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KSENIJA ATANASIJEVIĆ AND RABINDRANATH TAGORE**

Abstract: Ksenija Atanasijević published no fewer than five articles on Rabindranath Tagore. The last one is among her final published articles, and appeared in a special issue of the journal dedicated to her. Atanasijević's interest in the Bengali poet has remained under-researched. It should be understood within the context of the poet's interwar image, in which he was hailed as a world teacher and universal messianic figure, a phenomenon referred to as Tagorism. Atanasijević contributed to this image of the poet in Serbian culture. Her views were, however, peculiar in some aspects since she tried to assess Tagore through his potential importance for feminism; at the same time, she criticized his version of Buddhism, defending what she saw as the purity of Buddha's message.

Keywords: Tagorism, messianism, feminism, Buddhism

Ksenija Atanasijević published five articles on Rabindranath Tagore. Even considering her prolific and varied opus, it is not an insignificant number. Moreover, one of her last articles, from 1970, is about the Bengali poet. It was published in a special issue of the journal *Philosophical Studies* that commemorated her work—and her choice of topic for this occasion was Tagore. All this calls for better understanding what Tagore meant to her. For a full comprehension of Tagore's significance in Atanasijević's writings we have first to contextualize the reception of Tagore in Europe, in Serbia and then relate it to other aspects of her work.

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The story is well-known: awarding the Nobel Prize in 1913 to Tagore caused sensation in Europe that surpassed a purely literary event. In the words of his secretary and biographer, "It was received everywhere with a shock of surprise and turned Rabindranath from an individual into a symbol—a symbol of the West's recognition of Asia's neglected humanity and its potential resurgence. Tagore was the first[1] to impress vividly on the intellectual consciousness of the West the fact—now amply demonstrated—that the 'mind' of Asia was living and would have to be reckoned with as a vital entity and not merely as an interesting specimen in a museum" (Kripalani, 1961, p. 121). Tagore himself understood his philosophical writing as a tool for familiarizing the West with living India, as he famously stated it in the preface to *Sadhana* (a Vedantic work published the same year he was awarded the Nobel), "For western scholars the great religious scriptures of India seem to possess merely a retrospective and archælogical interest; but to us they are of living importance" (Tagore 1913). The peak of his glory came after 1918, with Tagore's travelling and lectures around the world. Not only were authors like Yeats and Pound, Rolland and Gide, Zweig and Juan Ramón Jiménez, Frederik van Eeden and Jurgis Baltrušaitis, the composer Leoš Janaček and artist Nicholas Roerich, the young J. L. Borges (who met Tagore through Victoria Ocampo) enchanted by Tagore, *viśvakavi*, but many of them made contact and entered networks with each other thanks to their common interest in Tagore (Ivbulis, 1986, p. 134). He was hailed not only as a poet, but as a prophet and teacher. This prophetic image gained influence particularly in Germany (Kāmpchen, 1990, p. 112). However, soon afterwards, his popularity declined and oblivion followed—even W. B. Yeats and Pound who were the first to champion Tagore in Europe lost sympathy for him. The Indologist Igor Grbić recognizes the pattern he calls "Tagore effect:" the West is initially enchanted by an "authentic," "Oriental" piece (often a reflection of European literature, like English romanticism in Tagore), but then disgrace follows (Grbić predicts the same destiny to S. Rushdie and A. Roy; Grbić 2014; Grbić, 2018, pp. 55–58). Tagore's sudden success not only as a poet but also as a guru should be understood within the framework of European self-reflection following the catastrophe of a world war. The impression of a world breakdown cried out for causes, and they were often interpreted as a crisis of culture (which can be seen as a secularized version of the Biblical and medieval idea of sin and punishment). Benda's treason of intellectuals, Ortega y Gaset's rebellion of masses, Spengler's decline of the West were the most popular (and still remembered) concepts that emerged as the answers. But if this was the cause, then the

1 One could debate whether this is entirely true: Vivekananda and R. M. Roy were known before Tagore.

remedy could come from the spiritual renewal—like Berdjajev's new Middle Ages—or by the transfusion of fresh ideas from the East. Hermann von Keyserling and René Guénon were among the European intellectuals who expected such a renewal; the Upanishads and Buddhism articulated the European sense of longing for salvation in T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, with its final verse a repetition of the word *shanti*. Romain Rolland, respected (and vilified) for his pacifism during the war, contributed to the popularity of such an attitude with his books on Vivekananda, Ramakrishna and Gandhi—the latter also attracting world attention for his nonviolent philosophy. The cult of Tagore fitted into these expectations, building at the same time on a previous layer, starting with Romanticism, of an Indophile "oriental renaissance" (Schwab). Although Tagore wrote philosophical texts, as mentioned, his literary works, like dramas *Red oleanders* and *The Dam* (*Muktadhara*) expressed an anti-mechanicism that found a sympathetic ear among the European *Kulturkritiker*. Much later, Keyserling's son Arnold recorded how difficult it was to explain the influence Tagore and his father had exercised in that period; according to him, the two were the first to discover the spiritual unity of the world beyond national borders, unlike academic comparative research (Keyserling, 2018, pp. 156–158). It is debatable whether the younger Keyserling is entirely right in claiming such a primacy, but this attitude undoubtedly had resonance among those who sought a message of peace and universalism after the war. Still, Tagore himself did not have many illusions about European enthusiasm, comparing his idolaters to drunkards afraid of sober moments (as cited in Grbić 2018, p. 55); he once remarked to Rolland that people tend to scold former minions opining that they paid too much for them (Rolland, 1960, p. 144).

The European "discovery" of Tagore soon also reached Serbian culture: his poems started appearing as early as 1914 (in the journal *Narod*).[2] The writer Nikola Trajković testified to how exiled Serbian students in France during the war learnt Tagore by heart (Trajković, 1932). The journal *Krfski zabavnik* (an appendix of the official bulletin of the Serbian government in exile) published translations during WW1 comparing Tagore to "the victorious song of a young eagle" (XXXX). After 1918 Tagore's popularity only grew; the first books to appear were *The Gardener*; *Nationalism*; *The Stray Birds*; *The Home and The World*; *The Wreck*, although intellectuals also read him in other languages.[3] The peak of this popularity

2 Interestingly enough, there was even a negative reaction: *Radničke novine* [Workers' Paper] (June 19, 1914) criticized the suave and pessimist poetry of a member of the upper class.

3 In English, German or French. There were Croatian editions, too, and some works, like essays or the drama *Chitra* appeared in journals.

was the poet's visit to Belgrade in November (14–16) 1926, part of his European tour. Tagore was received as a celebrity, followed by the press, his lectures attended by *le Tout-Belgrade*. Meetings with the representatives of artist and intellectual cultural associations were organized (Pejčić, 1988). An artistic protest against him almost spoiled the solemnity of his reading: a group of young avant-garde poets, *Zenitists* interrupted by making noise and throwing leaflets. Yet, even they did so because of their Indophilia: they mistook Tagore for an opponent of Gandhi's, who they supported. For many who listened to Tagore it was an experience they remembered even decades later. For the poet, on the other hand, Belgrade was just another stop on a tour he was forced to undertake for financial reasons (Rolland, 1960, p. 225; Kripalani pp. 160 ff; 169; 188–190; between 1920 and 1936 he did not travel, lecturing only in 1931; Sykes, 1947, p. 111). The entire tour was commercial and the Italian part of it even politically manipulated (Petrović, 2011, pp. 156–159.)[4]

While Tagore's visit itself has been researched, the reception of his writing has remained surprisingly less so. The comparatist Svetozar Petrović dedicated two studies to this question (Petrović, 2011, pp. 135–168; for newer works: Data, 2019), concluding that in interwar Yugoslavia, Tagore perceived as a poet, not a prophet.[5] Judging from the translations (see Komadinić 1961; Grubić, 1984), this appears to be the case. But if we take the articles about Tagore published in that period, it is clear that he was seen as a messianic figure and a universal teacher. Petrović toned down this aspect, because the interwar reception had an ideological subtext both repellent to Petrović and officially condemned by the Communist philosophy at the time when Petrović wrote. A quote from the publicist Ljubica Sazdović-Dimović (1926) illustrates this view of Tagore, "a magnificent biblical figure: patriarch, prophet ... the look of his glittering eyes ... looked through our soul ... as if he looked into eternity" (pp. 2–3). The famous essayist Isidora Sekulić writes enthusiastically about Tagore as a mystic who continues the Upanishadic tradition, opening her paper with the line, "There is a moment when man closing his eyes with a hand sees the truth. That is the moment when he understands the Sacred Book from the East" (and so on for two pages before embarking onto his poetry; Sekulić, 1985, pp. 380–395). The writer Vladimir Velmar-Janković

4 It is telling that in a letter to L. Elmhirst Tagore mentioned he would visit "Yugoslavia, Serbia" (Tagore, 2005, pp. 339–340).

5 Still, his influence in poetry does not seem to be great (Petrović, ibid.) Exceptions are perhaps Desanka Maksimović (Vučković, 2012), the Croat poets Tin Ujević and Dragutin Tadijanović and Slovenians Alojz Gradnik and Oton Župančič (Gönc-Moačanin, 1996, p. 101).

hails Tagore's arrival as the revelation of spirit in the midst of a mechanical civilization (1926; 1927). The philosopher Dušan Stojanović sees in Tagore's personality (not work!) the personification of the eternal ideas of the East, like the fullness of life in harmony with the absolute, and joy given by the closeness to the eternal source of life (Stojanović, 1990, pp. vi-viii; Stojanović, 1927). Most influential, however, was Tagore's essay *Nationalism*, in which he judged nationalism as the manifestation of Western mechanistic civilization and, warning Asian nations not to accept it, he called for universal brotherhood. The book strongly influenced the Serbian intellectual movement generally referred to as panhumanism or Slavic-Indian humanism, which was a sort of Yugoslav messianism with universalist goals. These examples clearly show the extent of Tagore's stature. This entire complex of ideas can be called *Tagorism*, by analogy with similar interwar currents, like Bergsonism or Spenglerism. The image of Tagore as a sage is not merely a projection. Coming from a family that belonged to the reformist Brahmo Samaj movement, he was one of Neovedantin authors that marked Indian culture from Vivekananda to Radhakrishnan. In that sense, Serbian authors were not wrong seeing in him reliance on the Upanishadic tradition. That they tended to conflate Upanishads, Vedanta, and Neovedanta was quite another issue. Being fascinated with the *topos* of ancient India, they subsumed all these schools under the same umbrella, whereas Neovedanta is formed by modernism, social reformism, deviation from orthodoxy and politics (Kostyuchenko, 1983, pp. 155–222). Even though the image of Tagore as a thinker might not be wrong, it is, however, one-sided: after all, Tagore wrote comedies set in the contemporary Bengali milieu, and his novels such as *The Home and the World* or *The Shipwreck* have nothing prophetic in their plots. Some opine that such a European reception was caused by the poet himself who chose to present himself through the works he found to be most accessible to the Western readers who lacked a more profound knowledge of the Indian cultural setting (Ivbulis, 1986, pp. 122–123).

Tagore was identified with a very imaginary kernel of India, perceived as spiritual. He was read as the continuation of the ancient Sanskrit literature, although there is centuries-old tradition in his native Bengali (Petrović, 2011, p. 161). Europeans jumped from "mere Nalas and Shakuntalas" (in the words of Max Müller) to the living poet, but they understood him as the voice of antiquity and *topos* of "the spiritual India" promptly reappeared. A 1927 travelogue Jelena Dimitrijević, whose trip to India had visiting the poet as one of the main aims, testifies to the fact that Tagore was seen as a metonymy of the country: "Because all those details, climate, atmosphere, vegetation, landscapes, places and peoples are

a frame around Tagore's spiritual figure, just as all those gods and divinities in the shapes of humans and animals in Hindu temples are the frame around Brahma's sacred being" (Dimitrijević, 1928, p. 31).

The soil for Tagorism had been prepared: Serbian poetry of the period included a strong line that literary historians refer to as *cosmism*, inspired, among other sources, by the Upanishads (mediated, most probably, through Paul Deussen's interpretation). At the same time Serbian culture was strongly influenced by the reception of Bergson, W. James, *Lebensphilosophie*, and Russian religious philosophy creating a strong current of irrationalism: in philosophy it meant turning away from the academic philosophy of Branislav Petronijević, but it had a strong impact on literature too. However, Serbian Tagorism cannot be entirely seen as an offshoot of a European vogue—it had its own cultural traits, as the panhumanist reading of *Nationalism* shows: it is deeply marked by historical optimism prompted by the Yugoslav unification, unlike the reception of Tagore in Germany, a defeated country.

Ksenija Atanasijević was one of the authors who contributed to the formation of Tagorism. She wrote about Tagore as early as 1923, then in 1925, 1926, 1927, and finally, as mentioned, in 1970. Four articles are from the period of the poet's peak popularity, but the late text shows that the same topics recur over a great time span, revealing both her deep interest in Tagore and the stability of the image she had. Although some of these articles are of popular nature and published in dailies, and thus not entirely in-depth, they nevertheless contain Atanasijević's important views. Even those written for a broader audience are important for Tagorism, since they show the creation of his public image. In 1923, she published "A Visionary of the Present's Joy" where she analyzed Tagore's philosophical views, but also took a critical stance, as we shall see. In 1925 appeared a short article entitled "Woman in Rabindranat Tagore's Work." In 1926, a month after his visit, Atanasijević published "Rabindranat Tagore's Stay in Belgrade," a brief but exalted report, and the next year "Metaphysical Lyrics of India" with a general overview of his life and works. Finally, in 1970 she produced a longish analysis in "The Lyrical Philosophizing of Rabindranath Tagore," in which she partly reproduced passages from her first article. She made references to his poetic works (*Gitanjali*, *The Gardener*, *The Crescent Moon*), dramas (e.g., *Chitra*), novels (*The Home and the World*), philosophy (*Sadhana*), autobiography, and even to the German multi-volumed edition of his collected works.

Beside writing about him, Atanasijević met Tagore in person: she was among the intellectuals who received the poet in 1926. Her description of him is given in exalted words,

> The builder of the teaching that joy heals, ennobles, and pacifies, the preacher of the salvation that comes from knowing the immortal spark in the soul, an ethicist who brings harmony among people and obliterates the bitterness of mutual fracturing, he has come to us too. Of a prophetic figure, in a wide gown,[6] with the eyes like two dark burning stars, of clear forehead, noble nose and hair of pure silver, he revealed to us by himself the great truth of his country, that we are all made of the same metal, that we and all of nature have the same origin and same end because our ground is the unchangeable and eternal substratum of the world. (Atanasijević, 1927, p. 3)

Forty-three years later she remembered the poet in the same way: "Eyes like two burning stars, gaze withdrawn into himself, clear forehead, well-proportioned nose, slightly tanned face and hair and beard of silver color" (Atanasijević, 1970). During the meeting, she asked him what he thought of the women's movement:

> Full of transcendent patience, the philosopher answered all the questions perseveringly. He responded to me eagerly: he told me what he thought of women's movement for independence [...] Instead of feminism—poetry, exceptional and illuminated. The understanding of a woman as more personal and more esthetical than a man is interesting and artistically refined, but, sadly, inapplicable to us. Of course, I did not expect to hear anything similar to what is known to us about feminism. I knew that the poet came from a country where women of great eyes are silent and muted and where their awakening will not be achieved by European methods. (Atanasijević, 1926, p. 512)

In addition, it seems that she asked him also why he underestimated the problem of evil in his philosophy (Atanasijević, 1927). These are the fragments of the conversation she had with him and these personal impressions also contain the ideas Atanasijević developed in her articles. In the first place, she understands him as a philosopher-poet and a poet-philosopher; his poetry is metaphysics and his philosophy is poetry. Atanasijević makes no sharp distinction between the two categories. Perhaps already in this early formulation it is possible to see her understanding of philosophy as something broader than a strictly academic discipline—an attitude that, in the wider framework of her work, meant parting ways with

6 Tagore's clothing, that attracted the attention of Serbian public, was a mixture of Hindu and Muslim elements. His garments showed what he rejected in theory, too: Gandhi's hand made textile (*khadi*; Bharucha, 2006, p. 131).

Petronijević.[7] Moreover, she did not hesitate to call Tagore 'a prophet' and 'a sage' (1926). For her too, Tagore is a living voice of the ancient India. He 'devotedly guards' the tradition of 'forest sages and prophets', that is to say the Upanishads (Atanasijević 1923). Such continuity is for her the mark of Indian philosophy, unlike the European one. Atanasijević correctly identifies (Vedantic) monism as the core of Tagore's teaching, and thus the principle of unity and love he preaches (the ontological unity of beings leads many Neovedantins to pacifism, respect for life and empathy). But it would be too simple to say that Atanasijević succumbed to the commonplace view of Tagore as an ancient sage revived. Actually, she was aware of his modernist and reformist views. She notes that Tagore worked on bringing down the caste system, and is thus astonished at the reaction against him in Belgrade, obviously referring to the Zenitist demonstrations (1926); she also praises him for supporting pacifism, women's rights and social reforms. However, when it comes to some tendencies in his very philosophical views, she is more critical. As previously depicted, she challenged him on theodicy (a remark repeated in the papers, cf. 1970), seeing him as an optimist of cosmic joy. Indeed, theodicy is a problem of every monism. More importantly, she was very critical of Tagore's interpretation of Buddhism and that is the point where she quite forthrightly stands opposed to Tagore. Atanasijević concludes that Tagore presents Buddha's teaching as based on love: it is through love that self-liberation is achieved. However, that is for her a newfangled deformation of Buddha's original thought. Tagore, she reckons, perhaps did so to bring Buddhism closer to Christianity or German idealism. She does not refute that Buddha preached love for all creatures, but she emphasizes that such love should be understood as compassion. What the awakening Buddha spoke about is not love and joy but liberation from pain in nirvana. She reiterated the criticism in 1970 repeating the same formulation nearly half a century later: the truth resides in Buddha (even sharpening her view slightly, saying Buddha did not preach love, but only compassion). In the later article she was more specific concluding that Tagore's image of Buddhism was influenced by the Upanishads and their "cosmic joy" (perhaps referring to *ānanda*, as part of *sat-cit-ānanda* principle). It would be more proper to speak about Neovedanta as Tagore's context. Although (in her last article only) Atanasijević refers to Neovedantic authors (Vivekakanda, Radhakrishnan), she situates them in the tradition stretching from the Vedas through *Bhagavad Gītā*, without mentioning the modernist aspect of Neovedanta. Literature on Tagore confirms that he was influenced by

7 Petronijević himself taught a course on Indian philosophy 1912–1914 (Marić, 2013, p. 142).

Buddhism (unlike his contemporaries Tilak, Gandhi, Aurobindo, who all wrote about *Gītā*; Ray, 2018, p. 229), but he chose to present an idealized Buddha and the Upanishads as best "propaganda" for India and the East in the West (expecting that it could also affect positively the West; Ivbulis, 1986, pp. 122–123). Although taken by the prophetic image, Atanasijević did not lose herself in the platitudes of "spiritual East" but was prepared to offer criticism too (which further shows that, in spite of the lack of institutional Indology, there were some Serbian authors who were able to write critical articles on Indian topics).

Did Atanasijević reproach Tagore as a historian of ideas, concerned about the correct historical understanding of Buddha? Or was her concern about the purity of Buddha's teaching more instigated by her own philosophy? Undoubtedly, Atanasijević had great respect for Buddhism. She considered Buddhism to be the most philosophical religion (1929, p. 56).[8] The crucial difference for her is that Tagore was an ontological optimist, of cosmic width, who even denied the reality of death seeing joy in an eschatological perspective. (Such optimism should be attributed perhaps not to the Upanishads but again to the Neovedantic turn that, unlike Shankara's classical Advaitic monism, did not consider the phenomenal world to be an illusion. This is especially visible in Tagore's esthetics and appreciation of nature (Kostyuchenko, 1983, pp. 232–233). While Tagore's emphasis on love is something he shared with other Neovedantists, the importance of "emotional and esthetical perception of the world" is his peculiarity, according to Kostyuchenko). Atanasijević sides with Buddha as an original pessimist whose "axiological evaluation of the empirical plane" bears the truth (1970). Her choice of pessimism as a philosophical worldview caused her to side with Buddha and to disagree with Tagore.

In this polemic she also emphasized that the original notion of nirvana was 'nothing without content' and the lack of suffering. This deserves a short comment. There was a strong interest in nirvana in Serbian culture since the early 20th century, both in philosophical and religious thinking (Marić, 2013), and even more in poetry (the poem "Nirvana" by Vladislav Petković Dis is the most famous example of *nirvanism*, as literary historians refer to this current, but far from being the sole one). The prevalent understanding of nirvana was a negativistic one, under the influence of the European reception and the authors like Schopenhauer, Burnouff, Taine, Gobineau, and Renan (De Lubac, 1987, p. 163). Nevertheless, another interpretation of nirvana by Buddhist scholars (Oldenberg, Rhys

8 In 1933 she gave a public lecture on Buddha (*Pravda*, January 14, 1933).

Davids) was made known to Serbian readership too;[9] still, Atanasijević adhered to the negativistic definition. In the 1970 article she somewhat modified this toward a kind of positive definition describing nirvana as "the transcendent realm of all-liberating and happy peace" (XXX).

Another peculiarity of her interest in Tagore are the links she tries to find between his work and feminism. The question she asked him during his visit (the same one asked by Ljubica Sazdović Dimović) might look surprising. But if we account for the fact that Tagore was seen as a teacher, then it is no wonder that they expected answers to contemporary questions from him. While that may seem to be an anecdote, the articles return to the link. Her articles elaborate the topic. In 1925 she gives a kind of overview of the female characters in Tagore's novels and dramas. Atanasijević pinpoints that a common denominator of Tagore's feminine characters is the idea that women announce humanity's rebirth and a new culture, founded on mutual help and love instead of nationalism. Although she sees a certain conservativism in Tagore, unavoidable in the cultural setting, she concludes that Tagore sees a woman as 'more personal' and 'more esthetical' than a man. Women have interest in others simply because they are alive; it boils down to the idea of the unity of humankind, and, although Atanasijević does not trace the idea to its ultimate source, such a view can also be deduced from ontological monism.

In 1970, she returned to the topic of the woman's role in the emergence of a new culture that would rely on cooperation among nations, with an eye on her contemporary Indira Gandhi: "Did he forebode that one of his compatriots would be one of the first female leader of a country in the world" (1970, pp. 19–20). At the time when Atanasijević wrote this article, India and Communist Yugoslavia were close collaborators in the Non-Aligned Movement, with their two leaders, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and Marshal Tito even on good personal terms.[10] (Ironically, five years later, Indira Gandhi introduced a state of emergency marked by arrests of political opponents, enforced mass sterilizations, corruption and nepotism).

Finally, Atanasijević praised Tagore not for his views only, but for the very influence his poetry exercised on people, strengthening harmony, judging him to be more human and more compassionate than the other builders of modern culture. Although undeveloped, such remarks reveal

9 As early as 1914 Pero Slijepčević published an article in which he discussed the definition of nirvana as neither nihilism nor quietism but beatitude.

10 While the link Atanasijević makes can seem far-fetched, it is interesting that the historian Ramachandra Guha opines that Nehru's universalism (which helped Nehru in forming the Non-Aligned Movement) was inspired by Tagore (Guha, 2012).

her awareness of the ethical and practical aspects of his literary work (different from pure estheticism).

Atanasijević's first article on Tagore was published a year after her thesis on Bruno and already showed her distancing herself from her *Doktorvater* Petronijević. She started with critical respect for Tagore, then moved toward an exalted view, obviously under the influence of her personal experience. In her last paper, she returns to a more analytical approach, full of respect but also with a critical stance regarding a Buddhism determined by her pessimism. Her interest in feminism can be seen as her specific contribution to the interwar Tagorism. Another element sets her apart from her contemporaries: she did not merge Tagorism with national messianism, as the panhumanists did, although she was close to the message of *Nationalism*.

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Atanasijević's interest in the Bengali poet can be seen as part of her broader interest in Indian topics, which is understandable if Tagore is taken as a metonymy of India. And India was part of her interest in the Orient that also included China and Japan[11] and a contemporary movement like Baha'ism (as we can tell from a highly favorable review of a book about it, she published in 1935).[12] As a kind of an appendix, we will tackle her views on Indian thought through the example of reincarnation. For Atanasijević reincarnation is adopted as a personal eschatology: "Yes, souls wander from one form into another and the more personal some of them was, the more unavoidable it is for it to continue from century to century (Atanasijević, 1930, p. 43). (She even mentioned Torquemada's reincarnations.) Although the sources of this concept could be Platonism, Orphism, or Pythagoreanism, since the 19th century reincarnationism had been closely linked to the reception of Indian texts. This transfer of ideas often took place through "alternative," occult movements, especially Theosophy, for which India enjoyed a privileged place. The Serbian case was no exception: while educated people read Schopenhauer or studies about Indian religions, for the followers of the "alternative," reincarnation was a matter of personal conviction. The majority of Serbian spiritists were reincarnationists and after 1918 Theosophy and Anthroposophy gained

11 In 1937 she lectured on the spiritual life of the East, i.e., about the philosophy and religion of China and Japan (*Pravda*, December 16, 1937). Her view implied that Asian spiritual unity is contrasted with political reality: at that time Japan was waging war on China.

12 Although again, she criticized the neglect of thinking about evil in the world.

popularity. The notion of karma and reincarnation were not restricted to elite circles: for example, the daily *Pravda* published an interview with Krishnamurti (August 28, 1932) discussing precisely these topics. Reincarnation also appears as a motif in the literature of the period. As early as 1922, the poet Svetislav Stefanović wrote, "the ideas of metempsychosis and transmigration today are flooding our poetry and art" (1922). Indeed, reincarnation is to be found in the stories by Stanislav Krakov (*The Story of a Mummy*, *The Alchemist*), the poem *Metempsychosis* by Božidar Kovačević, the avant-garde novel *The Phenomenon Monkey* by Marijan Mikac and in the poetry of Nenad Mitrov heavily influenced by Buddhism. In previous research we wrote about two poets who were close friends with Ksenija Atanasijević: Jela Spiridonović–Savić (1890–1974) uses the motif a couple of times in her poems and fiction, and making it the central one in her long poem *Pergaments* (Radulović 2018). The mostly forgotten minor poet Zora Topalović (1908–1996) frequently wrote about reincarnation in her poetry and in the novel *A Girl from the Shore* (part of *Trilogy* 1964–1966). Atanasijević wrote the foreword to Topalović's longish *Metaphysical Poem* (published 1982, but written much earlier), in which she praises the author for the highest spiritual insights provided by karmic laws (Radulović 2020). We can once more situate Atanasijević within the context and again, as in case of Tagorism, her views are not fully explicable by it. In 1928 Atanasijević published an entire article elaborating her views on reincarnation, calling it "the most rational answer to immortality." It is superior to the "ontologically impossible" and "ethically cruel" idea of post-mortal reward and punishment. At the same time, she criticized progressive reincarnations —a concept advocated by Spiritism and Theosophy (although she does not name them), since "different forms of ugliness in the world cannot be explained otherwise but by previous deeds." (The progressivist concept of reincarnation was criticized in *Filozofski fragmenti*, too; 1929, pp. 33; 36; for her views on reincarnation, see Radulović 2023, pp. 93–94). Indian views of reincarnation, both Hinduist and Buddhist, do not include progress. It is a modification included in the modern Western esotericism, under the influence of positivism, scientism and nineteenth-century optimism. Thus, Atanasijević distanced herself both from Christian and from alternative eschatology. Nonetheless, she also stepped away from Buddhism in that regard. The metempsychosis she talks about preserves continuity of personality, personal immortality, while Buddhism renounces personality (the concept of *anātman*), seeing the phenomenal 'I' as a conglomerate of ephemeral psychological elements (*skandha*).

Finally, this Orientalist complex of themes should be understood not as a result of purely theoretical study, but Atanasijević's living experi-

ence and praxis. As I have shown in previous research, Atanasijević was a member of the Theosophical society of Yugoslavia (she enrolled in 1934 together with her life-long friend Zora Stanković);[13] in a Theosophical framework, she discussed joining Co-Freemasonry (Le Droit Humain obedience); she was also a member of the Belgrade branch of the French occult society Polar Fraternity, which believed in making astral contact with the Tibetan sages. After 1945 she was acquainted with the circles practicing yoga in Belgrade (Radulović 2017; Radulović 2021; Radulović 2023). Biographies of important people and intellectual histories tended to dismiss such activities as marginal or eccentric, which again reflects the tendency to exclude esotericism from intellectual history. Nevertheless, they are both an important element of Western culture, and, in the Serbian case, "alternative" currents are obviously part of the history of Serbian intellectuals in modernity. This also constitutes an integral part of Atanasijević's intellectual biography.[14] Given the special role of India in modern Western esotericism, a better understanding of such activities could help us understand her interest in the Orient. Furthermore, it reveals how multifaceted her work is. Interpretations of her oeuvre have focused on different aspects of her writing and activities—on Bruno and on ethics, on Greek philosophy and feminism. Her views on Tagore, India, and the East (including "the alternative" aspect) are layers of her work that have been under-researched. Recognizing them reveals her contribution to Serbian culture between the wars and at the same shows her work to be a complex whole. Her Oriental themes are entangled with her ideas on other subjects, and understanding this Oriental part adds a new dimension to the comprehension of her better-known ideas.

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13 Both accepted on June 18, 1934 according to the Archive of Theosophical Society in Adyar, Central Register, book 14a 1933-1935, p. 55.

14 For other examples of her interest in esotericism see her biography by Ljiljana Vuletić.

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