

Of Harps and *Vīṇās*: Translating ‘Tone-Values’ in Tagore’s Songs

Matthew Pritchard

For most readers of *Sanglap*, Tagore will certainly need no introduction: when it comes not just to Indian literature but to the whole field of Asian literatures in translation, the historical importance of his self-translated poetry collection *Gitanjali* can scarcely be ignored. However, when *Gitanjali* won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913, it was not only the first time the prize had gone to an Asian, but also a breakthrough for a songwriter. The collection’s title means, roughly, “Song Offerings”, and indeed a large proportion of these ‘poems’ were originally written as songs. This was not, however, reflected in their English versions. Tagore’s songs and printed poetry alike were at this period written in carefully wrought Bengali verse; but his mastery of rhyme, metre, and form was lost in translation, and the English *Gitanjali* consists of paraphrases, poems in prose. Even as verse, let alone as music, Tagore’s songs thus remained inadequately known by the West. And yet they made cultural and literary history, changing Tagore’s life and the lives of countless readers.

The question I have asked myself since I began to learn Tagore’s songs, or *Rabīndrasaṅgīt* as they are termed in Bengali, in 2009, is whether they *can* be better known by non-Bengali-speaking audiences – and what role translation might have to play in that. My initial assessment – being a musicologist by training – was that presenting the right kind of musical rendering of the original song was the most important part of this task, and that the role of translation was limited, not least by current performance conventions (see Pritchard). The view that tackling these works as verse (printed or sung) was indeed ‘mission impossible’ had already been authoritatively put forward by Tagore’s leading English translator, William Radice, who consciously excluded songs from his pioneering edition *Selected Poems* of 1985 (Radice, “Introduction” 30-32). Radice has subsequently gone back on this opinion, most notably in his own 2011 re-translation of the songs and poems forming the English *Gitanjali* – but it is interesting what role he sees for translation in appreciating the songs. His model is that of the German lied, the core instance of ‘art song’ in the European tradition, which is normally listened to today in performances in the original German, accompanied with a printed translation of the lyrics’ meaning in hand – a literal, rather than a literary translation in any ambitious sense. Likewise, for Radice, translations of *Rabīndrasaṅgīt* should not be “self-standing poems” but “accurate translations” such as could be included in recording brochures or concert programmes, “purely there as an aid to appreciation of the songs” – as sung by Bengalis in Bengali (Radice, “The Future of *Rabindrasangit*” 157).

Yet it is worth noting that this was not always the expected model of performance even for German lieder. In fact, the transition to modern performing habits occurred only during the 1930s, advocated by leading modernist critics and poets (including Ezra Pound), and accompanied by a notable restriction of the audience for this repertoire. Previously dominant aesthetic norms, associated with Romanticism, dictated that songs should be sung in translation so as to be understood as immediately as possible by their audience. For the leading early twentieth-century British music critic Donald Francis Tovey, it was “a sure sign of an imperfect musical civilization when a public that does not know a foreign language prefers to hear foreign vocal works in the original” (cit. in Orr 323). The point was that songs were valued for their effect on the audience’s feelings, for their expressive charge – and being able to understand words and melody *together* was what made that charge so potent. This produced translation strategies that departed frequently, and sometimes radically, from a ‘faithful’ reproduction of literal meaning.

The present paper sets out to explore how, and why. For in the end, as well as being musically appropriate and effective, such a philosophy of translation is also arguably closer to how Tagore thought about the aesthetics of translated verse (whether sung or read on the page) than the kind of solution Radice and other modern translators have proposed. Between these two ways of thinking about the problem of translation exists a gap that is, on the face of it, simply historical. Tagore’s literary philosophy belongs to a Romantic tradition long since displaced by modernist sensibilities and modes of thought which (so it is assumed) correspond better to the contemporary *zeitgeist*. In the first part of this paper I want to challenge this assumption, and show how Romantic approaches can retain their relevance – above all for a writer such as Tagore who operated in the context of colonial subalternity. I will then move on to look at the consequences of the Romantic/modernist divide for

recent translations of *Rabīndrasaṅgīt*, and finish by exploring some potential applications of the Romantic approach in this context, drawing on examples from my own edition (currently in preparation) of Tagore's songs in translation.

Romanticism, Modernism, and Race

To foreground a *historical* 'translation gap' in approaching South Asian literature may seem perverse, given the much more obvious social, cultural and linguistic differences that separate the subcontinent from Europe. Yet as George Steiner observes, even within a single language, "when we read or hear any language-statement from the past...we translate", and in many cases "the time-barrier may be more intractable than that of linguistic difference" (Steiner 28-29). This goes not just for those semantic transformations measurable by historical dictionaries, but also for what Steiner calls language's "tone-values", decisively conditioned by differences in *sensibility* between the period of the text being read and its present-day recipients (Steiner 7).

One such difference in sensibility arises when one is reading (or translating) across that literary-aesthetic boundary which separates one's own era of taste from the era immediately preceding it. That era's products are likely to sound far more troublingly 'period' and 'dated' to the modern ear than anything from the truly distant past. Victorian or late Romantic poetry occupies just this position with respect to the modernist aesthetic that still prevails in English poetry today. To quote Steiner once more, "Our contemporary sense of the poetic...ha[s] developed from a conscious negation of *fin de siècle* ideals." The result, as displayed in Steiner's trenchant commentary on a sonnet by Dante Gabriel Rossetti ("For *Ruggiero and Angelica*"), is that the strongest exemplifications of those ideals may appear quite simply ridiculous to us: "to our current way of feeling, Rossetti's poem is a hollow bauble" in which "nothing is actually being said". The poem's use of "formulaic" pieces of "loftiness and sonority" and its lack of the "astringency and insistence on verifiable structure" characteristic of modernist poetics mean that we cannot read it without a "suspension of our natural reflexes" (Steiner 14-15). It exists wholly in the shadow of our own, contemporary conception of poetry, and while we can easily look past it to the more clearly delineated idioms of Marvell or Donne or (even better) right back to Villon or Catullus, it is, in Steiner's view at least, impossible to comprehend the positive values of Rossetti's sonnet from a genuinely modern perspective.

Tagore's verse was not Pre-Raphaelite, but as far as its English literary influences are concerned, it was undoubtedly shaped by Victorian late Romantic tastes. One of Tagore's first published pieces of literary criticism (in 1881) was a defensive review of Tennyson's "De Profundis" (1880), a poem about the mysteries of birth and fate, counter-attacking English critics who "find it amusing to satirise a...poem of noble theme", and boldly claiming that Indian readers would appreciate its spirituality better than the English themselves (Tagore, *Selected Writings on Literature* 29). It was with the English translation of *Gitanjali* that the original aesthetic impulses behind Tagore's poetry and the technique available to him to transmit those impulses, in a tongue not his own, diverged from one another. That divergence in fact played its own peculiar role in the formation of European poetic modernism. It was evident in a more esoteric strand of *Gitanjali*'s reception than that represented by the award of the Nobel Prize or the numerous secondary translations into other European languages. W. B. Yeats and Ezra Pound, the two poets who conspired to (as Pound put it) "boom" Tagore in 1912-13 and build his reputation, did so for somewhat different reasons than those for which the bulk of Western readers would appreciate the Indian poet. For them, Tagore was a way of avoiding the crowd, not reaching it, and the excitement would last only as long as their access to Tagore could be presented as unique and exclusive.

Yeats' description in his preface to *Gitanjali* of "carry[ing] the manuscript of these translations about with me for days, reading in railway trains, or on the top of omnibuses and in restaurants...I have often had to close it lest some stranger would see how much it moved me" is not just an eloquent confession of the poems' effect, but an advertisement of how they were uniquely entrusted to his care – and how their contemplation took Yeats out of the mundane modern world and into a mystic inner universe of saints and troubadours, inaccessible to those around him (Yeats 9). Pound's reaction was more overtly based on what his friend and rival Richard Aldington referred to as "snob appeal": he prized his copy of the expensive India Society limited edition, his personal access to the poet and the "inner circle of literature" welcoming Tagore in London, and even tried to organize a piano recital in Tagore's honour at which there would be only four guests (Longenbach 25).

These were the social attitudes that initially characterized what would later be called modernism in English literature. Of more lasting significance is how they changed attitudes to poetic language. Distrustful of contemporary ‘Georgian’ poetic style and the audiences who consumed it, Yeats and Pound were looking to create their own style and choose their own influences. Whereas much nineteenth-century poetry had invited a certain ‘high’ vagueness of imagery, a looseness and recurrence among adjectives and adverbs, a use of metaphor as (substitutable) ornament, all for the sake of enhancing poetry’s sensual, ‘musical’ values – luxury in sound or momentum in rhythm – Pound instead demanded asceticism and economy.

Pound wanted “direct treatment of the ‘thing’” itself, stripped of padding, and “music” only as a refined irregularity in the arrangement of stresses (Pound 3). He presented his approach largely as a technical issue – how to create tighter, more responsible, less lazy poetic textures – but it soon turned out to have consequences for what modern poetry was going to say, too. It would become a vehicle not of ideas, or of general feelings about life, but of specific *perceptions*. Those perceptions would not have to ‘stand for’ anything, nor fit into any pre-established scheme of form or argument – they would just be themselves, fragmented perhaps, but true to life. “The natural object is always the adequate symbol” (ibid) – it could and should exist without abstract interpretation. An expression such as “dim lands of peace” mixed an image of a landscape with an abstract noun, and was to be avoided (Pound 5).

Like the prose summaries of Japanese and Chinese poetry made by the scholar Ernest Fenollosa that Pound admired and reworked (Longenbach 147), the prose paraphrases of *Gitanjali* could fit this programme in many respects, because they were so condensed, determined by the content of the original rather than its form. But had Pound understood Tagore’s originals, he would have realized more quickly that he was dealing with a poet whose conception of poetry was still Romantic, and who at one time or another had broken nearly all of the rules of modernist good taste that Pound was trying to establish. He did so not just for reasons of sonic beauty, but because he believed in poetry – and music – as a socially and spiritually unifying force. Fragmented perceptions, however ‘true’, were insufficient.

If we talk about Romantic ‘tone-values’ in poetry, then, what exactly do we mean? Different analyses are no doubt possible, but I will single out three aspects, already hinted at: a ‘high’ tone or diction; overt sensuousness of language, created through rhyme (both formal and internal), alliteration, assonance, and other ‘musical’ effects, which may indeed extend to an actual musical setting; and a belief in aesthetic holism, the priority of the subjective whole over its parts. To understand how it might be worth preserving or recreating such aspects when translating Romantic poetry, and why, when they jar with readers’ more ‘modern’ sensibilities, it may be those sensibilities that need working on rather than the language of the poem, we need to examine the motivation behind these three elements, and the socio-political context of their employment in Tagore’s work.

A ‘high’ diction or consciously ‘poetic’ register of language came naturally to Tagore for the same reason it came naturally to English poets he admired, such as Tennyson: it seemed only appropriate to the high themes and high ideals in which their work dealt. He never renounced his prerogative to deal with such themes himself, in poems and songs that utilized consistently ‘high’ poetic language, and though other, younger poets did rebel against his style in the 1920s and 30s (and Tagore himself incorporated avant-garde techniques such as *vers libre* into his poetry), the anti-Romantic tide in Bengal was nowhere near as strong as it was in Europe (Chakrabarty chap. 6). The question should be, then, not why Tagore continued to write this way, but why poets in Europe stopped doing so; and the answer must surely make reference to the catastrophe of World War I. ‘High ideals’ for most of the poets of wartime now centred on sacrifice for one’s country, military glory and other propaganda aims dressed in the loftiest of poetic diction. As parodied by literary historian Paul Fussell, for pro-war establishment poets a friend was always a “comrade”, a horse a “steed” or “charger”, an enemy was the “foe” or the “host”, the dead were the “fallen” and bravery was “valor” (Fussell 21-22). For those who lived through the reality of the trenches, or had friends who died there, this entire poetic vocabulary began to seem hollow and mendacious: a false language used in the service of invalidated ideals. Its use in any context, even a peaceful one, declined from that point on, steadily but inexorably.

Yet that was Europe; India was in a different situation. Here the upper registers of poetic vocabulary were being used, not to sign volunteers up to fight for the British Empire, but to stoke the

nationalist sentiment that would undermine that very empire. (Yeats in Ireland took up a similar stance around the same time.) One might come to doubt the specific tactics employed by the Indian nationalist movement, as Tagore eventually did. One could not, however, doubt the justice of its cause, nor the sincerity with which Bengali poets celebrated the beauty of their land and the necessity of struggling for its freedom.

It can be acknowledged that one aspect of that struggle, the opposition of India's vaunted 'spirituality' and idealism to Western materialism, reflected in the quasi-Biblical diction of the English *Gitanjali* and Tagore's prophet-like image in later life, was something 'constructed', rather than being an eternal truth of 'Eastern civilization.' But it too arguably served emancipatory ends, by gaining profound global respect and sympathy for Tagore and the culture he represented.¹ It often seems to be forgotten that his audience outside India was not just in England, "the controlling and assessing power" who could at any time reject him and "reveal his fundamental helplessness", in Sukanta Chaudhuri's words (Chaudhuri 17), but included readers across the world, many of them in territories (South America, Russia, China, Germany) detached from or already hostile to British imperialism. Projecting an image and an ideal that they could rally behind was crucial to establishing international solidarity. If Tagore's international fame sank somewhat after his death, and no equivalent figure replaced him, it was perhaps in part because an independent and rapidly industrializing India stood less in need of such reactions from abroad.

In the use of language to give dignity to a politically subservient people, hoping that the demonstration of cultural and spiritual strength would successfully justify demands for political and economic autonomy, Tagore's high-toned speech resembles not only Yeats's but that of many black intellectuals and poets in twentieth-century America, from W.E.B. Du Bois through Langston Hughes or Martin Luther King to Maya Angelou. Poetry, typically spoken out loud or sung, performs a different and more public, affirmative, community-forming function in this political context from the printed, silent, often tortuous filtrations of reflective inwardness that constitute the mainstream of modernist poetry. Seen from this angle, what Steiner calls the "principal division in the history of Western literature" (Steiner 184), which gave rise to the modernist tradition, marks not so much a caesura in global literary history (occurring some time "between the early 1870s and the turn of the century" and cemented by the end of the First World War) as a parting of the ways in *racial* terms. The permanent refusal of aspirational rhetoric is a luxury one can afford if one's community no longer has to aspire to the most basic of social rights.

Allied considerations come into play in examining the Romantic concern for the sonority and sensuousness of verse, or what Pound derided as Victorian poetry's "rhetorical din and luxurious riot" (Pound 12). For poetry's "music" has traditionally formed part of its social, as well as its expressive, force. It has enabled verse to stick in the memory, to lend itself to melodic setting, to penetrate everyday life both public and intimate, through recitation and recollection. It has also leant it a popularity not always fully merited, and easily commercialized – grounds enough for modernist suspicion. To Pound, then, it was "not necessary that a poem should rely on its music, but if it does...that music should be such as will delight the expert" (Pound 5). It would be a subtle, inner rhythm, recognizable in theory by the connoisseur amid the irregular flow of *vers libre*, but in practice very much subordinate to Pound's other demands – notably "to use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation", in other words, to delineating the image or impression before the mind's eye of the poet (Pound 3).

The consequences of such purism for the life of modernist poetry in performance, whether spoken or sung, over the last century have been all too evident. Eliot's recitations of his own poems already sound perfunctory, while among major twentieth-century poets in English only Yeats and Auden, those apostates against Pound's hermetic creed, took a serious interest in the musical setting of their work. Contrast, once again, the African-American tradition, whose poetic soul has always been in the spoken or sung word, from the blues through jazz poetry to rap, and where poetry in performance frequently carries a forceful political charge.² Or think of another politically charged body of work by a more recent winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature, Bob Dylan (explicitly praised by the Nobel committee, incidentally, for having "g[iven] back to the language of poetry its elevated style, lost since the Romantics" (Engdahl)). Is every word in his songs determined solely by the 'presentation' of a preconceived image, or do rhyme and metre not generate their own cascading lyrical momentum? The folk songs of the Bauls that so inspired Tagore use regular metre, fixed

rhyme-schemes, and ‘poetic’ vocabulary no longer part of colloquial Bengali, but the best of them are no less authentically visionary for that.

As for the third aspect of Romantic poetics I will discuss here, its aesthetic holism, this doctrine’s crucial motivating principle is that the poetic ‘whole’ exists primarily as *felt* by the reader, rather than analysed by the critic. As A. W. Schlegel put it, “concepts outline each thing for itself, whereas in reality, nothing ever exists for itself; only feeling perceives the all-in-all” (Schlegel 134). In Romantic poetry, as in music, there is always a subjective centre – be it an emotion, an idea, or a vision – which casts its light across the poem’s individual elements of sound and meaning. In the act of criticism, it is this which must be evaluated above all else, and in the act of translation, it is this rather than each individual element which must be carried across into (or recreated within) the new language. Tagore’s essays on literature refer to it as the *rasa*, the “juice”, the savour, of the literary work. It is precisely what Steiner’s reading of Rossetti misses.

From the “High-Flown” to the Levelled-Down: Tagore’s Verse in Translation

How have these epochal differences in style and aesthetic manifested themselves through the history of Tagore’s poetry in translation? Though Tagore died in 1941, there was in theory time enough for translators to capture his Romantic sensibility and still be understood by an Anglophone audience. After all, Pound’s levelling innovations in poetic language – paradoxically, considering the importance of translation for him – did not achieve “widespread acceptance” for translated poetry until the 1950s, as Lawrence Venuti has observed (Venuti 178). Yet translations such as this – from one of the sonnets in Tagore’s collection *Naibedyā*, made in the 1920s by his biographer Edward Thompson – are, in their successful exploitation of (literally) ‘high-flown’ language, few and far between:

Suddenly on the river of my mind
The lotus-forests die in the chill wind,
In files and companies the wild geese [take] flight
To the far south, where feather-grass flowers white
And towering-tall, upon the sandbanks lone.
Again, in Spring, they come; aloft, high-flown,
They float, chanting with joy...
(Thompson 184)

How, then, does the range of tones and strategies adopted by modern translators look by comparison? Some recent attempts to translate Tagore’s songs are little more than cribs – including most of Kalpana Bardhan’s 2008 volume for Oxford University Press India, *Of Love, Nature, and Devotion: Selected Songs of Rabindranath Tagore* (Bardhan) (mercilessly characterized by a Calcutta Telegraph reviewer as “some of Tagore’s most beautiful lyrics, rendered in a language that one would call English only at gun-point”) (Sen), and the website “Gitabitan in English” (Majumdar and Sengupta). (Which is not to say that these amateur attempts have no value at all; but that value exists more for other translators, and for English-speaking Bengalis, than for non-Bengali readers.) Others achieve varying levels of competence and poetic success as literary translations, but tend to suffer in one way or another from the tensions I have outlined between modernist and Romantic poetic norms.

As one example, from among many that might be chosen, consider the tone of Ketaki Kushari Dyson’s rendering of the last two verses from Tagore’s famous song of consolation, “*Jibane yato pūjā*”:

Jobs undone that
trail behind me still –
I don’t believe
they’ll only add up to nil.
I hear them ring
on your own lute-strings,
which I haven’t reached
or plucked with my fingers yet.
I just don’t believe
they’re totally trashed, defeated. (Dyson 259-60)

Ignoring the apparent difference in meaning in the first couplet, read over Tagore's own prose translation of the same lines for *its* tone: "Those that lag behind in this life[,] I know, I know that even they have not lived uselessly. All my unformed thoughts and all my unstruck melodies are still sounding on the strings of thy *vīṇā*, and I know that they have not been altogether lost" (Fox-Strangways 93). (Note here the untransformed appearance of the *vīṇā*, an Indian instrument, in Tagore's text – a point to which I will return.) Dyson's version has aimed to capture some of the rhymes of the original; and yet the attempt does not recreate the dignity either of Tagore's translation or (still less) of the original song:

Jībane ājo yāhā rayeche piche
Jāni he jāni tāo hay ni miche.
Āmāro anāgato āmāro anāhato
Tomāro bīṇātāre bājiche tārā
Jāni he jāni tāo hay ni hārā.

In terms of specific features, Tagore's higher register is achieved partly through vocabulary (*yāhā* in Bengali is an archaic or poetic form of the relative pronoun *yā*, pronounced "jā"), while in the English version Tagore characteristically selects "thy" for *tomār*, and preserves the formal feel of the compounds "unformed" and "unstruck" for the Sanskritic *anāgato* and *anāhato*, partly through a rhetoric of solemn exclamation and repetition ("Jāni he jāni", lit. "I know, oh, I know", and the final recurrence of *hārā*, "lost", which has appeared twice already in the first part of the poem). Dyson's "trashed" (for *hārā*) in the last line is only the most obvious and unfortunate break with this register: "jobs", "nil", the paraphrasing of "unformed" and "unstruck", and the use of contractions and colloquial emphasis ("I just don't believe") likewise cooperate to bring the poem "down to earth."

Yet the point of this poem, especially when sung to its reserved, solemn tune in Tagore's favourite Rag Bhairavi, is *not* to be "down to earth" in its message of consolation ("Oh well, I can't really believe it was all for nothing, can you?"); the point is to deliver that message with dignity, and a certain nobility. To emphasize this may seem pompous, but it need not be. That tone-values of 'nobility', dignity and even 'respectability' were insisted upon indiscriminately by Victorian translators and critics (most famously Matthew Arnold, rebuking Francis Newman for his translation of Homer) may be true, and there is certainly a sense in which such insistence masked social taboos, inequalities and elitist prejudice (see Venuti 99-120; Apter 9-18 and 57-63). But where the original poem is noble and dignified, and a translation of it does not merely fail to be, but seems to be deliberately *avoiding* those values, then we are surely dealing with an equally indiscriminate preference for 'levelling down' where the Victorians 'levelled up.'

Are there any more profound reasons for seeking not to 'level down' Tagore's poetic tone than the charge of infidelity? If not, Dyson and others might argue, an insistence on antiquated high diction will simply ensure that Tagore's poetry ceases to be viable in the modern age, no matter what the poet himself might have wanted. Yet the continuing popularity of Tagore's English *Gitanjali* would suggest otherwise: 'modern', no; but viable it certainly is. And one reason for its viability is that, like "*Jībane yata pūjā*", it clearly acts as what one could call an emotional, or even spiritual, resource. It is not read as often and as widely as it is simply for pleasure, or in the poetry-lover's spirit of cultivated connoisseurship, but because it elevates, provides strength, and points its readers toward a higher and more ideal set of values than those governing much of their quotidian existence (whether they are 'believers' or not being neither here nor there).³

That such a function should be marked in a poem's language seems in many ways only logical and appropriate, which would be my defence for not seeking to avoid occasional 'thees' and 'thous', alongside other elements of a 'higher' poetic diction, when seeking to recreate Tagore's more devotional vein in my own translations. The use of such vocabulary is often labelled 'archaism' today – an indication of how much sensitivity we have lost, through modernism, to the tone-values of any mode of speech transcending the contemporary colloquial. Archaic language can be 'low' as readily as 'high', and Newman's preference for archaisms of the former type was what drew Arnold's fire. Often poetry of the long nineteenth century *is* marred by archaism, including some of the earliest English translations of Tagore's verse by Roby Datta in 1909, which rhyme "dight" with "bight", "lay" (in the musical sense) with "welladay", and cheerfully throw in extra nonsense syllables just to give the line a pleasant swing ("a-ringing", "a-clinging" and a "rise and fall O") (Datta 71, 35, 188).

But it is a different matter to dismiss vocabulary universally understood, and capable of imparting expressive resonance and dignity to poetic language, just because it is no longer part of the spoken vernacular. Poetry's true participation in the building of our hopes and the overcoming of our disappointments is, if it is to exist at all, in the "*Jāni he jāni tāo*", in the "I will lift up mine eyes" – not in "I just don't believe they're totally trashed."

Having said all this, if the basis of a poem's effect and its communicative aim is there, one does not necessarily need to go as far in amplifying it as the original (such amplification may undercut the effect, for a modern reader, rather than strengthening it). Nor does one need to go as far as Bengali performers and audiences do in constantly stressing the solemnity of Tagore's language – almost to the point at which he and his work become a devotional icon, a fetish, liable once again to seem exaggerated or ridiculous to those outside the circle of the cult. 'Tone-values' are relative and subjective, not absolute, and interpretive care is needed in handling them to produce a more diverse and convincing image of Tagore, capable of sustaining his appeal to non-Bengali audiences. One would like to say that such an image is truer, but it may be that comprehensive 'truth' concerning his personality is unattainable. Certain aspects of his demeanour in later years undoubtedly encouraged the habit of 'Tagore-worship' (the sage-like beard and robe, the hieratic tone in which he recited his own work); and yet for his French contemporary and co-editor of his songs Philippe Stern, it is worth noting, the songs were precisely where "the real Tagore was revealed... As soon as one talked to him about his songs it was as if he had left his beautiful white beard behind in the hall, in order to be himself" (Stern 293-4).

Moving onto the issue of metre, rhyme and form in current Tagore translations, it is evident that modernist norms have dominated here as well. Modern translators are predisposed toward offering versions without a pronounced poetic form, not because they cannot cope (as Tagore could not) with the linguistic demands of creating one, but because that is an aspect of contemporary taste. Joe Winter puts it challengingly – "Since Tagore's time it has become fashionable to put down words with feeling and break them up somehow on the page and to call the result poetry" (Winter 20-21). One does not need to be in automatic sympathy with the sharp tone of Winter's dismissal, though, in order to grasp that (in the words of Ronnie Apter, echoing Robert Lowell) "free verse runs the danger of becoming a formless sprawl" in the hands of many translators. "A great number of minor translators have adopted the method of making line-for-line, unrhymed free verse translations in a modern diction", with results that Apter, approving of Pound's influence though she is, believes tend to flatten the individual profile of the originals (Apter 94).

In Tagore's case, it is hard to deny that the greater informality possible within contemporary poetry is at the opposite extreme from the heightened exploitation of verse effects in many of Tagore's songs. It is thus not surprising that many contemporary translators do not attempt the task of representing the poetic structure of the song texts (Winter is an exception here). Even William Radice, who in his recent translation of *Gitanjali* succeeds marvellously in producing English sonnets from the Bengali sonnet forms of the *Naibedya* poems, refuses to try anything similar with the songs. For him, showing the structure of the text as sung – through line repetitions and highlighting of refrains – is more important than reproducing metre and rhyme, because "when the songs are sung we are not particularly aware of the metre or rhyme" (Radice, *Gitanjali*, lxviii).

Yet for the majority of cases this assertion seems doubtful. Like any Western lieder composer, Tagore departed from the literal structure of the text on the page, and sometimes those departures combined with a slow tempo can attenuate the effect of his rhymes and metres. But rhyme is also part of appreciating the most common, yet still endlessly charming, form of the songs, which rhyme the last line of each of their verses with the following refrain, and Tagore often takes care to highlight this (if it is not already audible, given the parallelism of musical phrases each capped with a rhyme word) in the melody. An example is "*Aar nāi re belā*", where the rhyme-words "*dharaṇīte*", "*dhvanīte*", *tarāṇīte*" are each set to the same phrase, so that the echo cannot be missed, despite the intervening repetitions of "*ār nāi re belā*":

Ār nāi re belā, nāmlo chāyā dharaṇīte
Ekhan cal re ghāṭe kalashhāni bhare nite.
Jaladhārār kalasvare sandhyagan ākul kare,
O re, ḍāke āmāy pather pare sei dhvanīte.
Ekhan bijan pathe kare nā keu āsā-yāowā,

*O re premnadīte uṭheche dheu, utal hāowā.
Jāni nā ār phirbo kinā, kār sāthe āj habe cinā,
Ghāte sei ajānā bājāy bīnā taraṅīte.*

Though it would be a stretch to reproduce the double and triple rhymes of the original, one should try to highlight the basic rhyme structure, since it is also in a sense an integral part of the music's form. The following represents my attempt:

Evening falls; across the earth its shade is cast –
And pitcher in hand now to the stream I must stride fast.

To watery music the clouds move in uneasy courses up above,
On the winding path I rove following echoes past.

Along the road at this late hour no travellers go;
Restless is the river of desire when new winds blow.
I cannot say, shall I return or not – whom to meet it may still be my lot;
The boatman's song from yonder bank reaches me at last.

The final issue in translating *Rabīndrasaṅgīt* as poetry that I will address here, before moving on to matters musical, is the Romantic doctrine of aesthetic holism. What *is* the centre of a poem, its *rasa*, to use Tagore's favourite word? And how can one allow a non-Bengali audience to taste it? Modern or postmodern theories of translation, for all their merits in other respects, are of less help here to the extent that their focus is on "meaning" and its reproduction in the target language. A literary translation is viewed as "the result of a complex system of decoding and encoding on the semantic, syntactic and pragmatic levels" (Bassnett 44). Next to these sorts of semiotic definitions, Theodor Savory's belief that the ultimate purpose of reading poetry, whether in the original or in translation, is to "absorb the poet's spirit and learn something of his secret" must inevitably appear "very unsystematic" (Savory 82; Bassnett 147). Yet it represents a theoretical position too – honest, coherent, Romantic, and close to Tagore's own – and it too has its characteristic consequences for practice.

One of these is that, broadly speaking (and the more specific details are of course important), the "domestication" of cultural meanings and metaphors tends to be favoured in the act of translation over their "foreignization", to use the terms coined by Lawrence Venuti (Venuti 15-20). The last part of this paper will look at some examples that demonstrate why. It is important to stress that *both* strategies were already available to nineteenth-century translators – but they were described differently, through a characteristically reader-oriented, subjective and emotional aesthetic discourse. Both the more "domesticating" argument of Arnold and his opponent Newman refer repeatedly and centrally to the translation's "effect" or "*general effect*", to the translator "feeling Homer truly – and unless he feels him truly, how can he render him truly?" (Arnold 251, 254, 252), and to the preservation of the original's "high qualities", or "intrinsic qualities", as the crucial standard of judgement (Newman 257, 258). "Effects" and "qualities" are subjective, aesthetic wholes, both perceived and felt – not units of meaning to be decoded or interpreted. Such holistic qualities may themselves *have* interpretable meanings in turn, as when Homer's 'nobility' or 'popularity' of style took on social connotations in Newman and Arnold's controversy. But that is a matter more for the critic than the translator, who, from the Romantic standpoint, is concerned with how meanings can be turned and guided to produce effects – the effect of the whole text, or even of the whole author, being the chief priority.

Examples of this are easy to assemble when one compares Tagore's own practice as a translator with that of his modern interpreters. Radice's translation of "*Ār nāi re belā*", for instance, includes two words which have no literal English equivalent, and are thus left in transliterated form in the English text (a practice familiar from Indian fiction in English): *ghāṭ*, or a flight of waterside steps, and *vīṅā*, one of the oldest of Indian stringed instruments, with four strings and two resonating gourds (Radice 18-19). Not every English reader can be expected to know what a *vīṅā* is, and in most cases translations of this type will include either a footnote or a glossary to explain. In a few cases, Tagore took the same approach, notably in his prose translation of "*Jībane yato pūjā*" cited earlier: but here the justification is evident – readers of a monograph on Indian music, the context in which Tagore's translation appears (Fox-Strangways), *can* be expected to know about, and take an interest

in, the *vīṇā*. In his rendering of “*Ār nāi re belā*” from the English *Gitanjali*, however, the *vīṇā* becomes a “lute” and the *ghāṭ* a “fording.”

For poetic purposes, then, exactitude is less important than approximate cultural equivalence and ease of comprehension (in other *Gitanjali* poems, the *vīṇā* becomes a harp instead). The last image of the poem before the return of the refrain should serve to close up and reinforce the poem’s air of excited yet melancholy-tinged mystery – not send the reader looking for a footnote or a glossary entry in the back of the volume. One might go even further, as my translation above does, and omit reference to an instrument entirely: the simple presence of music, drifting over from the boat moored somewhere on the opposite bank, suffices.

Elsewhere in the English *Gitanjali*, Tagore utilizes the translator’s principle of ‘compensation’, taking his chance to *add* cultural specificity and semantic richness to the target text, when this is reconcilable with concision. Where “*Tabo sīnhāsaner āsan hate*”, no. 56 in the Bengali *Gitanjali*, has “song” (*gān*) for both the devotee’s prayer and the music of the heavenly court, the English version (no. 49, “You came down from your throne”) substitutes for the former a “simple carol”. The “lonely house” of the same poem, meanwhile, becomes a “cottage.”

Tagore employed this strategy of locating cultural translations for particular images fairly frequently, whether he was translating Bengali poetry into English or English (and occasionally German) poetry into Bengali. In his Bengali translations of Amy Lowell and T. S. Eliot from the essay “Modern Poetry” (1932), the “opera tune” and “harpsichord” from Lowell’s “A Lady” become a “*jātrā* tune” (*jātrā* (*yātrā*) being a traditional musical form of folk theatre in Bengal) and a “*sāraṅgī*” (a bowed stringed instrument) respectively, and her “sealed spice-jars” are specifically “for washing hair” (since otherwise *masalā* here might evoke for the Indian reader rather less delicate associations with the kitchen). Eliot’s “broken blinds” in “Preludes” meanwhile become “broken window-panes” (since blinds are not traditionally used in Bengal), and the women “gathering fuel in vacant lots” in the final line are, more specifically and rationally for an Indian context, gathering dried cowpats (*ghūṭe*) – the principal traditional fuel in Indian villages (Tagore, *Selected Writings* 402). More spectacularly, in an earlier translation of Heine’s “Die blauen Veilchen der Äugelein”, a little five-line poem in which the parts of a woman’s body are compared to flowers, Heine’s colour-based equation of hands and lilies is replaced by a form-based, authentically Sanskritic poetic image, the *karakamal(a)*, lit. “hand-lotus” – thus inserting the poem into an entire system of Indian lotus-based symbology in which ‘lotus hands’, ‘lotus feet’ and gods seated on lotuses are all already established as familiar icons of formal perfection.

The strategy has its limits, of course, and I have tried to observe them in my own translations of Tagore’s songs. Rather than ‘de-Indianizing’ the song texts completely, the foreign reader must be trusted to have at least *some* notion of Indian culture, geography and climate, and so I have chosen to include a bare assortment of generally familiar images: monsoon rains, the summer heat, flower-garlands given as offerings to guests or deities, mango groves, banyan trees, the spring colour festival Holi. But for less familiar birds, trees, or religious images I elected to adopt Tagore’s approach, and either paraphrased or ‘domesticated’ the original. Even today, I would assert, what we want from a translated poem is more related to sensibility and feeling, with culture serving as a loosely-sketched backdrop, than in the case of foreign fiction (immersion in realistic cultural details *is* often a significant reason for embarking on the journey of a novel). And there is no reason not to employ a mixture of scholarship and cultural translation: find a ‘domesticated’ equivalent in the text when necessary and explain the precise difference from the original in the notes.

Finally, the urgency of these issues surrounding a text’s ‘effect’ on feeling is of course amplified when the text is to be performed – in other words, when we move from considering translations of *Rabīndrasaṅgīt* on the page to their potential existence as ‘singing translations.’ (Imagine *singing* the words *ghāṭ* or *vīṇā* as part of an otherwise English text, and you will see part of the problem.) As I noted above, the rejection of ‘singing translations’ for art song as distorting and unworthy is another of the aspects of the modernist aesthetic we have inherited from Pound and his era. There are signs that this attitude may also be changing,⁴ and since addressing the question of translating *Rabīndrasaṅgīt* in 2014 I have come to regard ‘singing translations’ as a more viable way of performing and disseminating Tagore’s songs. (As one example of the possibilities in this regard, Alain Danielou’s set of 18 *Rabīndrasaṅgīt* in English translation have been performed and recorded by Francesca Cassio – though the “domestication” of Tagore is also performed musically in these

versions for voice and piano, which support the melody with a series of impressionist harmonisations (Daniélou.) To translate for singing requires dealing with another set of technical challenges, which there is no space to analyse here: suffice it to say that for all the difficulties involved, they are in the end surmountable.

The deeper historical-aesthetic challenges remain. Are we able, or willing, to remould our poetic sensibilities so that they can fit Tagore's 'tone-values', his pathos, spiritual earnestness, and love for an artfully (yet also innocently) 'poetic' style of language? If we can, then we have much to gain both poetically and musically, aesthetically and culturally, in opening up a repertoire of more than two thousand songs whose range of form and expression far exceeds what is represented by current translations and performance practices, as these are accessible to non-Bengali audiences. If not, then his songs' appeal will remain, from a translational perspective, 'local' – if it is not an insult to apply that word to the cultural heritage of a quarter of a billion people – and Western music-lovers will never be able to comprehend Satyajit Ray's judgement (cit. in Dutta and Robinson, 385): "As a composer of songs Tagore has no equal, not even in the West – and I know Schubert and Hugo Wolf."

Notes

1 Here I take issue with the commonplace account of Tagore's early "spiritual" reception in the West as a misunderstanding produced entirely by a colonial or Orientalist power dynamic – what Mahasweta Sengupta describes as "the only way the colonizer was prepared to deal with the colonized, the only possible ground for admitting one from the subject race, who is accepted because he represents the wisdom and exoticism of the 'other' [Oriental] world" (Sengupta, 61). A misunderstanding it may have been, and it certainly represented a narrowing of Tagore's own multifaceted personality. But the blanket application of a vulgar-Saidian concept of Orientalism here seems to disguise the complex political affiliations of the idea of "Eastern spirituality", an idea that was constructed as much by Indians themselves in *opposition* to colonialism as by those in positions of power in the West. From Rammohan Roy through Bankim's *Ānandamāṭh* and Swami Vivekananda's tours of the West to Gandhi's overtly political use of Indian spiritual tropes, the Indian annexation of a position of spiritual and moral superiority was a potent propaganda weapon, and a clear ideological threat to the Empire.

2 Cf. Edmund Wilson's mention of "folk verse" and recent "collections of American popular songs" (including W. C. Handy) as one of the few signs that might point to a "revival of verse" in modern culture (Wilson, 39).

3 To quote one early twentieth-century English reader of *Gitanjali*, the war artist Paul Nash, "I would read *Gitanjali* as I would read the Bible for comfort and for strength" (cit. Som, 107).

4 In the past few years there have been encouraging signs that performing lieder in translation may once again be finding a place in the mainstream of classical performance practice – in particular, a series of concerts at London's Wigmore Hall (Nov-Dec 2016) at which Schubert's three song-cycles *Schwanengesang*, *Winterreise* and *Die schöne Müllerin* were presented in a new English translation by Jeremy Sams.

Works Cited

- Apter, Ronnie. *Digging for the Treasure: Translation after Pound*. New York: Peter Lang, 1984. Print.
- Arnold, Matthew. "On Translating Homer" (1861), excerpt in Douglas Robinson, ed., *Western Translation Theory from Herodotus to Nietzsche*. Manchester: St Jerome Publishing, 1997. 250-255. Print.
- Bardhan, Kalpana. *Of Love, Nature, and Devotion: Selected Songs of Rabindranath Tagore*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2008. Print.
- Bassnett, Susan. *Translation Studies*. London: Routledge, 2002. 3rd ed. Print.
- Chakrabarty, Dipesh. *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000. Print.
- Chaudhuri, Sukanta. *Translation and Understanding*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999.
- Daniélou, Alain. Arr. and trans. *Tagore's Songs of Destiny*. Francesca Cassio and Ugo Bonessi (perf.). Questz World, 2009. CD.
- Datta, Roby. *Echoes of East and West*. Cambridge: Galloway & Porter, 1909. Print.
- Dutta, Krishna and Andrew Robinson, eds. *Rabindranath Tagore: An Anthology*. London: Picador, 1999. Print.
- Dyson, Ketaki Kushari, trans. *I Won't Let You Go: Selected Poems*. By Rabindranath Tagore. 2nd ed. Highgreen: Bloodaxe, 2010. Print.
- Engdahl, Horace. Presentation speech for the Nobel Prize in Literature, 2016. *Nobelprize.org*. 10 December 2016. Web. 24 May 2018.
- Fox-Strangways, A. H. *The Music of Hindostan*. London: Oxford University Press, 1914. Print.
- Fussell, Paul. *The Great War and Modern Memory*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1975. Print.
- Longenbach, James. *Stone Cottage: Pound, Yeats and Modernism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988. Print.
- Majumdar, Anandamayee and Rumela Sengupta, eds. *Gitabitan in English*. Web. 24th May 2018.
- Newman, Francis W. "Homeric Translation in Theory and Practice" (1861), excerpt in Robinson, *Western Translation Theory*. 255-258. Print.
- Orr, C.W. "The Problem of Translation." *Music & Letters* 22 (1941): 318-32. Print.
- Pound, Ezra. "A Retrospect," in *Literary Essays*, ed. T. S. Eliot. London: Faber and Faber, 1954. 3-14. Print.
- Pritchard, Matthew. "What can Tagore's music mean to the West?" *The Tagore Centre UK*, 2014. Web. 23 May 2018.
- Radice, William, trans. *Gitanjali*. By Rabindranath Tagore. New Delhi: Penguin, 2011. Print.
- Radice, William. "Introduction." *Selected Poems*. Rabindranath Tagore. London: Penguin, 2005. 17-39. Print.

- Savory, Theodor. *The Art of Translation*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1968. 2nd ed. Print.
- Schlegel, A. W. "Antike und romantische Kunst und Poesie" (1809), from Herbert Uerlings, ed., *Theorie der Romantik*. Stuttgart: Philipp Reclam, 2000. Print.
- Sen, Aveek. "Aha, ha, ha! – Tagore in the plumeria bosk," *Telegraph* (Kolkata) 25th April 2008. Web. 24th May 2018.
- Sengupta, Mahasweta. "Translation, Colonialism, and Poetics: Rabindranath Tagore in Two Worlds", in *Translation, History and Culture*, ed. Susan Bassnett and André Lefevere. London: Cassell, 1990. 56-63. Print.
- Som, Reba. *Rabindranath Tagore: The Singer and His Song*. New Delhi: Viking, 2009. Print.
- Steiner, George. *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation*. 3rd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998. Print.
- Stern, Philippe. "The Real Rabindranath Tagore and his Music", in Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, ed., *Rabindranath Tagore: A Centenary Volume 1861-1961*. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1961. 293-4. Print.
- Tagore, Rabindranath. *Selected Writings on Literature and Language*. Edited by Sisir Kumar Das and Sukanta Chaudhuri. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001. Print.
- Thompson, Edward. *Rabindranath Tagore: Poet and Dramatist*. London: Oxford University Press, 1926. Print.
- Venuti, Lawrence. *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation*, 2nd ed. Abingdon: Routledge, 2008. Print.
- Wilson, Edmund. "Is Verse a Dying Technique?" in *The Triple Thinkers: Ten Essays on Literature*. London: Oxford University Press, 1938. 20-41. Print.
- Winter, Joe. Trans. *Song Offerings*. By Rabindranath Tagore. London: Anvil, 2000. Print.
- Yeats, W.B. "Introduction." *Gitanjali*. Rabindranath Tagore. New Delhi: Macmillan India, 1974. 5-15. Print.

Matthew Pritchard
School of Music
University of Leeds
E: M.Pritchard1@leeds.ac.uk
© Matthew Pritchard, 2018