In the Bengali poems of Rabindra Nath Tagore, we find that common emotional appeal is united in a very fine music and rhythm. This music and rhythm is almost unconceivable to Western ears. It has metaphysical quality, the peculiar subtlety and intensity of Shelly. He writes with a simplicity that makes his writings appear the most natural thing in the world. It will not be an exaggeration to say no Western poet has done precisely this way. Not Milton as he is far too grandiose for the human heart. Not Wordsworth as he is at once too subtle and too ponderous. And not the great mystic poets of the West, for they are the poets of mystics. Not Crashaw and not Francis Thompson, nor Henry Vaughan nor Blake at his simplest. However Dante and St. John of the Cross, stand very near to this great mystic poet of Bengal. For the songs of the “Gitanjali,” the purest of pure poetry are sung all over his native province. Written in Bengali language, they are sung in the churches of the BramaSomaj. We have not seen any of those great mystic poems of the West sung in church. Even if we do, they will not be understood by the congregation.

To the Western mind, there is a gulf fixed between the common human heart and Transcendent Being. That is why the devotional poetry of the West, with the exception of the works of the great mystics and the seers, is so unsatisfying. Another reason for this is its being written by people who are not poets. Also it is not supremely devotional. It does not directly deal with the Transcendent. We may be soothed by the assurance of atonement but our finer metaphysical hunger is left unappeased. Tagore bridges the great gulf by supreme simplicity in the songs of Divine Love from “Gitanjali”: The simplicity, restraint and austerity in Tagore’s writing are far away from efflorescence and sensual imagery. Extreme subtlety of feeling and of rhythm is evident in his writings. It may be because East is subtler than the West, and of all Eastern races the Bengali is the subtlest. The subtlety of the poet makes for transparence and simplicity. As a mystic, he is bound to be a symbolist. His phrase and his rhythm is infallibly the most perfect medium of his symbol and of his thought. He has incomparable unity of rhythm and language, of language and idea.

That sky there above us, O Zarastrustra, seen from afar looks like a palace built of heavenly substance and shining over the earth; it is like a garment inlaid with stars.

Gitanjali is a book of songs whose pages are tinged with a light like the sky shown to Zarathustra. The book has won for its author Nobel Prize in literature over his audience here and we still return to it as to a first love. We found in these “song-offerings,” an accent that is natural as our own hopes and fears. They took up our half-formed wishes and gave them a voice. They rose inevitably from the life, the imagination, and the desires of him who wrote. They were the vehicle of a great emotion that surprised its imagery not only in the light that was like music, the rhythm that was in the waves of sound itself and the light-waves of the sun; but in the rain, the wet road, the lonely house, the great wall that shuts in the creature-self, the shroud of dust, the night black as a blackstone.

To explain the true incidence of song is always lost endeavour. All one can do is to say the lyric fire is there for those who can and care to receive it; and for the others, of what use to try to convince them? You cannot force a reader like Shelley, or understand the innocence of Blake, any more than you can make an unmusical ear delight in "AderynPur" or the original air of "Lhude sing Cuccu."

The English notion of Indian religious poetry is that it lies too far aloof from the hopes and fears to pass the test of art of English men and women. But what strikes one in reading Gitanjali is that the heavenly desire is qualified by an almost childlike dependence on the affections, and at times by an almost womanly tenderness. Its pages carry on an old tradition, yet strike the new emotion of a race, in a mode that is very real, with all its ideality. In the second page of Gitanjali, the poet gives us the key to his melody and to its control of the two elements when he makes his confession: When thou commandest me to sing it seems that my heart would break with pride; and I look to thy face and tears come to my eyes.

All that is harsh and dissonant in my life melts into one sweet harmony, and my adoration spreads wings like a glad bird on its flight across the sea.

If The Gardener is the song-book of youth and the romance of the young lover who is satisfied with a flower for itself, or for its token of love's happiness, to be realised on earth in a day or night, Gitanjali is the book of the old lover who is in love with heavenly desire. He cannot be satisfied, but must always wish to transcend life and sensation through death, and attain not Nirvana in the sense of extinction, but Brahma Vihara, the joy eternal, the realisation of love in its last abode:

Thou art the sky, and thou art the nest as well. Oh, thou beautiful, there in the nest it is thy love that encloses the soul with colours and sounds and odours.

There comes the morning with the golden basket in her right hand, bearing the wreath of beauty, silently to crown the earth.

And there comes the evening over the lonely meadows.

In the Bengali poems of Rabindra Nath Tagore, we find that common emotional appeal is united in a very fine music and rhythm. This music and rhythm is almost unconceivable to Western ears. It has metaphysical quality, the peculiar subtlety and intensity of Shelly. He writes with a simplicity that makes his writings appear the most natural thing in the world. It will not be an exaggeration to say no Western poet has done precisely this way. Not Milton as he is far too grandiose for the human heart. Not Wordsworth as he is at once too subtle and too ponderous. And not the great mystic poets of the West, for they are the poets of mystics. Not Crashaw and not Francis Thompson, nor Henry Vaughan nor Blake at his simplest. However Dante and St. John of the Cross, stand very near to this great mystic poet of Bengal. For the songs of the “Gitanjali,” the purest of pure poetry are sung all over his native province. Written in Bengali language, they are sung in the churches of the BramaSomaj. We have not seen any of those great mystic poems of the West sung in church. Even if we do, they will not be understood by the congregation.

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There comes the morning with the golden basket in her right hand, bearing the wreath of beauty, silently to crown the earth.

And there comes the evening over the lonely meadows.
I have said that the soul is not more than the body.
And I have said that the body is not more than the soul,
And nothing, not God, is greater to one than one's self is."
So instead of being an ascetic Tagore became a pragmatist,
for he held, as he holds today, that the "greater cannot be
great without the small, the infinite is only the fullest
expression of the finite, and that there is no liberation
without love. Wherever love is there dwells the Infinite
within the finite." What Henry James says of Browning may
be said of Tagore with more appropriateness: "The meeting
point of God and man is love. Love, in other words, is, for
the poet, the supreme principle both of orality and religion.
Love, once for all, solves that contradiction between them,
which, both in theory and in practice, has embarrassed the
world for so many ages. Love is the sublimest conception
attainable by man; a life inspired by it is the most perfect
form of goodness he can conceive; therefore, love is, at the
same moment, man's moral ideal, and the very essence of
Godhood. A life actuated by love is divine, whatever other
limitations it may have. Such is the perfection and glory of
this emotion, when it has been translated into a self-
conscious motive and become the energy of an intelligent
will, that it lifts him who owns it to the sublimest heights of
being.
"For the loving worm within its clod,
Were diviner than a loveless God
Amid his world, I will dare to say."

Holding that the soul finds its fullest expression in work well
done, for, as Carlyle says: "All true work is religion," he thus
writes in Sadhana: "It is only when we wholly submit to the
bonds of truth that we fully gain the joy of freedom. And
how? As does the string that is bound to the harp. When the
harp is truly strung, when there is not the slightest laxity in
the strength of the bond, then only does music result; and the
string transcending itself in its melody finds at every chord
its true freedom. It is because it is. bound by such hard and
fast rules on the one side that it can find this range of
freedom in music on the other."

Rabindranath Tagore has been able in his poems and other
writings to preserve with uncommon felicity and naturalness
of effect the balance between the Sanskrit and the Bengali
idioms. He has the instinctive sense which warns him off the
schoolman's word and the intimidating note of pedantry, and
in Gitanjali the Bengali tongue has been carried to its most
forceful and melodious pitch. It has the quality begotten of
the inherent music of a tongue, which we find in the best of
Elizabethans, who wrote with a true regard for the spoken
word and its clear enunciation, using all those associations of
word behind word, and thought within thought, to which
Coleridge alludes in a famous passage of the Biographia.

REFERENCE


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