W.B. Yeats's Construction of India

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Abstract

William Butler Yeats's literary career consists of varied passions and interests. He had a life-long interest in the occult mysticism of the East and the West, and Indian philosophy and spiritual tradition cover a considerable space in Yeats's mysticism. From 1880s to the end of his life, Yeats cherished a profound interest in the spiritual India which was periodically reinforced by his encounters with three Indian personalities: Mohini Mohun Chatterjee in 1886, Rabindranath Tagore in 1912, and Shri Purohit Swami in 1931. Each of these three Indians left a profound impression on his mind and influenced him substantially. Yeats also wrote about them in memoirs, autobiographical reminiscences, and in a substantial number of letters. He also wrote introductions for Tagore’s *Gitanjali* (1912), Purohit Swami’s *An Indian Monk* (1932), and the latter’s translation of his Master, Bhagwan Shri Hamsa’s autobiography *The Holy Mountain* (1934). These introductory essays by Yeats as well as his autobiographical reflections, letters, and occasional poems like “Mohini Chatterjee” and “Meru” are significant documents that help us understand Yeats’s cultural-political construction of India. Yeats’s conception of India is complex and ambiguously nuanced. There are times when he conflates the Indian and Western mysticisms or spiritual traditions. At other times, he attempts to distinguish the “spiritual” Indian civilization from the materialist civilization of the West, and the philosophically syncretic Indian vision from the dualistic vision of Western thoughts. Although in these works he often seems to betray a deliberate or inadvertent complicity with the dominant Western discourses, Yeats’s construction of India also challenges and reverses the Orientalist binaries, and attempts to provide an alternative representation of the Orient.
W. B. YEATS’S CONSTRUCTION OF INDIA

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“[I]n 1930 we are confronted with the pitiful, the deplorable spectacle of a grown man occupied with the mumbo-jumbo of magic and the nonsense of India,” says the Public Prosecutor of W. B. Yeats in W. H. Auden’s “The Public v. the Late Mr William Butler Yeats” (5). “[T]he nonsense of India,” to add to Yeats’s discredit, had actually kept the defendant-poet preoccupied throughout his poetic career. Starting with the fanciful early interest in India of the 1880s, through the ephemeral infatuation with Rabindranath Tagore’s works in the 1910s, Yeats’s admiration for Indian wisdom became most prominent in the 1930s and lasted till the end of his life. For all the gaps in between, Yeats’s interest in India is far from being merely a sporadic enthusiasm. Rather, it seems to have persisted as an enduring undercurrent throughout the variegated life and career of the poet. In his 1937 essay “The Ten Principal Upanishads,” Yeats himself acknowledges his prolonged preoccupation with Indian texts like the *Upanishads*: “For some forty years [in fact some fifty years] my friend George Russell (‘AE’) has quoted me passages from some Upanishad, and for those forty years I have said to myself—some day I will find out if he knows what he is talking about” (*Later Essays* 171).

Given the persistence of Yeats’s profound interest in Indian philosophy and mysticism, it is indeed unfortunate that this significant chapter of Yeats’s life and career has been severely neglected in Yeats scholarship. It is true that there are only a few poems that bear any direct testimony to the influence of India on Yeats, and the essays he wrote on this subject are apparently limited to the occasions in which he met some influential Indian cultural figures. But, as his memoirs, autobiographical writings, and letters confirm, Yeats’s philosophical reflections and constructions, which were a driving
force behind his poetics as a whole, were significantly enriched by his periodic encounters with Indian philosophy, and the connections he made between the Indian and the Western thoughts. Yet, commonly in Yeats scholarship, the mystico-philosophical orientation of Yeats's work as a whole is almost entirely credited to the Western traditions represented by his own philosophical book, *A Vision*, with little or no attribution given to the influence of Indian philosophy and mysticism. Other than some sporadic mentions in Yeats's biographies and some occasional cross-references in Yeats criticism, there is a severe dearth of scholarship on this interculturally nuanced aspect of Yeats's life and work.

This intellectual indifference of Yeats studies to the Indian influence on his work validates a transnationalist reading of Yeats that would take into account the wealth of Indian materials that helped shape his philosophical understanding and imaginative construction of life and reality. Such a reading might add a new dimension to Yeats criticism by clarifying some of the obscure and compact ideas, images and symbols in his poetry. However inspired by the scholarly oversight in terms of Yeats's Indian influence, this project is not limited to merely tracing that influence. Rather, this cultural-political study of Yeats's construction of India attempts to throw some light on the way Yeats both drew upon and stood apart from Orientalist construction of India. In doing so, it will also trace the evolution of Yeats's thoughts about India, from his early quasi-Orientalist representation of India to a point where he seems to be responding to the Orientalist misrepresentation of Indian religion and philosophical mysticism.

Yeats's interest in India can be divided into three phases, in each of which he encountered an Indian personality who left a powerful impression on his mind and helped
shape his idea of India. The first two of these personalities—Mohini Mohun Chatterjee and Rabindranath Tagore—were from Bengal, and the third and final one, Shree Purohit Swami, was from Maharashtra, India. A Calcutta University graduate and a lawyer by profession, Chatterjee associated himself with the Theosophical Society in the early 1880s, and, while on a European tour on behalf of the Society, came to Dublin in 1886. It was then that Yeats came under the spell of his charismatic personality (Sasson 79-82; Foster, *Apprentice* 47). Although the spell lasted for a little while, Yeats remembered him long after in his autobiographical writings, and substantially revised a poem written about Chatterjee’s teachings decades later in 1928.

After this initial interest in India via Mohini Chatterjee, Yeats met Tagore in London in 1912. Unlike his predecessor, Tagore did not come to Europe with any specific intention of spreading the value of Indian philosophy or religion. He nevertheless ended up doing something quite similar when Yeats read his *Gitanjali* lyrics in English translation and was mesmerized by the beauty, simplicity and emotional poignancy of his soulful “song-offerings” (*gitanjali*) to God. Having introduced the Bengali poet to the Western literary elite as a spiritual voice from the East, Yeats helped him publish a selection from the book packaged with a highly appreciative introduction by himself. It is this book that in 1913 earned Tagore the Nobel Prize in literature (Dutta and Robinson 163-67; Foster *Apprentice* 469-71). Although Yeats’s intense interest in Tagore’s work was ephemeral (from mid-1912 to mid-1913), one finds Tagore mentioned in Yeats’s letters until 1917, and occasionally after that.

Two decades after the “Introduction to *Gitanjali*” (1912), Yeats wrote another acclamatory introduction for an Indian work, *An Indian Monk: His Life and Adventure* in
1932. The author of this autobiographical book was Shree Purohit Swami, a contemporary Indian monk. Unlike Chatterjee and Tagore with their respective philosophic and poetic predispositions, the Swami represented the freshness of mystic-spiritualist experiences, to Yeats's deepest satisfaction. As he did with Tagore, Yeats helped the Swami to translate and publish not only his own autobiography, but also that of his spiritual Master, *The Holy Mountain* (1934). With renewed enthusiasm for India, Yeats co-translated with the Swami what they considered to be the ten major *Upanishads* and published it as *The Ten Principal Upanishads* in 1937. Together they also published a translation of Bhagwan Shree Patanjali's *Yoga-Sutras*, *The Aphorisms of Yoga* in 1938. What is more, Yeats consecrated each of these works with an introduction that he wrote himself (Foster, *Arch-Poet* 461-62, 536-39).

Yeats of course was not the only modernist writer to be interested in India or the East. Nor was he unique in the transnational reach of his works. Imperialism facilitates transnational cultural exchange. Dwelling upon the complex connection of imperialism and modernism, Paul Stasi argues that, although "[i]mperialism tended to increase cultural contact,"

it did so under the relations of structural dependence characterized by the terms center and periphery. This relationship is represented by a conceptual structure I call Imperial Time – the contrast between an unending telic modernity and a world of reified unchanging traditions, which finds its clearest articulation in the atavistic primitivism characteristic of the period. Typically this primitivism sought to renew
Western culture by an introjection of the exotic, ostensibly more “natural”
forms of traditional culture. (6-7)

Canonical modernist writers like E. M. Foster, D. H. Lawrence, T. S. Eliot and Ezra
Pound among others have responded to the “Imperial Time” in their extra-territorial
interests in Indian or Eastern culture as well as in their respective “primitivism[s].”
Yeats’s representation of India, too, apparently harmonizes with the “atavistic
primitivism” characteristic of the time. However, I will argue that for all Yeats’s
imbrications in the ideologies of Empire in his construction of India, Yeats’s was not a
starkly imperialist or Orientalist construction, but a more complex and culturally nuanced
one, and, therefore, deserves serious scholarly attention.

In the first chapter, focusing mostly on the 1880s, I will discuss Yeats’s interest in
Indian philosophy and religion in the context of the transnational cultural currents in
Dublin facilitated by texts like A. P. Sinnet’s *Esoteric Buddhism* and philosophical
organizations with a transnational focus like the Hermetic Society and the Theosophical
Society (Foster, *Apprentice* 45-47). Because of his desire to have a taste of the concrete
magical or occultist experiences, Yeats had a mixed affiliation with these Societies
which, as his writings about them suggest, were more interested in theories or abstract
ideas than in analyzing, scrutinizing and questioning them, as Yeats preferred. His
reaction to Mohini Chatterjee was characterized by an analogous ambiguity. On the one
hand, he was drawn to the young Bengali philosopher “with the typical face of Christ” as
well as his teaching that “[c]onsciousness . . . does not merely spread out its surface but
has, in vision and contemplation, another motion and can change in height and in depth”
(*Autobiographies* 98). On the other hand, he seems soon to have lost interest in the
abstract ascetic focus and the life-denying renunciatory aspect of the Vedantic philosophy Chatterjee introduced his young pupils to (Foster, *Apprentice* 47). So far as his interest in mysticism at this early stage was concerned, Yeats was not at home with the abstract mystic notions of spiritual enlightenment at the expense of senses. With his penchant for magical or mystic experiences, he would of necessity have to rely on senses for conveying the extra-sensuous messages.

Although Tagore would not satisfy Yeats’s desire for magico-mystic experiences, he would represent a sunny alternative to Chatterjee’s teaching in his love of God that does not shut the world out, but sees it as inseparable from the all-encompassing divinity. In my second chapter, I will focus on the years 1912-1917 to discuss what I call Yeats’s half-Orientalist construction of Tagore and his India. Of the three phases of Yeats’s construction of India, this one is the most culturally- and politically charged. In his full-throated praise of Tagore’s “holy” songs, Yeats constructed an image of Tagore as an Oriental sage from a utopian Bengal, which mis- or under-represented the literary, cultural and political diversity of Tagore and his Bengal. What makes Yeats’s representation more interesting is Tagore’s half-reluctant “consent” to this quasi-Orientalist image of himself (Dutta and Robinson 163-67). Above all, Tagore’s position among the English modernist writers and artists like Yeats, Ezra Pound, William Rothenstein, and others in the wake of the First World War added a new dimension to the transnational or transcultural orientation of Modernism.

By the time he met Shree Purohit Swami in 1932, Yeats’s understanding of Indian culture had deepened and he had become more sensitive to the cultural imperialist politics. Covering the phase from 1932 to 1938, my third chapter will cast light on
Yeats’s evolving construction of India by closely reading the “introductions” that he added to the autobiographies of the Swami and his Master. In these essays, Yeats subtly moves from the half-Orientalist representation of India of his *Gitanjali* “Introduction” towards an alternative representation of India. While he still relies heavily on the Orientalist essentialism in his construction of India in these essays, he nevertheless challenges the Self/Other binary of the Orientalist discourse and betrays a keen awareness of the cultural-imperialist conditions of India. So far as Yeats’s personal philosophic vision is concerned, the Swami with his ascetic life represented the rare blend of ideas and experiences that was compatible with Yeats’s life-long search for a philosophy that would combine thought, mysticism and magic. Given that from an early age he abhorred abstract ideas, this final phase culminates his philosophical exploration. It is significant in this regard that he published a revised version of his philosophical book *A Vision* in 1937, and in a letter to the Swami on May 15 1937, he writes of this book that “only in India can I find any body [sic] who can throw light upon certain of its problems.”

Despite the immense cultural-political significance of Yeats’s construction of India, one rarely finds a book chapter or a journal article on this topic. The comprehensive works on this subject like Naresh Guha’s *W. B. Yeats: an Indian Approach* (1968) and Shankar Mokashi-Punekar’s “Shri Purohit Swami and W. B. Yeats” in *The Image of India in Western Creative Writing* (1970) are out of date. Moreover, among the three phases of Yeats’s construction of India, only the second one involving Tagore has received some attention in occasional works like Ana Jelnikar’s perceptive article “W. B. Yeats’s (Mis)Reading of Tagore: Interpreting an Alien Culture” (2012). However, no consideration of Yeats’s conceptualization of India can be complete
without considering the three phases and the way they interact, occasionally overlapping, standing out, or evolving from each other. Given the meager scholarship on this subject, I will significantly draw upon Yeats's own words and thoughts on India and these three Indian figures in the great quantity of letters that he wrote throughout his career. Read together with Yeats's introductory essays, occasional poems, and autobiographical ruminations regarding India, these letters provide a fascinating behind-the-scenes account of Yeats's construction of India and reveal the complex cultural politics involved in the affair.
Early Phase: the Occult India

How when we die our shades will rove,
When eve has hushed the feathered ways,
With vapoury footsole by the water’s drowsy blaze. (Collected Poems 18-20)

These dreamy, drowsy lines are from “The Indian to his Love,” a poem that Yeats published in his 1889 collection Crossways. Devoid of any geographical or culturally specific reference to India, this poem is remarkable for the mood of inaction and apathy. The diction is carefully chosen to create the atmosphere of an eerie, mysterious world, wrapped in an other-worldly silence: “shades,” “hushed,” “feathered ways,” “vapoury,” and “drowsy.” The dragging final line adds to an overall tonal effect of lethargy and drowsiness comparable to “The Lotos-Eaters” by Alfred Lord Tennyson. But while Tennyson’s island is a mythological location, Yeats’s India in this poem refers to a living culture. A similar treatment of the west of Ireland, particularly Sligo, is also found in Yeats’s early poems like “The Lake Isle of Innisfree,” where the speaker resolves to “live alone in the bee-loud glade,” where “peace comes dropping slow” (Collected Poems 4-5). However, while “Innisfree” has at least some concrete details like “clay and wattles[...]made” “cabin,” “nine bean-rows” (Collected Poems 2-3), “The Indian to his Love” relies almost solely on imaginative exoticism, typical of his other Indian poems of the time. Such imaginative construction was characteristic of Yeats’s early ideas of India in general.
Yeats’s interest in India, at least in this early phase, should be seen as a part of his general interest in the Occult. In his early writings, Yeats did not always distinguish among Indian, Eastern and Western occultisms. Yeats in the 1880s became familiar with Indian philosophy and religion through his artist friend George Russell (A.E) and the Bengali Brahmin from India, Mohini Chatterjee. Both of these early sources as well as the Theosophical Society they were affiliated with had a philosophically hybrid orientation that attempted to synthesize the Eastern and Western forms of mysticism. R. F. Foster describes “Theosophy” as “the fashionable New Age religion . . . blending East and West in a spiritual synthesis readily absorbed by its devotees” (Apprentice 45). While Yeats largely shared this orientation in trying to discover the commonalities between the Indian mystic wholeness and that of the pre-medieval West, he was also critically aloof from the Theosophist occultism, in particular its abstract asceticism. Unlike the Theosophists, Yeats had an inclination (however incompletely realized at that time) for mystic, magical experiences, for visionary revelations physically realized.

Nourished by his childhood exposure to the folk stories and beliefs prevalent in Sligo, Yeats’s occultist inclination found its antithesis in the skeptical tendency that he owed largely to his father’s influence. It was his “father’s unbelief,” reflects Yeats in Reveries over Childhood and Youth, that “had set me thinking about the evidences of religion,” not without some serious “anxiety,” of course, because “I did not think I could live without religion” (Autobiographies 54). This childhood ambivalence would, by the mid-1880s, take the shape of a deeper dilemma and a sharper ideological break with his father:
It was only when I began to study psychical research and mystical philosophy that I broke away from my father’s influence. He had been a follower of John Stuart Mill and so had never shared Rossetti’s conviction that it mattered to nobody whether the sun went round the earth or the earth round the sun. But through this new research, this reaction from popular science, I had begun to feel that I had allies for my secret thought.

(Autobiographies 96)

Besides his father’s influence, there was another source of Yeats’s skepticism. Prior to his serious interest in “psychical research and mystical philosophy,” he had developed, during his English school days, an interest in “natural history” intensified by the reading of “Darwin and Wallace, Huxley and Haeckel” (Autobiographies 77). However, the skepticism that was honed by those readings was soon subsumed under a generalized desire “to be certain of my own wisdom” (Autobiographies 80).

The decade that proved most significant in terms of Yeats’s mystic-occultist orientation in general, and his first serious interest in Indian mysticism in particular, was the 1880s. It was during this decade that Yeats found himself exposed to a variety of inter-cultural currents that both nurtured and nourished the religious temperament in him. In 1883, Yeats was admitted to the Dublin Metropolitan School of Art. It was during the short span of his studentship there that Yeats came in contact with Indian philosophy and esoteric texts through the influence of his classmate Russell (A.E.), “the poet and the mystic” (Autobiographies 90). Already speaking to his friends about “his visions” (Autobiographies 90), Russell was extremely well-read in the religious-philosophical literature of the East. During the early 1880s, a host of Eastern holy texts had become
available: *The Sacred Books of the East*, a series of fifty volumes, edited by Max Muller was being published; the *Buddhist Sutras* was published in 1881; and the *Bhagawat Gita* was published in 1882, and, coupled with the *Upanishads*, in 1884 (Guha 30-31). Besides Russell, there were of course other avid readers of Eastern esoteric texts in the Dublin of that time. Charles Johnston, John Eglinton, Charles Weekes formed a group of young writers who, along with Yeats and Russell, were among what Ernest Boyd calls “the Dublin mystics” (Boyd 213).

All this transnational traffic of ideas resulted, in 1885, in the establishment of the Dublin Hermetic Society with Yeats as one of its founding members (Foster, *Apprentice* 46-47). This is how Yeats describes a meeting of the Society in an 1898 newspaper article entitled “The Poetry of AE”: “A little body of young men hired a room in York Street, some dozen years ago, and began to read papers to one another on the Vedas, and the Upanishads, and the Neoplatonists, and on modern mystics and spiritualists” (*Uncollected Prose* 121). Thus it seems that the Hermetic Society had a philosophically syncretist orientation, and its construction of India or the East was essentially conflationist, if not completely Eurocentric.

Yeats’s endorsement of Indian philosophy and religion in the late nineteenth century should be seen as part of the ambitious desire for a reconciliation of the ancient and the modern that marks much of late-Victorian and modernist writings as well as Yeats’s own resuscitative idealism for Ireland or Western civilization in general. In *Memoirs*, lamenting that “[c]ommerce and manufacture had made the world ugly; the death of pagan nature-worship had robbed visible beauty of its inviolable sanctity,” he ardently wishes to “unite the radical truths of Christianity to those of a more ancient
world” ("From Memoirs" 234). It must be stressed here that the reconciliation Yeats envisioned was not merely religious or philosophical, but one that would encompass the whole culture in a unifying principle of a pre-Renaissance, pre-bourgeois kind. Hence his rhetorical question in *The Trembling of the Veil*: “Had not Europe shared one mind and heart until both mind and heart began to break into fragments a little before Shakespeare’s birth?” (*Autobiographies* 165). Against such fragmentation, he places the “hope” or “half hope” of seeking “unity as deliberately as it had been sought by theologian, poet, sculptor, architect, from the eleventh to the thirteenth century” (*Autobiographies* 167-68).

However, the same culturally eclectic syncretist attitude of the Hermetic Society was also characteristic of the Dublin Theosophical Society. At some point after 1884, Yeats had received from his aunt Isabella a copy of A. P. Sinnett’s *Esoteric Buddhism*, a book that “owed more to Western occultism” (Foster, *Apprentice* 47). It is this book which led to the establishment of the Dublin Theosophical Society; Yeats acted as a catalyst by lending the book to Charles Johnston who would soon gather people and form “the Dublin lodge of the Theosophical Society” in 1886 (Boyd 214). This is how Yeats recollects the incident:

My friend (Johnston) had written to some missionary society to send him to the South Seas, when I offered him Renan’s *Life of Christ* and a copy of *Esoteric Buddhism*. He refused both, but a few days later . . . asked . . . for *Esoteric Buddhism* and came out an esoteric Buddhist. He wrote to the missionaries withdrawing his letter and offered himself to the Theosophical Society as a *chela* [a devout follower]. (*Autobiographies* 97)
From the very beginning, Yeats had some reservations about the society, caused particularly by the quasi-religious abstraction in its method of approaching the truth. Talking about his “lack of zeal” regarding the Theosophical Society, he writes in *Reveries*, “I had stayed somewhere between the books, held there perhaps by my father’s scepticism” (*Autobiographies* 97).

Yeats’s ambiguous identification with theosophy and these societies tells us a lot about his conceptualization of Indian philosophy and mysticism at that time. In *Reveries* again, he tells us how he “proposed,” at the start of the Hermetic Society, “that whatever the great poets had affirmed in their finest moments was the nearest we could come to an authoritative religion, and that their mythology, their spirits of water and wind, were but literal truth” (emphasis added, *Autobiographies* 97). Such attempts at literalization of the philosophical or magical truths characterize Yeats’s occultism in general, and account for his breach with Theosophical Hinduism which did not satisfy, it seems, his craving for mystic experiences, rather than abstract philosophical ruminations. Besides, because of his skeptical inclinations, he would question other people’s visions and revelations, asking for a literal analysis of their vision. This sceptical tendency would later make him question Mohini Chatterjee and Purohit Swami about the fine points of Indian philosophy and mysticism.

The issue of abstraction was also largely responsible for the diverging ways of Yeats and Russell, after a period of intimate friendship. The following anecdote from *The Trembling of the Veil* reveals Yeats’s reservations about both Russell and the Theosophical Society’s attitude to life:
A certain young man became convinced that a certain young woman had fallen in love with him; and, as an unwritten rule pronounced love and the spiritual life incompatible, that was a heavy fault. As the young man felt the delicacy of the situation, he asked for Russell's help, and side by side they braved the offender, who, I was told, received their admonishment with surprised humility, and promised amendment. (Autobiographies 199)

Yeats's irony here is clearly directed against the incompatibility of love and asceticism—Indian Vedantic or Western Catholic—held as an unwritten law in the Theosophical Society. Such views adumbrate his high appreciation of the kind of Indian holiness represented by Tagore's Gitanjali lyrics wherein love, human and divine, are mystically fused and often indistinguishable from each other.

All these cross-cultural cross currents—the Hermetic Society, Theosophical Society and his friendship with Russell, Johnston and others—set the stage for his first significant encounter with an Indian mind that was to give a decisive shape to his construction of India. Yeats met Mohini Chatterjee in 1886 through the Dublin Theosophical Society. As Sarah Diane Sasson notes, coming from a "prominent Bengali family that for several generations had mediated between Hindu religious traditions and Christianity," Chatterjee had "joined the Theosophical Society" in 1882, attracted by "the value [Theosophy] placed on ancient Hindu traditions" (78-79). Highly educated and a graduate from Calcutta University, Chatterjee was "a modern young man who emulated European dress, interests, and attitudes." However, on his European tour accompanying Henry Steele Olcott and Helena Blavatsky in 1884, Chatterjee was expected to cater to "Western expectations about the mysterious East": "On the one hand, he was to display
India’s spiritual superiority, while on the other hand, he was to pose as a backward ‘native’ in need of Western regeneration” (Sasson 81).

Invited by the Theosophical Society in Dublin, Chatterjee came to Dublin in early 1886 (Ross 159). In Foster’s words, “Mohini Chatterjee in his youth was a genuinely impressive presence, preaching the Vedantic way of meditation, asceticism and renunciation” (Apprentice 47). Although Yeats’s reaction to these ideals would later distinguish his version of Indian mysticism from Chatterjee’s, Chatterjee was Yeats’s “first experience of an Eastern holy man: the exoticism, the simplicity, the gnomic utterance all appealed [to him], and were recapitulated in a number of poems.” Through Mohini, Yeats was also exposed to the belief in the endless reincarnations of souls having their source in the divine One (Foster, Apprentice 47-48). This is how Yeats would later retrospectively describe in “The Pathway” (1900-08) the first impression Mohini had on himself and the other Dublin theosophists:

[H]e taught us by what seemed an invincible logic that those who die, in so far as they have imagined beauty or justice, are made a part of beauty or justice and move through the minds of living men, as Shelley believed; and that mind overshadows mind even among the living, and by pathways that lie beyond the senses; and that he measured labour by this measure, and put the hermit above all other labourers, because, being the most silent and the most hidden, he lived nearer to the Eternal Powers, and showed their mystery of the world. Alcibiades fled from Socrates lest he might do nothing but listen to him all life long, and I am certain that we, seeking as youth will for some unknown deed and thought, all dreamed that but to
listen to this man who threw the enchantment of powers about silent and
gentle things, and at last to think as he did, was the one thing worth doing
and thinking; and that all action and all words that lead to action were a
little vulgar, a little trivial. Ah, how many years it has taken me to awake
out of that dream! (Early Essays 291)

It is worth noting that Yeats seems to have been attracted not so much by the Indian
ideals of asceticism or renunciation as by some exotic, aphorismic, even primitive (if we
could take “simplicity” to mean that) quality of India that Mohini represented for him. In
the beautiful quotation above, Yeats recollects Mohini as an exotic magician throwing his
power of enchantment not only on the youths gathered there but also “about silent and
gentle things.” Moreover, for all Yeats’s idealization of the concept of philosophical or
mystic non-action, such a notion seems to be associated with the Orientalist stereotype of
Eastern inaction or passivity as opposed to the proactive modern Western mind. It is
interesting to note how Yeats’s own subjective predilection for a certain kind of
mysticism—one that was to find expression in his own visionary work A Vision—
motivated him to appreciate some aspects of Indian philosophy and religion taught by
Mohini, and reject others. And, in doing so, he often helped perpetuate the Western
stereotypes about the East in spite of himself.

Mohini also found his place in Yeats’s poetry. The poem “Kanva on Himself”
was the later poem “Mohini Chatterjee” in its original conception. In the following
reflection in “The Pathway,” Yeats reveals both the source of the poems and also the way
they are connected:
Somebody asked him [Mohini Chatterjee] if we should pray, but even prayer was too full of hope, of desire, of life, to have any part in that acquiescence that was his beginning of wisdom, and he answered that one should say, before sleeping: “I have lived many lives, I have been a slave and a prince. Many a beloved has sat upon my knees, and I have sat upon the knees of many a beloved. Everything that has been shall be again.”

Beautiful words that I spoilt once by turning them into clumsy verse.

*(Early Essays 290)*

The “clumsy verse,” “Kanva on Himself,” reads as follows:

Hast thou not sat of yore upon the knees
Of myriads of beloveds, and on thine
Have not a myriad swayed below strange trees
In other lives? Hast thou not quaffèd old wine

By tables that were fallen into dust
Ere yonder palm commenced his thousand years?
Is not thy body but the garnered rust
Of ancient passions and of ancient fears?

Then wherefore fear the usury of Time,
Or Death that cometh with the next life-key?
Nay, rise and flatter her with golden rhyme,
For as things were so shall things ever be. *(Variorum 9-20)*
The deprecating image of the body as nothing "but the garnered rust / Of ancient passions" seems to have been inspired by the concept of reincarnation and, perhaps more significantly, by the Sankara Acharya’s Vedantic philosophy of un-qualified non-dualism. Peter Kuch tells us that although Chatterjee was asked “to explain Esoteric Buddhism,” he “went beyond it to discuss his own study of the Indian philosophy of Sankara, a system of metaphysics which grew out of a radical critique of the Upanishads offered in the late seventh century.” Kuch further writes that Sankara’s philosophy enforces the distinction between what is said to be illusory and what is said to be real more rigidly than other systems [of Indian philosophy]. The theory that the material world has no real existence, but is a mere illusion [maya] of the individual soul wrapped in ignorance, and that it therefore has only a practical or conventional [vyavaharika] reality and not a true [paramarthika] reality, is thoroughly developed. Thus the whole emphasis of Sankara is on inner realization, and not on any outer action or desire that might ultimately lead to action. (17)

This absolute theoretical disregard for the external, physical world which has but an illusory reality renders any action whatsoever superfluous and stresses the value of renunciation. Yeats’s amateurish appropriation of this theory, coupled with the concept of reincarnation of souls, results in a sense of stasis and resignation: “as things were so shall things ever be.”

In order to trace the evolution of Yeats’s views regarding Chatterjee and the Indian philosophy he preached, it is interesting to read the later version of the poem on
Dutta 26

Chatterjee, called “Mohini Chatterjee,” which retrospectively evolved in 1928 out of the 1886 version:

I asked if I should pray.
But the Brahmin said,
‘Pray for nothing, say
Every night in bed,
“I have been a king,
I have been a slave,
Nor is there anything.
Fool, rascal, knave,
That I have not been,
And yet upon my breast
A myriad heads have lain.”
That he might set at rest
A boy’s turbulent days
Mohini Chatterjee
Spoke these, or words like these.
I add in commentary,
‘Old lovers yet may have
All that time denied –
Grave is heaped on grave
That they be satisfied –
Over the blackened earth
The old troops parade,
Birth is heaped on birth
That such cannonade
May thunder time away,
Birth-hour and death-hour meet,
Or, as great sages say,
Men dance on deathless feet.' (Collected Poems)

This 1928 version is a significant revision of the earlier poem as well as of Yeats's earlier stance with regards to Indian philosophy or religion. The dialogue form of the poem is crucial in this regard. In the second verse paragraph, we detect a few crucial turns. "[T]he Brahmin" of the beginning becomes merely "Mohini Chatterjee." The speaker, too, has changed: no longer in his early youth of "turbulent days," he is now mature enough to "comment" more engagingly on the Brahmin's teaching. Hence the shift from the past tense used in relation to the Brahmin or Chatterjee to the present tense of "I add in commentary." What the poet-speaker adds— "Birth-hour and death-hour meet, / Or, as great sages say, / Men dance on deathless feet"— represents the imaginative synthesis that Yeats of 1928 seems to have reached in his understanding of Indian philosophy. The renunciatory ideals implied in the prose version of "Pathway" and the earlier poem are subtly and artistically eschewed in the mature poem of 1928 in favor of a poetic vision that privileges life over death: "Men dance on deathless feet." However, for all the inchoate imperfections of the earlier version of "Mohini Chatterjee," Yeats of the eighties was deeply moved by the philosophy Chatterjee taught which, as he recollects in
Reveries, “confirmed my vague speculations and seemed at once logical and boundless” (Autobiographies 98).

India found poetic representation in some other poems of that time, besides “Kanva on Himself.” It is useful to consider a few of those here, in order to note the imaginative transformation of all the cross-currents of influences on Yeats’s young mind. In Crossways (1889), dedicated to A. E., we find three poems on Indian themes.

“Anashuya and Vijaya,” set in a “little Indian temple in the Golden Age,” is a dramatic poem consisting of a dialogue between a young priestess and her unfaithful lover. In her attempt to make Vijaya swear not to love anybody else, Anashuya says:

Swear by the parents of the gods,
Dread oath, who dwell on sacred Himalay,
On the far Golden Peak; enormous shapes,
Who still were old when the great sea was young;
On their vast faces mystery and dreams;
Their hair along the mountains rolled and filled
From year to year by the unnumbered nests
Of aweless birds, and round their stirless feet
The joyless flocks of deer and antelope,
Who never hear the unforgiving hound.
Swear! (Collected Poems 66-76)

Irrespective of the mythical connotations of the poem, the image of India, as in the quote above, is overall an idealized and highly exoticized one. The image of gods having dreamy, mysterious faces and motionless feet, their long hair rolled along the mountains,
and so on has cultural-political implications. Such descriptions of the Indian gods consolidate the exotic image of meditating *rishis* present in the European mind via the Orientalist discourse.

Echoing the fearless flocks of birds and beasts in “Anashuya and Vijaya,” in the next one, “The Indian Upon God,” the moorfowl, the lotus, the roebuck, and the peacock speak of absolute harmony of the spirit and the form, in which each form represents God, the Spirit or the Platonic Ideal Form in its own self. Echoing William Blake’s Child, Yeats’s lotus in this poem says: “*Who made the world and ruleth it, He hangeth on a stalk, / For I am in His image made, and all this tinkling tide / Is but a sliding drop of rain between His petals wide*” (*Collected Poems* 10-12). The idealizing tone of these poems is found further in “The Indian to his Love” that I invoked at the start of this chapter. Echoing the title of Christopher Marlowe’s “The Passionate Shepherd to his Love,” this poem seems to blend the Eastern mystic and the Western pastoral traditions.

The opening description of the “Indian” landscape is highly idealized:

The island dreams under the dawn
And great boughs drop tranquility;
The peahens dance on a smooth lawn,
A parrot sways upon a tree,
Raging at his own image in the enamelled sea. (*Collected Poems* 1-5)

However, such idealizations, one might argue, largely characterize Yeats’s early Irish poetry too.

In many of his early Indian work, Yeats thus conflates Indian and Western concepts and images. His interest in Indian philosophy at this early stage seems not to
have fully developed. Yet his ambiguous relationship with theosophy and Indian
philosophy prepares him for a more comprehensive understanding of the latter in future.
An interesting anecdote about the Theosophical Society that Yeats later recollects in *The
Trembling of the Veil* reflects Yeats’s reservation about the life-denying abstraction of the
Society:

> We are sitting round the fire one night, and a member, a woman, tells a
dream that she has just had. She dreamed that she saw monks digging in a
garden. They dug down till they found a coffin, and when they took off the
lid she saw that in the coffin lay a beautiful young man in a dress of gold
brocade. The young man railed against the glory of the world, and when
he had finished, the monks closed the coffin reverently, and buried it once
more. They smoothed the ground, and then went on with their gardening.

(*Autobiographies* 202)

Although Yeats does not add any commentary to any of these anecdotes, this particular
one is highly suggestive of Yeats’s own complicated feelings regarding Theosophy and
Indian philosophy alike. As we have seen, he did not wholeheartedly endorse Russell’s—
and, by extension, the Theosophical Society’s—abstract view of Indian philosophy and
religious mysticism. And just before relating this burial-of-the-life dream of one of its
members, he states that he was “never anything but a dissatisfied critic” of the Society
(*Autobiographies* 202). Nor could he sympathize for long with Mohini Chatterjee’s
proclamation of the renunciatory asceticism of India. The Vedantic idea of renunciation
may have seemed to him to consolidate rather than suggest an alternative to the Christian
ideals of renunciation, celibacy and death-fetishism.
A letter that Yeats wrote to Sturge Moore much later on 5 February 1926 might be worth reading here. Written a couple of years before the poem “Mohini Chatterjee,” the letter encapsulates Yeats’s reaction against Indian philosophy in particular and mystical thoughts in general. Yeats here responds to a journal article’s threefold categorization of “possible beliefs about the nature of the external world.” In response to the first category—“Everything we perceive ‘including so called illusions exist, in the external world’”—Yeats writes that he was always “fascinated” by it “for I learnt it from a Brahman [Chatterjee] when I was eighteen & believed it till Blake drove it out of my head. It is early Buddhism & results in the belief still living in India, that all is a stream that flows on out of human control—one action or thought leading to an other [sic].”

Yeats’s own “conviction that we can influence events” made him reject such an absurd mindless flow of life that he captured in “Kanva on Himself.” While endorsing the second category, “Nothing can exist that is not in the mind as ‘an element of experience,’” he writes:

However when one admits, if one does, that mind which creates all is limited from the start by certain possibilities one admits Platonic ideas, and so a pre-natal division of the “unconscious” into two forms of mind. This is a Vedantic thought. However I try always to keep my philosophy within such classifications of thought as will keep it to such experience as seems a natural life. I prefer to include in my definition of water a little duck weed or a few fish. I have never met that poor naked creature H\(^2\) O [sic].
However, by the time Yeats reached this mature philosophic vision in 1926, he had already met Rabindranath Tagore, his second model from India. Tagore in 1912 exposed Yeats to a poetic version of Indian philosophy with a non-renunciatory, life-affirming relationship with God. Unlike Chatterjee, Tagore was steeped in the Upanishadic and Vaishnav traditions that are less absolutist in their conceptions of reality than the Vedantic tradition of Sankara (Foster, *Apprentice* 470).
Yeats’s Tagore—the “Hindu poet”

Almost two decades after his first bout of interest in India, Yeats met the Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore. For Yeats and for many around him, this *rishī*-looking poet with his long beard and serene meditative calm confirmed much of the stereotypical idea of an Indian “holy man” prevalent in the West. This cultural attitude is evident in the overall tone and the choice of details in Yeats’s “Introduction” to Tagore’s collection of “holy” songs, *Gitanjali* (1912), translated, with Yeats’s help, by the poet himself. The “Introduction” is a crucial document both because it is the only formal writing published by Yeats about Tagore, and also, and more significantly, because of the role that it played, along with all Yeats’s other attempts, in promoting Tagore in the Western world. Yet it is certainly not the only document available to help explain Yeats’s representation and promotion of Tagore in the English literary scene. The plethora of letters that Yeats wrote to or about Tagore during the time of the latter’s stay in London and later reveals a lot about the complex cultural politics involved in the affair. That Yeats manipulated these cultural politics successfully is evident in the fact that Tagore was awarded the Nobel Prize for *Gitanjali* in 1913, within a little more than a year of his introduction to the Western cultural elites and less than a year from the publication of the book by the India Society in November 1912 (Macmillan published it in early 1913).

Yeats both imagines and constructs Tagore as more or less a “holy” poet from India, perpetuating the colonial dichotomy of the rational West and the spiritual East. However, given Yeats’s ambiguous position in the Irish colonialist context as well as his active role in the cultural nationalist movement in Ireland, it might be wrong to
unequivocally align him with Western Orientalism. Yeats’s was at best a half-conscious Orientalism. There are times when he seems to transfer his unrealized dream of a “romantic Ireland” and a non-fragmentary ancient (Western) world to Tagore and his world, which, in Yeats’s imaginative construction, recedes to a timeless past when the Unity of Being was a living reality. However, despite Yeats’s unconscious bias for the English *Gitanjali* version of Tagore which he himself helped perpetuate, his epistolary exchanges reveal that he also consciously negotiated between his subjective interest in Tagore’s works and the cultural political demands of the time in terms of the incorporation of an Eastern poet in the world of Western literary production. More interestingly, Yeats’s legitimization of a particular version of Tagore brings into play what Pierre Bourdieu calls “the objective relations between producers and different agents of legitimation . . . [which] consecrate a certain type of work and a certain type of cultivated person” (121). Yeats’s preferred image of Tagore fits very well in the frame of Western ideological preconceptions about India prevalent in the field of literary/cultural production.

Yeats’s highly acclamatory representation of Tagore in his “Introduction” to *Gitanjali* as well as in his letters seems to be in tune with the colonial mindset and is, at its very best, a partial representation. So far as the “authenticity” of the image of Tagore is concerned, Yeats seems to have included certain aspects of Tagore’s life and works, while judiciously keeping others at bay. In his “Introduction” to *Gitanjali*, Yeats reports what someone from India told him of Tagore and his father: “Every morning at three . . . [Tagore] sits immovable in contemplation, and for two hours does not awake from his reverie upon the nature of God. His father, the Maha Rishi [the Great Sage], would
Dutta sometimes sit there all through the next day” (“Gitanjali” 166). He also reports to have been told of Tagore’s brother, Dwijendranath Tagore, “who is a great philosopher,” that “[t]he squirrels come from the boughs and climb on to his knees and the birds alight upon his hands” (“Gitanjali” 166). Unassumingly privileging spiritual passivity, such details match very well with the idea of India in his early Indian poems. Yeats also wrote of Tagore in the similar vein in a letter to Elizabeth Radcliffe, dated 20 July 1913: “He is a great saint & great man [not a great poet!]. . . . He has his own direct communication with the divine life & is to multitudes a sacred being.” Yeats thus valued Tagore less as a poet and more as a “saint” or a “sacred being.” Even while referring to Tagore as a poet, Yeats labels him with the religion-indicating adjective “Hindu” rather than the nationality-indicating “Indian” or the language-indicating “Bengali.” He wrote to Florence Farr on June 27, 1912, anticipating his first meeting with Tagore, that he was going to “dine with Rothenstein to meet Tagore the Hindu poet” (emphasis added). However, such identifications of Tagore and his family as “saint[s]” or “sacred being[s]” are part of an ideological misrepresentation found frequently in the Orientalist representation of the non-Western “Other.” Tagore and his family actually broke away from the institutionalized Hinduism and embraced the reformist spiritual society, called Brahmo Samaj.2 Quoting Paul Nash’s observation that he “would read Gitanjali as I would read the Bible for comfort and for strength,” Dutta and Robinson hold that “Tagore’s western admirers saw the humane spirit of Christianity, venerated in theory but ignored in practice, reflected back at them from Gitanjali in a pure form” (167, 169). Of the other examples used by Dutta and Robinson, the one worth mentioning is the observation of Nirad Chaudhuri who said (as they quote): “Tagore brought back the ideal of the first
beatitude transfigured, that is to say, without any painful abnegation and asceticism, and endowed with joyous peace” (169-70).

Tagore’s reaction to thus being labeled a “Hindu poet” or a saint-like figure was interestingly ambiguous. “Tagore unquestionably encouraged this impression,” write Krishna Dutta and Andrew Robinson, “through his subsequent English translations and sometimes by his personal behaviour in the West. At the same time he regretted it” (169). Such a disclosure reveals another dimension of the cultural politics involved in the field of transnational poetics in the colonial context of early twentieth century. Holding that “neither Yeats nor Tagore was blind to the politics of his day,” Jelnikar blatantly writes, “Tagore to some extent played the part of a willing accomplice in acquiescing to the false mask imposed by the Occident. He understood that he needed Western recognition in order to secure a better standing for himself and to achieve his goal in Bengal and India” (1008-09). Thus Yeats’s representation of Tagore as well as Tagore’s ambivalent encouragement of it reflect the larger colonialist cultural paradigm of the early twentieth century.

However, the English *Gitanjali*, in the form in which it was originally published under Yeats’s meticulous supervision, is far from being a collection of “holy” poems. Although it contains a few pieces which praise God’s grace and majesty, what finds expression in the vast majority of poems is not the unqualified divinity of God or the holy men, but the predicaments of a human being trying to come to terms with his two selves, the biological and the transcendental, a theme that Tagore would elaborate on later in *The Religion of Man*. While in one poem, like a typical Indian *sannyasi* renouncing his senses to realize the divine within himself, he promises, “Life of my life, I shall ever try to keep
my body pure” (2), in another, he sounds highly un-orthodox in asking himself to “[l]eave this chanting and singing and telling of beads” (4). Here he refers to the “holy” activities typical of an Indian “sacred” man only to disassociate himself from those. Again, while in one song he offers his humble self to God (the “King of kings”) in the mood of self-surrender—“Day after day, O lord of my life, shall I stand before thee face to face. With folded hands, O lord of all worlds, shall I stand before thee face to face / Under thy great sky in solitude and silence, with humble heart shall I stand before thee face to face” (31)—in the very next one, he regrets that “I know thee as my God and stand apart—I do not know thee as my own and come closer. I know thee as my father and bow before thy feet—I do not grasp thy hand as my friend’s” (31). Continuing in this vein of intimate relationship with the all-pervasive divine Self, in another song, entitled “In the deep shadows of rainy July,” the poetic persona awaits his Beloved in a beautiful day of Bengali monsoon (8), and, in another, imagines Him to be out on a love-tryst for the speaker who wonders: “Art thou abroad on this stormy night on thy journey of love, my friend?” (9).

Tagore does not see himself (literally and metaphorically) in the role of the austere ascetic pilgrim of the kind that one finds in Shri Purohit Swami’s narrative of his arduous pilgrimage up the Mount Meru. Because Tagore’s vision is that of a poet, and not that of a saint, God, in his imagination, is often envisioned coming down to meet him in a relationship of reciprocal feelings: “You came down from your throne and stood at my cottage door” (19); or in another song, “I know not from what distant time thou art ever coming nearer to meet me” (17). The last quoted song, suggesting, with its present participle form of the verb “come” and the adverb “ever,” the endlessness of the venture
(“ever coming”), fits very well with the typical Tagorean vision of life as a process of self-fulfillment. The realization of God, for Tagore, is the realization of his real or true self which is transcendental.

While this theme of spiritual self-realization seems to foreshadow the Meru-pilgrim’s objectives Yeats would later find so enlightening, there is a subtle difference. For the pilgrims and the sannyasis, the end, that is the realization of God, is all important. To this end, they renounce the world and bring the senses under control. Tagore’s poetic sensibility, on the other hand, relishes the grace of sense, while struggling to achieve freedom from the clutches of the baser, materialistic instincts. For Tagore, the process, which is represented by the recurrent images of the way and the wayfarer in his songs, is equally or more important than the end product of salvation or nirvana. It is in this sense that we should read the blending in the Gitanjali songs of three kinds of love—the love of God or the transcendental Self, the love of one’s friend or beloved (though as a metaphor for the divine love), and the love for nature. For all the intensity with which “the love of God” is expressed in the book, it is difficult to differentiate among these three sentiments in Tagore.

Abu Sayeed Ayyub, a famous Tagore critic, writes:

[I]n many of the songs of romantic love or songs of praise of the natural world in Gitanjali there is a touch of bhakti [i.e. devotion], but often the touch is very light. . . . In terms of both quality and quantity, the basic worth of Gitanjali rests with those songs in which devotion and love or devotion and affinity with nature or all three elements have had their confluence. (337)
Wondering how a reader like himself, who is not a theist or "a bhakta" (a devotee of God), can identify with the Tagore of *Gitanjali*, Ayyub states that "not all the poems of *Gitanjali* move me. Those which may be called poems of absolute devotion . . . do not touch me in terms of content. . . . But fortunately these are few in number" (337).

Stressing the universal and secular appeal of Tagore’s book, Ayyub further argues: "In *Gitanjali* no particular point of view or theory or conclusion about god is pronounced but simply one poet’s emotions have been expressed" (336) or, “[I]n reading it we become one with the poet by feeling the pain and eagerness of his soul” (337). I have quoted Ayyub’s appreciation at length in order to contrast his non-religious or quasi-secular reading of *Gitanjali* with Yeats’s highly theistic reading. While it is true that Yeats, too, notices, with remarkable subtlety, the breadth of Tagore’s images, in Yeats’s reading, they nonetheless lead to the inevitable theistic conclusion:

> 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. Lovers, while they await one another, shall find, in murmuring them, this love of God a magic gulf wherein their own more bitter passion may bathe and renew its youth. At every moment the heart of this poet flows outward to these without derogation or condescension, for it has known that they will understand; and it has filled itself with the circumstance of their lives. The traveller in the red-brown clothes that he
wears that dust may not show upon him, the girl searching in her bed for the petals fallen from the wreath of her royal lover, the servant or the bride awaiting the master’s home-coming in the empty house, are images of the heart turning to God. Flowers and rivers, the blowing of conch shells, the heavy rain of the Indian July, are the moods of that heart in union or in separation; and a man sitting in a boat upon a river playing flute, like one of those figures full of mysterious meaning in a Chinese picture, is God Himself. (*Later Essays* 168)

Tagore, for Yeats, was a spiritual incarnation of India, inseparable from Indian civilization: “Mr Tagore, like the Indian civilization itself, has been content to discover the soul and surrender himself to its spontaneity” (*Later Essays* 169). For all Yeats’s genuine veneration for Tagore at that time, such a reductionist view of a “myriad-minded” personality (to use the title-phrase of Dutta and Robinson) like Tagore all but confirms Edward W. Said’s contention that, for Western intellectuals, “[a]n Oriental man was first an Oriental and only second a man” (231). And, if in the paragraph above, Yeats has exhaustively identified Tagore with Indian civilization, in the following, he seems first to exoticize the *whole* Indian civilization, and then to ahistorically reduce it to nothing but a shadow of the European civilization: “A whole people, a whole civilization, immeasurably strange to us, seems to have been taken up into this imagination [of Tagore]; 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*” (emphasis added, *Later Essays* 168).
Notwithstanding all Yeats's tenuous attempts to connect with India on behalf of the West in the quotation above, it imputes some uncanny qualities to the Indian people and civilization. Talking about “the old, animistic conception of the universe,” Freud writes, in a tone similar to Yeats’s:

It would seem as though each one of us has been through a phase of individual development corresponding to that animistic stage in primitive men, that none of us has traversed it without preserving certain traces of it which can be reactivated and that everything which now strikes us as “uncanny” fulfills the condition of stirring these vestiges of animistic mental activity within us and bringing them to expression. (428-29)

Yeats’s “Introduction” as a whole reads as an attempt to consolidate the image of Tagore as a quintessential Indian mind, more susceptible than the modern, discursive Western mind to the primitive innocence and spontaneity as well as some animistic tendencies.

Jelnikar holds that Yeats’s introduction to Gitanjali, for all his good intentions, was in many ways “responsible” for the falsified British image of the Bengali poet. But while its tenor may have tuned admirably into the wider European (pre)conceptions about the Orient and the more general cultural climate at the turn of the twentieth century that was ready to welcome another Eastern guru, it was specific enough to have its own refrain. (1006-07)

“Yeats,” Jelnikar further observes, “both draws from and feeds into [the] broad [essentialist] stereotypes, reproducing in his portrayal of Tagore not only the clichéd opposition of the spiritual East to the material West, but an entire array of similar
dichotomies: passive vs. active, feminine vs. masculine, apolitical vs. political” (1012). Such essentialism becomes especially evident in the concluding lines of the first section of Yeats’s “Introduction.” Continuing to authenticate his representation of Tagore by reporting conversations with a few Indian people, Yeats writes:

I thought of the abundance, of the simplicity of the [Gitanjali] poems, and said, “In your country is there much propagandist writing, much criticism? We have to do so much, especially in my own country, that our minds gradually cease to be creative, and yet we cannot help it. . . . Four-fifths of our energy is spent in the quarrel with bad taste, whether in our own minds or in the minds of others.” “I understand,” he replied, “we too have our propagandist writing. In the villages they recite long mythological poems adapted from the Sanskrit in the Middle Ages, and they often insert passages telling the people that they must do their duties.” (Later Essays 167)

Given that Yeats had by that time had several intimate conversations with Tagore, and that Yeats’s friend William Rothenstein had visited Tagore’s family in India in 1911 (Foster, Apprentice 469), it is hard to believe that Yeats would be so completely ignorant of the real political propagandist writings in India of that time, other than the morally didactic mythological recitals, ritualistically rendered in rural India. Tagore came from the modern, cosmopolitan Calcutta (the capital of British India) which was very different from the rural India mentioned by the anonymous Indian in the last-quoted passage. It was also the hub of the Indian nationalist movement. A few years before, during the time of the Swadeshi Movement (1905-07), triggered by Lord Curzon’s proclamation of the
Partition of Bengal, Tagore himself had written a great number of inspirational patriotic songs, a few of them essentially propagandist in nature. Tagore also launched the famous *Rakhibandhan* ("The Tying of the Rakhi") festival on the day of the Partition, when a large crowd of Bengali people tied a *rakhi* or thread in a gesture of unity and brotherhood between the Hindus and the Muslims of Bengal (Dutta and Robinson 144-45). He even wrote a number of political essays addressing nationalistic issues (Dutta and Robinson 151).

Yeats himself would later make explicit his keen understanding of Tagore’s complicated political position in India in a letter to Robert Bridges on 18 October 1915. Comparing Tagore’s position in India to that of himself in Ireland, he writes in the letter: "[t]he position of a man of letters in a patriotic movement is always very difficult. I noticed that Tagore went back from Europe with increased confidence & wondered if there would not be trouble. I thought that when he met his old enemies he would probably make himself disagreeable." Whether or not Yeats was fully aware of this aspect of Tagore during the English *Gitanjali* period, his Introduction did indeed support the Western image of the harmless Indian mind rich in meditative imagination and inspired by the quest for personal spiritual salvation, rather than a collective "seditious" motive of political liberation of the nation.

That Yeats struck the “right” chord is obvious in that his enthusiastic appreciation of the Indian simplicity and spontaneity in Tagore, as opposed to the modern Western sophistication and complexity, found its echo in the words or minds of other significant Western personalities of the time. Dutta and Robinson suggest that, for all its short-lived nature, we should not perhaps “dismiss as ephemeral and even misguided the enthusiasm
for Tagore of poets such as Yeats, Bridges, Gide, Saint-John Perse and Jimenez, and also Ezra Pound, Wilfred Owen, Edward Thomas, Hart Crane and Robert Frost” (169). For one, Ezra Pound observes with reference to the first-published *Gitanjali*: “I find in these poems a sort of ultimate common sense, a reminder of one thing and of forty things of which we are over likely to lose sight in the confusion of our Western life, in the racket of our cities, in the jabber of manufactured literature, in the vortex of advertisement” (qtd. in Dutta and Robinson 166). One hears a better echo of Yeats’s style in the following Pound quote: in refuting the possible criticism of the over-abundance of piety in Tagore’s poems, Pound feels, as Dutta and Robinson quote it, “nothing but pity for the reader who is unable to see that their piety is the poetic piety of Dante, and that it is very beautiful” (167). Tagore himself was sensitive to the patronizing tone in all these enthusiastic plaudits. As for example, he writes to Kshitimohan Sen on 20 June 1912, from London: “My work has been received with great enthusiasm here, so much so that I can barely take it all in. I feel that they expect nothing much from our part of the world, and that is why they are so overwhelmed” (*My Life* 162).

However, in associating Yeats with Orientalism, we should keep in mind that his position in the cultural politics of British imperialism is a highly complex and ambiguous one. It is true that he half-consciously confirms the colonial binaries in his representation of Tagore. Yet, unlike a typical Orientalist writer, he would not unequivocally privilege European materialism or the violently masculine political activism, whether British colonialist or Irish nationalist. And if he has romanticized Tagore as a timeless “voice,” against the alienating, war-ridden modern history, he also does the same to his favorite poet-visionary William Blake: “we go for a like voice to St Francis and to William Blake
who have seemed so alien in our violent history” (*Later Essays* 169). Given his antipathy for the political, propagandist writings, which he found almost inevitable in the West, particularly in Ireland, he sounds genuine in his praise: “These *Gitanjali* lyrics . . . display in their thought a world I have dreamed of all my life long. The work of a supreme culture, they yet appear as much the growth of the common soil as the grass and the rushes” (*Later Essays* 167).

The language and tone here are strikingly similar to that of the Irish Revivalist project. Because of their Revivalist orientations, Yeats and J. M. Synge often felt indebted to the rural settings and subject-matter. The “town life,” holds Yeats, “is the spirit which is sterile when it is not married to nature,” as the “folk life” and “the country life” are (qtd. in Nolan 23). Similarly, in his preface to *The Playboy of the Western World*, Synge distinguishes himself from “writers where the springtime of the local life has been forgotten, and the harvest is a memory only, and the straw has been turned to bricks” (4). As Foster puts it, for Yeats, “Tagore’s poetry . . . seemed linked, like Synge’s art, to a noble and ancient tradition binding together aristocrat, peasant and poet. Unity of being arose from unity of culture” (*Apprentice* 470). And Yeats later says to Rothenstein that Tagore and his work “pointed a moral that would be valuable to me in Ireland” (qtd. in Foster, *Apprentice* 471).

Nevertheless, even the link Yeats envisions between India and Ireland is anachronistic. As Jelnikar nicely puts it, “Yeats’s utopian vision of Bengal [or Indian culture], which was to fuel his resuscitative ambition for Ireland, did rest on the assumption that Bengal [or India] was at a stage of historical evolution long surpassed by Ireland” (1012). The unifying idea of culture, obsolete for the politically fraught modern
Ireland (or the imperial Britain), is transferred, in Yeats’s construction, to the imaginatively wholesome Bengal of Tagore: “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” (*Later Essays* 167).

Besides representing all these cultural or ideological complexes, Yeats’s construction of Tagore also represents the socio-economic forces active in the production, distribution, publication and consumption of the literary or art work that Bourdieu draws our attention to. If this cultural materialist aspect of Yeats’s contribution to the Western success of Tagore (for good or for ill) is not obvious in Yeats’s “Introduction,” it is revealed in the bulk of letters that Yeats wrote to various people at that time. These letters are worth studying in order to gain some sense of how Yeats tried to fit his version of Tagore in the cultural-imperialist paradigm of the field of restricted production in the early twentieth century Western world. This is evident in Yeats’s negotiation with different “agents” involved in the whole process of production of *Gitanjali* and some other English works of Tagore. Bourdieu analyses the plethora of interconnected relationships operating behind the scene in any act of “restricted production”:

The public meaning of a work in relation to which the author must define himself originates in the process of circulation and consumption dominated by the objective relations between institutions and the agents implicated in the process. The social relations which produce this public meaning are determined by the relative position these agents occupy in the
structure of the field of restricted production. These relations, e.g. between author and publisher, publisher and critic, author and critic, are revealed as the ensemble of relations attendant on the “publication” of the work, that is, its becoming a public object. (118-19)

As we find in Yeats’s letters, he mobilizes these “relations . . . between author and publisher, publisher and critic, author and critic” with admirable dexterity and a keen insight into the complex cultural-political implications involved in this particular case of publishing and promoting Tagore’s works in the West. Finding Tagore, as Yeats wrote to Ernest Rhys on 13 November 1912, “the most abundant & simple imagination I have come across of late years,” he took upon himself the mission to get Tagore published in a respectable (as well as profitable) manner, that is to say, to “consecrate” him. It is interesting to see how, in the following letter to Rothenstein (dated 10 August 1912), Yeats relies heavily on the “large religious public” that the Theosophical society has cultivated in “Indian interests”:

I doubt if you are right to publish [Tagore] through the Indian Society. There [sic] means [sic] of distribution will be inferior to a good publisher & I think any publisher would gladly have taken the book. Properly managed the book might have a very large sale, as the Theosophical society has educated a large religious public into Indian interests. It should lead to other translations from Tagore. I may be mistaken but it would have been well to approach some publisher.

Moreover, the stress in this letter on a good publisher is significant. Yeats, like Bourdieu, seems to be aware that “[t]he art trader is not just the agent who gives the work a
commercial value by bringing it into a market. . . . He is the person who can proclaim the
value of the author he defends . . . and above all ‘invests his prestige’ in the author’s
cause, acting as a ‘symbolic banker’ who offers as security all the symbolic capital he has
accumulated” (Bourdieu 77). Both by writing the “Introduction” and by communicating
with publishing agents like Macmillan, Yeats plays the role of the art critics in “the field
of restricted production” who, according to Bourdieu, “collaborate with the art trader in
the effort of consecration which makes the reputation and, at least in the long term, the
monetary value of works” (78).

After the success of *Gitanjali*, Yeats became interested in Tagore’s prose-works,
particularly in his play *The Post Office*, and wrote to Rothenstein on 6 April 1913, from
Dublin: “I would like to publish at the Cuala Press ‘The Post Office’ if you think there is
no other plan to block the way. I have not yet asked my sister but she always does what I
suggest. It could be published at 7/6 & Tagore would get 15 per cent. After this limited
edition is sold out it could be published by Macmillan in the ordinary way. . . . We are
playing it here shortly.” Here one notes how Yeats used his reputation and consecratory
power over his family press (Cuala Press was founded by Yeats’s sister, Elizabeth Corbet
Yeats) and the Abbey Theatre (where *The Post Office* was soon to be played) to Tagore’s
benefit once again, this time in Dublin. Much as he does in the case of *Gitanjali*, he also
prepares the potential readers and audience by talks on Tagore: he mentions, in his letter,
dated 25 April 1913, to Tagore, that he has “lectured on your work in Dublin a few weeks
ago & had a large &most enthusiastic audience. I read a number of your poems.” After
the launching of *The Post Office* in Dublin in May, Yeats sent *Gitanjali* to Florence Farr
and wrote to her, on 12 June 1913, that “[w]e are to play a play of his [Tagore] at ‘The
Court’ where our players are at this moment.” This is how Yeats manipulated the market in favor of Tagore.

In line with his canonization of Tagore, Yeats also worked hard to get Tagore elected to The Academic Committee of the Royal Society of Literature. A letter to Rothenstein (dated 14 November 1912) reveals Yeats’s efforts to introduce Tagore’s work to various eminent men with some influence in the Committee “like Newbolt, & Sturge Moore, and Gosse or Shaw that I may have a chance of getting Tagore elected. The Academic Committee is really an English Academy of Letters. Almost every man of note in English literature belongs. Election to it is the highest compliment a writer can be paid.” We find another letter, written after ten days (24 November 1912) to Edmund Gosse, where Yeats tried to persuade Gosse by stressing the imperialist significance of electing Tagore:

[I]t would be an imaginative and notable thing for us to elect [Tagore] to our committee. He is the great poet of Bengal though eligible for election because of his English translation of his work alone. I think from an English point of view too it would be a fine thing to do, a piece of wise imperialism for he is worshipped as no poet of Europe is. . . . I believe that if we pay him honour, it will be understood that we honour India also for he is its most famous man today. (emphasis added)

Whether Yeats really endorsed this wise imperialist gesture in paying tribute to Tagore, or merely played an ideological game to serve his purpose of getting Tagore elected is indeed hard to determine. For our purpose, it is enough to note the way Yeats often capitalized on the imperialist logic in publishing, promoting and introducing Tagore.
However, it seems that, by some mistake on the Committee's part, Tagore ultimately did not get elected.

Later Yeats became less and less interested in Tagore's English works as he held that, with a very few exceptions, they rarely contained "any new side of his genius," as he wrote to Macmillan on 14 April 1916. Of the select few was Tagore's half-finished autobiography, the worth of which, again, was evaluated on imperialist grounds. In the letter to Macmillan & Co., mentioned above, Yeats further writes:

I beleive [sic] that Tagore would have been wiser to have published his "Autobiography" in English before publishing new verse. . . . If that book is as good as I hope, it would I beleive [sic] be of great value to his reputation if published in full in English. *It is important that we should again see him as an Oriental personality speaking to his own people & once more understand that these poems in English are translations of poems which have very intricate and precise form in his own language.*

(emphasis added)

This letter has significant cultural political implications. On the one hand, it reflects Yeats's genuine feeling that Tagore should be understood in his own cultural context, something to which his autobiography might introduce the West. Yeats's understanding of the value of Tagore's autobiography also adumbrates his future preoccupation with autobiographical works of Purohit Swami and his Master. On the other, the idea of "again see[ing] him as an Oriental personality speaking to his own people," not to mention the exotic value attached to it, suggests how Yeats's ideological construction of Tagore was
motivated, his subjective predilections apart, by the Orientalist mindset prevalent in the Western discourse of literary production.

Tagore’s position in the Western literary world is thus a highly complex and intercultural one. He was a Bengali writer from colonized India publishing the translated versions of some of his own writings in English, the colonizer’s language. He was conscious, as he writes in a letter to Robert Bridges, dated 8 July 1914, that, unlike the West, in India, “there is no such world as a literary world where poets are given a conventional value by appraisers expert in their trade” (*My Life* 168). That is why, it seems, he trusted his Western patrons—Yeats, Rothenstein and others—with his image in the West. But, being a prolific writer in his own language, he could not have completely surrendered his creator’s ego—as Purohit Swami would later do more easily—on a few points, the most important of which was perhaps the issue of translation. While on the one hand, he was aware of the limitations of his own English in translating his works from their original Bengali form, on the other, he had reservations about getting his works translated by somebody else.

And it is this language issue which, more importantly than any other factors, seems to be responsible for the waning of Yeats’s interest in Tagore. After *Gitanjali*, in *The Post Office* phase, Yeats wrote to Rothenstein, on December 1, 1912, about Tagore’s play: “It wants careful revision of the translation for the monotony of sentences, caused by Tagores [sic] writing in a tongue not his native tongue is more ruinous in drama, where there must be the vitality of speach [sic], than in spiritual meditation.” Careful observations like this one, when Tagore was publishing under Yeats’s supervision, became rarer as Tagore started to spin out of Yeats’s patronage in the post-Nobel Prize
period. For example, in another letter to Rothenstein written probably on 23 April 1917, Yeats finds it a "trouble . . . that [Tagore] is now writing in English & not in Bengali. In English he has few ideas because the language does not inspire him." Further on, on 27 April 1924, Yeats writes to Edward Thompson: "Tagore spoilt his own market in England, he should have published no more verse in translation after the three first volumes which were revised, ‘The Crescent Moon’ by Sturge Moore, ‘Gitanjali’ and ‘The Gardener’ by myself."

Tagore, on his part, became equally inconstant in his reaction to his Western fame and in his gratitude to Yeats and Rothenstein (among others), in a retrospective critical self-awareness of his complicity in the whole affair. His ambivalence is encapsulated in the following letter to Rothenstein, dated 26 November 1932, which deserves quoting at length:

But even then [during the Gitanjali boom in the West] I had no doubt that it was not the language but the earnest feeling expressed in a simple manner which touched their hearts. That was enough for a foreigner and the unstinted praise offered to me by those renowned critics was a great deal more than I could ever expect. Then came those delightful days when I worked with Yeats and I am sure the magic of his pen helped my English to attain some quality of permanence. It was not at all necessary for my own reputation that I should find my place in the history of your literature. It was an accident for which you were also responsible and possibly most of all was Yeats. But yet sometimes I feel almost ashamed that I, whose undoubted claim has been recognized by my countrymen to a sovereignty
in our own world of letters, should not have waited till it was discovered by the outside world in its own true majesty and environment, that I should ever go out of my own way to court the attention of others having their own language for their enjoyment and use. At least it is never the function of a poet to personally help in the transportation of his poems to an alien form and atmosphere, and be responsible for any unseemly risk that may happen to them. However, you must own that you alone were to blame for this and not myself. To the end of my days, I should have felt happy and contented to think that the translations I did were merely for private recreation and never for public display if you did not bring them before your readers. Please thank Yeats once again on my behalf for the help which he rendered to my poems in their perilous adventure of a foreign reincarnation and assure him that I at least never underrate the value of his literary comradeship. Latterly I have written and published both prose and poetry in English, mostly translations, unaided by any friendly help, but this again I have done in order to express my ideas, not for gaining any reputation for my mastery in the use of a language which can never be mine. (My Life 171)

This interim phase of Yeats’s interest in India is thus one of high significance for its transnational implications which, given the interplay between England, the British India, and the colonial Ireland, were much more complex than those of a simple post-colonial or global-cosmopolitan transnationalism.
Mystery Unveiled: Yeats’s Indian Monk

“Dr. W. B. Yeats said he wanted from me a ‘concrete life, not an abstract philosophy,’” writes Shri Purohit Swami in his “Acknowledgements” of An Indian Monk: His Life and Adventure (vii). And Yeats reports in his “Introduction” to the same book that, upon hearing the lived experiences of the Swami as a man and a monk, he told him: “The ideas of India have been expounded again and again, nor do we lack ideas of our own; discussion has been exhausted, but we lack experience. Write what you have just told us; keep out all philosophy, unless it interprets something seen or done” (Later Essays 131). One notes here a significant evolution in Yeats’s construction of India: his interest seems to have shifted from philosophy to the importance of original experience. This evolution does not mark, however, a complete shift, as he had always valued experience, and one remembers in this connection his conflicts with the Theosophical Society and Russell over the issue of abstraction or the reality of visionary experiences. But this is the first time he came across an Indian monk with a practical experience of ascetic life which was very different from the philosophical or poetic predispositions of Chatterjee or Tagore. In other words, the Swami, with his life of spiritual adventure lived as per the orthodox Indian creeds, exposed Yeats to the applied philosophy of India. In the Swami’s own words, “The greatness of yoga lies in application to life” (Indian Monk 134).

Yeats’s final “infatuation” with an Indian personality was also the most fruitful one. During the extended European tour of the Swami in the 1930s, Yeats not only helped the Swami translate and publish his own autobiography, that of his spiritual
Master, Bhagwan Shri Hamsa, and *Aphorisms of Yoga*, by Bhagwan Shree Patanjali; he also collaborated with the Swami to translate the classic Indian text *The Upanishads*. Each of these books was crowned with an “Introduction” by Yeats. In a letter to T. S. Eliot on August 1934, Yeats expresses his awareness of the value of “a scholourly [*sic*] introduction by a learned orientalist” for the Swami’s work. What is more, in terms of Yeats’s own cultural-political construction of India, too, one notes a significant change or evolution of thought in this final phase. As Margaret Mills Harper nicely puts it, “replac[ing] the romantic world-weariness of the first” phase of his interest in “Indian mysticism,” “Yeats’s friendship and collaboration with Shree Purohit Swami . . . re-established India in his mind as the location of truths that allowed escape from modern, materialistic, and scientific formulations of reality” (161). I, however, think that there is more than a mere modernist “escape” in Yeats’s construction of India in the 1930s. As I will argue, in the introductory essays of this phase, Yeats seems to attempt an alternative representation of India to that of imperialist or Orientalist writings. Although, like his earlier works on Indian themes, these essays subscribe to Orientalist generalizations and colonialist stereotypes, attempts are also made to render a direct, unmediated representation of Indian experiences, and, more interestingly, to subvert or revise the European/Indian polarity they draw so profusely upon. In other words, while Yeats in the 1930s was not completely free from the Us/Them polarity, he did not use it in the quasi-Orientalist way.

Yeats introduces the Swami in a way that sharply distinguishes him from European theologians and, while comparing his book to Tagore’s, stresses that the Swami, unlike his predecessor, has come “to interpret the religious life of India”: 
I wrote an introduction to the beautiful *Gitanjali* of Tagore, and now, twenty years afterwards, draw attention to a book that may prove of comparable importance. A little more than a year ago I met its author, but lately arrived in Europe, at Mr Sturge Moore’s house. He had been sent by his Master, or spiritual director, that he might interpret the religious life of India, but had no fixed plan. Perhaps he should publish his poems, perhaps, like Vivekananda, go to America. He had gone to Rome thinking it was but courteous to pay his respects to the Holy Father, but though the Abbots of the most orthodox Hindu Shrines had given him their blessing, and “the organsier of the Bharat-Dharma Mahamandal . . . a general letter of introduction”, he was not received. Then he had come to England and called upon the Poet Laureate [John Masefield], who entertained him. He is a man of fifty, broken in health by the austerities of his religious life; he must have been a stalwart man and he is still handsome. He makes one think of some Catholic theologian who has lived in the best society, confessed people out of Henry James’ novels, had some position at Court where he could engage the most absorbed attention without raising his voice, but that is only at first sight. He is something much simpler, more childlike and ancient. (*Later Essays* 130)

Yeats’s construction of the image of the Swami here is very interesting. Connecting the Swami with the by then popular figures in the West from India, Tagore and Swami Vivekananda, he distinguishes him from the Catholic theologians. He puts emphasis on the fact that, despite being a monk himself, the Swami was not accepted by the Roman
Catholic orthodoxy, but was entertained by the English Poet Laureate John Masefield. Echoing his introduction of Tagore, here, too, he stresses the qualities in the Swami of being “simpler, more childlike and ancient” than the European theologians. A little later, he identifies this simplicity or spontaneity as essentially Asiatic, and unambiguously puts it in a privileged position: “This care for the spontaneity of the soul seems to me Asia at its finest and where it is most different from Europe, the explanation perhaps why it has confronted our moral earnestness and our control of Nature with its asceticism and its courtesy” (*Later Essays* 131). Although here as well as in his other writings on the Swami and his Master, Yeats still draws upon the stereotypical ideas of India, he also tries to come up with an ideologically neutral alternative to the mainstream imperialist representation of the colonized world.

Whereas in the Orientalist discourse, as Said puts it, “Orientals, like housewives, were confined to silence and to unlimited enriching production” (“Orientalism Reconsidered” 12), Yeats here is trying hard to get the Swami to write about his first-hand experiences, and the “enriching production” that ensues from the Yeats-Swami encounter is of a truly collaborative nature—the Swami writing and/or translating his own as well as his Master’s spiritual adventures, Yeats helping him translate, advising, writing introductions, looking after the publication, production, and so on. It is very different from the Orientalist representations where a European writes about his own experience and/or interpretation of the Oriental cultures from a vantage point that is almost inevitably Eurocentric. Even in his own “introductions” to the Swami and his Master’s work, Yeats uses more narrative and fewer descriptive or analytical details than in his Tagore “Introduction.” His preference in both his introductory essays and the
Swami’s writings was for an anecdotal, as opposed to interpretive, style. And the descriptions and analyses, when they are used, are based on his painstaking reviews of the Swami’s books as well as other Indian texts, and also his in-person or epistolary exchanges with the Swami. As he acknowledges in a postscript at the end of the “Introduction to The Holy Mountain,” “I have made much use during the writing of this essay of Shri Purohit Swami’s An Indian Monk (Macmillan), of his unpublished translation of the Yoga-Sutras of Patanjali, and of the standard translation of the same work published by Harvard University. I thank Shri Purohit Swami for answering many questions” (Later Essays 155).

In constructing the image of the Swami, Yeats stresses the European/Asiatic binary with much more confidence and deliberation than in the case of Tagore. And, unlike the ambiguity of the Gitanjali phase with regard to this and similar colonial binaries, there are moments in these essays when he seems to use them not to validate, but almost to subvert, the Orientalist stereotypes. For example, seemingly stressing the “radical difference” between the Occident and the Orient in saying “East and West seem each other’s contraries,” he extends it in a way that is radically different from the Orientalist categorization where the East is always given the secondary position as a recipient of and a borrower from the Western beneficiaries. Yeats, on the contrary, stresses that the exchange is mutual:

the East so independent spiritually, so ready to submit to the conqueror;
the West independent politically, so ready to submit to its Church. The West impregnated an East full of spiritual turbulence, and that turbulence brought forth a child Western in complexion and in feature. Since the
Renaissance, literature, science and the fine arts have left the Church and sought elsewhere the variety necessary to their existence; perhaps the converse impregnation has begun, the East as male. (*Later Essays* 134)

Yeats’s cultural-political understanding in the excerpt above is highly perceptive. Using the gendered reading of cultures, essential to the colonialist ideology, he subverts it by his reversed essentialist gesture—polemically announcing “the East as male,” impregnating the West with its spiritual independence (rather than spiritual passivity, as the imperialist ideology would have it). He also touches upon a few other important aspects of the colonial encounter of different cultures and, in doing so, adumbrates many of the key issues of the post-colonial or post-structuralist discourse. Foreshadowing the title of Frantz Fanon’s polemical book *Black Skin White Mask* as well as Homi K. Bhabha’s theories of hybridity and mimicry, Yeats talks about the Western impregnation of the East resulting in “a child Western in complexion and in feature.” One thinks of the Theosophical Society and the Brahmo Samaj of India, both of which, in effect, dealt with a hybridized Indian philosophy, “Western in complexion and in feature.” It is significant that Yeats in his “Introduction” to *Gitanjali* or in his letters of that period was remarkably silent with regard to the Brahmo Samaj, and we have seen his reservations about the abstract, intellectual—as well as essentially conflationist—thrust of the Theosophical Society.

The Swami, on the contrary, gratified Yeats’s thirst for a “pure” Indian experience, for a living philosophy, with his “plain and simple” wisdom. Yeats recommends *An Indian Monk* and *The Holy Mountain* to Frank Pearce Sturm in a letter dated 7 January 1935, saying: “No theosophy, I assure you, in either book. He is a true
Indian saint and monk, having upon his forehead the Indian stigmata (the little mound that is probably on the forehead of your Buddha).” The following words of the Swami, minus the ascetic craving for renunciatory self-control, could very well have been Yeats’s:

I wandered from place to place in search of light. I read many books on religion and yoga. . . . Study only made me more intellectual. My need was not for knowledge, but for wisdom. Learning could not give me control. My soul was sick and was not helped by medicine administered to the intellect, since they were two separate things. I must prescribe for my soul; success in self-control, that would cure it. This plain and simple philosophy appealed to me. (Indian Monk 63)

This distinction between abstract intellectual exercise and concrete spiritual experience was crucial to Yeats, too. As for example, in a letter to George Russell (AE), dated 29 October 1931, Yeats was full of superlative praise about the upcoming An Indian Monk:

It is the first time a man who has been wandering nine years with a begging bowl after seven years meditation under a master, has written his life. . . . It will be a great thing if you can get this man to write his experience, the concrete events of his life. . . . He has lived with his idea under the open heavens & amidst the most ancient beliefs of mankind. Once the experience is recorded in all its simplicity and detail, his ideas will be full of meaning, until this is done what is it but one idea the more?

The notion of living with one’s idea makes all the difference in Yeats’s understanding of Indian spirituality and its difference from the Western. Far from being mysteriously
enigmatic, it is very much livable and analyzable. As the Swami reports, his Master told him “that real mysticism was not mystery, but mystery unveiled, and once a mystery is unveiled it no longer remains a mystery but is plain and simple knowledge” (Indian Monk 94).

Expanding the idea of the different religious or spiritual attitudes of the East and the West, Yeats discusses the wider cultural ramifications of these differences. Drawing upon the Indian idea of reincarnation Mohini Chatterjee first introduced him to, he tries to analyze, in a cultural-relativist gesture, the differing moral and legal attitudes of the East and the West:

Our moral indignation, our uniform law, perhaps even our public spirit, may come from the Christian conviction that the soul has but one life to find or lose salvation in: the Asiatic courtesy from the conviction that there are many lives. There are Indian courtesans that meditate many hours a day awaiting without sense of sin their moment, perhaps many lives hence, to leave man for God. For the present they are efficient courtesans. Ascetics, as this book tells, have lived in their houses and received pilgrims there. Kings, princes, beggars, soldiers, courtesans and the fool by the wayside are equal to the eye of sanctity, for everybody’s road is different, everybody awaits his moment. (Later Essays 136-37)

Yeats’s imaginative sensibility cannot but feel drawn to this spiritual freedom enjoyed by the Indian culture: “The English hymn-writer, writing not as himself but as the congregation, is a rhetorician; but the Indian convention, founded upon the most poignant personal emotion, should make poets” (Later Essays 135). In An Indian Monk, Purohit
Swami also suggests the unique non-congregational, if not non-conformist, religious experience in India. Reflecting on Lord Dattatreya, the form of God he worships, the Swami explains the essential monotheism of India, despite the apparently polytheistic manifestations of divinity:

The various gods in India have their special attributes in addition to the attributes of divine perfection. Every man is free to worship the god who suits his individual psychology, and that is for him the most perfect way of approaching divinity. Some lay more stress on one divine form, some on another, but when they realise one they realise all, though they may still prefer to contemplate the god who helped them to realisation. I was to find out the unity of all gods by the help of Lord Dattatreya, on whom ever since my attention has rested. (58)

Such spiritual openness, such individual freedom to choose one's deity is radically different from both the monotheistic Christianity (as well as its "Anglo-Indian" offshoots like the Brahmo Samaj) and the polytheistic paganism.

However, despite distinguishing the Indian religious freedom from the essentially conformist nature of modern-day Christianity, Yeats holds that such spiritual openness prevailed in the early Christian or Byzantine civilization. He was attracted to the Byzantine sages and their form of mysticism before meeting his Indian monk. Written in 1927, a few years before his encounter with the Swami, "Sailing to Byzantium" captures Yeats's artistic aspiration toward the "Unity of Being" that the Indian saints gain through the religious exercises:
That is no country for old men. The young
In one another’s arms, birds in the trees,
—Those dying generations—at their song,
The salmon-falls, the mackerel-crowded seas,
Fish, flesh, or fowl, commend all summer long
Whatever is begotten, born, and dies.
Caught in that sensual music all neglect
Monuments of unageing intellect. (Collected Poems 1-8)

The birds, beasts and men in this poem are equally “caught in [the] sensual music,” and what is idealized in their stead is “the artifice of eternity,” represented by the Byzantine “sages standing in God’s holy fire”:

O sages standing in God’s holy fire
As in the gold mosaic of a wall,
Come from the holy fire, perne in a gyre,
And be the singing-masters of my soul.
Consume my heart away; sick with desire
And fastened to a dying animal
It knows not what it is; and gather me
Into the artifice of eternity. (Collected Poems 17-24)

Beautiful though it is, the imaginative poignancy of this soulful poetic urge betrays an awareness that the ideal that the poem represents is almost impossible to realize in the contemporary Western context. But what the Swami represented was a living spiritual tradition: “he has what we have not, though we once had it—heroic ecstatic passion
prolonged through years, through many vicissitudes” (emphasis added, *Later Essays* 137).

Therefore, while comparing the “form of prayer or mental discipline” described by the Swami to that of the ancient “Byzantine mystical theologians,” coming down to the “modern Russian pilgrim[s] of their school,” Yeats finds a basic difference between them or their attitudes to life:

[T]he Russian’s prayer implies original sin, that of the Indian asks for an inspired intellect; and this unlikeness is fundamental, the source perhaps of all other differences. The Russian, like most European mystics, distrusts visions though he admits their reality, seems indifferent to Nature, may perhaps dread it like Saint Bernard, who passed the Italian Lakes with averted eyes. The Indian, upon the other hand, approaches God through a vision, speaks continually of the beauty and terror of the great mountains, interrupts his prayer to listen to the songs of the birds, remembers with delight the nightingale that disturbed his meditation by alighting upon his head and singing there, recalls after many years the whiteness of a sheet, the softness of a pillow, the gold embroidery upon a shoe. These things are indeed part of the “splendour of that Being”. The first four Christian centuries shared his thought; Byzantine theologians that named their great church “The Holy Wisdom” sang it; so, too, did those Irish monks who made innumerable poems about bird and beast, and spread the doctrine that Christ was the most beautiful of men. (*Later Essays* 133)
The image of the meditating Indian monk with nightingales alighting upon his head
reminds one of the similar images of the gods in “Anashuya and Vijaya” and that of
Tagore’s brother. But while in the earlier cases, particularly in the early Indian poetry,
there is a sense of dreamy mystery attached to the Indian images, in the quotation above,
the Indian monk epitomizes a living wisdom that does not distinguish between beauty
and terror, sense and spirit, Nature and God. This unifying vision is comparable only to
that of the early Christian or “Byzantine theologians,” or the ancient Irish monks, but not
their modern descendants, preoccupied with the sinfulness of man.

This difference between the Eastern and Western traditions is treated symbolically
in the same essay. Talking about the “little round lump on the centre of the forehead” of
“[c]ertain Indian, Chinese and Japanese representations of the Buddha, and of other
Divine beings,” Yeats finds that “[i]t corresponds to the wounds made as though by nails
upon the hands and feet of some Christian saint.” But, despite this correspondence, notes
Yeats, “the symbolism differs”: “The wounds signify God’s sacrifice for man . . . [while]
that round mark the third eye, no physical organ but the mind’s direct apprehension of the
truth, above all antinomies, as the mark itself is above eyes, ears, nostrils, in their duality”
(Later Essays 137). This symbolic analysis evinces Yeats’s keen understanding of the
essential difference between the dialectical or binarist nature of the Western culture and a
more synthetic, non-dualistic or pluralistic tendency of the Indian culture.

It is also important to note that, echoing the “unageing intellect” of “Sailing to
Byzantium,” the Swami’s narrative exposes Yeats to a quasi-mystical religious
experience that, at the same time, appeals to the intellect. That is why, although he
compares An Indian Monk to Lady Gregory’s collection of Visions and Beliefs, both of
which provide an alternative to the “blank abstraction” of “an Irish Protestant point of view,” he also distinguishes between them. While in the “eccentric,” “alien” experiences of *Visions and Beliefs*, “the explanatory intellect had disappeared,” in Purohit Swami’s description of his spiritual endeavors he claims to have found “all I wanted”—“a philosophy that satisfied the intellect” (*Later Essays* 132). Here one notes how Yeats imagines the Indian spiritual discipline as essentially “mental” in nature, and distinguishes it from the “eccentric” exoticism of the Irish folk tradition.

It might seem contradictory that, despite denigrating the intellectual, Yeats here praises the “intellect.” However, we should note that in Yeats’s use, the intellectual is often synonymous with the abstract and the theoretical, which is very different from the concrete religious, mystic or philosophical experiences amenable to the “explanatory intellect.” It is also possible to argue that Yeats here is also talking about his own spiritual experimentations put together in *A Vision*, where also he puts emphasis on the value of the mental or the intellectual.

Yeats’s “Introduction” to *The Holy Mountain* (1934), written by Bhagwan Shri Hamsa, the spiritual guru of the Swami, and translated by the latter, centers around the exotic image of Kailas or Mount Meru, in which “a dozen races find the birth-place of their Gods and of themselves,” and which “[t]housands of Hindu, Tibetan and Chinese pilgrims, Vedantin, or Buddhist, or of some older faith have encircled” (emphasis added, *Later Essays* 144). Apparently falling back on the same anachronistic parallelism of the Western past and the Indian present as in the *Gitanjali* “Introduction,” he writes: “We too have learnt from Dante to imagine our Eden, or Earthly Paradise, upon a mountain, penitential rings upon the slope” (*Later Essays* 144). What is more, imagining the Indians
to have been outside time and history in their preoccupation with the inner spiritual experience, he almost seems to deny the Indians a civilization:

Indifferent to history, India delighted in vast periods, which solemnised the mind, seeming to unite it to the ageless Heavens. . . . Preoccupied with the seeds of action, discoverable by those who have rejected all that is not themselves, he [the Indian] left to Europe the study and creation of civilisation. This he could do, perhaps because the villages that nurtured his childhood were subject to no change but that of the seasons—*their life, as it were, the symbolical syntax wherein we may write the History of the World*. (emphasis added, *Later Essays* 154)

As I have argued in the previous chapter, too, there is no denying that statements like this seem to consolidate the European ethnocentrism by suggesting that the Indians were still living in pre-civilized conditions, and, therefore, deserved to be subsumed under the History of the World written by the Europeans.

However, Yeats seems to have come a long way from the “wise imperialist” stance of the Tagore phase. And, given the interventions of the World War and the Easter Rising in Ireland, among so much else, it would be unfair to come to any sweeping conclusion about Yeats’s construction of an India without history and civilization without at the same time bringing his current opinion about the European history and civilization into consideration. In the poem “The Second Coming,” written more than a decade earlier in 1919, Yeats uses his theory of the gyre-like movement of the history of civilizations to suggest that the two thousand years of Christian civilization have come to a moment of reversal when a brutal force will overtake the force of love and divinity:
[T]wenty centuries of stony sleep
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born? (Collected Poems 19-22)

In a letter written to Ethel Mannin on 6 April 1936, Yeats refers to this poem to prove that he has “not been silent” about the contemporary political crisis in the West, but “used the only vehicle I possess – verse.” He does not want to see himself as a “politician . . . even in Ireland” any more, as, with his mature understanding of reality, his “horror of the cruelty of governments grows greater.” Denouncing all forms of governments, he holds that “Communist, Fascist, Nationalist, Clerical, anti-clerical are all responsible according to the number of their victims.” He pessimistically concludes the letter by quoting from the poem: “I am not callous, every nerve trembles with horror at what is happening in Europe ‘the ceremony of innocence is d[r]owned.” It is against such a bleak and decadent vision of the Western civilization that we should evaluate Yeats’s idealized construction of India.

With its theme of the rise and fall of civilization, “The Second Coming” is comparable to the sonnet “Meru” (1935). Significantly, in its listing of civilizations, “Meru” does not include the Christian civilization that “The Second Coming” deals with so exclusively. Written at about the same time as “Introduction to The Holy Mountain,” this poem is very different from the earlier poem both in perspective and in tone:

Civilisation is hooped together, brought
Under a rule, under the semblance of peace
By manifold illusion; but man’s life is thought,
And he, despite his terror, cannot cease
Ravening through century after century,
Ravening, raging, and uprooting that he may come
Into the desolation of reality:
Egypt and Greece, good-bye, and good-bye, Rome!
Hermits upon Mount Meru or Everest,
Caverned in night under the drifted snow,
Or where that snow and winter’s dreadful blast
Beat down upon their naked bodies, know
That day bring round the night, that before dawn
His glory and his monuments are gone. (Collected Poems 1-14)

Echoing the “Introduction to The Holy Mountain” in its central image, “Hermits upon Mount Meru or Everest,” the poem’s tone here is that of a detached observer of the rise and fall of civilization. As I have already noted, in Yeats’s cataloguing of the Western civilizations, there is no mention of Christian civilization. Only the pre-Christian (and hence pre-modern) Western civilizations are mentioned, all of which are shown to be equally subjected to the ultimate, inevitable destruction. The fall of civilizations is treated as a law of nature. In “The Second Coming,” however, the fall of Christian civilization, for all the sense of inevitability attached to it by the image of the gyre, seems to have been caused by the action of man. The lack of direct references to Western history here does not preclude one from reading in the poem the implication of nationalist histories of the West. Lines like “The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere / The ceremony of innocence is drowned” (Collected Poems 5-6) bring to mind the similar images in
poems like "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen," referring more directly to the decadent nationalist history of Europe: "a drunken soldiery / Can leave the mother, murdered at her door, / To crawl in her own blood, and go scot-free" (Collected Poems 26-28).

Unlike this drunken soldiery and this drowning of innocence, characteristic of the contemporary Western civilization, the hermits upon Mount Meru in the sonnet represent an enlightened simplicity, which is very different from the idyllic innocence or the prelapsarian simplicity of the early Indian poetry. With the detached enlightened vision of the \textit{rishis} upon Mount Meru, as it were, the poetic persona of the sonnet observes the inexorable motions of the eternal wheel of Time. This Time, not national or civilizational, is analogous to the great ages of the Indian faith, described in the "Introduction to \textit{The Holy Mountain}": "The year of twelve or thirteen months that constitutes a single lifetime was thought of as a day or night in a still greater year, and that year divided in its turn into months, and so on until we reach some greatest year" (Later Essays 154).

However, because of his glorification of the great years of Indian theology, Yeats should not perhaps be seen as idealistically constructing a timeless India without history and civilization. Rather, in placing the spiritual India above the antithetical history of the Western civilization, he seems to be placing India (or the East in general) outside what Said calls the "homogenising and incorporating world historical scheme" of the Eurocentric historicism, which was both a legacy and "one of [the] epistemological foundations" of Orientalism ("Orientalism Reconsidered" 10-11). A few times in his essays and letters of this period, Yeats suggests that the Hegelian dialectics would not appeal to the Indian. And the hermits of "Meru" seem to have reached beyond the Hegelian -(and, for that matter, world-historical) antimonies.\textsuperscript{6}
Moreover, for all his admiration of the transcendental vision, the ancient faith of the hermits upon the Himalayas with their “naked bodies,” Yeats did not see them as living in a pre-historic world. As we have also seen in his “Introduction” to *An Indian Monk*, what seems to be significant for Yeats is not the “older faith” so much as the idea that it was still being practised by the Indian sages like Bhagwan Shri Hamsa, Purohit Swami, and a myriad other sages they come across on their pilgrimages. Besides, Yeats must have found the master-disciple tradition of India very convincing in terms of the transference of the spiritual energy and tradition from one human being another, from one generation to the next. He tells us how, despite “inherit[ing] from his Maratha fathers the worship of Dattatreya, the first Yogi, spiritual Father of all Yogis since, or, as we would say, their patron saint,” the Swami was desperately looking for a living spiritual model: “He had seen [Dattatreya] in his dreams, but such knowledge is insufficient; dream words are few and hard to understand; he needed for guide some man who could point out from personal experience what meditations enrich the waking mind” (*Later Essays* 140).

Such transmission of spiritual experience is often executed through the medium of the body, too. This mystical soul-body union, holds Yeats, is rare in the Western tradition, but natural in the Indian. In Indian religious experiences, the physical and the spiritual, like so much else, transcend their oppositional characteristics. One of the few episodes Yeats describes in “Introduction to *The Holy Mountain*” symbolizes for him “an alliance between body and soul our theology rejects”:

A certain beautiful married woman at the age of twenty had, with her husband’s consent, become a pilgrim. After wandering from Himalayan shrine to shrine for many years, she had found a home in a ruined temple
at Brahmavarta. Some called her the mad woman, and some, because of the cotton mat that covered her loins, “the lady of the mat”. She had but two possessions, that cotton mat and her lute. Shri Natekar Swami’s [Bhagwan Shri Hamsa] father went on pilgrimage to Brahmavarta with his son, then but a child. Father and son visited the Lady of the Mat. The child climbed on to her knees. She said, “Leave him with me; I will take care of him.” The father did not dare to disobey, but was alarmed because she had no food but a daily piece of bread brought her by a water-carrier. When he returned next day with food, the child would not touch it, because the Saint had fed him from her breast. She fed him for a fortnight, then gave him back to his father, saying: “He will know when a grown man what I have done for him.” (Later Essays 141)

Although the life of an Indian ascetic is based on renunciatory principles, it is often through body that body is conquered. Talking about the highest stages of Yoga, Yeats writes,

If [an ascetic] finds it impossible at once to transform sexual into spiritual desire, he may beseech the God to come as a woman. The God may send some strange woman as his emblem, but should he come himself, the ascetic wakes at dawn to find his empty bed fragrant with some temple incense, or patches of saffron paste upon his breast; but, whether the God send or come, every need soon fades, except that for unity with God.

(Later Essays 149)
One might argue that Yeats is conflating the Tantric with the Vedantic system in such digressions about the transcendental soul-body union. Having read Sir John Woodroffe’s translation of the Tantric texts since 1914, Yeats, in the 1930s, was preoccupied with this school of Indian philosophy, too (Foster, *Arch-Poet* 537). “[T]he Tantric system,” in the words of Foster, “emphasized the mystical and symbolic use of sex, through the transfiguring power of desire and the possibility of externally realizing ecstasy.” Foster further observes that “these ideas had found their way into WBY’s recent changes to *A Vision* (where both the Swami and Bhagwan Shri Hamsa were also belatedly inserted into the Great Wheel)” (*Arch-Poet* 537). However, Yeats was so deeply moved by the ascetic lives of the Swami and his Master that he himself tried to experience the taste of renunciation. A letter to the Swami, dated 21 March 1937, proves revealing in this regard:

> Please tell him [Shri Hamsa] of the operation I went through in London & say that though it revived my creative power it revived also sexual desire & that in all likelihood [sic] will last me until I die. I believe that if I repressed that for any long period I would break down under the strain as did the great Ruskin. I am sorry to be kept from what might have brought me wisdom.

Apart from having a firmer grasp of Indian philosophy and religion than in the case of Chatterjee or Tagore, Yeats in this phase was also more alert to the exacerbating British imperialist policies in India. He even tries to accommodate the issue in his “Introduction to *The Holy Mountain*.” For example, he relates to us how, on a train journey during their pilgrimage, “[a] Europeanised Indian had denounced him [Shri
Hamsa] for wearing silk and travelling first class, and all monks and pilgrims for bringing discredit upon India by their superstitions and idleness.” This event, for Yeats, represented the “Europeanised India England has created with a higher education, which is always conducted in the English language” (Later Essays 142-43). In many of his letters of the time, too, Yeats addresses the issue of the imposition of English language in India. In a letter to Rothenstein, dated 9 September 1933, Yeats writes about an Indian poet writing in English, possibly recommended to him by Rothenstein. While sending back the poems as he thinks they give the impression of being written by someone “writing in a language in which he does not think,” Yeats blames the imperialist language policy of England: “When England insisted in all the higher education of the Indians being carried out in English she did her greatest wrong to India, making a stately people clownish, putting indignity into their very soul. Probably your friend has talent, may even make a name for himself, if he will write in the language that he learnt in childhood.”

Such a rounded understanding of the “Other” culture distinguishes Yeats from many around him. He obliquely refers to the cultural prejudice against India in Europe in a letter to Olivia Shakespear written on 21 February 1933. Acknowledging that he has “learned a good deal from the Swami who suddenly makes all wisdom if you ask him the right question,” Yeats thinks that the upcoming American edition of the Swami’s book should “be almost a best seller [sic] there, where there is no Anti-Indian prejudice.” In another letter, addressed to George Yeats, dated 16 January 1936, Yeats refers to an event of racial prejudice directed at the Swami. On Yeats’s trip to Majorca with the Swami and Gwyneth Foden, the three of them lived in a hotel where an “Englishman, who goes to a distant bathroom rather [than] share one with Swami got the manager to ask her [Mrs.
Foden] to ask the Swami to use the distant bathroom.” Even George Yeats was not happy with Yeats’s association with the Swami and “was sceptical about the time and effort spent lavishly on rewriting these soporific texts” (Foster, Arch-Poet 462). Referring to her statements about the Yeats-Swami collaboration on The Upanishads in Majorca, Foster writes that “[t]he collaborative murmurings of WBY and the Swami were punctuated by the flatulence of the holy man, who ate great quantities of rice” (Arch-Poet 541).

Such ironic portrayals of the Swami occur frequently in Foster’s book. Here is Foster again on the Swami: “The Swami apparently epitomized an integrated and distinctly unpuritan life, where spirituality was fused with a bantering humour, physical enjoyment, good looks, a spontaneous, extravagant manner, and a cultivated attractiveness to women” (Arch-Poet 537). Foster further draws upon Sturge Moore’s warning to Yeats, after Moore and the Swami had parted over some issue of money, that the Swami “wants to be the Vivekananda of this country. . . . This desire . . . makes him to some degree resemble the many poets who want to be Tagore,” and emphatically concludes that “[t]he Swami did indeed nurture literary ambitions: starting out as a poet, he had tried to get to England in Tagore’s wake in 1913 and was inordinately proud of his recent translation of the Gita” (537). Moreover, the following acerbic words of Foster seem to be unduly judgmental on the Swami: “the Swami, realizing that WBY could help him more than Sturge Moore, tried to . . . associate his autobiography with the man who had made Tagore’s name in the West” (435).

Since Foster draws so much upon Sturge Moore’s words in his arguments against the Swami, I would like to read what Moore wrote to Yeats earlier regarding the Swami.
With a letter to George Russell (AE), dated 29 October 1931, Yeats encloses the following letter of Moore that betrays Moore’s ambivalence about the Swami. While thinking that, in the draft of his autobiography, the Swami “has left out or hardly alluded to the most? [sic] enthralling incidents and puts in an amount of pious self congratulation and complacency with India in the most empty and abstract terms as is laughable,” Moore nonetheless holds that

he has lived an astonishing life. . . . He is a really sweet and loveable man and quite humble for all his personal and national self-complacency. I like him more every time I meet him. . . . He eats nothing but milk fruit and biscuits and not much? [sic] else and needs a lot of time for his religious exercises . . . he is politeness itself . . . and quite able to hear hard facts even when they are not in his favour.

It is obvious that Moore must have changed his mind about the Swami after the quarrel between them. Yet the letter above tells us a lot about Foster’s representation of the Swami. It is one thing to “objectively” cite somebody’s opinion about somebody, and quite another to construct a derogatory image of someone, based on selective data of other people’s opinion. The cumulative impression from all of Foster’s references to the Swami is that of a fawning, opportunist and cunning Indian monk, whose sole objective was to exploit people like Yeats and Moore to get his books published in order to make money.

Yeats’s, on the other hand, is a very respectful and non-judgmental representation. His opinion, as in the following letter, is very even-handed. Writing to Edith Shackleton Heald, on 6 August 1937, Yeats tries to make a case for the Swami’s English in his
books: “I understand what you feal [sic] about those Indean [sic] books. The teaching of English in India is the worst imaginable. . . . Yet in spite of all I find in both books an experience not described elsewhere & occupied with things of the first importance. I felt that I must get that experience recorded without interfereance [sic] from me or from my time.” This letter evinces Yeats’s perceptive cultural-political understanding. He understands that the English readership might have issues with the Swami’s English, which is the result of the deplorable colonial teaching of English. However, Yeats thinks that the Swami’s experience is unique, and, therefore, deserves being recorded as it is, without Western intervention. If, for his stress on the “pure,” uninterrupted Indian experience, Yeats sounds like a cultural purist, such purism or essentialism needs to be seen against the Eurocentric essentialism that one finds in the Orientalist representation of the Eastern culture he was responding to.
Conclusion

W. B. Yeats's construction of India has larger cultural-political and literary implications than Modernism's routine transnational interest in the Orient. Although in his treatment of India Yeats was not completely independent of Orientalist ideologies, he nevertheless attempted an original, "authentic" representation of India by negotiating between the points of view of the Indian cultural figures he represented and that of their Western audiences. In much of the famous Modernist literary representation of the Oriental cultures, one finds the Western writers acting as spokespersons for the Orient. One thinks especially of writers like E. M. Foster and Joseph Conrad in this regard. Yeats added a new dimension to this tradition by his incorporation of the original Indian voice into the Western literary discourse. Most of his Indian essays are meant to introduce original Indian works, written and translated by Indian authors. Although Yeats assisted them in editing the English translations of their works, he takes care not to interfere with the freshness of the original. Even in his own poem "Mohini Chatterjee," Yeats has included Chatterjee's own speech and dialogized it by inserting his own "commentary." He thus kept the two voices distinct, rather than suppressing or appropriating one by another. Despite believing, as he writes to the Swami in a letter (dated 21 December 1936), that the *Upanishads* "are vital to contemporary needs," he would not want the Europeans to live according to Indian ethical principles. As he writes in a letter to Edith Shackleton Heald, on 6 August 1937, "Certainly no European, & no Indian living in Europe, should attempt to live by an Indian ethic. Every civilization must create its own ethic."
Because of his emphasis on the unmixed purity of cultures, Yeats seems to be a proponent of the diversity or relativity of cultures, a notion that fails to recognize what Bhabha calls “the intertextuality of their historical locations.” Bhabha defines “cultural diversity” as “the recognition of pre-given cultural ‘contents’ and customs, held in a time-frame of relativism; it gives rise to anodyne liberal notions of multiculturalism, cultural exchange, or the culture of humanity” (206). Critiquing such a “unitary” concept of cultures, Bhabha speaks for “conceptualizing an inter-national culture, based not on the exoticism or multi-culturalism of the diversity of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture’s hybridity” (209). In his construction of an un-modern or pre-modern India of cultural solidarity, Yeats was far from “conceptualizing” such an “inter-national culture.” Finding his own Irish experience, and that of modern western civilization in general, to be fragmented and divided, Yeats imaginatively valorized that of India as unitary and unalloyedly pure.

However, it is interesting to note that, although Yeats did not recognize it, his three Indian personalities—Chatterjee, Tagore and the Swami—coming to the heart of the Empire with a view to getting their works and experiences, conveyed in the colonizer’s language, evaluated by the Western world, do represent a cultural hybridity and mimicry powerful enough to problematize Yeats’s construction of a culturally homogeneous India. Each of Yeats’s three Indians represents the native cultural elite in one form or other. Coming from families of the Brahmin caste, the highest of the four castes of the Hindu society, they were exposed to Western culture and education. Both Chatterjee and the Swami attended Calcutta University and studied law. Although Tagore never did complete his European education, his own family-house in Calcutta was a
confluence of Eastern and Western cultures. Foster describes “the wealthy and sophisticated Tagore family” in the following terms:

This was a level of Indian society different from that of WBY’s early guru Mohini Chatterjee; the Tagore ancestors included the “Oriental Croesus” who was entertained by Queen Victoria and fascinated Dickens, and the current generation numbered a leader of the Brahmo Samaj movement for religious reform and a translator of Moliere and Maupassant. . . . Rabindranath . . . was by then a well-established literary figure in Bengal. (Apprentice 469)

Although Chatterjee’s family was of a different level from Tagore’s, Sasson’s account (quoted in Chapter one) tells us that it, too, had acted over generations as mediator between the Eastern Hindu and the Western Christian traditions, a role Chatterjee carried forward in his association with the Theosophical Society as well as in his emulation of Western manners, for all his interest in orthodox Indian philosophy. Although the Swami’s life of renunciation was very different from the lives and values of these two Bengali Brahmins, he too represents the colonial psychic tendency by his desire to be valued and recognized by the West. That he came to the West in early 1930s with an ambition to publish his poems or go to America like Swami Vivekananda (as Yeats tells us in a passage quoted in the previous chapter) makes him part of a cultural diaspora Yeats would not like to recognize in his construction of the Swami as a “true” Indian monk.

However, it is indeed hard to determine whether Yeats failed to see the cultural heterogeneity of India and the hybridity of his Indian models or refused to do so in his
purist notion of culture as “the sanctity of the intellect.”” Whatever may have been the case, Yeats’s valorization of Indian religious texts as “the oldest philosophical compositions of the world” or his strong assertion that “no fundamental problem of philosophy, nothing that has disturbed the [Western philosophical] schools to controversy, escaped [the] notice” of the Indian “forest sages” (“Ten Principal Upanishads,” *Later Essays* 173) reversed the process of colonialist imposition of Christianity on what was considered to be a “culturally backward” Orient. Shorn of all the pejorative stereotypical ideas of sensuality, polytheism and superstition, India, in Yeats’s purist construction, becomes the land of superior spiritualist thoughts for the West to have drawn upon. In an undated journal collected in *Estrangement*, Yeats asks, “Was the *Bhagavad Gita* the ‘scenario’ from which the Gospels were made?” (*Autobiographies* 346). Seen from this cultural-political perspective, Yeats’s quasi-essentialist rendering of Indian culture gains in importance. In a letter to Bhagwan Shri Hamsa (dated 12 March 1937), he mentions his “thought of going to India with my own book of spiritual philosophy in my hand & hiding my self [sic] there for a time.” Although this dream never materialized, it is important to note that, unlike the Christian missionaries’ adventure to India with the *Bible* in their hands, Yeats thought of going on equal terms, not to colonize the indigenous religious practice by his “own book of spiritual philosophy,” but seemingly to begin a conversation between the two.
Notes

1. Foster writes about the origin of the India Society: “In June 1910, irritated at the prevalent condescension and ignorance where Indian culture was concerned, WBY’s artist friend William Rothenstein had founded the India Society, along with several of WBY’s acquaintances, including Rollenston” (Apprentice 469).

2. The Encyclopaedia Britannica entry, “Brahmo Samaj,” reads: “Brahmo also spelled Brahma, (Sanskrit: “Society of Brahmā”), quasi-Protestant, theistic movement within Hinduism, founded in Calcutta in 1828 by Ram Mohun Roy. The Brahmo Samaj does not accept the authority of the Vedas, has no faith in avatara (incarnations), and does not insist on belief in karma (causal effects of past deeds) or rebirth. It discards Hindu rituals and adopts some Christian practices in its worship. Influenced by Islām and Christianity, it denounces polytheism, idol worship, and the caste system.”

3. Foster quotes Sturge Moore’s account of his impression of Tagore upon hearing Tagore’s poems read by Yeats: “His [Tagore’s] unique subject is ‘the love of God’. When I told Yeats that I found his poetry preposterously optimistic he said ‘Ah, you see, he is absorbed in God’” (Apprentice 470).

4. Talking about “polishing” the English translations of some narrative poems, Tagore writes to Harriet Monroe, founder and editor of Poetry: A Magazine of Verse, in 31 December 1913, that “I find it difficult to impart to them the natural vigour of the original poems. Simplicity appears anaemic and spectre-like when she lacks her ruddy bloom of life, which is the case with these translations of mine” (My Life 167).

5. Tagore writes to Edward Thompson, in 18 November 1913: “The Gitanjali poems are intimately personal to me and the pleasure I have of polishing their English
version is of a different nature than that of an author revising his works for publication. Every line of these should be as closely my own as possible though I must labour under the disadvantage of not being born to your language. In such a case, I have to be guided by my instinct, allowing it to work almost unconsciously without being hindered by more than casual suggestions from outside. I think that the method that Yeats followed while editing my book was the right one in selecting those poems that required least alterations and rejecting others in spite of their merits" (My Life 165).

6. It is interesting to see how Hegel, for his part, had rejected much that Yeats was doing in his construction of India:

[t]he supposed condition of man’s knowledge of God. . . . the assertion that this condition prevailed at the very beginning of history, or that the traditions of the various religions began from this knowledge, and developed through a process of degeneration and corruption . . . —all these are presuppositions that have no historical foundations,

Hegel further thinks that “[i]t is only fitting and proper to philosophic contemplation for us to take up history at the point where rationality begins to enter into worldly existence, not where it is still merely an unrealized possibility” (62).

7. In a journal entry of 7 March 1909, collected in Estrangement, Yeats uses this phrase in a tone that betrays high-cultural elitism and apolitical purism: “A gentleman is a man whose principal ideas are not connected with his personal needs and his personal success. . . . [W]ithout culture or holiness, which are always the gift of a very few, a man may renounce wealth or any other external thing, but he cannot renounce hatred, envy, jealousy, revenge. Culture is the sanctity of the intellect” (Autobiographies 361)
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