






The Symbol of the Sea in Rabindranath Tagore and Juan Ramón Jiménez

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Commentary

The Symbol of the Sea in Rabindranath Tagore and Juan Ramón Jiménez

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Those of us who were born inland, deep inside the continent, have a fixed memory of the first time we saw the sea, the hugeness that goes beyond anything a child can ever imagine, the roaring that seems to want to share a secret which we shall never learn. One of the constants running through the oeuvre of Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) is an allusion to the beaches of the Ganges, where the poet meditated and on which, as the laureate himself told the world in his speech of acceptance of the Swedish prize, he heard the “muse” that prompted him to compose his verses¹. On the other hand, we also know, from his numerous trips to Europe and the United States, that he was acquainted with several oceans, in addition to the Indian one, owing to the many times he sailed their waves on his journeys. Over this course, he started to make out that other boundless, shoreless ocean of which he speaks to us. He does this, for instance, in his *Gitanjali* (Song Offerings), one of his key works, of which André Gide would say that Tagore was seeking God in a “coloured reflection”², thus pointing to the keen and vibrant spirituality of this extremely famous collection of poems, published in the bard’s own translation into English a year before he received the Nobel Prize. Here, he tells us in the poem ‘Ocean of Forms’ (G 101):

I dive down into the depth of the ocean of forms,
hoping to gain the perfect pearl of the formless.³

It is also in *Gitanjali*, a book “that occupies a very special place in the heart of all Indians”⁴, that Tagore tried to bridge the diverse manifestations of the Absolute with the formless Infinite, as made clear in poem 42:

In that shoreless ocean, at thy silently listening smile
my songs would swell in melodies, free as waves, free from all bondage of words.⁵

The endlessly renewed energy of this symbol—the infinite waters—and its transmission effect among the sacred texts and poets of all ages stems from the fact that it is the origin of life. This truth is verified by science in recent times and already described thousands of years ago by ancient cosmogonies and mythologies. The sea passed to form part of our own body, of our skin, our bones, our eyes... since, essentially, almost two-thirds (65%) of our human form—and this has been known for quite some time now—are made up of water.

Without doubt, the Upanishads had a marked influence on Tagore, and their nondualism (Advaita-Vedanta) worked upon his recurrent metaphor of the aquatic Absolute, applied to the deepest recesses of human feeling: the ocean of life and energy, presented in the Prashnā Upanishad, or of death as transcendence, in the Chāndogya Upanishad, among others, as Tagore tells us in *Gitanjali* (G 69):

The same stream of life that runs through my veins night and day
runs through the world and dances in rhythmic measures. ⁶

The waves, agitation and turbulence are an illusion, whereas the ocean represents the ultimate Reality, an image which, as we have already pointed out, is present in several Upanishads ⁷. With regard to this matter, Gandhi pointed out that “One ought always to remember, while dwelling on Him, that one is but a drop, the tiniest of creatures of the ocean that is God”. At the same time, he dwelled on the image of the ocean of Being, on this connection between the Individual and the Absolute. As all sages have pointed out since Vedic times, the goal of all spiritual life is to know oneself, totally and at every instant, as Brahman, a spark of the divine, a drop in the infinite sea of God, of Truth, the only thing that exists beyond Illusion (*maya*). How can the wave be differentiated from the sea? They cannot be separated; they are two aspects of the same merged reality, in which one makes up the other, and vice versa; infinite movement is established by permanence, and the other way around: “Samsara and Nirvana,” existence is ecstasy... Since, moreover, according to the perspective of the Upanishads, not only can God be found everywhere, as many religions advocate, but He “is” everywhere, although He is not reduced to this ‘everywhere’.

There is only one way of coming into contact with the ultimate mystery, with the unknown, and that is by wandering into it, inwardly dissolving into its circle of clouds. In this sense, the interesting approach set forth by the Upanishads is neither rational nor pietistical, since they scarcely mention God or the absolute power of the human mind. They do not provide answers, nor do these revealing texts invoke faith. Rather they place us before the unknown, in the form of privileged visions, flashes of different facets of the mystery, of what cannot be apprehended through the senses or the mind, i.e. the Absolute. It is true that the Upanishads tell us that that which can be attained through human means will always carry the stigma of the relative, the limited. But they also suggest that, although the ultimate secret of the Absolute—that which lives in the largest and the smallest of things—is not humanly conceivable. This does not mean that it cannot be glimpsed at, to a point, and, all in all, lived... hence the power of meditation, induced and stimulated in different levels of expression both by the Upanishads and *Gitanjali*. Poem 87 tells us:

Oh, dip my emptied life into that ocean, plunge it into the deepest fullness.

Let me for once feel that lost sweet touch in the allness of the universe. (G 87)

Or, also in *Gitanjali*, poem 96 says:

I have tasted of the hidden honey of this lotus that expands on the ocean of light, and
thus am I blessed—let this be my parting word. (G 96) ⁸

In a more contemporary line, but one who drinks from the tradition of Tagore, it pleases me to call to mind, in relation to this poetic approach to the Absolute, another Nobel Prize-winner in

Literature (1956), a Spaniard this time, but a poet who was profoundly influenced by the mystic from Bengal to whom we have been referring so far. This meditation on the “formless form” and the other shore of the divine was to make a deep impression on an already mature Juan Ramón Jiménez.

We would do well to remember that Tagore was to have travelled to Spain in 1921, on a visit, organised by Zenobia Camprubí and her husband, Juan Ramón Jiménez, to the Residencia de Estudiantes, as was the custom among the writers and intellectuals of the time passing through Madrid; and as Tagore’s contemporary, Einstein, actually did. In this regard, many letters were exchanged between Tagore and Zenobia from 1914 to 1921, a period over which Juan Ramón Jiménez dedicated five of his poems to his admired Indian colleague. There was an explicit thirst on the part of the Spanish poet for a symbolism that differed from that of France, England or any of the other central or northern European nations, but which was Mediterranean, from the South or beyond, which is what led him to become interested in Asia. We should recall here that in his personal library there were some 80 titles from the East, among them the Vedas and the Upanishads, the Tao, or the song of Kabir, and, of course, the works of Tagore, whose reading is conspicuous in *God Desired and Desiring* (1948-1949) and in his last period. From that date on, Juan Ramón Jiménez himself talked of the need to draw inspiration from foreign poetry, thereby giving expression to a paradoxical demand: that of deepening in one’s own roots while simultaneously drawing away from them.

Indeed, there is a parallel sensibility between Platero and *The Crescent Moon*, or works such as “*La Cosecha*” and “*The Gardener*”, largely based on the recreation of a dreamed childhood reality. Juan Ramón himself spoke of the “similarity” between Andalusia and Bengal, an example of human proximity between the East and the West, of which, beyond geographical territories, we are so deeply in need today. He hastened to point out, however, that he had had no access to the writings of Tagore prior to 1913, by which date he had already written a large part of his early work. Although the Bengali’s influence is evident in his later works, as we have already pointed out, after the favourable outcome of his wife’s translations and his own comments on the verses written by Tagore. After the success of *La Luna Nueva*, the Spanish version of *The Crescent Moon*, Zenobia would sign the translation of his work and Juan Ramón would write deeply enthusiastic lyrical prologues, also collaborating with Zenobia in the “poesy” of these translations.

On his first trip to America, Juan Ramón discovered the sea, the “mirror,” in his words, of the sky “with which it glides,” and this sea started to dwell in his poetry as a transcendental symbol, and to develop in parallel with a spiritual evolution; that which is generally known as his second and especially his third period. The image of the sea as a *God Desired and Desiring*—*Dios Deseado y Deseante*—who sees and is seen by His Creation, is a recurrent motif in several of the verses of this collection, as in poems 20 and 23, for instance. What is interesting to observe at this point is that, above any other consideration or image, the sea in this lyrical space becomes simultaneously overwhelmingly material and unconceivable. Indeed, it is one of the peculiarities of symbols to act as bipolar images that link the manifest with the mysterious, the human with the divine. We know one end, we intuit... we want to discern the other; it is not a question of one being less real than the other, simply less well known. In poem 7 of *God Desired and Desiring*, “*Conciencia plena*”, he says:

Tú me llevas, conciencia plena,
deseante dios, Por todo el mundo.

En este mar tercero,

Casi oigo tu voz; tu voz del viento

Ocupante total del
movimiento; De los
colores, de las luces
Eternos y marinos.

His admiration for the sea is such that he regards it "with the eyes of the absolute" and asks himself (in his third anthology, *Tercera Antología Poética*): "Can it be only water?" Equally, in the lecture entitled "Poesía cerrada y poesía abierta" (open poetry and closed poetry), which he gave in Buenos Aires (in August of 1948), Juan Ramón Jiménez argued that "Life without the sea is incomprehensible; I, at least, cannot conceive it, and I owe all my eternities to it; the sea is always an open, sleepless life; life without the sea is a closed life, a closed poetry." This is apparent, among others, in poem 19 of *God Desired and Desiring*, "Para que yo te oiga":

"Rumor del mar
que no te oyes tú
mismo, mar, pero que te
oigo yo con este oír a
que he llegado en mi
dios deseante y
deseado y que, con él,
escucho como él".

The so-called third pinnacle of Juan Ramón Jiménez's career, pervaded with a clear Pantheist spirituality, is, indeed, governed by a direct and privileged relationship with the sea. Although the ocean had already appeared a number of times in former poems⁹, it is evident in *Animal de Fondo* and in *God Desired and Desiring*, from which we have been quoting. In his notes to the latter work, Juan Ramón Jiménez stated that his life had passed through three different stages with regard to the "idea" of God. The first comprised a "sensitive devotion", the "ecstasy of love"; the second, an "intellectual phenomenon", the "eagerness for eternity"; and of the third, in which he spoke of God as a "discovery", he said: "Today I would define the divine as a unique, just, universal conscience of the beauty that is within us and outside of us at one and the same time," and he went on to add, "and this third consciousness integrates contemplative love and eternal heroism and it surpasses them in its totality."¹⁰

Let us now put Juan Ramón Jiménez to one side so as to return to the fountainhead by quoting from another one of his poems, "Esa órbita abierta" (17):

"... como yo, dios, me mezco en
los embates de ola y rama, viento y sol,
espuma y lluvia de tu conciencia
mecedora bienandante".

This symbol of undivided absoluteness, which Juan Ramón Jiménez borrowed to a large degree from Tagore—who in turn acquired it from the experience of life in his native Bengal and from the sacred texts, such as the Upanishads—is present in the tiniest fragment of Creation. “What you see is not Brahman, but that which makes you see is Brahman,” Kenopanishad (1-4). The universal soul or Brahman, the truth behind the illusion of forms is the origin of everything, of the gods, the forces and the cosmos, and it permeates all. The fact that the divine is found in each drop is illustrated, for instance, in the Kathopanishad (III):

“The soul is like the ocean; in order for somebody to grasp it, it is not necessary for him to drink it all in. A mere drop on his tongue will communicate that knowledge.”

The concept of Brahman transcends existence, which is an illusion, *maya*, like the ocean, an image formed by the thousands of rivers which, in turn, are made up of numberless drops that transcend them all and finally merge in a visual and conceptual unit.

It is impossible to understand the Absolute, to explain the Being in words; the Upanishads which know this do not even attempt it. The Mundaka Upanishad (Two Modes of Knowing), for instance, states that “The Lord of Love is beyond any name or form. He is present in all and yet he transcends all.” Hence the image of the sea as the symbol/subject of the final reunion. But, as in all mysticism, words are but signals, hiking signs that point the way to that which has no possible formulation, summary or graphic portrayal. In this sense, poetry presents rather than communicates, since there is no possible disclosure about what lies on the other shore.

As Aurobindo pointed out with respect to the Upanishads, “There are two ways to approach the End. One is through the mind, and the other through the heart.”¹¹ In this sense, I believe that the importance of the Upanishads lies in that over and above the many formulations to travel the path of that proximity—love, faith, knowledge...—the Upanishads take one more step in the knowledge of the Absolute, which is not opposed to the void, since, like it, it is indivisible. The absolute knows not of divisions, but of emanations within itself.

The Upanishads share an intuitive approach to the radiant and indivisible absoluteness of Reality. Spanish Sanskrit scholar Joan Mascaró (Santa Margalida, Majorca, 1897-1987) made an interesting observation about these which we would like to bring up here, since it draws an engaging similarity between the cultures of the East and the West, between Christianity and Hinduism, when it says: “In the Sermon of the Mountain we can picture in our mind’s eye the disciples seated at the feet of the Master listening to the sublime Upanishads. The spirit of the Upanishads is found in the words of the Gospel ‘The kingdom of God is within you’ and in the verses of St John of the Cross in his great poem, ‘The Dark Night’”...

Without light or
guide, save that
which burned in my
heart to join my God

Joan Mascaró also explained that

Before the first Upanishads we had in India the creation of the Vedas, lyrical and spiritual visions in which the human imagination first sees the gods and expresses them in poetic creations, and later advances towards more interesting poetic and spiritual units until

arriving at the unique Brahman of the Upanishads, the supreme Unity like the One and Only God of Moses, Christianity and the Islamic religion.

The Brahman of the universe, the God that transcends time and space, but that is immanent in time and space is, according to the Upanishads, both the divinity of humans and the divinity of all things. When the transcendental Brahman is immanent in us it is called Atman. These are two names for the same soul or divinity: the Infinite is called Brahman, while the Infinite manifested in the finite and limited is called Atman. In their eternal clairvoyance the supreme masters saw an Infinite of transcendental unity and at the same time an Infinite of immanent variety.

It seems to us that Mascaró spoke of the Upanishad not as the metaphysical reflection of an old religion, but as a quality and sustenance of the future when he said:

The Clairvoyants of the Upanishads did not create a religion. Their supreme vision was so elevated that it flies over religions, over the humanisms that attempt to take their place or the scientific attitudes that want to ignore them, and soars high above human fanaticism, illusion and indifference. Their vision also goes above religious ceremonies, theologies or philosophies and presupposes a creative vision of man's mind from which everything comes...

He stated:

We become separate from that which surrounds us through our knowledge; there is a person that studies and a thing that is studied. But in love we become one with things and in the happiness of contemplation, the sense of possession, egotism and destruction disappears.

We have quoted several passages from the work of Joan Mascaró i Fornés, Sanskrit philologist and professor at the University of Cambridge, best known for his work as the translator of the Bhagavad Gita, the Dhammapada and, of course, the Upanishads, thanks to whose English version hundreds of thousands of persons have been able to access these texts over the past decades. Given that, unlike Tagore and Juan Ramón Jiménez, who need no introduction, Mascaró is practically unknown in his homeland, Spain, we believe that it might be worthwhile to include a quick biographical sketch of the man here.

Mascaró had come a long way from 1916 (to 1920), when he held his first job as secretary of the British Consulate in Majorca, to 1954, when as a consecrated Sanskrit philologist in England he read at the residence of the Dutch Queen Julianna "A Star from the East", a personal approach to the Bhagavad Gita (which he would later publish in Cambridge). Mascaró began his academic career in 1929, when he obtained a Bachelor of Arts in English literature and classical Oriental languages—Sanskrit and Pali—from Downing College. During his time in Cambridge, he met Dámaso Alonso, Jorge Guillén and Salvador de Madariaga, through whom Guillén invited him to lecture at Oxford (1930-1931) about the Spanish mystics of the Golden Age. Later (1930-1932), he became sub-director of the English Department at Parameshvara College in Jaffna (Sri Lanka), which gave him the opportunity to study Oriental languages, particularly Pali, in which the primitive Buddhist canon (tripitaka) was written. In 1932, with the arrival of the Republic, his friend Joaquim Xirau, president of the board of the Pompeu Fabra University in Barcelona, called on him

as an English lecturer to set up an English and Sanskrit course. Between 1933 and 1936 he taught at the Teacher's Training College and the Instituto Escuela forming part of the University, obtaining a Master of Arts from Cambridge in 1933.

In 1935 he published his first translation into Catalan of the 11th Song of the Bhagavad Gita, and in 1938 the first translation of three Upanishads: the Himalayas of the Soul, with a prologue by Radhakrishnan (edited in the collection *The Wisdom of the East Series*, directed by L. Cranmer-Byng and Alan W. Watts). During that same year, he also published a translation of the Upanishads which was highly praised by Jorge Guillén and Tagore himself. Although he executed most of his literary and translating activities in the English language, Mascaró kept alive his link with Majorca, his native home, and with Catalan, his mother tongue; in 1949, for instance, he gave a recital of Majorcan poetry from the BBC in London. In 1958 he edited *Lamps of Fire*, a lengthy spiritual essay about the great religions of the world which, oddly enough, would end up inspiring one of the songs of the Beatles in the London of the mid-Sixties. At long last, in 1973 he published his commentary and translation from Pali into English of the *Dhammapada*.

Evoking the sea is one way of returning to our origins, to the wellhead of life as we know it, and following the thread of this aquatic image, we have managed to briefly discuss the work of three great men. We have spoken of Tagore, who turned Santiniketan, the meditation centre founded by his father, into the Vishva Bharati University (1918), thus contributing to the intellectual development of Calcutta and the whole of Bengal. Through direct induction, we recalled Juan Ramón Jiménez, one of the Spanish poets in whom Nature is largely present, as transcendence and as a palpable symbol of divinity. And we have also dealt with Joan Mascaró, who with the utmost discretion and the silence of the scholar made the classical jewels of Hindu philosophy and religion accessible to thousands of westerners. From very different spheres and with very different perspectives, the three of them were born by the sea, and it seems that they all tried to imitate it, being as inexhaustible as it is... humanly inexhaustible. In the back of their work it is possible to hear the echoes of the Upanishads, rocking their diverse and inspired words, with their paradoxical poetics of the unknown as certainty, and of the remote as proximity.

I would like to bring this exposition to an end here by recalling that all four Nobel Prize awards which have gone to Indian citizens have been received by men or women either born in Calcutta or directly related to it ¹². Let us, then, use the dictum of one of them, Mother Teresa, as our parting words: ¹³

"We ourselves feel that what we are doing is just a drop in the ocean. But
the ocean would be less because of that missing drop."

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Notes

(1) "My fitness was that training which my muse had from my young days in the absolute solitude of the beaches of the Ganges. The peace of those years had been stored in my nature so that I could bring it out and hold it up to the man of the West, and what I offered to him was accepted gratefully," in *Gitanjali*, UBS Publishers Distributors Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, 2003, p. 295.

(2) "Yet the joy Tagore speaks of is beyond that Maya; and it is while he was searching for God in the coloured reflection, in the moving curtain of the phenomena of the world that his soul grew thirsty," in André Gide's introduction to his French translation of *Gitanjali*, op. cit. *Gitanjali*, p. 279. For more on Tagore's relationship with the ocean, see "Space and Time on the Indian Ocean Rim: Theory and History," Sugata Bose Gardiner, Professor of Oceanic History and Affairs, South Asia Harvard University, in *Modernity and Culture* (New York, 2002).

(3) The translation into Spanish of the quotations extracted from Tagore, the Upanishad, Aurobindo and Gandhi were executed by Carlos Varona Narvi6n.

(4) See the introduction of the Vice Chancellor of Visva-Bharati to *Gitanjali*, UBS Publishers Distributors Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, 2003, p. 1.

(5) In that shoreless ocean, at thy silently listening smile my songs would swell in melodies, free as waves, free from all bondage of words. (G 42)

(6) The same stream of life that runs through my veins night and day runs through the world and dances in rhythmic measures. (G 69)

(7) Among the many places in Vedic literature in which the metaphor of the sea appears we find, for instance, the Satapata Brahmana (VI, 8, 2, 2; XII, 5, 2, 14).

As regards the Upanishads, a word that derives from the Sanskrit root sad (to be seated – next to the master), it should be pointed out that they are formed by a group of some 120 treaties, attributed to one or more persons, Upanishadic sages learned in the designs of the conscience, such as Shankaracharya or Ramanuja, to mention but two of the better-known thinkers. Their subject was the nature of Reality and Meditation throughout the centuries (from the 5thC BC to the 13thC AD), of which a dozen or so are the main ones. These texts derive from the Vedas, albeit free of their dogmatic and ritual content, and make up their ultimate poetic and metaphysical consequence (Vedanta). While some are chants or odes, others appear as dialogues or inspired stories, as reflections and maxims. Taking as their starting point the eternal questions and the desire to learn and transcend, they come into contact with something that transcends them.

(8) Oh, dip my emptied life into that ocean, plunge it into the deepest fullness. Let me for once feel that lost sweet touch in the allness of the universe. (G 87)

I have tasted of the hidden honey of this lotus that expands on the ocean of light, and thus am I blessed — let this be my parting word. (G96)

(9) Among the many poems in which the sea appears, the following stand out: the second part of *Historias*, the poems that make up *Otras Marinas de Ensueño*; *Monumento de Amor* (*Mar en calma*, la

noche plateada); Estío (¡Saltaré al mar, por el cielo!); Diario de un Poeta Recién casado (Aun cuando del mar es grande, Nocturno, La luna blanca quita al mar, No sé si el mar es, hoy); the poems in Piedra y Cielo, Nostalgia del Mar; En el Otro Costado (Mar sin Mar).

(10) Tercera Antología Poética (1898-1953), Editorial Biblioteca Nueva, Madrid, 1979, p. 1035

(11) In "Foundations of Indian Culture" with "The Renaissance in India" SABCL, Vol. 14, p. 269-281; it also points out that, "with ego comes the end of our spirit."

(12) In addition to Rabindranath Tagore (Literature, 1913), Chandrashekhara Venkata Raman (Physics, 1930) and Mother Teresa of Calcutta, who adopted the Indian nationality (Peace, 1979), we can also find Amartya Sen (Economy, 1998) who, despite being from the south of the country, studied and lived in Calcutta for many years.

(13) For more on the sayings of the Macedonian missionary who became a naturalised Indian (1910-1997), see <http://www.proverbia.net/citasautor.asp?autor=971>