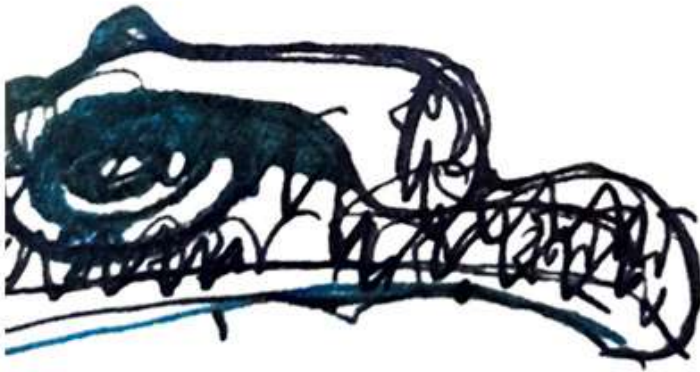


WINGS
OF MISTAKES
DOODLES OF
RABINDRANATH TAGORE

Introduced by
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PUNASCHA



VISVA-BHARATI

Wings of Mistakes: Doodles of Rabindranath Tagore

Errors, like straws, upon the surface flows;
He who would search for pearls must dive
below.

– John Dryden, *All for Love*

Fragments of forms stored in the mind
Combined in pictures at the magic touch of art.

– Rabindranath Tagore, *Chitralipi*

I do cover my mistakes in my writings, similarly I
have covered them completely with various doodles.

– Rabindranath Tagore's letter to Pratima
Tagore

'Mistakes' are almost inevitable in the process of any creative thinking. Rarely do they draw any special attention; they are usually ignored and forgotten as mistakes. Creative writing may often invite afterthoughts which lead to revisions and textual corrections. Such erasures provoke queries about the possible mental moorings of their creators. Indeed, few individuals would like their mistakes to be revealed in any possible form. Rabindranath Tagore transformed his textual cancellations into art, preserving them as creative works for posterity.

Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) lived and wrote through the first and second halves of two eventful centuries, producing a monumental

body of works in Bengali and English. This was at a time when typewriters were the only mechanical device to assist the writers. Unfortunately, there were no provisions for processing Bengali, the medium in which Rabindranath was most prolific. His writings ran into several thousands of pages including manuscripts of songs, novels, speeches, short stories, essays, poems, plays and numerous letters. Most of the the manuscripts of Rabindranath were therefore handwritten. In his last letter, dictated to Rani Chanda on 30 July 1941, Rabindranath wrote to Pratima, his daughter-in-law, 'I don't feel any urge to write to you as I cannot write with my own hands.'¹

Rabindranath was conscious about the importance and the uniqueness of his handwriting; his ornamental and calligraphic handwriting inspired many admirers to copy his style. There is a self reflexive comment on this aspect in his novel *Sesher Kobita* (Farewell My Friend). Amit Ray, the protagonist, an avowed detractor of Rabindranath argues at a literary meeting:

My second contention against Rabindranath Tagore is that his literary creations are rounded or wave-like, like his handwriting, reminding one of roses and moons and female faces. Primitive, so to copy Nature's hand.²

Psychoanalytical criticisms may attempt to trace the states of his mind at various points of

time on the basis of his ever-evolving handwriting and signatures. However, textual scholars have certainly seen Rabindranath as a prolific creative writer with a tendency to modify his writings, in most cases, without destroying their previous versions. Rabindranath modified his creative missives, not only in the manuscript, or in the press proofs but also in their most final forms, that is, after their publications in magazines, journals or in books. Many of his celebrated literary masterpieces have multiple versions with minor or significant variations which make them valuable for textual scholars. His play *Raktakarabi* (Red Oleanders), for instance, has nine versions with striking textual variations. Several of his poems were transformed into songs generating different versions of the same poem. Even small autograph-poems underwent minor or major changes by the author while being hand-copied or when he read them after their publications.³

While hundreds of manuscripts of Rabindranath Tagore show examples of free flowing text without any mistakes, numerous others illustrate textual revisions in simple or complicated patterns giving birth to designs, forms and sometimes to pictures. Rabindranath's early writings contain casual mistakes mostly corrected through simple strike-through erasures without any visual importance. Evidently, these were attempts to erase mistakes without any aesthetic motivation. He used straight, curved or circular lines in cancelling mistakes in geometric or casual arrangements. Sometimes he would completely reject the initial draft burying it under dark and indiscernible layers of scribbles.

Earliest extant examples of Tagore's erasures are found in the manuscript known as *Malati Punthi*. The manuscript which was written between 1887 and 1892 shows some minor cancellations with a few tiny sketches. Another manuscript known as the *Pocket Book* (1889), has erasures with sketches of a nature similar to that of *Malati Punthi*. Some manuscripts of Rabindranath dating back to 1902-1905 reveal occasional attempts to connect mistaken words or phrases in rhythmic arrangements which look like climbing creepers. It is in the second decade of the twentieth century that Rabindranath seems to have engaged far more seriously with his manuscript erasures.

Rabindranath, fell ill on his way to Peru via Argentina in 1924 and was persuaded to accept the hospitality of Victoria Ocampo, the Argentinean intellectual. He spent his time recuperating at the Villa Miralrio in San Isidro near Buenos Aires and Victoria was his zealous hostess. Tagore wrote his travelogue *Jatri* on board S.S. Andes on his way to Argentina and also composed poems to be included later in his book *Purabi*. The poems of *Purabi*, written during his visit to Argentina in 1924 have the first extensive and elaborate exercises in doodling which continued till the end of Rabindranath's life simultaneously with his continual engagement with painting. In a memorial essay Victoria Ocampo recollected:

When Tagore lived in San Isidro I was impressed by the copy-book where he was writing his *Purabi* poems in Bengali. He played with the erasures, following them from verse to verse with

A page from a
paper written after
the arrival of the new pen

While in America I had ^{occasions to talk} about the
rapid and enormous growth of organisations which attain
their ^{unmistakable efficiency} by eliminating the personal man and concentrating the
mechanical ^{one} in a huge ^{lump} of system. I spoke of the
spread of callousness and the deadening of the moral sense of responsibility

Plate 3. Detail of a doodled manuscript from the collection of the Dartington Hall Trust, UK. Note on the top left corner of the page reads: 'A page from a paper written after the arrival of the new pen.'

Opposite page Pen used by Rabindranath.

২৪

কিছু কিছু কথা শুনে, সেজন্য
আমরা কি করে নিজে গুলি গুলি
আমরা কি করে গুলি গুলি
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২৪

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২৪

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কিছু কিছু কথা শুনে

Plate 4. MS 127. Song ('Chokher chaoar haoy doday mon'), Gitabitan, 9 September, 1926. 12 x 17.5 cm.

his pen, making lines that suddenly jumped into life out of this play: prehistoric monsters, birds, faces appeared. The cancelled mistakes in Tagore's poems gave birth to a world of forms that grinned, frowned or laughed at us in a mysterious and fascinating way. I begged him to let me photograph some of the pages. The permission was granted. That copy-book, I think, was the beginning of Tagore the painter, of his urge to translate his dreams with a pencil or a brush. I took such delight in his doodles that it encouraged him to go on. When I met him, six years later, in France, he was painting, not doodling, and the exhibition I arranged for him with the help of my French friends was a success.⁴

It may be interesting to question what exactly prompted Rabindranath in putting so much of effort and time in transforming his mistakes into fanciful designs and decorative forms when his mind had been preoccupied with thoughts awaiting expressions in words. Rabindranath explained that he felt a sense of annoyance, generated out of the absence of harmony and beauty in the spontaneous deletions of his manuscripts. This upset the universal principle of beauty and balance, prompting him to give his erasures a beautiful makeover. Speaking on his obsession with doodling he wrote:

Desultory lines obstruct the freedom of our vision with the inertia of their irrelevance. They do not move with the great march of all things. They have no justification to exist and therefore, they rose up against them their surroundings; the perpetually disturb peace. For this reason the scattered scratches and corrections in my manuscripts cause me annoyance. They represent regrettable mischance, like a gapingly foolish crowd stuck in a wrong place, undecided as to how or where to move on. But if the spirit of a dance is inspired in the heart of that crowd,

Pen used by Rabindranath

