

Rabindranath Tagore and Hermann Keyserling: A Difficult Friendship¹

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Abstract

Hermann Keyserling, Germany's most influential philosophical writer in the early 20th century, met Rabindranath Tagore in 1911 in Calcutta and noticed his genius before it became known to the world through the Nobel Prize (1913). Keyserling's *Travel Diary of a Philosopher* (1918) with a long chapter on India continues to be a highly acclaimed work. Keyserling, who was endowed with a tempestuous temperament, tried to monopolise the Indian poet when he visited Germany in 1921. Tagore defended his independence successfully. However, he agreed to conduct the so-called "Tagore Week" at Darmstadt where Keyserling lived and had founded his School of Wisdom. While Keyserling always talked of Tagore in a language of superlative praise, it is clear that Rabindranath and his son Rathindranath Tagore were less appreciative of the philosopher and, privately, criticised him because of his domineering manners.

Abstract in Malay

Hermann Keyserling, penulis genre falsafah paling berpengaruh di Jerman pada awal abad ke-20, bertemu dengan Rabindranath Tagore pada 1911 di Calcutta dan menyedari kebijaksanaannya sebelum diketahui seluruh dunia menerusi Hadiah Nobel (1913). Karya Keyserling berjudul *Travel Diary of a Philosopher* (1918) yang disertai dengan satu bab meluas tentang India terus menjadi karya yang mendapat pengiktirafan tinggi. Keyserling yang bersifat baran, cuba untuk memonopoli penyair India tersebut ketika beliau melawat Jerman pada 1921. Tagore sebaliknya berjaya mempertahankan kebebasannya. Walau bagaimanapun, beliau bersetuju untuk mengadakan apa yang dipanggil "Minggu Tagore" di Darmstadt, di mana Keyserling tinggal dan telah

¹ For a more complete discussion of the topic, see my book *Rabindranath Tagore in Germany: Four Responses to a Cultural Icon* (Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla, 1999). All English quotations have been translated by the author. The archival material incorporated in this chapter has been mainly culled from the Keyserling-Archiv (Darmstadt/Germany), the Rabindra-Bhavan archives (Santiniketan, India) and the Deutsche Literaturarchiv (Marbach/Germany). I record my gratitude to Werner Wegmann (Darmstadt), Ute Gahlings (Darmstadt) and to Supriya Roy (Santiniketan).

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menubuhkan sekolahnya yang dipanggil “School of Wisdom”. Walaupun Keyserling sering memuji Tagore dengan berlebihan, Rabindranath dan anak lelaki beliau, Rathindranath Tagore tidak mempunyai pendapat yang sama tentang ahli falsafah tersebut, dan secara peribadi, mengkritik sikap gemar memanipulasi beliau.

Keywords

Rabindranath Tagore, Hermann Keyserling, travel literature, orientalism, cultural philosophy, intercultural friendship/understanding

Keywords in Malay

Rabindranath Tagore, Hermann Keyserling, sastera kembara, orientalisme, falsafah kebudayaan, persahabatan/kesefahaman antara budaya.

Rabindranath Tagore, the Indian poet, and Count Hermann Keyserling, the German philosopher, met on three different occasions: in Calcutta (1912), in London (1913) and again in Darmstadt/Germany (1921). During Tagore’s highly publicised trip through Germany in May/June 1921, Keyserling projected himself as Tagore’s friend and guide. They maintained a correspondence which lasted at least until 1938, that is until three years prior to Tagore’s death. Theirs was a difficult relationship. Their personalities harmonised on a particular level, yet on another, the sharp contrast resulted in friction. The basics of their philosophy of life and their approach to education were not dissimilar, as we shall see, but their ways of communicating with the world differed vastly. We shall first give a sketch of Keyserling’s life and work which is not well-known in Asia, and then proceed to map out the difficult friendship he built up with Rabindranath.

Hermann Keyserling’s Life

Count Hermann Keyserling, scion of an old and highly cultured noble family from the Baltic Provinces of Russia, was born at Könno (Livonia) in July 1880, at a time when Tagore was a young adult of twenty years and had already begun his writing career. Keyserling received his early education from private tutors in Rayküll in Estonia, where the family estate was situated. In 1897, his University studies took him to Geneva where he enrolled in geology, zoology and chemistry. Next he studied in Dorpat near his home, then in Heidelberg and Vienna where he completed a doctorate in geology in 1902. He was attracted by the British philosopher Houston Stewart Chamberlain who resided in Vienna. Soon Keyserling belonged to the inner circle of Chamberlain who was responsible for arousing the philosophical spirit in him. Soon after the completion of university studies, Keyserling, being independently rich, decided on a career as a free-lance philosophical writer. This was within the German tradition of a *Privatgelehrter*, a “private scholar” who renounces the constraints of

academia in order to devote himself entirely to research and writing, largely depending on royalties and on friends for a livelihood. Not unlike Tagore, Keyserling disliked formalised academic life, especially academic philosophy, and never got involved in it.

Keyserling's student years had been, by his own admission, wild and unrestrained, and so were the following years in two cosmopolitan centres of Europe. For about three years, he was based in Paris, thereafter in Berlin, before returning to the family estate at Rayküll in 1908. These stays in Paris and Berlin were frequently interrupted by trips to other cities. Having discovered his own extraordinary rhetorical talent, Keyserling began giving lectures on philosophical topics and wrote essays as well as his first books.

In 1911, restlessness again propelled Keyserling from the relative seclusion of his estate and out into the world. In October, he embarked on a trip around the world starting from Genoa and moving eastward. He returned one year later, in October 1912. In succeeding years, he shaped his travel notes into the book *Travel Diary of a Philosopher* which, when it could finally be published after the First World War in 1918, made its author instantaneously famous. It was one of the most widely read books in the post-war period.

Keyserling spent the war years at Rayküll. As a result of the Russian Revolution, his property was confiscated in 1918, and he became a refugee until he found a temporary home at the castle of the Bismarck family near Berlin. A year later, Keyserling wedded Countess Goedela Bismarck, the grand-daughter of Prince Otto von Bismarck, the first Federal Chancellor of a unified Germany from 1871 to 1890. The couple decided to choose Germany as their domicile and Keyserling accepted the invitation of the Archduke of Hesse, Ernst Ludwig, to settle in Darmstadt, a medium-sized town south of Frankfurt. Ernst Ludwig, who had been deprived of political power by the November Revolution, wished to promote his cultural interests. Earlier, he had already founded an artists' colony in Darmstadt which, however, had to be dissolved during the war. With Keyserling's help he now planned to establish a philosophers' colony. Keyserling, realising that he was not quite suited to lead a settled life at the helm of an institution, no matter how non-formal and amorphous it might be, declined to gather a group of philosophers around himself. He agreed instead to start a school of an entirely novel kind. He chose to call it *Schule der Weisheit* (School of Wisdom). After a great deal of hesitation, Hermann Keyserling and his wife arrived at Darmstadt in early November of 1919. Used to the cosmopolitan atmosphere of large cities, the Count did not find it easy to confine his activities to this relatively small town. Yet, this is where he and his family would live for the next twenty years until Hitler's Third Reich forced them to take refuge outside Germany.

The activities at the School of Wisdom were at their peak until 1927; with the advent of Hitler in 1933, its public role was over. Keyserling had sufficient

time to indulge in his passion for travel. He often combined it with lecture assignments. In 1927, he undertook a six-month lecture tour through North America. In 1929, invited by the Argentinean poetess Victoria Ocampo, he lectured in several countries of South America. Before Hitler assumed power, Keyserling had openly criticised National Socialism in a spate of newspaper articles. In 1934, the Nazi Regime ordered the expatriation of Keyserling and his family, but the order was later annulled. They managed to survive in Germany, amidst controversy and anxiety. The Count was no longer permitted to publish or speak in public. His passport was confiscated. Finally in 1939, he and his wife left Darmstadt hurriedly fearing Nazi repression. Mainly due to the social prestige of his wife's family, the regime never imprisoned him. He spent the next years as a virtual recluse in a castle of the Bismarck family in northern Germany. He was permitted to migrate to Austria in 1942. This is where he spent his last years, writing prolifically as always, but already ailing. In September 1944, Keyserling's house in Darmstadt was destroyed by bombs, and with it his large library and archive. After the war, Hermann Keyserling and his second son, Arnold, made preparations to reopen the School of Wisdom at Innsbruck where his family had been staying. Count Hermann Keyserling died in Innsbruck in April 1946, at the age of only sixty-five.

Hermann Keyserling's Work

Hermann Keyserling abhorred academic philosophy. He disliked philosophical systems and never attempted to establish one of his own. He was more of a philosophical essayist than a philosopher in the strict sense of the term. His style was associative and evocative, not deductive. He was opposed to doctrines, to dogmatic religions and to fixed theories, preferring to adopt an attitude of relativism with everything except his deep conviction of the supremacy of the Spirit (*Geist*). With the absolute value of the Spirit as his philosophical basis, Keyserling discussed ideas and experiences in a stunningly versatile and sweeping style replete with seemingly far-fetched associations and judgments. He was a genius at bringing out the Meaning (*Sinn*) of facts and situations by associating them with different perspectives, ideas and experiences. This he did in a grandiose, often bombastically high-minded style which was spellbinding to many, but which others considered "platitudinous" and "obscure" (*Encyclopaedia Britannica* 358).

He was a *Kulturphilosoph*, a philosopher of culture. Imbued with the tradition of German Idealism, he described and accessed cultural values from a spiritual perspective. Although his basic philosophical convictions revolved around the centrality of spiritual Being and Meaning, he never built upon those ideas; his thoughts remained accidental, unstructured and to some degree interchangeable. He was more of an artist who "played" with ideas and word-images, than a philosopher. When he wrote his *Travel Diary*, he in fact identified

himself with the Greek mythological figure of Proteus who establishes his relation with the world and attempts to comprehend it by a constant metamorphosis into the persons and things he wishes to comprehend. Proteus is never subjectively “himself,” lacking an identity separate from the objects of his knowledge. Similarly, Keyserling wanted to understand the other, by “becoming” the other. He had to pay for his enormous versatility by lacking in any firm standpoint, by often being ambiguous, vague or iridescent. He was capable of dazzling his readers and audiences with his audacious philosophical statements. But Keyserling lacked the ability to guide his readers and listeners to a certain philosophical insight step by step; he lacked Socratic sobriety.

His talent was to expound a personalised philosophical message befitting a particular situation, gathering or individual. To that extent, he was an able spiritual and intellectual guide, a role he played as preceptor of the School of Wisdom. Keyserling, however, adhered to no particular religion; he was no practising Christian in any orthodox sense. Deriving his inspiration from the tradition of German Idealism, his convictions were rather rooted in a “pagan” affirmation of *Geist*, the Spirit which manifests itself in a variety of ways, in the cosmos as well as in the human being.

Hermann Keyserling wrote prolifically from his early adulthood until the last weeks of his life. He wrote as he spoke: in torrents. He enjoyed recording his views on contemporary political and social issues in newspapers. Even his books often had a topical relevance. Often they were based on lectures he had delivered. Some of his most successful books were reflections he had jotted down while travelling, especially his *Reisetagebuch eines Philosophen* (Travel Diary of a Philosopher) and *Südamerikanische Meditationen* (South American Meditations). In Keyserling’s later period, when political circumstances no longer allowed him to comment on current affairs, his writing became increasingly autobiographical; his reflections, *Reise durch die Zeit* (Travels Through Time) appeared in three volumes posthumously.

His *Travel Diary of a Philosopher* (1918, English translation 1925), the first part of which recounts his journey through the Indian subcontinent, is the one book from his vast literary output which has survived until this day with new editions being published regularly.

During the period between the two world wars Keyserling enjoyed considerable popularity not only on account of his published works, but also because of his forceful, charismatic personality which made him a focal point in cultivated society. In fact, he easily may be considered the most popular philosophical writer of his time in Germany.

This broad impact was certainly due to Keyserling’s claim to bestow a new Meaning (*Sinn*) to contemporary life; he was in search of a “New Man” who lived life according to the highest spiritual ideas. He saw himself in the role of educator of the German people, in fact of all Western peoples, whom he

would guide towards the goal of spiritual regeneration through his books, his own life example and the School of Wisdom.

Educated Germans between the world wars responded warmly to these promises of a higher life in the Spirit. The First World War had caused a deep emotional and spiritual crisis. The defeat in the war, the humiliating conditions of the Versailles Peace Treaty, the loss of many lives which shattered the happiness of countless families, the extreme economic misery succeeding the war were breeding grounds for emotional insecurity, and catalysts for a renewed search for cultural and national identity and for *meaning* beyond life's trivialities. In their yearning for answers, Germans turned to new masters, be they Rudolf Steiner, who with *Anthroposophy* founded possibly the last universalistic system of thought, or Sigmund Freud and Carl Gustav Jung, who discovered new modes of understanding human experience through exploring the unconscious and dream layers of the mind. They also sought esoteric masters or masters from the East like Rabindranath Tagore. Count Hermann Keyserling integrated well into this panorama. In fact, his universalistic philosophy seemed to bring together, in one grand sweep, the various strands of humanistic and religious thought and proposed itself as their logical conclusion.

Hermann Keyserling and Rabindranath Tagore

Tagore and Keyserling were nineteen years apart in age. When Keyserling visited Tagore in Calcutta in 1912, the German philosopher was a young man of 31 years, a published author and a budding, self-confident philosopher, yet unrecognised. Similarly, Tagore, though the leading Bengali poet of his generation, still lacked international fame being a mere one-and-a-half years away from the Nobel Prize.

When, a decade later, they had their historic meeting in Darmstadt, Keyserling was an ebullient, middle-aged man of imposing physical presence, whereas Tagore, though only 60 years of age, already emanated the image of a wise old man.

Keyserling's last halt on his Indian sojourn of 1911/1912 was Calcutta. He visited the Tagore family in their ancestral home to attend an evening of Indian classical music. Many members of the Tagore household were present though Keyserling mentioned only Abanindranath, the artist, and Rabindranath, the poet, by name. Of the latter, Keyserling wrote: "Rabindranath, the poet, impressed me like a guest from a higher, more spiritual world. Never perhaps have I seen so much spiritualized substance of soul condensed into one man" (*Indian Travel Diary of a Philosopher* 227).³

It goes to Keyserling's credit that he intuitively singled out Rabindranath from the other members of the Tagore family, recognising his genius although

³ This book reproduces only the India-chapter of the *Travel Diary of a Philosopher*.

he had never heard the name of Rabindranath Tagore before, nor read a single line of his work. Keyserling initiated a correspondence with Rabindranath even before the latter was awarded the Nobel Prize, that is, before it became prestigious for a European to be associated with the Indian poet. From this first mention of Rabindranath in his *Travel Diary* until his memoirs *Reise durch die Zeit* (Travels Through Time) written at the end of his life, Keyserling never wrote and spoke of Rabindranath in anything less than superlative language, unrelenting even when friends considered Keyserling's hero worship exaggerated.

When in 1921 Tagore planned to visit Germany, Keyserling offered himself virtually as his guide and tour-manager. Although they did not meet during Tagore's two subsequent visits to Germany in 1926 and 1930, the correspondence between the two men continued. In each of its phases, the driving motor of their relationship was Keyserling. Tagore accepted the philosopher's offer of friendship and took a moderate amount of pride in it, writing a few reviews of Keyserling's books, yet there are indications that he also felt uncomfortable with Keyserling's overbearing nature and in at least one instance Tagore restrained him.

What did these two men have in common? Let me summarise the answer in three points: First, Keyserling as well as Tagore, were endowed with a strong sense of personal mission. The enormous success of his *Travel Diary* seduced Keyserling into believing that he was the intellectual mouthpiece of his epoch in the West. Similarly, Rabindranath Tagore regarded himself as the voice not only of India but of "the East" after receiving the Nobel Prize in 1913. As a messenger of the "spiritual East," he undertook nine long and arduous foreign trips to Europe, the Americas and to numerous Asian countries. Thus the meeting of Keyserling and Tagore brought together the two prominent figures of their time who saw themselves as representing the "West" and the "East," and who recognised such a representative status in each other, and whose audiences in Europe readily bestowed this status on them as well.

Second, the professed aim of both men was to bring about a synthesis of "East" and "West," the urgent need of which they proclaimed from different platforms. Tagore saw the need to assimilate the good qualities of the West as a man from the East; conversely, as a man from the West, Keyserling wished to assimilate essential qualities of Eastern life.

Third, both men saw the culmination of their pedagogical efforts at fusing East and West in the establishment of a non-formal school. The dissemination of ideas was not sufficient; both men yearned for *Verleiblichung*, for "embodiment" of their ideas. Keyserling founded his School of Wisdom in Darmstadt at the end of 1920. Tagore's week-long visit to that School in mid-1921 was, significantly, its first large, public event which, by all available records, seems to have implanted this institution into the public mind. Tagore

in his turn first created his school for children at Santiniketan in 1901, and then formally launched his International University, the Visva-Bharati, in December 1921. It is significant to realise that these two institutions came into existence at exactly the same year.

I rule out that these two men directly influenced each other when establishing their respective schools. They independently considered the time ripe for such a pedagogical experiment. In Tagore's mind India needed a place where "East" and "West" could meet in order for the spiritual East to reveal its potential of fusion with and inner transformation of the "West." If India could reveal this potential, her politically and socially repressed people would derive deep consolation from this and continue the cultural self-assertion which had begun with Tagore's Nobel Prize and his singular popular success in the West. Keyserling saw his School of Wisdom as an instrument for Germany's cultural and spiritual re-emergence after the crisis inflicted upon her people by the defeat in the First World War. Significantly, Tagore's avowed aim of visiting Germany in 1921 was just that: to demonstrate sympathy to the German people and by this, help her to overcome the crisis.

After discussing these three common traits of their ideals and actions in the early 1920s, I point out the fundamental *differences* which separate Tagore and Keyserling. Enough has been said to characterise Keyserling's temperament. Rabindranath Tagore lacked Keyserling's extrovert vitality and self-assertive nature. Although his conviction to speak as the voice of spiritual Asia generated sufficient determination for him to leave the relative seclusion of Santiniketan and undertake his strenuous foreign tours, he was constantly assailed by self-doubt. Let us quote from the letters he wrote to a Western friend, C.F. Andrews, during the years 1920 and 1921, the period we are concerned with here. From Chicago he wrote in a tone of despair: "I say again and again that I am a poet; that I am not a fighter by nature" (*Letters to a Friend* 132).

His regret at having neglected his true vocation – poetry – grew more pungent with advancing age, yet Tagore never really abandoned his role of the representative of the East. He doubted his mission as a preacher of Eastern wisdom, sarcastically calling it "hawking truths from door to door" (*Letters to a Friend* 126), and "pushing the wheelbarrows of propaganda from continent to continent" (*Letters to a Friend* 126). This ambiguity between a poet's vocation and his public mission of good works would be resolved neither emotionally nor in his actions.

He could not sacrifice the dream of a meeting of the "East" and the "West," a dream which had its deepest source in Tagore's overpowering craving for harmonious unity. It permeates his entire literary opus as well as his essays. Tagore, as mentioned, identified the "West" with "material civilisation," with the "physical," and the "East" with the spiritual needs of humankind. This

equation appears facile to us today to the point of being unjust. In the 1920s, however, it was Tagore's instrument of envisaging India's role in the world, giving her political subjugation, her material poverty a dignity and a purpose – and, indeed, bestowing on India a spiritual supremacy which, in the long run, would outlast and triumph over her political subjugation. It was not an ill advised patriotism which induced Tagore to proclaim that the “most important of all facts in the present age is that the East and West have met” (*Letters to a Friend* 109), but it was his conviction that the one could not exist without the other, his belief in an interdependence.

Returning to our comparison, I suggest that Tagore's championing an East-West synthesis had its complex socio-political as well as personal root causes. Tagore advocated this synthesis both in Asia and in the Western hemisphere. In contrast to this, Keyserling had a comparatively easier stand as he confined his advocacy to the western hemisphere and felt the pulls and pressures of his European political situation to a considerably less extent than Tagore. In fact, Keyserling pursued no socio-political aims except the most general ones, like trying to nurture a *Geistesaristokratie*, a spiritual aristocracy. This he did, however, only by writing and lecturing, and not by any direct political or social action. Further, Keyserling being a philosopher who was in his natural element in the universe of ideas, felt no need to sacrifice other, possibly deeper, impulses by speaking on East-West synthesis, unlike Tagore whose poetic intuitions rebelled.

In his autobiographical essay “Significant Memories” (1937), published in India, Hermann Keyserling summarised his long relationship with Rabindranath Tagore:

... I have known only one man who in my view is truly worthy of reverence: he is neither Chinese nor a Balt, but the Indian poet, Rabindranath Tagore. In 1912 I first became acquainted with him in Calcutta. A year later, in London, I made him intimately acquainted with European music. In 1921 I twice organized meetings for him in Darmstadt. Since then I have not met him, although we have always been in touch with each other. In 1934, when he came to know indirectly that my life had become very hard, he sent me a picture painted by himself, under which was the following verse: “Faith is the bird which sings when the night is still dark.”... This man is indeed far greater than the world takes him to be. (15)

Of their meeting in London no details have come to light except what Keyserling has mentioned in the above essay and in two letters to Tagore.⁴ In

⁴ All existing letters by Keyserling to Rabindranath Tagore are preserved in the Rabindra-Bhavan archives, Santiniketan, India.

the first – undated – letter, Keyserling extended his invitation to Tagore to meet the French sculptor Auguste Rodin for tea at the German Embassy. The second, a considerably longer letter, dated 16th June 1913, was written after Keyserling and Tagore had met. The main body of Keyserling's letter was devoted to explaining the letters of introduction to friends in France and Germany he and his sister handed over to the Indian poet. Tagore intended to proceed from London on a tour of these countries, a plan which however had to be abandoned. Keyserling showed himself only too willing to be Tagore's mentor in Europe. After a lapse of two months, in August 1913, Keyserling also supplied Tagore with advice about planned visits to Japan and Italy.⁵

Tagore is not known to have referred to this meeting with Keyserling in London. It was a crucial period in Rabindranath's life. Tagore stayed in Britain from May to September 1913. The previous summer Tagore had visited Britain where the artist William Rothenstein arranged to publish the poet's English version of *Gitanjali* which was an immediate success with the English public (ten reprints in about one and a half years!) as well as with a number of discerning fellow-poets. The winter of 1912/1913 Rabindranath had spent in the USA where he had, hesitantly in the beginning, launched into his public career as a speaker. He was on the threshold of becoming an international figure. Tagore's attempts to visit Germany and France in order to meet the leading lights of cultural and social life shows once again how much indeed he wanted to be in touch with the international intelligentsia and be recognised by them as one of their tribe. Two months after returning to Santiniketan, Rabindranath was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature which sealed his fate as a public figure.

The Rabindra-Bhavan archives at Santiniketan have preserved a series of twenty-two letters written in fluent, if not always flawless, English by Hermann Keyserling to Rabindranath Tagore, spanning the period 1913 to 1938, two letters to the poet's son, Rathindranath Tagore, and one significant letter by the poet to Keyserling. All other letters by Rabindranath to Keyserling were destroyed during the Second World War, with the exception of two cards and one letter preserved in the Keyserling-Archiv at Darmstadt.

This exchange of letters, although incomplete, is sufficient to draw the contours of this relationship after 1913. Keyserling's reaction to Tagore receiving the Nobel Prize was generous: "I have been very glad... that the Nobel Prize has been awarded to you. Not indeed for your sake – you are beyond prizes and praises – but for the sake of India."⁶

⁵ Letter by Hermann Keyserling to Rabindranath Tagore dated 22 Aug. 1913 from Rayküll, Estland.

⁶ Hermann Keyserling, Letter to Rabindranath Tagore, 14 Feb 1914.

In this letter as well as in several others, Keyserling reiterated his intention to visit India again. Yet, each time he tried, the obstacles seemed to be insurmountable. Another theme running through this correspondence was Tagore's visits to Germany. In 1920, Keyserling immediately extended an invitation when he came to know about Tagore's renewed plans to visit Germany.⁷ He wanted to "talk over" things. Keyserling's need for congenial partners in conversation, for testing his ideas on others and enriching them, appears to have been as urgent as that of Tagore's. In this letter Keyserling had already briefly mentioned that he was the "spiritual head" of a School of Wisdom at Darmstadt.

The year 1921 saw a spate of seven Keyserling letters.⁸ In a veritable barrage of verbal effusions he tried to convince and coax the Indian poet, his son Rathindranath, and his secretary S.R. Bomanji, to visit Darmstadt as the guest of the Archduke of Hesse, use the facilities of the School of Wisdom, give lectures, and moreover, to make Darmstadt Tagore's base in Germany asking everybody to flock there to meet him (a suggestion whose advantages Keyserling argues aggressively).⁹ Apparently, Keyserling envisaged a grand show of reverence and adulation much in the spirit of his own inflated praise, fêting the poet as a *guru* – and himself basking in the reflected glory of the Indian celebrity. Keyserling prefaced his campaign by unqualifiedly throwing his weight behind the Indian poet: "I am in greatest sympathy with your ideas and your work and shall do all in my power in order to promote it."¹⁰

Significantly, one of the arguments Keyserling used to attract Tagore was that his School of Wisdom is guided by "very much the same spirit as your University."¹¹ Being an excellent organiser, Keyserling composed a press notice, urged Tagore not to accept any further engagements before arriving at Darmstadt or in the town itself, to adhere exactly to the dates once fixed and so on. All of this must have rattled the poet, unused as he was to the ways of Western lecture-tour management. With typical Indian spontaneity he and his entourage had until now fixed their itinerary and Tagore's lecture programmes a few days ahead of time.

From Hamburg, Rabindranath Tagore penned a politely indignant response to Keyserling, rebuffing the latter's attempts to monopolise him.

⁷ Hermann Keyserling, Letter to Rabindranath Tagore, 14 Sept. 1920.

⁸ Internal evidence shows that several other letters were lost.

⁹ Hermann Keyserling, Letter to Rabindranath Tagore, 7 May 1921. ("I strongly advise you to choose this little town" of Darmstadt, Keyserling wrote to Tagore).

¹⁰ Letter by Hermann Keyserling to Rabindranath Tagore dated 27 April 1921.

¹¹ Letter by Hermann Keyserling to Rabindranath Tagore dated 27 April 1921.

Rabindranath's letter is noteworthy, revealing, as it does, his dignity and humility and at the same time his strong sense of mission. He wrote:

.... I fully appreciate your kind wish to spare me the trouble of unnecessary travelling & the strain of meeting strangers. But it cannot be helped, for it is the part of my mission. I should never forgive me if I tried to economise my effort & restrict my movement within a too limited range. I have already been in some other countries of Europe where I have received generous welcome and freely given myself to them. I am humble in my estimate of my own worth & the only claim I have upon my fellow beings is the claim of love which I feel for them. My whole heart shrinks from the idea of raising a special platform for myself in order to receive homage from the people & to play the part of a teacher to them who have any regard for me; & I implore you not to create a situation which will be against my nature. Though a stranger I have a great admiration & sympathy for your people, & as I am only to be for a short time in this country, all that I can hope to do is freely to make my general feeling known in every place where I am able to go. It will be wrong for me to be narrowly exclusive in my selection of place, parties or friends, which, to be fair, needs experience of long acquaintance. I give you my idea of the press notice which should go to the papers in the following paragraph. It should have nothing in it in its reference to me which would make me blush or make it appear that I identify myself with only one institution in this country thus giving valid reason for annoyance to others. I am sure you will understand my scruples & help me, in this my first visit to Germany, in establishing my relationship with your people in consonance with my nature.¹²

The Count's reply was dispatched in great haste and with assurances that he had no intentions whatsoever to dominate the poet:

Your words have touched me very deeply in their great humility and wonderful sweetness; you may be assured that I understand you perfectly and that my only wish has always been to make matters not only easier for you but also most profitable for my countrymen. There is no question of my trying to monopolise you for myself or the School of Wisdom.... The School of Wisdom will play no other part than to serve as intermediary

¹² Hermann Keyserling, Letter to Rabindranath Tagore, 20 May 1921. In a letter, dated 27 May 1921, by Helene Meyer-Franck, Tagore's German translator, written to Rathindranath Tagore, she warns the poet's son about the "way Count Keyserling is preparing his [Rabindranath Tagore's] coming to Darmstadt" and hopes that "he may have the possibility of protesting & setting things right" (Rabindra-Bhavan archives). As it were, this setting things right had already taken place. See also Martin Kämpchen and Prasanta Kumar Paul, eds. *My Dear Master: Rabindranath Tagore and Helene Meyer-Franck / Heinrich Meyer-Benfey – Correspondence 1920-1938*. Santiniketan: Visva-Bharati, 1999: 65.

between you and all without restriction who love your work and want to help your mission....¹³

The result was that Keyserling arranged the Tagore Week at his School in an atmosphere of studied “informality” and “intimacy.” Cleverly, he issued various announcements through the press that, invited by him, the great Tagore would visit Darmstadt and that all “serious-minded,” philosophically-inclined persons who were not driven by mere inquisitiveness, may come to see and hear him; as the Indian poet disliked large meetings and any kind of showmanship, the gatherings would be kept small. Keyserling demanded “complete control” of the proceedings in order to ensure its success. Large posters were put up. Keyserling even gave a list of hotels for those who arrived from outside and offered to arrange for private quarters through the office of the School of Wisdom. He hastily summoned the members of the School and sent letters of invitation to a number of famous personalities. Predictably, these widely publicised small gatherings turned out to be crowd-pullers. And Keyserling himself expected crowds for he made advance booking of garden area belonging to the municipality where “the populace” could meet Tagore. Luckily, Tagore did not seem to object; in fact, he let it be known later that he nowhere in the West enjoyed himself more than in Darmstadt.

Among the famous personalities to whom Keyserling dispatched letters was Thomas Mann, at that time Germany’s foremost novelist, requesting him to write an article, to be published in newspapers, publicising Keyserling’s project, and also to come to Darmstadt himself to participate in the Tagore Week. Would Tagore have approved of such a step if he had known of it? One is inclined to doubt it. Mann’s refusal casts a revealing light both on the “ironic German” that was Mann, and on Keyserling’s insistent nature. Here is an excerpt from Mann’s letter:

Dear and Respected Count Keyserling,

I cordially thank you for your letter. It exudes so much enthusiasm that I almost packed my bags and went to Darmstadt. However, this would have been easier than writing an article, particularly one canvassing for this famous Indian of whom I have, whether you believe it or not, no understanding, or almost none, up till now. I am familiar with isolated, intensely soulful poems of his which, however, reading them in German, made no immediate impression on me, as indeed is the case with all translated poetry. The image I have always had of him is picturesque but pallid. Surely I do him an injustice in assuming that the subjective pallor of this image reflects reality; in presuming him to be a typical Indian pacifist, animated by a somewhat anaemic humanitarian spirit and a mildness which

¹³ Hermann Keyserling, Letter to Rabindranath Tagore, 22 May 1921.

I deemed almost hostile in the years I spent engrossed in violent emotional conflict. Surely the man is totally different. Since I understand from your letter that he has made a deep impression on you, he must be great. But as it is you who are under his personal spell, how can you think that someone else, for example myself, could be the right person to write an essay publicising the Tagore Week in Darmstadt? This you have to do yourself! You have to do it with the immediate and appealing enthusiasm of your letter. This will give an altogether different impression than if I were to squeeze out of myself some mediocre little piece, devoid of inner compulsion and only because I find it difficult to refuse you.... (188)

Keyserling dashed off letters to other writers as well, but to his chagrin only few responded. In his memoirs, Keyserling noted that he had experienced “a great deal of ugliness from other writers which I have never forgiven. They refused to collaborate, and said: If Tagore wants to see us, let him come and visit us” (*Reise* 369).

In May and June 1921, we find Rabindranath Tagore and his entourage passing through Darmstadt twice. First, “over Pentecost,” he arrived from Switzerland and stopped at Darmstadt *en route* to Hamburg and Scandinavia. And again, almost a month later on his way back south, he reached Darmstadt via Berlin, Munich and Frankfurt, to conduct the Tagore Week from 10th to 14th June. Leaving Darmstadt, he moved on to Vienna, Prague, Paris, Marseilles from where he boarded a ship sailing for Bombay on 1st July.

Rabindranath Tagore and Hermann Keyserling never met again, although the Indian poet visited Germany twice thereafter, in 1926 and 1930, and lived for another twenty years. One letter, written in October 1921, that is, soon after Tagore’s departure from Europe, reveals the interesting fact that Tagore apparently planned to send some of his Santiniketan students to Darmstadt to be educated under Keyserling’s tutelage. “Your boys shall of course be looked after and helped as much as possible,” the Count wrote magnanimously, and he continued: “Please write a personal account of every boy who comes to us....”¹⁴ Several newspapers in fact reported that the School of Wisdom and Santiniketan planned some kind of cooperation, including the exchange of students. The Sinologist Richard Wilhelm was supposed to establish a third, similar centre in China. This goes to show that Tagore did indeed find some common ground between his Visva-Bharati and the School of Wisdom and was prepared for personal exchanges in order to have his students profit from this mutuality. Yet, nothing was heard of this plan thereafter.

In 1930, Tagore was apparently interested in revisiting Keyserling in Darmstadt. The Count who was resting in Schönhausen, a two hour drive from Berlin, professed his inability to visit the poet in Berlin due to his extreme

¹⁴ Hermann Keyserling, Letter to Rabindranath Tagore, 23 Oct. 1921.

fatigue. Instead, he suggested that Tagore visit him at his home,¹⁵ an invitation, however, which Tagore did not accept.

The correspondence petered out on a discordant note. However, Rabindranath Tagore published not less than seven contributions by Keyserling in the journal Tagore had founded, *The Visva-Bharati Quarterly*. In his last but one surviving letter, Keyserling declared: “I am greatly upset by the entirely unsatisfactory rendering of my ‘Significant Memories’” and continued to lambast the insufficiencies of the English translation of his essay, demanding a “full list” of corrigenda to be published in the next issue and a separate corrected print of the article.¹⁶ His demand was not fulfilled. A year later, in his last letter, Keyserling again expressed, in his typical style, that he is “very sorry to note that in spite of many promises” his book *The Art of Life* had not yet been reviewed.¹⁷ Two months later, a review did appear in the *Quarterly*,¹⁸ but it expressed sharp criticism.

In this last letter (June 1938), written a year before Hitler’s army invaded Poland, Keyserling mournfully confessed that he was “living as a perfect recluse,”¹⁹ a harsh sacrifice for a man of his vitality. Not long thereafter, the fascist regime would forbid Keyserling to publish and speak publicly.

Conclusion

Count Hermann Keyserling had on several occasions, in articles and books, expressed his opinion of the Indian poet. The language was, as mentioned, invariably exalted to such a degree that one tends to not take his judgements very seriously, even though Keyserling appeared altogether sincere in his statements. Let us, for example, see what Keyserling has written for *The Golden Book of Tagore*, brought out in 1931 to celebrate Rabindranath’s 70th birthday: “Rabindranath Tagore is the greatest man I have had the privilege to know.... There has been no one like him anywhere on our globe for many and many centuries” (127). Or elsewhere: “Tagore is without doubt one of the highest expressions of the Indian genius of all time” (Keyserling, *Das Erbe der Schule der Weisheit* 85). Or: “*Oh, welch ein Mensch!* I simply adore him” (Landau 298).²⁰ Such

¹⁵ Hermann Keyserling, Letter to Rabindranath Tagore, 15 July 1930.

¹⁶ Hermann Keyserling, Letter to Rabindranath Tagore, 6 June 1937.

¹⁷ Hermann Keyserling, Letter to Rabindranath Tagore, 5 June 1938.

¹⁸ Surendranath Tagore: “The Art of Life. By Count Hermann Keyserling.” *Visva Bharati Quarterly* 3.2 (Aug.-Oct. 1937): 199-202.

¹⁹ Hermann Keyserling, Letter to Rabindranath Tagore, 5 June 1938.

²⁰ The German expression means: “Oh, what a man!”

examples could be multiplied. Why a man with so slight an acquaintance of Tagore should develop such a deep interest and form such an exalted opinion of him, is hard to fathom. It was not appreciation of his poetry, as Keyserling understood no Bengali. In fact, he clearly admitted he did not “care for his poetry” (Landau 298). It was Rabindranath’s *personality*, not his works, which, as Keyserling himself wrote,²¹ created such a deep impression. The philosopher felt especially attracted by two traits of Tagore’s personality. One was that Tagore combined in himself the best of the “East” and the “West” while remaining “a pure Indian”: “Thus we may term Tagore the first ecumenical man of Indian nationality, and his importance for all mankind rests on this fact” (Keyserling, *Das Erbe der Schule der Weisheit* 233).²² Interestingly, Keyserling regarded Tagore “of greater importance for the West than for the East” (*Das Erbe der Schule der Weisheit* 85), apparently because the “East” was already, at least partially, in possession of what Tagore had to offer. Keyserling refrained from elaborating his concept of “ecumenical man” here. As a result, it remained an emotion-charged cliché, from which readers were unable to derive much pedagogical stimulation.

The second of Tagore’s traits which especially appealed to Keyserling pertained to Tagore’s persona as a poet. Keyserling viewed Tagore as a reincarnation of the archetypal mythic poets who do not merely create with words but, in a way, regard themselves as co-creators with God. This rather unusual comparison and perspective is found in a paragraph of Keyserling’s intellectual autobiography written late in his life. It deserves to be quoted in full:

Let me now talk about the one poet who has meant so much, immeasurably much, to me: Rabindranath Tagore. He was a creative person like the old bards and skalds who, as mentioned in the Finnish legend, first sang the forests and stars into being.... Once in Darmstadt Tagore told me with a sigh: ‘I write poetry in the same way that the trees flower in India, year in and year out. But their blossoms fall to the ground and turn to dust. Mine are collected, and that, perhaps, is not good.’ For the greater part of his life Tagore wrote one poem after another and composed for these one musical score after another. These songs he sang for himself. Listeners came and went; in India no doors are closed, for no visitor would intrude on a revered man. Whoever heard a single poem recited by the master never forgot it. They returned in silent contemplation

²¹ “It is not Rabindranath Tagore’s intellectual quality nor his talent as a poet which seem to be so very great to me, but it is his depth which is manifest in his life and in his speech.” (Hermann Keyserling, “Rabindranath Tagore,” *Rabindranath Tagore in Germany. A Cross-section of Contemporary Reports 1921-1931*. Ed. Dietmar Rothermund, 2nd ed. New Delhi: Max Muller Bhavan, New Delhi, 1962: 25. [Translation from *Schöpferische Erkenntnis*]).

²² English translation in Rothermund 26.

and spread the poem among the people. Soon millions were singing it. In this way through his words and songs, Tagore actually created the Bengali people, and indeed possibly the future people of India. How he recited in his mother-tongue! He was then totally absorbed by rhythm, melody and word at the same time. Every fibre of his body vibrated in unison with his mind and soul. Thanks to his tremendous presence, Tagore could be and remained an improviser, even when he was reciting the best known and highly refined texts. For example, when he recited ancient Sanskrit prayers, his living faith, his living understanding, his ardent devotion to Indian tradition breathed new life into old texts. Europe has forgotten how to recognise the primeval. This we can see from the fact that Tagore is generally judged by his 'literature.' Parts of his writing are certainly not of the highest quality, at any rate not his English works, for as a true poet of the people (*Volksdichter*) he is strictly bound to his mother-tongue. But who with eyes to see and ears to hear cannot see in Tagore a man of letters?... Tagore indeed created and sang from our primeval roots. (Keyserling, *Reise durch die Zeit* 368-70)

Keyserling intuitively grasped that in the Bengal of Tagore's time, poetry, song and dramatic art still constituted a unity. In Europe this original unity had been ruptured since the late Middle Ages.

It is not easy to surmise to what extent, or whether at all, Tagore reciprocated the appreciation Keyserling showered on him. There are no public pronouncements on Tagore's part. None of the published letters supplies a hint of what the poet thought about the philosopher. Only in two unpublished diaries, one written by Edith Andreae (1873-1950), younger sister of Walter Rathenau (German Foreign Minister during the Weimar Republic), the other by the poet's son, Rathindranath, do we find some brief references which may show the direction in which Tagore's mind moved.

Edith Andreae met Tagore in Berlin in early June 1921; this was after Tagore had passed through Darmstadt for the first time. The diary records: "Asked what he thought of Keyserling, Tagore replied cautiously: 'So far I know him only slightly; I have met him, but I have not yet become acquainted with him.'" A month later, on 3rd July 1921, Andreae mentioned a conversation with Helmuth von Glasenapp, the distinguished Indologist who was Tagore's guide in Berlin. Glasenapp heard Tagore saying: "Keyserling is intelligent, but he is not a good person."²³

Rathindranath Tagore's diary jottings are less than respectful of the Count. He mentions an incident during the Tagore Week when Keyserling tried to stop Tagore from meeting the theologian Rudolf Otto: "Keyserling tries to

²³ "Glasenapp erzählt, 'Tagore habe von Keyserling gesagt, er sei ein kluger, aber kein gutet Mensch.'" Quoted from a typed copy of Edith Andreae's diary made available to me by Walter Holzhausen (Salzburg).

send away father & not allow him to meet Dr. Otto. Gives himself away completely – very jealous of Otto. Bomanji and myself managed to baffle K in his efforts & father met Otto and other professors....”²⁴

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²⁴ Rathindranath Tagore’s diary, Visva-Bharati archives.

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