

Singing Birds, English Romanticism, and Two Bengali Bards in Their Late Romantic Phaseⁱ

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Abstract

The paper examines how English romanticism in general and romantic poets, in particular, had an impact on concepts of romanticism in our part of the world and why it is important to understand their influence. It argues that we must look at interactions between our leading Bengali poets and their English counterparts to determine the imaginative lineage of the Bengali poets. It specifically focuses on the relationship between birds and bards, and romantic poetic imaginings of the avian lot in Rabindranath and Jibanananda in their late-romantic phase.

Keywords: English romanticism, birds, bards, Jibanananda, Rabindranath

We were the last romantics - chose for theme
Traditional sanctity and loveliness;
Whatever's written in what poets name
The book of the people; whatever most can bless
The mind of man or elevate a rhyme;
But all is changed, that high horse riderless,
Though mounted in that saddle Homer rode
Where the swan drifts upon a darkening flood.

W. B. Yeats, "Coole Park and Baylelee" (1931)

The bird would cease and be as other birds
But that he knows in singing not to sing.
The question that he frames in all but words
Is what to make of a diminished thing—

Robert Frost, "The Oven Bird" (1916)

Beginning assumptions

This paper begins with some preliminary observations drawn from my knowledge of literary history, criticism and theory. The first of my preliminary assumptions is that romanticism, as it manifested itself in either English or Bengali literature, is a multi-faceted concept. It came first with a message of revolution, an urgent call for throwing off of all shackles, a yearning for democracy and egalitarianism. But if that suggests activism and rebellion, at the opposite point of English romanticism is the quest for the sublime and for transcendence. We all know, too, that romanticism is closely linked with the individual. Taken to a point, we can say romanticism involves making an individual's

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thoughts and feelings the primary object of artistic concern. The “I” is the subject of much romantic literature; to be precise, the creative imagination is often the exclusive focus of romantic writers. Indeed, romantic poets are at times so exclusively preoccupied with the sources of creativity and the well-spring of the arts and literature that at least one of them, William Wordsworth, has been accused of indulging in the egotistical sublime by another, John Keats. A positive implication of this in practice, however, is that romantic poets have always quested for new forms of expression and a new kind of poetry based on a new poetics. Wordsworth had shown the way when he led other poets in jettisoning existing poetic diction in favour of everyday speech in English verse, but William Blake had already done good work in that vein. However, a few romantic poets also tended at times to move away from the quotidian to the world of symbols in transcendental moves. Indeed, some of them tended towards the symbolic as often as they could. Another aspect of romanticism is the fascination with extreme mental states and with such things as the morbid and the irrational, that is to say, the caverns of the mind, dark or not. But of course, many of us most often associate romanticism with nature and the natural, a love of the beautiful, and of open and pristine spaces. Romanticism also contrasted the innocence of human beings in the state of nature with the corruption and decadence in the world of experience. It has pioneered too, we must emphasize now that we are in the age of the anthropocene, the idea of preserving the environment, and keeping it in as unspoiled a state as possible, despite the urbanization and constantly encroaching squalor and ugliness of industrialization. And of course romanticism is instinctively linked to love that is spontaneous and that yearns for communion with the beloved—a real or an imagined one. At times though, it is linked to sheer escapism and nostalgia or fantasizing.

From such multi-faceted perspectives, we can see how early English Romanticism influenced Bengali Romantic writing of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in general and Rabindranath and Jibanananda, the Bengali poets I know best, decisively. Classic English romantic poets resonate in the works of these two and other Bengali writers of the period continuously, albeit in complex, diverse and often intertextual ways. Quite inevitably, in the wake of the British colonization of Bengal in the late eighteenth century, and the ensuing Bengal literary Renaissance of the nineteenth century, led Bengali writers to prioritize thematic issues and utilize literary forms privileged by the English romantics such as the ode or the sonnet or the song-lyric, and made a few of them adopt and adapt some aspects of European Romanticism in prose fiction, like Walter Scott’s historical novels.

In Rabindranath Tagore’s writings, in particular, we can see a romantic preoccupation with nature and the natural; his quite prescient warning about what human beings have been doing to sully nature is also in the romantic vein. To me, he is a devoted student of the American Renaissance as well, quite influenced by Emerson and Thoreau in all sorts of ways. For sure Rabindranath repeatedly yearns for the sublime and quests for transcendence in manners that can be deemed metaphysical as well as romantic. Many of his works articulate his feelings and emotions romantically one way or the other. We see him too dealing with the well-springs of creativity on not a few occasions. But he is of course supremely the poet of love who can capture the emotions of the lover and the

feelings raised by love in manifold ways. Nevertheless, he never detached himself fully from national events or politics and was at times involved in the movement that led to decolonization.

Jibanananda Das, another Bengali writer I know mainly through his poetry, is not someone who was attracted to revolution and political activism either. He was never a poet drawn to metaphysical musings or the quest for the sublime. He is definitely a poet who mused on the imagination endlessly and dwelt on the sources of inspiration. There is an inclination in him, however, to reflect on morbid states of mind and to deal with extreme mental states. He is undoubtedly a poet drawn to nature; he revels in its lushness on some occasion but broods on its melancholy-inducing aspects even at times when immersed in its beauty; he is occasionally fascinated by its haunting and reverie-inducing qualities. Famously, he is forever inspired by women he perhaps knew or created in fantasies based on the ones he knew. He uses the ode and the sonnet form quite often in a vein that had been first worked by the English romantic poets, even though he is endlessly creative and brilliant, formally as well as thematically. Much given to formal experimentation, he reflects his knowledge of modernist and even high modernist poetics in his versification.

It would not take anyone long to realize that Nazrul Islam is the most romantic of poets when we think that the wellspring of English Romanticism is revolution, and the romantic vision is in its origin one of liberating individuals from the chains that bind them politically and culturally as well as the mind-forged manacles clamping us though we were born as free agents. In his writings, he is aggressively against divisions created in society by oppressive and tyrannical regimes—feudal or colonial. Nazrul is moreover the poet who stresses egalitarianism at every opportunity. He celebrates nature repeatedly too and is obviously and endlessly a poet of romantic love.

In this paper, however, I do not deal with Nazrul. I concentrate on Rabindranath to some extent and on Jibanananda for the greater part, for I find in the latter the late romantic and early modern elements which are at the heart of my paper. This is because I deal in it with Bengali poets who although originally inspired by European romanticism were at the height of their career in a time frame that makes them not early but belated romantics. In his late poem, “Coole Park and Balylee” W. B. Yeats (1931) had also identified himself as one of the “last romantics” (line 41) in his treasuring “traditional sanctity and loveliness” (line 42), but he is also someone aware of the way traditional values are under threat because of the modernizing and destructive impulses of industrial, capitalist society and unwarranted divisiveness induced by nationalism. Yeats holds on to traditional forms of poetry like rhyme and blank verse but adopts as he develops over the decades the tone of a man speaking to contemporary men and women he had sought the company of, so much so that we can hear him constantly toning down the lyricism that characterized his early verse in his later poems. Yeats, I might add, is also inclined to the mystical at times. Moreover, he embeds his early verse in Irish history and Celtic myths in the romantic vein.

From the middle stages of Rabindranath’s poetic career and almost always in Jibanananda, if we discount his juvenilia here, we are dealing with poets close to Yeats in sensibility and perhaps influenced by him and other belated romantic poets as well as

classic ones such as Wordsworth, Shelley and Keats. Like Yeats, both Bengali poets are romantic in their wariness about encroaching industrialization and commercialization; all three are troubled by anxieties and thoughts created in them by colonial as well as other worldwide wars. Also, both are put off by the divisive politics partitioning the fabric of the world they had grown up in, albeit in ways very different from Yeats'. Both Bengali poets seemed wary of violence and were nationalistic like Yeats only in their apolitical and cultural inclinations. Clearly, like Keats, they found in their culture elements to treasure and revive through their verse-making. Like Yeats, Jibanananda is inclined to musings on history's dark cycles; Rabindranath sees the darker side as well, but famously in "Crisis in Civilization" was not willing to give up his faith in human existence. Moreover, Rabindranath proclaimed that he would never forsake his transcendental quest for unity with a Supreme Being. I would also stress that from the midpoint of Rabindranath's career and after his extended visits to the West immediately before and after the English *Gitanjali* and the Nobel Prize, he kept experimenting with new techniques of expressing himself in poetry and fiction that brought him closer to modernism. Nevertheless, he continued to work in traditional forms and verse styles as well, and the lyrical impulse always dominated him.

Jibanananda Das would at times resort to traditional forms such as the sonnet and the ode and would write occasionally in the lyric vein, but he would increasingly try fragmented forms of expression as well as adopt distinctly high modernist tones in his later, and often freer, verse. Like Yeats, Jibanananda would immerse himself in Bengali legends and myths from time to time, and would be drawn to earlier and even mythical periods of Bengal's history. Both were of course inclined towards symbolism in the high romantic mode. However, Jibanananda would also find other poets he could affiliate himself with who had gone beyond romanticism and were obviously closer to modernism in their dealings with nature and wariness of metaphysical certainties —Emily Dickinson, Robert Frost, W.H. Auden and Dylan Thomas, to name a few.

A third assumption I am making in this paper on English romanticism and its impact on the two Bengali poets I am about to focus on in some detail is the question of influence. I would like to state unequivocally that there seems to be a lot of tell-tale signs of the way these Bengali writers reflect in their works the influence of English romanticism, but if we are to go anywhere with that idea, we have to understand the issue of "influence" in its complexity and from two, quite contrasting, theoretical vantage points.

One such vantage point is provided by T. S. Eliot in the essay titled "Tradition and the Individual Talent". It may be pointed out here that Eliot's concept of tradition is quite complex in manifold ways. This is because while it is easy to understand how we can and must be part of a tradition, his much more intricate assertion is that tradition is not something passively acquired or merely inherited. What he does not believe in is the idea of tradition as "blind or timid adherence" (Eliot, 1962, p. 294). For him "the poet must develop or procure the consciousness of the past" (p. 296). That is to say, tradition must be acquired by a conscious process; it must be cultivated and deposited in the poet's consciousness where it will then fuse with the poet's contemporary emotions and feelings so that a "*significant* emotion" (p. 301) is presented significantly, that is to say, originally

and creatively. The point seems to be that one chooses the tradition one wants to be influenced by and the extent one wants to be influenced by it. Only a truly great poet can make, out of tradition he or she has mastered, poetry of lasting importance.

But there is another and quite radical view of tradition and influence that I always find immensely thought-provoking. It is to be found in the 1973 book, *The Anxiety of Influence* by the distinguished and now departed American scholar and critic Harold Bloom. Bloom argues in it that the truly original poet is devoted to “misreading” (p. 5) since he or she is ready to grapple with a precursor poet so that he or she can come up with truly creative work by going beyond the ancestor’s voice. We can say thus that a really great poet chooses to be influenced by a tradition only to the extent it will allow that poet to express himself or herself in the time and space the poet wants to be in originally and creatively. And this he or she will do by getting rid of the sources that have influenced the poet after mastering them and by seeking alternative sources to be influenced by. To create original work for one’s time and space and for a whole new generation of readers, one must thus go beyond the ancestor poet through an act of poetic activism. My point here is that Rabindranath sought to escape after a while the influence of English romanticism while working with themes or situations the romantic poets had pioneered. Jibanananda too tried to swerve away not only from the English romantic poets he had been initially influenced by but also from late-romantic poets he had chosen in the phase of his career where he came into his own. Also, he chose to wrestle with his own ancestor romantic poet, Rabindranath Tagore, so that he could be his own poet and a truly modern one.

In the next section of the paper, I will try to look at the cross-connections between our leading Bengali poets and their English counterparts in order to determine how far they have influenced these writers. But since this is too vast a topic, I have chosen to narrow it down by looking at the relationship between birds and bards, and their poetic imaginings from the perspective of romanticism in Rabindranath and Jibanananda.

Singing birds in Tagore’s poems

In getting a perspective on the use of birds in English romantic verse, Frank Doggett’s 1974 essay published in *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* is quite helpful. He points out at the outset how the image of the singing bird is central to English romanticism, and indeed English poetry as a whole. Doggett stresses that for centuries “the singing bird” has become a metaphor of the poet, both as an image of transcendence and a source of inspiration for the poet. To quote Doggett, “just as the muse, addressed as a separate power that ruled his art, evoked the idea of the poet’s inner creative life...so the bird, addressed as though it were a natural artist, evoked the idea of the creative life of the poet within” (p. 551). He points out that Shelley’s “To a Skylark” is a symbol of the “imperceptibility of the lyric source” as well as “an image of the soul ...when depicted in relation to a function or an act” (p. 552). But to Doggett, Shelley’s singing bird also “suggests the idea of a poet in the moment of the rapture of invention” and someone “open to the springs of creativity from which issue light and sound and music and thought” (p. 552). Ultimately, it becomes, Doggett argues, a symbol of “the idea of

creativity as a subliminal power” (p. 553). As he infers, the “singing skylark” is an image of the “composing poet” (p. 553). To quote from the middle of Shelley’s poem in this context, the skylark is “Like a Poet hidden/In the light of thought/Singing hymns unbidden, /till the world is wrought/to sympathy with hopes and fears it heeded not” (lines 36-40). And in the final verse stanza this is what Shelley says he expects to learn from the bird: “Teach me half the gladness/that thy brain must know, /such harmonious madness/from my lips would flow/the world should listen then, as I am listening now” (lines 101-105).

To turn to Rabindranath Tagore and the way he uses birds in his verse, let me focus on what I feel is a key poem in his poetic oeuvre— “Balaka” or in my English translation, “A Flight of Geese”, published in *The Essential Tagore* (Alam & Chakravarty, 2011), which is what I will use for quotations in what follows. The birds in flight over a Kashmir Lake visit that Rabindranath undertook at a time when he was transiting from traditional verse form and diction to ones that were free flowing and closer to speech in the modernist vein bear for him the message that the soul is in eternal flight, refusing stasis, that is to say, or not wanting to be fixed in one place. To quote from the translated poem itself, the message of the flying geese is “Not here, not here but somewhere far away” (p. 263, line 38). In other words, it is a message of spiritual transcendence that the poet takes from the flight of the geese; the imperative also is for self-transcendence. What the geese have left behind for the poet is an even more subtle message. As he puts it: “O geese in flight/you’ve lifted stillness’ lid for me tonight, /Underlying the silence” (lines 39-41). In other words, the flight of geese takes the poet to the realm of the sublime and truths that pass understanding.

The poem is written in a quasi-ode form in that it is an address to the geese. Let us note too that the metrical pattern is unique, mimicking visually on the page the flight patterns of geese ascending or descending in flocks—as we can see over the lake in Jahangirnagar University and in our *beels* and *haors* in winter times when migratory birds make these water bodies their temporary home. In essence, then Rabindranath has taken over the ode form to evoke a moment that can be seen as an instance of the romantic sublime, for the poet is so absorbed by the flight of the geese that the emotions that come to him instantly is of awe and reverence. The ultimate result is a transcendental insight that allows him to understand that in the world of creation there can be no stasis and that eternal imaginative movement must be the wellspring of the truly creative poet. These birds ultimately become for Rabindranath a source of inspiration in a manner that intertextually resonates with Shelley’s use of the skylark as a symbol and the English romantic poet’s discovery in the birds a font of perpetual inspiration and a stimulus for eternal creativity.

Another poem by Rabindranath that I translated for *The Essential Tagore* that I would like to instance in this context is one that was published much earlier by the poet in Bengali as “Dui Pakhi” (“The Two Birds”). Here Shelley is not an influence but the poem is suffused with romantic ideals that no doubt originated in European romanticism. The encounter of the captive bird and the free one is surely an illustration of Rousseau’s adage that “man is born free but is everywhere in chains”, But I am reminded, too, of poems in Blake’s *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, for the English lyric poet, too, had

set up a contrast between, the children in “The Nurse’s Song” of *Innocence* who “leaped & shouted & laugh’d (line 15)” and those of *Experience* who are urged by their nurse thus: “Your spring & your day are wasted in play,/And your winter and night in disguise” (lines 7-8) so that she can make them “come home”!ⁱⁱ

In fact, once we look for the romantic in Rabindranath’s works which resonate with the ideals and beliefs of English romanticism, we can look in any direction—verse or prose or song-lyrics—and you will discover how birds immersed in natural movements become part of the Bengali bard’s mental landscape. Here is another extract from *The Essential Tagore*, but this time in prose from “Letter-Fragments”. Writing from Shahzadpur and looking no doubt at the Jamuna’s sand-banks in this extract, Rabindranath is intoxicated by the smell of the grass and the sight of, among other things, the ducks that “descend upon the water and continuously dip their heads into it and clean the feathers upon their backs with their beaks” (Chaudhuri, 2011, p. 88). These and other sights make him think of the bounties of nature in Bengal’s riverine landscape; it has so much “beautiful, careless and generous peace” that he cannot but think of the contrasting scene of men in the workaday world of cityscapes where “one sees such a continuously trying, belabored, harassed and minute disquiet in one’s self...” (Chaudhuri, 2011, p. 88).

Jibanananda Das and English bards

To continue with my attempt to show the close relationship between English romanticism and two leading Bengali poets primarily through the image of the singing bird in all its lyrical and symbolic manifestations, or as I indicated earlier, my aim to link intertextually English and Bengali birds and bards, let me now turn to the image of the nightingale as captured most vividly and memorably by John Keats. Doggett can be as helpful here as well as in his comments on Shelley’s “To a Skylark”. In Keats’ poem, he observes, ‘the poet is an auditor and longs to become one with the invisible bird’, although he also finds Keats writing in a convention that stresses “the darkness, the rapt auditor and the invisible bird” as well as the presence of “the moon and attendant stars, the profusion of flowers, the shadowy grove and the thick undergrowth, the forests nearby, the song that is the essence of poetry” (p. 554) and nature itself. Ultimately, the nightingale becomes for Keats, as Doggett declares, not only the “source of creativity” (p. 553) but an occupant of an idealized realm that can only be inhabited for a while and not for any length of time in a world where pain and despair test one endlessly in extreme and unbearable ways.

My point of comparison with Keats’ immortal poem about the bird he has immortalized in its very English setting is Jibanananda’s equally unforgettable Bengali poem “Sindhu Sarosh”, which in my English translation is titled “The Sea Stork”. As before, I will be using my own translations in this section on Jibanananda in referring to this and other Bengali poems by him. But first of all let me note that in contrast to the singing but invisible bird of Keats’s poems, Jibanananda views the sea stork as dancing the “tarantula” as well as singing while in flight. What is the tarantula? By coincidence, I was reading Amitav Ghosh’s 2019 novel *Gun Island* recently where I read that the tarantula is a dance as well as musical form originally performed for exorcizing victims of “venomous spider bites” (p. 88). In Jibanananda’s poems, the sea stork through its movements, like Keats’ nightingale song and presence, will remove any despair

occasioned by the “jackals” of the world. Jibanananda tells us in his poem that he will “in silence” watch the sea-stork spread its “snow-white wings against the living soul of the sky/And dance like the white spray to show your joy to the world” (Das, 1999, lines 4-5).

These lines remind me of ones in Keats’s poem about a “light-winged Dryad of the trees” (line 7) that “In some melodious plot/ Of beechen green, and shadows numberless/Singest of summer in full-throated ease” (lines 8-10). In contrast to the seemingly immortal nightingale and the eternally recurring birdsong, however, Keats articulates the anguish he feels about a life where one experiences endlessly “weariness, the fever and the fret” (line 23) and is disturbed by visible and overwhelming signs of mortality everywhere.

The way to some kind of permanence is only through the imagination after it has been stimulated by the bird’s song. In Jibanananda’s poem, too, only the singing bird in flight can intimate a way out of a “jaded world” (Das, 1999, p. 88) filled with darkness and despair. To the poet, the sea stork’s song “conjures/a new ocean, bright sunlight, and a soul as green as grass” (Das, 1999, pp. 87-8). It symbolizes through its song a kind of “joy” that “does not always give way to worry and fret” (Das, 1999, p. 88). It will not ever have to know a world where “To this day, the beauty of Kanchi and Vidisha shed like flies;” (Das, 1999, p. 89) and be part of a world where “Beauty must at the end rest its hands on caverns of darkness and hunger” (Das, 1999, p. 89), or a world where “the sky-blue moods and deeds of men—their bid to grasp rainbows/dissipate in the fog of wintry and short-lived *Hemonto* days” (Das, 1999, p. 89). Just as Keats’s poem ends with a vision of a singing bird that has so enthralled him even when flying away with intimations of immortality and images of “magic casements” (Keats, line 69) despite his own position in a world of evanescent happiness, Jibanananda’s poem ends with a world of “golden harvests” and a bird that “basks in delectable, intense, and infinite sunlight”, though leaving the poet in a realm where one won’t “hear no more tales of golden harvests” (Das, 1999, p. 90).

But Jibanananda is a late romantic and an early modernist poet and his poems show the influence of modernism in all sorts of ways in other poems. This must be the reason why for him another and contrasting symbol from the avian family is the owl. In what surely is his second most well-known poem after “Banalata Sen”, “Aat Bachhar Ager Ekdin” or in my translation “A Day Eight Years Ago”, the poem that has replaced the sea stork or even the wild ducks or eagles of other famous poems by him such as “Buno Hansh” and “Hai Cheel”, is the enigmatic bird of darkness—the owl. This poem is about a man in a morgue who had killed himself and who now “flat out on the table in that morgue/defeated...lie” (Das, 1999, p. 94), having been induced to take his life by some “beguiling disaster” (Das, 1999, p. 93). In the late modern age that the poet now inhabits, the singing, inspirational birds have been replaced by hooting ones, and melodious, inspirational birds have given way to ones that either foretell death or indicate we are in the land of the sleeping dead.

Indeed, in late Jibanananda, the familiar duck and the white stork that cohabit with the owl in the sonnets of “Ruposhi Bangla” no longer co-exist with night’s trance-inducing owls but have to share space with either seemingly ominous owls such as the

one we encounter in “At Bocher Ager Ekdin” or simply live in a landscape without birds. In “Kothai Giyecche Aj Sheishab Pakhi?” or “Where Have All those Birds Gone?” we know we are in a twilight world where there are no more familiar or soothing landmarks and life-sustaining symbols. Here is the entire poem in my translation in a life-denying landscape—

Where have all those birds gone now—and those horses—
 And the women in those white houses?
 Wet with the fragrance of acacias—tinged with golden sunlight
 Those birds—and those horses—
 Have left our world behind;
 My heart, tell me where—where have they all gone now!
 Darkness; like the dead pomegranate, silence. (Das, 1999, p. 139)

Like the late W.B. Yeats of the poems that he wrote then about intimations of apocalypse, but in an even more surrealistic urban landscape reminiscent of those depicted by poets and painters of high modernism, Jibanananda depicts now a lonely poet trapped in a bird-less city where hope has vanished. Take the poem “These Birds” too as an example of one where the poet of beautiful Bengal is trapped in the squalor of Kolkata where the birds have all gone away by day. Here, owners of jute mills rule. The poet finds the birds returning and descending in flocks only at night in the backdrop of an emerging moon. Hope of sorts? This is how the wonderful poem ends—

Birds descend from the sky then
 They say: “This is a Calcutta we can stay in;
 In the evening ocean
 We will be falling like rose petals.”

I stand on the roof for a long time and see
 Feathers fluttering everywhere;
 Feathers and wings
 Fluttering between the tall *devdaru* trees of the college;
 Through *devdaru* leaves a sun shaped like a golden egg,
 A moon shaped like a silvery egg,
 Dew falling:

Calcutta?
 Calcutta! (Das, 1999, p. 144)

No singing bird anymore but there is some compensation at least! As Frost had said in “The Figure a Poem Makes”, his great essay on the kind of illumination a poem can make in the modern age: “It begins in delight and ends in wisdom... in a clarification of life - not necessarily a great clarification, such as sects and cults are founded on, but in a momentary stay against confusion”. A momentary stay against confusion at least is what the descending birds offer the poet in post-World War II Kolkata! Or as the American poet, who was older than Jibanananda in age but poetically his contemporary for a long time, had said in another poem about the kind of truth the modern poet can discern in his

poem “For Once Then Something”–“Truth? A pebble of quartz? For once, then, something!” (line 15).

Romanticism/Modernism and Bengali bards

I conclude, then, that Jibanananda Das began as a romantic poet when he was writing poems that can now only be classified as juvenilia. As he matured, he was at best a late romantic in the manner Rabindranath Tagore was. But as he progressed he became a late romantic and an early modern as was the case with his most famous predecessor in Bengali poetry. These poets wrote in distinctly modern idioms and adopted verse forms so that they could write freely, and often with toned-down music. But Rabindranath was modern only up to a point, for he never abandoned his quest for transcendence and his desire to unite with the Supreme Being. In other words, he never ceased being a romantic in some ways even though he adopted distinctly modern views and forms that transformed his poetry and prose from the middle phase of his career. Jibanananda, on the other hand, is like Frost’s bird in the poem “The Oven Bird”, that is to say, a singer that makes a belated appearance in a fallen world, and that “knows in singing not to sing/The question that he frames in all but words/Is what to make of a diminished thing” (lines 12-14). His is poetry, I would claim, that ends in Bengali literature’s completely modern phase and he is at best only a belated romantic.

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ⁱⁱ The author’s translation of Rabindranath’s lyric poem is in the Appendix.

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Appendix

The captive bird in a gilded cage lay,
 The free bird in the forest,
 Fate decreed they would meet one day—
 Was God setting up a test?
 The free bird said: “Dear captive bird,
 Let us to the forest fly.”
 “Free bird; let us peacefully to the cage,”
 Was the captive bird’s reply.
 The free bird said emphatically,
 “I’ll never give up my freedom.”
 The captive bird said ruefully,
 “How can I in the forest be at home?”

Outside the cage, the free bird sang songs
 Learned from its flights in forests,
 The captive bird was full of notes memorized—
 The two talked in different tongues!
 The free bird said, “Dear captive bird,
 See if you can sing songs of the wild”
 The captive bird answered,
 “Learn from me songs of the caged”
 The free bird said, “Never!
 Will I sing songs dictated to me?”
 The captive bird cried, “How can I ever
 Sing the song of the free!”

The free bird said, “The sky is blue and bright,
 And nowhere do I feel fettered.”
 The captive bird said, “The cage is proper and right,

See how I am perfectly protected.”
The free bird said, “for once let yourself go
And become one with the sky.”
The captive bird said, “to this retreat know
You can yourself firmly tie.”
The free bird said, “no!
How can one there fly?”
The captive bird said, “this I know
There is no place to rest in the sky!”

This was how the birds came to desire each other
Though destined to stay apart.
Through the bars of the cage one touched the other
Silently, desire stirred in each heart.
But one the other failed to understand
Failed even its own self to comprehend.
Vainly, they their wings fluttered
And wailed, “Come closer”.

The free bird said, “What if I am trapped
Inside—never!”
The captive bird said with a sigh,
“I’ve lost the strength to fly!”