral and spiritual "perfection"—personally and/or universally realised—without allowing "the clear stream of reason" to lose "its way into the dreary desert sand of dead habit". This marriage of faith and reason, we will see in Chapter 3, was not always an easy task to accomplish for the poet, and needed continuous negotiations and adjustments. The struggle to keep these two streams of his inheritance flowing together constitutes the "tireless striving" of his mystic modernity.

²⁶ Poem no. 72, *Naibedya*, *Rabindra-rachanabali* 8: 56.

Chapter 2

“Deathless feet”: Mystical Poetics of Early Yeats

I was unlike others of my generation in one thing only. I am very religious, and deprived by Huxley and Tyndall, whom I detested, of the simple-minded religion of my childhood, I had made a new religion, almost an infallible Church of poetic tradition, of a fardel of stories, and of personages, and of emotions, inseparable from their first expression, passed on from generation to generation by poets and painters with some help from philosophers and theologians. (*Autobiographies* 115)

In this excerpt from *The Trembling of the Veil*, Yeats declares himself to be a “religious” poet, and distinguishes himself from the materialist mainstream of his “generation”. He then qualifies the statement by suggesting that his religion is an invented one, nevertheless rooted in continuous creative traditions of various kinds. Finally, creative artists have the central role in this “new religion”, and “philosophers and theologians”, only subsidiary ones. In the 1880s and 1890s, Yeats moved from one quasi-religious or mystical camp to another in an untiring fashion. From Indian spirituality and Eastern Theosophy to Western ritual magic, Symbolism, Decadence-aestheticism, and Irish Celticism—it was an endless exploration of mystical ideas and experiments. Yeats did not always distinguish between Indian and Irish, Eastern and Western mystical ideas and praxes, nor did he see them as different from his other parallel ventures in the fields of symbolic art and cultural nationalism. This syncretic attitude characterises his life-long search for an alternative mystic-modern vision of reality. Given the scope of this project as well as the existence of some thorough works on the Golden Dawn episode of Yeats’s life, the first two sections of this chapter will zoom in on his initiatory interest in Indian lore and literature, and their importance to his creative imagination. Rather than functioning as an amateurish poetic experimentation leading to a fuller understanding of India in his late years, or to his “real” pursuits of Irish and modernist subjects, Yeats’s early

preoccupation with India remains fundamental to the syncretic spirituality of his thought. The final section will briefly examine the relevance of his Indian initiation to the larger literary, cultural, and mystical enterprises of his early life and career.

I

The 1880s was a foundational decade in terms of Yeats's mystic-occultist orientation in general and his first serious interest in Indian thought in particular. It was during this decade that Yeats was exposed to a variety of intercultural currents which stimulated his mystical temperaments. Yeats first became interested in India through the activities of the Dublin Hermetic Society (of which he was elected President at the first meeting) and the Dublin Theosophical Society.¹ In an 1898 newspaper article entitled "The Poetry of AE", Yeats describes a typical meeting of the Hermetic Society. Gathered in a rented room of York Street, Dublin, a small group of young enthusiasts "began to read papers to one another on the Vedas, and the Upanishads, and the Neoplatonists, and on modern mystics and spiritualists" (*Prose* 2: 121). Such a conflation of Eastern and Western schools of thought as well as of ancient and "modern" mysticisms suggests a multi-layered syncretism, characteristic not only of the Hermetic Society but of Yeats's mysticism in general. Yeats's fascination with Eastern spirituality was shared by his friends such as Charles Johnston, John Eglinton, Charles Weekes, and, most significantly, George Russell (AE), a visionary artist and poet (Kuch 1-20; Boyd 213). A century after the first flowering of European fascination with Sanskrit texts,² a host of Eastern texts were being translated (or retranslated) into English during the early 1880s, as part of the fifty-volume *The Sacred Books of the East* edited by Max Müller. This series included such texts as *The Bhagavad Gita* and *The Upanishads* (Guha 30-31). Apart from these, Foster particularly

¹ The Dublin Hermetic Society was launched on June 16, 1885, becoming the Dublin Theosophical Society in April 1886; see Foster 1: 46-47; Boyd 214; and Graf 51.

² European exploratory interest in Indian religious/philosophic and literary texts commenced in the late eighteenth century, leading to what is known as an "Oriental Renaissance" and feeding into German Romanticism. See Schwab 15-17, 24, 51-53.

mentions A. P. Sinnett's *Esoteric Buddhism* (1883) as "a founding text of the fashionable New Age religion, Theosophy, blending East and West in a spiritual synthesis readily absorbed by its devotees" (Foster 1: 45). Despite Yeats's uncertainty about Theosophy, the orientation it provided and the connections it helped forge had abiding influence on him.³

All these cultural crosscurrents set the stage for Yeats's first significant encounter with an Indian personality in the figure of Mohini Chatterjee, a disciple of the Theosophical Society's co-founder, Helena Petrovna Blavatsky. Chatterjee came to Dublin as a representative of the Society in April 1886 (Foster 1: 48).⁴ Coming from a sophisticated Bengali Brahmin family and descended from Raja Rammohan Roy, Chatterjee was a lawyer by profession (McCready 75). Also related to the Tagore family by marriage, he was the son-in-law of Rabindranath's elder brother Dwijendranath Tagore (Paul 6: 329). Attracted by Theosophy's interest in Hinduism, he became a member of the Theosophical Society in 1882.⁵ However, on his European tour accompanying Henry Steele Olcott and Blavatsky, starting in 1884, he was expected to cater to "Western expectations about the mysterious East" (Sasson 78–79, 81). Yeats's retrospective records are also rife with Orientalising gestures. At one moment Chatterjee was "[a] handsome young man with the typical face of Christ" (*Autobiographies* 98),

³ Given the scope of this project, I only draw upon Theosophy in so far as it illuminates Yeats's early relationship with Indian subject matter. For a more detailed narrative and analysis of Yeats's connection with the Theosophical Society, see Ellmann 56-69; and Monteith.

⁴ Scholars are divided as to the date of Chatterjee's trip to Dublin. Bachchan thinks that Chatterjee "came to Dublin towards the end of 1885" and quotes the evidence of *The Dublin University Review* (August 1885) that at the second meeting of the Dublin Hermetic Society announcement was made of the "possibility of the celebrated Mr Mohini visiting Dublin some time towards the end of the year" (17, 19). Guha also dates the trip to 1885 (33). Sri echoes Bachchan, although he does not cite him, in stating that Chatterjee "came to Dublin towards the end of 1885" (62). For Sushil Kumar Jain, "Yeats invited Chatterjee to come to Dublin in 1885 or 1886" (82). Foster, on the other hand, gives the date as April 1886 and quotes Charles Hubert Oldham's postcard, "undated [...] but postmarked Apr. 1886", to Sarah Purser inviting her to "come and join" others in meeting "Mr *Mohini* the Theosophist in my rooms on Wednesday afternoon 4 o'clock" (Foster 1: 47-48, 552 n81; emphasis in original). Lennon and Graf, too, hold that Yeats met Chatterjee in Dublin in 1886 (Lennon 256; Graf 51). It is likely that, despite the possibility of an earlier trip, Chatterjee eventually visited Dublin in April 1886.

⁵ When Olcott and Blavatsky visited Calcutta (19 March and 6 April respectively), Bengal Theosophical Society was founded on 6 April 1882 with Dwijendranath Tagore, Janakinath Ghoshal (Tagore's brother-in-law), and Mohini Chatterjee as its founding members, and Peary Chand Mitra as its President. On 14 April, Dwijendranath became a vice-president and Chatterjee an assistant secretary. Tagore's sister Swarnakumari Devi, wife of Ghoshal, also became a member of the Society on 9 April and remained the president of its women branch until 1886. Paul notes that it is hard to know what Rabindranath felt about Theosophy in the absence of any indication regarding this in his writings (Paul 2: 171).

and at another he is idealistically “Eastern”: “He sat there beautiful, as only an Eastern is beautiful, making little gestures with his delicate hands” (“Wisdom” 40). Yeats, it seems, was equally attracted by the “Eastern” charm of the man and the wisdom he taught.

Chatterjee became an authority in the West so far as Indian philosophical matters were concerned. In the grand reception given to Blavatsky and Olcott in London, Chatterjee was one of the key speakers (alongside Olcott and Sinnett) and he spoke on “the relationship India bears to the Theosophical movement and why Europe should take an interest in it”. In the account of Francesca Arundale, Blavatsky’s London hostess, “[v]ery often Mohini Chatterji [*sic*] would answer questions on Indian philosophy. I have rarely met with anyone who could give such clear and forcible explanations clothed in such beautiful language”. His talks were indeed so popular that Arundale remembers having “rarely closed our doors till one or two o’clock in the morning” (Cranston 261, 256). The pitch of Arundale’s recollection matches that of Yeats, who recalls that during Chatterjee’s momentous stay in Dublin he used to come to Chatterjee early in the morning with some question and stayed “till ten or eleven at night” to ask it, due to frequent interruptions by other visitors (*Autobiographies* 98).

As Yeats recollects in a 1900 newspaper article “The Way of Wisdom”, in his very first talk, Chatterjee “overthrew or awed into silence whatever metaphysics the town had” (“Wisdom” 40). So far as Yeats and his other “initiated” fellow mystics were concerned, though, the effect was not subversive but reassuring: “It was my first meeting with a philosophy that confirmed my vague speculations and seemed at once logical and boundless” (*Autobiographies* 98). The core of Chatterjee’s teaching of Indian philosophy seems to have been based on Shankaracharya’s sect of Advaita Vedanta. Peter Kuch tells us that, despite being asked to dwell on *Esoteric Buddhism*, Chatterjee “went beyond it to discuss his own study of the Indian philosophy of Sankara” (17). However, the relationship between Buddhism and Shankara’s Advaita Vedanta is not an oppositional but a complementary one. As Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan has observed, the similarities between the two “is not surprising in view of the fact that both these systems had for their background the Upaniṣads”. For all their differences in concepts and/or approaches to the same concepts, the Buddhist views of phenomenalism and

nirvana are similar to the Advaita Vedantic concepts of maya and moksha respectively (*Indian* 472–73).⁶ Despite holding “the Tibetan Brotherhood” to be higher in grade than any of the other “occult fraternities” in the world, Sinnet admits at the start of *Esoteric Buddhism* that “Brahminical philosophy, in ages before Buddha, embodied the identical doctrine which may now be described as Esoteric Buddhism” (2, 6-7). As Mann has observed, Chatterjee’s “Theosophy was closely linked with Vedantic philosophy, and the two strands are evident in his written work”, such as *Man: Fragments of Forgotten History* (1884), co-written with Laura Holloway, and the *Dublin University Review* article “The Common Sense of Theosophy” (1886) (“Indian Philosophy and Vedanta”, *System* n. pag.). Chatterjee’s other publications include a pamphlet for the London Lodge of the Theosophical Society, entitled “A Paper on Krishna” (1886), and edited volumes of *The Bhagwad Gita* (Boston, 1887) and *Viveka-Chudamani of Sri Sankaracharya* (Adyar, 1932) (Bachchan 20, 275, 280). Familiarity with some basic premises of relevant Hindu philosophical doctrines, therefore, helps us better appreciate Yeats’s initial response to and later revision of Chatterjee’s teaching.

Shankara is said to have summed up the quintessential wisdom of his Advaita Vedanta in the following epigram: “*brahma satyam, jagan mithya, jivo brahmaiva nāparaḥ*” (“the *brahman* is the truth, the world is false, and the finite individual [or living being] is none other than the *brahman*”) (Gupta 225; emphasis in original). Radhakrishnan summarises some key points of Shankara’s conceptualisation of Brahman as follows:

Brahman has no *genus*, possesses no qualities, does not act, and is related to nothing else. [...] As it is opposed to all empirical existence, it is given to us as the negative of everything that is positively known. [...] It is non-being, since it is not the being which we attribute to the world of experience. (*Indian* 535-36; emphasis in original)

Maintaining that the external, physical, or phenomenal world has but a deceptive reality, this particular school of Vedanta often uses the rope-snake metaphor to indicate the relation between Brahman and the world of experience: “Brahman appears as the world, even as the rope appears

⁶ Yeats Library possesses the two volumes of Radhakrishnan’s *Indian Philosophy*: YL 1663; NLI 40,568/188; vols. 1-2, 21 and 3 sheets; envelope 1028A.

as the snake” (Radhakrishnan, *Indian* 569, 571). Such false appearance happens because of adhyasa or the attribution of one object’s properties to a different object. Adhyasa thus leads to avidya (“non-knowledge”, or false knowledge) (Radhakrishnan, *Indian* 505-06). Another concept that is often associated with this imposition of false reality on what is truly real is maya which, as suggested in the previous chapter, is the power that sustains the world of empirical experience or phenomena (Radhakrishnan, *Indian* 565-66). At the dawning of supreme wisdom, the individual self and the phenomenal world disappear, revealing nothing but Brahman, the supreme reality. Hence the ultimate superfluity of all worldly activities.

Chatterjee, recalls Yeats, found “even prayer” to be “too full of hope, of desire, of life, to have any part in that acquiescence that was his beginning of wisdom”, contending that “even our desire of immortality was no better than our other desires” (“Wisdom” 40). It is, however, worth noting that in this view of life and reality, there are two perspectives working simultaneously. As Matthew R. Dasti and Edwin F. Bryant observe, “[t]he meta-narrative of Advaita, that all that exists is the Brahman alone and there is no action or agency” works only “at the absolute level”. But, “at the phenomenal level”, the self has got quite a powerful agency over its life and destiny, which are determined by “the karma generated by its own acts” (195-97). The latter view is particularly pertinent given that the attainment of wisdom is not accomplished in a single birth. In Chatterjee’s translation, a verse in Shankaracharya’s *Crest-Jewel of Wisdom* maintains that “the spiritual knowledge which discriminates between spirit and non-spirit, the practical realisation of the merging of oneself in Brahmātmā and final emancipation from the bonds of matter are unattainable except by the good karma of hundreds of crores of incarnations” (Śaṅkarācārya 1). This brings us to the notion of reincarnation, which is crucial to Yeats’s creative transformation of Chatterjee’s teaching.

Seemingly owing its origin to the pre-Aryan aboriginal faiths, the doctrine of the transmigration of souls is shared by all schools of Indian philosophy with the sole exception of the materialist school of Carvaka (Macdonell 386-87). In the *Upadeshasahasri*, Shankara stresses the unreality of “transmigration”, since neither the “changeless” Supreme Self nor the unreal phenomenal self can be said to “transmigrate” (Potter 82). In *The Bhagavadgita*, a text

which was recognised as one of the key authorities by the proponents of Vedanta (including Shankara whose commentary on it is the oldest of those extant), Krishna says to Arjuna with a view to ridding him of his delusion: “Never was there a time when I was not, nor thou, nor these lords of men, nor will there ever be a time hereafter when we shall cease to be” (2:12).

However, from a less absolute perspective, each self, although essentially eternal, is doomed to take multiple bodies, as emphasised by the verse that follows the one quoted above: “As the soul passes in this body through childhood, youth and age, even so is its taking on of another body. The sage is not perplexed by this” (2:13). Despite upholding such realisation of self as not-body, *The Bhagavadgita* does not promote inaction; delivered at the battlefield, the ostensible purpose of Krishna’s advice is to propel the warrior Arjuna to action, albeit with detachment.⁷ The gist of its third chapter, entitled “Karma Yoga or the Method of Work”, is that a self-conscious renunciation of action is as illusory as performing action with desire. What is to be shunned is not action in itself—which is impossible for the finite beings—but the sense of self or ego in its performance (3: 6–9, 19). By performing selfless action, the wise let their “karma” be “dissolved” (4: 23), and thus progress towards the ultimate goal of wisdom, namely freedom from the cycle of reincarnation.

Although Blavatsky maintained that the theory of reincarnation was “taught by all major thinkers and scriptures, particularly Jesus in the New Testament” (Neufeldt 241), much of her argument in *The Key to Theosophy* deeply resembles Indian thought, such as her distinction between the “false (because so finite and evanescent) *personality*” and the “true individuality” that “plays, like an actor, many parts on the stage of life” (34; emphasis in original). Another leading Theosophist Annie Besant argues that, while from the “mortal” perspective of man reincarnation means “a succession of lives”, viewed from the perspective of “the Eternal Man”, it is non-existent “unless we say that a tree reincarnates with each spring when it puts out a new crop of leaves, or a man reincarnates when he puts on a new coat” (61–62). This distinction between temporal and eternal perspectives resonates with the Indian scriptures discussed above.

⁷ For the context and setting of *The Bhagavadgita*, see Chapter 14 of Gupta.

In at least a couple of the 1884 meetings of the Theosophical Society's London Lodge, as Shalini Sikka has noted, Chatterjee spoke on the concepts of karma and rebirth as well as the role of desire in the latter (78, 82, 94). From Yeats's autobiographical and poetic accounts, it appears that Chatterjee dwelt upon these concepts in his Dublin talks, too.

Yeats translated Chatterjee's philosophical wisdom into "Kanva on Himself", an undated poem that he must have written after the Theosophist-Vedantist's visit in Dublin. Published in *The Wanderings of Oisín and Other Poems* (1889), the poem was later excluded from the "definitive edition of his poetry" (*Variorum* 641-42; Jeffares, *Commentary* 7). Yeats does not offer any specific reason for the poem's exclusion in his 1894 correspondences with T. Fisher Unwin as to the content of the edition, except for saying that he would keep only "the best lyrics from the 'Oisín' volume", among other works (*Letters* 1: 402, 411-12). Thus the poem simply suffered the same fate of abandonment from *Poems* (1895) as did fifteen other lyrics from the 1889 volume (Bornstein 16). Taking its speaker from Kalidasa's play *Shakuntala* (both the play and the character Kanva will be discussed in the second section, below), the poem "Kanva on Himself" deals with the idea of reincarnation in a fairly straightforward manner:

Hast thou not sat of yore upon the knees
Of myriads of beloveds, and on thine
Have not a myriad swayed below strange trees
In other lives? (*Variorum* 724)

Much before the poem's creative transformation into "Mohini Chatterjee", in "The Way of Wisdom" (1900) Yeats remembers Chatterjee suggesting that one should say to oneself every night at bed: "I have lived many lives. It may be that I have been a slave and a prince. Many a beloved has sat upon my knees, and I have sat upon the knees of many a beloved. Everything that has been shall be again" ("Wisdom" 40). In its concluding quatrain, "Kanva on Himself" strikes a note of passivity, changelessness, and resignation:

Then wherefore fear the usury of Time,
Or Death that cometh with the next life-key?

Nay, rise and flatter her with golden rhyme,

For as things were so shall things ever be. (*Variorum* 724)

The poem is written from the point of view of the eternal self of man which is unaffected by the power of death and hence indifferent to the “myriad” births it has undergone. Yeats recalls in “The Way of Wisdom” how, pressed by others to name his “own religion”, Chatterjee “would look embarrassed and say ‘this body is a Brahmin’” (“Wisdom” 40), thus dissociating his real self, which is eternal, from his mortal body which is identifiable as belonging to the Brahmin caste.⁸

At the end of the article, Yeats seems to confuse Chatterjee’s wisdom of detachment with some kind of philosophical passivity:

Alcibiades fled from Socrates lest he might do nothing but listen to him all his life, and certainly there were few among us who did not think that to listen to this man who threw the enchantment of power about silent and gentle things, and at last to think as he did, was the one thing worth doing; and that all action and all words that lead to action were a little vulgar, a little trivial; nor am I quite certain that any among us has quite awoken out of the dreams he brought among us. (“Wisdom” 41)

If the idea of waking up from a “dream” is uncertain at the end of this article, this is not so in its 1908 version which was included, in a slightly revised form, in the collected edition of his writings under the new title “The Pathway”. There the ending of the essay was significantly altered by turning the uncertain final clause of the previous version into a more unequivocal statement: “Ah, how many years it has taken me to awake out of that dream!” (*Early Essays* 291). This subtle change points the direction that the 1929 poem “Mohini Chatterjee” would take, as we will see a little later.

⁸ Here I disagree with Sri’s reading of Chatterjee’s “this body is a Brahmin” as a distortion of Shankara’s “*Aham Brahmasmi*—I, the *Atman* is *Brahman*—[...] partly due to Yeats’s misunderstanding of the words *Brahman*—the Supreme Being—and *Brahmin*—Mohini Chatterjee’s caste” (65). Rather than seeing any distortion or misunderstanding involved in the statement concerned, I find it compatible with Shankara’s idea of “*Aham Brahmasmi*”. Claiming his “body” to be “a Brahmin” by caste, Chatterjee conceptually identifies his true self (the *Atman*) with *Brahman*.

Underscoring the importance of enlightened silence and inaction, “The Way of Wisdom” captures Yeats’s fin de siècle impression of Chatterjee’s teaching. As the above allusion to Alcibiades and Socrates suggests, for all his awed fascination for Chatterjee and his wisdom, Yeats in 1900 may have felt the urge to cast off the spell of what appeared to him to be a thoughtful, meditative calm. He was by that time tilting more and more towards cultural-nationalist activism, as attested by such journalistic writing as “The De-Anglicising of Ireland” (1892) and the founding of the Irish Literary Theatre in 1899 (Prose 1: 255–56; Foster 1: 205–10). His mystic-spiritual interest had also undergone significant reorientation. As noted in the Introduction, having joined the Blavatsky Lodge in 1887, Yeats was compelled to resign from the Theosophical Society in 1890 due to his involvement in some “empirical experiment”. He was then drawn to the “Western ceremonial magic” of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, remaining with it until 1923 (Foster 1: 62, 103; Ellmann 62; Graf 52-53). It is not therefore surprising that he would get over his initial fascination for Advaita Vedantic philosophy as he understood it from Chatterjee’s interpretation. This sense of overcoming his youthful infatuation with his Indian master is further extended in the 1929 poem “Mohini Chatterjee”, from *The Winding Stair and Other Poems* (1933).

While in the 1900 article Yeats presents himself as a silent listener, in “Mohini Chatterjee” he takes up the more active role of a commentator. Divided into two stanzas, the poem has a dialogic structure. The first stanza reports what “the Brahmin said” having been asked whether he would recommend praying to the poet-speaker. The Brahmin bade his disciple to “[p]ray for nothing”, but to daily remind himself of his “myriad” previous incarnations:

I have been a king,
I have been a slave,
Nor is there anything,
Fool, rascal, knave,
That I have not been,
And yet upon my breast
A myriad heads have lain. (*Variorum* 495–96)

In the second stanza, Yeats dissociates himself from the “boy” that he was while receiving the above advice (given to “set at rest | A boy’s turbulent days”) and assumes some agency by “add[ing]” his own “commentary” to the above wisdom:

Old lovers yet may have
All that time denied –
Grave is heaped on grave
That they be satisfied. (*Variorum* 496)

Unlike the resignation implied in the last line of “Kanva on Himself”—“as things were so shall things ever be”—here the speaker-Yeats’s “commentary” provides a subtle twist on the doctrine of reincarnation. Rather than preaching the value of renunciation of desire, the modification in the “commentary” emphasises the desire itself and its satisfaction. Instead of calmly accepting the workings of time and death, this poem presumes to “thunder [them] away”:

Birth is heaped on birth
That such cannonade
May thunder time away,
Birth-hour and death-hour meet,
Or, as great sages say,
Men dance on deathless feet. (*Variorum* 496)

While the note of energy in words such as “cannonade” and “thunder” is unmissable, the above lines are ambiguous. That is to say, they do not essentially contradict the theory of reincarnation: that the cycle of birth-death-rebirth will be repeated until desire (born of misconception of the true nature of self and reality) is completely extinguished. The exhaustion of desire means liberation from a time-bound existence, and hence the possibility of “thunder[ing] time away” after multiple births. Read in this way, the meeting of the “birth-hour” and “death-hour” may mean the arrest of the cycle of reincarnation, and hence an uninterrupted spiritual existence: “Men dance on deathless feet”.

On another reading, however, “dance on deathless feet” might imply the dynamic continuity of the cycle of reincarnation where death-hour is followed by another birth-hour. The

dynamism of this poem must have been owing in part to the dialectical energy of Yeats's own mystic-philosophic system *A Vision*; the 1925 version of the book had already been published and he had started to work on the revised version of the same, which would arrive in print in 1937. In fact, the poem that we know as "Mohini Chatterjee" was first included in the Cuala Press edition of *A Packet for Ezra Pound* (1929), where it appears as one of the two lyrics under the umbrella title "Meditations upon Death" (9-11). Although none of these poems is included in "A Packet for Ezra Pound" that crowns the 1937 version of *A Vision*, "Mohini Chatterjee" might be read as Yeats's creative appropriation of the Indian thought imparted by Chatterjee for his own system. *A Vision* views human life and history to be cyclical in nature, involving multiple incarnations. As Yeats writes, "all the symbolism of this book applies to begetting and birth, for all things are a single form which has divided and multiplied in time and space" (*Vision* 1937:156). Yeats prefers division and multiplicity to "a single form", whether Platonic, Neo-Platonic/Plotinian, Vedantic, or any other of the plethora of sources that he distills into his system. He recounts in the introduction to *A Vision* (1925) how, while contemplating nature the day before, he "murmured, as I have countless times, 'I have been part of it always and there is maybe no escape, forgetting and returning life after life like an insect in the roots of the grass.' But murmured it without terror, in exultation almost" (lvi).

It is possible to hear in the above quotation an echo of what Chatterjee asked his disciples to mutter at bedtime as an alternative to prayer. Yet, this is a very different kind of reincarnation from what Chatterjee might have taught Yeats; the ideal purpose of reincarnation in Hinduism and Theosophy would be perfection and escape, whereas Yeats here seems to subscribe to the Nietzschean idea of "eternal recurrence": "Everything becomes and recurs eternally—escape is impossible!" (*Will* 545). Yeats was reading Friedrich Nietzsche from as early as 1896 (Brown 150-51). Writing to Lady Gregory on 26 December 1902, he calls Nietzsche "that strong enchanter" and claims to have found in him a "curious astringent joy" (*Letters* 3: 284). In *Vision*-ary terms, strength and astringency would be considered "antithetical" qualities (*Vision* 1937: 192) and hence more attuned to Yeats's own personality. As Mann writes, "[i]t is possible that the end of time and life is the beginning of fuller being but

that is not where Yeats's interests lie. ("Foundations" 10; emphasis in original). However, for all his subjective interest, Mann notes elsewhere, "Yeats certainly sees release from the wheel of rebirth as not only possible but inevitable, though only after a full series of incarnations, paradigmatically twelve rounds of twenty-eight lives", with some possible modifications ("*Thirteenth*" 168-69). Therefore, Nietzschean "eternal recurrence" and Hindu liberatory reincarnation might be seen as emblematic of the dialectics of the phenomenal and the transcendental in Yeats's system.

Yeats's attitude towards Eastern spirituality is eloquently expressed in a much earlier letter to Florence Farr. Informing her of his undertaking of "eastern meditations", Yeats adds that his objective is "to lay hands upon some dynamic and substantialising force as distinguished from the eastern quiescent and supersensualizing [*sic*] state of the soul—a movement downwards upon life not upwards out of life" (Kelly and Schuchard 343; 6 February 1906). Similarly, in "Mohini Chatterjee" Yeats seems to be more interested in the process of reincarnation than in its end-purpose in orthodox Indian theory: liberation. The self-surrendering quiescence of the earlier "Kanva on Himself" is replaced by the later poem's exultant passion. Yet, the relation between these two Chatterjee poems—or rather the two versions of the same poem—is not one of subversion, but one of revision in all senses of the term. The latter poem reads as a retrospective reconstruction of the former.

The form of "Mohini Chatterjee" reflects its revisionary aspect and hence merits close analysis. In contrast to the neatly rhymed quatrains of "Kanva on Himself", this poem has two uneven stanzas of eleven and seventeen lines respectively. The regularly, albeit abortively, rhymed (abab cdcd efe) first stanza narrates the dialogue between the poet and the Brahmin in the past: "I asked" and "the Brahmin said" (*Variorum* 495). This part of the narrative is fairly unchanged from the earlier prose and verse manifestations of the material. However, the second and longer stanza names the Bengali Theosophist and makes clear the shifting of time from the past—"Mohini Chatterjee | Spoke these"—to the present: "I add in commentary" (*Variorum* 496). Beginning with a five-line interval of a prosaic reporting speech, this stanza resumes and completes the regular rhyming pattern in the twelve-line reported speech (the poet's

“commentary”) that follows, rhyming abab cdcd efef. Given that the rhyme scheme of the commentary section invites association with the quatrains of English sonnet, one might be tempted to read the poem with its twenty-eight lines (two sonnets put together?) as a reworking of the English sonnet form. The first stanza’s incomplete pattern of abab cdcd efe could be seen as a deliberate rupture, suggesting a discontinuity between the stanzas and what they contain, namely Chatterjee’s teaching and Yeats’s “commentary” respectively. The first line of the second stanza ends with “rest”, which could very well have rhymed with “breast” of the tenth line of the first stanza, thereby completing its efef pattern. Thus, the formal structure of the poem represents the process of revision, recreating the past experience in the first stanza, and revising and improvising upon it in the second. The incompletely rhymed wisdom of the first stanza (abab cdcd efe) needed to be completed, as it were, by the “commentary” of the poet: abab cdcd efef. And if such patterning evokes a desire for resolution that the missing concluding couplet (gg) of the English sonnet form might well have provided, the lack of such a closure is befitting for a poem that is interested in the dynamic power of reincarnation—the abab scheme of the quatrains simulating the birth-death-birth-death pattern of the reincarnative cycle—rather than any transcendental resolution.

The fact that Yeats in the late 1920s creatively reengaged with a previously discarded Indian poem attests to the continued importance of his early engagement with Indian material. It is true that he himself downplays the worthiness of his early Indian poems in a 1925 note: “Many of the poems in *Crossways*, certainly those upon Indian subjects or upon shepherds and fauns, must have been written before I was twenty, for from the moment when I began *The Wanderings of Oisín*, which I did at that age, I believe, my subject-matter became Irish” (Jeffares, *Commentary* 3). Written between 1886 and 1887, the early Indian poems were, in fact, contemporaneous with those of *The Wanderings of Oisín* (Jeffares, *Commentary* 6-8, 521). Read as part of his intellectual and creative explorations of India, the Indian poems of *Crossways* gather more nuances than they do by their otherwise-isolated presence in a volume dominated by the poems of Irish themes.

II

In *Reveries Over Childhood and Youth*, Yeats remembers asking his friends in the Hermetic Society to consider the proposition “that whatever the great poets had affirmed in their finest moments was the nearest we could come to an authoritative religion, and that their mythology, their spirits of water and wind, were but literal truth” (*Autobiographies* 97). In the 1880s, he seems to have taken a serious interest in a fifth-century north Indian poet-playwright, whose texts were marked by elemental simplicity and mythological sophistication: Kalidasa. Scholars vary in their accounts of how and when Yeats came across Kalidasa’s works. Both Harbans Rai Bachchan and Sushil Kumar Jain think that it was Chatterjee who recommended Kalidasa to Yeats, while Lennon maintains that Yeats had read and written in imitation of Kalidasa before he met Chatterjee (Bachchan 64; Jain 86; Lennon 256).⁹ Whatever the case, the three Indian poems in *Crossways* (1889), originally published in *The Wanderings of Oisín and Other Poems* (1889) along with “Kanva on Himself”, certainly carry the mark of Kalidasa’s influence, particularly that of his renowned play *Shakuntala*. As two of these poems were written in 1886 (the year of Chatterjee’s visit) and the third in 1887, it seems that Yeats was exposed to the twin influences of Kalidasa and Chatterjee roughly around the same time. “The Indian upon God” (1886) had “Kanva, the Indian, on God” as one of its previous titles (*The Poems* 418). Kanva, as already mentioned, is an important character of *Shakuntala*. “Anashuya and Vijaya” (1887) takes one of its titular characters from the Sanskrit play: Anasuya is one of Shakuntala’s two closest friends. The connection between “The Indian to His Love” (1886) and Kalidasa is revealed in a letter by Yeats. Writing to John O’Leary, he vents his irritation caused by a critical review referring to the poem: “The Freeman reviewer is wrong about peahens[;] they dance throughout the whole of Indian poetry. If I had Kalidasa by me I could find many such

⁹ The divergence of scholarly opinion in this regard seems to have been partly due to the uncertainty about the date of Chatterjee’s Dublin visit; see n4 above. And, as to the question of Chatterjee introducing Kalidasa to Yeats, or Yeats having already incorporated Kalidasa into his poetry by the time he met the Theosophist, it is hard to be certain given the fact that the poems concerned were written in 1886 and 1887.

dancings. As to the poultry yards, with them I have no concern—The wild peahen dances or all Indian poets lie” (*Letters* 1: 138; 3 February 1889). Here one finds an instance of Yeats’s taking the words of the “great poets” as “literal truth”. Whether the wild peahen dances or not, the confidence expressed in this letter suggests Yeats’s careful reading of Kalidasa.

By the 1880s, Kalidasa’s *Shakuntala* had already been acclaimed by many European writers and scholars for almost a century. William Jones’s 1789 English translation of the play was an epoch-making Orientalist phenomenon, which led to the play being translated into twelve other languages within a century (Franklin 252). Georg Forster’s 1791 German translation made it available for enthusiasts like Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Friedrich Schlegel. Goethe was profoundly moved by the play and found in it a model for the on-stage prologue of his *Faust* (1797) (Franklin 260; Macdonell 416). Michael Franklin in his chapter “Europe Falls in Love with Śakuntalā” refers to “the *Śakuntalā* fever that gripped Europe in the early 1790s”. He adds that Kalidasa’s play, along with Jones’s other translations of Indian materials, stimulated Romantic Orientalism in Britain in the last decade of the eighteenth century (251, 284). Yeats’s early interest in Indian literature, then, was consonant with a long-standing European enthusiasm for Indian literature and culture.

Yeats apparently synthesised Kalidasa and Chatterjee in his poetic imagination. Kanva, we have seen, became the poetic persona for Chatterjee in “Kanva on Himself”. The foster-father of *Shakuntala*, Kanva is an ascetic, sage character of Kalidasa’s play. Before she leaves the forest-hermitage, *Shakuntala* bemoans the fact that “[m]y father’s body is already tortured by ascetic practices” (132; act 4). But after a few pages, in response to King Dushyanta’s inquiry after “Father Kanva’s health”, we come to know that “[s]aints control their own health” (137-38; act 5). In the final scene of the play, sage Maricha says that Kanva knows all about the positive turn of his daughter’s fate without being told “through the power of his austerity” (176; act 7). Kanva is thus a man of superhuman qualities of mind, achieved through the power of rigorous asceticism and “austerity”. As Yeats recalls, Chatterjee dwelled upon a similarly penetrating power of mind or consciousness: “Consciousness, he taught, does not merely spread out its surface but has, in vision and in contemplation, another motion and can change in height

and in depth” (*Autobiographies* 98). However, despite being a powerful ascetic, Kalidasa’s Kanva is not immune to filial affection and worry. Scrutinising his emotional suffering prior to Shakuntala’s departure for her husband’s palace, he himself observes:

if a disciplined ascetic
suffers so deeply from love,
how do fathers bear the pain
of each daughter’s parting? (126; act 4)

This compassionate side of his character makes Kanva a less ideal poetic persona for the stoical wisdom of “Kanva on Himself” than for the organic spirituality of “The Indian upon God”, which, too, had previously adopted Kanva as its speaker.

“The Indian upon God” upholds the notion of absolute harmony of spirit and form, in which each form represents God in its own self. Peacefully adopting the harmonised perspectives of the moorfowl, the lotus, the roebuck, and the peacock, the poem is true to the spirit of Kalidasa’s play where Shakuntala “feel[s] a sister’s love” for the trees in the forest hermitage (94; act 1) and father Kanva does not distinguish between Shakuntala and her jasmine vine (128; act 4). In Yeats’s poem the lotus, in a similar tone to that of Blake’s Child,¹⁰ says: “*Who made the world and ruleth it, He hangeth on a stalk, | For I am in His image made*”. In the same way, the moorfowl conceives of God as “*an undying moorfowl*”, the roebuck, as “*a gentle roebuck*”, and the peacock, as “*a monstrous peacock*” (*Variorum* 76–77; emphasis in original). Given that every existent being imposes its own self-image on God, it is possible to read the poem in terms of the Advaita Vedantic distinction between the personal, subjective, and distorted perspective(s) of worldly existence, and the impersonal, objective condition of the transcendental reality. However, rather than upholding any objective metaphysical wisdom, the poem celebrates the play of perspectives on the phenomenal level and the subjective experiences of individual creatures. In this sense, the poem foreshadows Yeats’s later revision

¹⁰ See Blake, “The Lamb” (106).

of Chatterjee's Vedantic wisdom as well as the proclivity of his Visionary system for duality and multiplicity.

The atmosphere of idealised quietism that we have noticed in the previous poem also prevails in "The Indian to his Love". Echoing the title of Christopher Marlowe's "The Passionate Shepherd to his Love" (157-58), this poem might underscore the similarity between Yeats's Indian source material and the English pastoral tradition. The opening description of the "Indian" landscape is highly romanticised, verging on the exotic:

The island dreams under the dawn
And great boughs drop tranquility;
The peahens dance on a smooth lawn,
A parrot sways upon a tree,

Raging at his own image in the enamelled sea. (*Variorum* 77)

Fairly consistent use of iambic tetrameter in the first four lines of each stanza again inspires analogy with Marlowe's poem.¹¹ But, unlike the latter's quatrain form, this poem is written in four five-line stanzas with a regular ababb rhyme scheme. The longer fifth line of each stanza adds to the mood of dragging drowsiness that persists throughout the poem. Even the variations, such as the two stressed feet in "smooth lawn" in the third line above, foreground the idyllic peacefulness of the situation. While the fifth lines of the first three stanzas start with an accented syllable ("Raging", "Murmuring", and "One"), in the fourth and final stanza, the fifth line starts with an unstressed "With", which intensifies the atmosphere of "hushed" silence: "With vapoury footsole by the water's drowsy blaze". The lovers' thoughts and actions are also in tune with the setting. As the speaker says in the second stanza, mooring their "lonely ship" in this island, they will "wander" with "woven hands" and murmur "softly lip to lip". The poem, furthermore, echoes "Kanva on Himself" when the speaker says to his beloved that "when we die our shades will rove" (*Variorum* 77-78).

¹¹ See, for example, the second stanza of Marlowe's poem: "And we will sit upon the rocks, | Seeing the shepherds feed their flocks | By shallow rivers, to whose falls | Melodious birds sing madrigals" (157).

The mood of shadowy serenity is continued into the 1887 poem “Anashuya and Vijaya”. Set in a “little Indian temple in the Golden Age”, this dramatic poem begins with the following prayer uttered by Anashuya “the young priestess”:

Send peace on all the lands and flickering corn.—

O may tranquillity walk by his elbow

When wandering in the forest, if he love

No other.—Hear, and may the indolent flocks

Be plentiful.—And if he love another,

May panthers end him.—Hear, and load our king

With wisdom hour by hour.—May we two stand,

When we are dead, beyond the setting suns,

A little from the other shades apart,

With mingling hair, and play upon one lute. (*Variorum* 71)

Despite similarities of imagery and diction (“tranquillity”, “shades”), this is a very different poem from “The Indian to His Love”. The peaceful atmosphere is undercut by the conflicted desire betrayed by Anashuya’s conditional prayer for her lover Vijaya, depending on whether he “love[s] another” or not (lines 3-6, above). This is also far from the desireless prayer recommended by Chatterjee. Originally entitled “Jealousy” (*The Poems* 417), “Anashuya and Vijaya” is built around the sexual jealousy of Anashuya for Vijaya’s other beloved, who is absent from the poem. Vijaya, of course, blurts out the name of another female character, Amrita. This slip on Vijaya’s part introduces a tension into the poem, which is tentatively resolved by Vijaya’s promise that he will not love the other girl.

Yeats later reveals that this poem “was meant to be the first scene of a play about a man loved by two women, who had the one soul between them, the one woman waking when the other slept, and knowing but daylight as the other only night” (Jeffares, *Commentary* 6). As Albright points out in his note to the poem, this is an early version of “Yeats’s doctrine of the anti-self” (Yeats, *The Poems* 417). A significant aspect of Yeatsian dialectics is thus rooted in Kalidasa’s play where, as Bachchan has noted, Shakuntala is wooed by the married king

Dushyanta, who implores her not to indulge in the thought that he could love someone else (66). Moreover, the idea of two diametrically opposite women with “the one soul between them” might be seen as symptomatic of the tension in Yeats’s early understanding of India between the spiritual and the sensual, the ascetic and the aesthetic. If Chatterjee stands for a Vedantic indifference to life for Yeats, Kalidasa offers him a more balanced picture of life where one gets, in the words of Goethe, both “the spring’s blossoms and the fruits of the maturer year”.¹² In that spirit, “Anashuya and Vijaya” juxtaposes Brahma, the old god of creation, with Kama, the young god of love, and does not discriminate between the “sacred Himalay” and “the sacred [...] flamingoes”. In her final prayer, Anashuya not only includes man and animal, but also does not discriminate between “The merry lambs and the complacent kine, | The flies below the leaves, and the young mice” (*Variorum* 72, 74, 75). This harmonious coexistence of men, animals, and gods is true to Yeats’s source text.

Yeats’s interest in the fusion or confusion of god and man, heaven and earth, the spiritual and the corporeal, which would be a key feature of his later mystical formulations, finds fine expression in the poem’s anthropomorphic description of “the parents of gods”:

who dwell on sacred Himalay,
 On the far Golden Peak; enormous shapes,
 Who still were old when the great sea was young;
 On their vast faces mystery and dreams;
 Their hair along the mountains rolled and filled
 From year to year by the unnumbered nests
 Of aweless birds, and round their stirless feet
 The joyous flocks of deer and antelope,
 Who never hear the unforgiving hound. (*Variorum* 74-75)

¹² Here is Goethe in Franklin’s translation: “If you want the spring’s blossoms and the fruits of the maturer year, | What is seductive and creates joy, or what is satisfying and nourishing, | If you want to encompass Heaven and Earth in one single name, | Then I name you, Sacontala, and everything is said” (Franklin 251).

Although Richard Ellmann thinks that these Himalayan gods are inspired by “the poorly drawn pictures of [Blavatsky’s] masters, Koot-Hoomi and Morya” on her door (68-69), they seem more likely to have been modelled, as Bachchan has pointed out, on the description of the abode of the demigods in *Shakuntala* (66-67). On his way back to earth from heaven, where he went to fight a battle on behalf of god Indra, King Dushyanta becomes curious about the gold-streaked mountain that he sees stretching below. Matali, Indra’s charioteer and the King’s escort, responds thus: “Your Majesty, it is called the ‘Golden Peak,’ the mountain of the demigods, a place where austerities are practiced to perfection”; and a few lines down, pointing towards sage Maricha’s hermitage, says:

Where the sage stands staring at the sun,
as immobile as the trunk of a tree,
his body half-buried in an ant hill,
with a snake skin on his chest,
his throat pricked by a necklace
of withered thorny vines,
wearing a coil of long matted hair
filled with nests of śakunta birds. (164-65; act 7)

The similarity of these descriptions with Yeats’s account of “the parents of gods” is too striking to be accidental. Thus, the theme, mood, and atmosphere of this poem is inflected by its poet’s reading of Kalidasa.

The three *Crossways* poems on India, true, betray a youthful fantasy about an exotic landscape, and such exoticism is all too common in Yeats’s other early poems written about the west of Ireland. For one, “The Lake Isle of Innisfree” (written in 1888), a poem about an island in County Sligo, entertains the notion of “go[ing]” to a land of “peace”, comparable to the sense in “The Indian to his Love” of having come “far away” from “the unquiet lands” (*Variorum* 117, 78). Yet, there is a more complicated cross-cultural identification going on in Yeats’s “Indian” poems of the 1880s than in his poems about idyllic Ireland. With reference to “The Indian upon God”, Elleke Boehmer views Yeats’s “adoption of an Indian persona” in that poem

as indicative of “a genuine openness[,] [...] a desire not only to embrace but to internalize the other” (*Indian* 116), while Jahan Ramazani suggests a latent “connection” between the poem’s “understanding of religion as projection of oneself onto the divine other and its own attribution of this perspectivist concept to the cultural other”, essentially problematising any “authentic” knowledge of that other (*Hybrid* 36). (This might remind one of the Advaita Vedantic concept of *adhyasa*, discussed above.) Rather than being limited to only one poem, both of these readings are applicable to Yeats’s early connection with literary and philosophical India. We have traced Chatterjee’s periodical “reincarnations” in Yeats’s oeuvre, seeing how in each of these cases Yeats seems to have projected a part of his own self on the Bengali Brahmin and his wisdom. Kalidasa’s organic aestheticism, on the other hand, appears to have been largely internalised by the poetic sensibility of Yeats.

Internalised or self-projected, India played a powerful role in Yeats’s artistic as well as ideological self-construction at that formative phase of his career. The India he envisioned via these diverse materials was an India of poets, philosophers, and rishis, which chimes in with the Ireland of faeries, mystics, and bards that he imaginatively adored and desperately wanted to revive. Not only that but, as the next section will briefly demonstrate, the ascetic-aesthetic interconnection that dominates his early imagination of India would soon find its parallels in his other diverse but essentially connected literary, cultural, and mystical pursuits that would lay the foundation for his mystic-modern poetics.

III

“[A] strength of WBY’s synthesizing and autodidactic mind”, notes Foster, “was to find assonances in all he read [or heard], bend them to his purposes, and create universal patterns by annexing writers and philosophies into his personal pantheon” (1: 99). As we saw in the introductory chapter, for Yeats the movement from mysticism to magic was not a straightforward progression from one point to another, but was of a more syncretic nature. While Theosophy had given him “theories”, the Order of the Golden Dawn provided him with

“the opportunity and method for constant experimentation and demonstration” (Ellmann 93). Combining Rosicrucianism, alchemy, and the Tarot, the Golden Dawn had a distinctly Western flavour (Foster 1: 103-04). It is, however, intriguing that the experiment which drew Yeats to the Order’s key figure MacGregor Mathers had to do with “the Tantric symbol of fire” (Ellmann 93), suggesting a connection of Eastern and Western magical schools. The Order was especially appealing for the artists because of its particular “preoccupation with symbolism” and inventiveness (Foster 1: 104-05). In his essay “Magic” (1901), Yeats considers poets, musicians, and artists to be the “successors” of “the masters of magic”, and holds symbols to be not “less than the greatest of all powers” (*Essays and Introductions* 49).

From around 1899, Yeats along with the artist Edwin Ellis undertook a multidimensional project which would come to fruition as *Works of William Blake* in 1893. Significantly, Yeats saw this project as coterminous with his Theosophical interests and was confident that this “must [...] influence for good the mystical societies throughout Europe” (Foster 1: 99). We saw in the introduction that he viewed Blake as “a great mystic” (*Prose* 1: 282). This reemphasises the strong interrelatedness of his mystical and artistic preoccupations that has been analysed in the previous sections on his Indian connections. As Matthew Campbell has argued, prior to his proper introduction to the French Symbolists, Yeats found in Blake “a system to which he could devote himself and from which he could extract what was useful from an already well-formed English symbolist tradition” (“Romantic” 311). What was most “useful” for Yeats was perhaps the idea that “the imaginative arts were [...] the greatest of Divine revelations”, as he writes in an 1897 essay “William Blake and the Imagination” (*Essays and Introductions* 112). One of the most potent vehicles of such “Divine revelations” was symbol which he sharply and significantly distinguishes from allegory in another essay on Blake from the previous year “William Blake and His Illustrations to the *Divine Comedy*”:

A symbol is indeed the only possible expression of some invisible essence, a transparent lamp about a spiritual flame; while allegory is one of many possible representations of an embodied thing, or familiar principle, [...] the one is a revelation, the other an amusement. (*Essays and Introductions* 116)

Purged of any arbitrary, contingent quality, symbol is here given the status of pure divinity. Although Yeats had found similar notions in the Indian philosophy imparted by Chatterjee, there remains this important difference that here the “invisible essence” is given “expression”, unlike the noumenal Absolute of Advaita Vedanta. By that time he was convinced of the expressive power of symbols by the Golden Dawn experiments. If the symbol is not absolutely transcendental, nor is it mundane in the truest sense either, but mystically shares the substance of the “spiritual flame”, as is clear from the contrast drawn between “expression” and “representation”. The former is associated with “True art”, he continues in the same essay, while the latter with “False art” which is merely “mimetic”, springing “not from experience but from observation” (*Essays and Introductions* 140).

Although Yeats traced his interest in symbolism to Blake, Jacob Boehme, and Emanuel Swedenborg, it was Arthur Symons who initiated him into “modern Symbolism” (Foster’s phrase). Yeats befriended this enthusiastic reader of the French Symbolists in 1890 (Foster 1: 109). When *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* was published after nine years, Symons dedicated the book to his Irish friend calling him “the chief representative of that movement in our country” and counting “[y]our own Irish literary movement” as well as “A.E.’s poetry” as part of the Symbolist movement (xix). His introduction corroborates such claims by adding that “[i]t is all an attempt to spiritualise literature”. (We will return to the spiritual elements of the Irish Revival later in this section.) Freed from the pressures of “exteriority”, “rhetoric”, and “a materialistic tradition”, the Symbolist literature, maintains Symons, “becomes itself a kind of religion, with all the duties and responsibilities of the sacred ritual” (5). Yeats also uses such words as “religion” and “sacred” with some abandon. In fact, using the same epithet that he ascribed, we have already noted, to Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound*, he would later term the French Symbolist writer Villiers de l’Isle-Adam’s play *Axël* “the Sacred Book I longed for” (*Autobiographies* 246). In the essay on Villiers in his book, Symons holds the “duality” of the “aristocratic and [the] democratic” to be “typically Eastern and Western” (*Symbolist* 22). As for Villiers’s aristocratic (and, hence, essentially Eastern?) works, Symons maintains that, unlike the “democratic” and naturalistic tendencies of his contemporary (Western) dramatists, Villiers

“choos[es] to concern himself only with exceptional characters, and with them only in the absolute”, and the speech he attributes to them is “the speech of their thoughts, of their dreams” (*Symbolist* 26). However, as Brown has perceptively observed, there is a subtle difference between Yeats’s “aesthetic” and that of such French Symbolists as Stéphane Mallarmé in that Yeats’s was “actively religious” unlike Mallarmé’s: “Yeats took Symbolism as a vital religious practice” (72).

In “The Symbolism of Poetry”, an essay published a year after Symons’s book in 1900, Yeats dwells with a hieratic suggestiveness upon the role of rhythm in facilitating the revelatory experience of symbol:

The purpose of rhythm [...] is to prolong the moment of contemplation, [...] which is the one moment of creation, [...] to keep us in that state of perhaps real trance, in which the mind liberated from the pressure of the will is unfolded in symbols. (*Essays and Introductions* 159)

What is more, he recommends abandonment from “serious poetry” of such physically “energetic rhythms, as of a man running” in favour of “those wavering, meditative, organic rhythms, which are the embodiment of the imagination, that neither desires nor hates, because it has done with time, and only wishes to gaze upon some reality, some beauty” (*Essays and Introductions* 163). The notion of the creative potentiality of prolonged, trance-like “contemplation” as well as of surrendering one’s “will” and transcending “time”, however temporarily, can be traced not only to the practice of ritual magic of the Golden Dawn, but to Chatterjee’s Vedantic “wisdom” as well. In his Chatterjee article from the same year, Yeats also echoes Symons’s democratic/aristocratic binary in employing the polarities of Western “facts” and Eastern “principle” to argue that Chatterjee’s “principles were part of his being, while our facts [...] were doubtless a part of that bodily life, which is the one error” (“Wisdom” 40). It is not, therefore, surprising that the maxim he used as the epigraph for “Way of Wisdom” was taken from the speech of the titular character of *Axël*: “As for living, our servants will do that for us” (“Wisdom” 40). This “proud rejection of ordinary life”, notes James Pethica, writing about Yeats’s heightened aestheticism of the 1890s, was his “favourite maxim”

(*Autobiographies* 236; *Pethica* 205-06). The fact that he chose this for the epigraph of the retrospective article on the Vedantist Brahmin underscores the connection between asceticism and aestheticism, which formed the basis of Yeats's mystic-modern poetics.

Commenting on the years between 1889 and 1903, the “frenz[ied]” and apparently confounded period of Yeats's life, Ellmann maintains that “the maze was not without a plan, a clue to which can be found in his increasing self-consciousness” (70). This “self-consciousness” had many facets which are essentially linked with one another. We have already discussed how his transcultural, eclectic mystical orientation was translated into his equally poetic and magical preoccupation with symbolism. All this was also related to a cultural-nationalist agenda. The influence of the Fenian nationalist John O'Leary—whose demise would later mean the demise of “Romantic Ireland”¹³ for his disciple—and the books he lent him since the mid-1880s sensitised Yeats to “the special character of the island which he began to see as a microcosm of the world of the spirit” (Flannery 17). Part of his enthusiasm about the revelatory mysticism of Blake was rooted in the “erroneous conviction” of Blake's “Irish ancestry”. Simultaneously with his work on Blake, he was perusing the Celtic lore in Standish James O'Grady's English renditions, which fanned the Revivalist fire of Yeats and Russell (A.E.) (Brown 67). In “Bardic Ireland” (1890), Yeats describes the first few centuries of the current era as a period when “the genius of the Gael” was widespread and when “the Celt made himself” (as opposed to a “later” date when “Fate made him”). Discussing the findings of the Celtological research by O'Grady and others, he observes:

Instead of the well-made poems we might have had, there remains but a wild anarchy of legends—a vast pell-mell of monstrous shapes: huge demons driving swine on the hill-tops; beautiful shadows whose hair has a peculiar life and moves responsive to their thought; and here and there some great hero like Cuchullin, some epic needing only deliberate craft to be scarce less than Homer. (*Prose* 1: 163, 166)

¹³ “September 1913”, *Variorum* 289-90.

The figures here would have resonated for Yeats with the demigods of Kalidasa's play as well as his own poem inspired by that. In fact, he observes in a *Providence Sunday Journal* letter of the previous year that "[t]radition is always the same. The earliest poet of India and the Irish peasant in his hovel nod to each other across the ages, and are in perfect agreement" (*New Island* 97). Although there is not a tradition of "well-made" literature in Ireland as in Kalidasa's India or Homer's Greece, he detects ample potential for such great literature requiring merely some "deliberate craft" to which people like himself and Russell were ready to dedicate themselves. Crucially, that craft was not merely literary, but as he writes in his 1930 Diary apparently reflecting on the Revivalist ideologies, "I would found literature on [...] Freedom, God, Immortality" (*Explorations* 332).

In his chapter entitled "Danaan Mysteries: Occult Nationalism and the Divine Forms", Mark Williams discusses how, drawing upon O'Grady's work, both Russell and Yeats took upon themselves "to crystallize an iconography for the indigenous gods", which was by no means an easy job given that far from being "fixed", "the pantheon itself was a moving target, and Yeats himself was a central player in the process of retrieval and imaginative reshaping" (310-11).¹⁴ On the point of Yeats's "taxonomic" endeavour to "pigeonhole and classify" the Irish pantheon Tuatha De Danann,¹⁵ Williams discerns with Mary Helen Thuente a "three-way equation: the literary Tuatha De Danann = the ancient gods of Ireland = the fairies or Sidhe of folklore" (314-15). The intricate relationship among these three variously informs his writings at that time.¹⁶ From the mid-1890s he began with Lady Gregory "a large-scale survey of folklore and fairy-tale", resulting in a series of essays by Yeats published between then and 1902, and Lady Gregory's *Vision and Beliefs in the West of Ireland*, published in 1920 (Foster 1: 170). Reflecting on his collaborative work with Lady Gregory in his 1932 introduction to *An*

¹⁴ For a comparative analysis of Yeats and Russell's different approaches to this Revivalist iconography, see Williams 310-60.

¹⁵ "[T]he mythological Celtic conquerors of Ireland" (Brown 93).

¹⁶ Consider, for example, the prose anthologies such as *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry* (1888), *Irish Fairy Tales* (1892), and *The Celtic Twilight* (1893); the short-story collection *The Secret Rose* (1897); the Irish mythological poems of *Crossways* (1889), *The Rose* (1893), and *The Wind Among the Reeds* (1899); and the play *The Shadowy Waters* (conceived in the late 1880s, revised throughout the 1890s and beyond, this play was first staged in 1904), among other creative and journalistic works.

Indian Monk, Yeats writes that they felt to have tapped “into some fibrous darkness, into some matrix out of which everything has come” (*Later Essays* 132).¹⁷ In the mid-1890s, Yeats also conceived of the idea of founding a “Celtic Order of Mysteries in a Castle of the Heroes” inspired by the island of Castle Rock in Lough Key on a trip to County Roscommon with the folklorist and founder of the Gaelic League Douglas Hyde. His Golden Dawn guru Mathers was to provide the rituals with his muse Maud Gonne as well as A.E. working as fellow mystics (Brown 92-93; Williams 332-34). The objective was, in Brown’s words, “to infuse Irish reality, through symbolic rites and ritual enactments, with an ancient spirituality in which paganism and heterodox Christianity combined would help Ireland achieve a transcendent liberation from the crassly materialist world of England’s commercial empire” (92). This nicely sums up the interrelatedness of his mystical and cultural-nationalist missions. Although this particular Order failed to live up to its promise, the desire to revive or rebuild a lost spiritual tradition accommodating “paganism and heterodox Christianity” would remain with him, we will see, till the very end of his career.

“Folk-lore is at once the Bible, the Thirty-nine Articles, and the *Book of Common Prayer*, and well-nigh all the great poets have lived by its light”, writes Yeats in an 1893 article “The Message of the Folk-lorist” (*Early Articles* 210). In this mystic-poetic approach to Irish folklore, Yeats avoids, as he suggests in his introduction and headnotes to *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry* (1888), both scientific and literary approaches to the matter (*Prefaces* 7-8). However, as Sinéad Garrigan Mattar argues in her chapter on “Yeats, Celticism, and Comparative Science”, despite his initial “anti-scientism”, Yeats in the course of 1890s “increasingly had recourse to scientific discourse to support and justify” his own “occult mission” (*Primitivism* 44). This strategic use of science and rationality to justify his mystical theories and ideas sets the tone and attitude of much of his subsequent mystic-modern writings, including *A Vision*. The mystical idea that was at the heart of Yeats’s preoccupation with folklore in the last two decades of the nineteenth century, notes Mattar, was “that mankind in

¹⁷ In that 1932 introduction, Yeats of course finds these folk beliefs and tales “lacking” in “the explanatory intellect” which was supplied by the ascetic anecdotes of Shri Purohit (*Later Essays* 132).

his primitive state was the vessel of revealed religion and not the first link in an evolutionary chain” (*Primitivism* 42). Inspired by the Theosophical notion that “[e]volution actually occurred on the spiritual plane”, Yeats viewed it as to have happened “not through a gradual exfoliation of layers of animistic savagery, but through sudden revelation and reversal” (*Primitivism* 43, 65). Tagore too, we will see in the following chapter, takes a spiritual view of evolution, by modifying the scientific theories to suit his anthropocentric mystical vision.

However, rather than having to rely upon merely second-hand accounts of “revelation”, Yeats in the 1890s had his own mystical visions and revelations to experience first-hand. As he records it in *Trembling of the Veil* (1922):

It was at Coole that the first few simple thoughts that now, grown complex through their contact with other thoughts, explain the world, came to me from beyond my own mind. I practised meditations, and these, as I think, so affected my sleep that I began to have dreams that differed from ordinary dreams in seeming to take place amid brilliant light, and by their invariable coherence, and certain half-dreams, if I can call them so, between sleep and waking. [...] [I]t was during 1897 and 1898, when I was always just arriving from or just setting out to some political meeting, that the first dreams came. I was crossing a little stream near Inchy Wood and actually in the middle of a stride from bank to bank, when an emotion never experienced before swept down upon me. I said, “That is what the devout Christian feels, that is how he surrenders his will to the will of God”. I felt an extreme surprise, for my whole imagination was preoccupied with the pagan mythology of ancient Ireland, I was marking in red ink, upon a large map, every sacred mountain. The next morning I awoke near dawn, to hear a voice saying, “The love of God is infinite for every human soul because every human soul is unique; no other can satisfy the same need in God”. (*Autobiographies* 284-85)

This is a powerful revelation for the readers of Yeats as well. Given that he hardly documents his personal mystical experience, we too feel a no less “extreme surprise” than he did at his emotion of self-surrendering devotion for God in the manner of a proper mystic, as defined by Evelyn Underhill and S. N. Dasgupta (noted in the Introduction). This challenges the general

assumption that Yeats did not have any personal theistic faith or experience, but took merely a metaphorical interest in things religious or mystical. Based on this small but rich piece of evidence, one might presume that he may have had more of such experiences which he did not feel it right to register. In the first draft of his autobiography, written in 1916-1917 and published in *Memoirs* (1972), he records the above experience, in a slightly different form, along with a few similar ones, such as a dream vision in which he “was taken out of my body and into a world of light, and [...] I saw the mystic elements gather about my soul in a certain order”. He then relates how he could not describe some such visions to Lady Gregory because “I felt a difficulty in articulation and became confused”, and connects this to “what I had read of mystics not being always [able] to speak” of their experiences (127-28). It is also telling in this regard that Yeats’s 1921 inscriptions on the envelope which contained the above manuscript considered the material “Private” and “not for publication now if ever” (*Memoirs* 19n1).¹⁸ This suggests that there might have been some esoteric reasons for the dearth of personal mystical experiences in Yeats’s writing.

One should not, however, overemphasise such points. A few years after the occurrence of the above visions and revelations, in a 1906 prose piece from “Discoveries”, Yeats makes his position clear by making a distinction between the saint and the poet:

If it be true that God is a circle whose centre is everywhere, the saint goes to the centre, the poet and artist to the ring where everything comes round again. The poet must not seek for what is still and fixed, for that has no life for him; and if he did, his style would become cold and monotonous, and his sense of beauty faint and sickly. (*Essays and Introductions* 287)

This foreshadows the distinction he would later make between the primary and the antithetical (which will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 4). For the moment, it is important to

¹⁸ In his essay “Magic”, too, he admits to have deliberately excluded some details because of his intuitive feeling of betraying some mystical secrets. Even “I look at what I have written with some alarm, for I have told more of the ancient secret than many among my fellow-students think it right to tell” (*Essays and Introductions* 51).

observe that what he indirectly dissociates himself from in the above excerpt is not God as such, but a form of religion or mysticism which is “still and fixed” (the primary) as opposed to a creative and antithetical form of spirituality vitalised by the dynamism of cyclical recurrence (of human experience).

In the *Trembling of the Veil* excerpt above, Yeats emphasises the fact that the revelations of a Christian mystical kind happened to him at a time when he was immersed in “pagan mythology” and “sacred[ness]”, apparently validating the deep-rooted connection between paganism and Christianity that he wanted to unearth. If “since I was seventeen years old” he found “Irish Protestant point of view” dull and uninspiring because of its “blank abstraction”,¹⁹ he was, by 1897, overtly critical of what Foster calls “the philistine aspects of modern Catholicism” (1: 170). Rather than being unique to Yeats, such a stance seems to be quite typical of the mystic-occultist phenomena in general. Mircea Eliade sees the “modern” Western “craze” of the occult as part of a reaction to Christianity’s dismissal of “the mystery-religion type of secret initiation”: “As for the mystics and mystical experiences, the Western churches barely tolerated them. One can say that only Eastern Orthodox Christianity has elaborated and conserved a rich liturgical tradition and has encouraged both gnostic speculation and mystical experience” (63-64). As already proposed, in the fourth chapter I will dwell upon Yeats’s turn to Eastern Christianity before considering his return to the idea of a pagan-Christian union as well as to Indian mysticism—materials which kept him preoccupied in his early career discussed in this chapter.

By way of moving on to the next chapter on Tagore, it is worth remembering that as with Yeats’s detachment from both Protestantism and Catholicism, Tagore too dissociated himself from what he held to be the mechanical doctrines of Brahmoism as well as from the emotional excesses of popular Hindu cults, finding an alternative form of spirituality in the folk mysticism of the Bauls in the 1890s. However, what attracted him to the Bauls’ way, we have seen, was the absence of “exuberant distraction of legendary myths”. “[L]egendary myths” were

¹⁹ Introduction to *An Indian Monk* (1932), *Later Essays* 132.

exactly what Yeats sought for in folklore at least until the early 1900s.²⁰ Further, Tagore found in the Baul faith—or partly read into it—a simpler and more personalised version of what Yeats would later credit Purohit Swami’s book with, preferring it to the wisdom of the Irish peasantry: “an ancient discipline, a philosophy that satisfied the intellect” (*Later Essays* 132). The following chapter will demonstrate some of the ways in which “intellect” comes into play alongside his mystical sentiments in Tagore’s later thoughts and works.

²⁰ Mattar elsewhere argues that “after the first few years of the twentieth century” Yeats’s interest in the folklore becomes more and more “self-referential”, leaving behind “the breathless, hope-filled discovery of the ‘primitive excellent imagination’” (“Folklore” 253-54).

Chapter 3

The Spiritual Evolution of Man in Tagore

O great river,
Your water flows on
In a ceaseless stream forever—
Invisible, silent.
Your fierce massless motion throbs through the thrilled space,
Stirring up, by the blow of your raging current,
Masses of foam;
The universe cries out in clouds ablaze.
The darkness races, dispersing
Light rays dazzling in the waves of colours.
Swirling round in the eddies of water,
Layer upon layer,
Suns, moons, and stars expire
Like dissolving bubbles. (*Rabindra-rachanabali* 12: 20; translation mine)

The above excerpt is from poem no. 8 of *Balaka* (1916), the volume which marks a turning point in Tagore's literary career (Roy 89). In this translation I have tried to capture the energy and fluidity of the Bengali original while inevitably losing Tagore's sophisticated use of end-rhymes. The first stanza of the poem, as quoted above, originally rhymes as follows: abbacccddeeff. Repeating the abba or abbaa pattern only twice more (lines 52-55, and 79-83) in its intricate fabric of 92 lines, the poem with its manifest predilection for the successive rhyming in couplets, triplets, or quadruplets sonically evokes the impression of the forward-moving, yet diverse, current of a river.¹ A careful look at these lines reveals that the river

¹ These "rhymed lines (usually couplets) of irregular length and varying prosody" are known as "the muktabandha or 'free-bound' verse-form" which Tagore used from *Balaka* onwards with a view to liberating the verse form from a strict metrical patterning (S. Ghosh, Introduction 29).

symbolises some imperceptible but dynamic cosmic power vibrating throughout the universe which is alive with the conflict between the material (“masses of foam”) and the immaterial (“massless motion”). Hence the occasionally violent diction and imagery: “fierce”, “raging current”, and “clouds ablaze”. This power, strictly speaking, is too mobile to be indicative of the Upanishadic Brahma, and too impersonal to stand for the poet’s own Life-Deity. With its unseen “massless motion” and racing “darkness”, its “[l]ight rays dazzling in the waves of colours” and planetary bodies “[s]wirling” and “dissolving”, the cosmology depicted here betrays a close affinity with the natural sciences.

From a very early age, Tagore was interested in astronomy and the life sciences, among other branches of science. His first published prose piece was an essay (“Grahagan Jiber Abashbhumi”) written at the age of 12 on the possibility of life’s existence in the terrestrial planets. Tagore mentions this work in the dedication of his mature publication on science, *Visvaparichay* (an introduction to the universe, 1937), intended as a self-learning primer for a general readership (D. Chattopadhyay 15-16, 32). Between these two poles of his career, Tagore continued to update himself on the development of modern science, reading works by the biologists Thomas Henry Huxley and Alfred Russel Wallace; the philosopher, scientist, and sociologist Herbert Spencer; the botanist Julius von Sachs; the astronomers Norman Lockyer and Simon Newcomb; and others (B. Chattopadhyay 27; D. Chattopadhyay 31-32; Paul 2: 148). Writing to Ajitkumar Chakravarty from Illinois on 30 January 1913, Tagore looks forward to the possibility of meeting Henri Bergson in New York (Paul 6: 364). Whether or not that possibility materialised, Tagore certainly met Bergson in Paris in 1920 and “had very long discussions” with him, according to the reminiscence of his son Rathindranath (126). Apart from that, Tagore also met Albert Einstein several times in 1926 and 1930 (Dutta and Robinson 272, 293).

Despite this lifelong interest in science, God was not “dead” for Tagore, as He was for Friedrich Nietzsche; and, for all their similarities, Tagore’s Great Man is not a Nietzschean Superman if only for the essentially moral nature of the former (*Zarathustra* 6-7). As this chapter will demonstrate, Tagore’s faith in an eclectic mystical spirituality persisted alongside

his knowledge of and contemplations on modern science. A notable expression of this coexistence is found in the artistic synthesis of Upanishadic theism, Baul mysticism, and evolutionary theories contained in *The Religion of Man* (1931), originally delivered as the Hibbert Lectures at Oxford in 1930. However, if he sounds poised and confident in his lectures and essays, his poetical self is less self-assured and more ambivalent. Accordingly, as this chapter argues, Tagore's late poetry from *Balaka* onwards reflects a divided psyche torn between the demands of a mystical credulity and modern scepticism. We will also consider some earlier cases foreshadowing this mode, although there it is more the exception than the rule.

In order to appreciate the relevance of this chapter to the overall scheme of the thesis, it is helpful briefly to consider the connection between science and modernity in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Bengal. Tagore's interest in science was part of his cultural inheritance. As Dipankar Chattopadhyay points out, science played an important role in the Bengal Renaissance. He mentions two key events in this regard: the formation in 1835 of Calcutta Medical College, which was patronised by Tagore's grandfather Dwarakanath, among others; and, much later in 1876, of the Indian Association for the Cultivation of Science which would eventually turn into an eminent research institution in India. However, the way science influenced the spirit of Renaissance modernity in the nineteenth century was by disseminating a scientific consciousness or attitude to life. Reformers like Rammohan Roy wanted to promote rational thinking and a scientific frame of mind as part of their social and religious reforms (D. Chattopadhyay 18-19). When the first Council of Education in India, having been charged with educating the "natives", moved towards the teaching of the Sanskrit language, Roy protested that initiative. Referring to the importance of Francis Bacon in enlightening the minds of the British people, he stressed in a letter to the Governor-General the value of what he termed "a more liberal and enlightened system of instruction [for India,] embracing Mathematics, Natural Philosophy, Chemistry, Anatomy, with other useful sciences" (Sastri 57-58). Commenting on Rammohan's step against Sanskrit education, the prominent Brahmo writer Sivanath Sastri considers this "to be characteristic of the great man whom Providence had designed to be the

maker of New India” (58). It is intriguing that these religious figures saw a providential design in replacing the “sacred” language of Sanskrit with a science-based modern education.

This reveals a great deal about the nature of modernity that these Renaissance men of Bengal were promoting for their nation. They appropriated the new secular and/or scientific ideas of Western Enlightenment in order to reform their religious institutions, not to eliminate them. We have seen in Chapter 1 how Rammohan did not see his pursuit of a scientific attitude as incompatible with his eclectic-monotheistic religious faith rooted, in part, in the pre-Puranic Hindu scriptures. We have also seen that Debendranath Tagore sought to qualify the quasi-deistic rationalism of Rammohan’s Brahmoism. At the same time, despite his personal reservations, Debendranath allowed Akshay Kumar Datta, the founding editor of the Brahmo journal *Tattvabodhini Patrika*, to publish articles with a rationalist, and often subversive, approach to theology (Sastri 108-09). Furthermore, partly due to the dearth of a proper institutional environment for scientific research and partly because of the social-reformist drive of these Bengali enlightened intelligentsia, the prime medium of cultivation of science or scientific thinking at that time was literature, facilitating the remarkable perfection of modern Bengali prose between the era of Rammohan and that of Rabindranath. Science was thus a crucial element in the fledging ideologies of modernity in nineteenth-century Bengal (D. Chattopadhyay 18, 20-21).

While Tagore inherited the scientific spirit of the Bengal Renaissance, viewing it synonymously with modernity, he was wary of “wrong application[s]” of both science and modernity. As he puts it in *Nationalism* (1917),

True modernism is freedom of mind, not slavery of taste. It is independence of thought and action[.] [...] It is science, but not its wrong application in life[.] [...] Life based upon mere science [...] is [a] superficial life. It pursues success with skill and thoroughness, and takes no account of the higher nature of man. (75-76)

Tagore here propounds the idea of a “true”, universal modernity, which is a mental attitude closely associated with the freedom of spirit.² Science should be warmly welcomed as a conduit of this universal modernity, although it should not be allowed to compromise the “higher nature of man” which is spiritual in a holistic sense. Accordingly, as the following sections will demonstrate, his creative engagement with selective scientific topics and concerns leaves room for the imagination of higher spiritual-humanist ideals. While the notions of cosmic evolution provide him with a scope to cling to some non-materialist energy, Bergsonian vitalist ideas support his mystical views of human consciousness, and the biological evolution theories he seems to rely on voice humanist sentiments of an essentially moralist kind. Further, Tagore takes a similar selective approach to his reading and appropriation of Indian religious and/or mystical materials, prioritising the universal, humanist elements in them over the crudely ritualistic and overly transcendental.

I

In the excerpt from *Balaka* 8 quoted at the start of this chapter, we have noted the images of the “fierce [...] raging current”, “clouds ablaze”, and the celestial bodies vanishing like “bubbles”. However, later in the poem, the poet tries to infuse some meaning into this cosmic death-dance.

O restless dancer, sylph celestial,
Invisible beauty,
The heavenly stream of your dance, pouring down ceaselessly,
Purifies the life of the universe
Through death’s holy bath.
The infinite sky reveals itself in pristine azure blue. (*Rabindra-rachanabali* 12: 22;
translation mine)

² Although in this particular context, Tagore is addressing a Japanese audience, cautioning them against a mindless mimicry of Western-influenced external modernisation, the essential argument quoted here reveals his general attitude towards modernity and science.

Notwithstanding the illusion of an Upanishadic moral of self-sacrifice in the idea of a death-transcending purification, this statement actually follows on from the quasi-scientific utterance that if this living stream of motion stops momentarily, “the universe will fill up with mountains of matters; | Lame, dumb, dull, deaf, and blind” (*Rabindra-rachanabali* 12: 21-22; translation mine). It is in this sense that the dancing “heavenly stream” keeps life pure. Hence the poet finds an irresistible inspiration in the dynamism of this primordial motion:

You are rendered restless, Poet,
By the jingling girdle of the universe,
The causeless, endless motion of the viewless feet. (*Rabindra-rachanabali* 12: 22;
translation mine)

Hence the poem ends with such autosuggestions as not to “look back” and follow the “call” of “the ahead”, moving “[a]way from the clamorous behind | Towards fathomless darkness—unbounded light” (*Rabindra-rachanabali* 12: 23; translation mine). There is, however, a subtle suggestion of uncertainty and ambivalence about the future in the juxtaposed images of “fathomless darkness” and “unbounded light”. This is a troubling enough conclusion given that too often in Tagore light is used as a symbol of spiritual hope and of life. In another poem from the same volume, “The Storm-Crossing” (poem no. 37), for example, the poet observes after presenting a bleak picture of reality: “Will not | [d]aylight at length by night’s ascetic toil be brought?” (236). Even in the final line of poem no. 8, the phrase “fathomless darkness” is followed, once and for all, by “unbounded light”, in a tenuous poetic attempt to hold on to light in what looks like a Godless and potentially meaningless universe. Note, also, the dash (instead of comma) that connects the two phrases, possibly implying a directionality, an evolution from the former to the latter.

However, Tagore cannot but have been aware that, as Huxley writes in his 1893 lecture *Evolution and Ethics*, “the most obvious attribute of the cosmos is its impermanence. It assumes the aspect not so much of a permanent entity as of a changeful process, in which naught endures save the flow of energy and the rational order which pervades it” (50). Tagore published a

Bengali essay on this lecture of Huxley in 1893 or 1894.³ Tagore appears to have read about Darwin’s theory of evolution through other writers such as Huxley, Spencer, and Wallace. (He also wrote an article summarising Spencer’s opinion on the origin and utility of music,⁴ and I will discuss his reading of Wallace later in this chapter.) As suggested earlier, Tagore takes from these writers only those elements he finds to his liking. Towards the end of his lecture, Huxley states that “[t]he theory of evolution encourages no millennial anticipations. If, for millions of years, our globe has taken the upward road, yet, some time, the summit will be reached and the downward route will be commenced” (85). As a humanist thinker of generally optimistic temperament, Tagore would not want to give up on “millennial anticipations” and therefore suppresses the grim prediction articulated in the second half of Huxley’s last sentence above. More often than not, Tagore’s view of evolution is an upwardly mobile, progressive, anthropocentric view, compatible with a mystical notion of spiritual becoming.

Inasmuch as modern treatment of the problem of impermanence is concerned, Tagore seems to find the intuitions of Henri Bergson convincing. Writing about the *Balaka* volume, and the poems we discuss here in particular, Satyendranath Roy discerns in them a similarity with the “Creative Evolution” theory of Bergson (129-30). We have seen from his letter to Ajitkumar Chakravarty that Tagore was at least aware of Bergson and his works by 1913. Bergson’s 1907 book *Creative Evolution* was critiqued by Bertrand Russell in 1912 in *The Monist*, and his 1913 lecture at Columbia University was widely publicised by an article in *The New York Times* (Lawlor and Leonard n.p.). During his stay in England and America in 1912-1913, Tagore may have read those articles and/or Bergson’s works. Bergson’s theory of the consciousness-matter dualism would have appealed to the poet. Here is a passage from *Creative Evolution*:

Life as a whole, from the initial impulsion that thrust it into the world, will appear as a wave which rises, and which is opposed by the descending movement of matter. [...]

³ “Kartabyaneeti: Adhyapak Huxleyr Mat” (Ethics: Professor Huxley’s Opinion), 1300 Bengali year, *Rabindra-rachanabali* 12: 478-84.

⁴ “Sangiter Utpatti o Upajogita: Herbert Spencerer Mat” (The Origin and Utility of Music: Herbert Spencer’s Opinion), written in 1881 or 1882 (1288 Bengali year); Hossain 2: 631-36.

[T]his rising wave is consciousness, and, like all consciousness, it includes potentialities without number which interpenetrate[.] [...] The matter that it bears along with it, and in the interstices of which it inserts itself, alone can divide it into distinct individualities. On flows the current, running through human generations, subdividing itself into individuals. (284)

This description of the creative surge of consciousness from the beginning of life through the emergence of individual souls, its complex interrelationship with matter, as well as the innumerable potentialities of consciousness would have struck a chord with Tagore and do indeed sound similar to the opening stanza of “The Restless One” quoted at the start of this chapter. Also to Tagore’s liking would have been the fact that Bergsonian philosophy allows human consciousness the possibility of freedom from a mere material existence: “Once freed, [...] consciousness can turn inwards on itself, and awaken the potentialities of intuition which still slumber within it”. What is more, according to Bergson, “not only does consciousness appear as the motive principle of evolution, but also, among conscious beings themselves, man comes to occupy a privileged place. Between him and the animals the difference is no longer one of degree, but of kind” (*Creative* 192). As we will see in the next section, Tagore’s anthropocentric views of evolution rely heavily on a qualitative superiority of human beings over other animals.

The quality-quantity dichotomy in Bergson is deeply connected with the time-space distinction that he made in *Time and Free Will* (1889). This book also introduced his famous concept of *la durée*. “Pure duration”, he writes there, “is the form which the succession of our conscious states assumes when our ego lets itself *live*, when it refrains from separating its present state from its former states”. Neither complete absorption “in the passing sensation or idea” nor oblivion of the “former states” yields this experience of pure duration, but a condition of consciousness which “forms both the past and the present states into an organic whole, as happens when we recall the notes of a tune, melting, so to speak, into one another” (*Time* 100; emphasis in original). This pure and unitary “qualitative multiplicity”, Bergson is aware, is a reflective category which cannot be expressed in words: “the idea of a multiplicity without

relation to number or space, although clear for pure reflective thought, cannot be translated into the language of common sense” (*Time* 121-22). This potential ineffability, coupled with its intuitive leaning, attaches a mystical quality to Bergson’s philosophy.

Evelyn Underhill, whose 1911 masterpiece *Mysticism* included a chapter on “Mysticism and Vitalism” (Part 1, Chapter 2), published an article in 1912 entitled “Bergson and the Mystics” wherein she views Bergson as “a mediator between [the] inarticulate explorers of the Infinite and the map-loving human mind” (511). Comparing the ideas of the French philosopher to the mystical experiences of Dionysius the Areopagite, John van Ruysbroeck, Richard Jefferies, Jacob Boehme, Angela of Foligno, St. Augustine, Jalaluddin Rumi, and others, Underhill observes that,

with the twentieth century, Bergson brings their [the mystics’ and the contemplatives’] principles and their practice into immediate relation with philosophy: telling us [...] how great and valid may be the results of that new direction of mental movement, that alteration and intensification of consciousness, which is the secret of artistic perception, of contemplation and of ecstasy. (512-13, 518, 520)

True to the spirit of Bergsonian fluidity, Underhill collapses the sister disciplines of mysticism, philosophy, and art in a way that is helpful for our purposes. To this can be added the collation of the discourses of science and philosophy in Bergson’s works. Both Tagore and Yeats are prone to such porousness of disciplinary borders. Writing about contemporary Irish literature in “A Symbolic Artist and the Coming of Symbolic Art” (1898), Yeats reflects upon “a company of Irish mystics who have taught for some years a religious philosophy” which “has changed its symbolism from time to time” without ever ceasing to “take a great part of its colour and character from one lofty imagination” (*Prose* 2: 133). And in the next chapter, I will discuss Yeats’s *A Vision* and relevant literature, which blur the distinctions between philosophy, religion, mysticism, arts, and science.

What Underhill calls the “new direction of mental movement” in Bergsonian philosophy—from intellect to intuition, from the external (spatial) solidity to the internal (temporal) fluidity of experience—found its artistic analogues in modernist writers of different

camps. Shiv K. Kumar's 1962 study of Bergson's influence on "the stream of consciousness novel" discussed the works of Dorothy Richardson, Virginia Woolf, and James Joyce. More recently, Mary Ann Gillies has analysed the impact of Bergson's ideas on different stylistic and thematic aspects of "British Modernism". She traces Bergsonian influence in the Imagist manifestos of Ezra Pound, particularly in his definition of the image,⁵ as well as in Virginia Woolf's anti-materialist aesthetic theories, especially in her preoccupation with "moments of being" which Gillies views as literary counterparts of Bergsonian "pure *durée*". Furthermore, Bergson's influence is noticeable, argues Gillies, in the pre-eminence of intuition, memory, epiphany, and a multiplicity of selves in the works of Woolf and James Joyce; as well as in T. S. Eliot's literary concerns with much of the above plus language, "historical sense", impersonality, and the "objective correlative" (48, 58-59, 62, 64, 69-71, 73, 109, 113-14, 116, 124, 134, 136). Although Gillies understandably does not include Yeats in her reading of "British Modernism", Bergson's theory of time, as Katherine Ebury has pointed out, was of "strong interest" to the Yeatses, if with some ambivalence on the part of the poet Yeats. Ebury sees this interest as symptomatic of the supposed similarity of Bergson's notion of time with theories of relativist science which, she mainly contends, stirred Yeats's imagination (175).

To return to Tagore, what Gillies writes about Eliot contains the gist of my argument about Bergson's importance for Tagore: "Bergson's philosophy, especially its discussion of time, [...] seemed able to embody the changes wrought by the widespread acceptance of evolutionary theory, while retaining a hint of the absolute Eliot wanted to preserve" (68). However, if Eliot in 1911 found Bergson's *durée* "simply not final" (Gillies 62, 68-69), Bergson's ideas seem to have been met with a more welcome reception from Tagore's mystic-modern world view with its increasing preference for keeping any metaphysical notion of finality at bay.

⁵ Note, in particular, the final of the three key points in Pound's 1913 manifesto: "As regarding rhythm: to compose in sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of a metronome"; and his definition of the image as "that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time" (qtd. in Gillies 48).

The most representative poem of Tagore's *Balaka*, poem no. 36, is redolent with the idea of becoming, of going to an undefined "somewhere else". The poet-speaker finds himself in a romantic setting by the side of the river Jhelum (in Srinagar, Kashmir)⁶ after sunset when, as the opening lines of the poem go:

Glimmering in evening's colours, Jhelum's curved stream
faded in the dark, like a sheathed
curved sword.
The day ebbed. Night, in full flood,
rushed in, star-flowers afloat in its black waters. (*I Won't* 157)

As in poem no. 8, here too the consciousness seems to turn inward "like a sheathed | curved sword"; and once again we have the image of a river used as a metaphor for the sky: "star-flowers afloat in its black waters". The central metaphor of this poem, though, is the flight of a flock of wild geese (*balaka*):

Suddenly that instant I heard
a sound's lightning-flash in the evening sky:
it darted across that tract of empty space,
then receded—further, further—till it died.

This "sumptuous whoosh" of geese flying overhead momentarily disturbs the meditative quietude of "Creation", thrilling everything "with excitement" at "velocity's passion": "How the universe cried with longing— | Not here, no, not here, somewhere else!" (*I Won't* 157-58). In the original, the Bengali word "shabda" (*Rabindra-rachanabali* 12: 57), which Dyson has reasonably translated as "sound" in the second line of the last block quotation, is resonant with its other meaning: "word", intensifying the poem's attempt to give voice to an inexpressible inner quality of creation. For the poet-speaker, the sound/word of the wild wings functions as an epiphany, combining a romantic desire for an ideal future or some visionary unknown with a

⁶ Tagore recalls that the poem was conceived while sitting on the roof of a boat on Jhelum in Srinagar, and compares that experience to his stay on his boat on the river Padma in East Bengal (K. Sen, *Balaka* 194).

central concern of modern science: that of motion or velocity. The epiphany launches the speaker into an experience of “pure duration” in which he sees and hears “into the life of things” (in a Wordsworthian⁷ or a Bergsonian sense). He envisions the mountains and forests “travelling with outspread pinions [...] from one unknown to another” (*I Won't* 158). In its final stanza, the poem turns to the human world, imagining a continued human existence across generations:

Many are the human speeches I've heard migrating
in flocks, flying on invisible tracks
from obscure pasts to distant inchoate futures. (*I Won't* 159)

Starting from a specific point in the poem's present—evening—we enter (imaginatively) an endlessly mobile eternal present, spanning “[f]rom obscure pasts to distant inchoate futures”. Thus, both of these *Balaka* poems celebrate “[t]he causeless, endless motion”, to repeat the quintessential phrase of “The Restless One”.

Explaining “The Restless One” to a group of colleagues at Santiniketan, Tagore recalls how sitting under the clear sky of a winter evening in Allahabad, the endless darkness of the firmament seemed in his imagination to be the deep stream of creation. Remembering the forceful currents of his favourite Bengali river Padma, he comments on his symbolic river-image that the movement of this stream is unseen and unfelt, its visible surface strewn with the foamy substance of planets and stars: “the deep, infinite motion underneath can only be perceived by meditation” (K. Sen, *Balaka* 72-73; translation mine). Tagore then moves through discussion of the endless circles of waves to the cyclical nature of living organisms including trees and human beings, and quotes a Baul saying to the effect that our body is a microcosmic form of the whole universe (K. Sen, *Balaka* 73). Without attaching too much importance to the poet's retrospective analysis of his own poem, this free assimilation of disparate thought materials evinces the adaptability of his creative mind. Understandably, therefore, when asked if Bergson's thoughts influenced this poem, Tagore cannot produce a direct answer but says that

⁷ For a comparable mystical moment of revelation in William Wordsworth, see “Lines Written A Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey”: “with an eye made quiet by the power | Of harmony, and the deep power of joy, | We see into the life of things” (132-33).

he has read Bergson's writings with high regard and has met him the previous year (K. Sen, *Balaka* 75).⁸ That said, he stresses that the idea of motion is also vital in Indian spirituality—in the Upanishads, Buddhist thoughts, and medieval mysticism (K. Sen, *Balaka* 75, 77). Elsewhere in a similar discussion of *Balaka*, he re-emphasises this point, declaring: “Shankaracharya has considered Brahma as immovable and motion as maya, but the Upanishads do not make such distinctions. [...] They say—‘That moves, That moves not’” (K. Sen, *Balaka* 125; translation mine). Not only does this demonstrate Tagore's self-conscious resistance to being tagged to a Western philosopher, but also illustrates his inner ideological wavering between the roles of a preacher and a poet. The preacher in him cannot dispense with the Upanishadic registers even when his poems can do away with any transcendental divinity.

However, Tagore rightly points out in his analysis of the *Balaka* poem that the idea of motion is nothing new in his literary oeuvre but has existed since “The Spring Wakes from its Dream” (K. Sen, *Balaka* 77). Written in 1882, this early poem contains such lines as:

The soul awakes, the waters stir:

I cannot stem my heart's passion, my heart's desire.

The earth shudders and quakes

And the massive rocks roll down,

The swollen foaming flood

Rages with furious groans [...] (45)

The motif is, once again, that of streaming water, symbolising this time the awakening of “soul” or life (“pran”), and its victorious journey defying the barriers of matter. This is also suggestive of the flow of creative consciousness. It is telling that in the chapter entitled “The Vision” in *The Religion of Man*, Tagore calls the revelatory experience that was behind the birth of this poem his “first” “religious experience”, narrating how while gazing at the rising sun one day, “I suddenly felt as if some ancient mist had in a moment lifted from my sight, and the

⁸ These undated discourses are collected by Kshitimohan Sen over a period of some 20-25 years (Mukhopadhyay 184). However, from Tagore's statement that he had met Bergson the previous year, this particular discourse can be dated to 1921, given that he met the French philosopher in 1920.

morning light on the face of the world revealed an inner radiance of joy”.⁹ And this is how he interprets the central metaphor of the poem: “The waterfall, whose spirit lay dormant in its ice-bound isolation, was touched by the sun and, bursting in a cataract of freedom, it found its finality in an unending sacrifice, in a continual union with the sea” (55). The (spiritual) idea of a unitary self-sacrifice is coupled here with that of the cyclical nature of things. However, as the manuscript of his autobiography *Jibansmriti* reveals, at the time when the poem was written, Tagore was an engrossed reader of Huxley and works of astronomy by Lockyer and Newcomb (Paul 2: 148). It seems, then, that in voicing the first significant spiritual experience of his life he was consciously or subconsciously drawing upon his favourite fields of natural science. Even the confessedly “religious” experience itself—sparked by his contemplation of the rising sun¹⁰—might have been partly informed by those readings. As also in the case of Yeats, Tagore’s eclectic mind internalised and appropriated the diverse materials of his knowledge in a way that makes it hard to prioritise one influence over another.

II

In his draft of *Europe Jatrir Diary* (The Diary of a Traveller to Europe), written during his second visit to Europe in 1890, Tagore keeps the record of having “finished reading” Alfred Russel Wallace’s *Darwinism* and “liked it a lot—especially the last chapter” (191; translation mine). In that chapter, entitled “Darwinism Applied to Man”, Wallace qualifies the view that the whole nature of man as well as “all his faculties, whether moral, intellectual, or spiritual, have been derived from their rudiments in the lower animals, in the same manner and by the action of the same general laws as his physical structure has been derived” (461). Analysing the nature and evolution of “the organic world”, Wallace propounds the existence of “causes of a higher

⁹ For a similar account of this epiphany in his *Jibansmriti*, see its English translation *My Reminiscences* 217.

¹⁰ A little before recounting the “religious” vision in *The Religion of Man*, Tagore recalls his “sense of serene exaltation” caused by the regular utterance of *Rigveda*’s “*gāyatrī* verse of meditation” which he translates as: “Let me contemplate the adorable *splendour* of Him who created the earth, the air and the starry spheres, and sends the power of comprehension within our minds” (54, second emphasis mine).

order than those of the material universe”, reaching this powerful conclusion: “the whole purpose, the only *raison d’être* of the world [...] was the development of the human spirit in association with the human body” (475-77). Little wonder that this theory of a spiritual anthropocentrism, nevertheless compatible with the scientific laws of evolution, appealed to Tagore’s mystic-modern sensibility.

Hence, in the *Diary* draft that we are considering, Tagore writes in response to Wallace’s book:

The law of *survival of the fittest* is probably continuing even in the *Spiritual Man*—although he has a different type of life and death. It is this *spiritual survival* that the rishis asked for when they prayed “*mṛityormamṛitaṃ gamayo*” [take me from death to immortality]. They prayed for the perfection of the soul that we have got. (191; translation mine; italicised words in English in the original)

It is worth mentioning that Chapter 5 of Wallace’s *Darwinism* is entitled, “Natural Selection by Variation and Survival of the Fittest” (102), although Tagore here is clearly responding to the following statement in his favourite final chapter of Wallace’s book: “The law of Natural Selection or the survival of the fittest is, as its name implies, a rigid law, which acts by the life or death of the individuals submitted to its action” (469).¹¹ Continuing to summarise and freely analyse Wallace’s contentions, Tagore reflects that unlike the plants and the animals, men’s major mental virtues or qualities (“*chittabrittī sakal*”) are not essential for the survival of their lives, and wonders: “Who knows what higher essentials are these apparently inessential qualities leading us to” (*Diary* 191-92; translation mine). Again, if it seems that “[t]he laws of *natural selection* kind of stopped having come to the human life—one cannot clearly understand what its final outcome is” (*Diary* 195-96; translation mine; italicised words in English in the original). Drawing upon Wallace’s ideas and seamlessly fusing them with the spiritual wisdom of the Upanishadic rishis, Tagore thus holds the purpose of human life to be spiritual perfection. But a potential ambivalence in Tagore’s mystic-modern idealism is also in operation here. If on

¹¹ Tagore also possessed (since 1891) Spencer’s *The Principles of Biology* (D. Chattopadhyay 32), wherein Spencer coined the term “survival of the fittest” in 1864.

the one hand he is certain that the goal of human evolution is the “essentials” which, however indistinct at the moment, are certainly of a “higher” nature, on the other hand he is uncertain about the very nature of “its final outcome”. While the latter uncertainty will be most acutely expressed in some of his later poems, Tagore’s general penchant is for the undefined or half-defined mysticism implied in the former certitude.

In his 1930 Oxford Hibbert Lectures *The Religion of Man* (published in 1931), Tagore synthesises to great effect what he found in Wallace (and other evolutionary writers) with Indian theistic and mystic-humanist idealism. In order to avoid puzzling over Tagore’s idiosyncratic use of the term “religion” as well as the ideological baggage he imposes upon the generic “Man” in this book and elsewhere, it is helpful to look at the following excerpt from its third chapter, “The Surplus in Man”:

Each age reveals its personality as dreamer in its great expressions [...] [which] may not be consciously religious, but indirectly they belong to Man’s religion. For they are the outcome of the consciousness of the greater Man in the individual men of the race. This consciousness finds its manifestation in science, philosophy and the arts, in social ethics, in all things that carry their ultimate value in themselves. These are truly spiritual and they should all be consciously co-ordinated in one great religion of Man, representing his ceaseless endeavour to reach the perfect in great thoughts and deeds and dreams, in immortal symbols of art, revealing his aspiration for rising in dignity of being. (36-37)

Let us concentrate, first, on the distinction between “the greater Man” and “the individual men of the race”. Also called “[i]deal Man” and “transcendental Man” (36-37), the former stands for whatever is “great” or “ideal” in human “consciousness” and “expressions”, and is represented by the essentially human expressive faculties like science, arts, philosophy, and ethics. These discourses are “truly spiritual” because their “ultimate value” resides “in themselves”. In other words, as Tagore has already noted in Wallace, they are not essential for man’s physical existence. Man’s religion, then, consists in these “truly spiritual” or truly humane faculties. These are also universal, because they represent the collective effort of men of all ages and all

racess, renewed by the fresh contribution of “[e]ach age”, but nevertheless part of one “ceaseless endeavour” of Man towards an endless process of self-realisation. Man, therefore, “has a feeling that he is truly represented in something which exceeds himself. He is aware that he is not imperfect, but incomplete” (36). This awareness of his perfection is not a quality of individual man but of the greater Man; and this ideal of perfection, though potentially present from the beginning of human evolution, needs to be endlessly realised by a collective effort in human civilisation. This civilisational self-realisation is a process which is ever-evolving and hence “incomplete”. What drives the individual man forward is a spiritual-evolutionary “feeling”, instinct, or intuition¹² which inspires him to see himself in that which “exceeds himself”.

Much of this can be traced back to his scientific reading that I have already outlined. Huxley, for example, notes that “the ethical progress of society depends, not on imitating the cosmic process, still less in running away from it, but in combating it. [...] The history of civilisation details the steps by which men have succeeded in building up an artificial world within the cosmos” (83). While mostly endorsing this view, Tagore transforms what is “artificial” in Huxley into the “spiritual”, because, like Wallace, he believes in a higher, spiritual purpose for human existence and evolution. The final chapter of Wallace’s *Darwinism* includes such sections on man’s “Mathematical”, “Musical and Artistic Faculties”. The crux of Wallace’s argument, as already suggested, is that these human faculties have no essential bearings on man’s “survival in the struggle for existence” (464-69). Similarly, two of the fifteen chapters of Tagore’s *The Religion of Man* are called “The Music Maker” and “The Artist” (69, 74). The idea of the essential superfluity of the characteristically human qualities, common to the evolutionary writers Tagore read, is incorporated into his “surplus” theory: “above the din of the clamour and scramble rises the voice of the Angel of Surplus, of leisure, of detachment from the compelling claim of physical need” (28). Associating the value of “the surplus” with an

¹² Intuition and intellect are two important concepts in Bergson as well. A prerequisite for the recognition of “the unity of the spiritual life”, intuition “is a lamp almost extinguished, which only glimmers now and then, for a few moments at most. But it glimmers wherever a vital interest is at stake” (*Creative* 282). At their 1920 meeting, Bergson praised the intuitive “power of the Indian mind” as well as of Tagore as revealed in his prose works *Sadhana* (1913) and *Personality* (1917) and contrasted that with the precision of “the European mind” (Andrews 26-27).

important Eastern religious virtue, “detachment”, Tagore then goes on to show these to be essential qualities of the evolutionary man as well. Contrasting the snail’s house with man’s, he illustrates that “Man’s house need not grow on the foundation of his bones and occupy his flesh”. Not only does this “detachment” allow man to be ambitious in his house-building endeavour, but it also gives him “a sense of the eternal in his creative work” when he considers that being independent of his body, his shelter will (or might) endure beyond the life of its maker. In this way, “[f]rom his original serfdom as a creature Man takes his right seat as a creator” (28-29). Man’s biological evolution is thus compatible with his creative, affective, and moral qualities.

Such a holistic view of humanity, Tagore wants to show, is also sanctioned by scriptural authority. At the start of the chapter “The Surplus in Man”, he draws upon the *Atharva Veda*, translating some verses “in which the [Vedic] poet discusses his idea of Man, indicating some transcendental meaning” as follows:

Who was it that imparted form to man, gave him majesty, movement, manifestation and character, inspired him with wisdom, music and dancing? When his body was raised upwards he found also the oblique sides and all other directions in him—he who is the Person, the citadel of the infinite being. (32)

Tagore immediately connects this majestic “idea of Man” with a crucial fact of man’s evolution: his “erect [...] posture”, which is “a permanent gesture of insubordination” to Nature, “making it easy for us to turn on all sides and realize ourselves at the centre of things”. From this privileged position man gained the related boon of “view” as well as the freedom of hands and, most importantly, of mind “through his imagination” (32-33; emphasis in original). Despite drawing upon Upanishadic sources, Tagore makes clear that he is not interested in any extra-human Godhead. On the contrary, as he notes in his Bengali lectures *Manusher Dharma* (Man’s Religion, 1933),¹³ “the qualities that Atharva Veda talks about are all humane qualities. If with

¹³ Delivered at Calcutta University in 1933 and published in the same year, this collection of lectures, as its title indicates, deals with similar subject-matters to the Hibbert Lectures. However, it is a different book, not a mere translation of its English precursor (B. Chattopadhyay 35; Roy 136).

the help of those we realise some entity superfluous to our animal nature, that cannot be any non-human entity, but must be Man-Brahma” (*Rabindra-rachanabali* 20: 391; translation mine). The unusual compound noun “Man-Brahma” exposes the intensity of Tagore’s vacillation between a theocentric and an anthropocentric faith-system. Whereas this is a potentially heterodox construction, elsewhere in the Bengali book, he employs the orthodox philosophical term “saguna Brahma” or Brahma with qualities, and compares it to “Man-Brahma”. This wavering notwithstanding, the basic contention remains the same, because Tagore emphasises that “saguna Brahma” ideally contains all the external and internal qualities of man, and hence “the world of [saguna Brahma] is human world” (*Rabindra-rachanabali* 20: 393; translation mine). This is how Tagore blends the Upanishadic “idea of Man”, Renaissance anthropocentrism, scientific facts of human evolution, and his view of modernity into his syncretic “religion of Man”.

However, such syncretism, as Satyendranath Roy has rightly pointed out, has been made possible only by stretching the divergent concepts, often beyond recognition. Taking issue with Tagore’s contention in a 1931 letter to Hemanatabala Devi that he considers the Upanishads to be the foundation of all religions, Roy maintains that Tagore’s understanding of the Upanishads is a personalised and selective understanding (145-46). Here one is reminded again of Debendranath Tagore’s similar appropriation of the Upanishads to suit his spiritual preference for a dualist theism, as discussed in the first chapter. Tagore, too, we noted in that chapter, personalised his inherited Brahma faith to accord with the inner compulsion of his mystical sensibilities, finding inspiration in the Man-centred imagination of Baul mysticism. I already quoted there from *The Religion of Man* chapter “The Man of My Heart”, named after the Baul concept of “Maner Manush”. Suffices here to mention that the Baul songs Tagore translates and quotes in that chapter contain a preponderance of such words and phrases as “man”, “God-man”, “Divine Man”, “the truth of man”, and “Love”, suggesting, in his own words, “a direct perception of humanity as an objective truth that rouses a profound feeling of longing and love”. This, he significantly emphasises, is not any “intellectual cult of humanity” (64-65), which would often be of a secular and rationalist orientation. Tagore needs his God

who, as he puts it eloquently, “is God and man at the same time; and if this faith be blamed for being anthropomorphic, then Man is to be blamed for being Man” (66). Repudiating the concept of an abstract Brahma, he quotes from the Upanishads passages where “the supreme” is called “the Person” (purush) and adds that “a village poet [Baul] of East Bengal” similarly “sings of the Eternal Person within him, coming out and appearing before his eyes” (67). Tagore thus validates these highbrow and lowbrow mysticisms by each other, in a selective and appropriative manner.

The mystical search for “the Man of my heart” is symptomatic of a more general conviction that “[w]e can never go beyond Man in all that we know and feel” or, in the words of the Baul “mendicant” he quotes, “[o]ur world is as it is in our comprehension; [...] [e]verything would be lost in unconscious if man were nought” (*Religion of Man* 66). Tagore pursues a similar line of argument in his conversation with Albert Einstein. After his Oxford Hibbert Lectures in 1930, Tagore met Einstein at least four times in Germany and New York (Dutta and Robinson 293-94). One version of their very first conversation, published as “Note on the Nature of Reality”, is included in the appendix of *The Religion of Man*. Asked by the scientist if he believes “in the Divine as isolated from the world”, the poet replies in the negative, adding that “[t]he infinite personality of Man comprehends the Universe” and “the truth of the Universe is human truth” (*Religion of Man* 126). Tagore further explains that “[w]hat we call truth lies in the rational harmony between the subjective and objective aspects of reality, both of which belong to the super-personal man”. Seemingly dissatisfied with this definition of the “objective”, the physicist introduces the hypothesis that the table in his house will remain there even if there is no human being in that house to comprehend the object. Tagore retorts that the table will remain “outside the individual mind, but not outside the universal mind”. Our scientific mind, he suggests earlier in the conversation, corresponds to that universal human mind. Towards the end of the conversation, Tagore remarks that “if there be any truth absolutely unrelated to humanity then for us it is absolutely non-existing”, and the final statement Einstein makes is “[t]hen I am more religious than you are!” (*Religion of Man* 128). This is of course not the only time Einstein uses the word “religion” in this conversation. As regards his claim about

the existence of truth independent of the human mind, Einstein said, “I cannot prove that my conception is right, but that is my religion” (*Religion of Man* 127).

Einstein here seems to be alluding to his idea of “cosmic religious feeling” which he distinguishes, in a 1930 article “Religion and Science”, from the primitive “religion of fear” as well as “the social or moral religion” (36, 39). Experienced by “the individuals of exceptional endowment” including “[t]he religious geniuses of all ages” and devoid of any “anthropomorphic conception of God”, the “cosmic religious feeling” is in effect a cosmic mysticism characterised by a feeling of “sublimity and marvellous order [...] in nature and in the world of thought” as well as a desire “to experience the universe as a single significant whole” (38). Moreover, bridging the gap between science and religion, Einstein holds this “feeling” to be “the strongest and noblest motive for scientific research” (39). Although it is exactly such a sublime and “marvellous” “feeling” that Tagore’s poems such as *Balaka* 8 and 36 (among others) embody, at that 1930 meeting Tagore seems too preoccupied with his newly found “Religion of Man” to appreciate any human-independent idea of divinity. As for Einstein, in his contribution to *The Golden Book of Tagore* (1931), he touches upon the same point about anthropocentrism that he took issue with at their meeting a year earlier: “Man defends himself from being regarded as an impotent object in the course of the Universe. But should the lawfulness of events, such as unveils itself more or less clearly in inorganic nature, cease to function in front of the activities in our brain?” (Home and Robinson 529, 532). Given the account of Tagore’s take on natural laws and evolution outlined in this chapter, one can assume that Tagore’s response would have been to say that the “lawfulness” of nature found its greater perfection in human life. Moreover, Tagore would have been less interested in “activities” of the “brain” than that of consciousness which, he would have believed like Bergson, was independent of “the cerebral activity”.¹⁴ While sharing Einstein’s cosmic religious wonder at the

¹⁴ Note Bergson’s following argument in *Creative Evolution*: “Everything seems, therefore, to happen as if consciousness sprang from the brain, and as if the detail of conscious activity were modelled on that of the cerebral activity. In reality, consciousness does not spring from the brain; but brain and consciousness correspond because equally they measure, the one by the complexity of its structure and the other by the intensity of its awareness, the quantity of *choice* that the living being has at its disposal” (276-77; emphasis in original).

unitary “whole[ness]” of the universe, Tagore’s mysticism differs from Einstein’s on the crucial question of human consciousness.

Discussing the conflict between classical physics and quantum physics, as well as Einstein’s long-standing controversy with the Copenhagen interpretation of Niels Bohr and Werner Heisenberg, Dipankar Home and Andrew Robinson maintain that:

Tagore did not adhere either to Einstein’s realist, essentially objective position or to Bohr’s quasi-positivistic, essentially subjective view of nature, a position that, taken to its logical extreme, denies the existence of the physical world—or at least its dynamical properties—until they are measured. Tagore did not deny the existence of the table when nobody was in the house, but he argued that its existence becomes meaningful for us only when it is perceived by some conscious mind. (530, 532)

Tagore’s position, however, is not as straightforwardly rational or commonsensical as it appears in the above account. The table was always “meaningful” for him not only on the account of its being occasionally “perceived by some conscious mind”, but, more importantly, because of its being always under the domain of the consciousness of “the super-personal man”.¹⁵ As this crucial phrase embodies, Tagore collates the subjective and the objective, both of which for him remain in the realm of the human.

The emphasis on a holistic human consciousness is indeed crucial in Tagore’s conception of reality, as he puts it in a later poem, “I” (1936), which speaks interestingly to both his Hibbert Lectures and his tête-à-tête with Einstein:

It is by the colours of my consciousness

That the emerald is green,

The ruby red. (300)

¹⁵ It is intriguing that in a symposium on “Science, Philosophy and Religion” (published in 1941), Einstein would use the phrases “superpersonal value”, “superpersonal content”, and “superpersonal objects and goals” in trying to define the characteristic “aspirations” of a religious person (44-45), but never “superpersonal man”—a phrase he may have found oxymoronic.

By foregrounding subjective vision, this view potentially evokes Immanuel Kant's distinction between the "phenomena" ("appearances, beings of sense") and the "noumena" (things in themselves). In the second edition of *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant emphasises that "that which we call noumenon must be understood to be such only in a negative sense", that is, in the sense in which "we understand a thing insofar as it is not an object of our sensible intuition". Because trying to understand that "in a positive sense", as "an object of a non-sensible intuition", is erroneous since this presupposes "a special kind of intuition, namely intellectual intuition, [...] [which] lies absolutely outside our faculty of cognition" (360-62). Tagore, we have seen, held a similar absolutist position against the possibility of any human-independent experience for us in his argument with Einstein. He would, of course, have compared the Kantian "noumena" to the Advaita Vedantic Brahman. In fact, he brought up the latter concept in that conversation. When Einstein refers to "the Pythagorean theorem" to argue that "if there is a *reality* independent of man there is also a truth relative to this reality", Tagore puts forward the idea of Brahman as the "absolute Truth" adding that "such a truth cannot belong to Science. The nature of truth which we are discussing is an appearance [...] and may be called *maya*, or illusion" (*Religion of Man* 127; emphasis in original). Earlier in 1894, Tagore published a Bengali article in the journal *Sadhana*, summarising the German philosopher and Indologist Paul Deussen's "mat" or opinion of Vedanta.¹⁶ Entitled "Vedanter Bideshiya Byakhya" (foreign interpretations of Vedanta), that article compares Shanakra's interpretation of Vedanta to the idealist philosophies of Plato and Kant, arguing that whereas Shankara and Plato drew upon their inner convictions to contend that the world is nothing but *maya* and shadow respectively, Kant used logic and scientific analysis to prove that this temporally, spatially, and causally bound world is nothing but an effect of our minds (Hossain 2: 660). Although not original, this article nevertheless indicates that Tagore was in sympathy with the connection made by Deussen among these philosophers. We have seen in the second chapter that in his poems written around the time of this article,

¹⁶ Tagore does not give the name of the source piece by Deussen, but it is likely to be as follows: *The Philosophy of the Vedānta in its relation to the Occidental Metaphysics: An address delivered before the Bombay Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, Saturday, the 25th February, 1893*. Bombay: Education Society's Steam Press, 1893.

Tagore expressed his penchant for the phenomenal world without regarding it as illusory or unreal. He would therefore prefer the Kantian version of the world of experience to the Advaita Vedantic and Platonic ones, although his notion of “super-personal Man” as well as his Life-Deity mystically conflates the noumenal and the phenomenal, the objective and the subjective.

In the poem “I” Tagore takes a bold stance against the negative view of the ultimate reality upheld by the “metaphysician” (Vedantist?) chanting at every breath “No, no, no | No emerald, no ruby, no light, no rose”, as well as the objectivity of the “pundit” (scientist?) who views the “aged moon” as creeping “like death’s messenger | [t]owards the earth’s rib-cage” (300-01). As opposed to these realist attitudes—which Yeats, we will see, would call “the primary”—the poet advocates how things appear to the human eyes, to the human consciousness, adding that “these are [not] abstractions” but “truth, | [a]nd therefore poetry” (300). The word “truth” has a moral or spiritual-idealist sense for Tagore and seems synonymous with “the perfect” or “the eternal”. Thus, the poetic vision here merges with the mystic faith:

This is my pride,

Pride on behalf of all humanity.

Human pride is the canvas

For the divine artificer’s cosmic art. (300)

There is a threefold subjectivity at play here: the individual “I” (“my pride”),¹⁷ the collective “I” (“on behalf of all humanity”), and what he terms later in the poem as “the cosmic I” (301) (“the divine artificer”). What is, however, common to all these versions of self is the fact that they are always tied to human experience. Rather than being independent of or indifferent to the human, the divine is imagined as an “artificer” constructing his “cosmic art” on the “canvas” of “[h]uman pride”. In other words, as he put it in his penultimate statement to Einstein at that meeting, “my religion is in the reconciliation of the Super-personal Man, the Universal human

¹⁷ Rightly translated as “pride”, the word “ahamkar” in the original would also imply the sense of “ego” or “self” from Sanskrit “aham”.

spirit, in my own individual being” (*Religion of Man* 128). Such reconciliation also happens at times by smoothing out the edgy ruggedness of the individual perspectives.

During his European tour in 1930, Tagore also wrote his only poem in English, *The Child*. Inspired by a Passion Play he had watched at Oberammergau (Dutta and Robinson 293), this long poem dramatises his idea of the spiritual evolution of man. The start of the poem presents a sight of absolute confusion with a group of people groping in the chaos of darkness:

“What of the night?” they ask.

No answer comes.

For the blind Time gropes in a maze and knows not its path or purpose.

The darkness in the valley stares like the dead eye-sockets of a giant,

the clouds like a nightmare oppress the sky,

and the massive shadows lie scattered like the torn limbs of the night.

A lurid glow waxes and wanes on the horizon,—

is it an ultimate threat from an alien star,

or an elemental hunger licking the sky? [...]

Are they the cry of an ancient forest

flinging up its hoarded fire in a last extravagant suicide,

or screams of a paralytic crowd scourged by lunatics blind and deaf? (479)

The images of groping “blind Time”, a giant’s “dead eye-sockets”, nightmare-oppressed sky, “massive shadows”, night’s “torn limbs”, menacing “alien star”, “an elemental hunger licking the sky”, a suicidal “ancient forest”, and “a paralytic crowd” create the illusion of an evolutionary “waste land” seemingly before the advent of humanity. As the poem unfolds, however, this nightmarish world is peopled by human figures (the “they” of the first line), instead of struggling animals. This might contain a veiled comment on the moral bankruptcy of human civilisation. Years before in 1913, in another Oxford lecture at Manchester College entitled “Religion in Love”, Tagore bitterly criticised Western imperialist civilisation with this statement: “Civilisation can never sustain itself upon cannibalism of any form” (*Sādhanā* 112; Dutta and Robinson 174). Similar comments also appear in such collections as *Nationalism*

(1917) and “East and West” (*Creative Unity*, 1922).¹⁸ During his 1930 Europe tour, the *Manchester Guardian* of 16 May 1930 published the statement Tagore gave in the context of Mahatma Gandhi’s arrest in India, in which he denounced “Western race supremacy” and maintained that “Europe has completely lost her former moral prestige in Asia” (Dutta and Robinson 290-91). Therefore, his bitter awareness of contemporary international politics may have partly inspired the picture of a general human plight that we find in this poem.

The second section introduces the “Man of faith” crying “Brothers, despair not, for Man is great”, but the crowd does not trust him, “for they believe that the elemental brute is eternal” (480). However, when at the break of the dawn he proposes a “pilgrimage”, they follow him without fully understanding the real meaning of the venture. Taking this to be a “pilgrimage of fulfilment”, the crowd swells with men “gather[ed] from all quarters” of the world and all walks of life, many hoping for personal and selfish gains of various kinds (480-81). As the Man of faith leads them “on along pitiless paths”, the people become suspicious and start cursing him (482). With the confusion exacerbating at the nightfall, they blame him as a “[f]alse prophet” and kill him in a fit of madness (483). When they to their utter despair realise that there is nobody to show them the way, the old man from the East consoles them by saying that it is the Victim who can still lead them: “We refused him in doubt, we killed him in anger, now we shall accept him in love” (483). Led by the “spirit of the Leader [...] within them”, they carry on (484). When the morning dawns again, the sky-reader among them ensures by the sign of the stars that they have come to the end of their pilgrimage, although the crowd remains unconvinced by the sight of the humble countryside surrounding them. However, led by the stars, they come to a “leaf-thatched hut” at the door of which “the poet of the unknown shore” starts singing “the primeval chant of creation: | ‘Mother, open the gate!’” (485). Then, in the final lines of the poem:

¹⁸ In *Nationalism*, Tagore repudiates “carnivorous and cannibalistic [...] tendencies” of Europe’s “political civilization” (60). In “East and West”, he writes: “the Western mind, after centuries of contact with the East, has not evolved the enthusiasm of a chivalrous ideal which can bring this age to its fulfilment. It is everywhere raising thorny hedges of exclusion and offering human sacrifices to national self-seeking. It has intensified the mutual feelings of envy among Western races themselves, as they fight over their spoils and display a carnivorous pride in their snarling rows of teeth” (*Creative Unity* 109-10).

The gate opens.

The mother is seated on a straw bed with the babe on her lap,

Like the dawn with the morning star.

The sun's ray that was waiting at the door outside falls on the head of the child.

The poet strikes his lute and sings out:

“Victory to Man, the new-born, the ever-living.”

They kneel down,—the king and the beggar, the saint and the sinner, the wise and the fool,—and cry:

“Victory to Man, the new-born, the ever-living.”

The old man from the East murmurs to himself:

“I have seen!” (485-86)

The sanguine piety of the final section of the poem might have owed something to the Passion Play Tagore modelled this poem on, but the underlying convictions are his own. The end of the self-sacrificial pilgrimage that the Man of faith launched them on is none other than the eternal Man: “Man, the new-born, the ever-living”. In a song that he would write after the declaration of the Second World War, he would similarly describe Christ as “the Son of Man”,¹⁹ reinforcing “the idea of the humanity of our God, or the divinity of Man the Eternal” that he elaborated in *The Religion of Man* (15). Apart from the baby (Christ), the other human figures the poem glorifies include the sky-reader, the poet, and the wise “old man from the East”, who have kept the spirit of the murdered Man of faith alive. The humanity represented by all these figures is the generic humanity of “Man the Eternal” which has won over the chaos of individual perspectives foregrounded in the bulk of the poem.

¹⁹ This poem naturally has a bleaker picture of life, stating that “Those who struck Him once | in the name of their rulers | are born again in the present age”, and have come to “the prayer halls in a pious garb” (Tagore’s own translation, quoted in Dutta and Robinson 347). This song is sung every year in his Santiniketan school as part of their Christobshab or Christmas celebration.

III

So far in this chapter we have noticed how Tagore put together a comfortable theory of human existence by selecting and synthesising the diverse and disparate raw materials of the Upanishadic and Baul mysticisms, life sciences, theories of evolution, and vitalist philosophy. When in the process the “fathomless darkness” and the “unbounded light” occasionally vied for prominence, Tagore suppressed the former giving the latter an upper hand. In doing so, often his preacher self gained prominence over the poet in him. This, however, is not always the case. There are plenty of moments in Tagore when the suppressed darkness erupts in the forms of doubt, uncertainty, or questions about the meaning of human existence. Despite featuring prominently in the poems of his late years, those dark “moments of being” (to use Woolf’s term) are not limited to his late career but are occasionally found in the poetry of his earlier phases as well. Beginning with a fin de siècle poem of this mood, this section will focus on some of his later poems.

Composed in 1897 and published in the 1900 volume *Kalpana*, “Duhsamay” (“A Stressful Time”, in Dyson’s translation²⁰) is a poem in which the poet’s inner self takes the form of a tired and blind bird flying alone “in the endless sky” over an equally limitless surging ocean. Each of the six stanzas ends with the speaker urging the “blind” bird on with “don’t fold your wings yet” (*I Won’t* 135). Given that the bird is blind, however, such a pleading rings with irony which is further intensified by such details as “[a]head of you still stretches a long, long night” while “a great sense of dread throbs unspoken” (*I Won’t* 135-36). The excerpt below is from the final stanza of the poem:

Ah, there’s no fear, no bonds of love’s illusion;
there’s no hope, for hope is mere deceit.
There’s no speech, no useless lamentation,
neither home nor flower-strewn nuptial sheet.

²⁰ See also Sukanta Chaudhuri’s translation of the poem as “Affliction” in S. Chaudhuri, *Poems* 122-23.

You've only your wings, and painted in deepest black,

this vast firmament where dawn's direction's lost. (*I Won't* 136)

Here we get a powerful embodiment of the feeling of potential purposelessness of existence save for the only purpose created by the assertion of the very existence, represented by the bird's wings.

While perceptively teasing out a sense of doubt and potential purposelessness of life in poems such as "Niruddesh Jatra" (A Journey without End) and "Gati" (Motion), both published in *Sonar Tari* (1894), Abu Sayeed Ayyub in his analysis of "A Stressful Time" claims that the poet here is not in doubt about the prospective breaking of the dawn which is why he is repeatedly urging the bird of his being not to withdraw its wings (*Adhunikata* 45-46, 50-51). Such a reading stands if the blindness of the bird is taken not as a permanent but a temporary condition caused by the darkness of the all-encompassing night. However, rather than suggesting that, Ayyub invokes the Upanishads where the luminous eternal Person is imagined beyond (the sea of) darkness. The strongest support he offers for his reading is from the penultimate stanza where we have: "on a far shore some are pleading with you. | 'Come, come': their wailing prayer says" (Ayyub, *Adhunikata* 51; *I Won't* 136). Even these lines are at best ambiguous given that the far-off shore does not have to be ahead of the bird, but might as well refer to the shore that is left behind or lost, nostalgia for which is already evoked in the second stanza: "Where's that shore, dense with blossoms and leaves? | Where's that nest, branch that offers shelter?" (*I Won't* 135). Thus the poem embodies an existential and ontological uncertainty.

Both in its suppression of the affective aspects of life and in its grim imagery, the poem foreshadows the spirit of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* where, too, we have no "roots that clutch", no "branches grow[ing]" to offer shelter (5). However, the only meaning that Tagore's poem shores against its ruins is to be born out of the ceaseless flight of the blind bird. In the last block quotation (from the final stanza of Tagore's poem), the list of the non-existent things is followed by a mention of the "only" things that do exist: the self-bird's "wings" and a "vast firmament" of empty space. In the original Bengali, the final line of the refrain and also of the

whole poem reads: “ekhani andha, bandha koronā pākhā” (*Rabindra-rachanabali* 7: 121; “already blind, don’t fold your wings yet” [*I Won’t* 135]), which includes two six-matra²¹ feet—“elkhalnil, andha” and “bandhal, kolrolnā”—and a broken foot of two matras: pākhā. (The closed syllables “an” and “ban” in the second and third words should be prolonged in pronunciation and carry the value of two matras each, as per the rule of the Nabya [new] Kalabritta form devised by Tagore [P. Sen 5-6, 9-13]). Thus, after an undulation of two even feet of six mātrās each—suggesting, as it were, the smoothly undulating flight of a bird—the broken foot in the recurring final word of the stanzas—“pākhā” (wings)—create a sonic impression of abrupt halt. This enhances the urgency of the poem’s repeated pleading with the bird not to “fold your wings yet”. (In a more literal translation, this phrase would come across as “don’t stop your wings yet”). One might also hear the desperate beating of the blind bird’s wings in the two beats of the word: pākhā. These suggestions evoke two dominant feelings of the poem: apprehension of a sudden termination of existence (stopping of the bird’s wings) and a desperate assertion of consciousness amidst a soul-blinding despair, or an “unreasonable silence of the world”, to use Albert Camus’s phrase (29).²² However, dark moments like these are not rules but exceptions in Tagore and are often overcome by his mystical belief in his Life-Deity or a quasi-religious faith in the spiritual meaning of universal humanity.

That said, questions about the meaning and purpose of human existence keep haunting Tagore’s late poems. Straightforwardly entitled “Why?”, a poem composed in 1938 squarely faces one of the unpalatable implications of evolutionary theories, which Huxley pictured as the “downward route” of human evolution. In the penultimate stanza of the poem, Tagore depicts the idea of creation “achiev[ing] its harmony” in humanity (represented by the speaker):

I felt: a flow of utterance, having lost its way,

Knocking among the stars age after age,

Had finally

²¹ Matra is the smallest metrical unit.

²² “The absurd”, maintains Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), “is born of [the] confrontation between the human need [for happiness and for reason] and the unreasonable silence of the world” (29).

In me achieved its harmony. (323)

Thus far, we are in a familiar territory. However, the ultimate stanza challenges this wholesome finality, pushing further in search for an answer to the ultimate question:

And now I seek to know,

Will its uniting bond shatter once more—

A formless motion, towards a ghostly world

Along an empty track of myriad years be hurled?

Will it then drain

Its wayfarer's vessel of short-lived pain

Like a broken dish of scraps from feasts gone by?

But why? (323)

This fundamental question is doomed to be baffled by the “unreasonable silence of the world” (to borrow Camus’s phrase again), or, as Tagore says in another poem from the same year (“Prasna” or Question), “the astringent cry of questions will be resounding in an empty space | with no answer uttered” (*Rabindra-rachanabali* 24: 46; translation mine). The cherished idea of “motion”, celebrated in *Balaka*, has turned “formless” in “Why?”, and the “invisible tracks” that meaningfully stretched “from obscure pasts to distant inchoate futures” in poem no. 36 of the previous volume appear here as “an empty track of myriad years”. With its unifying thread torn, human existence seems thrown into the domain of what Bergson would call quantitative, as opposed to “qualitative”, multiplicity (see pp. 123-24 above).

In the introduction to *Nabajatak* (1940), which contains the poems “Why?” and “Prasna”, Tagore tentatively suggests that the compiler of the volume, Amiya Chakravarty, may have detected in the poems collected “experiences born of thinking” (*Rabindra-rachanabali* 24: 3; translation mine).²³ Chakravarty, as noted earlier, was Tagore’s intimate associate and a

²³ Following Tagore, I have translated the compound word “mananjata” (manan + jata) here as “born of thinking”, instead of “born of intellect”. In a letter to Chakravarty (dated 17 March 1939), written in a different context, Tagore decided not to translate the word “*thought*” as “manan” which, he argues, means “an action of mind, that is *thinking*” (*Chithipatra* 247; translation mine and the words in italics are in English in the original).

leading poet of the younger “modernist” generation. In a much earlier letter to Tagore (21 March 1925), he mentions the physician and writer Havelock Ellis’s sincere regret that, despite being a great thinker and an illustrative poet of the modern age, Tagore in his poetry does not accommodate the “concrete blessings” of modern scientific discoveries. Chakravarty then adds that his response to this criticism would be to say that, although Tagore does not write about such external aspects of modern science as, say, “aeroplane”, in *Balaka* and some other poems one finds an imaginatively inspired vision of modern “scientific spirit”. In such poems, Chakravarty continues, science has been sublimated on a “high romantic plane” (51-52). Tagore in his reply to Chakravarty (dated 28 March 1925) endorses such views by writing that when science confronts our minds with the ultimate mystery of atomism, it reveals the supreme whom he has celebrated in his poetry. But in the steam-hauled rails he sees the “clever” instead of the “perfect”, “Vulcan” instead of “Apollo”, and the gross instead of the ineffable (*Chithipatra* 43; the quoted words are in English in the original). Here the universal, spirituo-intellectual aspects of science is privileged over its discrete, particular boons.

Tagore would take a similar stance in the question of modernist avant-gardism of the West as well as its Bengali acolytes of the 1920s, who self-consciously marked a break with “the Tagorean era”. Against what they considered to be the Romantic overlays of that era, these Bengali modernists dedicated themselves “to the conventionally unbeautiful and unsanctified, to reality and sexuality” (S. Ghosh, Introduction 29-30). In his 1932 essay “Modern Poetry”, discussed earlier in the introductory chapter, Tagore reveals his mixed views of the modernist trend in poetry while writing ostensibly about “*modern* poets in English”. We have already noted his view of “modernity” as a matter not of “periods”, but of “ideas” and “temperaments” that mark any significant break with “stifl[ing]”, solidified conventionality. It is in this sense that the English Romantic poets were “deemed modern” for their time. “That modernity”, he observes, “has now been dubbed mid-Victorian antiquity” (280-82; emphasis in original). So far, this seems to be a fairly objective account of the fluidity of the concept of modernity as it applies to literary tradition. However, his account of the twentieth-century modernity/modernism is far from being objective and unbiased:

Today's modernity comes cut and dried, with short dress and chopped hair. [...] It wants to say that we no longer have any use for infatuation. The creator has strewn our way with bewitchments; their diversity strikes different chords through different forms. But science has plumbed their depths and declared that there is no bewitchment at bottom, there are only carbon, nitrogen, *physiology*, and *psychology*. Old-fashioned poets that we are, we had thought these to be minor matters and fascination to be primary. We must admit that we tried to emulate the creator and sought to weave a web of illusion, cast a magic spell of metre and phrase, words and gestures. (282; emphasis in original)

Notwithstanding his disapproval of the subject ("It wants to say") and his sensitive self-consciousness ("Old-fashioned poets that we are"), this passage reveals a great deal about the kind of modernity Tagore wants to advocate. Contrary to appearances, his attitude to science in the above excerpt cannot be negative, given that at the end of the essay he gives European science the credit of achieving "a dispassionate mind" which he finds lacking in modern European literature (292). What engages him here is the role of poetry in the context of a scientific demasking of reality.

Given that in his draft of *Europe Jatrir Diary* he wrote eloquently about his appreciation of a beautiful painting of a nude woman at a "French Exhibition" (182), his disapproval of the short-skirted and chopped-haired modernity might seem contradictory. However, this is consistent with the view of modernity that he put forward in a political context in "Nationalism in Japan" (1917), cited earlier in this chapter. The distinction in both cases is between an external change of fashions which is superficial and culturally specific, and an internal evolution of ideas and temperaments which is of a more universal nature. As Roy has observed, however, despite making such distinctions, Tagore often collapses them in his repudiation of modernist poetry, due partly to a subjective sting caused by the criticism he received from the poets of the younger generation (232-34). This limitation of vision on Tagore's part, notes Sankha Ghosh, rendered him incapable of appreciating what is truly modern in modernist poetry: an organic interdependence of intellect and emotion, form and

content, which is often achieved by crafting a self-sufficient image or symbol without requiring any descriptive details (*Nirman* 172, 205). A living modern poet himself, Ghosh perceptively observes that, despite achieving such compactness of poetic expression in the *Balaka* poems discussed in this chapter, Tagore often lacks that quality even in some poems of his later phase because of his romantic tendency for verbosity and explanatory details, as well as his ambivalence about the role of intellect in modern poetry (*Nirman* 173, 181, 205-06). We have already observed the tone of provisionality in Tagore's indirect announcement, via Chakravarty, of the existence of intellectual experience in his poems of *Nabajatak*.

It is therefore telling that in a poem from the same volume, "The Romantic", Tagore claims himself as a romantic poet:

They call me a Romantic.
I accept the name,
For I am a pilgrim on the path of rasa.
[...]
Cheating the almighty, I steal
Colours and feelings from his workshop,
Steal his magical touch.
Much, I know, is illusion,
Much only shadow.
When you ask, "Could this ever be called realistic?"
I say, "Never, I am a Romantic." (343-44)

Both in its defensive tone—"They call me", "I accept"—and in its content and diction, this poem echoes the essay "Modern Poetry", where, too, we have seen Tagore describe his poetic vocation as "weav[ing] a web of illusion" and "cast[ing] a magic spell of metre and phrase, words and gestures" in emulation of the creator. However, towards the end of the poem, he claims that he knows the "real world"—characterised by "poverty," "disease, ugliness", and rapaciousness—and "obey[s] its call", not "in words" but in "merciless" "work" (344). Given that the symptoms of reality he lists here have also become the subject of his poetry, however

occasionally,²⁴ this anti-modern pose seems to be deliberately adopted in order to distinguish his from the kind of modern poetry which “lacks the profundity of a simple acceptance of the real with a quiet, dispassionate heart”, as he puts it in “Modern Poetry”. This impassioned restlessness in European modernism, he remarks, is caused by the experience of the First World War. For the very same reason, this “[w]holesale carping”, “this arrogant mistrust and vilification of the world” are signs of a temporary “infatuation”, and hence fall short of true modernity which, we have seen, is synonymous for him with dispassionateness, detachment, and “undeluded vision” (287-88).

Poem no. 11 from Tagore’s posthumously published volume *Shesh Lekha* or Last Writings (1941) seems to achieve just such a dispassionate vision of truth:

On Rupnarayan’s bank

I awoke

and knew the world

was no dream.

In blood’s alphabet

I saw my countenance.

I knew myself

in blow on blow received,

in pain on pain.

Truth is hard,

and I loved the hard:

it never deceives.

This life’s a penance of suffering unto death,

to gain truth’s terrible price,

²⁴ See poems like “Now Turn Me Back” (1896), read in Chapter 1; “The Storm-Crossing” (1915; written in response to the First World War), trans. Sukanta Chaudhuri, in S. Chaudhuri, *Poems* 232-36, 414; “The Question” (1932), trans. Supriya Chaudhuri, in S. Chaudhuri, *Poems* 272; “Africa” (1936; written as a reaction to Mussolini’s 1935 invasion of Abyssinia [Dutta and Robinson 344-45]), trans. William Radice, *Selected Poems*, 102-03; “They Work” (1941), trans. Supriya Chaudhuri, in S. Chaudhuri, *Poems* 368-70.

to clear all debts in death. (*I Won't* 245)

Rupnarayan is the name of a real river in West Bengal and gives a local flavour to the poem. In her note to the poem, Dyson points out its etymological undertones: that the word is “a compound formed of two words, *rup*, meaning appearance, manifest form, beauty etc., and *narayan*, which is one of the names of Vishnu” (*I Won't* 301; emphasis in original). Thus, this local name provided Tagore with a ready-made symbol. The stress in Tagore’s usage, however, seems to fall on the segment “rup” or form. “Rup” is used as an individual word in a crucial phrase in line 6 in the original version, “aponar rup” or “my form” (“my countenance” in Dyson’s translation above) which he “saw” written “[i]n blood’s alphabet”. The word “alphabet”, used in this ontological context, brings life and poetry into close proximity with each other, suggesting a commonality between self-creation and the creation of art. If “narayan” or God has any role to play in the poem, that must be subsumed under the reality of world of forms, which, as the poem stresses, is “no dream”—a powerful statement, once again, against the Advaita Vedantic view of the world as maya. (It is worth pointing out that the word Tagore uses in the original Bengali is actually “Rupnaran” [*Rabindra-rachanabali* 26: 48], a contracted or colloquially elided form of “Rupnarayan”.) Nor does the poem seem to suggest any dualist theology of the immanence of God in the world. Instead, the absolute emphasis in the poem is on the “hard” “Truth” of lived experience: knowing oneself “in blow on blow received | in pain on pain”. If life is a “tapasya” or “penance”, it is not for any supernatural gain or transcendental Godhead, but rather “to gain truth’s terrible price”, and more strikingly, “to clear all debts in death”.

Tagore’s very last poem (no. 15, *Shesh Lekha*), however, attempts to make peace²⁵ with the Creator or his Life-Deity, appearing as a female figure in the manner of some *Manashi* and *Sonar Tari* poems we have read in Chapter 1. Here she appears, however, in the crooked form of an “enchantress”:

Your creation’s path you’ve spread with a magical net

²⁵ “[P]eace”, indeed, is the most important word in the final line of the poem, and is the last word in the English translation used here (*I Won't* 247).

of tricks, enchantress,
laying with expert hands the snares
of false beliefs
for life's innocents. (*I Won't* 246)

The translator Dyson's use of the word "magical" is problematic and must be taken in a negative sense—connoting guiles, wiles, or tricks—and not in the positive sense implied in the use of the word in "The Romantic". In her version of the poem, Supriya Chaudhuri has translated the original Bengali phrase "bichitra chalanajale" (*Rabindra-rachanabali* 26: 50) as "[w]ith nets of varied wiles" ("The Path of Your Creation" 376). Having thus portrayed this enchantress-figure in a negative light, the poem undergoes a subtle shift in tone:

With this trickery you've stamped human greatness:
for such a one you haven't left veiled nights.
The path that your stars
show him
is his inner way,
ever transparent,
ever illuminated
by his simple faith. (*I Won't* 246)

"[H]uman greatness" is personified here as a human being whose "inner way" corresponds to the path shown by "your stars". Leaving aside the guileful nature of the "you" of the poem, the second enjambed sentence above seems to reiterate the idea of the humanist spirituality, endorsing the "simple faith" of man's inner self that we examined in the previous section. The light of the stars might symbolise the primordial cosmic light Tagore writes about in his conclusion to the science primer *Visvaprichay* (1937). Referring to the scientific discovery that "light is acting subtly even within those gross matters which are apparently devoid of light", Tagore goes on to imagine the gradual manifestation of that "cosmic light" in life, consciousness, and mind in an increasingly subtler forms: "Since there seems to have been nothing but cosmic light at the very dawn of creation, we can say that it is that very light which

is manifesting itself in consciousness”. This he then associates with the liberatory evolution of consciousness which is “the final end of creation” (413-14; my translation).

It is this spiritual evolution of human consciousness which is the main thrust of the poem as well. The “false beliefs” that the enchantress spreads as snaring nets might be the institutional religious faiths that one has to overcome in order to be illuminated by the mystical inner light: “he receives | truth within, bathed in his inner light” (*I Won't* 246). Tagore composed this poem on the morning of his operation from which he would never recover. According to the account of Rani Chanda to whom he dictated the poem, having given most of the poem, Tagore fell silent for a long time. Resuming his speech, he dictated the final three lines, but detected some flaws in the poem which he said he would fix once he recovered (S. Chaudhuri, *Poems* 449). Here are the final three lines:

He who easily endures your tricks receives
from your hands
a lasting claim to peace. (*I Won't* 247)

These final lines reinstate the enchantress, indicating a possible reconciliation with her provided one can survive the tricks and guiles. Given that the poem stresses the power of endurance, fortitude, and self-reliance, the enchantress-goddess might seem superfluous to the poem. That Tagore still needs her underscores the persistence of his mystic faith in a Life-Deity, however inconsistent that might be with his intellectual experience of modernity. In other words, as he puts it in a *Nabajatak* poem, “a veiled faith persists under the façade of doubts”.²⁶ This “veiled faith”, of course, cannot be the “false beliefs” of any orthodox religion or religious sect, but an idiosyncratic, potentially heterodox, personal faith. Speaking in literary contexts, Tagore often terms this mystical faith or attitude to life “romantic”.

In a crucial passage of the essay “Modern Poetry”, Tagore employs a diurnal metaphor and compares the “fresh stirring of our consciousness” in the morning as a “romantic” “phase”, in which the inner consciousness explores and expresses itself in creative interactions with the

²⁶ “Rater Gari” (Night Rail), *Rabindra-rachanabali* 24: 27; translation mine.

world. Then comes the midday of “blatant reality” when “experience hardens” and “many a web of illusion” is shattered. Although he does not name it, this is obviously the phase of modernity. He then maintains that “different poets” respond to this reality in “different ways”. One group turns “rebellious” out of their “mistrust” of that reality, while a downright hatred for it makes another “frankly and shamelessly rude”. There is still a third group of poets which is neither rebellious nor rude. These poets “sense a profound mystery at the heart of this shape that looms all too clear in the harsh light: they do not feel that there is no secret, or that everything is fully contained in what is perceived” (287). Tagore would clearly align himself with that third category of poets who are not completely disillusioned about the higher meaning and purpose of life and hence carry some of the mystical illusions from their romantic phase into their modernist poetic projects. Yeats would also fit into this third category. In a poem written contemporaneously with Tagore’s essay, “Coole and Ballylee, 1931” (1932), he considers himself as belonging to a group of “the last romantics” whose “theme[s]” are “[t]raditional sanctity and loveliness”: “whatever most can bless | The mind of man or elevate a rhyme” (*Variorum* 491-92). In the last chapter we have seen how in Yeats the distinction between the ascetic and the aesthetic, the mystical and the traditional (both in literary and cultural senses) becomes blurred. Thus, like Tagore, Yeats also views mystical sanctity, blessedness, and the self-elevating power of poetry as “romantic”, in order to keep himself clear of what he considers to be a “filthy modern tide”, to use again his phrase from the 1939 poem “The Statues” (*Variorum* 611). Rather than making them unmodern, such stances make these poets mystic-modern.

Chapter 4

Artifice of Eternity: Yeats's Antithetical Vision

In a 1934 remark upon the “Supernatural Songs”, Yeats writes:

An Irish poet during a country walk talked of the Church of Ireland, [...] one could be a devout communicant and accept all the counsels before the Great Schism that separated Western from Eastern Christianity in the ninth century. In course of time the Church of Ireland would feel itself more in sympathy with early Christian Ireland than could a Church that admitted later developments of doctrine. I said that for the moment I associated early Christian Ireland with India; Shri Purohit Swami, protected during his pilgrimage to a remote Himalyan [*sic*] shrine by a strange great dog that disappeared when danger was past, might have been that blessed Cellach who sang upon his deathbed of bird and beast[.] [...] Saint Patrick must have found in Ireland, for he was not its first missionary, men whose Christianity had come from Egypt, and retained characteristics of those older faiths that have become so important to our invention.
(qtd. in Jeffares, *Commentary* 424-25)

As so often in Yeats, this real or imaginary dialogue could very well be read as taking place between his two selves. The Irish poet here seems to speak for the Yeats of the 1920s whose fascination for Eastern Christianity¹ and/or an ideal Christianity prior to the “Great Schism” dividing the Eastern and the Western forms of Christianity informs his imaginative reconstruction of Byzantium both in his system and his poems.² On the other hand, the Yeats who speaks in this passage is the Yeats of the 1930s, as is clear from the mention of Shri Purohti Swami, an Indian monk from Maharashtra whom he met in 1931. The shift in interest from Christian East to Hindu India as an ideal analogue for “early Christian Ireland” is an

¹ In the final book of *The Trembling of the Veil* (1922), he remembers to have discovered, “a few months ago”, F. Crawford Burkitt’s *Early Eastern Christianity* (London: John Murray, 1904), and links it to his early mystical visions before the turn of the century that we discussed in chapter 2 (*Autobiographies* 284-85, 490n57).

² Although the second Byzantium poem was written in 1930, it was a response to or revision of the first poem on Byzantium written in 1926.

immediate repercussion of that encounter as well as Yeats's collaborative work with the Swami on Indian spiritual matter. As it seems from the moderate, tentative tone of the speaker-Yeats ("I said that for the moment [...]"), the relationship between these two standpoints is not one of absolute contrast or radical shift, but of continuity or changed emphasis. What is common between an early Christian Ireland or Byzantium and an apparently ahistorical India is their "older faiths" which, we will see, are characterised by forms of spirituality that do not make sharp distinctions between the natural and the supernatural, the profane and the sacred, the physical and the metaphysical and is hence ideal for Yeats's own predilection for an organic, embodied spiritual condition. It is the same search for an "authentic" mystical spirituality that drives him first to the Byzantine East and then, once again, to the Indian East.

"The ultimate reality", Yeats writes in *A Vision*, "because neither one nor many, concord nor discord, is symbolised as a phaseless sphere". Almost immediately he adds: "My instructors, keeping as far as possible to the phenomenal world, have spent little time upon the sphere, which can be symbolised but cannot be known" (*Vision* 1937: 142). Whatever status we might attribute to Yeats's "instructors", here their decision seems to have chimed with the instructee's inclination for the "phenomenal world". Accordingly, as this chapter will demonstrate, not only *A Vision* but also Yeats's mystical poetry in general betrays a tendency to push to the periphery any concern with "[t]he ultimate reality" which he jargonises as the primary. Instead, he is interested in a form of divinity that is inflected with the "complexities of mire or blood" of human existence ("Byzantium", *Variorum* 498)—the antithetical, to deploy Yeatsian terminology. After a brief discussion of the dialectics of the primary and the antithetical, the abstract and the concrete in Yeats's mystical thinking, this chapter will examine two of his well-known and much-discussed poems from the post-1925 phase—"Sailing to Byzantium" and "Byzantium"—which dramatise and complicate these binaries. These high or late modernist poems, we will see, are deeply invested in mystical questions and explorations of an antithetical nature, rather than merely dwelling upon secular concerns with poetical selves and subject matters. This discussion will then be extended into a reading of the 1930s "Supernatural Songs", a sequence of lyrics which draws upon orthodox and heterodox mystical

thoughts and practices of the different Easts noted above. Read as later developments of Yeats's search for alternative forms of spirituality which began in his early career discussed in Chapter 2, the Byzantium poems and "Supernatural Songs" as well as his late Indophilia yield fresh insights and nuances.

I

Given the pull between the noumenal and the phenomenal, the mystical and the poetic, and the primary and the antithetical (the last couple of terms will be discussed later) in Yeats's Visionary literature, critics sometimes tend to lean towards one or the other of these binaries. In *Yeats's Vision and the Later Plays*, Helen Vendler attempts to demysticise Yeats's system by reading "all of *A Vision* [as] a series of metaphorical statements about poetry" and poetic process (30). So far as *A Vision*'s mystical material is concerned, Vendler maintains that "our reaction to [it] should be the reaction of Yeats's father to Blake's system, that 'mysticism was never the *substance of his poetry, only its machinery*'" (Vision 2; emphasis in original). Vendler's poetic-symbolic approach to this abstruse text has certainly rendered fine analyses of some aspects of *A Vision* as well as the poems and plays closely related to it, if at the cost of flattening out detail and the fine "mystical" distinctions that the text suggests. On the other hand, as mentioned in the Introduction, there are critics like George Mills Harper, Margaret Mills Harper, Catherine Paul, and Neil Mann who have taken Yeats's mystical system more seriously in their explications of *A Vision* (1925 and 1937 versions) and the related literature. Despite remaining indebted to all these works, this chapter will not delve too far behind the texts into identifying the true nature of Yeats's "instructors" or attempting to pinpoint the exact sources of his doctrines more than occasionally hinting at some hitherto-unconsidered possibilities as regards, mostly, Indian subjects. While reading the bulk of these materials symbolically, I would not second Vendler's claim that "mysticism was never the *substance of his poetry, only its machinery*". One of the core purposes of this thesis is to show that mysticism *is* an important part of the substance of Yeats's poetry. Granted, the symbolic approach

predominates Yeats's Visionary works, but that does not cancel out their mystical propensities. As we remember from Chapter 2, the borderline between the symbols and the truth they embody is very thin for Yeats who viewed symbol as "a transparent lamp about a spiritual flame" (*Essays and Introductions* 116). Echoing this early thought from 1896 in a 1939 letter to Lady Elizabeth Pelham, he contends that "[m]an can embody truth but he cannot know it" (Kelly and Schuchard 7362). Or rather, if man could know the ultimate truth, it would be at the cost of something vital to his antithetical existence which Yeats would not be willing to part with. Hence his aspiration for embodied truths. It is the veil between the symbols and the symbolised (the "lamp" and the "flame"), however trembling and transparent, that indicates his antithetical ambivalence and keeps him from being a pure mystic, making him instead a mystic-modern poet.

A letter that Yeats wrote to his father on 14 June 1917 might be helpful here. Referring to "a little philosophical book called 'An Alphabet'", an earlier title of *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*, Yeats writes that it is

part of a religious system more or less logically worked out, a system which will I hope interest you as a form of poetry. I find the setting it all in order has helped my verse, has given me a new framework & new patterns. [...] [T]his is the real impulse to create. Till one has expressed a thing it is like an untidy, unswept, undusted corner of a room.

When it is expressed one feels cleaner, & more elegant, as it were, but less profound so

I suppose something is lost in expression. (Kelly and Schuchard 3261; emphasis added)

Yeats here sees *Per Amica* (and by extension *A Vision*) as primarily "religious" which can also be read "as a form of poetry", particularly by people like his father who cannot appreciate the "religious" or mystical aspects of it. More importantly, as suggested by the tentative, uncertain nature of the expressions italicised above ("part of", "a form of"), it is neither purely "religious" nor absolutely poetic or metaphorical in a secular, "modern" sense. Of course, the "religious system" significantly serves his poetry by providing it with a "framework", but that framework is not only stylistic but also substantial. He clearly indicates that he has "expressed a thing" and systematised some "religious" material, if at the cost of losing part of its profundity. As

elsewhere in Yeats (as well as in Tagore), the word “religious” of course needs to be taken with a pinch of salt; at best, it means an alternative religion or mysticism. The fictional prefacer of the first edition of *A Vision*, Owen Aherne reports to have attempted to dissuade Michael Robartes (another fictional character) from his unalterable decision to “give all his [mystical] material to Mr Yeats” for writing an exposition, by saying that Yeats is more prone to “the love of woman than [to] the love of God”. To this Robartes is said to have replied: “I want a lyric poet, and if he cares for nothing but expression, so much the better, my desert geometry will take care of the truth” (*Vision* 1925: lxii). Yeats uses this powerful repartee to suggest the expressive, anti-noumenal thrust of the text which is but his attempt to offer a poetic and symbolic expression of the mystical content whose “truth” will be automatically taken care of. Crucially, the reason why Robartes did not give his findings to Aherne is that he “interpreted the system as a form of Christianity”, that his interest lay only in “primary character” (*Vision* 1925: lxii). (The Christianity that is eschewed here cannot mean early Christianity which for him would be open to cross-fertilisation from pre- or non-Christian cultural and mythical formations.) Both the letter and the fictional introduction point to a tension between creative expression (“the real impulse to create” in the letter) and some substantial spiritual “truth” (“a thing” in the letter). This contradiction, we will see, is more facilitating than frustrating in terms of Yeats’s poetic creation.

“*A Vision*”, notes Margaret Mills Harper, “is a unique book, part cosmology, part apocalypse, part psychoanalysis, part poetry, and part confusion” (“Occult” 160). Speaking of the “intergeneric openings” of Yeats’s poetry, Jahan Ramazani reads its “ambivalences toward philosophy” as typical of “much modern and contemporary poetry” (*Others* 37). Considering *A Vision* as “the later culmination of Yeats’s efforts to construct an abstract ‘system,’ an eccentric theoretical amalgam of various forms of mysticism and traditional philosophy”, Ramazani maintains that “his poems reanimate both sides of the debate in what Plato was already calling the ancient quarrel between poetry and philosophy. [...] Yeats enacts a longing for abstraction, only to turn against it and embrace the sensual immediacy of embodied thought” (*Others* 38). Such wavering characterises both *A Vision* and his mystically oriented poetry. Further, the

ambivalence about abstract thought that Ramazani discusses is also reflected in his response to science. Katherine Ebury argues that “Yeats’s philosophy is [...] anti-Newtonian and anti-positivist”, rather than being “anti-scientific”. She significantly illuminates Yeats’s tendency to demolish the wall “between scientific and non-scientific forms of knowledge” by showing the connection between *A Vision*’s “occult, anti-materialist stance” and the contemporary developments in “new physics” and “relativistic cosmology” (167-68, 170). Although he remembers to have “read Darwin and Wallace, Huxley and Haeckel” with some enthusiasm, Yeats also recalls (as noted in the second chapter) to have “detested” such evolutionary writers, particularly Huxley and Tyndall (*Autobiographies* 60, 115), clearly for their overly materialist perspectives. We have seen how Tagore, too, betrays a mixed attitude towards evolutionary ideas, preferring the mystically tilted versions of Wallace and Bergson to others. However, while Tagore’s overall tendency is to synthesise his mystical faiths to scientific theories, Yeats’s belief system, although equally syncretic, is not synthesist or unitary but thrives on antinomies and paradoxes.

However, despite being wary of overly abstract or absolutist philosophical and scientific theories, Yeats finds some abstractions less abstract and more congenial to his purposes than others. He famously (or notoriously) writes in the September 15 entry of his 1930 Diary: “Descartes, Locke, and Newton took away the world and gave us its excrement instead. Berkeley restored the world” (*Explorations* 325). Yeats collates the first three English thinkers seemingly for their rationalist, empiricist, and absolutist (as well as potentially positivist) theories of the world respectively. On the other hand, the world that Berkeley is said to have returned “only exists because it shines and sounds” (*Explorations* 325). The most obvious contrast employed here is with the world of John Locke, as Yeats makes clear in his introduction to *Bishop Berkeley* (1931) by Joseph M. Hone and Mario M. Rossi. Referring to Locke’s separation of “the primary and secondary qualities”, Yeats there maintains that “from that day to this the conception of a physical world without colour, sound, taste, tangibility, though indicted by Berkeley [...] and proved mere abstract extension, a mere category of the mind, has remained the assumption of science” and been reinforced by “the mechanical

inventions of the next age” (*Later Essays* 106). The theories of the world that he takes issue with, then, are “abstract” and “mechanical”, as opposed to his preferred version of the world alive with sensuous concreteness and embodied spirituality.

In her essay on “Yeats and Abstraction”, Colin McDowell assumes that “Yeats read [Berkeley’s] *The Principles* and *Three Dialogues* through the prism of the *Commonplace Book*” where Berkeley states that, McDowell quotes, “all abstract ideas whatsoever are particular. I can by no means conceive a general idea” (257, 261). In his above-mentioned introductory essay on Berkeley, Yeats reflects that “[t]he romantic movement seems related to the idealist philosophy; the naturalist movement, Stendhal’s mirror dawdling down a lane, to Locke’s mechanical philosophy”. A few lines down, he adds that “[w]hen I speak of idealist philosophy I think more of Kant than of Berkeley who was idealist and realist alike, more of Hegel and his successors than of Kant” (*Later* 108-09). This gives us some useful insights into Yeats’s ambivalence about idealism. As Robert Snukal points out, idealism, in Yeats’s understanding, meant “[a]ny philosophical or quasi-philosophical position which seemed to imply that objective reality was mind-dependent” (2). From the previous excerpt, his preference for idealism and romanticism over naturalism becomes clear. While certainly preferable to Locke, Berkeley here is viewed as less idealist than Kant, Hegel, and the Hegelians, because he combines both idealism and realism. Dwelling on the difference between Berkeley and Yeats, McDowell observes that “Berkeley guaranteed the continued existence of the chair in the study when the scholar wasn’t there by the fact that God still perceived it, while Yeats substituted for God all existing beings” (269-70). (Tagore, we remember, took recourse to the consciousness of the “super-personal man” in order to ensure the uninterrupted existence of Einstein’s table.) Yeats of course explains away this point of difference by maintaining that it was Berkeley’s social “mask” that induced him to evaporate the active agency of “will” or “volition” by attributing it to only God.³

³ Here is Yeats in his introduction to *Bishop Berkeley*: “Berkeley wrote in his *Commonplace Book*—‘The Spirit—the active thing—that which is soul and God—is the will alone’; and then remembering the mask that he must never lay aside, added: ‘The concrete of the will and understanding I must call mind, not person, lest offence be given, there being but one volition acknowledged to be God [...]’” (*Later Essays* 110).

As he does with most, if not all, of the thinkers or thought systems he finds himself in sympathy with, Yeats is trying to twist Berkeley's philosophy to suit his preferred form of idealism.⁴ Therefore, while Kant calls Berkeley's a "mystical and visionary idealism",⁵ Yeats tellingly terms his Irish predecessor's philosophy "idealist and realist alike", for, as he writes to Sturge Moore, preparatory to invoking Berkeley, "[t]he belief [*sic*] that all is experience does not mean that there is no truth unknown to us for there are unknown minds, but it does mean that there is no truth where there is no mind to know it" (Kelly and Schuchard 4855; dated 29 March 1926). (Interestingly, he also echoes these ideas in a passing reference to Bergson's consciousness theory in a 1927 letter to Maud Gonne.⁶) Here is the crux of Yeats's dilemma: while prioritising subjective "experience" (roughly in line with both Kant and Berkeley), he at the same time wants to explore the "truth" or reality beyond the perception of living human minds (here parting with Kant⁷), which is perceived by "unknown minds" (qualifying and pluralising Berkeley's contention about the mind of God as well as, potentially, Tagore's notion of the mind of the "super-personal man"). In a similar fashion, self-admittedly "found[ing] myself upon the third antinomy of Immanuel Kant, thesis: freedom; antithesis: necessity",⁸ Yeats's Robartes "restate[s] it": "Every action of man declares the soul's ultimate, particular freedom, and the soul's disappearance in God; declares that reality is a congeries of beings and

⁴ Writing to Sturge Moore on March 12, 1926, he distinguishes between the "later Berkeley who was a Platonist" and "My Berkeley [who] is the Berkeley of the 'Commonplace Book' & it is this Berkeley who has influenced the Italians. The essential sentence is of course 'things only exist in being perceived', & I can only call that perception God's when I add Blakes [*sic*] 'God only acts or is in existing beings or men'" (Kelly and Schuchard 4849).

⁵ Kant pits this phrase against "the empirical idealism of Descartes", and distinguishes from both his own "transcendental idealism" which he calls "critical idealism" in order to avoid "misinterpretation" (*Prolegomena* 50-51).

⁶ "As things only exist in being perceived (or as Bergson puts it, echoing Plotinus, 'The universe is itself consciousness') when we forget a thought or an emotion, which we will recall perhaps years later, it does not pass out of existence" (Kelly and Schuchard 5036; dated 7 October 1927). He then goes on to compare this notion to his theory of Victimage which he develops in *A Vision* (1937). What is intriguing for our purposes about this is Yeats's collation of Berkeley, Bergson, and Plotinus. One might assume that it is because he found what he would need from Bergson in Plotinus and Berkeley that he does not draw as frequently upon Bergson as other modernists, as well as Tagore, do. Note also that G. M. Harper reports to have found among Yeats's Occult Papers the manuscript of Bergson's "Presidential Address to the S.P.R". Harper thinks that it might have been "translated and copied" in 1913—the year in which the philosopher was the President of the Society for Psychical Research—and that "[a]s a reasoned defense [*sic*] of 'psychic research', it surely was convincing to Yeats" ("Occult" 8).

⁷ See the discussion on Kant in the previous chapter, p. 138.

⁸ For the description of Kant's third antinomy, see Kant, *Critique* 484-85.

a single being” (*Vision* 1937: 37). These antinomies of the absolute loss of self in God and the freedom of will, singularity and plurality would have found parallel in Yeats’s mind with the Advaita Vedantic noumenal Brahma (as well as Plotinus’s One or Absolute) and the phenomenal, pluralist, and supposedly illusory world.

The pull between abstraction and concreteness, idealism and realism, noumenal and phenomenal, and transcendence and immanence animates Yeats’s works and feeds into the complementary opposites of the primary and the antithetical in *A Vision*: “A *primary* dispensation looking beyond itself towards a transcendental power is dogmatic, levelling, unifying, feminine, humane, peace its means and end; an *antithetical* dispensation obeys imminent [*sic*] power, is expressive, hierarchical, multiple, masculine, harsh, surgical” (*Vision* 1937: 192). In the twenty-eight-phase cycle, corresponding to the phases of the moon, Yeats marks phases between twenty-two and eight as primary and those between eight and twenty-two as antithetical phases, twenty-two and eight being transitional phases (*Vision* 1925: 14; *Vision* 1937: 60). Elsewhere he adds another dimension to this categorisation: “When my great diagram of the wheel was first drawn for me, all from Phase 1 to Phase 15 had the word ‘Nature’ written beside it; all from Phase 15 to Phase 1 the word ‘God’” (*Vision* 1937: 149). This gives a more mixed picture; for example, Yeats’s phase—seventeen—is antithetical but falls in the God zone, while the phases between twenty-two and one are more purely spiritual being both primary and within the zone of God. There is also a Sun/Moon (solar/lunar) analogy: “The Sun is objective man and the Moon subjective man, or more properly the Sun is *primary* man and the Moon *antithetical* man” (*Vision* 1925: 13).⁹ Although the solar-lunar configuration becomes rare in the 1937 version, “this imagery”, as Mann notes, “still infuses his understanding” (“Foundations” 5). The dialectical oppositionality of these contrastive qualities as well as their complex, creative interdependence gives an antithetical dimension to his mystic-modern poetry, that is, the poems that invoke and engage with mystical problems but resist (re)solving them.

⁹ Yeats adds that “Objective and Subjective are not used in their metaphysical but in their colloquial sense” (*Vision* 1925: 13).

II

In a 1931 note written for BBC Belfast, Yeats commented with reference to “Sailing to Byzantium” (written in 1926 and included in *The Tower* [1928]) that “[w]hen Irishmen were illuminating the Book of Kells [in the eighth century] and making the jewelled croziers in the National Museum, Byzantium was the centre of European civilisation and the source of its spiritual philosophy, so I symbolise the search for the spiritual life by a journey to that city” (qtd. in Jeffares, *Commentary* 253-54). By reclaiming the connection between medieval Ireland and the Eastern Christianity of Byzantium, this note foreshadows the comment on the “Supernatural Songs” that we read at the start of this chapter. Yet, as already suggested, the “search for spiritual life” symbolised in “Sailing to Byzantium” cannot be Christianity in a primary sense that Robartes repudiates in the introduction to 1925 *A Vision*. The invocation the third stanza of the poem opens with—“O sages standing in God’s holy fire | As in the gold mosaic of a wall”—collapses the spiritual and the material. Viewed as a purely spiritual journey to the “holy city of Byzantium”, the prayer of that stanza seems to be addressed to the “sages standing in God’s holy fire”; but the second line makes the invocation ambiguous. The symbol and the symbolised are so intrinsically connected (sharing the same non-finite verb “standing”) that it is hard to know one from the other. If the “sages standing in God’s holy fire” are as good as the sages standing “in the gold mosaic of a wall”, the question arises as to whether the poet is invoking the spirits of the dead sages or merely addressing their gold-crafted artistic embodiment on the wall of the Byzantine cathedrals. The invocation of course continues in the lines that follow where the poet seems to be conjuring up the sacred spirits by the magical rhythm of “[c]ome from the holy fire” and “perne in a gyre”. The tonal ambiguity is furthered in the final phrase of the stanza: “artifice of eternity”. The poet prays to the sages to “consume away” his sensual “heart” and “gather me | Into the artifice of eternity”. Despite rhyming “me” with “eternity”, he interposes these words with the powerful word “artifice”, deferring as it were the absolute merging of the self into the abstraction of eternity. Of a mixed French-Latin origin (from the French *artifice* and the Latin *artificium*), the meanings of the word “artifice” include

“[t]he action of an artificer”, “the making of something by art or skill”, “craftsmanship”, “workmanship”, “a manufactured article or object”, “a mixture [or] a compound”, and “artfulness, cunning, [or] trickery” (*OED*). “[T]he artifice of eternity” then might mean “eternity’s artifice”—that is, an artifice belonging to eternity—or “an artifice representing or portraying eternity”, depending on how we read the preposition “of”. In one meaning, “eternity” takes up the role of the “artificer”; in the other it is the human being or human artist who assumes that role. In any case, the implication seems to be that what Yeats is after is a mediated eternity, symbolically embodied by Byzantine craftsmanship, with the pure eternity remaining out of reach or of no interest.

In “A Dialogue of Self and Soul”, Yeats expresses an apathy towards liberation from the cycle of reincarnation and a strong desire for human incarnations (*My Self*: “I am content to live it all again | And yet again” [*Variorum* 479]). In “Sailing to Byzantium”, on the other hand, the poet neither wants to attain liberation nor craves for a human (or “natural”) birth, but wishes to be reborn as a Byzantine symbol: “such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make | Of hammered gold and gold enamelling” (*Variorum* 408). Sturge Moore’s famous criticism of the poem needs to be read against its context which is often ignored. Towards the end of his 16 April 1930 letter, Moore introduces George Santayana’s argument in *Platonism and the Spiritual Life* (1927) about “the Indian philosophers [being] the most spiritual” and expresses his scepticism about “whether mere liberation from existence has any value or probability as a consummation. I prefer with Wittgenstein [...] to think that nothing at all can be said about ultimates, or reality in an ultimate sense”.¹⁰ It is against this philosophical background that Moore voices his criticism about “Sailing to Byzantium” which, “magnificent as the first three stanzas are, lets me down in the fourth, as such a goldsmith’s bird is as much nature as a man’s body, especially if it only sings like Homer and Shakespeare of what is past or passing or to come to Lords and Ladies” (Bridge 162). Now, read in this context, Moore’s criticism seems to be inspired by his expectation to get in the final stanza of the poem Yeats’s verdict about “liberation from

¹⁰ Moore here is referring to Ludwig Wittgenstein’s seventh and final proposition in *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921) that “Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent” (189).

existence". But we have seen earlier that, like Moore, Yeats was sceptical about the "value" of "liberation" and the possibility of speaking with certainty about "reality in an ultimate sense". He would therefore have aimed to represent spiritual reality in a phenomenal or antithetical sense.

That said, I would not read the fourth and final stanza of the poem, as Vendler has done, as a turning away from the "transcendent order" of reality (of the third stanza) to a "secular" one (of the fourth) which she phrases as "artifice of time" given that the "golden bird" "sings in all tenses, past, present, and future" ("Later" 83). Neither Sturge Moore, nor Yeats, would have associated the final stanza with secularity; otherwise, the former would not have made his objection and the latter taken it seriously enough to attempt to clarify it, as we will see, in his next poem about Byzantine spirituality. Chapter 2 has demonstrated that for all Yeats's mixed response to Indian reincarnation doctrine, he views liberation not as a matter of one but many lives, hence deferring it on a firm doctrinal ground. Furthermore, as suggested above, already in the third stanza of this poem the word "artifice" has qualified "eternity" to an extent that it cannot be indicative of any purely transcendental spirituality. The very fact that he has asked the "sages" to "[c]ome from the holy fire, perne in a gyre, | [a]nd be the singing-masters of my soul" (*Variorum* 408) connects them with temporality, because "gyre" in Yeats's system "represents the cyclical nature of reality, and the recurrent pattern of growth and decay, waxing and waning" (Mann, "Terminology", *System* n. pag.), as opposed to "phaseless sphere" which we have seen is symbolic of eternity. Therefore, there cannot be any essential difference between the song that the golden bird would "sing" and the one that the incarnate saints would teach the poet's soul—both symbolising a mixed and mediated form of spirituality.

The distinction between the golden saints and the golden bird appears untenable also in the context of Yeats's ideal Byzantium, as described in his system: "I think that in early Byzantium [...] religious, aesthetic and practical life were one". This expression of a syncretic ideal in Book 3 of *A Vision* ("Dove or Swan") is preceded by the passage where he reveals his desire to time-travel to the "early Byzantium", foreshadowing his wish to be reborn as a Byzantine artificial bird in the poem:

I think if I could be given a month of Antiquity and leave to spend it where I chose, I would spend it in Byzantium a little before Justinian opened St. Sophia and closed the Academy of Plato. I think I could find in some little wine shop some philosophical worker in mosaic who could answer all my questions, the supernatural descending nearer to him than to Plotinus even, for the pride of his delicate skill would make what was an instrument of power to Princes and Clerics and a murderous madness in the mob, show as a lovely flexible presence like that of a perfect human body. (*Vision* 1925: 158-59; *Vision* 1937: 203)

The repeated use of the phrase “I think” (such constructions are frequent in the texts) indicates the imaginative and subjective, as opposed to factual and strictly historical, nature of Yeats’s system. Given that the Hagia Sophia was reconstructed by Justinian in 532-37 CE and the Academy in Athens closed as a consequence of Justinian’s drive against pagan learning in 529 CE (Gregory 125, 128; Mathews 52; *Vision* 1925: 302n66), it might be “a little before” the latter date that Yeats would like to be in the “holy city”. But Foster notes the contradiction between this date and the one that Yeats implies while stressing the connection between Byzantium and the eighth century Ireland that produced the Book of Kells, in the 1931 note that we considered earlier (2: 326). To this might be added another misdating on Yeats’s part: in the quotation that this chapter opens with, he dates the Great Schism to the ninth century instead of 1054 when the event actually took place (Gregory 251). In case of Yeats’s wishful holiday in ancient Byzantium, however, what is more important than the actual dates is the idea of being there at a time when Christianity coexisted with paganism, including the latter’s rich intellectual tradition, to be officially curbed by the closure of the Academy, which, from the manner of his dating the events, seems to be contemporaneous with or a repercussion of the opening of Hagia Sophia for him. This, again, may have corresponded in his imagination to the eighth century production of the Book of Kells in Ireland, significantly before the ecclesiastical split between

the Eastern and Western wings of Christianity, even according to his misdating it to the ninth century.¹¹

A little later than the above “Dove or Swan” passage, Yeats discloses another of his personal wishes, which is to associate his preferred period of Byzantine history with Phase 15: “If I were left to myself I would make Phase 15 coincide with Justinian’s reign” in the early sixth century CE (*Vision* 1925: 160; *Vision* 1937: 204). In O. M. Dalton’s *Byzantine Art and Archaeology*, a book that Yeats possessed (YL 461), “Justinian’s reign [...] has been justly described as the First Golden Age of Byzantine Art” (10). The phase of the full moon, Phase 15 is “a phase of complete beauty” which “can contain no human life” and where “[a]ll thought becomes an image and the soul | [b]ecomes a body” (*Vision* 1925: 5, 58, 252n141; *Vision* 1937: 43, 101). This is, of course, a phase where the Vision of Evil takes place which seems to be a prerequisite for the Unity of Being (*Vision* 1925: 59-60, 65; *Vision* 1937: 102, 107-08), another ideal concept for Yeats. One of the most suggestive but sparsely described terms of Yeats’s system, Unity of Being is “the unity of man not of God, and therefore of the *antithetical tincture*” (*Vision* 1937: 188). Given that a couple of pages before this, he refers in another context to “the concrete and sensuous unity of Phase 15” (*Vision* 1937: 186), it seems that these two concepts are closely related, although not identical. (In the 1925 *A Vision*, Yeats cautions that, although “[i]n the phases between Phase 12 and Phase 18, the unity sought is Unity of Being, [it] is not to be confused with the complete subjectivity of Phase 15, for it implies a harmony of *antithetical* and *primary* life, and Phase 15 has no primary” [*Vision* 1925: 51].)¹²

¹¹ This last misdating may have been caused by his unconscious conflation of the Great Schism and Charlemagne’s coronation in 800 CE (Gregory 201), which significantly changed the course of Western Christianity and can be viewed as an inception of the separation of the Eastern and the Western Christianity.

¹² George Yeats defines the term “Unity of Being” in her notebook entry of 7 October 1921 as “a co-equality of Primary & Antithetical” (qtd. in *Vision* 1937: 354n37). As Neil Mann points out to me in his 11 May 2018 email, “Phase 15 is the climax of the *antithetical* but it is not a phase of Unity of Being—rather than being spaced the *Faculties* coincide in a form of unison, *CM* [Creative Mind] submerged in *Will* and *BF* [Body of Fate] submerged in *Mask*, like an octave chord perhaps” (n.p.; emphasis in original). Mann here has in mind Yeats’s following explication of the term: “My father, from whom I had learned the term [Unity of Being], preferred a comparison to a musical instrument so strung that if we touch a string all the strings murmur faintly. There is not more desire, he had said, in lust than in true love, but in true love desire awakens pity, hope, affection, admiration, and, given appropriate circumstance, every emotion possible to men” (*Autobiographies* 164).

Yet, the phrase he repeatedly quotes in *A Vision* and elsewhere in connection with the ideal of Unity of Being— “perfectly proportioned human body”¹³—seems to resonate in the phrases “lovely flexible presence” and “perfect human body”, used above as regards the art works created by “the pride of [the Byzantine mosaic worker’s] delicate skill. Justinian’s Byzantium, then, is definitely linked in Yeats’s imagination to embodied images.

In his influential study of Yeats’s tour to Sicily and Italy in 1925 through a critical exploration of the photographs the poet “collected on that tour”, Russell Elliott Murphy has brought to light the previously ignored importance of the image of the Christ Pantokrator in Yeats’s understanding of the Byzantine “religious art history”, illuminating aspects of both “Dove or Swan” and the Byzantium poems (80-81). In a passage of “Dove or Swan” that Murphy also refers to, Yeats writes:

[Joseph] Strzygowski thinks that the church decorations where there are visible representations of holy persons were especially dear to those who believed in Christ’s double nature and that wherever Christ is represented by a bare Cross and all the rest is bird and beast and tree, we may discover an Asiatic art dear to those who thought Christ contained nothing human.

Earlier in the same paragraph, he tentatively ascribes a Greco-Roman origin to the former and associates it with the antithetical, while associating the decorative motif of the latter “which seems to undermine our self-control, and is it seems of Persian origin” with the primary (*Vision* 1925: 159-60; *Vision* 1937: 204). The above categorisation gives a primary dimension to the Byzantine bird and tree in the poems concerned. However, as Murphy suggests, Yeats “admired” the Byzantine “view of Christ suspended somewhere between His double nature and He of the pitiless intellect that contained nothing human”, and adored Byzantine “art, with its smooth blending of the Graeco-Roman and the Persian, for its managing to express such a

¹³ Yeats claims to have found the phrase as well as the connection in Dante’s *Il Convito* (*Vision* 1925: 167; *Vision* 1937: 61, 188, 212). Although Margaret Harper and Catherine E. Paul do not find “WBY’s exact reference to Dante”, they offer two possible source-passages for the phrase in Philip H. Wicksteed’s translation of Dante’s text which George Yeats owned. The words that are common in both of these passages are “body”, “harmony”, and “perfection” in different forms (*Vision* 1937: 353n37).

blatant paradox” (85n24). In his own poems, Yeats attempts to express a harmonised coexistence, if not a “smooth blending”, of these differential categories and what they stand for.

Although no Christ-figure is directly invoked in the poem concerned, “the artifice[s] of eternity” there embody both the “double nature” of the “sages standing in God’s holy fire” (transcendental though personified) as well as “in the gold mosaic of a wall” (phenomenal),¹⁴ and the motif of “bird and beast and tree”, seemingly represented by the “form [...] set upon a golden bough” (significantly Yeats does not use the word “bird” in the final stanza of the poem). Of course, the poet’s imagination correlates the imagery he found in Strzygowski with another anonymous source he mentioned in his note to the original publication of the poem (in *October Blast* [1927]): “I have read somewhere that in the Emperor’s palace at Byzantium was a tree made of gold and silver, and artificial birds that sang” (Jeffares, *Commentary* 251, 257). This factual account undercuts the symbolic seriousness of the other source. However, as D. J. Gordon and Ian Fletcher have noted, the Byzantine “Emperor [...] is half divine, intermediary between God and Man, who sits in the throne of Solomon between the Lions and the Golden Tree” (86). What is more, Murphy’s photographic art-historical account discloses that the images of Christ collected by Yeats on that 1925 tour to Sicily and Italy include those of “Christ Pantokrators or variations, such as the Christ Enthroned and Christ in Glory”, in the hierarchised company of the saints and, occasionally, the Virgin Mary (99-101). The “drowsy Emperor” in the company of his “lords and ladies” might then be read as a veiled symbolic gesture towards the Emperor Christ in the sacred company of the saints in Byzantine churches. Apart from creating a strategic half-ironic tone in order not to make the poem sound too dogmatically Christian, the mockery implied in the “drowsy Emperor” could in part be directed to the poet’s own self. Such self-mockery has already been introduced in the poem’s second stanza (“An aged man is but a paltry thing, | A tattered coat upon a stick” [*Variorum* 407]) and

¹⁴ Interestingly, this reflects the “neo-Platonic image theory that stressed the transparency of images”, which was used by the defenders of icons during the Iconoclastic period in Byzantium (726-842). The Second Council of Nicaea in 787 maintained that “the honor which is paid to the image passes on to that which the image represents, and he who does worship to the image does worship to the person represented in it” (Mathews 56). We have already discussed Yeats’s similar theory of symbol as “a transparent lamp about a spiritual flame”.

begins the poem that follows this one in the volume.¹⁵ As for the problematic temporality of the final line where Yeats makes the primary (solar) symbol of the golden bird sing “[o]f what is past, or passing, or to come”, it might be read as a poetic trope to alloy the timeless with the terrestrial to construct an antithetical form of spirituality, rather than any secular antithetical. Already noted in “Mohini Chatterjee”, this trope is also present in the second Byzantium poem (as well as a few others to be discussed in the next section).

Triggered by Moore’s objection to the earlier poem, Yeats wanted to give better “exposition” to his “idea” in “Byzantium” (written in 1930).¹⁶ Consequently, there too we have similar imagery: “Miracle, bird or golden handiwork, | More miracle than bird or handiwork” (*Variorum* 497). There is however a subtle difference between these poems. Whereas the “artifice of eternity” (both the phrase and the concept) holds in perfect harmony the abstract and the embodied spiritual conditions, the phrase “Miracle, bird or golden handiwork” lacks solidity in being neither one nor the other. Overall, there is an undermining of physicality in this poem. It starts at night after the “unpurged images” of the physical life “recede” in the background and the “great cathedral gong” marks the shift to a spiritual plane of reality where

A starlit or a moonlit dome disdains
All that man is,
All mere complexities,
The fury and the mire of human veins. (*Variorum* 497)

Murphy discusses the combined influences of Strzygowski and Mrs. Arthur Strong on “Yeats’s store of poetic imagery” including the “domed religious structures”, identified by Strzygowski as originating in the Middle Eastern “ancient desert tombs”. The motif of star and moon that often decorate such domed structures is a Roman “funerary” motif which Strong identifies in “Orphic beliefs” and as representing “the soul’s astral destiny” (Murphy 82). Murphy points out

¹⁵ Note the poet’s opening reflection in “The Tower”: “this caricature, | Decrepit age that has been tied to me | As to a dog’s tail” (*Variorum* 409).

¹⁶ In a 4 October 1930 letter to Sturge Moore, Yeats wrote: “The poem originates from a criticism of yours. You objected to the last verse of “Sailing to Byzantium” because a bird made by a goldsmith was just as natural as anything else. That showed me that the idea needed exposition” (Kelly and Schuchard 5390).

the Christ Pantokrator's "imperial" position "in the dome or apse above the high altar", symbolically replacing among other things "the star- and moon-lit interior dome" of "pagan worship and burial sites" (85, 88). By reinstating the astral motif in this poem, Yeats then not only empties the cathedral "dome" of the bodily presence of Christ but also its "wall" of that of the "sages standing" in "gold mosaic". This, considered alongside the previously noted point about Christ's non-human aspect being symbolised by "a bare Cross" surrounded by "bird and beast and tree", heightens the mood of an abstract spirituality.

As Frederick L. Gwynn has pointed out, the two Byzantium poems represent two "different periods of history". Whereas "Sailing to Byzantium" seems to take its inspiration from the golden period of Emperor Justinian, Gwynn places the poem "Byzantium" at "about 1000 A. D." (30). Gwynn here draws upon Yeats's plan of the poem in an entry in his 1930 Diary: "Describe Byzantium as it is in the system towards the end of the first Christian millennium" (*Explorations* 290). It is therefore imperative to have a brief look at the description of the Byzantium of that time in *A Vision*. Two draft versions of the passage that seems most illuminating in terms of this poem were headed, as Margaret M. Harper and Paul have noted, "Phases 26. 27. 28. AD 900 to A D 1000" and "Phases 25 26. 27 AD 900 to 1000" (*Vision* 1937: 452n80). To sum up Yeats's impression of Byzantium in that "last quarter" in the published version, there are "heterogeneous art" and "hesitation amid architectural forms". Although "interest" in Greco-Roman literature persists, they are limited to "a few courts and monasteries" with "an Asiatic and anarchic Europe" prevailing everywhere. In the absence of "secular intellect" due to the narrowing of the "intellectual cone", "everywhere the supernatural is sudden, violent, and as dark to the intellect as a stroke or St. Vitus' dance". The "spiritual life", although "overflowing", has no influence upon human "conduct" other than in "some rare miracle or vision". (*Vision* 1925: 161; *Vision* 1937: 205-06). There is, in short, a lack of harmony between the spiritual and the physical, the primary and the antithetical, which is very different from the ideal coordination in the earlier poem.

We have already discerned a note of uncertainty in the poem "Byzantium" which seems to correspond to the artistic heterogeneity and hesitancy Yeats finds in turn-of-the-century

Byzantium. The poem is also haunted by the spiritual and the supernatural, which apparently have no influence upon people's regular "conduct", as suggested by "[t]he Emperor's drunken soldiery" in the first stanza (*Variorum* 497). Such spirituality works only in "some rare miracle of vision" like the vision of the speaker. The penultimate stanza begins with "At midnight on the Emperor's pavement flit". Midnight is symbolic of the climax of the dark primary phases where the spiritual condition reigns supreme: "[a]t stroke of midnight God shall win", as Yeats would write a few years later in one of the "Supernatural Songs" ("The Four Ages of Man", *Variorum* 561). Hence the predominance of afterlife and liberatory images in the poem concerned. In the penultimate stanza, we see "blood-begotten spirits" enter the "flames begotten of flame" to get rid of "all complexities of fury", by "[d]ying into a dance, | [a]n agony of trance" (*Variorum* 498). Here, as F. A. C. Wilson has suggested, "orthodox Christian symbolism" (as in Dante) combines with "Buddhist purgator[ial]" motif that Yeats may have found in the Noh play *Motomezuka* which shows a dead young girl burning in "flame in the Buddhist purgatory" and "ends with 'the dance of her agony'" (55).¹⁷

Although this purgatorial imagery prepares us for a peaceful vision of a Dantesque Paradise or a Buddhist nirvana, the ultimate stanza offers a very different picture. Here the disparate images of the poem are brought together to create an artistic symmetry:

Astraddle on the dolphin's mire and blood,
 Spirit after spirit! The smithies break the flood,
 The golden smithies of the Emperor!
 Marbles of the dancing floor
 Break bitter furies of complexity,
 Those images that yet
 Fresh images beget,
 That dolphin-torn, that gong-tormented sea. (*Variorum* 498)

¹⁷ See Yeats's account of the scene from the play in "Swedenborg, Mediums, and the Desolate Places" (written in 1914) (*Later Essays* 69-70). Jeffares assumes that the "general idea of purification by fire" came "from some of the mystic or theosophical writers whom Yeats read" ("Byzantine" 26).

The “images” showcased here—dolphin, Emperor’s smithies, dancing—reinforce the idea of liberation or ascension to heaven. According to Jeffares, the source of the “dolphin” of this poem is Mrs. Strong’s *Apotheosis and After-Life* where “the dolphin is an ‘emblem of the soul or its transit’” (“Byzantine” 27). But rather than ending in a primary paradise, the poem appears to end in an antithetical one. The “golden smithies of the Emperor”, symbolising divinity, “break the flood” or the “sensual sea”, as Yeats calls it elsewhere.¹⁸ According to the syntactical structure of the final sentence (the last five lines of the poem), the simplifying dance of the marbled “pavement” (“marbles of the dancing floor”) is meant to “break” all complexities, represented by the multiplying “images”, as well as the “dolphin-torn” and “gong-tormented sea”. However, there seems to be a conflict between the grammatical structure and the emotive effects of the final sentence which cannot subsume under its control all its disparate parts. In other words, if the import of the sentence is primary (all-levelling or unifying), that of its body parts is antithetical (multiplying and self-assertive). The core of the sentence “Marbles of the dancing floor | Break bitter furies of complexity” is fairly consistent and does not imply any complexity while its adjuncts—a subordinate clause and a phrase—seem to spin out of control. Contradicting the image-breaking or disembodied implications of the sentence, the adjunct clause forms itself into a quasi-independent couplet—“Those images that yet | Fresh images beget”—and its verb “beget”, rhyming with and reinforced by the adverb “yet”, weakens the force of and refuses to be subordinated by the main verb “break”. This struggle ends here in the absence of an active verb in the adjunct phrase that follows. Therefore, rather than fighting for dominance, the spiritual and the sensual are held together in the immaculate iambic pentameter of the final line of the poem: “That dolphin-torn, that gong-tormented sea”. However, this “union” is not purely unitary. The “rhythm” of this line, Denis Donoghue points out, “is entirely different from the hieratic tone of the mage”, its accents being “the accents of passion turned upon loss” (66). The violent, sexualised past-participle verbs “torn” and “tormented” suggest

¹⁸ In a discarded commentary on the poem Yeats writes that “I have pictured the ghosts swimming, mounted upon dolphins, through the sensual seas, that they may dance upon its pavements” (Jeffares, *Commentary* 353).

the embodied spiritual order (“dolphin” and “gong”) transfixing the “sensual sea”, an image that evokes analogy with that of “interpenetrating gyres”, to use the phrase of Horace Reynolds.¹⁹ In the manner of the earlier poem on Byzantium, here too the final word is given to the sensual and the temporal sea.

We have noted a similar accentuation of passion over loss, continuity over stasis, at the end of “Mohini Chatterjee” where man’s (as well as the poem’s) “deathless feet” carry forward the reincarnation process, instead of bringing it to a close. It is clearly not a coincidence therefore that Yeats placed “Mohini Chatterjee” immediately before “Byzantium” in his *Collected Poetry*. Both these poems betray Yeats’s poetic preference for a mixed and antithetical spirituality, as opposed to a pure and unalloyed one, be it a form of Christianity or Hinduism. The following section will continue the theme of alternative spirituality through close readings of some of Yeats’s “Supernatural Songs” in the context of the renewal of his interest in Indian thought in the 1930s.

III

In the Yeats Library copy of Walter Pater’s *Plato and Platonism* (1893), Yeats scribbled “Kanva” on the margin of a paragraph that discusses Plato’s readiness in *The Republic*

to sacrifice much of that graceful polytheism in which the Greeks anticipated the *dulia* of saints and angels in the catholic church. He does this to the advantage of a very abstract, and as it may seem disinterested, certainly an uninteresting, notion of deity, which is in truth :— well! one of the dry sticks of mere “natural theology,” as it is called. (26; emphasis in original)

Pater suggests that Plato here is following the Greek philosopher-poet Xenophanes who took a very strong stance against anthropomorphic religious faiths and pointed out the popular

¹⁹ See Reynolds’s 13 March 1938 *New York Times* article “W. B. Yeats Expounds His ‘Heavenly Geometry’: In ‘A Vision’ He Sets Forth a System of Enormous Complexity and Range”, in Mann, “Reviews of *A Vision B*”, *System* n. pag.

“fallacy” that men displayed in “making gods after their own likeness, as horse or dog too, if perchance it cast a glance towards heaven, would after the same manner project thither the likeness of horse or dog”. What Xenophanes advised was a negative way to “think of deity [...] as neither here nor there, then nor now”, to get rid of “all limitations of time and space and matter” and even “of thought itself”. Pater concludes his summary by noting that Xenophanes failed to realise in so advising “that to think of [deity] in this way was in reality not to think of it at all:— That in short Being so pure as this is pure Nothing” (26-27). It is little wonder that Yeats in reading this would be reminded of Chatterjee’s (or Kanva’s, as in “Kanva on Himself”) preaching of the Vedantic concept of pure, non-dual Brahma. The name of Kanva is written by the line which mentions Xenophanes for the first time in this passage, and the words underlined are “seem disinterested, certainly [...] uninteresting”, emphasising Yeats’s antipathy for an abstract notion of divinity.

This association of Kanva with the negative theology and absolute non-dualism of Shankaracharya’s Vedanta reminds us of Yeats’s abandonment of Kanva from the published title of “The Indian upon God”, the poem which engages in exactly the kind of anthropomorphic “fallacy” which Plato and Xenophanes here take issue with. Despite the existence of these two versions of India in Yeats’s early poetry, it seems likely that it is the Advaita Vedantic model that stuck with him as truly representative of Indian religiosity until his meeting and long-standing engagement with Shri Purohit Swami inspired him to revise his views of Indian mystical thoughts and practices. During the extended European tour of the Swami in the 1930s, Yeats edited and helped publish the Swami’s translation of his own autobiography (*An Indian Monk*, 1932), the autobiography of his spiritual Master, Bhagwan Shri Hamsa (*The Holy Mountain*, 1934),²⁰ and Bhagwan Shree Patanjali’s *Aphorisms of Yoga*. Yeats also jointly translated with the Swami *The Ten Principal Upanishads*, published in 1937, the same year in which the revised version of *A Vision* came out. He also supplied all these Indian books with introductory essays.

²⁰ Lennon wrongly ascribes to Purohit Swami the authorship of this book by Bhagwan Shri Hamsa, by asserting that Yeats “encouraged Swami to write his mystical treatise *The Holy Mountain* (1934)” (286).

Commenting on the close relationship between Yeats's introductions to these texts and *A Vision*, Charles I. Armstrong maintains that "they might be read as mirroring texts, or—more subtly—complementary commentaries on one another" (90). Those introductions also document subtle revisions of Yeats's views of India. Purohit Swami reports in *An Indian Monk* to have been told by his master that "real mysticism was not mystery, but mystery unveiled, and once a mystery is unveiled it no longer remains a mystery but is plain and simple knowledge" (94). Corroborating this stance, Yeats relates in his introduction to the same book that upon hearing the lived experiences of the Swami, he told him that "[t]he ideas of India have been expounded again and again, nor do we lack ideas of our own [...] but we lack experience. Write what you have just told us; keep out all philosophy, unless it interprets something seen or done" (*Later Essays* 131). On a related note, recommending the autobiographies of the Swami and Shri Hamsa to Frank Pearce Sturm, Yeats persuasively asserts that there is "[n]o theosophy, I assure you, in either book" (Kelly and Schuchard 6169; 7 January 1935). Yeats thus dissociates Purohit Swami's "authentic" mystical experience from the philosophical or theoretical preoccupation that he associates with Theosophy, taking his battle with abstraction to another level.²¹

The shift in Yeats's interest from a passive and peaceful to an active and experiential Indian spirituality is due partly to his reading of another branch of Indian mysticism: Tantra. Originally associated with "transgressive rituals", often sexually charged, Tantra in course of time developed also a right-wing, "domesticated" form that prioritised interiority and non-dualism, viewing "phenomenal existence" as "expressions of divinity" (Soud 35-39). By the account of the books in Yeats's collection, he may have been familiar with Tantric spirituality of India from a much earlier period than the 1930s: except for one, the books on this subject in

²¹ In a letter to Gwyneth Foden, Yeats writes: "Mrs Elliott is the result of the vulgarization of mystical philosophy by the theosophists, it has gone among people who should never have heard of it. The west is not the east. Among us the ignorant are not blessed nor are the poor simple" (Kelly and Schuchard 6304; 28 July 1935). This comment suggests that his reservations about Theosophy should not be taken as his apathy for mysticism or Indian spirituality, but a particular form of vulgarisation thereof in the hands of the Theosophists.

the Yeats Library (YL) were published between 1913 and 1916.²² Guha claims to have been told by George Yeats that her husband collected the books on Tantra immediately after their London publication (144n90).²³ However, Yeats's interest in Tantric Hinduism was obviously reinforced by working with Purohit Swami who, as Soud has shown, "incorporates Tantric principles into his [autobiography]" as well as into his teaching of Yeats (39).

In the penultimate section of his introduction to "Mandukya Upanishad" (1935), Yeats brings up Tantra while discussing the processes of "transfiguration of sexual desire" that an "Indian devotee" practices with a view to realising the Self:

he repeats thousands of times a day words of adoration, calls before his eyes a thousand times the divine image. He is not always solitary, there is another method, that of the Tantric philosophy, where a man and woman, when in sexual union, transfigure each other's images into the masculine and feminine characters of God, but the man must not finish, vitality must not pass beyond his body, beyond his being. There are married people who though they do not forbid the passage of the seed practise, not necessarily at the moment of union, a meditation, wherein the man seeks the divine Self as present in his wife, the wife the divine Self as present in the man. There may be trance, and the presence of one with another though a great distance separates. If one alone meditates, the other knows; one may call for and receive through the other, divine protection. (*Later Essays* 162-63)

Interestingly, Yeats calls such occult, esoteric practices "philosophy", apparently because he characteristically collapsed the diverse Indian mystical materials he was exposed to via the Swami at that time, without distinguishing the purely philosophical material (the Upanishads) from those in which philosophy blends with rigorous mental and physical practices (the Yoga

²²*Tantra of the Great Liberation* (Mahanirvana Tantra). Trans. with commentary by Arthur Avalon [pseudonym of Sir John Woodroffe]. London: Luzac, 1913 (YL 2105); Bhattachâryya, Shiva Chandra Vidyârnavâ. *Principles of Tantra*. Ed. Arthur Avalon. 2 vols. London: Luzac, 1914-16 (YL 162); *Panchatantra and Hitopadesa Stories*. Trans. A. S. Panchapakesa Ayyar. Great Short Stories of India. Bombay: D. B. Taraporevala, 1931 (YL 1532). Another book Soud mentions in this connection is *Hymns to the Goddess*. Trans. from Sanskrit by Arthur and Ellen Avalon. London: Luzac, 1913 (YL 943). See Chapman 11, 66, 105, 145; and Soud 89n130.

²³ For Guha's discussion of Yeats and Tantra, see 120-26.

Sutras,²⁴ Tantra, the autobiographies of the Swami and Shri Hamsa). Besides, the esoteric praxis described in this passage might have had a personal resonance for Yeats, reminding him of the inextricability of the supernatural (spiritual) and the natural (sexual) in the automatic writing affair undertaken jointly by him and his wife.²⁵ Yeats includes a similar anecdote in his introduction to *The Holy Mountain* (1934)—which he also uses in *A Vision* (1937) in a slightly altered form—in order to demonstrate “an alliance between body and soul our theology rejects” (*Later Essays* 141). There the “ascetic” is said to pray to the God to come in the form of a woman to aid him in such “transfiguration of sexual desire”. “The God may send some strange woman as his emblem [...] [or] come himself”, leaving behind some visible signs in the latter case. The result of such a union is the fading of “every need” but “for unity with God” (*Later Essays* 149) or “the supernatural union” (*Vision* 1937: 174). In the revised version of *A Vision* he seems to employ this story to validate his theory of the union “between an incarnate *Daimon* and a *Spirit of the Thirteenth Cone*” (174). *Daimon* and the *Thirteenth Cone*—the eternal archetype of individual soul and God in Yeats’s theory²⁶—are roughly analogous to the Indian concept of *jivatma* (human soul or the soul of the creature) and *Isvara* (the phenomenal manifestation of God).²⁷ However, in that section Yeats also refers to “a mediaeval story of a man persecuted by his Guardian Angel because it was jealous of his sweetheart”, adding that “such stories seem closer to reality than our abstract theology. All imaginable relations may arise between a man and his God” (*Vision* 1937: 175). Yeats thus collapses what is supposedly real (or natural) in case of Indian mystical practices, what is fictional in medieval Western

²⁴ For a detailed discussion of the Yoga Sutras as well as Yeats’s reading and misreading of it, see Soud 17-31.

²⁵ For example, while communicating with the spirit of Ameritus on the role of a perfect sexual intercourse in the influx of “automatic” wisdom, Yeats asks, “Is a long excited preliminary important in the present case [?]”, to which the answer comes: “What is important is that both the desire of the medium and her desire for your desire should be satisfied—that is to say her desire & you as the image of her desire must be kept identical” (qtd. in Brown 260).

²⁶ Yeats defines “*Daimon*” as “ultimate self of [a] man” (*Vision* 1937: 61-62) “or *Ghostly Self* [...] when it inhabits the sphere” (*Vision* 1937: 142). It “contains within it, co-existing in its eternal moment, all the events of our life, all that we have known of other lives, or that it can discover within itself of other *Daimons*” (*Vision* 1937: 141). The *Daimons* are said to “live” in “the Thirteenth Cycle or *Thirteenth Cone* [...] that cycle which may deliver us from the twelve cycles of time and space” (*Vision* 1937: 155).

²⁷ “The whole phenomenal world is the appearance of Brahman. Brahman, on which all rests, becomes *Isvara*, which includes all, when shaped by the phenomenal forms” (Radhakrishnan, *Indian* 554).

Christianity, and what is supernatural or paranormal in his system, probably in his attempt to belie and partly purge of the abstraction that is embedded in such concepts as Daimon and the Thirteenth Cone. Conflation of natural and supernatural, physical and spiritual, pagan and Christian, or Tantric and Vedantic/Upanishadic is a dominant motif of the “Supernatural Songs” where, too, the battle is with “our abstract theology”. Fortified by the precepts of organic mysticisms of India, Yeats can now become bolder and wilder in his representation of the Eastern-borne early Christianity than he did in his Byzantium poems. Whereas previously he tentatively turned “eternity” into “artifice”, now we have such bold statement as “Eternity is passion” (“Whence Had They Come”, *Variorum* 560).

In his Preface to *A Full Moon in March* (which included the “Supernatural Songs”), Yeats introduced Ribh, the speaker of some of these lyrics, as a “hermit” whose “Christianity, come perhaps from Egypt like much early Irish Christianity, echoes pre-Christian thought” (qtd. in Jeffares, *Commentary* 425). In “Ribh denounces Patrick”, Ribh rejects the “masculine Trinity” of Christianity, which is inspired by “[a]n abstract Greek absurdity”, in favour of a seemingly “pre-Christian”, antithetical trinity of “Man, woman, child (a daughter or a son)”, and claims that “Natural and supernatural with the self-same ring are wed. | As man, as beast, as an ephemeral fly begets, Godhead begets Godhead” (*Variorum* 556). As Vendler has pointed out, composed in “parodic trinitarian tercets, ragged in meter but carefully tricked out in trinitarian rhyme (*aaa*)”, the poem’s “unwieldy” lines suggest a more complicated, and less neat, version of trinity than Patrick’s (*Secret* 328). In fact, the last two tercets celebrate reproductive “multiplicity”: “all must copy copies, all increase their kind”. After the exhaustion of “the conflagration of their passion”—weakening of the divine or supernatural force—“[t]hat juggling nature mounts, her coil in their embraces twined” (*Variorum* 556). Serpentine nature reminds one of the image of Satan as “half-divine Serpent” in that section of “Dove or Swan” which sketches out his ideal period of “early Byzantium” where “the work of many [...] seemed the work of one” and the “ascetic” is called “God’s Athlete” (*Vision* 1925: 158-59; *Vision* 1937: 203). In the final tercet of this poem, the nature-serpent becomes equivalent to the creation as a

whole: “The mirror-scalèd serpent is multiplicity”. Multiplicity, we remember, is an essential characteristic of the antithetical.

Given the association of serpent or Satan with the fall of man from paradise, it is possible to argue that in Yeats’s poem pure “passion”, rather than pure bliss or innocence, becomes the hallmark of the prelapsarian condition. Moreover, he achieves a powerful symbolic concentration by conflating “mirror” and “serpent”, Eastern and Western symbols of the antithetical respectively, given that Yeats often uses the mirror as a symbol for an Eastern—Buddhist or Hindu—idea of creation viewed as *maya*. Unreality is also suggested by the idea of “copy[ing] copies”, potentially privileging some original purity. (We will explore this point in more detail later.) Although the multiple forms are essentially one, it is only because they cannot love purely that they generate “copies” rather than being self-generating.²⁸ All the couples of “earth”, “flood”, and “air” indeed “share God that is but three, | And could beget or bear themselves [as Godhead begets or bears Godhead] could they but love as He” (*Variorum* 556). The rootedness of the multiple forms in the One is further suggested by the rhymes of the final stanza representing a return to the primal One (“He”): “multiplicity [...] three [...] He”. Thus the poem gives a threefold representation of the fundamental binary of One and Many. As noted in Chapter 2, Yeats holds birth and begetting as central to his Visionary system, and we have seen how they are also the primal concern of poems such as “Mohini Chatterjee” and “Byzantium”.

True to Ribh’s heretical proclamation of an alternative trinity to what he considers “[a]n abstract Greek absurdity”, the abstract supernatural ideal, however antitheticalised, of Godhead begetting Godhead is acted out by the multiple life-forms of nature, presenting us with a procreative version of the Platonic Form. The next poem “Ribh in Ecstasy” puts the same concept in the form of a revelation experienced by Ribh in some spiritual “ecstasy”. The word “ecstasy” (*ἔκστασις*), it is worth pointing out, contains the “classical senses of [...] ‘insanity’ and ‘bewilderment’”, to which was later added the sense of “withdrawal of the soul from the

²⁸ Note his comment in a letter to Olivia Shakespear, dated 24 July 1934: “The point of the poem is that we beget & bear because of the incompleteness of our love” (Kelly and Schuchard 6072).

body, mystic or prophetic trance” (*OED*). The note of “bewilderment” as well as of a “mystic [...] trance” is struck in the opening lines of the poem:

What matter that you understood no word!

Doubtless I spoke or sang what I had heard

In broken sentences. (*Variorum* 557)

The abrupt second-person beginning, with its startling suddenness, makes us share the experience of Ribh’s first-hand audience while overhearing the “broken sentences” he uttered “in ecstasy”. Despite rhyming in pentameter couplets, the second sentence, enjambed from line two, ends halfway through the third line, graphically representing the discontinuous mystical utterance (of the kind that Yeats wrote about in connection with his own mystical experience, as noted in Chapter 2).

The uncertain form of the trance-expression—“spoke or sang”—also suits its subject matter: orgasmic ecstasy (“amorous cries”) acted out on a divine plane:

Godhead on Godhead in sexual spasm begot

Godhead. Some shadow fell. My soul forgot

Those amorous cries that out of quiet come

And must the common round of day resume. (*Variorum* 557)

The phrase “sexual spasm” is a significant addition to the concept of Godhead begetting Godhead introduced in the last poem. To give expression to the divine amorous orgy, Yeats not only repeats the trope of enjambment but also lets the first line in the above quotation (line 5 in the poem) to flout the 10-syllable limit otherwise observed so carefully by all the other lines of the poem. A short sentence follows, representing the shadowy, transitional moments between the ecstatic and the mundane. Seemingly echoing Eliot’s “The Hollow Man” (1925)—“Between the conception | And the creation | Between the emotion | And the response | Falls the Shadow” (90)—Yeats’s “shadow” literally falls *between* “Godhead” and human “soul”, separating the level of divine conception from that of worldly creation. The final sentence of the poem (the final two and a half lines) echoes Wordsworth’s “Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood” which maintains that “[o]ur birth is but a sleep and a

forgetting” and our “Soul” “[h]ath had elsewhere its setting”. Having “come | From God”, we fall under the influence of “Earth” or Nature and forget our divine root, while the heavenly “light” gradually “fade[s] into the light of common day” (281). However, Yeats’s is a more erotic and hence potentially blasphemous version. While Wordsworth’s child loses sight of the divine light, Ribh’s “soul” in Yeats’s poem forgets the “amorous cries” of Godhead at the moment of His self-begetting “sexual spasm”.

Of course, it is possible to read the divine sexual ecstasy as a metaphor for soul’s ecstatic “happiness in its own cause or ground”: the self-begetting Godhead symbolising Ribh’s self-delighting soul. Alternatively, these two forms of expressions might point to a more fundamental problem of Yeats’s mystical poems, namely that of rendering mystical or supernatural experiences in a communicable form. Note that those “amorous cries” that “out of quiet come” are audible only to Ribh whose saintly ears must be as refined as his eyes which, as the first Song has it, “[b]y water, herb and solitary prayer | [m]ade aquiline, are open to [the mystical] light” born of the union of the ideal lovers turned “angels” (*Variorum* 555). Quite naturally, Ribh’s addressees, or rather his overhearers, “understood no word” when he emitted out his “broken sentences”. Vendler points out that what we get in the poem is a post-ecstasy summary of Ribh’s experience by himself, and none of “those mid-ecstasy ‘broken sentences’ [...] [which] are beyond literature, and mark the point at which the supernatural becomes useless to the poet” (*Secret* 330). Yet, the challenge that Yeats undertakes in these poems is to put the supernatural to poetic uses of some sort. To make another autobiographical connection, besides his personal mystical visions, the bewilderment of Ribh’s audience might reflect that of Yeats himself when George Yeats automatically wrote or spoke out the spirits’ words in similar “broken sentences”.²⁹ Thus, if Ribh in ecstasy represents William and George Yeats in trance, Ribh the summariser (the Ribh that we hear in the poem) represents the poet Yeats’s task to put

²⁹ As Margaret Mills Harper puts it, “[a]t first, GY [George Yeats] wrote seemingly disconnected words and phrases, for the most part in large rounded letters sloping down sheets of paper” (*Wisdom* 5-6). Consider also her following account of George Yeats’s later-developed automatic method of sleep-speaking: “this ‘new method’ involved a number of methods, all involving GY in a sleep-like state, during or after which she would speak. Later, she or WBY would write down what they recalled, or they would have a conversation that elaborated on the ideas consciously” (*Wisdom* 8).

together those fragmentary speeches in relatively more intelligible forms in *A Vision* as well as in his poetry. Ribh's summary, for example, shows Yeats trying out two different registers representing two different discourses. The statement "My soul had found | All happiness in its own cause or ground" attempts a metaphysical, hence philosophical, form of expression. It is followed by an almost absurdly reiterative "Godhead on Godhead in sexual spasm begot | Godhead" which can hardly be taken as a clarification or elucidation of the former. Rather, the second sentence seems to stand for an alternative form of expression—symbolic, coded, esoteric, and poetic. The sensuous suggestiveness of the latter would be preferable for Yeats to the dry, cold abstraction of the former.

The juxtaposition of these different registers as well as the poem's self-reflexive anxiety about lyrical expression of complex mystical or psychic truths has aesthetic implications of typically modernist nature. As Margaret M. Harper notes in another context, "the arrival of the spirit communicators of the automatic script" faced the Yeatses with an "aesthetic and philosophical trouble with writing and the real". While this is not uncommon in "modernist texts", Harper argues that

the Yeatses' experiment dramatizes it in especially bold ways. For example, voices here are not merely standard terms in literary critical discourse, signs of an orality or bodily immediacy imagined as lost from Western literary culture. Nor are they synecdoches only for the uncanny, [the] lack of fit between an imagined perceptible world and an unimaginable real[.] [...] The communicators of the script intrude into historical and textual analysis [...] [working] as a third term that makes the Yeats couple, and their joint production, possible. (*Wisdom* 23-24)

Yeats thus introduces a new dimension to modernist concern with indeterminacy reflected by various experimentations with multiple speakers and narrative techniques. The "third term" that facilitated the Yeatses' collaborative mystic-poetic "production" also comes between the speaker and the reader of Yeats's works, puzzling the readers and problematising any authoritative, positive explication of the piece at hand.

The reader's role is also significant from a mystical point of view. While in "Ribh in Ecstasy" we were doubly removed from Ribh's first-hand experience of "Godhead on Godhead [...] beg[etting] Godhead", "What Magic Drum?" allows us a glimpse into another version of that bizarre supernatural drama:

He holds him from desire, all but stops his breathing lest
Primordial Motherhood forsake his limbs, the child no longer rest,
Drinking joy as it were milk upon his breast. (*Variorum* 559)

Unlike Ribh's use of the past forms of the verbs in referring to his "Ecstasy" ("I spoke or sang", "My soul had found"), here the sense of immediacy is constructed from the very beginning by the present tense form of "He holds". Starting with the pronoun "He" instead of the noun "God", also, suggests that our familiarity with the subject from the previous poems and our readiness for such a supernatural vision are taken for granted. Like the mature initiates of a mystic cult, we are at or past the midpoint with this poem which is the seventh of the twelve "Songs". Hence Ribh's mediation is shunned and we are plunged directly into the vision on offer. In the first half of that supernatural show quoted above, not only the gender roles—"He", "Primordial Motherhood", "his breast"—but also the emotions—carnal "desire" and parental affections—are confused. The use of the abstraction of "Primordial Motherhood" may suggest that motherhood, like fatherhood and childhood, is an essence of the same ultimate reality: Godhead begetting Godhead on Godhead, one in three and three in one. This essential oneness of God as well as the unnatural or supernatural conflation just noted is further stressed by the fact that these three lines are actually one sentence, whereas the next three-line stanza has four sentences symbolising the shift from the unitary supernatural to the multiplicitous natural plane (putting the many-three-one structure from "Ribh denounces Patrick" in reverse order):

Through the light-obliterating garden foliage what magic drum?
Down limb and breast or down that glimmering belly move his mouth and sinewy
tongue.

What from the forest came? What beast has licked its young? (*Variorum* 560)

By bringing us back on the natural world, this stanza demonstrates once again the marriage of “[n]atural and supernatural” (“Ribh denounces Patrick”). The sensual details and movements of this stanza (“move” is the main verb of the only assertive sentence of the stanza) stand in stark contrast with the lack of movement and activity in the first stanza where God “holds him from desire, all but stops his breathing”; even the seemingly suckling child is actually “[d]rinking joy [an abstract noun] as it were milk upon his [the divine parent’s] breast”. Unlike the “Primordial Motherhood” abstraction of the first stanza, here the female partner is concretised by her “limb”, “breast”, and “glimmering belly” down which “move” the “mouth and sinewy tongue” of the male partner. The child appears in the final line which with its two sentences conveys the sense of engendering multiplicity: “What from the forest came? What beast has licked its young?”. The description of the second stanza ambiguously covers both the human and the animal. Whereas the third line is explicit about its bestial subject, the second could refer to both man and animal. Enacting the conflation of emotions suggested in the first stanza, here both carnal desire and parental affection are depicted by only one active organ, “tongue”—first, in what seems the male partner performing foreplay on his female, and then in the mother “beast” “lick[ing] its young”. Further, the woman’s “glimmering belly” attaches to the potential conception of a child the status of a divine (or semi-divine) act, by what seems a glimmering reference to the Annunciation (cf. “Leda and the Swan” [1923], *Variorum* 441).

The phrase “Primordial Motherhood”, combined with the images of “forest”, “light-obliterating garden foliage”, and “magic drum”, weaves a primitive atmosphere suitable for an imagination of pagan pantheons who would have coexisted simultaneously with what hermit Ribh considers Patrick’s “abstract” Christian Trinity.³⁰ The epithet “Primordial Motherhood” might also be alluding to the pre-eminence of Mary the “Mother of God”³¹ or “God-bearer” in

³⁰ According to Mark Williams, “The public worship of pagan gods by high-status individuals had probably come to an end in the mid to late 500s, but occasional, increasingly marginalized manifestations of non-Christian religion seem to have continued until the turn of the eighth century” (4).

³¹ See also Yeats’s poem “The Mother of God” (*The Winding Stair and Other Poems*, 1933) which depicts Mary oscillating between her divinity and her humanity, betraying a tendency towards the latter (*Variorum* 499).

Byzantine Christianity (Mathews 70).³² The Byzantium connection appears to have been alive in Yeats's mind at the drafting stage of this poem, as indicated by a couple of lines that would eventually be replaced by the demonstrably pagan "Through the light-obliterating garden foliage what magic drum?": "Somewhere beyond the garden sounds the great cathedral gong | ~~What can the starlit dome await, what the cathedral~~ gong." (Clark 215). Such a subconscious and/or imaginative conflation (a constructive interpenetration?) of the pagan and the Christian divinities might be behind the "passionate" magical show enacted in this poem, not least its bizarre confusion of the natural and the supernatural.

In a 1930 diary entry, Yeats writes that in his preoccupation with the approaching historical cycle which is "particular" and "concrete", "[a]gain and again with remorse, a sense of defeat, I have failed when I would write of God, written coldly and conventionally" (*Explorations* 305). This anxiety is also reflected in his treatment of God in *A Vision*. We have already seen that Yeats views the "ultimate reality" as "neither one nor many, concord nor discord", and hence "symbolised as a phaseless sphere" (*Vision* 1937: 142).³³ Another term Yeats uses in his system to symbolise God is the Thirteenth Cone which Mann considers to be a "strange geometric abstraction hover[ing] indistinctly at the margins of the system" ("*Thirteenth*" 159). While sphere refers to God as the supreme reality inconceivable by human mind—"The ultimate reality must be all movement, all thought, all perception extinguished" (*Explorations* 307)—the Thirteenth Cone represents what that sphere appears to be in human perception:

I only speak of the *Thirteenth Cone* as a sphere and yet I might say that the gyre or cone of the *Principles* is in reality a sphere, though to Man, bound to birth and death, it can never seem so, and that it is the antinomies that force us to find it a cone. Only one

³² Another possible inspiration for the Primordial Motherhood could be the Indian philosophical concept of "*prakṛti*" which means "Nature" or Matter and is "unconscious", while its opposite, "*puruṣa*", is "[S]elf", "consciousness", and the "knowing subject" (Radhakrishnan and Moore 424-25; emphasis in original). Yeats would have encountered this primordial dualism in working with the Swami and discusses it as the Spirit-Matter dichotomy in his introduction to *The Holy Mountain (Later Essays* 147-48).

³³ For a discussion of Yeats's possible sources for "ultimate reality" and "sphere", see Mann, "*Thirteenth*" 159, 161-62.

symbol exists, though the reflecting mirrors make many appear and all different. (*Vision* 1937: 175)

The Thirteenth Cone is given a secondary status, because it “is in reality a sphere” appearing as “a cone” to the limited perspective of human beings, reminding us of the Advaita Vedantic premise of the rope (the Brahman) appearing as the snake (the world) discussed earlier in Chapter 2 (see pp. 88-89, above). In a draft, Yeats defines the Thirteenth Cone as an “illusory form” of the Sphere (qtd. in Mann, “*Thirteenth*” 162). In other words, it is the appearance of the absolute reality or supreme Godhead produced by the “reflecting mirrors”.

The image of “reflecting mirrors” underscores both multiplicity and distortion, and connects intertextually with “[t]he mirror-scalèd serpent [which] is multiplicity” from “Ribh Denounces Patrick” (*Variorum* 556). Mirror, as already mentioned, has Eastern religious/philosophical implications for Yeats. In an earlier letter to Sturge Moore (5 February 1926), he responds quite at length to three propositions in A. C. Ewing’s *Times Literary Supplement* article, “Ways of Knowing” (4 February 1926). Yeats’s response to the first one of these is relevant to the current argument: “Everything we percieve [*sic*] ‘including so called illusions exist, in the external world’”. Claiming to have “learnt” it “from a Brahman [Mohini Chatterjee] when I was eighteen”, Yeats identifies this proposition with “early Buddhism” and “Vedantic thought”, summarising it as:

all is a stream which flows on out of human control—one action or thought leading to an other [*sic*]. That we ourselves are nothing but a mirror and that deliverance consists in turning the mirror away so that it reflects nothing, the stream will go on but we [will] not know.

Although Yeats thinks that it can “liberate us from all manner of abstractions & create at once a joyous artistic life”, he has “come to reject [this view] because of my conviction that we can influence events” (Kelly and Schuchard 4830). The resonance of this with his reaction to Berkeley’s philosophy is not surprising given that this letter is contemporaneous with his correspondence with Sturge Moore discussing Berkeley (as noted earlier). In both cases, Yeats’s ambivalence centres on the question of artistic freedom. The above theory implies, as he puts it

in this letter, that the “mind which creates all is limited from the start by certain possibilities”, which for him is another version of “Platonic ideas” (Kelly and Schuchard 4830). However, unlike the time when he wrote this letter, by mid-1930s he had found alternative spiritual faiths and practices in India which were more attuned to his antithetical temperament.

To return to the representation of God in the revised version of *A Vision*, much like Tagore’s concept of Jibandebata minus its strongly personal dimension, Yeats seems to be interested in a form of divinity that interacts with human experience, rather than denying it. While the “phaseless sphere” lies outside all actions, thoughts, and categorisations, the Thirteenth Cone “act[s] upon the humane cone as male upon female, to produce total reality” (Mann, “*Thirteenth*” 165). What is more, the Thirteenth Cone’s relationship with the cone of life is described in terms of a quasi-sexualised oppositionality. Here is the source-passage in Yeats:

The cone which intersects ours is a cone in so far as we think of it as the antithesis to our thesis, but if the time has come for our deliverance it is the phaseless sphere, sometimes called the Thirteenth Sphere [...] [O]ur expanding cone seems to cut through its gyre; spiritual influx is from its circumference, animate life from its centre. (*Vision* 1937: 155)

The key concern of this passage—and the whole system of Yeats—is the intersection of the human and the divine (symbolically and sensually realised). The sexual imagery as well as the gendered relationship between human cone and the divine cone is crucial to Yeats’s antithetical mystical vision which, like his earlier attitude to Hindu reincarnation doctrine, prefers the process (interpenetration of the cones concerned) to the ultimate product—“phaseless sphere”, associated here with “our deliverance”. If the final synthesis is the stasis where “all the gyres converge in one”, as he puts it in “There”, the Supernatural Song that best represents the primary state (*Variorum* 557), the intermediary ones that Yeats is interested in begin new cones or cycles. Yeats prefers the creative contingency of the latter to the dogmatic certainty of the former: “philosophy talks about a first cause or a final purpose, when we would know what we were a little before conception, what we shall be a little after burial” (*Vision* 1937: 162). That is

to say, his concern is with the human cycle or human cone, consisting of life, death, and afterlife so far as it is a preparation for a new birth.³⁴

The final poem of “Supernatural Songs”, the sonnet “Meru”, dramatises this tension between cessation and progression, the divine and the human, or the primary and the antithetical in a way that ends the series not in a resolution, as would be expected, but in an ambiguous note.

Civilisation is hooped together, brought
Under a rule, under the semblance of peace
By manifold illusion; but man’s life is thought,
And he, despite his terror, cannot cease
Ravening through century after century,
Ravening, raging, and uprooting that he may come
Into the desolation of reality:
Egypt and Greece, good-bye, and good-bye, Rome!
Hermits upon Mount Meru or Everest,
Caverned in night under the drifted snow,
Or where that snow and winter’s dreadful blast
Beat down upon their naked bodies, know
That day brings round the night, that before dawn
His glory and his monuments are gone. (*Variorum* 563)

Both Vendler and Ramazani have noted Yeats’s fusion of the Petrarchan and Shakespearean sonnet forms, by combining Shakespearean rhyme scheme with Petrarchan octave-sestet

³⁴ To be more precise, “The Soul in Judgment”, book 3 of *A Vision*, deals with “[t]he period between death and birth” dividing that after-life period into six stages, the first three of which clear away the attachments, experience, and emotion of the last incarnation and the final two prepare the soul for the upcoming incarnation, while the fourth stage, “the *Marriage* or the *Beatitude*”, is the only stage that is “complete equilibrium [...] good and evil vanish[ing] into the whole” (*Vision* 1937: 162-71). Mann considers this “brief culmination” as “symbolic Phase 1 in the circle of the *Principles*, the soul’s round of life in the body and out of it” (“*Thirteenth*” 174). So we see that other than this one unitary stage, all the rest are connected with either the previous or the forthcoming life.

structure. Vendler also notes the violation of the Shakespearean tradition of “self-contained quatrains” by Yeats’s enjambments between the first two quatrains as well as between the final quatrain and the couplet (Vendler, *Secret* 177, 179-80; Ramazani, *Poetry* 40-41). This simultaneous retention and subversion of traditional poetic forms stylistically demonstrates the poem’s major thematic concern: the inexorability of constructions and destructions of civilisations.³⁵ The first eight lines (Petrarchan octave) is actually one sentence with three major parts, connected by a semi-colon in the third line and a colon in the seventh. Keeping aside the imperative goodbye speech of the eighth line, the other two parts are distinguished by their respective passive and active structures. The first two and a half lines have a passive structure starting with the object “Civilisation” and ending with the passive subject “manifold illusion”. Both the subject and the object are abstract nouns. These passivity and abstraction starkly contrast with the hyperactivity of the next segment. The “semblance of peace” born of the artificial unity of civilisation is ruptured half way through by the clause “but man’s life is thought”, representing the power of the active, living thought of man. The force of destabilisation is heightened by the cluster of present participles—“Ravening [repeated], raging, and uprooting”—sonically, semantically, and graphically enacting a chaotic but progressive urgency that leads “[i]nto the desolation of reality” and collapses the civilisations of Egypt, Greece, and Rome. The motion-denoting preposition, “Into”, at the start of the seventh line adds a sense of directionality and inevitability to the scenario.

The whole first section might also be read as reflecting the complex process of the birth and death of civilisations in Yeats’s system. The mid-point intensity of any civilisation followed by a gradual waning into dissolution seems to be implied in the poem’s octave by the way it gains momentum in lines 4-6 with line 8 announcing the death or termination of some major civilisations of the world. Collapsing the distinctive civilisations of Egypt, Greece, and Rome that succeeded one another points to the repetition of similar patterns in the history of human civilisation. By suggesting the vanity of man’s civilisational drives, Yeats might also implicate a

³⁵ Ramazani, however, finds it ironical that Yeats uses “the highly cultivated form of the sonnet [...] to think through and beyond cultivation” (*Poetry* 40).

generalised modern Western civilisation of his contemporary period. Against this he would pit a spiritually orientated India or East, emphasising the antinomy of modernity and mysticism. What the octave seems to leave us at is a potentially apocalyptic moment when a “revelation [might be] at hand” as he suggested in his famous apocalyptic poem “The Second Coming” (*Variorum* 402). But in comparison with the earlier poem’s shocking vision of the Sphinx-like “rough beast”, here we are in a more peaceful situation.

The next section—the Petrarchan sestet, or the Shakespearean third quatrain and terminal couplet—shifts the focus from Europe to India. Instead of the Vedantic-philosophic India of Chatterjee and Theosophy, the inspiration this time came, as noted earlier, from the more mixed sources which Yeats was working on with Purohit Swami. So far as the poem “Meru” is concerned, his introduction to *The Holy Mountain*, written in the same year as the poem (1934), proves particularly illuminating. The poem’s second part shares its setting with the ascetic autobiography of the Swami’s master, and so does the poem’s title. Dwelling upon the spiritual significance of the mountains “[t]o Indians, Chinese and Mongols”, Yeats writes in his introductory essay that “of all these mountains Kailas, or Mount Meru [...] was the most famous” (*Later Essays* 143-44). As Soud has also pointed out, Woodroffe’s introduction to *Tantra of the Great Liberation* which Yeats possessed from a much earlier period than the 1930s, begins with a section called “Mount Kailāsa” (located in Kashmir) and then suddenly switches to talking symbolically of the Mount Meru: “in the regions beyond [Kailasa] rises Mount Meru, centre of the world-lotus. Its heights, peopled with spirits, are hung with clusters of stars as with wreaths of Mālati flowers” (Avalon xvii-xviii; Soud 59). Although it was Kailasa which was the culmination of Sri Hamsa’s pilgrimage in *The Holy Mountain*, Yeats’s introduction “equates the two peaks” (Soud 59). The importance of this choice on Yeats’s part becomes clear if we observe how his description conflates the factual, the mythological, and the symbolic. Known widely “from the *Mahabharata* or from the poetry of Kalidas”, we are told, this is a mountain in which “a dozen races find the birth-place of their Gods and of themselves” and which “[t]housands of Hindu, Tibetan and Chinese pilgrims, Vedantin, or Buddhist, or of some older faith have encircled” (*Later Essays* 144). The conflation of different Asian cultures

and faith systems, as well as the mention of Kalidasa, looks back to his foundational engagement with Eastern lore in the 1880s, when Sinnett's version of Tibetan Buddhism merged with Chatterjee's Vedantic and Kalidasa's mythopoetic versions of India.

Meru gains a symbolic status in Yeats's system as well. The Indian texts that he was working on with Purohit Swami at that time confirmed some of his own theories:

Here and there in the Upanishads mention is made of the moon's bright fortnight, the nights from the new to the full moon, and of the dark fortnight of the moon's decline. He that lives in the first becomes fire or an eater; he that lives in the second becomes fuel and food to the living [...] He that moves towards the full moon may, if wise, go to the Gods (expressed or symbolised in the senses) and share their long lives, or if to Brahma's question—"Who are you?" he can answer "Yourself", pass out of those three penitential circles, that of common men, that of gifted men, that of the Gods, and find some cavern upon Meru, and so pass out of all life. (*Later Essays* 153)

Meru is thus associated with the liberation possible at the climax of the antithetical phases. On the other hand, the liberation possible near "the dark of the moon" is given a comparatively lower status, because it is achieved by those that "are pious, as the crowd is pious". By proper observation of rituals, these submissive (primary) sorts "can go to the blessed Ghosts, to the Heaven of their fathers, find what peace can be found between death and birth. The Upanishads denied any escape for these" (*Later Essays* 153). (The descriptions of both these categories of liberation remind us of the Thirteenth Cone wherein, according to the revised *A Vision*, "live all souls that have been set free and every *Daimon* and *Ghostly Self*" [155], that is to say, both permanently and temporarily liberated entities.) Then, using the final two of the four states of consciousness, Sushupti ("unconscious *Samadhi*,³⁶ a dreamless sleep") and Turiya ("the greater or conscious *Samadhi*") respectively,³⁷ Yeats writes: "I find my imagination setting in one

³⁶ According to Radhakrishnan and Moore, *Samadhi* "may be translated variously: as contemplation, concentration, trance, superconscious state, etc." (454n3).

³⁷ The first two states are waking and dreaming. Soud shows that Yeats in these cases has "mistakenly conflated the Upanishadic states of consciousness with Patanjali's [Yogic] stages of *samādhi*" (26; emphasis in original); for Soud's full discussion of this point, see 23-31.

line *Turiya*—full moon, mirror-like bright water, Mount Meru; and in the other *Sushupti*, moonless night, ‘dazzling darkness’—Mount Girnar [the mountain climbed by Purohit Swami during his pilgrimage]” (*Later Essays* 142, 155; emphasis in original). Hence Meru is associated in his imagination with the highest state of consciousness: Turiya, achieved, according to Purohit Swami, by Bhagwan Shri Hamsa (*Later Essays* 147).

With this background in mind, let us have a close look at the final six lines of the poem:

Hermits upon Mount Meru or Everest,
Caverned in night under the drifted snow,
Or where that snow and winter’s dreadful blast
Beat down upon their naked bodies, know
That day bring round the night, that before dawn
His glory and his monuments are gone.

Like the first half of the poem, this half also contains only one sentence, working nicely as a Petrarchan sestet. However, given that the last two lines have achieved a semi-independence in their elevated tone of philosophical detachment, it is also possible to read this section as the third quatrain and the couplet of the English sonnet. Minus the couplet’s wisdom of indifference, the quatrain reads like an account of a struggle with nature or elements. Of course, while in the first section it is man who is seen “[r]avaging, raging, and uprooting”, here it is the external environment—the “snow and winter’s dreadful blast”—that carries on the assault upon the “naked bodies” of the hermits who are bent upon attaining the supreme knowledge. As Vendler puts it, “[t]he hermits [...] live in a sentence which is entirely static” with its “verb of state, not a verb of action”—“know” (*Secret* 180). Yeats’s plan for this poem also demonstrates that the hermits were initially conceived as “[t]he ascetic frozen into the ice bird sit[ting] naked in contemplation” (Clark 243), reminding one of the “stirless” “parents of gods” of “Anashuya and Vijaya” (see Chapter 2, p. 103). However, we have just seen how in the introduction to *The Holy Mountain* he clearly dissociates Meru (or Kailasa) and the grade of enlightenment achieved there from “dreamless sleep” which is “an absorption in God, as if the Soul were His food or fuel”. Unlike this “unconscious” loss of self in God, Meru stands for a “conscious”

trance, also symbolised by the “full moon, mirror-like bright water” (*Later Essays* 143, 155). It is worth noting that rather than implying illusion or unreality, the mirror here must be “the pure mirror” which he identifies in the same essay with the supreme “Spirit, the Self that is in all selves” (*Later Essays* 147). The symbol of the “full moon” (Phase 15) invokes analogy with Justinian’s Byzantium and its poetic mirroring in “Sailing to Byzantium”. Like the embodied sages of that poem, the “Hermits upon Mount Meru” gain the status of a conscious, embodied spiritual wisdom.

Such a representation of the Meru hermits also appears to have been inspired by his reading of *The Holy Mountain*. Yeats’s introductory essay offers the following description of Bhagwan Shri Hamsa’s pursuit of a melodious voice, chanting a holy mantra, during the penultimate leg of his pilgrimage:

The ice began fifty yards below the cave; that past, came a perpendicular cliff with notches for hand and foot cut in the rock, and seven feet from the bottom the mouth of the cave. He climbed, and crawling through darkness, found a dim lamp and an oldish naked man, sitting upon a tiger’s skin.

This “naked man”, he soon came to discover, is endowed with a highly sophisticated intellect; he not only “knew all languages” but also spoke the few he used in flawless “grammar and accent”. What is more, “during [the] three days” of Shri Hamsa’s stay there, that naked hermit “neither ate nor drank” (*Later Essays* 146). Here Yeats found an Indian version of the ascetic-athlete equation that he established in his reading of Byzantium. Shri Hamsa then moved on from there to the final phase of his onerous pilgrimage.

In his introduction to “Mandukya Upanishads” (1935), Yeats analyses at length the nature of Shri Hamsa’s vision of his divine Master “the Lord Dattatreya [...] in his physical form” (*Later Essays* 159). He also attempts to offer a quasi-rational explanation of such visions by viewing it as “the unity of thought and fact” achievable by highest meditation, and zooms in on the self-consciousness that still remains after attaining Turiya:

In pure personality, seedless Samadhi, there is nothing but that bare “I am” which is Brahma. The initiate, all old Karma exhausted is “The Human Form Divine” of Blake,

that Unity of Being Dante compared to a perfectly proportioned human body; henceforth he is self-creating. But the Universal Self is a fountain, not a cistern, the Supreme Good must perpetually give itself. The world is necessary to the Self, must receive “the excess of its delights”, and in this Self all delivered selves are present, ordering all things, from the pole star to the passing wind. (*Later Essays* 160, 162)

Here is a curious mixture—or rather an ideal harmony—of the transcendental and the phenomenal states of consciousness. The “self-creating” hermit is identical with “the Universal Self”, like Godhead begetting Godhead, and yet maintains a connection with this world. Elsewhere in the essay he clarifies the point by writing that the “ascetic” after attaining Turiya might still “remain in Life” either for emptying out the past karma or for serving his fellow beings. “While such binding to the past remains, or duty to the living, it must, one would think, be incomplete, something less than absolute Self” (*Later Essays* 149). Little wonder that Yeats would relish this wholesome, however transcendently “incomplete”, way of gaining spiritual wisdom without having to surrender one’s consciousness of self. The facts that Shri Hamsa could write his autobiography after attaining the supreme spiritual consciousness and the naked hermit he met up the mount Kailash could speak multiple languages with remarkable perfection must have been especially gratifying for Yeats.³⁸ Despite being liberated or semi-liberated themselves, the wisdom of the Meru hermits, encapsulated in the concluding couplet of the poem, seems to be none other than that of Yeats’s system: if “day brings round the night”, the night also brings round the day. So, the fragment might metaphorically imply that the “day” of man’s worldly success will end in the spiritual “night” (or “midnight” when the “soul cannot endure | A bodily or mental furniture” [“Ribh Considers Christian Love Insufficient”, *Variorum* 558]). Hence, “before dawn | His glory and his monuments are gone”. But the “dawn” image

³⁸ Consider also the following reflection on Buddhist nirvana: “I think of the Nirvana Song of the Japanese monk: ‘I sit on the mountain side and look up at the little farm—I say to the old farmer: “How many times have you mortgaged your land and paid off the mortgagee?” I take pleasure in the sound of the reeds”’ (*Explorations* 325).

inevitably hints at the commencing of another diurnal cycle, whether that of a civilisation or an individual soul.³⁹

Thus, although Yeats has constructed a whole mystical system based on the antinomies of the primary and the antithetical, it is not often hard to determine on which side the authorial bias lies. As Mann puts it, Yeats “is happy to be an *antithetical* man, acknowledging his partiality and incompleteness, without any desire to rid himself of it” (“Foundations” 10; emphasis in original). Time and again, he expresses his anathema for certain forms of spiritual theories and practices, such as absolutist Hindu philosophy of Advaita Vedanta and what seems to be a primary, dogmatic Christianity. At the same time, due to his reliance upon popular wisdom and traditional faiths, he would need these religions in what he believes their least dogmatic, least abstract, and most organic forms. In his introduction to *Aphorism of Yoga* (1938), he writes:

Before Humanism, before the Renaissance, the popular intellect found rest and satisfaction in the adoration of God imagined as the figure on the Cross, or the Child upon its Mother’s knee, but to the Humanist this must have seemed as alien as did the mythology of early India or Greece to the followers of Yadnyawalkya or Pythagoras, but no Zen Buddhism, no Yôga practice, no Neo-Platonic discipline, came to find a substitute. Our mechanical science intervened. (*Later Essays* 178)

What this complex formulation of his thought implies is a fascination for wholesome spiritual systems, which, according to him, prevailed in the early-Christian West and is still prevailing in the East, wherein disciplined philosophical intellect coexists with traditional mythical wisdom without destroying it. It is this spirituality that he wants to reclaim for Western modernity

³⁹ Although Yeats in his poems often associates night or darkness with the primary, solar condition as well as the soul’s discarnate state, and day or light as the antithetical, lunar, worldly condition of the incarnate human beings, from the perspective of the afterlife or the Principles, the whole analogy is reversed: “It is because of the identification of light with nature that my instructors make the *antithetical* or lunar cone of the *Faculties* light and leave the solar dark. In the cone of the *Principles* the solar cone is light and the other dark, but their light is thought not nature” (*Vision* 1937: 140). However, his poetry (as well as his system) is predominantly concerned with the worldly, lunar, antithetical perspective and hence, in the tradition of his other poems discussed in this chapter, I think we should read the “dawn” image of this poem as indicative of the worldly, antithetical cone.

represented by the Renaissance Humanism and “[o]ur mechanical science”. Despite identifying with this modernity, the epithet “mechanical”—a primary quality—dissociates him from that. In a similar passage from *A Vision* (1925) he detects a separation of “myth and fact” in such canonical Western modernists as “Mr Ezra Pound, Mr Eliot, Mr Joyce, Signor Pirandello who [...] eliminate from metaphor the poet’s phantasy and substitute a strangeness discovered by historical or contemporary research”. Once again, he considers these dissociations to be symptomatic of a trend that began after “the exhaustion of the Renaissance” (174-75). This propels him to invoke pre-modern Western and Eastern cultures wherein mythology, theology, philosophy, and creative imagination would find an ideal harmony and hence retain a concrete, antithetical character.

Conclusion

In this study, I have attempted to revise some dominant conceptions about Tagore and Yeats prevalent in the critical oeuvre on them. As proposed in the Introduction, the Tagore chapters (Chapters 1 and 3) have countered the general scholarly tendencies either to see the Bengali poet as merely another of the mystic messiahs from the East, or to position him as a modern thinker with a bent of mind that prioritises scientific rationality and is essentially secular. What is unique about the Tagore I have presented is that he complicates both these positions by reconciling what he would consider a modern, undeluded, rational perspective with an ever-evolving mystical spirituality of a non-dogmatic propensity, without seeing any essential contradiction between them. On the other hand, my Yeats chapters have showed his lifelong connections with India to be integral to a plethora of mystic-modern enterprises that he undertook throughout his life. My first chapter on the Irish poet (Chapter 2) explored the link among the disparate Indian materials (poetic, mystical, and philosophical) that he came across in the 1880s and their imaginative transformation in his poetry of that decade and beyond. Apart from that, I also pointed to the way this early Indian orientation impacted on his larger mystical, poetic, and cultural enterprises of the 1890s and the 1900s. In my second chapter on Yeats (Chapter 4), I explored the poet's imaginative travels to Byzantine and Indian Easts with a view to tracing the connection between early Christian and Hindu mysticisms of orthodox and heterodox modes in his antithetical imagination. Moreover, although it was not the central concern of the thesis, the last two sections of my introductory chapter reappraised the relationship between Tagore and Yeats by looking at it from a mystic-modern poetic perspective without disregarding the validity of the cultural-political readings available on that subject.

Reading these poets alongside each other has yielded some shared or related concerns and attitudes between them. Both of them, we have seen, are interested in non-noumenal, non-saintly, and uninstitutional mystical faith systems of a poetic and symbolic nature, prioritising lived experience and embodied spirituality. This concrete, experiential spirituality has a

significant anthropocentric character for both. Moreover, while remaining indebted to science or a scientific attitude or approach to reality, each of these poets is wary of materialist science as well as a bourgeois, materialist modernity. Their eschewal of both spiritual and materialist absolutes—or primaries, as Yeats would have called them—is nicely captured in the following excerpt from Yeats’s 1906 “Discoveries”:

The imaginative writer differs from the saint in that he identifies himself—to the neglect of his own soul, alas!—with the soul of the world, and frees himself from all that is impermanent in that soul, an ascetic not of women and wine, but of the newspapers. Those things that are permanent in the soul of the world, the great passions that trouble all and have but a brief recurring life of flower and seed in any man, are indeed renounced by the saint, who seeks not an eternal art, but his own eternity. The artist stands between the saint and the world of impermanent things, and just in so far as his mind dwells on what is impermanent in his sense, on all that ‘modern experience and the discussion of our interests’, that is to say, on what never recurs, as desire and hope, terror and weariness, spring and autumn, recur, will his mind losing rhythm grow critical, as distinguished from creative, and his emotions wither. (*Essays and Introductions* 286)

Here the creative artist is distinguished not only from the saint, bent on personal liberation, but also from the type of (modern) writer or artist who is obsessed with facts (“newspapers”) and “modern experience” of a bourgeois, utilitarian orientation (“our interests”). The former stands for what is absolutely “permanent” in a spiritual sense—eternal “soul”—while the latter for what Yeats would consider as absolutely “impermanent” from the worldly perspective of the ideal artist. What are permanent from the artistic point of view that Yeats champions here and that Tagore, too, endorses in his writings are universal human “passions” and natural phenomena—things that are “renounced” by the saints or pure mystics. Thus the artist who commits neither to the eternal, heavenly world of the saint, nor to a fact-ridden “modern” world, who is “an ascetic not of women and wine, but of the newspapers”, is neither purely mystic nor exclusively modern, but mystic-modern.

Despite being artists of this kind, we have discovered that Tagore and Yeats differ in their approaches to and expressions of this mystic modernity. It is true that, contrary to Yeats's opinion as conveyed in his 1912 introduction to *Gitanjali* as well as during his 1937 meeting with Abinash Chandra Bose (noted in the Introduction),¹ Tagore's inner and outer worlds are riven with conflicts, contradictions, and ambivalences—much like Yeats's. Still, while Yeats almost invariably resists resolving them, the general tendency in Tagore is towards synthesis and resolution. We have seen how his favourite metaphor for life is the river, and often this river finds its greater meaning “in an unending sacrifice, in a continual union with the sea”, to use again his interpretation of his earlier poem “The Spring Wakes from its Dream” (*Religion of Man* 55). If the adjectives in the phrases “unending sacrifice” and “continual union” suggest his belief, like Yeats's, in a cyclical nature of things, the nouns underscore the spiritual sadhana of a unitary self-sacrifice which is the core virtue of his “religion of Man”. Of course, this self-transcendence is not for realising any noumenal, absolute Godhead, but to realise an ideal human condition, the eternal Man within us—a late development of his mystical Life-Deity who in herself or himself was deeply connected with the poet's own life. Yet, the note of devotion and piety often palliates the edgy starkness of his vision of reality. Commenting on the Bengali version of the poem “The Child”, which we read in Chapter 3, Serwer Murshed Khan argues that the conflictual earlier sections of the poem with their bleak vision of evil are more convincing than the benevolent picture we are offered at the end. “Although the readers do not forget that ‘the elemental brute is eternal’, the poet himself does so at the end of the poem” (341; translation mine). We have also seen how in some of his profoundly sceptical, essentially agnostic, last poems, he reaches a rather superfluous theistic resolution of a forced unitary disposition.

Yeats, too, searches for the Unity of Being which we have seen is “the unity of man not of God” (*Vision* 1937: 88). While this might seem compatible with Tagore's Man-centred

¹ In a draft of *A Vision*, as Catherine Paul and Margaret M. Harper point out in their note, Yeats considered including Tagore in Phase 27, the phase of “The Saint”, but later crossed out his name for some reason (*Vision* 1925: 265n237).

mystical “religion”, Yeats’s Unity of Being is not a revolutionary ideal, but, according to the wisdom of the Control during an automatic-writing session, a “[c]omplete harmony between physical body intellect & spiritual desire” (qtd. in *Vision 1937*: 354n37). Accordingly, we have seen a tendency in Yeats to keep his poems open-ended with the conflict between “physical body intellect” and “spiritual desire” unresolved, if often harmonised. He sometimes uses a dialogic mode in his poems in order to keep any unitary resolutions at bay. We have seen an example of this in “Mohini Chatterjee”. In another poem from the same volume, “A Dialogue of Self and Soul” (1927), *My Soul* advises *My Self* to:

Think of ancestral night that can,
 If but imagination scorn the earth
 And intellect its wandering
 To this and that and t’other thing,
 Deliver from the crime of death and birth. (*Variorum 478*)

Refusing to surrender the bodily “intellect”, *My Self* “claim[s] as by a soldier’s right | A charter to commit the crime once more” (*Variorum 478*; emphasis in original). Given that *My Self* not only gets the final word of the poem but the whole second section to speak for life, Yeats’s antithetical bias for it is fairly obvious. But this does not negate the existence of *My Soul* and the validity of its arguments. We noted the personal mystical experiences of his early years in Chapter 2. Such moments, although rare, occasionally surface in his later poems as well. In “A Meditation in Time of War” (1920), he writes of his epiphanic realisation, “[f]or one throb of the artery”, that “One is animate | Mankind inanimate phantasy” (*Variorum 406*). Another passionate mystical moment is captured in the fourth section of “Vacillation” (1932), which describes his epiphany, experienced “[i]n a crowded London shop” when his “body of a sudden blazed” and for some “twenty minutes” or so he felt “[t]hat I was blessèd and could bless” (*Variorum 501*). However, we already noted in the Introduction how in the last two sections of the same poem he reveals his ambivalence about any wholehearted mystical self-surrender. Thus, as this thesis has suggested, the differences between Tagore and Yeats are not of kind but of degree and emphasis. Far from being oppositional, mysticism and modernity are

complementary concepts for both. The conflict that we have noted in each poet is not so much between his mystical and modern perspectives as it is between his mystic modernity and any pure, exclusive, and/or absolutist form of mysticism or modernity.

As for the broader impacts of this thesis, the wedding of a non-dogmatic, transcultural, and syncretic mystical spirituality with a modern, scientific view of the world that we have noticed in the poets in question remains as relevant to today's world as it was in the era inhabited by these poets. Given the growing polarisation of religion and a secular Western modernity in the worldwide context of dogmatic religious fundamentalism of different kinds and equally fundamentalist persecutions of people of different religious faiths, the kind of transnational, transcultural, transracial, and/or transreligious mystic modernity that these poets advocate exemplifies a viable sociocultural alternative to the two forms of extremism mentioned above.

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