

## ARTICLES

### RABINDRANATH TAGORE'S INDIA AND WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS'S IRELAND:

### THE INTERSECTION OF CLASSICAL LANGUAGES, LITERATURE, AND NATION-BUILDING IN POSTCOLONIAL EAST AND WEST\*

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#### POLITICAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

This article analyzes the remarkable resonance that exists between the intellectual nation-building attempts in postcolonial India and Ireland. This involves reviewing the development of a cultural narrative that drew heavily upon both nations' classical languages and the relationship of standardized registers of the national languages to the independence movement as a means of outlining the broad sociocultural context on the eve of both countries withdrawing from the British Empire. Against this overarching background, I subsequently explore the similarities in the development of a new canon of national literature by examining the relationship between William Butler Yeats and Rabindranath Tagore. This creation of a corpus of national literature, drawing upon an older literary and linguistic tradition, was significant in

representing each region as possessing a shared “national” heritage.

116 There is considerable research on the topic of (symbolic) nation-building, usually tied to the importance of national narratives for specific states. Harris Mylonas defines nation-building (from a political science perspective) as “the process through which governing elites make the boundaries of the state and the nation coincide” using policies such as “accommodation, assimilation, and exclusion” (xx). For Benedict Anderson, a nation is an “imagined political community [...] It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members” (6).<sup>1</sup> This article looks primarily at the private efforts of intellectual elites, rather than the official efforts of governing elites, to create a sense of national unity via the development of a national literature, against the background of state language policies. Naturally, there are other factors that contribute to intellectual nation-building that exist in parallel: one that has been extensively studied is the manner in which local elites develop a sense of “national unity” via an educational system modelled on that of the colonial power, such as the foundation of Indian public schools on the British model or tertiary education at Batavia and Bandung in the former Dutch East Indies; obviously, this is contrary to the original intentions of the colonial power.<sup>2</sup>

In the case of Ireland and India, these efforts are aimed not at merely aligning the culture with the state’s frontiers, but projecting its cultural radiance beyond them, as seen both in Ireland’s Gaelicization and in Indian interest in both pan-Asianism and the “Greater Indian” cultural sphere. The Greater India Society was founded by members of the Bengali intelligentsia at Calcutta, Tagore’s social milieu. Tagore’s comments in this regard, though, avoid harsh nationalistic formulations, instead taking the form of a *captatio benevolentiae* during his lectures, drawing attention to the commonalities he shares with a non-Indian audience. For example, Tagore envisaged the relationship between India and Bali not in colonial European terms, but rather as a love story between a sea-maiden, Bali, and her visiting lover, India, as outlined in his poem *Sagarika* (*Sea-maiden*). It might not seem like an obvious choice to compare Ireland and India. Both regions, however, have had a similar experience with regard to their colonial history, suffering the trauma of partition along a primarily religious divide.<sup>3</sup> The island of Ireland separated into a predominantly Catholic Irish Free State, which would later become the Republic of Ireland, with predominately Protestant Northern Ireland remaining within the United Kingdom, while British India initially fractured into India and East and West Pakistan, along with Bhutan and Sikkim. Given the similarity of both societies’ experiences during colonialism, it is worth exploring the extent to which their efforts at nation-building, particularly in intellectual or cultural terms, overlap.

It should be noted that both the Indian and Irish independence movements were largely unrelated phenomena, although both can be interpreted as a response to a weakening British political situation: the Proclamation of the Irish Republic in 1916, which ultimately triggered the Irish War of Independence in 1919, took place during the First World War, while Indian independence occurred shortly after the Second.

The situation regarding Ireland is also complicated, since Irish troops served the British colonial administration elsewhere in the Empire. For Irish Catholics serving in India, the differences between (Catholic) Irish troops and Anglo-Irish or British officers could be elided given the unfamiliarity of their new location, allowing the Irish some limited upward social mobility. This, in fact, forms the background to one of the few direct Indian connections with the Irish Independence Movement: the rioting of Irish soldiers serving with the Connaught Rangers at Jalandhar (Punjab) in 1920 during the Irish War of Independence, in protest against the imposition of martial law in Ireland.

## CLASSICAL LANGUAGES

The classical languages allowed Ireland to claim a wider intellectual significance and geographic extent than its limited territory would suggest. Latin, Greek, and Gaelic manuscripts could be found as far afield as the Irish monasteries at St. Gallen in Switzerland<sup>4</sup> or Bobbio in Italy.<sup>5</sup> Gaelic, the first official language of the Irish state, had been spoken not only across Ireland, but also western Scotland and the Isle of Man. The medieval Irish epic *Lebor Gabála Éirenn* (Standard English title: *Book of Invasions*; lit. *The Book of the Taking of Ireland*) identifies four perfect languages: Hebrew, Greek, Latin, and Gaelic.<sup>6</sup> But, as might be expected in an Irish text, Gaelic is identified as the most perfect of the perfect languages, since, the epic claims, it was an attempt by a Scythian prince and great-great-grandson of Noah, Féníus Farsaid, to reverse the linguistic confusion that originated with the building of the tower of Babel and collate the better elements of the resulting languages.<sup>7</sup> Of all the classical languages, it was Gaelic that played the key role in the new Irish state. A very prominent example of the subordination of the Greco-Roman tradition to the Celtic one was the Tailteann Games, held in the Irish Free State in 1924, 1928, and 1932, a revival of an ancient type of Irish Olympics noted in Celtic mythology as having been established by the god Lugh to celebrate the introduction of agriculture and open only to those of Irish ancestry. Debates in the Dáil (the lower house of the Irish parliament) at this time note its superiority to the Olympics, since the ancient Tailteann Games had a longer tradition than the ancient Olympics.

Whereas the collapse of Gaelic as a spoken language within Ireland was partly due to the emigration caused by the Great Irish Famine and the Irish Catholic Church's adoption of English, following the foundation of a Catholic seminary at Maynooth, the Irish nationalist narrative represented its decline as the direct result of British policy in Ireland. Just as in India, interest in the classical language preceded the movement towards independence, but was in many ways inseparable from it. *Conradh na Gaeilge* (The Gaelic League) was founded in 1893 by the academic Douglas Hyde, who would later serve as the first President of Ireland, to promote the Irish language. This followed his 1892 lecture "The Necessity of De-anglicising

Ireland.” During this period, the fact that Ireland had the third oldest literature in Europe after Greek and Latin—and, most importantly, older than English—became a source of pride within Ireland and a foil to the sort of representation of the Irish as subhuman brutes incapable of self-government frequently found in the British magazine *Punch*.<sup>8</sup> The standardization and simplification of modern Irish to produce the *Caighdeán*, the version of Irish used by the state, in the 1950s and 1960s drew heavily on classical Gaelic; while the removal of silent letters resulted in some divergence from classical Gaelic orthography, standardized Irish retained many classical Gaelic forms, even when these were no longer in use in any of the three principal Irish dialects (the Munster, Connaught, and Ulster dialects).

The situation in South Asia is much more complex. So-called Hindustani, the Khariboli (“good language”) dialect of Delhi, developed different standardized registers: Urdu, written in nastaliq, and Hindi, written in Devanagari. Urdu had already been made a language of administration under the British regime by 1837. This led to

**118** a linguistic split that preceded the later political split into India and Pakistan, with Hindus demanding to adopt a register of the language that would use the Devanagari alphasyllabary adapted from Sanskrit. Although Hindi is simply the language of the union government, rather than the national language of India, it has a special role “as a medium of expression for all the elements of the composite culture of India” (Article 351 of the Indian Constitution). The Constitution goes on to endorse Sanskritization: Hindi will draw “wherever necessary or desirable, for its vocabulary, primarily on Sanskrit.”

Although Sanskrit was originally the cultural and religious language of Bengal, Muslim rule in the region, beginning in the thirteenth century, supported the development of a Bengali literary tradition long before Tagore. The connection between the South Asian languages and nationalism is particularly nuanced and complex, illustrated by West Pakistani resistance to accepting Bengali as a national language, leading to agitation in 1948 and 1952, on the grounds that it was a “Hindu” language (Dil 293). Clearly a fuller analysis of the development of the South Asian languages and their connection to Indian, Pakistani, or Bangladeshi nationalism is beyond the scope of this article. It will suffice to make the following points: the linguistic situation in Ireland, as a nation-state in the European tradition with Irish portrayed as the language of national unity, can only be compared with difficulty to the situation in multiethnic and multilingual India. Even if there were originally aspirations for Hindi to become the language of national unity on the part of the Union government, the language has not been universally accepted, particularly in southern Indian states such as Tamil Nadu. This is illustrated by anti-Hindi agitations in the then-Madras Presidency, a province of British India (1937-40), and also in 1965 in Madurai, triggered by the prospect of a switch to Hindi as the sole official language of India. For the sake of context, Hindi is not the sole Indian language to have become politicized in this way. From the annexation of Goa in 1961, there was considerable agitation for Konkani, rather than Marathi, to achieve recognition as the sole official

language of the union territory, culminating in violence in 1986 and only resolved with Konkani's recognition in 1987 as the official language of Goa, Daman, and Diu.

This serves to underscore how complex the linguistic situation is in South Asia and, even though the Irish language has often been politicized, it is not directly comparable with the complexity of the Indian situation or with the violent tendencies triggered by linguistic concerns there. It is therefore difficult to form a direct comparison with Yeats writing in the colonial language, English, which was the language of the majority of the Irish population in any case, and Tagore's decision to write in Bengali. That said, Yeats's use of Celtic mythology can be compared with Tagore's employment of heavily-Sanskritized Bengali as feeding into, and being influenced by, the tendency towards pseudonostalgic politics. Of course, Tagore himself later switched from Sanskritized Bengali (*shadhu-bhasha*) towards a more colloquial form of the language (*cholito-bhasha*).

Naturally, we have a further dimension when considering the problem of what exactly constitutes a classical language. In a European context, the term is generally used to refer to Latin and Greek. In India, the situation is significantly more complex with six classical languages recognized: Tamil (2004), Sanskrit (2005), Kannada (2008), Telugu (2008), Malayalam (2013), and Odia (2014). One might note here that the situation regarding the status of a language as classical is a phenomenon that has continued in India long after the initial phase of nation-building was completed and relating to the political concerns of India's various constituent states. Under the British colonial administration<sup>9</sup> and later the Republic of India, Sanskrit was granted a privileged status, connected with Latin and Greek, due to their shared heritage and initially presented as the "mother language" of Indian civilization, although this was ultimately rejected with the understanding of a Dravidian family of languages in South India (cf. Venkatachalapathy 13). The rivalry between the Indo-European language family and the Dravidian languages was exemplified by the rivalry between Sanskrit and Tamil. Demands for the recognition of Tamil were made as early as 1903 by V.G. Suryanarayana Sastri, Professor of Tamil at Madras Christian College; it was officially recognized as a classical language before Sanskrit. This highlights the fact that in India, the decision to recognize a language as classical, with the "superiority" in the linguistic hierarchy that this implies, has become a political decision made by the union government, not one determined by academics. Tamil received classical language status in 2004, the year in which Dravida-based parties, the DMK and the AIADMK, met with electoral success in the state of Tamil Nadu and exerted influence over the formation of the Indian union government.<sup>10</sup>

In Ireland, the situation is rather different, since the tension has been between Irish and English, the colonial language, rather than between a variety of indigenous languages. Yet even here, we can identify similarities in terms of political engagement with language. The ultimate authority for the standardization of the Irish language in both grammatical and orthographical matters is a political one: the Translation Service of the Irish parliament. Whereas in India, the recognition of various lan-

guages as classical has become politicized, in Ireland, language politics has tended to focus more on the question of compulsory Irish within the school system, though one might note that standardized Irish has not met with universal acceptance amongst native speakers of the various Irish dialects. The collapse of talks in February 2018 between the DUP (Democratic Unionist Party) and Sinn Féin to restore power-sharing in Northern Ireland, officially as a result of the failure to agree upon an Irish language act, and the role that Ulster Scots would play in any such legislation, reveals the extent to which language has remained politicized.<sup>11</sup>

## LITERATURE: YEATS AND TAGORE

In parallel with the classicizing of their new languages of government, a particularly significant form of nation-building in both countries was the development of their literary canons. Rabindranath Tagore and W.B. Yeats both played major roles in the development of Indian and Ireland as “imagined communities.” Their literary careers played out against the background of the struggle for political independence, while their work fed an appetite for a pseudonostalgic conception of the nation, a conception that appears to have global appeal. Both Ireland and India were bitterly divided, even aside from the religious split: the newly-formed Irish Free State was engulfed in civil war (1922-23), while India was additionally fragmented along caste lines. Rabindranath Tagore won the Nobel Prize for Literature as the first non-European in 1913 against the English candidate, Thomas Hardy (Dutta and Robinson 186-87).<sup>12</sup> This is particularly significant when one thinks of Thomas Babington Macaulay’s comment that “a single shelf of a good European library is worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia” (qtd. in Anderson 91).<sup>13</sup> W.B. Yeats won the Nobel Prize in 1923. Both Yeats and Tagore saw their literary works, with their pseudonostalgic elements, as aiming at national unity,<sup>14</sup> yet they both remained critical commentators of the significant historical events and the violent forms of nationalism which unfolded around them.

Even though Yeats could not matriculate at Trinity College Dublin to read Classics due to the weakness of his Greek, his works make use of Hellenic motifs. A notable example is *No Second Troy*, published in 1916, the same year as the Proclamation of the Irish Republic and the Easter Rising, which is both a deeply personal and a political poem. Maud Gonne, who had previously rejected at least four marriage proposals from Yeats, is equated with Helen and both criticized by Yeats for her rejection of him and portrayed as responsible for the violence of Irish nationalism: “Why should I blame her that she filled my days with misery or that she would of late have taught to ignorant men most violent ways.”<sup>15</sup> That year, Gonne’s estranged husband, John MacBride, was executed for his role in the Easter Rising, leading Yeats to propose unsuccessfully to Gonne once again before proceeding to unsuccessfully propose marriage to Gonne’s daughter, Iseult. In 1914, Yeats had attempted to per-

suade Tagore to confer the rights for the French translation of his poetry to Iseult, but Tagore hesitated, as he was unsure of Iseult's competency in Bengali, which she had only begun to learn the previous year.

Apart from Hellenic motifs, Yeats's work drew on elements from Gaelic literature, even though he was opposed to what he regarded as the enforced Gaelicization of Ireland on the part of the Irish Free State Government, illustrated by his opposition to compulsory Irish within the educational system. His play *On Baile's Strand* (1903) depicts the death of Cuchulain, hero of the Irish national epic, the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* (*The Cattle Raid of Cooley*).<sup>16</sup> His earlier play *Cathleen ní Houlihan* (1902)<sup>17</sup> is written in the typically Irish nationalistic genre, the *aisling*, in which the hero has a vision of a woman, often a young and beautiful one, who symbolizes the plight of Ireland. For Yeats, we "must care for things Gaelic and Irish, not because we hold them better than things Saxon and English, but because they belong to us and because our lives are to be spent among them, whether they be good or evil" ("Hopes and Fears" 188). Similarly, Tagore claimed "we cannot borrow other people's history, and [...] if we stifle our own, we are committing suicide. When you borrow things that do not belong to your life, they only serve to crush your life" (*Nationalism* 107). Both writers played key roles in the self-identity of their respective states. The Bard of Bengal composed both *Jana Gana Mana* and *Amar sonar Bangla* ("My Bengal of Gold"), later adopted as the Indian and Bangladeshi National Anthems. Yeats served as a Senator in the Irish Free State and assisted with the selection of the design of the new Irish currency.

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In fact, Yeats played a key role in Tagore's acceptance into English-speaking literary circles, meeting him first on June 27, 1912 at the house of Tagore's London host, William Rothenstein (Hurwitz 56). In 1913, along with Lady Gregory, Yeats directed the first staging of Tagore's *The Post Office* (*Dak Ghar*, 1912) at Ireland's National Theatre, the Abbey, which he had helped to found. Also in 1913, Yeats wrote the introduction to Tagore's collection *Gitanjali: Song Offerings*, published by the India Society of London, the basis of which were translations which Tagore had originally presented to Rothenstein, his London host, and which Yeats had helped to improve. Tagore was awarded the Nobel Prize primarily for this volume.<sup>18</sup> In the introduction, Yeats notes: "I have carried the manuscript of these translations about with me for days, reading it in railway trains, the top of omnibuses and in restaurants, and I have often had to close it lest some stranger see how much it moved me" ("Introduction" 10). Yeats even confessed to Ezra Pound that "Tagore is greater than any of us." Yeats's interest in India predated Tagore, illustrated by Indian-themed poems as early as his 1889 collection *Crossways*.<sup>19</sup> To a large extent, this interest was based on Yeats's romanticized notion of ancient Ireland, which he viewed as being the same as India. For Yeats, Indian culture was attractive to the Irish, not because of its "strangeness," but because it was like meeting "our own image [...] our voice as in a dream" ("Introduction" 11).

Ana Jelnicar has pointed out the extent to which Tagore was regarded as both

an exotic exhibit from the East and as inferior, as a member of a colonized group.<sup>20</sup> Thomas Sturge Moore, who would later prepare two more translations of Tagore's work into English along with Yeats, and who proposed Tagore as a worthy recipient to the Nobel Prize Committee, recounts meeting Tagore: "Yeats and Rothenstein had a Bengalee poet on view during the last days I was in London [...] The poet himself is a sweet creature beautiful to the eye in a silk turban" (Sturge Moore's account to R.C. Trevelyan, qtd. in Foster 470). As "a sweet creature," Tagore's humanity is denied (cf. Jelnikar 1010). Even Tagore's citation for the Nobel Prize is not devoid of this Eurocentric view, which refused to acknowledge the significance of Indian literature. He was praised that "he made his poetic thought [...] a part of the literature of the West" (Nobel Prize in Literature).<sup>21</sup> Tagore himself was more than capable of inverting such Eurocentric views, such as when he referred to the Athenian Acropolis as "barbarian ugliness"<sup>22</sup> or when he described European schools as "the hideous structures where their children are interned" or square European houses as places "where these people are caged in their lifetime" ("Spirit of Japan" 12, rpt. in *Nationalism* 75). He did not want Asia to become an imitation of the West along the lines of Japan, a model to which some Indian nationalists aspired due to the narrative that it was the first Asian power to defeat a European one in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-05:<sup>23</sup> "One morning the whole world looked up in surprise, when Japan broke through her walls of old habits in a night and came out triumphant" (*Nationalism* 52). In fact, much earlier the Ming navy had defeated both the Portuguese at the First Battle of Tamão (1521) and the Dutch at the Battle of Liaoluo Bay (1633). Despite this, Japan is repeatedly presented as the first Asian power to defeat a western one because of its Europeanization during the Meiji restoration (1868), and yet it is precisely this adoption of European (imperializing) values that Tagore repeatedly criticized.

One of Tagore's contacts amongst Japanese intellectuals was Okakura Tenshin, who propounded a theory of Pan-Asianism (Coloma).<sup>24</sup> Tagore, though, was not blind to the fact that the result of Japanese victory was not the removal of the European domination of Asia, but rather the Japanese colonization of both Korea (1910) and Manchuria (under Japanese influence from 1906, invaded in 1931), leading him to note in despair "I have given up Japan. I feel more and more sure it is not the country for me" (qtd. in Hogan and Pandit 47).<sup>25</sup> Japan had become a dragon devouring slices of the earth's flesh ("Spirit of Japan" 3), a colonial power on the European model,<sup>26</sup> rather than heralding Pan-Asian liberation and Tagore feared that a Japan that became a mere imitation of the West could never fulfill the expectations placed upon her.<sup>27</sup> Violence—in this context nationalist violence—was to be condemned, irrespective of who inflicted it:

By this device the people which loves freedom perpetuates slavery in a large portion of the world with the comfortable feeling of pride in having done its duty; men who are naturally just can be cruelly unjust both in their act and in their thought [...] men who are honest can blindly go on robbing others of their human rights for self-aggrandizement, all the while abusing the deprived for not deserving better treatment. (*Nationalism* 111)

Nationalism is like an anesthetic that leads one to forget the higher ideals of humanity and engage in acts of moral perversion, and nationalists become “dangerously resentful” if their attention is drawn to this (*Nationalism* 42-43).

Tagore also denounced nationalist violence in India because paying back “Europe in her own coin” by returning “contempt for contempt and evil for evil” imitated “Europe in one of her worst features,” illustrated by her treatment of those “whom she describes as yellow or red, brown or black” (*Nationalism* 87).<sup>28</sup> For Tagore, “[Europe] not only cannot forget that she is Western, but she takes every opportunity to hurl this fact against others to humiliate them. This is why she is growing incapable of imparting to the East what is best in herself, and of accepting in a right spirit the wisdom that the East has stored for centuries” (*Nationalism* 104). In Tagore’s view, India adopting the values of western colonialism would be as absurd as Switzerland building a navy large enough to compete with England (*Nationalism* 108).<sup>29</sup> Nationalism conflicted with the heterogeneity that, for Tagore, formed the very essence of India. There was no need to attempt to emulate Europe by confusing modernity with what is merely European (“Spirit of Japan” 12-13), particularly since the foreign policies of the most powerful European states, in Tagore’s view, simply aimed at having “the exclusive possession of the devil” (“Spirit of Japan” 22).

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Clearly, though, Tagore was not anti-European since he regularly separated the colonial violence he deplored from the aspects of European culture that he admirably called “the glories of the West” (*Nationalism* 87). Some of these included the harmony between the component linguistic groups of Switzerland, which he viewed as a rare example of racial tolerance in the West (*Nationalism* 123), the beauty of Italian culture, and European progress more generally:<sup>30</sup> “When we truly know the Europe which is great and good, we can effectively save ourselves from the Europe which is mean and grasping” (*Nationalism* 88). Europe was able to dominate Asia because it had advanced, while Asia, in spite of what Tagore saw as its past superiority, had not:

[Asia] is like a rich mausoleum which displays all its magnificence in trying to immortalize the dead [...] It was said of Asia that it could never move in the path of progress, its face was so inevitably turned backwards. For centuries we did hold torches of civilization in the East when the West slumbered in darkness [...] then fell the darkness of night upon all the lands of the East. The current of time seemed to stop at once and Asia ceased to take any new food, feeding upon its own past which is really feeding upon itself. (*Nationalism* 50)

Though Tagore, just like Yeats, looks back to an idealized past, Tagore’s notion of progress means that he has no interest in returning to this period. In contrast to Gandhi, who notoriously rejected western medicine for his wife<sup>31</sup> but accepted it for himself,<sup>32</sup> Tagore sees little point in the Indian living in the same type of hut, ploughing the land with the same design of plough as has been the case for thousands of years, as in the vision of India idealized by Gandhi.<sup>33</sup> Rather, knowledge of the Asian past is important to remind Asians that Asia had been a source of political power,

philosophy and the arts and the foundation of the great religions. Asians suffered from the “bondage of dejection [...] hopelessly chained in loss of faith in themselves” (*Nationalism* 49). Despite his criticisms of Japan, Tagore still praises her for freeing Asia from its torpor.<sup>34</sup>

The massacre of hundreds of unarmed Indians attending Baisakhi (the Sikh New Year) at the hands of British troops at Jallianwala Bagh, Amritsar in 1919 is now widely seen as having a decisive effect in hardening Indian opposition to British rule. Following the massacre, Tagore renounced his knighthood, alluding to the Anglocentric view of racial superiority when he defended his “countrymen, who for their so called insignificance, are liable to suffer degradation not fit for human beings,” sufferings which he noted were mocked in the Anglo-Indian media, but which had yet trickled through “gagged silence, reaching every corner of India” (Letter to Lord Chelmsford, Viceroy of India, qtd. in Alam and Chakravarty 109). As a result, Tagore fell from favour amongst the British establishment. The Amritsar massacre remains to this day a central event in Indian national self-identity, commemorated by the Eternal Flame of Liberty at Jallianwala Bagh.<sup>35</sup>

The Amritsar massacre was supported by Britain’s Lieutenant Governor of the Punjab, Michael O’Dwyer, who was in fact Irish. This elision between Irish and British in a colonial context had been previously evoked by Tagore’s fifth and longest novel, *Gora* (“*Whitey*”), serialized in the literary magazine *Prabasi* (*Exile*) from 1907 to 1909,<sup>36</sup> which examines the conflict experienced by a white child raised by Brahmins with a preference for his adopted culture, rather than that of the colonial power. The irony here is that the protagonist, Gora, is not solely British, but actually Irish, adopted against the background of the Indian “Mutiny” of 1857. Gora rejects the model of the West: “Other countries want generals like Wellington, scientists like Newton, and millionaires like Rothschild, but our country wants the Brahmin, the Brahmin who knows not what fear is, who hates greed, who can vanquish sorrow, who takes no account of loss” (*Gora* 87; cf. Singh 6-7). Gora, though a westerner by lineage, favours the Brahmin as the possessor of Eastern wisdom who can liberate India: “India wants the Brahmin of firm, tranquil, and liberated mind—when once she gets him then only will she be free!” (*Gora* 13). Tagore, however, rejects this view when Gora’s mother, Anandamoyi, stresses common humanity beyond religion and caste: “When you hold a little child to your breast then you feel certain that no one is born into this world with caste. From that very day the understanding came to me that if I looked down upon any one for being of low caste, or a Christian, then God would snatch you away from me” (*Gora* 13; cf. Singh 11). In *Gora*, Tagore presents an “imagined community” extended beyond caste lines, even as his protagonist’s insistence on his view of “caste purity” highlights the divisions facing Indian society.

If Yeats had been charmed by the exotic exhibit from the East, he had little time for the politically-engaged Tagore. In his Introduction to *Gitanjali*, Yeats had portrayed Tagore as not being under the compulsion to waste his energy on politics, noting that the closest thing India had to “propagandist” writings were adaptations from Sanskrit

mythological poems ("Introduction" 10; cf. Jelnikar 1012, 1019). One might have expected better from an Irish writer who was opposed to British colonial activity in Ireland, but there is a strong Anglocentric bias in his 1935 criticism of Tagore: "Damn Tagore [...] Tagore does not know English, no Indian knows English" ("Damn Tagore" 834).<sup>37</sup> Yeats claims responsibility for Tagore's success: "We got out three good books; Sturge Moore and I" ("Damn Tagore" 834), and he criticizes the quality of Tagore's translations: "then because he thought it more important to see and know English than to be a great poet, he brought out sentimental rubbish and wrecked his reputation" ("Damn Tagore" 834). Yet only four years earlier in *The Golden Book of Tagore* (1931), published to celebrate Tagore's seventieth birthday, Yeats had written "I am still your most loyal student and admirer" (269).<sup>38</sup> Yeats seems to have over-rated the significance of his collaboration on the *Gitanjali*. According to Rothenstein, Yeats made only minor revisions; Tagore himself suggested that Yeats merely selected which poems would be included in the collection (Dutta and Robinson 184). The English *Gitanjali*, consisting of 103 poems, is not simply a translation of the Bengali *Gitanjali* (1910), a collection of 157 poems. Only 53 poems from the Bengali *Gitanjali* appear in the English *Gitanjali*; the remainder of the English collection is drawn from Tagore's 1912 drama *Achalayatan* (*The Immovable*), and from other collections of his poetry, such as *Gitimayla* (*Wreath of Songs*) or *Kheya* (*Ferry*). Another major difference is the sequence of poems: Tagore conceived of the Bengali collection as a complete whole, whereas it is difficult to see any rationale to the English arrangement made by Yeats, other than placing poems relating to death at the end (Radice 59-61).

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One might have expected a certain criticism of Tagore in Europe based upon his perceived support of Mussolini and fascism during his Italian tours.<sup>39</sup> Tagore's initial invitation in 1925 came from the Philological Society of Italy<sup>40</sup> and was cut short on account of his ill health, though it may also have been as a result of what he learned about the Italian fascist regime from the Duke of Milan, Gallarati Scotti (Dutta and Robinson 266). Although Tagore did not meet Mussolini on that occasion, the seeds were sown for their subsequent encounter. Carlo Formichi, an Italian Sanskritist at the University of Rome,<sup>41</sup> met with Tagore who invited him as a visiting professor to Visva-Bharati, the college that Tagore had founded, on condition that he donate Italian volumes to its library.<sup>42</sup> Formichi turned to Mussolini to supply the funds. Tagore's initial contact with Mussolini was to express gratitude for the library and one year's salary to fund Giuseppe Tucci, who was to work with Formichi at Visva-Bharati (Kundu; Dutta and Robinson 267).<sup>43</sup> During his subsequent visit to Rome in 1926, it was natural, then, that Tagore would visit Mussolini to thank him in person for his financial support. During his second meeting with Mussolini on June 13 before leaving Rome, Tagore noted that Italy was the most suitable nation to "promote a rapprochement between the Asian and the European civilizations" (Kundu). Tagore met with some criticism in the European press as a result of this trip, and later clarified in a letter published in *The Manchester Guardian* on August 5, 1926 that he had never expressed support for fascism. Tagore's meetings with Mussolini were also

somewhat nuanced, since Tagore requested that Mussolini allow him permission to visit the Italian philosopher Benedetto Croce, who was under (virtual) house arrest in Naples for his opposition to the fascist regime (Dutta and Robinson 268). Since Yeats displayed an initial interest in the Blueshirts, the Irish fascist movement, the Italian episode is not the basis for Yeats distancing himself from Tagore.<sup>44</sup>

Rather, Yeats's subsequent disappointment with Tagore was not simply linguistic or literary, but also philosophical. If Tagore never lived to see either of the states for which he served as a spiritual father, India and Bangladesh, Yeats became increasingly disillusioned with the Irish state. This disillusionment can be traced back to even before the state's establishment. As early as 1909 in *All Things Can Tempt Me*, even before the formation of the Irish Free State, he denounced Ireland as "a fool-driven land" (line 3). His bitterness here, however, seems to have really been due to Maud Gonne's 1903 marriage to MacBride, a "drunken lout" according to Yeats: "All things can tempt me from this craft of verse / one time it was a woman's face or worse / the seeming needs of my fool-driven land" (lines 1-3). "Romantic Ireland is dead and gone," Yeats admits in *September 1913* (line 7). In *No Second Troy*, Irish nationalists are described as men whose courage is not equal to their desire. In the later *Sailing to Byzantium* (1928), Yeats simply laments "That is no country for old men" (I, line 1). *Sailing to Byzantium* is also notable for Yeats's preference for classicizing motifs: "Once out of nature I shall never take / My bodily form from any natural thing, / But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make / Of hammered gold and gold enameling" (IV, lines 1-4). This represents a rejection of the natural simplicity that Yeats espouses in his 1888 poem *The Lake Isle of Innisfree* at the height of the Celtic Revival and which so attracted him to Tagore.

Yeats fell under Tagore's influence because he admired what he regarded as the "unbroken culture" of Bengal, where "folk life" and high culture, poetry and religion were one ("Introduction" 10; Hurwitz 58-59). For a time, Yeats hoped to unite all of these aspects in a national Irish literature devoid of provincialism; for him, an uncomplicated life, separated from the mechanical, took Asiatic form (Letter to Tagore, 7 September 1931, qtd. in Chakravarty 155). Naturally, this view is indicative of Yeats's understanding of Eurocentric superiority, just as his admiration for ancient Ireland was due to his conception of the Celt as a "noble savage." Furthermore, Yeats resented the vagueness of references to the divine in Tagore's poetry (Jelnikar 1016-17), seeing his own work by contrast as "clear and rational" (Ellman 54). To the end, Yeats remained a political poet in spite of his protestations in *Politics*, first published in *Last Poems* (1938-39): "How can I, that girl standing there, / My attention fix / On Roman or on Russian / Or on Spanish politics" (lines 1-4). Yeats failed to heal Irish disunity with his literature as he hoped. When Gora exclaims, "You have no caste, you make no distinctions, and have no hatred... It is you who are India!" (407), we find traces of a similar project to heal the rifts of Indian society in Tagore's work.

## CONCLUSION

Both Yeats and Tagore, then, tried to invert the imperializing narrative of the British government, in which British involvement in both nations was represented as a civilizing influence necessary for the benefit of the exploited population, who were portrayed as incapable of self-government. Each drew on his cultural heritage to develop a literature that underpins his respective nation as the cradle of a civilization that radiated beyond the current frontiers of the nation and attempted to use literature to create a type of national unity, a private project that took place against the background of state language policies oriented towards symbolic nation-building. For Tagore, this took the form of his frequent criticism of the manner in which Indians are divided amongst themselves both along religious and along caste lines, his interest in pan-Asianism, or his engagement with the “Greater Indian” cultural sphere, illustrated by his trip to Malaya, Java, and Bali in July 1927.<sup>45</sup> For Yeats, this occurred via his construction of a body of English-language works drawing heavily on Gaelic themes and his involvement with the Abbey, Ireland’s National Theatre. Yeats’s bitterness towards Irish nationalism was based on more than simply the failure of his relationship with Gonne; it also stems from the hostility that many Irish nationalists heaped on newer works of Irish literature. His disillusionment with the possibility of healing the rifts in Irish society with literature was reinforced by the riots at the Abbey that greeted the performance of Seán O’Casey’s play *The Plough and the Stars* (1926), caused by a perceived lack of respect shown to the Irish tricolour, and John Millington Synge’s *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907), caused by the play’s perceived immorality and negative representation of Ireland.

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Many of the commonalities between the Indian and Irish movements towards nation-building can be traced back to the similar experience both nations had during the colonial period. One must not seek, however, to equate the Irish and Indians as colonized nations: Irish troops and administrators served in the British imperial service, while those in India often sought to elide the differences between them and their British masters. Both Ireland and India drew on their ancient languages to veil the shame of their recent past and look back to a time before the trauma of partition when both had enjoyed a cultural radiance that shone beyond their current frontiers. However, it is in the interaction between Tagore and Yeats, the creators of the national literature of their respective states, that we have evidence of more direct influence. Yeats’s initial approval of Tagore’s work was couched in Eurocentric terms, seeing Indian culture simultaneously as superior to that of Ireland in its unity, but by equating it with his romanticized notion of ancient Ireland, it was a culture that Ireland had long surpassed. His later criticism of Tagore reflects both his view of Anglophonic cultural hegemony and his misconception of Tagore, the intellectual who denounced the Amritsar massacre, as apolitical. The significance of both writers for their respective “imagined communities” remains unabated: Yeats remains a colossus of Irish literature, while Tagore is revered in both India and Bangladesh.<sup>46</sup>

In the final analysis, perhaps both Tagore's and Yeats's similarities can be traced to their understanding of art as "an endeavour to condense out of the flying vapour of the world an image of human perfection" (VP 849). Their literary output can be seen as an articulation of national trauma against the background of pseudonational politics, and as a critique of some of the worst excesses of such a political agenda.

## NOTES

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1. Anderson also examines the link between print-languages and the imagination of the nation as a political community (67-111).
2. On India, see Srivastava; on Indonesia, see Anderson (121-27). Since Tagore was educated at the Jesuit St. Xavier's College Calcutta, rather than a British-style school, and Yeats did not study at Trinity College Dublin, this aspect is not relevant for my topic.
3. In the case of Ireland, ethnoreligious would be a more accurate term.
4. The founding of St. Gallen Abbey can be traced back (with a break in continuity) to the establishment of the hermitage of the Irish monk St. Gall in 612.
5. Bobbio Abbey was founded by the Irish monk St. Columbanus in 614.
6. The earliest version of this text can be dated to the eleventh century.
7. One might note here that the work manages to write the Irish into the Biblical narrative.
8. The magazine incidentally also parodied Tagore's work; cf. Dutta and Robinson (187).
9. New Year honours for academics were primarily granted to Sanskrit scholars.
10. Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (Dravidian Progress Federation) and All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (All India Anna Dravidian Progress Federation).
11. One should stress here that there are other issues at play in addition to the linguistic one; most significantly, the situation regarding the future status of the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland in the aftermath of Brexit.
12. It should be noted, though, that Hardy was regularly nominated for the Nobel Prize including 1923, the year in which Yeats won.
13. Macaulay was president of the Committee of Public Instruction in Bengal in 1834.
14. See Yeats on national unity and Tagore's views on the caste system in *Gora*, both discussed below.
15. This distaste for nationalist violence was not solely rooted in Yeats's rejection by Maud Gonne and her espousal of the nationalist cause. As Yeats later stated, "I have learned to know that nothing great

comes out of hatred and bitterness" (comment attributed to Yeats by his friend, Edith Lyttleton, during her visit to Ireland in 1922 and recorded in a private notebook kept at Churchill College, Cambridge; Chandos Papers, Churchill College, CHAN 1 6/4, cited by Foster).

16. Yeats's Cuchulain cycle also contains the later plays *The Green Helmet* (1910), *The Only Jealousy of Emer* (1919), and *The Death of Cuchulain* (1939).
17. Cowritten with Lady Augusta Gregory.
18. The prize language notes that Tagore was awarded the prize "because of his profoundly sensitive, fresh and beautiful verse [...] expressed in his own English words" (Nobel Prize in Literature). This is clearly a reference to the (English) *Gitanjali*, the only body of work Tagore had published in English in 1913.
19. These poems, *Anashuya and Vijaya*, *The Indian Upon God*, and *The Indian to his Love*, were written before Yeats was twenty.
20. Jelnikar analyzes the Yeats-Tagore relationship against the background of colonial politics.
21. Jelnikar comments on the extent to which this reveals "an embarrassing degree of Western self-obsession" (1008, n. 4). Cf. the disdain the announcement met with in the *New York Times* (14 November), which misspelled Tagore's name as "Babindranath" and commented: "It is the first time that this prize has been given to anybody but a white person" (qtd. in Dutta and Robinson 186). An attempted modification on the 15 November did not really help matters: "Babindranath Tagore, if not exactly one of us, is, as an Aryan, a distant relation of all white folk" (qtd. in Dutta and Robinson 186).
22. Tagore has a much more nuanced understanding of Greek antiquity than the philhellenism typical of western intellectuals. For example, he viewed Sparta negatively as an example of a state that exchanged her humanity for power, and in so doing served as a prototype for European colonialism and Japanese imperial aspirations (cf. *Nationalism* 28).
23. For a detailed treatment of Tagore's view of nationalism, see Collins.
24. Tenshin himself was nervous about the extent to which Japan had adopted European values and the rift that this would cause with other Asian states. Tagore addresses the rise of a Pan-Asian "race" in "Spirit of Japan" (22).
25. Rabindranath Tagore's letter addressed to C.F. Andrews, 11 June, 1915, cited by Hogan and Pandit (47). Tagore continued to visit Japan after its annexation of Korea; he was kept informed of events by Korean students during a visit to Tokyo (Dutta and Robinson 285).
26. See, for example, Tagore's remarks: "Why is it that I saw in an English paper an expression of bitterness at Japan's boasting of her superiority of civilization—the thing that the British, along with other nations, has been carrying on for ages without blushing?" (*Nationalism* 39).
27. Cf. *Nationalism* 38-39: "I am just coming from my visit to Japan where I exhorted this young nation to take its stand upon the higher ideals of humanity and never to follow the West in its acceptance of the organized selfishness of Nationalism as its religion, never to gloat upon the feebleness of its neighbours, never to be unscrupulous in its behavior to the weak, where it can be gloriously mean with impunity, while turning its right cheek of brighter humanity for the kiss of admiration to those who have the power to deal it a blow." Tagore comments more starkly: "The bloodhounds of Satan are not only bred in the kennels of Europe, but can also be domesticated in Japan and fed with man's miseries" ("Spirit of Japan" 23).
28. Tagore links racism in this context with distinctions of caste in India, correctly pointing out that both are an affront to humanity.
29. Tagore was not hostile to cultural adaptation, however, since he approved of the Indian adoption of European principles that he valued, regularly emphasized the shared heritage of India and other

Asian nations, and hoped to develop an exchange of scholars between India and China as a result of his 1924 lecture tour there on the invitation of the Beijing Lecture Association, Jiangxueshe.

30. For example, European science and the European concept of the public good. On European literature, Tagore notes: "I must not hesitate to acknowledge where Europe is great, for great she is without doubt. We cannot help loving her with all our heart, and paying her the best homage of our admiration—the Europe who, in her literature and art, pours out an inexhaustible cascade of beauty and truth fertilizing all countries and all time" (*Nationalism* 65).
31. Penicillin to treat his wife's pneumonia; Kasturba subsequently died.
32. Gandhi subsequently received quinine to treat malaria; he also underwent an appendectomy.
33. Cf. "Spirit of Japan": "the spirit of the race should harmonize with the spirit of the time" (12). See also Williams (84).
34. Cf. *Nationalism* 50, though it must be stressed that Tagore's view of Japan was complex. Tagore ("Spirit of Japan" 4-6) looks back fondly on his time in Japan and his encounters with the Japanese people, presenting it as a land of love and beauty and recalling the cultural closeness between Japan and India, partly due to their shared Buddhist heritage. Cf. Tagore's praise of Japanese civilization (*Nationalism* 52-58).
- 130 35. See Tuteja (50-51) for documentation of the emotive use of the events at Jallianwala Bagh.
36. *Gora* is also famously a discussion of the interrelation between the liberal Brahmo sect founded by Rabindranath's father, Debendranath, and orthodox Hinduism.
37. See Jelnikar (1009) for a treatment of Yeats's self-identification with the English in respect to the viewpoint from which he regarded Tagore.
38. I raise here the possibility of a certain jealousy on Yeats's part since he clearly regarded his efforts as playing a role in Tagore being awarded the Nobel Prize; Yeats was only awarded his Nobel ten years later. Yeats's negative attitude toward Tagore, though, can be found even after this.
39. On the relationship between Bengali intellectuals and Italian culture, see Beggiora (300-01).
40. Tagore's first visit to Italy was unofficial; a stopover at Brindisi in 1878.
41. Formichi would subsequently serve as Tagore's chaperone and interlocutor during his 1926 visit to Italy.
42. Visva-Bharati became a university in 1951.
43. Tucci left Visva-Bharati rather abruptly, regarding it as "one of the greatest disappointments of my life" (Dutta and Robinson 275).
44. Yeats composed "marching songs" for the movement. Though Yeats has also been criticized for accepting the Goethe Medal from Frankfurt in 1934 during the Nazi period, his acceptance had more to do with his admiration for Goethe, who, one might note, was an Honorary Member of the Royal Irish Academy, than political considerations.
45. Cf. Dutta and Robinson (277-80) for the background to this trip.
46. Yeats's poetry remains at the centre of the Irish educational canon; the opening lines of *The Lake Isle of Innisfree* are printed in Irish passports, and in 2016 the Irish Naval Service commissioned a new offshore patrol vessel, the LÉ William Butler Yeats. Several universities and university buildings in India and Bangladesh have been named after Tagore and adaptations of his works are regularly featured in Hindi and Bengali cinema, including the 2012 Bengali film *Nobel Chor* (*Nobel Thief*) about the theft of his Nobel medal from a museum in 2004.

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