Nostalgia and Autobiographies: Reading Rabindranath Tagore's *Jīban'smṛti* (1912) and *Chelebelā* (1937)[1]

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Abstract

Nostalgia as a form of consciousness or a feeling is in more than one way connected with literature and the arts. Fred Davis in his foundational monograph Yearning for Yesterday *claims a two-way relationship between them: "[...] in its culturally crystalized, symbolically transmuted form, nostalgia is as much a device of art as an effect of its exercise" (Davis 1979: 74). Indeed, not just literature and the arts, but also film, fashion, architecture, and so many other fields of cultural production display a marked propensity to ally with nostalgia in their relation to the past. In narratives, it does not seem far-fetched to surmise that this link is particularly strong in genres that are explicitly designed to commemorate the past, such as biographies and, even more, autobiographies.*

The present article is thus an attempt to explore the notion of nostalgia and the mechanisms of autobiographical writing, and link the two to each other. Thereupon I will gauge the role of nostalgia in Rabindranath Tagore's (1861–1941) autobiographical writings, a story that gains complexity by Tagore's cult status in Bengali culture and his concurrent proneness to be appropriated as an object of collective nostalgia. In a separate step, some of Tagore's ideas about remembrance and the literary process will be compared to nostalgia, yielding the somewhat paradoxical finding that though these have a lot in common, nostalgia as a concept is unassimilable to Tagore's aesthetical ideas and remains an external category. As such, however, nostalgia operates on various levels in Tagore's life-writings and their reception, creating nostalgic loops and resulting in what I call a form of hyper-nostalgia that has come to wrap the Tagore experience.

[1] Draft versions of this article were read at the ECSAS at Warsaw in 2016 and the workshop "The space between the lines: Exploring gender, performance, history and archive in auto/bio/graphical writing from South Asia" at Torino University in 2017. I thank the participants of those events for their valuable input and criticism.

Nostalgia

Nostalgia, in today's current usage, is an affective kind of remembrance that bestows the thing that is remembered with an emotional surplus and combines a rather positive memory with a sense of loss, usually resulting in a "bitter-sweet" sensation. One of the most prominent features of such nostalgia is the filtering of the past in view of the present. It is safe to say that in modern societies, nostalgia, like history, is one of the dominant modes of handling the past in both individual and collective domains, and forms a part of what we may more generally refer to as cultures of remembrance. One could even say that the mechanisms of narrativization, of balancing in- and exclusions, following Hayden White's insights, are something that nostalgia and history share – while of course one must hasten to add that these function to very different degrees and tend to be very differently valued.

A category in many ways related to, and yet quite distinct from and opposed to historical thinking, nostalgia has a very curious history. The conceptual development of nostalgia, literally "pain for the far-away", displays some interesting turns and shifts which, though well-known,[2] deserve to be shortly introduced.[3] Nostalgia was originally coined in 1688 by a Swiss physician, Johann Hofer, from Greek *nostos* (home) and *algia* (disease), as a denomination for a physical illness that beset Swiss mercenaries in those days once they were away from home (Davis 1979: 1–3). Nostalgia proved contagious and spread to other populaces. Scotts, English, Laplanders, Austrians, and Napoleon's army suffered from it, and it became a familiar diagnosis with 19th century psychologists. As Kimberley Smith emphasizes in extension of Davis's argument, nostalgia was not just a new name for something that had always existed, but evolved into a syndrome that was related to the rise of modernity (Smith 2000: 510). The rapid change of living conditions and the increasing requirement of geographic mobility connected with modernity crucially contributed to the spread of nostalgia.

Two major shifts happened to the concept in the process. One was its altered definition in terms of time rather than space:

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[2] Cf., e.g., the Wikipedia entries in languages like English, German, Italian, Russian and French (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nostalgia, accessed on February 26, 2018), which all give versions of the history of the concept (but not so those in Danish, Spanish and Dutch).

[3] I follow Fred Davis (1979) and Kimberly Smith (2000) who both present detailed genealogies of the concept and discuss the delineations of nostalgia in medical, psychological and sociological literature from the 17th to the 20th century.

> *"Once defined simply as a desire to return home, to a specific place, nostalgia was gradually being conceptualized as a longing to return to a former time – and usually a time the patient only imagined to be better"* (Smith 2000: 512).

The other shift was the aestheticization of nostalgia, i.e. its making into an emotion with mildly melancholic but also soothing qualities to be relished leisurely. Kimberley Smith exemplifies this shift by pointing at a passage of Marcel Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* of 1906–22 (Smith 2000: 514). In a way, this hint at Proust signals yet another shift by demonstrating that nostalgia had developed into a bourgeois, classy sentiment, potentially in line with other strategies of self-alienation for aesthetic effect such as the dandy-like practice of flânerie. Nostalgia was now also a "privilege of the sensitive, introspective (and largely inactive) intellectual" (Smith 2000: 518) and had thus covered a long way from its first hosts, the Swiss mercenaries.

Nostalgia can assume individual or collective forms. Freed from its limiting and dismissive uses that imply some kind of manipulation and deny nostalgia any proper legitimacy in representing the past ("just nostalgic"), nostalgia emerges in Fred Davis's research as an extremely widespread and fundamental form of consciousness or feeling for the past, particularly in modern societies that are characterized by rapid change. Putting into perspective the general prejudice that nostalgia is false consciousness[4], Davis normalizes it as a mechanism with identity-stabilizing functions, helping to tackle individual or collective ruptures in life, and common not to particular age-groups or classes, but pretty much all-pervasive in modern societies.[5] He also introduces a useful distinction between three levels of nostalgia: the first level catches nostalgia in the act, while the second denotes reflexive nostalgia that questions the accuracy of the nostalgic effect, and the third features interpreted nostalgia that involves meta-level theorizing about nostalgia (Davis 1979: 17ff.).

[4] Particularly from a Marxist and leftist vantage point; cf. Davis (1979: 109) and Smith (2000: 507).

[5] Davis's reference is mainly to US American society in the 1970s but he cautiously generalizes his findings for modern (western) societies; he does so in sharp contradistinction, however, to traditional societies as he asserts through a supportive quotation from Russell Baker: "Asian villagers living for generations in one place would be baffled by nostalgia. It is an affliction of traveling races who do not like where they have arrived and have no taste for the next destination." (Davis 1979: 50) – a strong and evocative statement that, however, appears to be far too sweeping and would only apply to certain forms of collective nostalgia. As for the identity-stabilizing function of nostalgia seen from the angle of trial-based experimental psychology, cf. the recent publications of a team of US and UK psychologists, such as Constantine Sedikides et al. (2008), or Matthew Vess et al. (2012).

Nostalgia and Autobiography

As I claimed initially following Fred Davis, nostalgia is intricately connected with arts and literature, and particularly, as I conjecture in extension of his remarks, with genres that reflect about the past such as the autobiography. Belonging to the larger category of life-narrations, autobiography is special in that it implies as a rule the splitting of the self into a narrating and an experiencing I.[6] The former addresses the latter in a mode of retrospection and usually engages in an attempt to construe some kind of identity and continuity across the crevices and ruptures of life. As Monika Horstmann points out, autobiography encompasses the writing self's present and future as well (Horstmann 2003: 143), which supply the frame for reflections about the past. This basic structure of autobiography is very similar to what Davis calls "life review", i.e. the retrospective evaluation and explanation of one's life usually taking place in its last third. Such life reviews are an exercise which serves settling issues and making peace with oneself and one's environment, and is inherently nostalgia-bound (Davis 1979: 79f.).

So on the one hand, autobiographies may very well cover extravert aspects such as the dutiful documentation out of ethical considerations, the didactic function of conserving one's example and insights for posteriority, or the articulation of status claims or self-assertion through authoritative representation. As Gita Dharampal-Frick remarks, Gandhi, true to his slogan "my life is my message", consistently strove to set up an example for society in his life (Dharampal-Frick 2011: 560), and this is quite literally true for his famous autobiography as well. [7] On the other, however, autobiographies may also turn out to be literary versions of rather introvert life reviews. In turn, if such introvert life reviewing on the basis of individual remembering can be made out as the driving impulse of an autobiography, we have to ask how this introversion is extraverted by an author's act of making it public rather than keeping it hidden in the manner of a diary, and whether and how this brings back collective remembering through the backdoor. In a nutshell, how do authors tackle the paradox of meaning something to be private and personal and still exposing it to a larger public?

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[6] Vogt (1990: 71): "erzählendes" and "erlebendes Ich" are the German terms. For a discussion, cf. Schaflechner (2018: 114f.).

[7] Gandhi's *Experiments with Truth* (written from 1925-29 in their original Gujarati version) would seem to be driven by a mix of these three motivations. According to Monika Horstmann's interpretation, Gandhi in this text and elsewhere re-appropriated techniques of hagiography and thereby promoted the idolatry that had developed around his person (Horstmann 2003: 150f.).

Quite naturally, then, making accounts of one's life public raises doubts about the introspective nature of the exercise and may make it seem hypocritical. A breach of a basic distinction between private and public seems to lie at the root of autobiographic writing, which by its very structure converts the one into the other. Such display of something usually kept concealed evokes misgivings of centering attention on the self in undue measure and thus of being self-aggrandizing. Hence, and even more than authorial prefaces in general, introductory paratexts to autobiographies can be expected to be a fertile ground for disclaimers of all kinds.

This seems all the more true for South Asia where the autobiography is a rather late arrival in the canon of literary forms. Life narrations of the hagiographic kind abound in the classical and modern literatures, right from the *Rāmāyaṇa* and Buddhist literature via an immense output of hagiography to the present day (Horstmann 2003: 145f.). But full-scale autobiographies – barring very few examples such as some Persian works by kings and nobles at the Mughal court, or exceptional texts such as Banarsidas's 17th century *Ardhakathānak* – enter the scene only in the 19th century by way of colonial contact. Be it due to the contention made by some critics (too obviously ideological not to be questioned) that modesty and the lack of individualism prevented such initiatives, or to the acute awareness of the paradoxical nature of the enterprise, the genre seems to have been held in suspicion by many of its South Asian practitioners. Calaṃ (1894–1979), for instance, a central protagonist of Telugu literature in the twentieth century, supplies a good example of a disclaiming paratext by boldly proclaiming in the introduction to his autobiography:

> *"I hate autobiographies. By writing an autobiography one thinks that he is someone important to the world, did great service to the people; if he did not tell the world about it, his greatness would not be known; [and] if it is not known, it would be a damage to the world, I think.*
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> *Why was I born? Once I was born, why did I not die immediately? Why did I pollute my surroundings [English in the original] for such a long time? To write one's story shamelessly is a thing that cannot be forgiven"* (Calaṃ 1994: 4).[8]

Adopting a genre despite hating it, molding it to one's needs and concerns, adducing exterior motivations in the service of society, using the form to set up models to follow or – more interestingly – not to follow, or even resisting the appellation "autobiography" were some of the options open to authors that

[8] I thank Heiko Frese for the English translation of this passage.

somewhat paradoxically served a common goal: that of carving out a space in vernacular writing cultures for what I would still call the autobiographical mode.

Nostalgia and Autobiography in Bengal

If modernity brought abundant change and much disruption, colonialism brought no less change and arguably more disruption: ideal conditions, one should say, for nostalgia to thrive. With 19th and 20th century Bengal being the epitome of a culture under the impact of colonialism, it is not far-fetched to explore nostalgia in Bengal. And indeed, the idea of looking at the role of nostalgia in aspects of Bengali culture along such lines is not exactly new. Dipesh Chakrabarty, to quote just one example, in his chapter on *āḍḍā* in *Provincializing Europe*, identifies this practice of informal spirited gatherings, thought of as "quintessentially Bengali", as a major topos of cultural nostalgia triggered by anxieties of the present (Chakrabarty 2000: 181f., 213) – anxieties that Bengalis and particularly Calcuttans, as common stereotypes have it, are sometimes said to be particularly prone to. In another context, though without explicitly referring to nostalgia, Chakrabarty deals with literary historian Dinesh Chandra Sen's sentimental return to the pre-modern Bengal of Chandidas, resulting in what in the present context one might describe as nostalgic historiography. Chakrabarty compares this with poet Jibanananda Das's turning to a *rūpasī bāṃlā*, beautiful Bengal, that would equally yield an analysis in terms of nostalgia, also since Jibanananda's poems are satiated with folk images (Chakrabarty 2004: 678–679) which are, as Fred Davis remarks, often used for the creation of nostalgic sentiments (Davis 1979: 92).

The present article aspires to add to such studies by making the focus on nostalgia explicit and precise, and by examining the concept in the light of two particular texts so as to establish the link between nostalgia and autobiography. What it cannot do, though extremely desirable, is to go beyond the trappings of the nostalgia paradigm by looking out for its semantic equivalents in Bengali. A word like *pichuṭān* comes to mind, literally the "pull behind". The word's etymology is unclear but it is not unlikely that it is of recent origin and was invented to function as an equivalent of nostalgia. Beyond analysing the more or less successful career of such a neologism (though admittedly a very nice and elegant one), the real task would be to sketch the semantic field of emotional vocabulary in Bengali around notions of loss, remembering, retrospective longing and incorporation, together with a diachronic genealogy in texts and narratives. Only then can one hope to locate nostalgia properly in Bengali idioms, or alternatively show how its space is blocked by other overlapping or competing notions. Such a two-way approach would be needed to balance the all-too-

pervasive measuring of particular cultural enunciations against perceived global categories. Such 'measuring against' global categories with a European legacy is a biased procedure that can only be balanced by doing the reverse simultaneously. I would not call this 'provincializing', but perhaps 'balancing Europe' in a kind of counterfactual trial set-up, given that beyond any doubt it is mapping against concepts of European origin that is the order of the day, both in research and in the "field". Having laid out these limitations in tackling "nostalgia", and without any nostalgic remorse for a study-that-could-have-been (if nostalgia can also inhabit the conjunctive mode), I now proceed to outlining some further limitations with regard to the second key word of this article, autobiography.

Tagore is known as a pioneer in many fields, but he definitely was not the first autobiographer in British India or in Bengali literature. The first full-fledged specimen of this genre, preceding his first reminiscences by more than three decades, was Rassundari Debi's *Āmār jīban* ('my life', 1876), the spectacular life report of a self-taught literate house wife.[9] Also other women's autobiographies had started to appear.[10] Among male autobiographers, Brahmo Samaj notables were particularly active. In the Tagore family itself, Rabindranath's father Debendranath Tagore had published his *Ātmajībanī* in 1898, and Rajnarayan Basu's *Ātmacarit*, written in or shortly after 1875, appeared in 1909.[11] However, if it were our task to chart out precisely the location of Tagore's writings in the greater context of life narrations on the Indian subcontinent, then such a genealogy of the autobiography could not stop at name-dropping these references but would have to admit for precursors in various literary forms. Alokeranjan Dasgupta has argued, in an article on biography in India, that autobiographical accents are spread over a large body of pre-19th century *bhakti* literature in Bengali and other new Indo-Aryan literatures, even though the autobiography proper was a "derivative *genre*" (Dasgupta 1979: 4). Similarly, from a postmodernist viewpoint, Malhotra and Lambert-Hurley, in their introduction to a book on gender and autobiography in South Asia, take in the criticism that the term 'autobiography' may cause exclusions and in fact amount to an act of epistemic violence if forced upon South Asian articulations

[9] Cf. Tanika Sarkar's detailed study of this text (Sarkar 1999).
[10] Women's autobiographies on the Indian subcontinent have recently found a lot of attention, not only in the English sphere but also in vernacular research. For two Bengali expositions, one dealing exclusively with Hindu women's autobiographies and the other an anthology containing also "life writings" of a majority of Muslim women, see Datta (2006) and Ākhˡtār & Bhaumik (1998).
[11] See Basu (1995: 1–171) for the text and Baridbaran Ghosh's editorial remarks: Bāridˡbaraṇ Ghoṣ: 'Sampādakīẏa'. In: Basu (1995: V–XI), IXf.

of the self (Malhotra and Lambert-Hurley 2015: [4]). These precautions are apt to heed in the following, particularly given Rabindranath's denial of the genre assignation.

In approaching the topic, I assume that Tagore's writings operate in a climate that is fully aware of the newly established genre of autobiography and thus entertain a highly reflected and dialectic relationship with it. While taking his denial of the genre seriously, I however also contend that the normativity inherent in Tagore's perception of the genre (let us call this autobiography^{i}: a quasi-historical, self-centred and factual life report) is far more confined than what recent debates on the topic would allow to be included under the term (autobiography^{ii}: life-narrations in which the self splits up into an experiencing and a narrating I). Therefore I stick to calling his writings autobiographical – deemphasizing the designation by restricting it to adjectival use – in this latter sense of autobiography^{ii}, and will use the concept in order to designate the narrative mode and particular structure of self-reference it entails.

Tagore's Autobiographical Writings

Rabindranath Tagore was thoroughly aware of the autobiographical production in Bengali, but nevertheless foreshadowed above-quoted Chalam in being suspicious of a genre that for him seemed to bear testimony of an undue European infatuation with life writings. In his *Cāritra-pūjā* (1907) he claimed that "In Europe, considerable energy is spent in writing biographies of men in power. We may indeed call Europe biomanic" (quoted from Bhattacharya & Chakravorty 1979: 23). When he wrote about his life at different points, he did so by distancing himself from the genre: in sharp contradistinction to some of the then existing autobiographies, Rabindranath Tagore's autobiographical writings refused to be called thus and thereby to fall into the category of such promotional documents of men in power, claiming instead to be exercises in literature (in the sense of *belles lettres*).

To be sure, there was no reason for his autobiographical texts to promote their author's popularity – Tagore was all-too well-known in Bengal even in 1912, aged 50, when he set about writing his *Jīban'smṛti* (reminiscences of life), a year before the Nobel award; and he had become a monumental celebrity in 1937, four years before his death, when he authored *Chelebelā* (childhood). These two are the texts coming closest to a common understanding of autobiography; the essays written between 1904–1940 that were compiled under the

title of *Ātmaparicaẏ* in his works (Ṭhākur 1996²) contain random reflections on his role as a poet but little life narratives.[12]

What motivated Tagore to pen down his reminiscences in both cases was different: a wish to collect the "raw material of literature" his life had yielded in the first, and the behest of an editor to write something for children in the second. It certainly was not any claim to fame, for famous he already was; nor was it any strong urge to force his own explanations on any events or give his own spin to certain narratives, because he had already had ample space in the abundance of his other writings to achieve such things. He had no such weapons to wield, it appears. And indeed, in keeping with his claims as stated in his foreword, there is a certain genuine humility about Tagore's autobiographical texts that appears to ward off any misgivings about self-aggrandizement. There is a certain casualness to his narration and a complete lack of any self-gratulatory rhetoric – this very casualness in general being one of the outstanding qualities in Tagore's writings, or at least prose writings.

The Paratexts

But before taking a closer look at Tagore's life narrations proper, the respective authorial prefaces deserve some attention. Both are very self-conscious and programmatic, and it is in them that Tagore sets out to settle the status and generic confines of his texts. Here are excerpts from the one to *Jīban'smr̥ti*:

> *"I do not know who paints the pictures of life on memory's canvas. But whoever it may be, what he is painting are pictures, meaning that he is not sitting there with his brush simply to make a faithful copy of all that is happening. He takes in and leaves out so many things according to his own taste. He renders so many big things small and small things big. He doesn't hesitate at all to arrange earlier things later and later ones earlier. In short, painting pictures is his task, not writing history [itihās]. [...] But though the attempt to gather precise history from memory's storehouse may be fruitless, there is an intoxication [neśā] in looking over the pictures, a fascination which got hold of me. [...] There is nothing in these memories which is worthy of being eternally remembered. [... But] if that which has blossomed into pictures in one's own memory can be made to blossom in words, it is worth a place in literature. [...] These memory pictures are also such literary material. To take them as an attempt to write an autobiography [jīban'br̥ttānta] would be a mistake. In such a view these writings are incomplete and useless"* [Ṭhākur 1994: 411f.].

[12] Another source of autobiographical information, but of course very different in nature from an autobiography, is the corpus of Tagore's travel accounts and letters.

In these lines, apart from the typical display of modesty ("nothing in these memories which is worthy of being eternally remembered") so common in authorial prefaces,[13] what is most conspicuous is the setting apart of memories, or "pictures of life on the canvas of memory" (*smr̥tir paṭe jībaner chabi*), from history (*itihās*). Unlike history – and strikingly close to nostalgia –, these memories do not obey any rigid chronology and cannot claim faithfulness in representing the outer facts of life. They are processed differently and adhere, to paraphrase Tagore's words, to a separate level of consciousness, thereby gaining representativeness of a different order. Therefore he denies them the status of autobiography, a genre he subsumes under the larger regime of history.

We can connect these remarks with other statements on the role of literature in Tagore's essays to find a clue to his project. In 'Literature and its Judge', written in the first decade of the 20th c, i.e. shortly before *Jīban'smr̥ti,* he argues that literature is not representation of the world but rather a transformative reassemblage, built by selectively appropriating the world through the human mind. "The mind makes natural things into mental ones; literature makes these mental things into literary ones."[14] The true poet, according to Tagore, is the one who manages to isolate the true bits and pieces of reality, whatever is emotionally and aesthetically relevant, and who from these bits and pieces creates a truer-than-life picture of mental substance to the readers – truer than life because the irrelevant, superfluous details of reality have been filtered out. This procedure constitutes literature, whose purpose is to distill artistic truth from the flow of time, thus immortalizing it and making it into a common property of the literary community or, more generally, humanity. In this way, *Jīban'smr̥ti* becomes an exercise in trans-creating recollections of his personal life into literary substance. The same is true for his *Chelebelā*, written 25 years later. In the introduction Tagore states an overlap with *Jīban'smr̥ti*, although *tār svād ālādā – sarobarer saṅge jhar·nār mato:* "Its taste is different, like a lake is different from a creak" (*Chelebelā,* p. 4).

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[13] Cf. my article on introductory paratexts in modern South Asia (Harder 2016) for a general examination of such displays of modesty. See also the introductory sentences to Tagore's *Ātmaparicaẏ*, a text not anywhere coming close to an autobiography, but apparently commissioned as such: "I have been asked to write my autobiography. I will not take any extra space here to display unnecessary modesty. I have to state in the beginning that only certain special people have the special characteristics required for writing an autobiography – I don't. There is no harm in that, though, because I cannot see anybody's benefit in [reading] a detailed description of my life." (Ṭhākur 1996²: 137). This passage is a perfect example for the paradoxical inversions of modest gestures that one can encounter in introductory paratexts or passages.

[14] I take this quotation from Rahul Peter Das's translation in Tagore (1997: 112).

We will get back to these statements and link the ideas of literariness and nostalgia that together, I argue, are the central impulses that drive Tagore's rather ego-weak autobiographical writings. But before jumping to the conclusions, let me now present the texts.

Jīban'smṛti (Reminiscences, 1912)

Tagore's *Jīban'smṛti* (*JS*), though disqualified from being called an autobiography by the author himself, is a rather chronological account of Tagore's childhood, youth and early adulthood. It is divided into 44 chapters of quite heterogeneous nature, the range of titles being from "The normal school", "Beginning to write poetry" and "The atmosphere at home" to "An essay on songs" and "Bankimchandra". Broadly speaking, and in accordance with his personal trajectory, the dominant topics in the early chapters are his schooling, domestic life and family, whereas in the later ones more emphasis is placed on his literary endeavors, travels and contemporaries. He depicts the life in the huge Tagore mansion in Jorasanko, ironically reports his school life and furnishes humorous portraits of his teachers, narrates his travels to the Himalaya with his illustrious father Debendranath Tagore (1817–1905), the Brahmo Samaj leader – and passages like these have arguably become some of the best-known pieces of Bengali literature to this day.

When setting out in search of nostalgia, it needs to be said that Tagore's reminiscences are anything but excessively sentimental. Or if there is sentimentality, it is mitigated by a certain mild irony that is typical of much of Tagore's prose – in such a way that some parts read like a picaresque novel (*Schelmenroman*). What finds the narrator's approval in the boy he once was is his highly unorthodox habit of reading things he would not fully understand, filling the gaps with his imagination, and more generally his deep-seated dislike for all school learning (*JS*: 437–39; *R*: 73–77).[15] But on the whole, the adult, middle-aged narrator looks back upon the capricious, naughty, dreamy and sometimes conceited child of the past and passes lots of critical judgments on him.

This is particularly so when it comes to the erstwhile boy's writing skills. To quote just a few examples, his mind in his young days, Tagore writes, consisted of "hot vapor" and "lazy fancies" (*JS*: 458f.; *R*: 130). His review of Michael Madhusudan Datta's *Megh'nād'badh'kābya,* written at age 16, makes the 50-year old narrator remark: "As acidity is characteristic of the unripe mango so is abuse of the immature critic" (*JS*: 466; *R*: 150). "The writings of an age like the

[15] I give references for both *Jīban'smṛti* (JS) and the *Reminiscences* (*R*), the latter being the English translation of the former. The quotations given in this section are usually translated from the Bengali original by me (HH), though in a few cases I have followed *R*.

one when I started writing cannot possibly be fit for publication", he adds (*JS*: 467; *R*: 152). He is ashamed of besmirching the pages of the *Bhāratī*, "not just because of immature writings but because of its haughty impudence, its weird excesses and its high sounding artificiality". The only thing that was laudable was the enthusiasm that drove him (*utsāher bisphār*) (*JS*: 467, *R*: 153).

So Rabindranath strongly counteracts the idea of any supposed literary genius in the young boy he once was, and there is no sense of loss, constitutive of any nostalgic feelings, in his re-visiting the early stages of becoming a writer. The nostalgia sits in other niches of the reminiscences: not on the level of his expressions, but rather his *im*pressions at that age – his dreamlike imaginations, contemplations and feelings in a world of the past that was now lost. In the first pages of *Jīban'smr̥ti*, he describes a huge banyan which he had imagined as the home to various ghosts and supernatural beings:

> *"But alas, where is that banyan tree now! Neither is there the pond which served to mirror the presiding goddess of this forest-lord; many of those who used to bathe there have also followed the shade of the banyan tree. And that boy has grown up and is counting the shade and sunshine of good and bad days in the immense complexity after having pulled down the roots from all around him"* (JS 415).[16]

This loss hints also at the larger process of speedy urbanization that Calcutta witnessed during Rabindranath's lifetime, and comes up again when he comments upon what formerly used to be the house's garden and likens this childhood's garden with paradise. There also used to be a husking pedal in that garden: "Accepting the absolute defeat of village life in Kolkata, this husking pedal had some day silently covered its face [out of shame] and died" (*JS* 417).[17] All these images are intense enough to be perceived as first level nostalgia according to Fred Davis's scheme introduced in the beginning, but they also come with various degrees of reflection and thus simultaneously arch into the second level of reflexive nostalgia.

A similar loss Tagore deplores is that of social institutions like the *maj'lis*, refined social gathering, which he sees on the verge of extinction. The stream of visitors coming into the house now seemed like a thing of the older generation, and was not being seen to be replaced by European-style sociality since

[16] The imagery of the last sentence is not quite clear; cf. the smoother, but less exact translation in the *Reminiscences*: "And that boy, grown older, is counting the alternations of light and darkness which penetrate the complexities with which the roots he has thrown off on all sides have encircled him." (*R* 13)

[17] Cf. the smoother English translation: "This last vestige of rural life has since owned defeat and slunk away ashamed and unnoticed." (*R* 18)

none had the means to establish it; the visitors in the house now were like "visitors from some other country" (*JS*: 456f.). This description is nostalgic indeed and tallies with Dipesh Chakrabarty's observation that *āḍḍā* has so often been imagined in terms of a gradual disappearance and a kind of residue of the premodern (Chakrabatry 2000: 182).

But rather than such outer material and social changes, it is a particular vision of childhood that drives Tagore's occasional fits of nostalgia in *Jīban'smr̥ti*. This announces itself in the first pages already when he describes the acrimony with which he kept watering some custard apple seeds in that garden and, all wonder-struck, observed their gradual sprouting into plants, summarizing that childhood was the period of wonder and adulthood came as disillusionment (*JS*: 418, *R*: 21). Elsewhere, he evokes the "great advantage of first vision [*paricaẏ*]" (*JS*: 444, *R*: 92) which, in its freshness and intensity, is unparalleled by anything that might follow. Further on, he offers an analogy of youth by likening it to the history of the earth: the human youth, like that of the earth, is equivalent to the turbulent times before things go crusty (*JS*: 466, *R*: 149f.). And he adds metaphors of seasons in the end of *Jīban'smr̥ti*, in a sort of summary of his reminiscences, by portraying his life thus far as a sequence of the monsoon and the autumn – the rains, as we hardly need to spell out, standing for turbulences, fluidity and fermentation, and the autumn for reaping, completion, perhaps containing also a bit of the (European) seasonal nostalgia of looking back before things go into their winter sleep (*JS*: 511f.; *R*: 264f.). Again most of these instances can be assigned to Davis's reflexive nostalgia.

What is striking is Rabindranath's almost complete silence about his wedding and marital life: he just takes one sentence to soberly record the fact that he got married (*JS*: 501; *R*: 239) and adds a remark, a little later, on his *nabayauban*, "new-born youth" (*JS*: 501; *R*: 241), leaving open all kinds of interpretations, and thereby perhaps also consciously signaling the limits of what, in such reminiscences, can be confided to a reading public.

Chelebelā (Childhood, 1937)

The sentiment of nostalgia, we may suppose, is easily transmitted to an adult reading public sharing a disrupted past and a childhood to revisit. But how about nostalgia when addressing children? Let us shortly turn then to *Chelebelā* (*CB*), the "creak" version of the "lake" of Rabindranath's reminiscences, as it were. The subject matter of both narrations being largely the same, we can neglect a summary of its contents and turn to the differences in its treatment right away.

In *Chelebelā*, the difference between then and now is very prominently marked, more so than in *Jīban'smr̥ti*, and to the point of becoming a constitutive pattern on which the narration rests. This makes sense insofar as children can be assumed not to share the past as a template of reflection for the present and need to be attuned to thinking in different temporalities. The introduction of old-day Calcutta from the first chapter of *Chelebelā*, would indeed seem trivial for an adult audience: the narrator here explains that there was then no current, and in the evening lamps and candles had to be lighted; nor was there tab water, all water had to be brought from the river; people were far less busy, also the babus going to work (*CB*: 10).[18] The former scarcity of entertainment in the city prompts a similar kind of passage:

> *"Today, entertainment in the city is like the stream of a river. There are no breaks in between. Every day there is cinema somewhere at some time, whoever wants attends for little expenses. In those days, a yātrā performance was like digging into the sand of a dry river every two-three kilometers to draw some water in a bucket. It lasted only for a few hours, wayfarers suddenly turned up and thoroughly quenched their thirst"* (*CB* 30).

Also changes in the public space are carefully noted down, e.g. the disappearance of itinerant traders, snake charmers etc.

> *"The quietness of the noontime is no longer, nor the pherioẏālā [itinerant trader] of that time – who perhaps pulls a riksha today"* (*CB*: 50).

Likewise there are passages on snake charmers and performers with dancing bears who are all no more but "left the country, greeting the cinema from afar" (*CB*: 52). The crevices of rurality in the city, whose gradual disappearance also features in the reminiscences, as well as the roof-tops gain comparatively more space as the realm of the supernatural in *Chelebelā*:

> *"We can clearly see that a difference between those days and today has come about when we see that nowadays, neither are people frequenting the roofs of the houses, nor are ghosts. I told before that the Brahmadaitya, not being able to stand on atmosphere of excessive learning, had run away. The rumour about the corner of the roof being the place where his leisurely foot rested gave way for the quarrel of crows over the left-over kernel of a mango. The life of the humans had become restricted to the quadrangular pack boxes made of the walls of the lower floors"* (*CB*: 45).

[18] Again in *CB*, p. 24: "When we were small, the city of Calcutta was not as awake in the evenings as it is now."

The way the adults in those days used to keep the children away from their activities (*CB*: 26f.) is narrated to the young readers with a sort of complicity. And finally, there are very visual, indeed picture-like passages like the following at the end of chapter 10 (*CB*: 58):

> *"The evening meetings came to an end. I always was a late-waker. Everybody went to bed, and I kept wandering around like the disciple of the Brahmadaitya-ghost. The whole neighborhood was quiet. In moonlit nights, the shadow of the rows of trees on the roof were like works of mosaic [ālpanā]. Beyond the roof the Sisu tree top was wavering in the breeze, the leaves were rustling [jhil·mil·]. I have no idea why the thing that held my gaze most was a little rooftop chamber with a sloping roof on the sleeping house in the front lane – standing there as if pointing its finger at something.*
>
> *It became 1, 2 o'clock at night. From the main street in front came the sound of balo hari! Haribol!"*[19]

It is hard to be sure about the effect such a passage had on young readers. The appreciation of the nostalgic impulse necessitates a distance of perspective that young readers would not usually dispose of. In greater likelihood it was the uncanniness of the situation on the roof at night, like a ghost, that impressed his readers. One can suppose, however, that the emotionality of the memory on the author's side, an instance of first-level nostalgia, translates into a heightened intensity of the depiction. As a matter of fact, it appears that it is in such passages that Tagore comes closest to the particular desire that motivated him to write down his memories: writing about his own childhood for children as an excuse to revisit it himself and to cast it into literature. This allowed him to collect the still lives he himself experienced, with the self pretty much receding into the background, becoming mere witness, spectator or container of an enchanted world greater than himself.

Tagore's Nostalgia

It results from these observations that Tagore's life-writings rely on nostalgia as one of their main emotional foundations. The adult revisits the congealed images of his past and finds enjoyment in casting them into an aesthetic form. But if such a statement may by now seem quite unproblematic, it does not imply that Tagore would have subscribed to such an understanding of his reminiscences as nostalgia. We have stated the correspondences between the par-

[19] The same scene is described in *Jīban'smr̥ti,* p. 466 (*R*: 149): the experiencing I is up all night and hears the *haribol*s from the Nimtala burning ghat on the roof above Chitpur Road, but in direct comparison the evocative effect of the *Chelebelā* version is greater.

ticular kind of filtering past memories that underlies nostalgia, and the mental processing behind Tagore's "pictures of life". Both are selective, undergo some amount of editing and transformation and are emotionally charged. However, the evaluations of these transformed experiences are different. What is at stake is the truth value, or the ontological status, of nostalgic remembrance.

Following Davis, nostalgia is to be acknowledged as a fundamental way of dealing with the past. It is a social fact on individual and collective levels, and needs to be taken into account seriously in social sciences and cultural studies. Nostalgia plays an important role in identity constructions by bestowing continuity on them. But its truth value in terms of adequate representation of the past is questionable since it lacks the critical tools of historical inquiry. And it is a sense of loss and absence that is constitutive of nostalgia – all it can achieve is a virtual proxy-presence, a faint reflection or *Abglanz*.

For Tagore, by contrast, those pictures of life are a presence. He conceives of them as a truer-than-life essence. This seems quite in tune with his humanist belief in the centrality of beauty as constituted *exclusively* through the human mind and finding its abode in literature and art.[20] In this sense, Tagore's literary images assume a sort of hyperreal status – even though we may doubt that he would have agreed to see them as *simulacra* in the postmodernist sense.[21] For the present argument that means that reading Tagore's recollections as nostalgic may claim validity as long as the difference between the ontological baggage that comes with this concept and Tagore's humanist and idealist conceptions of art is made transparent.

Another point that deserves attention is whether or not Tagore's nostalgia is a leisurely and privileged sentiment that can, from a Marxist point of view, be debunked as false consciousness. For even though Davis dispels the notion that nostalgia is inherently non-progressive, one can still argue that in its Proustian sense, nostalgia flourishes in a settled and wealthy milieu. Given his upper-class background, Tagore would seem to be an easy target for such an interpretation. As a member of one of the most affluent families of Bengal at his time, he had sufficient leisure to afford reveling in nostalgia. Perhaps he also had reason to look back because in terms of finance and property, because the heyday of the Tagore family was already a thing of the past, just as the "old world" of the late 19th century.

[20] This is a point Tagore made at various times, most famously perhaps in his conversation with Albert Einstein at Caputh in 1930.

[21] A thorough discussion of this question seems fascinating but would require another full-length article at least.

However, a closer look at the texts does not support such an interpretation. Some of his memories, such as the vanishing of the old-style *majlis*, have distinct upper-class contents, but it is not the loss of classiness that Tagore deplores in his retrospection but, to the contrary, the loss of a certain informality and genuineness in these gatherings. In most of the other overtly nostalgic passages, the substance matter of the recollections is younger Rabindranath's emotional attachment and response to the world, not any longing for a past social status. Of course he was privileged in that he did not have to suffer any disruptive losses, and his living conditions certainly put his autobiographical impulses at a huge distance from the self-asserting motivations we find, for instance, in Dalit life writings that start to appear half a century later. But the loss of privileges is not what his nostalgia was about, and it does not seem that the privileges he enjoyed had any direct bearings on the nature of his nostalgia.

Hyper-nostalgia

A discussion of nostalgia and Rabindranath Tagore could not possibly come full circle if we did not at least mention the various additional loops connected with it. For Tagore is not only a producer, he is also an object of nostalgia.

In 2010, Chandranath and Mausumi Chattopadhyay edited a little book titled *Byaṅgadarśane rabīndranāth*, "Rabindranath in satirical perspective", a collection of little doggerel verses and cartoons by various authors. Rabindranath did become the target of satire during his life and after, be it in the pages of the German *Simplicissimus* or in the Bengali periodical *Śanibārer ciṭhi*. But contrary to expectations of finding traces of that alternative reception history, this book features mostly mild and humorous poems, written with a twinkle in the eyes, and more celebratory than satirical. Alakendushekhar Patri, for instance, in his "Rabi Thakur in eight lines", states that "In word and deed, in song and soul / Everywhere is he enmeshed / Bengal's water, Bengal's image / Bengal's soil, Bengal's sun".[22] Shyamali Basu contributes a poem I render in my austere prose translation:

> *"Young or old, Ravi Thakur is everyone's favorite poet / There are thousands of well-known pictures of happiness and sadness in his writings / Everybody revels in his verses, plays and stories / We got to know the world in the words and melodies of his songs / It is not easy to talk about the poet in a line / All age groups walk on the path of the poet's writings."*[23]

[22] Alakenduśekhar Patrī: ‚Āṭ lāiner rabi ṭhākur'. In: Caṭṭopādhyāẏ (2010: 51).
[23] Śyāmalī Basu: 'Tā̃r'i sure bhuban gaṛi'. In: Caṭṭopādhyāẏ (2010: 47).

Learning to see the world through Tagore, through the *pictures* in his writings, with him infused into Bengal's water, image, soil and sun – these are strong words indeed. Paraphrasing these lines, Tagore appears as one with Bengali culture and nature, and the *pictures* of his literature supply *us* – the Bengali readers or Bengali people, we are to understand – with our vision of the world.

Perceiving Tagore in terms of Bengali or Indian identity is of course not limited to the Bengali literary context, but extends into South Asian writing in English and the Bengali/South Asian diaspora. Bernd-Peter Lange (2015) presents instances from eight writers. He quotes from Anita Desai ("reading Tagore, I recreated my parents' world" – Lange 2015: 361), discusses Tagore in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* as an "identitarian prop" for preserving culture and heritage, and cites Aravinda Adiga's protagonist Mr D'Mello for whom, thinking of his youth, "the whole world seemed to be singing Tagore's verses" (Lange 2015: 363–364). Thoroughly nostalgia-driven, according to Lange, is Sunetra Gupta's *Memories of Rain* (1992), a novel narrating a return to Bengal and to childhood with Rabindranath as leitmotiv (Lange 2015: 364–366). As for critical engagements with Tagore nostalgia, Lange singles out Amit Chaudhuri who has one of his protagonists amalgamate Tagore, Vaishnava poetry, bullock carts, terracotta and Calcutta into a "primitive past". Indeed, Chaudhuri supplies many instances of what we can term second and third-order nostalgia about Tagore. And he also mentions reading Tagore's *Chhelebelā* with a mentor as a text that was first forced upon him but later made him acknowledge that "the music of a piece of writing becomes richer with the passing of time".[24]

These examples must suffice here to hint at the gigantic field of Tagore's reception, a terrain that is of course not restricted to literature but spans over practically all cultural spheres – but the present argument is limited to the realm of reading and literature. What the texts mentioned just now have in common is that all of them, naively or critically, deal with the identification of Tagore with Bengal or India. Whether Tagore actively promoted or refuted any parallelism between himself and any Bengali or Indian "mind" or "soul" is a moot point. What counts is that the cultural community of his readers (and non-readers, too) have construed him as a signifier of Bengaliness and Indianness, removed in time but still thoroughly entrenched with the present. Such strong identification added to temporal displacement or loss, as it were, creates perfect conditions for nostalgia to arise. No wonder, then, that in the reception of Tagore, cultural nostalgia is a big factor indeed.

[24] Lange (2015: 367), referring to Chaudhuri (2002: 12).

If we focus on Tagore's autobiographical writings, we can note very clearly that retrospection is involved on more than one level. The postcolonial reader looks back at Rabindranath who, in turn, looks back at his own past – or actually, to make it more complicated, the contemporaries look back at one or two parents' generations looking back at Tagore, who looks back at his life. Nostalgic retrospection multiplies. Such retrogressive moves, I argue, produce loops and cause a subtle echo effect, amplifying the resonances and blurring the temporal fixities. Fred Davis has pointed out that nostalgia itself can become the object of nostalgia in the neat phrase concluding his book, "nostalgia ain't what it used to be" (Davis 1979: 142). This is part of what is happening here: the present-day Tagore reader somehow senses that he or she is less alone than with other texts, that he or she is part of a larger community that has been engaging over generations in a continuous revisiting of Tagore and the past.

In such a perspective, reading Tagore's autobiographical writings means re-reading them, and visiting his past means re-visiting, or actually re-re-visiting it through his literary voice, our readings and those of our seniors. Feeling nostalgic in the process can mean many things at once: experiencing Tagore's nostalgia about his youth, deploring the passing away of Tagore and his times, sharing the nostalgic Tagore reception of one's seniors or of society at large. These levels overlap and interfere with each other and render the experience multidimensional; it becomes richer and more opaque at the same time. At the risk of overstretching the acoustic metaphors, one might say that the loops of nostalgia make the echoes of a murmuring collective resound with ample overtones. Such loops produce a heightened sensation, a *hyper-nostalgia* that occurs regularly with classics, but most forcefully with those classical texts that are intrinsically nostalgic themselves. Cultivating nostalgia with its affective proxy-presences can thus come close to a ritual of collective remembrance. The Tagore experience, for sure, is quite thoroughly wrapped in hyper-nostalgia today. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why indeed, with texts like *Chelebelā*, "[t]he music of a piece of writing becomes richer with the passing of time", as Amit Chaudhuri put it.

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