CHAPTER 1

# (Un)Translatable Authorship

## *Positioning Yeats' "Preface" and the Poetry of Tagore*

*Amardeep Singh*

**Abstract**

This chapter argues that Yeats's "Preface" to the 1912 translation of Tagore's *Gitanjali* is an expression of both Yeats's (and perhaps Tagore's) universalist aesthetics and the fraught nature of their relationship. Gayatri Spivak's own long preface to Jacques Derrida's *Of Grammatology* theorizes the fraught relationship between Preface and Text. Yeats's use of his Preface to define Tagore as an Author in his own image worked for both writers while their conceptions of authorship aligned, but the rhetorical positioning created a structural impossibility: one cannot claim to be a universalist Author *and* depend on the Authority of another writer to assert that on one's behalf. The chapter then reads Tagore's growing divergence from Yeats' conception of a universal Poet as a form of postcolonial textual resistance to the shaping effects of the Euro-modernist Preface.

**Keywords**

India – Ireland – Folklore – Authorship – Poetry – Prefaces – Orientalism – Poststructuralism – Exoticism – First books

W.B. Yeats and Rabindranath Tagore entered the mainstream of Anglo-American literature from the colonial margins about twenty-five years apart. In their initial appearances, both authors benefited from the novelty of their respective connections to Irish and Bengali literary and folk traditions. Yeats, who published his first books of Irish folklore in 1888 and his first, solo-authored book, *The Wanderings of Oisin and Other Poems* in January 1889, was encouraged by English publishers to exploit his access to Irish folklore. For his part, while Tagore entered the world of Anglophone literature only after having earlier established himself as a pre-eminent poet, novelist, dramatist, and journalist in Bengali, many parallel dynamics applied to his explosion onto the

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London publishing scene in 1912, with the publication of a translated version of *Gitanjali*. Like Yeats, Tagore was encouraged to trade on the exoticism of a particular colonial culture, and he was presented to readers – by Yeats himself – as a saintly, otherworldly genius. Unlike Yeats, Tagore was never truly able to assimilate to the Anglo-American mainstream, partly due to his own sense of conflictedness about his status as author and spiritual leader. But at least part of Tagore's problem might have been embedded in the impossible rhetorical position he was put in by Yeats in his initial 1912 Preface. There, Yeats dramatically aimed to "lift" Tagore into visibility and status, though he seemed unconscious that the gesture itself would leave Tagore marked, in some sense, as an artifact of that lifting. The logic undergirding this rhetorical diminution is explored by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, in her "Preface" to her translation of Jacques Derrida's *Of Grammatology* (1967). Spivak explores the many ways a Preface can decenter the text it precedes, which can lead to an opportunity for deconstructive play with respect to interpretation. That said, this dynamic can be problematic when the preface author is introducing an emergent writer from the margins, as Tagore was in 1912; it contributes to the sense that the Indian writer is impossible to read in his own right. (Ironically, in Spivak's own case, it could be argued that she used her "Preface" to Derrida as a self-authorizing gesture, showing how the imbalance between metropolitan center and colonial margin might be subverted.)

While Yeats became a canonical figure in modern Anglo-American poetry (not just an "Irish poet"), Tagore remained a novelty figure in the West – a footnote in the literary history of the 1910s and 20s (specifically within the Anglo-American tradition; within Bengali and Indian literature his position is quite different). Yeats, in other words, became "universal" (in the West), while Tagore, despite his intentions to the contrary, continued to be understood as an "Indian poet" first and foremost. The exact reasons for this difference will be explored below, but the parameters of the differential reception of the two writers by mainstream editors, publishers, and readers might be framed by the differences in the ways their first respective first books were presented. Yeats' *Wanderings of Oisin* was presented and received as an important first work by an emergent Author, even if sales were somewhat modest. But the reception of Tagore's *Gitanjali* was shaped to a considerable degree by the rhetorical frame Yeats himself constructed for Tagore in his "Preface." While Yeats does aim to balance his exoticization of Tagore with parallel efforts to render the Indian writer legible to western readers, his rhetorical framing ultimately seems to preclude the possibility that Tagore could ever come to stand independently.

## 1 The Double-Edged Gift and Curse of Yeats' "Preface" to *Gitanjali*

Though Yeats' Preface to *Gitanjali* has been much discussed by biographers and critics over the years, it has rarely been *interpreted* as a text in its own right. Here it might be worth taking a moment to look closely at its rhetoric, specifically with reference to the ways it aims this double-work of distancing and naturalizing Tagore. Let's begin with this widely quoted passage:

> I have carried the manuscript of these translations about with me for days, reading it in railway trains, or on the top of omnibuses and in restaurants, and I have often had to close it lest some stranger would see how much it moved me. 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 live long. The work of a supreme culture, they yet appear as much the growth of the common soil as the grass and the rushes. A tradition, where poetry and religion are the same thing, 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.
>
> YEATS, "Preface" to *Gitanjali* [1912]

If one looks past the rapturous tone of Yeats' over-the-top praise, some concrete rhetorical strategies can be identified in the passage above. The allusion to "reading it in railway trains, or on the top of omnibuses and in restaurants" can be read as a way of naturalizing Tagore's poems, by making them potentially legible as part of the everyday life of modern London. Yeats also seems to embrace the collection as something he might identify with himself ("a world I dreamed of all my live long"). However, even as Yeats suggests a space for Tagore in a modern, cosmopolitan context, here he also distances Tagore, by describing his as the "work of a supreme culture," where "poetry and religion are the same thing." In phrases like these, Tagore – and Bengali high culture more generally – seem otherworldly and allochronic (that is to say, more medieval than modern). Yeats, in effect, is engaging in what Johannes Fabian called the "denial of coevalness" (34): what Yeats refers to in the passage quoted above as Tagore's "supreme culture" may be admirable, but it is decidedly not the world of trains and omnibuses – not here, not now.

Yeats follows the above with tropes that continue this pattern of simultaneous inclusion and exclusion, of naturalization and othering:

> If the civilization of Bengal remains unbroken, if that common mind which – as one divines – runs through all, is not, as with us, broken into a dozen minds that know nothing of each other, something even of what is most subtle in these verses will have come, in a few generations, to the beggar on the roads. When there was but one mind in England, Chaucer wrote his *Troilus and Cressida*, and thought he had written to be read, or to be read out – for our time was coming on apace – he was sung by minstrels for a while. Rabindranath 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. These verses will not lie in little well-printed books upon ladies' tables, who turn the pages with indolent hands that they may sigh over a life without meaning, which is yet all they can know of life, or be carried by students at the university to be laid aside when the work of life begins, but, as the generations pass, travellers will hum them on the highway and men rowing upon the rivers. […] A whole people, a whole civilization, immeasurably strange to us, seems to have been taken up into this imagination; and yet we are not moved because of its strangeness, but because we have met our own image, as though we had walked in Rossetti's willow wood, or heard, perhaps for the first time in literature, our voice as in a dream.
>
> YEATS, "Preface" to *Gitanjali* [1912]

Yeats' idea that the "civilization of Bengal remains unbroken" is of course highly arguable at best; he's overlooking the numerous ways in which British colonial modernity is as epistemologically transformative in India as it was in Ireland (the one difference being the survival of the Bengali language). But more broadly, Yeats again seems to be following two rhetorical impulses in tension with one another. In the first lines of the passage above, Yeats positions Tagore alongside Chaucer, as a writer whose works will have broad public appeal ("he was sung by minstrels"). But even as he asserts the potential for broad public purchase ("these verses will not lie in little well-printed books upon ladies' tables"), Yeats seems to undercut his argument: if the best exemplar for the kind of universalism he sees in Tagore is a medieval poet, how can Tagore actually transcend his various forms of marginality in the present? A similar split gesture ends the passage above, as Tagore's Bengali cultural context is presented as a "whole civilization, immeasurably strange to us," which is also, paradoxically, a version of "our own image." And yet the effect here is not to naturalize or humanize Bengalis like Tagore, but to figure the Indian poet's

similarity to the "we" that is the Western reader in terms that Freud might describe as Uncanny (Tagore's is "our voice as in a dream").

I will end this consideration of the rhetorical postures of Yeats' "Preface" with one further short passage, which makes a key rhetorical turn that will broaden the significance of what I have been describing as the self-contradictory impulses of Yeats' representation of Tagore as both an Author like other Western Authors, and incomprehensibly Other:

> This is no longer the sanctity of the cell and of the scourge; being but a lifting up, as it were, into a greater intensity of the mood of the painter, painting the dust and the sunlight, and we go for a like voice to St. Francis and to William Blake who have seemed so alien in our violent history.
>
> YEATS, "Preface" to *Gitanjali* [1912])

The final phrase of this passage does rhetorical work that rhymes with the other passages quoted above – Tagore is linked to figures who are at once decidedly and inarguably Western figures (with Blake being much closer to contemporaneous than Chaucer or St. Francis), but with a difference: here, even Blake has been an "alien" figure. However, there is also something new in this passage – the spatializing gesture of "lifting up." Most literally, Yeats is contrasting the prospect of a closed kind of asceticism ("the sanctity of the cell and of the scourge") to a more universalizing secularity. He posits Tagore as of the latter, problematically, by immediately linking him to two historical Christian mystics. More expansively, however, "lifting up" might be a self-reflexive figure for the complex project of Yeats' entire "preface": it expresses the fraught nature of the relationship between the established Anglo-Irish modernist and an Indian writer who was at that time unknown in the West – the former "lifting," as it were, the latter, into the public eye. Yeats' preface, in other words, both described what he saw (and what he helped editorially *produce*) in Tagore's poetry, and, in effect, performed it.

This performative rhetorical gesture entailed in Yeats' Preface merits closer analysis; it might be helpful to turn to Gayatri Spivak's own infamously long preface to Jacques Derrida's *Of Grammatology,* where Spivak in some ways reverses the positioning of the Preface and Text, using the opportunity to authorize herself as a "rising" postcolonial intellectual, helping "establish" French poststructuralism in the Anglophone world. In performing her own Authority, Spivak also directly theorizes the fraught relationship of Preface and Text, and her insights continue to be useful to us here.

Spivak's long "Translator's Preface" is much more than a traditional preface; it might be seen as an important work of theory in its own right. It has

certainly been read as much, if not more, than the difficult work of Derrida's it ostensibly introduces. Spivak begins self-consciously, with a deconstructive analysis of Prefaces themselves, both with respect to Derrida's understanding of them and, further in the past, Hegel's own "Preface" to his monumental philosophical treatise, *Phenomenology of the Mind.* In his 1807 Preface, Hegel seemed to object to the function of a Preface as a text that abstracts from the text that follows it. As she follows Hegel and links his ambivalence about his own prefatory gesture to Derrida, Spivak describes an analogy between preface and text, "abstraction" and "activity," to demonstrate a relationship between Hegelian abstraction and the signifier in Derrida. The preface is the face, or the name, which points to the text itself that is in the signified position. As she puts it: "Hegel's objection to prefaces reflects the following structure: preface/text – abstract generality/self-moving activity. His acceptance of prefaces reflects another structure: preface/text = signifier/signified. And the name of the '–' in this formula is the Hegelian *Aufhebung*" (xi).

Just as Derridean and Barthesian poststructuralisms have challenged the solidity of the distinction between Signifier and Signified, Spivak's "Translator's Preface" challenges the distinction between Preface and Text. Hegel doubted the formal efficacy of talking *about* the primary text (the "self-moving activity") that he hoped and expected the reader would read – and be transformed by – but what Derrida and Spivak see is that the "aboutness" (or "abstraction") of the Preface ultimately becomes one of the properties of the Text itself. Spivak's proper aim is to deconstruct the analogy posed above: if the stability of the text itself as a linear entity, with a front and rear, may be questioned, the Preface's position comes into question in terms that are either spatial (the Preface in front of the Text), or temporal (the Preface must be written after the Text is read, though ironically it is typically experienced by the reader *before* the Text). Spivak sees her "Translator's Preface" to Derrida, as well as Hegel and Derrida's own Prefaces to themselves, as ultimately both inside and outside, both preceding and subsequent to, the greater scene of the Text. One could argue (appreciatively, but perhaps somewhat cynically) that this head-spinning self-reflexive gesture might allow a rising postcolonial theorist from the formerly colonized margins to "self-authorize" herself – to in effect write herself into Derrida's groundbreaking text. Less cynically, Spivak's gesture might be seen as additive rather than self-promotional: her "Translator's Preface" helped make many of the key gestures of *Of Grammatology* more legible to Anglo-American readers than they otherwise might have been. Her modeling of Derridean thinking, in short, can be seen as a kind of performative pedagogy for Anglophone readers: I have translated Derrida, now let me *do* what Derrida does.

The spatial tropes in the passage quoted above, along with Spivak's allusion to Hegel's concept of "Aufhebung," brings us back to Yeats/Tagore. *Aufhebung*, according to Spivak, might be translated alternatively as "sublimation," "sublation" or, more straightforwardly as "lifting up" – in Hegel's case, the "lifting up" that is the condition of philosophical enlightenment. Yeats does not use the word "Aufhebung," but he does see Tagore's poems, as we have seen, as a "lifting up, as it were, into a greater intensity of the mood of the painter, painting the dust and the sunlight." And as an established Anglo-Irish modernist introducing an Indian writer to English-language readers, Yeats' preface aims to operate as a "lifting up" of Tagore. And yet even as it does so it takes precedence away from the text that it supposedly prefaces; both formally and, as we have shown above, in its interior rhetorical postures.

In short, while Yeats ostensibly aims to vouch for Tagore, that legitimation can also be seen as instituting dependency or vassalage: Yeats, one could say, uses the name "Tagore" to extend the domain of his own Authorship, and subsumes Tagore into his own image of a worldly modernism. The very act of "lifting up" Yeats' preface aims to perform with his Preface seems to be the gesture that makes it impossible for Tagore to *rise up* on his own agency. And in the longer lens of literary history, Yeats' rapturous praise of Tagore has become part of the long and continuing story of Yeats' career as a canonical Anglo-American Author, rather than the beginning of a new chapter in the story of Tagore's.

## 2 Authorship at the Scene of Its Emergence: Two Independent Cases

Above, I argued that because of Yeats' preface, it became impossible to dissociate Tagore from Yeats in the years following the publication of *Gitanjali*. Here, I will attempt to do work through the steps that might make such a dissociation possible, and briefly consider the stakes of emergent authorship for Yeats and Tagore in turn. The goal is to give an account of the moment of authorial emergence in the mainstream of the British literary world – with Yeats' first published books (1888–1889), and a brief consideration the actual text of Tagore's *Gitanjali* (1906–1910).

Edward Said has famously described Yeats as a poet of "decolonization," but much of that characterization is based on a reading of Yeats' mid-career poems, especially collections like *Responsibilities*. At the start of his career, Yeats' political gestures were much more contingent, and dependent on the patronage of more established British and Anglo-Irish writers as well as, especially editors in London such as Ernest Rhys. As R.F. Foster notes, in *W.B. Yeats: A Life,* Yeats was

involved with two branded "Irish" collections before he went on to publish his own, self-authored work in 1889 (Foster 75–77). One was a collection he edited, *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry,* which was commissioned by Rhys and published in London in December of 1888. Another was a collection he likely co-edited with the more established Anglo-Irish poet Katherine Tynan, *Poems and Ballads of Young Ireland*. This volume was published in Dublin in the spring of 1888 by Gill & Sons.

*Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry* has an "Introduction" authored by Yeats himself that is remarkable in some ways for rhetorical gestures that seem to parallel those in Yeats' 1912 "Preface" to *Gitanjali*. Here we will look at just two brief passages along these lines. At the beginning of the 1888 "Introduction," Yeats, writing for a largely British and cosmopolitan, Anglo-Irish group of readers, makes it a point to mark Celtic culture as otherworldly and pre-modern:

> The Celt, and his cromlechs, and his pillar-stones, these will not change much – indeed, it is doubtful if anybody at all changes at any time. In spite of hosts of deniers, and asserters, and wise-men, and professors, the majority still are averse to sitting down to dine thirteen at table, or being helped to salt, or walking under a ladder, or seeing a single magpie flirting his chequered tail. There are, of course, children of light who have set their faces against all this, though even a newspaper man, if you entice him into a cemetery at midnight, will believe in phantoms, for every one is a visionary, if you scratch him deep enough. But the Celt is a visionary without scratching.
>
> YEATS, "Introduction," Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry [1888]

Just as Yeats would see himself as a translator of Tagore for a western readership in 1912, as he is just embarking on his literary career in 1888 he takes on a similar role for himself with respect to Irish folklore. And just as we adduced ambivalence in the gesture there, some traces of ambivalence may be seen here, as Yeats simultaneously positions himself as a cosmopolitan observer with a modern sensibility and as an admirer and enthusiast for the "old tales." While the image of Celtic culture as an unchanging source of traditional myths and legends is familiar, one important aspect of Yeats' depiction of Celtic folk culture here is his use of the word "visionary," which both suggests an attachment to supernatural storytelling and hints at the qualities of these storytelling patterns that Yeats found so compelling. Later in the "Introduction," Yeats makes a gesture that should seem familiar:

> These folk-tales are full of simplicity and musical occurrences, for they are the literature of a class for whom every incident in the old rut of birth, love, pain, and death has cropped up unchanged for centuries: who have steeped everything in the heart: to whom everything is a symbol. They have the spade over which man has leant from the beginning. The people of the cities have the machine, which is prose and a *parvenu*. They have few events. They can turn over the incidents of a long life as they sit by the fire. With us nothing has time to gather meaning, and too many things are occurring for even a big heart to hold.
>
> YEATS, "Introduction" Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry [1888]

The rhetoric here parallels the double-gesture of Yeats' 1912 "Preface" to *Gitanjali* almost exactly. Just as Yeats would later (incorrectly) describe Bengali literary tradition as "unbroken," here he depicts Irish folk culture as "unchanged for centuries." And while there is considerable admiration for the premodern epistemology he is describing for the reader, there is also a clear delineation of "us" and "them" that perfectly anticipates Yeats' later move both recognizing and distancing European modernity from the subject being discussed. For the modern "we" of the "Introduction," thoughts are crowded and ephemeral ("nothing has time to gather meaning"); this is in contrast to the essentially timeless and allochronic world of the otherworldly Celt.

The other collection with which Yeats was involved in 1888 was *Poems and Ballads of Young Ireland*. This was a collection of poems published without an attributed editor, and – remarkably – without a regular preface other than an anonymous ode to the Fenian exile John O'Leary, who had returned to Ireland in 1885 after a long exile, and who acted as an elderly statesman supporting the "young Ireland" movement with which Yeats briefly associated himself (see Foster, 57). While other poets in the collection make explicit political statements, Yeats' contributions stress his continued investment in Irish folklore. The most memorable of Yeats' contributions to this collection might be "The Stolen Child," where Yeats makes, in verse form, a version of the rhetorical gesture he also makes in both his "Preface" to Tagore and his "Introduction" to *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry*. Take for instance the final stanza of the poem:

> Away with us he's going,
> The solemn-eyed –
> He'll hear no more the lowing
> Of the calves on the warm hill-side,
> Or the kettle on the hob

Sing peace into his breast,
Or see the brown mice bob
Round and round the oatmeal chest.
For he comes, the human child,
To the woods and waters wild
With a fairy hand in hand,
For the world's more full of weeping than he can understand.
(YEATS, "The Stolen Child" [1888])

Here Yeats marks the contrast between the modern world the human child leaves behind ("the brown mice bob / round and round the oatmeal chest") with the exotic fairy world he enters. The only hint of political upheaval is in the refrain that appears as the last line of each stanza ("For the world's more full of weeping than he can understand"), but any political interpretation is clouded by language that is quite abstract and general. The larger gesture rhymes quite well with the gestures we have seen Yeats make in his various prefaces and introductions: the narrator in the poem acts as a kind of witness testifying to the child's escape from the modern world, though he positions himself firmly in that same modern world. Yeats appears interested in representing "Irishness" as a form of exoticism and difference without, in these early poems, actually committing himself by identifying with that difference. (At best, he is the translator and interpreter of that difference.)

Finally, it might be worth saying a brief word about the collection of poems that would help Yeats establish himself as a solo poet – as, in effect, an Author. Yeats published *The Wanderings of Oisin and Other Poems* in London in 1889 with the support of another English publisher, Kegan Paul. Remarkably, the young Anglo-Irish poet published his first substantial book under his own name – with no Preface from a more established author. Several of the shorter poems had already been printed in *Poems and Ballads of Young Ireland*; the three "Indian" themed poems, inspired by Yeats' encounter with theosophists in Dublin, had been published in the *Dublin University Review* in 1885. The most substantial new poem, "The Wanderings of Oisin," can be read, in effect, as a longer exploration of the same theme of escape into a fairy kingdom that is described in "The Stolen Child" and celebrated (at a distance) in Yeats' Introduction to *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry*. In effect, Yeats can join the mainstream of Anglo-Irish literature on his own terms. He is shaped by a certain vision of Irish folklore, inspired by Irish revolutionary politics but not explicitly committed to any particular political course of action. He can appoint himself as the translator and prefacer of Irish folklore in early works, before fully assimilating that material and signing it under his own signature

in *The Wanderings of Oisin.* Themes from Irish folklore were at the heart of Yeats' early poetry, but Yeats did not feel limited by them; in time, he could confidently move away from these themes and toward more concrete social and political engagements.

In contrast to the young Yeats of 1888–1889, Tagore was already very much an established author before publishing the translation of *Gitanjali* in London in 1912. He had published numerous novels and plays in Bengali, including the highly influential novel *Gora* in 1910 and the play *The Post Office* in 1912 itself. He was well-known in Bengal as an important writer, but also as the son of an influential leader of the reformist Brahmo Samaj; he was also someone who was ready and willing to debate the politics of the day in the Bengali-language newspapers. Despite this history, when he came to England in the summer of 1912, Tagore was received as essentially an otherworldly mystic – to Yeats, an Oriental incarnation of the exotic and timeless Celt he had first described more than twenty years earlier. While biographers like Dutta and Robinson and letters to his friend William Rothenstein confirm that Tagore allowed this version of himself to be presented in the West (Dutta and Robinson 169–171; see also Letters 43, 45, 54 in Lago [1972]), it is nevertheless important to recognize he was not fully in control of the image of himself that began to be disseminated in 1912. Tagore's various mediators – Yeats (the preface-writer, but also co-translator), editors, publishers – substantially shaped him. Even the selection of poems and the style of the translations suggests the problem of presenting the first English versions of *Gitanjali* as a "translation" of the collection Tagore had composed in Bengali between 1906 and 1910. Many verses were removed from the London *Gitanjali,* and some of the verses included in that translation were actually from other collections by Tagore.

Indeed, an even approximately literal translation was for many years inaccessible in English. A much more literal English translation of *Gitanjali* – with all 150 poems in Tagore's intended order – was finally published in 2004, translated by Joe Winter. The collection is strikingly different from the Yeats/Tagore *Gitanjali,* in ways that would be beyond our scope to explore in depth here. However, even a glance at the opening poem of the two versions of *Gitanjali* might give one some indication of how differently Tagore presents himself as an authorial persona in the two respective volumes. To begin with, here is the first verse of the 1912 *Gitanjali*:

> Thou hast made me endless, such is thy pleasure. This frail vessel thou emptiest again and again, and fillest it ever with fresh life.
>
> This little flute of a reed thou hast carried over hills and dales, and hast breathed through it melodies eternally new.

> At the immortal touch of thy hands my little heart loses its limits in joy and gives birth to utterance ineffable.
>
> Thy infinite gifts come to me only on these very small hands of mine. Ages pass, and still thou pourest, and still there is room to fill.

The first thing one should note is the second-person voice; nearly all the poems in *Gitanjali* are in the second person, vocative mode. The subject of the address is at times humanized, at other times a stand-in for the divine. This in itself is familiar from a wide range of devotional poetic traditions, including both classical Indian poetry as well as devotional poetry from the Sufi tradition. More specifically, note the interplay between a thematics of universality or infinity, on the one hand, and the limited "vessel" of the speaker's self. The only really specific characterization of the speaking persona here is in the final line: "Thy infinite gifts come to me only on these very small hands of mine." The smallness of the hands of the poet seems to stand in for the sense of being surpassed in all ways by the infinity of "you."

By contrast, the first verse of poem 1 in the new, more literal translation of Tagore's *Gitanjali* reads as follows:

> O now beneath your feet's dust let
> my head kneel on the ground.
> Yield up my arrogance to tears,
> let all my pride be drowned.
> If glory to myself I offer
> it is self-insult that I suffer –
> and then I die within myself,
> turning around, around.
> Yield up my arrogance to tears,
> let all my pride be drowned.
>
> TAGORE, *Gitanjali* (Tr. Joe Winter)[1]

Note the stark differences between the two modes of self-presentation in the two translations. In the original *Gitanjali*, his first verse is a self-critique that is grounded and specific. The author has been "arrogant," and is aspiring to humility and simplicity: "let all my pride be drowned." This is in sharp contrast to the much more universal image of the speaker presented in the 1912

1 For readers who read Bangla, the original poem can be found here: http://www.milansagar.com/gitanjali/bangla1.html#1.

translation – a person receiving divine wisdom from "you," whose only marked flaws are "small hands." In Tagore's original, Bangla version of *Gitanjali*, the starting point is not so much divine wisdom as the humbling of a person who has thought himself to be larger than life. The language is concrete, even critical: "arrogance," "pride," "self-insult," "tears." And the spiritual frame is less important than the human context: one could easily imagine the "you" in this poem as a human interlocutor – a lover, a friend, a rival – rather than as an immortal divine presence (i.e., the kind of presence seen in the first verse of the 1912 translation of *Gitanjali*).

The difference in self-presentation extends throughout and could be identified in multiple places in the text. The differences matter in part because the problem for Tagore in both Yeats' "Preface" and the selections included in the actual text of the Yeats-assisted translation of *Gitanjali* was that they created expectations of a saint-like figure. Tagore did have strong spiritual commitments, but he was very much a writer whose main works were involved in grounded human debates and conflicts. One sees this quite clearly in novels like *The Home and the World and Gora,* and one certainly sees it in the voice of the aspiring writer in Tagore's letters (in a number of Tagore's letters to Rothenstein, for example, he asks his friend in publishing when he could expect to be paid). But above all, one can see that version of the humanist author in the speaking persona of many of the poems in the original, Bengali edition of *Gitanjali* itself. The gap between the Indian saint image that was presented and the actual man and writer proved too much to overcome. Though Tagore would ride the translation of *Gitanjali* to a kind of stardom in Europe and the United States, he would remain a novelty figure – a fad. He was rarely described as an "English" poet in the 1910s or 20s, nor was he understood as connected to the Modernist movement that was emerging in those years, even despite his closeness to Yeats and his connection to figures like Ezra Pound. He was not, in short, taken all that seriously. This is doubly unfortunate, since the themes and arguments of the original Bengali *Gitanjali* – exemplified in the humanism of the self-critique seen in the verse quoted above – come much closer to Euro-American modernism than the 1912 translation does.

## 3 Conclusion

The contrast between the respective western careers of Rabindranath Tagore and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak might be instructive. While Tagore emerged in the West with an extremely well-received translation of his poetry, he soon fell out of favor with many of the same mediators who first helped him rise

to fame. By the late 1910s, both Yeats and Pound were expressing disdain or frustration with Tagore (Dutta and Robinson 208), and that distancing would harden later. All of this might have been predicted: Tagore's career as an Author in English was permanently limned by the way Yeats initially presented him in his 1912 Preface, and by the choices Yeats made (with Tagore's consent) regarding the ordering and selection of verses to be included in the translation. And while Tagore achieved a measure of success as a lecturer on nationalism in the U.S. in the 1920s (a history I have explored elsewhere; see Singh 2008), Tagore had little scope to later reframe his authorial reputation on his own terms. By contrast, while Yeats also depended on the patronage of well-established editors and publishers, in his first collection of solo-authored poems, he was able to present himself as an author without the imprimatur of more established Anglo-Irish writers like Katherine Tynan or George Russell.

For her part, Spivak, writing her "Translator's Preface" to *Of Grammatology* in 1967, reversed many of the dynamics that seemed to hem in Tagore as a marginal and exotic figure some fifty years earlier. Where Tagore allowed himself to be prefaced and translated by others, Spivak in effect Authorized herself as a translator and prefacer in her own right. She helped bring a new set of ideas and a new way of thinking to Anglo-American literary studies – not from exotic India, but from exotic France – and wrote herself into the story of the Rise of Theory as a central player rather than a figure from the margins.

There is a final part of the story that in some ways remains to be written, and that might be the prospect of Tagore's *Gitanjali* as a text that might be experienced separate from Yeats' "Preface." Can *Gitanjali* be re-translated and read in English as, effectively, an *un-prefaced* text? Can Tagore be re-presented as a modern Author separate from his canonical Anglo-Irish patron? By revisiting the scene of Yeats' own emergence as an author in the London publishing world in 1888 and 1889 – before Yeats became "Yeats" – one sees a model of how a young writer from a colonial milieu can position himself advantageously. Yeats was able to both exploit Irish folk culture in his early poetry and distance himself from deep identification with the "exotic" Irish peasantry. By contrast, Tagore's emergence as an author in translation in 1912 and 1913 was marked by a transformation of his actual work and a "Preface" that framed him rhetorically in ways that would prove impossible to overcome.

Though he would have used different language to describe it, Tagore himself knew all too well how Yeats' role in his elevation had the potential to circumscribe his own voice. As early as February 1914, he wrote in a letter to William Rothenstein that he had heard a speaker at a conference in India suggest that "the English Gitanjali was practically written by Yeats" (qtd. in Lago 147). In April 1915, Tagore wrote that in light of Yeats, he would need to ensure that his

subsequent writings be purely his own, and "the faintest speck of lie should be wiped out from the fame I enjoy now" (qtd. in Lago 195). Consequently, he would make an effort to own his translations, even at the expense of being able to communicate their lyricism into English: "My translations are frankly prose, – my aim is to make them simple with just a rhythm to give them a touch of the lyric, avoiding all archaisms and poetical conventions" (qtd. in Lago 195). As the trail of correspondence shows, Yeats' and Tagore's path essentially come to diverge by around 1920, and Tagore does come to assert himself much more autonomously on the world stage. But the voice that was communicated was a prosier, more ordinary presence – a working writer and intellectual rather than the grand, transcendent Author figure that had initially been presented. And the process of recovering the "real" Tagore on the international stage remains an ongoing critical project.

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