

REMOTE REFLECTIONS

THIS EDITORIAL, written far from Canada, begins with a subject — Rabindranath Tagore — which may well seem remote from the normal preoccupations of *Canadian Literature*. Chance led me to attend during November in New Delhi some of the sessions of the literary seminar held to celebrate the centenary of Tagore, who, like Gandhi, has become the centre of one of those reverential cults which flourish in independent India.

On the whole what was said at the seminar confirmed my own impression of Tagore as a great literary — and more than literary — personality rather than a great writer. Like A.E., the poet of the Irish Renaissance whom he resembled in so many respects, Tagore came at a crucial time in the revival of his country's culture, and, with his multiform interests in poetry and drama, in painting and music, in education and philosophy and Indian nationalism, he served a catalytic rather than a creative purpose. Perhaps the most relevant of all the suggestions made about him at the seminar was that, by commanding world-wide respect, he brought about "the restoration of the self-respect of the Indian intellectual." For, while Tagore's writings may raise doubts in the minds of critical readers, Tagore as a symbolic figure, standing for the revival of Indian culture after the long submersion that followed the decay of the Moghul empire, occupies a permanently important place in the literary history of his country. He does so largely because he was so much more than a writer, because he was one of the few men in our age to approach the great Renaissance ideal of the many-sided man, because he saw literature never in isolation but always in the context of the general culture of his time, because his loyalty to India and his loyalty to the world were equal yet never conflicted. In this respect it is not inappropriate to compare him

with men like Goethe and Pushkin, who changed the intellectual life of Germany and Russia, not merely by what they wrote, but also by their personification of the many-sided urges towards cultural identity to which their times gave birth.

As I have suggested, all this may appear to have very little to do with literature in Canada. Yet there are similarities between the literary worlds of India and Canada. In both countries native writers are adapting the English language and English literary forms to the lives they live in a world away from England. In both countries the limitations of publishing facilities make writing more often a labour of dedication than a profession by which the author can hope to attain economic independence. In both countries writers are divided by sheer distance, which makes the links between Bombay and Calcutta or Mysore and Delhi as remote as those between Vancouver and Toronto, and equally by linguistic differences, for while Canada has two major literary languages, India has at least nine.

Yet there is a certain unity in Indian literary culture, multilingual as it is, which unfortunately we have not yet attained in Canada. There are common traditions, a common body of myth and belief, and, closer in time, a shared experience of the liberation movement and of the extraordinary, magnetic personality of Gandhi. Canada's progression towards national autonomy did not produce, and perhaps did not need, a figure of Gandhi's moral power; it produced instead the infinitely more prosaic figure of Sir John A. Macdonald. Similarly, it did not produce a literary personality of the stature of Tagore. We have had writers whose work has been as good as Tagore's, and even better, but we have had none so far who has so clearly and admirably in his own life related the aims of literature to the realities of his country and of the world beyond, to the external demands of history and to the unhistorical urges of the man within.

It is perhaps pointless to regret the lack, since catalytic personalities can no more be produced to order than creative artists. Yet there is a point in remembering, in our North American world, the values for which Tagore stood. In a time when specialization has narrowed down literary criticism to a technique of analysis and had led to the snobbish cultivation of "creative" as distinct from other forms of writing, it is well to recollect those writers who realised that the arts will atrophy if they are separated too deeply from each other or from the wider world in which all artists live. Men like Tagore have lessons for other lands beside their own.