'GITANJALI'

In talking with the Indian poets, said one of our earlier Orientalists, you will find they consider poetry a divine art, practised for untold ages in heaven before it was revealed on earth. Here, in the West, we have been rather forgetting the old inspirational idea of poetry, though it has been insisted on by writers like Spenser, Milton, and Shelley; and it is time we should hear its reminder, and after a fashion that is better than prose argument—in inspired verse itself. Such reminders when they do come are apt to fall naturally, without any noise or loud creaking of the press. At an Indian play given last autumn in London, my next neighbour, a native of Bengal, asked me if I had read any of the other writings of the playwright—Rabindra Nath Tagore. He went on to speak of them with the enthusiasm of a disciple, in a way indeed to make one's ears tingle. His account had the effect of the tuning up of the fiddles before the actual music; or it was like that passage in the Vedic Hymn, which speaks of the coming of the poet, the long-expected poet who has the gift of the supernal lyric tongue. A week or two later, one Sunday afternoon, my fellow-playgoer brought, according to promise, a volume of the new poetry in the original Bengali, along with some translations, and read them aloud.

In that way, those who heard were able to get an idea both of the Indian melody and the actual content of the verse; and there could be no doubt in our minds of its original imagination and its poetic reality—a voice that had in it mixed accents of East and West, yet was individual to a degree.

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 deserted by herds, through trackless paths, carrying cool draughts of peace in her golden pitcher from the western ocean of rest.

But there, where spreads the infinite sky for the soul to take her flight in, reigns the stainless white radiance. There is no day nor night, nor form nor colour, and never never a word.

This is the sixty-seventh of the *Gitánjali*, or song offerings, in the volume produced lately by the Indian Society, which again is an English draft from three books printed in Calcutta—*Naivédya*, *Kheyá*, and *Gitánjali*, besides a few songs that hitherto have appeared in magazines only. One thing it is well to realise in perusing the leaves is that the title does not mean songs in the conventional sense with which we use the term, but songs really to be sung. Their writer is himself a musician and a singer, and the tonic and the verbal strains combined and were both present when the verse sprang to life. The two musics were essential to its existence in fact, and it is truly, and in the old Greek sense, melic and lyrical, although the *tambura*, or other Indian stringed instrument, may not be accounted strictly a lyre. So when Rabindra Nath Tagore uses the terms of his craft, when he refers to singing in a poem, it is not a conventional allusion; it means that he sings:

I am here to sing thee songs. In this hall of thine I have a corner seat.

When the hour strikes for thy silent worship at the dark temple of midnight, command me, my master, to stand before thee to sing. . . .

The whole spirit of the book is musical, and if the emotion at times seems to be affected by the Indian tradition and a note of Quietism, and the rapture is held in suspense, the songs even in the English prose-rhythms are irresistibly impulsive. Their spirit is original, and yet they are full of reminiscent fragrance. Now they recall a strain like that of the Silurist, which runs:

> All the long hours of night and rest
> Through the still shrouds of sleep and clouds,
> This dew fell on my breast.

But it is needless to look for comparisons. The book has its own dialect; the author a voice affectingly individual, which by its accent holds the ear:

In the deep shadows of the rainy July, with secret steps, thou walkest, silent as night, eluding all watchers.

To-day the morning has closed its eyes, heedless of the insistent calls of the loud east wind, and a thick veil has been drawn over the ever-wakeful blue sky.

The woodlands have hushed their songs, the doors are all shut at every house. Thou art the solitary wayfarer in this deserted street. Oh, my only friend, my best beloved, the gates are open in my house—do not pass by like a dream.

In England the old lyric tradition has almost been lost. The poets do not write to music, or with any accompaniment in their ears, save that of the literary make-believe, or the verbal melody employed in the stanzaic compact entered upon between writer

and reader. There is inevitably some loss of lyric reality in this dependence on the printed page, and only here and there a verseman of true singing brain is able to bring the perfect illusion of song into what may be called 'read verse.' From these difficulties the author of Gitánjali has by the fortune of heaven and the custom of his country been left free; and the gain to his poetry has impressed even Mr. W. B. Yeats, whom I can remember speaking two or three years ago with a fine contempt of those who tried to relate verse to music.

When there was but one mind in England [he says in his introduction] Chaucer wrote his *Troilus and Cressida*, and though he has written to be read, or to be read out—for our time was running on apace—he was sung by minstrels for a while. Rabindra Nath Tagore, like Chaucer's forerunners, writes music for his words, and one understands at every moment that he is so abundant, so spontaneous, so daring in his passion, so full of surprise, because he is doing something which has never seemed strange, unnatural, or in need of defence.

A friend of his, Mr. Maitra, who recently played and sang some of his songs to the original tunes for a select audience, told us that the music actually suggested the words; very much as it did at times to Burns, one of the last of our true song-writers. Burns in one of his casual revelations explained that his way was to take one of 'the old Scottish airs' and then 'sowth the tune' over and over until the words came, and that there was the readiest way to achieve again the 'glorious enthusiasm' of the older poetry. But this new Indian poet has the advantage over the Scots song-writer in that he makes his own tune, although possibly it may have some old recollective associations or cadences in it.

The rhythms, the intervals, the harmonies of the Indian *rag* or song are markedly different to those of our music; but in his translations Rabindra Nath Tagore has obtained a most natural and beautiful melodic equivalent. Sometimes the original phrase lingers in a use of parallelism, or an echoing note, or a refrain. Try the two child-poems: No. lx. which opens:

On the seashore of endless worlds children meet. The infinite sky is motionless everhead and the restless water is boisterous. On the seashore of endless worlds the children meet with shouts and dances.

or No. lxii.:

When I bring to you coloured toys, my child, I understand why there is such a play of colours on clouds, on water, and why flowers are painted in tints—when I give coloured toys to you, my child.

When I sing to make you dance I truly know why there is music in leaves, and why waves send their chorus of voices to the heart of the listening earth—when I sing to make you dance.

When I bring sweet things to your greedy hands I know why there is honey in the cup of the flower, and why fruits are secretly filled with sweet juice—when I bring sweet things to your greedy hands. . . .

These poems illustrate the musical element in *Gitânjali*, while they hardly suggest its most individual note, which is that of profound longing, an unappeasable quickening of the spirit of song by vivid desire. The utterance is often impassioned, often poignant; yet rarely lets go of its directness and simplicity of expression.

He came and sat by my side, but I woke not. What a cursed sleep it was, O miserable me.

He came when the night was still; he had his harp in his hands, and my dreams became resonant with its melodies.

Alas, why are my nights all thus lost? Ah, why do I ever miss his sight whose breath touches my sleep?

One cannot do better than return to Mr. Yeats's pages of Introduction for the account there given by a distinguished Bengali doctor of medicine of the poet's fame at home and among his own folk.

We call this [he said] the epoch of Rabindra Nath. No poet seems to me as famous in Europe as he is among us. He is as great in music as in poetry, and his songs are sung from the west of India into Burmah wherever Bengali is spoken. . . . I so much admire the completeness of his life; when he was very young he wrote much of natural objects. He would sit all day in his garden; from his twenty-fifth year or so to his thirty-fifth perhaps, when he had a great sorrow, he wrote the most beautiful love poetry in our language . . . words can never express what I owed at seventeen to his love poetry. After that his art grew deeper, it became religious and philosophical; all the aspirations of mankind are in his hymns. He is the first among our saints who has not refused to live, but has spoken out of Life itself, and that it why we give him our love. . . . A little while ago he was to read divine service in one of our churches—we of the Brahmo Samaj use your word 'church' in English—it was the largest in Calcutta, and not only was it crowded, people even standing in the windows, but the streets were all but impassable because of the people.

The portrait by Mr. William Rothenstein (to whom the volume is dedicated) serves to give personal colour to these glimpses of the author in his natural environment. It is a remarkable characterisation by a fine interpreter, a masterly portraitist; yet it leaves one still but half satisfied, as any portrait must do. Nor, I suppose, would anything quite suffice, but to be able to hear and understand Rabindra Nath speaking to his own people in his own musical tongue. If this is taken to imply any feeling of disappointment in the English versions

of *Gitánjali*, it will be doing their writer and translator in one great injustice. Since the Hebrew Scriptures and the Greek Testament were translated into the English Bible, no finer transfusion of the genius of other or Eastern tongues into that of the Western world has been effected.

Take two more of these songs, one of them the eighty-sixth, which is a song of Death, and see if your English instinct for word and phrase direct the alteration of a syllable?

I

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 to find in the very next moment its consolation in the left one.

II

Death, thy servant is at my door. He has crossed the unknown sea and brought thy call to my home.

The night is dark and my heart is fearful—yet I will take up the lamp, open my gates, and bow to him my welcome. It is thy messenger who stands at my door.

I will worship him with folded hands, and with tears. I will worship him placing at his feet the treasure of my heart.

By way of completing an imperfect tribute, let this passage from a recent discourse of Rabindra Nath's (translated by Mr. Satis C. Roy) be added to the songs:

The Being who is in his essence the light and life of all, who is world-conscious, is Brahma. To feel all, to be conscious of everything—this is His spirit. Not only does he pervade everything, but everything is and has being in His consciousness. The Mother not only is in contact with her child, but she intensely feels it from head to foot. So does the consciousness of the Immortal Being fill all space, completely pervade the universe always and everywhere. We are immersed in His consciousness body and soul. . . . It is through His consciousness that the light-waves are being transmitted from planet to planet. There is no discontinuity of space, no interval of time in Him.

So far, finally, as one may venture on a contemporary estimate from this side of the world, it may be said that nothing has come to these shores of late years in the way of poetry from abroad that can compare with these Indian songs. Their imagination and melody, touched with human feeling and

spiritually fired, are of a quality unlike anything we have had in this or the last generation. Indeed, one is tempted to go further and to say they are among the few really important things that have happened in poetry within the overlapping terms of the two centuries, the nineteenth and the twentieth; while the message they bear to the Western world amounts to a spiritual revelation.

ERNEST RHYS.