

ESSAY

THE FIVE ELEMENTS

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INTRODUCTION

For the convenience of composition, let me christen my five companions after the five elements—Earth, Water, Fire, Air, and Ether. The moment one attempts to give a person a fabricated name, some alteration of the man himself becomes necessary. Just as a sword requires its sheath, so a name that fits a human being perfectly is well nigh impossible to find in language. And how, in any case, could one contrive to match five actual persons precisely with the five elements?

Nor do I truly wish to match them so exactly. I am not, after all, standing before a court of law. Only this much of an oath does a writer owe to the tribunal of his readers: that he shall speak the truth. But that truth he may clothe as he pleases.

Let me, then, present my five elements.

Kshiti (Earth) is, of all of us, the most weighty in temperament. On most matters his convictions stand immovable, unshaken. Whatever he can grasp directly, in some solid and definite shape, and put to use when the occasion demands—that alone he acknowledges as truth. If truth exists beyond such bounds, he has no reverence for it, and wishes to have nothing to do with it. He says: the burden of merely essential knowledge is heavy enough to bear. The load grows heavier by the day, and learning ever more arduous. In ancient times, when knowledge had not yet accumulated in such towering strata, when what a man strictly needed to learn was but little, there was leisure enough for ornamental learning. But that leisure exists no longer. A small child may be swathed in bright clothes and jewels without harm, for he has no task in life but to eat and be fed. But can a grown man—one who must act, and move, and rise, and walk through the world—be adorned with anklets on his feet, bracelets on his wrists, and a peacock-plume in his hair? He must instead tuck up his garment, bind on his helmet, and march forward with quick step. This is why, day by day, ornament falls away from civilization. Progress means nothing other than the steady hoarding of the necessary and the steady casting-off of the unnecessary.

Srotaswini ("the Flowing One," Water) can offer no proper rejoinder to this argument of Kshiti's. She can only circle round it, again and again, in sweet murmuring cadence and lovely gesture, saying—No, no, that can never be true. My heart will not accept it; it can never be wholly true. Only this, over and over: "No,

no, it is not so." She has no argument beyond this—only a liquid music, a tone of pleading, the sway of a throat that shames the very waves—"No, no, it is not so." I love the unnecessary, therefore the unnecessary too is necessary. The unnecessary often does us no service at all—it merely calls forth our tenderness, our love, our compassion, our willingness to forsake self-interest; and is there, in this world, no need for such love? Before this flood of Srotaswini's pleading, Kshiti very nearly melts—but by what argument is he to be defeated?

Dipti ("Radiance," Fire) flashes like a bared blade drawn from its scabbard, and says to Kshiti in a voice both sharp and lovely—Ah! You imagine that you alone do the world's work. What you would prune away from your labours as unnecessary may well be necessary to ours. From conduct, from speech, from belief, from learning, from the body itself, you would strip away every ornament, because in the jostling crush of civilization space and time have grown so scarce. But our eternal task, once these ornaments are cast aside, comes very nearly to a halt. It is only by hoarding a thousand small graces, a thousand delicate touches, a thousand sweetnesses and courtesies, a thousand words and tales and moods and gestures and leisures, that we are able to run this household called the world. We smile sweetly, we speak with modesty, we labour with becoming shyness, we take pains, over long years, to wear in each place only what becomes it—and it is precisely for this reason that we are able to perform, so effortlessly, the office of your mothers and your wives. If indeed, under the pressure of civilization, everything but strictly necessary knowledge and science is to be driven out, then I confess I should like to see what becomes of the helpless infant, and of that great, helpless, foolish tribe—men!

Samir ("the Breeze," Air) at first laughed and waved the whole matter away. He said—Never mind Kshiti's talk. The moment one steps back a little, turns to one side, shifts one's ground, and examines a truth from several angles, such an earthquake seizes that poor immovable mental kingdom of his that his carefully-built, solidified opinions are shattered, some cracked and some razed to the ground. And so the fellow declares that everything, from god to worm, springs from the earth—for to admit that something exists beyond the earth would require him to shift a good deal from his earthy footing. He needs to be made to understand this: that the world's true business does not lie in man's relation to inert matter, but in man's relation to man. However much natural science one may learn, it teaches nothing of how to live among men. But those things which are the ornaments of life, which constitute grace, which constitute poetry—these alone

forge the true bonds between human beings, clear the thorns from one another's paths, heal the wounds in one another's hearts, open the eyes to sight, and stretch the compass of life from earth to very heaven.

Byom ("the Void," Ether) closed his eyes for a while, and then said—If you speak of man in his truest sense, then that which is unnecessary is precisely what is most necessary to him. Whatever proves convenient, whatever gets the work done, whatever fills the belly—that, man comes in time to despise. This is why the sages of India cast off hunger and thirst, heat and cold, altogether, and proclaimed the freedom of manhood. That anything external should be indispensable to him is itself an insult to the soul. If that very necessity is enthroned as king upon the seat of human civilization, and no higher sovereign acknowledged above it, then that civilization cannot be called the highest of civilizations.

No one listens with much attention to what Byom says. Srotaswini, for fear of wounding him, hears him out with an appearance of deep attention, yet secretly regards him with a certain pitying indulgence, as one might a "poor madman." But Dipti cannot endure him at all. She grows restless and hastens to interject some other subject. Because she cannot quite follow his meaning, she seems to nurse against him something very like a genuine grudge.

I myself, however, never dismiss what Byom says out of hand. I said to him—What the sages achieved for themselves alone through fierce austerity, science wishes to achieve for all mankind. Hunger and thirst, heat and cold, and the thousand tyrannies that matter inflicts upon man—these are precisely what science seeks to abolish. Rather than fleeing from matter to win manhood's freedom in some forest hermitage, if we instead enslave matter itself, keep it penned like a bondservant in its quarters, and enthrone man as king in this palace of nature, then surely no dishonour remains to humanity. Therefore, to arrive at last at a free, spiritual civilization, permanently released from bondage to matter, it is altogether necessary that we first pass through a long and arduous discipline of science.

Just as Kshiti thinks it wholly beneath him to trouble with refuting his opponents' arguments, so too our Byom, having once spoken, falls silent again, and thereafter whatever anyone else says cannot disturb his gravity. My words, too, failed to touch him. Kshiti remained exactly where he had stood, immovable, and Byom too

remained composed within the ample folds of his moustache, his beard, and his gravity.

Such, then, are I and my company of five elements. Among them, one morning, Dipti said to me—Why do you not keep a diary?

Women's minds harbour many blind convictions, and among Dipti's was this one: that I was no ordinary person. Needless to say, I made no great effort to disabuse her of it.

Samir, with a broad and restless gesture, slapped me on the back and said—Don't write one, old fellow.

Kshiti and Byom remained silent.

I said—Diary-keeping has one great fault.

Dipti broke in impatiently—Never mind that, write it anyway.

Srotaswini asked softly—What fault? Let us hear.

I said—A diary is an artificial life. But the moment it is fashioned into being, it inevitably comes to exercise a certain dominion over our real life. Within a single man there exist a thousand fragments, and to govern them all and still carry on one's affairs is difficulty enough; to fashion, with one's own hand, an artificial double of that self from the outside only compounds the trouble.

Byom, who never lets a chance for nothingness pass, broke in—That is precisely why the philosophers forbid all action whatsoever. For every act is a kind of creation. The moment you create an act, it attains a sort of immortality and clings to you forever after. The more we think, the more we experience, the more we splinter ourselves into fragments. Therefore, if it is the pure, unblemished soul you seek, abandon all thought, all impression, all action.

Without answering Byom, I went on—I have no wish to shatter myself into fragments. Within me a certain being is, day after day, weaving together various thoughts and various deeds upon the fabric of the world, building thereby,

according to some undiscovered law, a single life. If, alongside this, one keeps writing a diary, one shatters that being and raises up, in its place, another—thereby setting up a second, rival life.

Kshiti laughed and said—Why you call a diary a "second life" I confess I still cannot see.

I said—My meaning is this: life is tracing out its path in one direction; if you, pen in hand, draw right beside it a second, corresponding line, then in time a condition may well arise in which it becomes hard to tell which is which—whether your pen is tracing a line parallel to your life, or your life is following the line laid down by your pen. Between the two lines, it grows difficult, in time, to determine which is the original and which the copy. The movement of life is by its very nature full of mystery; within it lie many self-contradictions, many inconsistencies, much disharmony between what came before and what comes after. But the pen, by its very nature, wishes to follow one clear, well-defined course. It can only resolve all such contradictions, smooth away all such disharmonies, and draw a single, simplified line. Having once observed an event, it cannot help arriving at some logical conclusion about it. And so its line naturally tends to advance toward the very conclusion it has itself constructed, and seeks, moreover, to bend life into conformity with it, to make life its follower.

Seeing my eagerness to make the point clear, Srotaswini said, with tender sympathy—I understand what you mean. By nature, our great Life-Force, seated in some deeply hidden workshop, shapes our life according to some wondrous, unknown law; but the moment one begins keeping a diary, the task of shaping that life is entrusted to two hands instead of one. In part, the diary follows life; in part, life comes to follow the diary.

Srotaswini listens to everything with such patient, silent attention that one imagines she is labouring hard to grasp one's meaning—only to discover, quite suddenly, that she had understood it perfectly long before.

I said—Just so.

Dipti said—And what harm is there in that?

I said—Only he who has suffered it knows. Anyone who has made a trade of literature will understand what I mean. The literary craftsman must draw forth from within himself a multitude of moods and a multitude of characters. Just as a skilled gardener, working to order, by various graftings and particular cultivations, coaxes from a single species of flower many different varieties—in one enlarging the leaf, in another varying the colour, in another perfecting the fragrance, in yet another sweetening the fruit—so too does the literary craftsman draw forth from his one mind a manifold harvest. He applies the warmth of imagination to each separate mood of the mind, and brings forth each, in turn, as a distinct and complete shape. Those moods, those memories, those swells of feeling which, in the ordinary man, perform their appointed office and fall away in their season, or else transform themselves into something else—these the literary craftsman isolates, and clothes in a permanent and vivid form. The moment he gives them a well-wrought embodiment, they attain immortality. In this way, little by little, there grows up within the writer's mind a whole settlement of separate, self-sufficient beings. His life ceases to possess unity. Before he knows it, he has splintered into a hundred selves. The hungry, undying broods of feeling that he has begotten stretch out their hands in every direction across the universe. They are curious about everything. The mystery of the world leads them astray in ten directions at once. Beauty binds them with the pipe's sweet snare into the bonds of sorrow. They take even grief for a playfellow, and would put even death itself to the test. Like children endlessly curious over some new thing, they touch, they smell, they taste everything, and will submit to no restraint. It is as though a single lamp were lit with a score of wicks at once, and the whole of one's life consumed with a great roaring flame. So many living growths within a single nature become themselves the cause of terrible discord and confusion.

Srotaswini asked, with a faint shadow upon her face—Is there, then, no joy at all in expressing oneself in this rich and various way?

I said—There is a vast joy in creation. But no man can remain forever occupied in creating; his strength has its limits, and, being caught up in the world, he must also conduct the ordinary business of living. And it is in this ordinary business that he finds himself sorely inconvenienced. He has so continually warmed his mind under the brooding heat of imagination that nothing any longer sits easily upon it. A flute with seven holes makes an excellent instrument—it sings at the merest breath; but

for the road of life, a solid, unpierced staff of seasoned bamboo serves better, for upon it one may lean one's whole weight.

Samir said—Unhappily, man's faculties are not divided up like the segments of a bamboo—the man-flute must become a flute when it is time to play, and a staff when it is time to walk. But you two, at least, are well provided—one of you a flute, one a staff; while I am nothing but the breath itself. I possess all the inward materials of music, but lack that one outward form through which alone it might be sounded forth as melody.

Dipti said—In this human birth of ours, so much is needlessly lost. So many thoughts, so many feelings, so many events raise their great waves of joy and sorrow, stirring me daily into fresh disturbance; if only I could bind them fast within writing, it would seem to me as though a great portion of my life remained safely in my own hands. Whether joy or sorrow, my heart cannot bear to relinquish entire possession of either.

I had a good deal more to say on this, but I saw that Srotaswini was hesitating, wishing to say something; and I knew that if I now launched into my speech, she would at once abandon her own thought. So I held my peace. After a moment she said—I do not know, my friend, but to me that very thing seems the most objectionable of all. If we set down, day by day, whatever we happen to feel that day, it will not keep its true proportion. Much of our joy and sorrow, our love and anger, springs up suddenly, out of some trifling cause, and swells to disproportionate size. Perhaps something we have borne easily for years becomes, on one particular day, utterly unbearable; something that is, in truth, no fault at all, appears to us on some one day as a grievous wrong; some trivial sorrow, for no good reason, seems on a certain day heavier than sorrows far greater; because our mood happens to be ill, we often judge another unjustly—and whatever falsehood lies in all this, time gradually clears away from our minds. In this manner, the excesses of life are little by little worn down, and only the broad, essential outline of life survives—and that alone is my true self. Besides this, many thoughts come and go and fade within our minds only half-formed, and to drag every one of them out into full, sharp clarity is to destroy the very delicacy of the mind. In keeping a diary, we are driven, by an artificial necessity, to magnify every trifle of our life into something large, and, in forcing many a tender, half-formed thought into bloom before its time, we end by tearing it, or twisting it out of shape.

Suddenly Srotaswini became aware that she had been speaking at some length, and with no little feeling; at once the tips of her ears reddened, and, turning her face slightly away, she said—I do not know—I cannot say for certain. I wonder if I have understood it rightly at all.

Dipti never hesitates for a moment over anything—and seeing her poised to deliver some forceful reply, I said quickly—You have understood it perfectly. That is exactly what I was about to say myself, though I doubt I could have put it half so well. Dipti should remember this: to grow, one must relinquish. To gain, one must spend. It is only by forgetting much, casting off much, giving away much, day after day, from our lives, that we are able to move forward at all. What good would it do to hoist every trifling object upon our heads, to tie up every torn scrap in our bundle, dragging behind us, every day, every moment, the whole weight of the past? Whoever presses his whole heart against every word, every mood, every event, is most unfortunate indeed.

Dipti laughed a formal little laugh, and, folding her hands, said—It was my error to have urged you to keep a diary; never again shall I make such a mistake.

Samir, quite disturbed, said—One must never say such a thing! To confess a fault is the greatest of blunders in this world. We imagine that a confession of guilt will make the judge lenient—not so at all; the pleasure of judging and reproaching another is a rare pleasure indeed, and however much you exaggerate your own fault, the stern judge will only seize upon it the more eagerly, and take his pleasure in pressing it home. I had been wondering which course to follow—now I have decided: I shall keep a diary.

I said—I too stand ready. But I shall not write of myself. I shall write of matters that belong to all of us—these very things that we discuss, day after day—

Srotaswini grew a little alarmed. Samir, folding his hands, said—I beg you, if every word we say is to go into this writing, then I shall have to memorize my speeches at home before coming, and if I chance to forget them halfway through, I shall have to go home again to look them up. The result will be that conversation will grow much scantier, and effort much greater. And if you write down the plain,

unvarnished truth, then you may strike my name from your company, for I shall withdraw from it altogether.

I said—No, no—I shall honour no obligation to truth, only my obligation to friendship. Have no fear, any of you—I shall put the words into your mouths myself.

Kshiti opened his great eyes wide and said—That is more alarming still. I can see it plainly already—into my mouth you will place every manner of ill-founded argument, and out of your own you will draw the unanswerable retort.

I said—One must, after all, take revenge in writing upon him who has defeated one so often in speech. Let me say plainly, in advance: for all the trouble and defeat I have suffered at your hands, I mean now to exact my due.

Kshiti, ever long-suffering, said with contentment—So be it.

Byom said nothing, but smiled faintly for a moment—and the deep meaning of that smile I have, to this day, never been able to fathom.

THE BOND OF BEAUTY

The rains had swollen the river until it overflowed into the fields. Our boat moved forward over the half-submerged paddy with a soft rustling sound.

Not far off, upon higher ground, a walled single-storeyed house and two or three tin-roofed cottages could be glimpsed through banana and jackfruit trees, mango groves, clumps of bamboo, and a great masonry-platformed banyan.

From that direction came the thin strain of a shehnai and the beat of several drums. The shehnai, most cruelly out of tune, played over and over the opening phrase of some rustic melody, while the drums seemed to have flown, without cause, into sudden fury, bent on tearing the very kingdom of the air to pieces.

Srotaswini thought there must be a wedding somewhere close by. Filled with eager curiosity, she thrust her face out of the window and turned her searching gaze toward the tree-shaded bank.

I asked the boatman moored at the ghat—What's this music for?

He said—Today is the zamindar's punyaha.

Hearing that punyaha did not mean a wedding, Srotaswini was somewhat disappointed. She had expected to catch sight, somewhere along that shadowy village path, of a sandal-anointed, beardless young bridegroom in a peacock-boat, or a shy young bride swathed in red.

I said—Punyaha means the opening day of the zamindari year. Today the tenants, each according to his means, will bring some portion of the rent and present it before the naib, dressed up in his ceremonial headgear like a bridegroom, in the cutcherry hall. On this day it is not customary to count the money. That is to say, the payment of rent is made to seem a purely voluntary act of joy—free of base greed on one side and base fear on the other. Something like the way trees and creepers, in nature's great festival, offer flowers to spring, and spring does not count them up with a hoarder's eye.

Dipti said—But the business is simply rent-collection—why, then, all this music and drumming?

Kshiti said—When a kid-goat is led off to sacrifice, is it not garlanded and accompanied with music? Today the music plays for a sacrifice offered to the goddess Rent.

I said—You may see it that way, certainly, but if sacrifice there must be, it is better to invest it, as far as possible, with some elevated feeling, rather than slaughter the beast like a mere animal.

Kshiti said—I would rather say: preserve whatever is the true nature of a thing. Very often, by imposing a lofty sentiment upon a base act, we only degrade the lofty sentiment itself.

I said—The truth or falsehood of a sentiment depends a great deal upon the manner of feeling it. I look upon this river, brimming in the rains, in one way; that fisherman looks upon it in quite another—I cannot admit that my way of seeing it is false by so much as a hair's breadth.

Samir said—To many people, the truth or falsehood of a sentiment is weighed by the pound. Whatever is heaviest is held to be truest. Dust is truer than beauty, self-interest truer than affection, hunger truer than love.

I said—And yet mankind has, since the beginning, been forever trying to deny outright these heavy, weighty things. It covers over dust, puts self-interest to shame, banishes hunger out of sight. Squalor is among the oldest creations upon this earth; nothing is harder to find than a substance more ancient than dust and refuse—yet does that make it the truest thing of all? And is the goddess-housewife of the inner chamber of the heart, who comes forever trying to wash it clean, to be dismissed as a falsehood?

Kshiti said—Why, friend, such alarm? I have not come to plant dynamite beneath the foundations of your inner chamber. But calm yourself and tell me this—what is corrected in the world by the playing of that discordant shehnai on punyaha day? It is certainly not the art of music.

Samir said—It is nothing more than this: the striking of a single note. After a year's worth of stumbling and broken rhythm, one comes once more to the beat and brings all back into tune. Amid the clamour of worldly self-interest, if now and then a fifth note is sounded, the face of the earth is restored, if only for a moment; suddenly, in the midst of the marketplace, the grace of home appears; the tender moonlit gaze of love falls upon buying and selling, and dispels their parched harshness. What actually happens in the world happens at the pitch of a shout; but what ought to happen comes, now and then, on some chosen day, to sit down in the midst of it all and set the tone with a sweet and gentle melody—and for that while, all the shouting softens and tunes itself to that melody. Punyaha is that day of music.

I said—So it is with every festival. Man labours, day after day, in one fashion, and on certain days tries to mend himself by acting in the opposite fashion. Day after day he earns; one day he spends. Day after day he keeps his door shut; one day he throws it wide open. Day after day, within his home, he alone is master; on one day, he is servant to all. That day is the auspicious day, the day of joy, the day of festival. That day is the ideal of the whole year. On that day garlands of flowers, lamps of crystal, graceful adornments, and, somewhere in the distance, a flute, all seem to say: today's melody alone is the true melody, all else is discord. We come to understand that we had come into this world to meet, heart to heart, and rejoice together, but that the poverty of our daily lives prevents it; the day we succeed, that day becomes the chief day of all.

Samir said—The poverty of this world has no end. Looked at from that side, human life appears a thing withered, empty, graceless. However exalted the human soul, it must gather its two fistfuls of rice twice a day, and without a scrap of cloth it dissolves into the earth. On one hand it believes itself deathless and infinite; on the other, the day its snuff-box is lost, it rends the very heavens with its cries. However it may be managed, day after day it must eat, move about, buy, sell, haggle, jostle, and struggle—and of this it feels ashamed. And so it forever strives to conceal the meanness of this dry, dusty, crowded marketplace of existence. In eating and moving, in giving and taking, the soul tries ever to unfold its own radiance of beauty. It seeks to bring its own necessities into graceful harmony with its own greatness.

I said—The flute of punyaha is proof enough of that. One man's land, another man's payment for it—within this dry contract, the abashed human soul wishes to instill a beauty of sentiment. It wishes to forge between the two some bond of kinship. It wishes to make it understood: this is no mere contract, there is here a freedom born of love. King and subject stand in a relation of feeling; giving and taking are duties of the heart. Rent-money has, of itself, nothing to do with melody; the treasury is no place for orchestras—but wherever a bond of feeling comes to stand, there the flute summons it, there melody gives it voice, there beauty walks at its side. The village flute strives, as best it can, to declare: today is our day of sanctity, today is the meeting of king and subject. Even in the zamindar's cutcherry the human soul labours to build itself a doorway of entry; even there it has spread out a seat for sentiment.

Srotaswini, thinking to herself, said—It seems to me that this does more than merely enhance the beauty of the world—it truly lightens the burden of sorrow. Since inequality exists in this world, and can never be abolished except by the dissolution of creation itself, then, so long as an unbroken bond exists between the high and the low, the weight of that height becomes easier to bear. It is easy for the feet to carry the body's weight; a burden carried apart from oneself is heavy indeed.

The instant Srotaswini finishes making a point well, with the help of some figure of speech, a shyness overtakes her, as though she had committed some fault. Many people feel no such hesitation when stealing another's thought and passing it off as their own.

Byom said—Wherever a defeat must inevitably be acknowledged, man, to relieve his sorrow of inferiority, forges a bond of sentiment. And this he does not only toward man, but everywhere. When man first came into the world and found himself utterly unable to contend with forest-fire, storm, and flood; when the mountain, like Nandi standing sentinel before Shiva, barred his path with an upraised finger and stood silently touching the blue sky; when the sky, immovable in majesty beyond his reach, rained down now shower and now thunderbolt by its own inexorable will—then man made gods of them, and bound them to himself in kinship. Otherwise, no treaty could ever have been struck between man and the nature that was to be his eternal dwelling-place. Only when he filled unknown Power with reverence was the human soul able to dwell within it with dignity.

Kshiti said—There is no doubt that the human soul, in one way or another, contrives various devices to preserve its own dignity. When a king behaves according to his own whim, and there is no escape whatever from his hand, then his subjects fashion him into a god, and thereby try to forget the sorrow of their own abjection. When a man is strong and capable of sole dominion, his helpless wife sets him up as a god, and thereby tries to bear, with some semblance of dignity, his selfish and cruel tyranny. I grant this much: had man not this power of covering want with sentiment, he would long since have sunk lower than the beasts.

Srotaswini said, with a touch of hurt—It is not only from compulsion that man practises this kind of self-deception. Even where we are in no way overpowered—indeed, where we ourselves are the stronger party—we may observe this same effort to establish kinship. Why do the people of our country worship the cow as mother, as goddess? She is nothing but a helpless animal; oppress her, ill-treat her, and there is none to speak two words on her behalf. We are strong, she is weak; we are human, she is beast. Yet it is precisely that superiority of ours which we strive to conceal. When we take benefit from her, though we do so by force, though we do so only because we are capable and she is helpless, our inmost soul refuses to admit as much. Only by calling this patient, tranquil, beneficent animal-mother "mother" does one truly taste satisfaction in drinking her milk; only by establishing a bond of feeling, a bond of beauty, between man and beast does the soul's need to create find its rest.

Byom said gravely—You have spoken a very great truth.

Hearing this, Srotaswini started. She had no notion of when she had committed so grave an offence. For this unwitting fault, shy and abashed, she silently begged pardon.

Byom said—There is much to say concerning this creative striving of the soul which you have mentioned. Just as the spider sits at the centre and casts its web out in every direction, so our soul, dwelling at the centre of things, is forever busy weaving bonds of kinship on every side; it is forever making the unlike like, the far near, the alien its own. Sitting still, it builds a thousand bridges between self and other. That which we call beauty is its own creation. Beauty is the bridge between soul and

matter. Matter, in itself, is mere mass; we draw sustenance from it, dwell within it, and also suffer injury at its hands. Were we to regard it only as alien, what could be more alien than the aggregate of matter? But it is the very work of the soul to make kinship. And so it laid down beauty between them as a bridge. The day it called matter "beautiful," on that day it entered into the heart of matter, and matter too took shelter within it—and great indeed was the joy that came of it. This work of bridge-building continues even now. This is the poet's chief glory: that on this earth he strengthens our old bonds with all that surrounds us, and discovers ever new ones. Day by day he makes the alien earth our own, and makes the earth of matter a fit dwelling-place for the soul. Needless to say, when I use the word "matter" I use it in its accepted sense; were I to expound my own views upon the inertness of matter, I fear I should remain the sole sentient being left in this present company.

Samir, paying little heed to Byom's words, said—Srotaswini has given only the example of the cow, but our country lacks no instances of this kind. The other day, when I saw a man, scorched and weary from the sun, set down an empty kerosene tin from his head upon the bank and plunge into the water crying "Oh Mother!"—something stirred within me deeply. That this cool, beautiful, deep expanse of water, flowing on with sweet murmuring, giving suck as it were to both its banks, should have its heated body received into that cool embrace, and should call out to it as "mother"—what sweeter overflow of the heart could there be! When this fruitful and grain-bearing earth, down to the ancestral homestead familiar since birth, tended by father and grandfather before us, appears to us clothed in living affection as one's very own kin, then life grows wondrously fertile, beautiful, and green. Then a deep communion is struck with the universe; the unbroken unity binding matter to beast, and beast to man, does not strike us as strange at all—for we knew this truth in our hearts long before science ever hinted at it; before the scholar came to trace out for us the genealogy of our kinship, we, by the mere pull of blood, had already set up house everywhere in this world.

Because our language has no exact equivalent for the word "thank," certain European scholars suspect that we lack gratitude. But I find the very opposite to be true. Our hearts seem, if anything, to yearn for occasions to declare their debt. Whatever we receive from beast, whatever we receive from matter, we regard it too as an act of tenderness, of kindness, of benefaction, and long eagerly to repay it. A people whose very wrestler brings his own cudgel to life in his mind out of a longing to render it thanks, whose student does likewise with his book, and whose

artisan with his tool, cannot rightly be called ungrateful merely for want of one particular word.

I said—It can be called so nonetheless. For we have gone beyond the very bounds of gratitude. That we accept help from one another so freely, without hesitation, is not owing to ingratitude, but chiefly to a comparative absence, among us, of any strong sense of separateness. Beggar and giver, guest and host, dependent and protector, master and servant—these relations seem, among us, almost natural relations. And so it occurs to no one, in such cases, to discharge the debt by an expression of thanks.

Byom said—Gratitude, in the European sense of bookkeeping, we do not even show toward our gods. When a European says "thank God," his meaning is this: since God has deliberately done me some particular service, I cannot, like a barbarian, walk away without acknowledging that service. We cannot offer our gods mere gratitude, for gratitude would be to give them too little, to cheat them of their due. It would be to say to them: you have done your work, and I, for my part, have discharged mine, and so we are quits. Rather, love has its own species of ingratitude, for love's claims can never be settled in full. And that ingratitude of love is deeper and sweeter than the gratitude of separateness. There is a song of Ramprasad's:

"No longer, Mother, shall I call thee Mother—
such torment hast Thou given me, and givest still."

Such lofty ingratitude as this could never be rendered into any European tongue.

Kshiti said, with a sidelong glance—Perhaps our ingratitude toward Europeans, too, has some such deep and generous cause behind it. All that has been said concerning the establishing of kinship with inanimate nature is, no doubt, exceedingly beautiful; and profound too, beyond question, for I confess I have not yet been able to fathom its depths entirely. Each of you, one after another, has declared that it is we who have forged this bond of feeling with nature, while Europe treats her as a stranger. But let me ask this: had we never known European literature, English poetry, would today's discussion even have been possible? And could one who has never read a line of English ever, in the end, grasp its meaning at all?

I said—No, never. And there is good reason for it. Our relation to nature is, as it were, that of brother and sister; the English poet's relation to her is that of husband and wife. We are kin from birth, one with her by nature. We do not see in her fresh and endless variety, the fine and shifting shades of feeling; we lie steeped in a kind of blind, unconscious tenderness. But the Englishman approaches nature from the outside, and enters her only by degrees; and it is precisely because he has preserved his own separateness that his discovery of her is so full of fresh delight, his union with her so profound. Like a young bridegroom, he strives to win her, even as nature, to charm him, unveils her own hidden beauty. At first he knew nature only as matter; then suddenly, one day, as though at the dawn of youth, he turned his gaze upon her and discovered her unutterable, immeasurable, spiritual beauty. We have made no such discovery, for we never doubted, and we never questioned.

The soul can feel itself wholly only through friction with another soul; only thus is the spirituality of union churned up to its fullest measure. To be undifferentiated is next-door to not existing at all. A certain English poet has written that God has divided His own paternal and maternal essence between man and woman upon this earth; and those two divided parts are drawn to each other, to become one again, by a joy that neither can resist—yet, had that separation never taken place, so profound a knowledge of each other could never have arisen between them. There is more of the spiritual in union than in mere oneness.

We call the earth, the river, "mother"; we worship the shade-giving banyan and peepul; we look upon stone and rock as living things—yet we do not feel their spirituality within our own soul. Rather, we turn the spiritual into the merely material. We impose upon it forms shaped by our own fancy; we beg of it happiness, wealth, success. But a spiritual bond is one of beauty alone, of joy alone; it is no relation of profit and loss, of gain and expenditure. When the Ganges, flowing with beauty and tenderness, grants joy to the soul, then indeed she is spiritual; but the moment we bind her fast within some particular image and beg of her some particular advantage, in this life or the next, then it becomes a graceless delusion, a mere blind ignorance. It is then that we turn the god into an idol.

The riches of this life, the merit of the next—these, O Jahnavi, I do not ask of thee, nor would I receive them if I did; but for all the many days of my life, from childhood onward, at sunrise and at sunset, in the crescent light of the waning moon, in the cloud-darkened noon of the deep monsoon, thou hast filled my inmost soul with an indescribable, unearthly rapture—may those treasured joys of my rare life remain undimmed through birth after birth; and whatever peerless beauty I have been able to gather from this earth throughout my life, may I, at the hour of my departure, carry it away in my hand like a lotus in full bloom—and if I should chance to meet my Beloved, may I place it in His outstretched palm, and thereby account this one human birth fulfilled.

MAN AND WOMAN

Samir raised a question. He said—In English literature, whether in prose or in verse, one finds the greatness of both hero and heroine fully brought to light. Beside Desdemona, neither Othello nor Iago is dimmed in the least; Cleopatra has indeed enveloped Antony within her dark and sinuous coils, yet even so, Antony's grandeur stands visible to all, like some broken triumphal pillar wound about with creepers. However much the heroine of *The Bride of Lammermoor* may enchant us with her pathetic, simple, delicate beauty, she cannot draw our gaze away from the dark, brooding hero of Ravenswood. But in Bengali literature, it is the heroine who reigns supreme. Beside Kundanandini and Suryamukhi, Nagendra pales; beside Rohini and Bhramar, Govindalal all but vanishes; beside the luminous Kapalkundala, Nabakumar is the faintest of satellites. Look, too, at the old Bengali poetry. In *Vidya-Sundar*, if any figure lives at all, it is only Vidya and the flower-seller Malini—of Sundar's character there is not the least substance. Across the vast, level plain of Kabikankan's Chandi, only Fullara and Khullana stir and move about at all; otherwise, the hunter is nothing but a huge, misshapen stump, and Dhanapati and his son are of no use whatever. In Bengali literature, man lies as motionless in the dust as Mahadeva, while woman reigns upon his breast, wakeful and vividly alive. What can be the reason for this?

Srotaswini grew intensely curious to hear the answer to Samir's question, while Dipti, feigning utter indifference, opened a book upon the table and fixed her gaze upon it.

Kshiti said—The novels of Bankim Babu that you have named are all novels of the inner life, not of action. In the world of the mind, woman's influence is the greater; in the world of action, man's dominion prevails. Where the matter concerns only the play of feeling, how should man hold his own against woman? It is only in the field of action that his character finds its true unfolding.

Dipti could contain herself no longer—she flung down her book, dropped all pretence of indifference, and burst out—Why so? Was not Bimala's character in *Durgeshnandini* revealed precisely through action? What hero in that very novel can show such skill, such resourcefulness, such perseverance? *Anandamath* is surely a novel of action above all. True, Satyananda, Jibananda, Bhabananda and the rest of the Santan brotherhood act throughout it, but that is merely the poet's

narration; if any character's true capacity for action has been genuinely brought to life, it is Shanti's. And in Debi Chaudhurani, who holds the reins of command? A woman. And is it merely command within the inner chamber? It is not.

Samir said—My dear Kshiti, not everything can be neatly sorted by the straight lines of logic. On a chessboard one can rule off squares of red and black in perfect regularity, for it is merely a stage for lifeless wooden figures; but human character is no such simple thing. However unassailable the boundaries you draw by reasoning—this one governed by feeling, that one by action—in the vast and varied field of actual life everything is overturned. Were it not for the fire of life burning beneath society's iron cauldron, mankind's categories would remain fixed and immovable, exactly as drawn. But when the flame of life leaps up, all human character comes bubbling and boiling forth, and there is no longer any limit to the fresh and astonishing variety that appears. Literature is the shifting reflection of that ever-changing human world. To try to bind it fast with the labels of critical theory is folly. No one can set down in black and white that woman is supreme in feeling. Othello is surely a play of the inner life, yet how tremendous is the force of the hero's passion within it! How terrible the storm of the heart in King Lear!

Byom suddenly broke in, impatient—Ah, you argue in vain. If you think deeply upon it, you will see that action itself belongs to woman. Woman has no place anywhere but in the field of action. The true man is the yogi, the recluse, the dweller in solitude. When the shepherd of the Chaldean wilderness lay alone upon the desert sand, gazing upward to trace the courses of the planets and stars across the midnight sky, what joy was his! What woman could spend her time so, on so unprofitable a pursuit? What woman would spend her life upon knowledge that serves no practical end? To what woman is that meditation of any worth, which yields only the pure joy of a soul detached from the world? Had man, as Kshiti claims, truly been given over to action, human society could never have risen so high—no new truth, no new idea would ever have come forth. It is in solitude, in leisure, that knowledge is revealed and thought is born. The true man dwells always in that detached solitude. Even Napoleon, the hero of action, was never truly immersed in his own deeds; wherever he might be, he remained enclosed within his own vast solitude, girded about by the sky of his own thought—he was ever guarded by some single mighty idea of his own, and even in the midst of the most tumultuous action, he lived a life apart, alone. Bhishma, too, was a hero of the battle of Kurukshetra, but amid that terrible clash of multitudes, who else was as

utterly solitary as he? Was he acting, or was he in meditation? It is woman who truly acts. In her action there is no interval, no gap. She is wholly immersed, wholly entangled in the act itself. She alone dwells in the true habitation of mankind; she preserves the household. Woman alone can give companionship in its fullest, truest sense; one seems to feel her touch directly and immediately—she never holds herself apart.

Dipti said—Everything you say is fantastic nonsense—there's no making sense of it at all. I do not say that women cannot act—only that you men never let them.

Byom said—Women have bound themselves fast within the fetters of their own labour. Just as a burning coal gathers its own ashes about itself, so does woman bury herself beneath the accumulated heap of her own household tasks—that is her inner chamber, and round about her there is no leisure whatsoever. If she were once freed from that ash-heap and flung into the vast field of outward action in the world, what a commotion would follow! What man could ever match her in stirring up so swift and tumultuous an upheaval? Man is slow to act; a long road lies between him and his deed, a road strewn thick with deliberation. But let woman once join an outward revolution, and in an instant the whole field is ablaze. It is only the household that keeps this devastating power of action bound and checked; it is this very fire that lights only the evening lamp of the bedchamber, that warms the shivering, that cooks food for the hungry. If, in our literature, these beautiful flames of fire burn bright, why then all this dispute about it?

I said—The chief reason woman has attained such prominence in our literature is that the women of our country are, on the whole, far superior to the men of our country.

Srotaswini's face flushed faintly and broke into a smile. Dipti said—Now you are going too far.

I understood that Dipti's wish was to contradict me, so as to hear more praise of her own sex. I told her as much, adding—Women are exceedingly fond of hearing themselves praised. Dipti shook her head vigorously—Never!

Srotaswini said softly—That much is true. Unpleasant words are far too unpleasant to us, and pleasant words far too sweet.

Though a woman, Srotaswini never hesitates to acknowledge the truth.

I said—There is a reason for this. Among authors, poets, and among the accomplished, singers especially relish the sweetmeats of flattery. The truth is, for those whose task is to enchant the mind, praise is the sole measure of their success. Every other kind of achievement has various direct proofs of its own; but there is no other proof of having charmed the heart save the winning of praise. That is why the singer, at the close of each phrase, looks for applause; that is why neglect is so bitterly painful to every artist.

Samir said—Not only that; discouragement is a chief obstacle to the work of charming others. Only when the singer sees the listener's mind advancing with him can he unfold the full measure of his own powers. And so praise is not merely his reward—it is an essential part of the accomplishment of his art itself.

I said—Woman's chief task, too, is to give joy. Only by making her whole existence as perfectly beautiful as music or poetry does she fulfil the purpose of her life. This is exactly why woman takes such particular delight in praise—not merely for the satisfaction of vanity, but because in it she feels the fulfilment of her own life's purpose. To point out her flaws, her imperfections, is to wound her at the very root of her being. This is why the censure of the world is so terrible a thing to a woman.

Kshiti said—What you have said is charmingly put, quite poetic, pleasant to hear; but the real truth is this: the scope of woman's action is narrow. She has no place in the great world of space and time. Her duty is fulfilled if she can, for the present moment, satisfy and content her husband, her children, her kin, her neighbours. But one whose field of action stretches over distant lands and distant ages, whose results are not always immediately visible, does not depend so utterly upon the praise or blame of those near him and of the present moment; distant hopes and vast imaginings can lend him unshaken strength even amid neglect, indifference, and censure. The chief reason woman is so shaken by public censure or praise, by the pride of good fortune or the sting of humiliation, is that her dealings with life are, as it were, all in ready cash; all her profit and loss lie in the present; whatever return she can get in hand, that alone is her sole gain—and this is why she wants to haggle and bargain for every last farthing, unwilling to let go the smallest coin.

Dipti, vexed, began hunting for examples of great world-benefiting women of Europe and America. Srotaswini said—Greatness and largeness are not always the same thing. I cannot for a moment believe that because we do not act upon a vast field, our actions therefore carry less glory. Muscle, sinew, bone and skin occupy a large space, but the seat of the heart is a small and hidden thing. We dwell at that very heart-centre of all human society. Male gods ride about mounted upon powerful animal-vehicles—bulls, buffaloes, and the like; goddesses dwell within the lotus of the heart, seated in full majesty amid a single unfolding, unchanging beauty. If I am to be born again upon this earth, let me be born once more a woman. Let me not be a beggar, but Annapurna, the giver of food. Consider only this: throughout the whole of human society, how vast is the daily burden of sickness, sorrow, hunger, and weariness; how the dust thrown up by the ceaseless wheel of labour piles higher every moment; how boundless a love is required merely to preserve each single household. If some gracious, smiling, patient goddess, loving toward all, dwells at the head of each such day, laying a cooling touch upon its fevered brow, removing its grime with her own skilled and lovely hands moment by moment, and enters every household to establish there, with unwearied tenderness, welfare and peace—who then can deny her greatness merely because her field of labour is narrow? If I keep bright within my heart that image of the goddess of fortune, I can never again feel contempt for the lot of woman.

After this we all fell silent for a while. Embarrassed by this sudden quiet, Srotaswini turned to me and said—What were you saying about the women of our country? Other arguments came between and buried it.

I said—I was saying that the women of our country are far superior to our men.

Kshiti said—Your proof?

I said—The proof is at hand, everywhere. The proof is in every household. The proof lies within the heart itself. Travelling in the west, one sometimes comes upon rivers where, for the greater part, only hot, dry sand stretches bare and shimmering—only along one narrow edge does a clear crystal stream flow on, gentle and sweet. That sight always brings our society to mind. We are like that useless, barren, motionless heap of sand, blown about, scattering with every passing breeze, and whatever monument we try to raise crumbles down again within a day or two. And

there, along our left bank, our women flow on humbly, along the lower path, shrinking modestly into themselves like devoted handmaids, in a clear and nourishing stream. They know not a moment's pause. Their movement, their affection, their whole life advances steadily toward one fixed goal. We are aimless, disunited, incapable of coming together even when trampled underfoot by a thousand others. Wherever the water flows, wherever our women are, there alone is all beauty, all shade, all fulfilment; and wherever we are, there is only desert glitter, vast emptiness, and scorched servility. Samir, what say you?

Samir, glancing sidelong at Srotaswini and Dipti, laughed and said—Two living obstacles stand present in today's gathering, preventing us from confessing our own worthlessness. I will not name them. In this whole wide world, the Bengali male is honoured only within his own inner chamber. There he is not merely lord, he is a god. Why on earth should we reveal to our worshippers that we are no gods at all, but mere images of straw and clay? When our devoted, trusting worshipper arranges all the blossoms of her heart's garden upon a golden platter and lays them at our feet, where indeed are we to send her away? When that ever-vowed handmaid, having seated us upon the divine throne, waves her secret, unwavering evening lamp of everlasting love round and round our unremarkable faces, a hundred thousand times, in a passion of unappeased devotion—if we do not sit there loftily and accept her worship in silence, then where is her happiness, and where is our honour? When she was a little girl she played with her clay doll as though it had a living soul; grown older, she worships her human doll as though it possessed divinity—if someone broke her plaything then, would the child not have wept? If someone breaks her worshipped idol now, does the grown woman not grieve? Where true human worth exists, humanity itself can command respect without disguise; it is only where true worth is lacking that the trappings of divinity must be got up. Can those who hold no true position anywhere in the world expect, in the guise of ordinary mortals, to win their wives' respect? But since we are each of us a very god, we have been able, without the least hesitation, to build our footstool out of such delicate, beautiful hearts as these.

Dipti said—Whoever possesses true human worth feels shame at accepting divine worship while remaining merely human, and if worshipped nonetheless, strives to make himself worthy of it. But in Bengal, one finds instead that the men, shamelessly, flaunt their supposed divinity. The less worth a man has, the greater his pomp and show. Nowadays men are labouring, in thought, word, and deed, to

teach their wives the greatness of husbands and the worship due to them. It seems the quantity of offerings has lately diminished a trifle, and this alarms them greatly. But it would serve better to teach husbands how to become gods than to teach wives how to worship them. Those who mock modern women for their diminishing worship of the husband-god—if they had the least sense of the ridiculous, that very mockery would turn and pierce themselves. Alas, alas, what great merit must Bengali women have earned in some former birth, to be born now into such a paradise of gods! What splendour in these gods! What greatness!

By now it had become too much for Srotaswini to bear. She shook her head and said gravely—You two keep pitching the note lower and lower until whatever sweetness there was in our hymn of praise is fast disappearing. Even if it be true that we exalt you men beyond your worth, are you not also exalting us beyond ours? If you are not gods, neither are we goddesses. If we are simply gods and goddesses to one another by mutual courtesy, then what need is there for further quarrel? Besides, we do not possess every virtue—if we surpass you in greatness of heart, surely you surpass us in greatness of mind.

I said—You have done very well to say these gentle things in that sweet voice of yours; otherwise, after Dipti's rain of verbal arrows, it would have grown quite impossible to speak the truth. Goddesses, you are goddesses only within poetry; within the temple, it is we who are the gods. Whatever offerings are due a god belong to us, while for you there remain only two, or at most two and a half, verses out of Manu's law-code. You are such gods to us that it would be laughable for you even to claim aloud a right to happiness, health, or prosperity. The whole earth is ours, only the leavings are yours; the feast is for us, the scraps for you. The beauty of nature, the open air, healthful rambles—these are ours; and, having been granted the rare gift of human birth, only the corner of the house, the sickbed, and the edge of the window are yours. We, as gods, receive service at every footstep; you, as goddesses, endure every trampling of the foot—look closely, and you will find the difference between these two divinities.

One thing must be remembered: in Bengal, men have no real occupation. In this country there is nothing but domestic life, and it is women who build up the household, and women too who bring about its ruin. In our country all power, for good or ill, lies in women's hands; our women have wielded that power since time immemorial. Just as a small, sleek, gleaming steamboat tows behind it a great,

heavily-laden barge, upstream or down, so has our housewife towed along behind her the great household, crowded with social obligations and family ties, together with that immovable, unnecessary burden called the husband. In other countries, men, long occupied with the great and manly business of treaty-making and statecraft, have shaped for themselves a character quite distinct from women's. In our country, men are house-reared, mother-coddled, wife-directed. Their lives have never unfolded within any great idea, any great endeavour, any great field of action; and yet they have had to bear, with bowed heads, the oppression of dependency, the degradation and humiliation of servitude. They have never had to perform any manly duty, and yet they have had to bear every insult due a coward. Fortunately, woman need never go abroad to seek out her duty; like fruit and flower upon the branch, duty comes of itself into her hand. The moment she begins to love, her duty begins; at that very moment her thought, her judgement, her reasoning, her action—her whole mental being—awakens, and her entire character bursts into bloom. No outward political upheaval interrupts her work or diminishes her glory; even amid national subjection, her vigour remains unimpaired.

Turning to Srotaswini, I said—Today, having received a new education and a new ideal of manly action from foreign history, we are struggling to rush toward the outer field of action. But wet wood does not burn, and a rusted wheel does not turn; what burns produces more smoke than flame, what moves makes more noise than progress. We have, throughout the ages, done nothing but form factions, whisper behind backs, and laugh idly among ourselves, while you have gone on, all this while, doing your work. That is why you can take up new learning so easily, so quickly, make it your own, and let it flow into your very life, in a way that we cannot.

Srotaswini remained silent for a long while, then said slowly—If only I could understand that we truly have something to do, and by what means, what duty might be accomplished, then, whatever else, I could at least make the attempt.

I said—There is nothing else you need do. Remain just as you are. Let the world see and understand what truth, simplicity, and grace look like when given living form. In a house where the goddess of fortune dwells, there is no disorder, no ugliness. In all the undertakings we pursue today, the hand of fortune has no part—which is why they are full of such disorder, such excess. If you, educated women, bring the beauty of your hearts to stand within this society, within this unruly heap of

endeavour, then and only then will fortune find her place among us; then, quite easily, all will grow graceful, orderly, and harmonious.

Srotaswini said nothing more, but touched my forehead with a grateful, tender gaze, and went off to attend to her household duties.

Once Dipti and Srotaswini had left the gathering, Kshiti heaved a sigh of relief and said—Now at last I have my chance to speak the truth. Now the air can be cleared of its spell. Your talk was full of exaggeration, which I bore in silence; if my own words run somewhat long, you must bear with that in turn.

Our chairman is under the impression that he strives to see every side of every question. I am not so sure that this trait is entirely a virtue. It might rather be called a gluttony of the intellect. Only the man who curbs his appetite and knows how to choose and reject can truly be said to eat. Only he who exercises some discrimination in eating can truly taste, and truly digest. If the intellect has no discrimination at all, if it has the unlovely habit of swallowing a subject whole, it fancies it has gained more, but in fact gains less.

When a man whose intellect is, as a rule, excessively impartial happens, in some particular matter, to become partial, he loses himself entirely; then it becomes hard to keep patience with his intemperance. Our chairman's one partiality is woman. His exaggerations on that subject are harmful to a healthy mind and hostile to a fair judgment of the truth.

Man's field of life lies in the great world, where the errors and shortcomings of ordinary men naturally loom larger. Strength adequate to that vastness requires discipline; mere native wit will not bring success there. Woman's field of life lies within the small household, where native wit alone can manage well enough. Native wit follows organic habit—it is an unlettered cleverness—and it is intolerable that it should claim superiority over cultivated, disciplined skill. What is easily beautiful within a narrow compass is not, on that account, of a higher order than that beauty which, within a vaster compass, bears the scars of battle, which has been hardened through friction and encounter with what is unlovely, and which is therefore neither wholly symmetrical, nor wholly graceful, nor wholly flawless.

I condemn the utter injustice you two have shown toward the men of this country; the very extravagance of your language proves how groundless it is. There are cowards enough in this world, and perhaps our country has more than its share. I have already hinted at the chief reason. It is no easy thing to become truly a man; it is rare precisely because it is so costly. Nature herself has supplied the greater part of the materials that go to make an ideal woman. Man is no pampered child of nature; he must plunder the treasure-house of the world's strength for himself. This is why so many men in this world remain unfulfilled. But those who do succeed in fulfilling themselves—where in your world of women will you find their equal? At least in our country, is not this very failure due, in some measure, to women themselves—their blind prejudices, their attachments, their jealousy, their pettiness? Women renounce only where their own instinct leads them to renounce—for their children, for their loved ones. But man's true field of renunciation lies in resisting instinct itself. Bear this in mind when you compare the two.

Woman herself secretly mocks the henpecked man; she knows it for infatuation, for weakness. I sincerely hope that Dipti and Srotaswini are, this very moment, laughing heartily over your extravagances; if they are not, then I shall lose my respect for them. Do they themselves not know the limits of their own nature? Vanity may be forgiven when it is meant to charm another, but along with it there ought to be a private, suppressed laughter at oneself. If those who can absorb boundless vanity into themselves with unshaken gravity, meant only to deceive themselves, happen to be women, then one must conclude that women lack any sense of humour—and that in itself would be laughable, even lamentable. The goddesses of heaven feel no embarrassment at any excess of praise in their hymns; if our earthly goddesses share that same quality, then that alone would justify their divine title.

There is one more thing I am reluctant to say, but which must be said, for the sake of balance in your discussion. If I were to claim that in nearly every one of these small households, women are the very image of the goddess of fortune, I should be committing libel against that goddess herself. The reason is this: native instinct—what in English is called "instinct"—has its bad side as well as its good. Joined to weakness of judgment, how much unbearable suffering, how much terrible ruin, has this blind instinct brought upon household after household—can this not be said, even in the absence of Dipti and Srotaswini? Women do indeed hold their

place upon the bosom of the nation—but can the nation ever be lifted up while that very bosom lies crushed beneath the great millstone of ignorance which they themselves have helped to lay there? You will say the cause is simply lack of education. Not education alone—excessive sentimentality as well.

Your chivalry is rising to a truly dangerous pitch. I know you will hurl a great many harsh words at me today, for in your heart of hearts you know that what I say is true. With that satisfaction, I take my leave and run for it—I have a train to catch.

IN THE VILLAGE

Where I am now living, at this remote edge of Bengal, there is no police station nor magistrate's court anywhere nearby. The railway station lies at a good distance. That world which trades in buying and selling, in argument and litigation, in the advertisement of self-importance, has not yet been linked to these small settlements by any stone-hard, paved highway. There is only a little river. It seems to belong only to the children of these few villages, as though it were their very own. That it also has dealings with some other great river, some far-off sea, with strange and unknown villages and towns, the people here seem never to have learned—and so they have given it an exceedingly sweet, endearing name, and taken it wholly for their own kin.

It is now the month of Bhadra; on every side the land lies drowned in water, and only the tips of the rice-fields remain barely visible above it. Far off, here and there, a tree-encircled village appears upon some higher ground, like an island.

The people here are of so devoted, so trusting a nature, so simply given to faith, that one might think Adam and Eve had given birth to the first ancestor of this race before ever they tasted of the fruit of the tree of knowledge. And so, should the devil himself come and enter their homes, they would believe in him as innocently as a child, and honour him, sharing their own food with him, as though he were some esteemed guest.

While I was dwelling in the gentle hermitage of these people's hearts, one of the members of our council of five elements sent me some clippings cut from the newspapers. His purpose, no doubt, was to remind me that the earth still turns, and does not stand still. From London, from Paris, he had gathered a handful of whirlwind tidings and posted them off to me here, into the midst of these water-drowned, tender green rice-fields.

In a way, he did well. Reading those clippings, many thoughts arose in my mind which, had I remained in Calcutta, I should never have grasped so clearly.

I began to think: these illiterate, simple peasant-folk here—in theory I look down upon them as uncivilised, as barbarous; but coming close to them, I find that I truly

love them as my own kin. And I have noticed, too, that my heart secretly feels for them a certain reverence.

Yet set beside London and Paris, where do they stand! Where is their art, their literature, their statecraft! Far from giving their lives for their country, they do not even know what "country" means.

Having weighed all this fully, still a kind of oracle kept sounding within my mind—that these foolish, simple people are worthy not merely of love, but of reverence.

I began to consider why I revere them. I saw that the simple faith that dwells among them is something of very great worth—indeed, it is the very treasure that mankind has, through all ages, laboured to attain. If I must speak my inmost mind, I must confess that nothing charms me more than this.

Once that simplicity is lost, all the beauty of civilization is lost with it. For health itself is lost. Simplicity is the very health of human nature.

The body remains healthy only when it digests fully whatever it eats. A rich, spiced, ghee-fried delicacy, however savoury, however delightful to chew and suck and lick, we do not call health.

That state in which all one's knowledge and belief are wholly digested and made one with one's nature—that is simplicity, and that is the health of the mind. A mere variety of knowledge, a mere multiplicity of opinion, we do not call health of mind.

These foolish villagers here carry on the business of life with a stock of knowledge and belief that has become utterly one with their nature. Just as the drawing of breath, the circulation of blood, lie beyond our control, so too, for them, the holding or not holding of these beliefs lies beyond their choice. Whatever they know, whatever they believe, they know and believe with perfect ease—and for that very reason, their knowledge, their belief, their action, and their very selves have all become one.

Let me give an example. When a guest comes to their door, they will on no account turn him away. With whole-hearted devotion and undivided mind they wait upon him. And so no loss appears to them as loss, no hardship as hardship. I too

acknowledge hospitality, in some measure, as a duty; but I know it only in the intellect, not in belief. The moment I see a guest, my whole being does not at once, spontaneously, rush forward in welcome. All manner of argument and calculation goes on in my mind. No belief on this matter has yet become one with my nature.

But the indissoluble unity among the different parts of one's nature is the ultimate goal of manhood. Among the lowest orders of living creatures, we find that even if their limbs are severed, even if their bodies are divided into two or four parts, no harm results; but the higher a creature has risen, the closer has grown the unity among its various limbs and organs.

So too, in human nature, the disjunction of knowledge, belief, and action belongs to the lower stages of development. The undivided union of all three is the highest attainment.

But where knowledge, belief, and action show no great variety, such unity comes rather more easily. It is far easier for a flower to be beautiful than for a living body to be so. Among the various organs of a living creature, adapted to their manifold functions, so flawless a completeness is very hard to find. Among men, completeness is harder still to find than among animals. And the same holds true of the nature of the mind.

The unity I observe in the nature of these peasants of my small village has in it nothing of vastness or complexity. Here, at this edge of the earth, amid these rice-fields, one does not need much philosophy, science, or sociology to satisfy a handful of simple wants and sustain one's life. The few primitive principles of family, village, and tenantry that are needed here can very easily blend with human life and take on a single, living, undivided character.

And yet, however small, there is in this a beauty that cannot help but draw the heart—and this small beauty, blossoming forth like a lotus out of an unlettered little village, holds up an ideal before the whole of proud, civilized society. This is why, though the tumultuous clamour of London and Paris civilization comes ringing to my ears today through the newspaper, my little village has today taken the chief place in my heart.

To my mind, distracted by so many thoughts, this small village offers, like the simple melody of a tanpura, a single, abiding ideal. It says: I am not great, I am not wondrous, but I am complete within my smallness, and so, whatever else I may lack, you must grant that I possess a certain sweetness. I am trifling because I am small, but I am beautiful because I am whole—and this beauty is the ideal of your life.

Many, I know, will not be able to suppress a smile at what I say, but I must say it nonetheless: in the graceless faces of these simple peasants I sense a beauty like the beauty of a woman. I myself have been astonished by this, and have pondered what this beauty could be. And an answer, too, has arisen in my mind.

Whoever's nature clings fast to some one enduring sentiment finds that sentiment gradually etching a lasting grace upon the face.

These village folk of mine have, since birth, kept their gaze fixed steadily upon a few unchanging sentiments, and so those sentiments have had a long, unbroken leisure in which to trace themselves upon their eyes. This is why a certain sorrowful patience appears in their gaze, a certain trusting, tender devotion appears, fixed and constant, upon their faces.

Those who question every belief, who test one contrary view against another, show in their faces a certain sharpness of intellect, a certain skill in inquiry—but that is a far different thing from the deep, gentle beauty of settled feeling.

The little river on which my boat now lies has scarcely any current at all, and so it lies covered over with white lilies, red lotuses, pink lotuses, and duckweed. Just so, unless the beauty of feeling finds some such foothold of permanence, it never gets the leisure to strike deep root and unfold itself fully.

This is precisely the want that old Europe feels in young America. America has brilliance, has restlessness, has hardness, but it lacks depth of feeling. It is far too new; feeling has not yet had time to take root there. That civilization has not yet been thoroughly mingled with man, has not yet been coloured through by the human heart. I cannot say how true this is, but so it is said, and the scarcity of any truly native American literature lends some support to the notion. In every crevice and corner of old Europe, many an old, green sentiment has sprouted and adorned

her with rich and varied grace; America has not that grace. Human life has not yet, through long ages of memory, folk-legend, belief, and tradition, come to colour her through and through.

Upon the faces of my peasants, that colouring of the inner nature has settled deep. I feel a great longing to show everyone that old beauty of simplicity. But that beauty is so delicate a thing that, should someone say "I see nothing," or should someone laugh, it is beyond my power to point it out and prove it to them.

Reading these newspaper clippings, it occurs to me that it is written in the Bible: the meek shall inherit the earth. The meekness I see here has, I think, a heavenly right to inherit it. There is nothing in this world more meek than beauty—it desires to accomplish nothing by force—and one day the earth shall belong to it alone. This beautiful simplicity, dwelling in the village, which today captures unawares the heart of some city-bred foster-child of the new civilization, shall one day sit enthroned as the very queen of all these civilizations. That day, perhaps, is yet far off. But in the end, if civilization does not unite itself with simplicity, it will have fallen short of its own ideal of perfection.

I said before that the beauty of feeling depends upon permanence. The beauty that belongs to old memory is not owed merely to its being unattainable; it is because the heart has had time, over long ages, to dwell upon it, and can stretch out a thousand living threads of imagination to weave it into itself—that is the true source of its sweetness. The chief beauty of an old house, an old temple, lies in this: that through long duration they have become intimately bound up with human life; through ceaseless contact with the human heart, they have become sentient in every part; every separation between them and society has vanished, and they have become limbs of society itself—and it is in this very unity that their beauty lies. Among human beings, woman is the oldest of all; man flows on restlessly through varied labours, varied conditions, varied changes; woman abides steadfastly, always as mother, always as wife, undisturbed by any upheaval; and so woman has blended into the very heart of society so beautifully, so completely. Not only that—she has become so wholly one with her own feeling, her own work, her own strength, all together—for she has had, throughout, the long leisure needed to attain that rare, all-embracing unity.

Just so, when reasoning, argument, and knowledge, resting upon a long duration, gradually ripen into settled conviction and belief, their beauty begins to unfold. Then knowledge stands firm and still, and whatever seeds of life lie within it sprout forth, nurtured by the long light of human joy and the long rain of human tears, until they cover it entirely.

In the new age of civilization that has lately dawned in Europe, fresh knowledge, fresh science, fresh opinion pile up incessantly; even machinery and material goods have grown so abundant there is scarcely room for them. In this ceaseless restlessness, nothing is given the chance to grow old.

And yet I observe that, amid all this vast apparatus, the human heart does nothing but weep; the songs of simple joy and quiet peace have been utterly banished from European literature. What remains is either the intoxication of pleasure, or the lament of despair, or the mocking laughter of rebellion.

The reason is this: so long as the human heart cannot establish some beautiful unity within this vast heap of civilization, it can never settle down at ease and make its home within it. Until then, it will only wander about, restless and unquiet. Everything else has been gathered together—only that abiding beauty, that royal fortune of the new civilization, has not yet come and taken her seat. Knowledge, belief, and action do nothing but torment one another—not striving toward unity, but locked in battle, each seeking to conquer the other.

Beauty does not belong only to old memory; it belongs also to fresh hope. But unhappily, hope has not yet stirred within Europe's new civilization. Old Europe has been deceived by many hopes, time and again; she has seen, one after another, the very means in which she placed her greatest trust prove futile. Many regard the French Revolution as the vain outcome of some vast effort come to nothing. There was a time when men believed that, once the vote was granted to high and low alike, most of the world's evils would vanish—now all men vote, and yet most evils show not the slightest haste to take their leave. There was a time when men hoped the State might cure all human misery; now, once again, the learned fear that any attempt by the State to cure such misery is more likely to make matters worse. Some place a measure of faith in coal-mines, cotton-mills, and the sciences, but even there doubt is not resolved; many great men now declare that machinery

cannot bring about human perfection. Modern Europe says: hope not, believe not, only experiment.

The new civilization seems to have married an old husband; he has wealth, but no youth; he is worn out with a thousand old experiences of his own. Between the two there is no true love—only unrest fills the household.

Reflecting on all this, I find myself enjoying the small, complete beauty of this village with a doubled joy.

Yet I am not so blind as to fail to understand the true worth of European civilization. Unity amid difference is the perfect ideal of unity—unity amid variety is the chief source of beauty. Europe today is passing through just such an age of difference, and hence this discord, this disparity. When the age of unity comes, much within this vast heap will fall away, much will be digested and absorbed, and a single, whole, beautiful civilization will stand forth. There is, no doubt, a certain peace, beauty, and security in reaching a small fulfilment and resting content within it—while those who set human nature free from such small unities, and lead it toward vast expansion, must endure much unrest, many obstacles and dangers, must fight on unwearied amid the battlefield of revolution—but it is they who are the true heroes of the earth, and even should they fall in battle, they win an undying heaven. True completeness lies only in the union of this heroism with beauty. Their separation makes but a half-civilization. And yet we do not dare call Europe half-civilized, and even if we did, it would not sting her in the least. Europe calls us half-civilized; and it stings us, because she has seated herself at our helm.

Sitting here at the edge of this village, I say to European civilization, matching my own plain tanpura's four strings and their few sweet, blended notes against her: "Your melody is not yet in tune." And to my tanpura, too, I must say: "Nor can one rest satisfied, taking the repeated ringing of your few notes for a complete symphony. It may be that tomorrow, by the touch of genius, today's varied and disordered medley of sound will rise into some mighty symphony—but alas, to draw forth, from among those few strings of yours, any truly great and living music, would defeat even genius itself."

MAN

One morning Srotaswini came in carrying my large notebook and said—What is this you have written! Words I have never spoken in all my life—why have you put them into my mouth?

I said—What harm has come of it?

Srotaswini said—I never speak in this manner, nor could I ever speak so. If you had put into my mouth words which, whether I say them or not, it would at least be possible for me to say, I should not feel so ashamed. But this is as though you had written an entire book and were passing it off under my name.

I said—How could you possibly judge how much you have said to us? What you actually say, mingled with all that I know of you besides, together become a great deal more. Your words are filled out by the whole of your life. I cannot simply leave out those unspoken, implied things of yours.

Srotaswini fell silent. I do not know whether she understood or not. Probably she did understand, but still I went on—You are a living present, expressing yourself moment by moment in ever new forms—that you exist, that you are true, that you are beautiful, requires no effort on your part at all to make us believe it. But in writing, to prove that same primary truth, one must resort to many devices and spend many words. Otherwise how could the unseen possibly stand equal to the seen? You imagine that I have made you say too much; in truth, I have rather condensed you—I have had to gather only the essence of your million words, your million actions, your endlessly varied gestures and glances. Otherwise I could never have made the exact words you spoke to me reach the ears of anyone else—people would have heard far less, and heard it wrongly.

Srotaswini turned her face slightly aside, opened a book, and began turning its pages, saying—It is only because you love me that you see me as more than I really am.

I said—Do I really have so much love that I could see you as fully as you truly are? Who can take the full measure of a single human being? Whose love is like God's?

Kshiti grew quite agitated and said—What sort of talk is this you've brought up now! Srotaswini asked you one kind of question, and you answer with something else entirely.

I said—I know. But that is how question and answer often turn out in conversation. The mind is such combustible stuff that, instead of catching fire exactly where the spark of the question falls, it may suddenly blaze up ten cubits away, in quite another place. In a select committee, outsiders are forbidden entry, but at a great festival, whoever comes may be invited to sit down—our conversational gathering here is just such a festival; if some unconnected remark arrives uninvited, then, unless we at once say, "Come in, sir, do sit down," and smilingly make its acquaintance, the openness of the festival is lost.

Kshiti said—My mistake! Do so, then—go on with what you were saying. At the mere sound of the syllable "Kri-," Prahlada, remembering Krishna, would burst into tears, and never got past learning the alphabet. If, the moment you hear one question, another answer springs up in your mind, then no conversation will ever advance a single step. But it is best to let a Prahlada-natured man follow his own whim—say whatever comes to you.

I said—I was saying that it is only in those we love that we perceive the infinite. Indeed, to feel the infinite within a living being is simply another name for love. To feel it within nature is what we call the enjoyment of beauty. This reminded me that this very deep truth lies hidden within the whole of Vaishnava religion.

Kshiti thought to himself—Good heavens! Now where has this philosophizing sprung from again! It was not that Srotaswini or Dipti were especially eager to hear philosophy—but when some idea suddenly leaps up out of the darkness of the mind, it is the confirmed habit of the hunter of ideas to chase it to the very end. I ramble on in order to master my own thought for myself, and people imagine I have sat down to preach doctrine to others.

I said—Vaishnava religion has tried to perceive God within every relationship of love in this world. When it saw that a mother finds no end to her joy in her child, that moment by moment she can unfold fold after fold of her heart and yet never wholly encompass that small sprout of humanity, it worshipped its own God within its own child. When it saw that a servant gives up his life for his master, that friend

sacrifices self-interest for friend, that lover and beloved grow restless to surrender their whole souls to one another, it perceived, in all these supreme loves, a boundless, unearthly majesty.

Kshiti said—The infinite within the finite, eternity within love—the more I hear such talk, the harder it becomes to understand. At first I thought I was grasping something of it, but now I find that words like "infinite" and "boundless" have piled up so thick that they block the very path to understanding.

I said—Language is like soil. Sow the same crop upon it again and again, and its power to yield is exhausted. The words "infinite" and "boundless" have nowadays grown threadbare from constant use; unless one truly has something to say, one ought not to use those two words at all. One owes a little tenderness to one's mother tongue.

Kshiti said—You yourself show scant tenderness toward language, it seems.

Samir, who had all this while been reading through my notebook, finished and said—What is this you have done! Are these people in your diary human beings, or are they truly ghosts? I see they do nothing but utter fine, weighty sentiments—but where has their shape, their bulk gone?

I said, downcast—Why do you say so? Tell me.

Samir said—You seem to think that mango-preserve is better than the mango itself, because in it the stone, the fibre, the skin, and the watery part are all done away with—but then what becomes of that tempting fragrance, that lovely shape? You mean to give people only my essence—but where has the human "me" gone? You have confiscated all my idle chatter and set up in its place some solid, static image so hard that one can hardly get a tooth into it. I do not wish merely to win the applause of two or three thinking men—I want to live on among ordinary people.

I said—What must be done for that?

Samir said—How should I know? I have merely lodged my objection. Just as I have an essence, so I have a flavour; the essence may be necessary to people, but the flavour is what they love. I do not wish people to extract some doctrine or argument

by way of me—I want people to recognise me as one of their own. I have no wish to renounce this cherished, error-strewn human birth only to be reborn in the flawless form of an article in some monthly magazine. I am not a philosophical theory, I am not a printed book, I am not a sound argument or an unsound one—I am simply what my friends, what my own people, have always known me to be.

Byom, all this while, had been sitting leaned back in one chair with his feet propped on another, calm and unshaken. Suddenly he spoke—Call it argument, call it doctrine—their final movement lies in conclusion and summation; their chief glory lies in their completion. But man is a thing of a wholly different order—immortality, incompleteness, is his supreme reality. Restless, unceasing motion is his chief mark. Who can abridge immortality? Who can extract the essence of motion? If you set fine, polished phrases too easily into a man's mouth, it creates the illusion that there is no further growth stirring in his mind—that whatever he was to become, he has already become in full. Effort, error, incompleteness, repetition—though these may look, on the surface, like poverty, it is precisely through them that man's chief wealth is proven. Through them a movement, a life, of thought is indicated. Unless one preserves in a man's speech and character that raw colour, that tenderness and weakness of incompleteness, one reduces him, finishes him off, makes him small. One condenses his endless unfolding chapters into a mere table of contents.

Samir said—Man's power of expression is exceedingly small; and so, along with expression, one must add suggestion; along with language, gesture; along with feeling, the play of thought about that feeling. It is not enough to give the chariot—one must set in motion, within that chariot, its own movement. If you bring forward a man, it is not enough to stand him up and have him utter a few machine-cut phrases—you must set him walking, make him shift his place, and to convey his true vastness, you must show him always as unfinished.

I said—That is exactly the difficulty. To make it understood, by finishing a sentence, that it has not really finished at all—to give speech that poised, unspent quality—is a terribly hard thing to do.

Srotaswini said—This is exactly why, for so long, there has been a running argument in literature over whether the matter or the manner is of greater importance. I have thought about this many times myself, without arriving at any clear understanding.

It seems to me that whichever one happens to be given prominence, according to the whim of the argument, becomes for that moment the more important.

Byom, tilting his head up toward the rafters, went on—When I try to judge whether matter or manner is supreme in literature, I look to see which of the two holds more mystery. Matter is the body; manner is the life. The body is complete in the present moment; life is a restless incompleteness clinging to it, carrying it forward toward some vast future, and, beyond whatever is visible of it, keeps bound to it a wealth of fresh, hope-filled possibility yet to come. Whatever is expressed as pure matter is mere inert body, bounded and finite; whatever is infused into it through manner is life itself—it is this that signals its power to grow, its power to move.

Samir said—Every subject in literature is exceedingly old; it becomes new only by taking on new form.

Srotaswini said—It seems to me the very same is true of human beings. This or that person appears bearing some particular shape of mind, and looking upon it, we discover, as it were, some fresh unfolding of humanity itself, ancient though humanity is.

Dipti said—That very shape of mind and character is what we call style. It is by that alone that we come to be known, familiar, and tested in each other's eyes. I sometimes wonder what my own style might be. Not what the critics call lucid, certainly—

Samir said—But forceful, all the same. The shape you speak of, that which is peculiarly our own—that is exactly what I too was speaking of. What I was urging was that the outward form should remain intact along with the thought.

Dipti said, smiling faintly—But not everyone's form is alike, and so before making such a request, one must consider carefully. Some forms reveal, others conceal. The brilliance of a diamond shines forth of its own accord from within the diamond itself; one need not break its shape to bring out its light—but straw must be burnt before its light can be released at all. It hardly becomes small creatures like us to lament that our shape is not being preserved in literature. There are some whose very existence, whose very nature, whose whole sum and substance, is to us a fresh lesson, a fresh joy. For such as these, it is enough simply to preserve them exactly

as they are. There are others from whom the husk must be stripped away before the kernel within can be brought out. If even that kernel can be brought out, one ought to be grateful for it—for how many people even possess such a kernel, and how many can bring it forth?

Samir said, smiling—Forgive me, Dipti, but never even in a dream have I felt myself so poor a thing as straw. On the contrary, looking within, I often suppose myself to be a diamond fresh from the mine. I am merely waiting now for some jeweller capable of recognising me. And as the days go by, I find myself ever more convinced—there is not nearly so great a want of jewels in this world as there is of jewellers. In my youth, I hardly noticed the people around me in the world; it seemed to me that all the truly real human beings had taken refuge only in novels, dramas, and great epics, and that only a single specimen remained in actual life. Now I find that the world is full of people—but, "O forgetful heart, O forgetful heart, why did you never learn to know mankind!" Forgetful heart, go once and enter into the very midst of this world, into this crowd of human hearts. Those who cannot speak in the assembly hall will speak there; those who are overlooked and pushed to one side in society will there show forth a new glory; those the world deems unnecessary—there you will find that the world itself stands founded upon their simple love, their unceasing service, their self-forgetting self-sacrifice. Bhishma, Drona, Bhima, Arjuna are the heroes of the great epic, but within our own small Kurukshetras there exist their humble kin as well—what new Dvaipayana shall ever discover and reveal that kinship!

I said—And what great matter if none ever does! If men did not know one another, how could they love one another so much? There was once a young man, far from his birthplace and his kin, who worked as a temporary clerk for some ten or twenty rupees a month. I was his employer, but I hardly even knew of his existence—he was so utterly insignificant a person. One night he was suddenly seized with cholera. From my own bedroom I heard him crying out in a piteous voice, "Pishima! Pishima!"—"Aunt! Aunt!" Then all at once his small, glory-less life appeared before me immeasurably large. That unknown, unremarkable, foolish, dull man, who used to sit copying documents with bent neck, pen held upright, absorbed wholly in his task—it was his aunt who had raised him, pouring into him the whole accumulated store of a childless widow's tenderness. On returning wearily each evening to his empty lodging, when he lit the stove with his own hands and set the rice to cook, was he not, as he sat gazing fixedly at the flickering flame, thinking all the while of

that loving, blessed aunt in her distant cottage? On the day his copy contained an error, when it failed to match the original, and he was rebuked by his superior—had he not, that very morning, received a letter telling of his aunt's illness? For the daily good news of this insignificant man, was there not, in one tender and sacred heart, no small anxiety? Was there not bound up, with this poor young man's life in a foreign place, no small measure of pity, sorrow, and worry? All at once, that night, this small, nearly extinguished flame of life shone before me with a priceless splendour. I understood that if I could, by any means, save this trifling man, it would be a great deed indeed. I stayed awake the whole night, tending and nursing him, but I could not give back to his aunt what belonged to her—my temporary clerk died. Bhishma, Drona, Bhima, Arjuna are indeed very great, and yet this man too was of no small worth. No poet ever guessed his worth, no reader ever acknowledged it, yet that worth was not, for all that, undiscovered in this world—one life had utterly devoted itself to him—though the man's wages, food and clothing included, came to eight rupees, and not even for all twelve months of the year. Greatness reveals itself by its own light; but small, lightless people like us must be revealed by some outward light of love. Seen by the light of an aunt's love, we suddenly shine forth. Where, in the darkness, no one at all could be seen, once the light of love is cast there, one suddenly finds it full of human beings.

Srotaswini said, her face softened with pity—I have heard you speak before of that foreign clerk of yours. I do not know why, but hearing of him, our Hindustani bearer Nihar comes to my mind. His wife recently died, leaving behind two small children. He still does his work, sits and pulls the punkah through the midday hours, but he has grown so withered, so wasted, so utterly forsaken-looking! Whenever I see him, it pains me—but that pain does not seem to be for him alone—I cannot quite explain it, but it feels as though a grief is being felt for the whole of mankind.

I said—The reason is that his pain is the pain of all mankind. All human beings love, and are stricken and terrified by separation, parting, and death. In the joyless, sorrowful face of that punkah-puller of yours is inscribed the sorrow of every human being upon this earth.

Srotaswini said—It is not only that. It seems to me that, however much sorrow there is in this world, there is nowhere near so much compassion to match it! There is so much suffering into which human comfort never once enters, and yet there are so many places where love pours down in needless excess. When I see my

bearer patiently, silently pulling the punkah, while his two boys roll about in the courtyard, fall, and burst into tears, and their father turns his head to see what has happened, yet cannot leave the punkah to go to them—so little joy in his life, and yet the pinch of hunger no less sharp; however great the misfortune that may befall him, he must still go on working steadily for his two handfuls of rice, and no one will forgive any lapse—when I think how countless are such people, whose suffering, whose very humanity, remains as if undiscovered to us, whom we merely use and pay wages to, giving them no tenderness, no comfort, no respect—then I truly feel that a great part of the world lies wrapped in dense darkness, utterly beyond our sight. Yet the people of that unknown, lightless country too love, and are worthy of love. It seems to me that it is the duty of our poets today to reveal in human form those who have no greatness of their own, who are shut up within some opaque covering unable properly to express themselves—who indeed do not even properly know themselves—who bear joy and sorrow and pain in mute bewilderment; it is the poet's task to make them known as our own kin, and to cast upon them the light of poetry.

Kshiti said—In former times, there was, in every matter, rather too great an admiration for strength and power. In those days human society was largely helpless and unprotected; whoever had genius, whoever had power, seized for himself all the space there was. Now, under the good governance and order of civilization, dangers and obstacles have receded, and the excessive prestige once given to sheer power has diminished. Now even the unaccomplished, the powerless, have come to claim their share of a very large portion of the world. And so today's poetry and fiction, too, having left Bhishma and Drona behind, have set about giving voice to these silent multitudes, bringing to light these embers hidden beneath ash.

Samir said—The light of literature's rising sun fell, at first, only upon the loftiest mountain peaks; now, little by little, spreading down into the valleys below, it is beginning to illuminate even the smallest, poorest cottages.

THE MIND

Here I sit, at midday, in a single-storeyed room in a village by the river; a lizard clicks in the corner of the room; in a hole in the wall left for the punkah-rope, a pair of sparrows, bent upon building a nest, keep flying busily in and out, gathering straw from outside with an anxious chirping; boats float upon the river—beyond the high bank, against the blue sky, one can see their masts and a portion of their bellying sails; the air is soft, the sky is clear, and from the far-off line of the opposite shore to the little fenced garden before my veranda, all lies bathed in bright sunlight like some painted picture—here I am, then, very much at ease; just as a child, cradled upon its mother's lap, feels a certain warmth, a certain comfort, a certain tenderness, so, nestled here close against the lap of this ancient Nature, a warm, gentle, life-filled, caressing heat is entering my whole body from every side. What harm, then, in simply remaining so? Who was it that kept prodding you to sit down with pen and paper? What need was there to gird up your loins and sit down in such a bustle over what you think about this matter or that, over your assent or dissent? Look there—out in the middle of the field, where there was nothing at all, a little whirlwind has caught up a bit of dust and a scattering of dry leaves and gone spinning and dancing away in the most wonderful fashion. Poised for a moment upon the very tip of its toe, straight and tall, striking some graceful pose—and then, in an instant, with a rush and a scatter, it flung everything abroad and vanished, no one knows where. What poor resources it had! A handful of straw, some dust and sand, whatever lay conveniently to hand—with that alone it struck an attitude and played out its little game. So it dances the whole length of the empty field through the unpeopled noon. It has no purpose, and no one to watch it. It has no opinion, no doctrine; no excellent moral lesson to offer about society and history. Among the most utterly needless, forgotten, discarded things of this world, it breathes one warm gust and, for a single moment, makes them live, wake, and grow beautiful.

If only I too could, just as easily, in a single breath, set up some random thing or other, make it beautiful, spin it round, send it flying like a whirling top, and then move on! If only I could create so effortlessly, and with one puff, break it again! No thought, no effort, no aim—only the joy of a dance, only the passion of beauty, only the whirl of one living moment! An open field, an unroofed sky, sunlight streaming everywhere—and, in the midst of it all, to weave a web of enchantment out of mere handfuls of dust—that is possible only through the boundless, reckless delight of some frenzied heart.

That, at least, one can understand. But to sit, hour after hour, piling stone upon stone, sweating with effort, to raise up a heap of immovable opinions! In it there is no movement, no affection, no life at all! Only a hard, rigid monument. Some may stand gaping at it, others may kick it aside with their foot—whatever its merit may or may not be!

And yet, however much I might wish it, can I really stop doing this? For the sake of civilization, man has indulged, without measure, that part of himself called mind, and swollen it beyond all bounds—and now, even should you wish to be rid of it, it will not let you go.

Even as I write this, I look outside and see a man walking toward the kitchen with a cloth thrown over his head against the sun, carrying, in his right hand, a little curd wrapped in a leaf-cup. That is my servant, Narayan Singh. Thoroughly hale and hearty, untroubled, cheerful of heart. Like a well-nourished, richly-leaved, smooth and glossy custard-apple tree. Such a man fits perfectly with this outer world of nature. Between him and Nature there is no great mark of separation. Clinging close to the body of this vast, life-giving, grain-bearing earth, this man dwells here with perfect ease; within himself there is not the slightest discord or dissension. Just as that tree, from root to topmost leaf, is nothing but wholly and entirely a custard-apple tree, with not the least concern for anything else, so my hearty Narayan Singh, from head to foot, is simply, entirely, one whole and complete Narayan Singh.

But suppose some mischievous, playful child-god, out of sheer wickedness, were to drop just one single droplet of mind into the very heart of that custard-apple tree! Then what dreadful disturbance would break out in that lush, green, wooden life! Then its glossy green leaves would turn pale as birch-bark with brooding, and, from trunk to smallest twig, it would grow wrinkled as an old man's brow. Then, come spring, would its whole body still thrill with tender young leaves within those same two or three days? Would every branch still be laden with cluster upon cluster of round, dimpled fruit? Instead, it would stand all day balanced on one foot, thinking: why have I only leaves, and not wings? I have strained with all my might to stand up straight and tall—why, even so, can I not see far enough? What lies beyond that horizon? How am I ever to reach that tree upon whose branches the very stars of the sky have blossomed? Where have I come from, where am I going—until that is

settled, I shall stand here shedding my leaves, drying up my branches into mere wood, absorbed in meditation. Whether I exist, or do not exist, or perhaps both exist and do not exist—until that question is resolved, there can be no happiness in my life. How, then, could I ever express that thrill which runs through my very marrow on the morning when, after the long rains, the sun rises for the first time? And on that evening in late winter, in the middle of Falgun, when suddenly a south wind rises—what is it I long for then? Who can explain that longing to me!

And so it all ends. Gone is the poor tree's flowering, gone the ripening of its juicy, sweet custard-apples. Trying to become more than it is, wishing to become something other than what it is, neither wholly this nor wholly that. And at last, one day, in sudden inward anguish, it splits open from trunk to topmost branch, and out comes—an article for some magazine, a piece of criticism, some unseasonable philosophical treatise on the society of the forest. In it there is neither the rustle of leaves, nor the shade, nor that rich, complete fullness that once pervaded its whole being.

If some mighty devil, creeping like a reptile beneath the earth, should insinuate mind through the million winding roots into every tree, creeper, blade of grass and shrub of this world, then where on this earth would one find a place of rest! It is fortunate indeed that we find no meaning in birdsong when we walk in the garden, and that, instead of unlettered green leaves, we do not see, hanging from every branch, dry white monthly journals, newspapers, and advertisements!

It is fortunate indeed that trees have no capacity for reflection! It is fortunate the thorn-apple does not criticise the jasmine, saying, "There is softness in your flower, but no vigour," and the plum does not say to the jackfruit, "You think yourself great, but I rank the pumpkin far above you." It is fortunate the banana does not boast, "I publish the largest leaf at the cheapest cost," while the arum does not rise to compete with it, offering a still larger leaf at a still cheaper price!

It is only by gazing upon the vast, thought-worn, luminous, unclouded brow of the open sky, by listening to the wordless rustle of the forest and the meaningless murmur of the waves, by bathing in this mindless, boundless, tranquil Nature, that man—driven by argument, scorched by thought, wearied by endless discourse—finds himself somewhat cooled and composed. To quench even that one small

spark of mind, the vast, unminded ocean, with its calm expanse of blue water stretching without end, has become a necessity.

The truth of the matter, as I have said before, is that our mind has grown so monstrously large that it has destroyed all inner harmony within us.

It can no longer be contained anywhere. It has grown far larger than is needed for eating, clothing oneself, sustaining life, and living in comfort and ease. And so, even after all necessary work is finished, a great deal of mind remains left over on every side. And so it sits and keeps a diary, argues, becomes a newspaper correspondent, makes difficult what could easily be understood, sets up in one light what ought properly to be seen in another, and clings, forsaking all else, to that which can never, under any circumstances, be understood at all—indeed, it commits deeds far graver and more reprehensible than even these.

But the mind of my rather unsophisticated Narayan Singh is exactly fitted to the measure of his body; it clings precisely and snugly to his needs, with no excess anywhere. His mind protects his life from cold and heat, from sickness, from ill health, and from shame, but it does not go flying off in every direction at the least gust of wind. I cannot say that some stray draught never slips in through a chink or a loose button of his mental garment and puffs it up a little now and then—but that small degree of restlessness of mind is, in fact, quite necessary for the health of his life.

WHOLENESS

Dipti said—I mean this quite seriously, but it strikes me that lately all of you have begun rather to overdo this praising of Nature.

I said—Goddess, can it be that you cannot bear the praise of anyone but yourself?

Dipti said—When there is nothing more to be had beyond mere flattery, I cannot bear to see it squandered so.

Samir, bowing his head with an excessively humble and charming smile, said—Blessed lady, there is not so very much difference between the praise of Nature and the praise of you ladies. You may perhaps have noticed that those who compose hymns to Nature are the very chief priests of your own temple.

Dipti said, with wounded pride—In other words, whoever worships matter is a devotee of ours. Samir said—Having so grossly misunderstood, I am obliged to give a lengthy defence. You have all read the essay our esteemed chairman, Shri Bhutanath Babu, wrote in his diary, describing the mischief of that unruly thing called Mind. Directly beneath it I have written down a few remarks of my own; if the members permit, I shall read them out—by which my own view will become clear.

Kshiti said, folding his hands—Look here, Samir, my friend—the natural relation is that between writer and reader: you write of your own free will, I read of my own free will, and neither side has anything to say against the other. It is as though sword and sheath fit together perfectly. But if the sword insists on establishing that same intimate union with an unwilling frame of flesh and bone, the result is not so naturally or pleasantly achieved. The relation between writer and listener is just such an unnatural, ill-matched thing. O four-faced Brahma, whatever punishment thou dost ordain for sin, grant only that in my next birth I be not born a doctor's horse, a drunkard's wife, or an essayist's friend.

Byom attempted a witticism, saying—To begin with, a friend (bandhu) means, by very etymology, a bond (bandhan); and when an essay (prabandha) is added to that bond, it becomes a noose upon a noose—a boil upon a boil, as they say.

Dipti said—I beg two years' grace before I can laugh at that; in the meanwhile I shall have to master Panini, the Amarakosha, and the verb-conjugations. Hearing this, Byom was greatly amused, and said, laughing—Excellently put; that reminds me of a story—

Srotaswini said—It seems you are all determined not to let us hear Samir's writing today. Samir, do read it—pay no heed to what they say. No one dared object to Srotaswini's command. Even Kshiti himself took down the diary-notebook from the shelf and sat, meek and helpless, composing himself to listen.

Samir began to read—Man is compelled, at every step, to take the help of his mind, and this is precisely why, in his heart of hearts, he cannot bear to look upon it. The mind does us a great deal of good, but its nature is such that it can never be wholly one and mingled with us. It is forever fretting, offering advice, coming forward to lecture us, interfering in everything we do. It is as though some outsider had come to be treated as a member of the household—one can neither cast him out, nor bring oneself to love him.

He is, in a way, much like the British Government in the land of the Bengali. Our nature is simple and native; his is a complicated, foreign sort of law. He does us good, but does not consider us his own. Neither can he understand us, nor we him. Whatever natural, easy faculties we once possessed have been ruined by his tutelage, and now we cannot so much as sit or stand without his assistance.

There are several other points of resemblance between the Englishman and the Mind. Though he has dwelt among us all this while, he has never truly become a settled inhabitant—he is forever restless, ever ready to take wing. He seems to feel that he could only be saved by getting some furlough, some chance to sail back across the great ocean to his own native land. The most curious resemblance of all is this: the softer you are toward him, the more you fold your hands and say "Yes, my lord, as you command," the greater grows his arrogance; but if you can suddenly roll up your sleeve and raise your fist, setting aside the precepts of the Christian scripture and returning blow for blow, he turns to water at once.

Our aversion to the Mind runs so deep that whatever act shows least trace of its hand, that we praise most highly. Books of morality do indeed condemn rashness, but in actual practice we find in ourselves a real fondness for it. We do not love the

man who weighs everything carefully, considers every consequence beforehand, and acts with the utmost caution; but we love the man who, ever carefree, speaks recklessly with an unclouded face and does outrageous things with perfect ease. We go to the man who saves money carefully, calculating for the future, whenever we need a loan—and secretly hold it against him; while to the fool who, giving no thought whatever to his own or his family's future, spends freely whatever comes into his hands, people come forward of their own accord to lend money, without much expectation of ever being repaid. Very often we call sheer imprudence—that is, absence of mind—by the name of generosity, and the prudent man who, lantern of reason in hand, guided by careful judgment of right and wrong, follows with iron resolve the hair-splitting path of rule and principle, we brand with such reproachful names as calculating, mercenary, and narrow-minded.

Whoever can make us forget, even for a moment, that the mind exists at all—him alone we call charming. That state in which we cease to feel the burden of the mind, we call joy. We would rather, by intoxication, sink to the level of the beast, ruin ourselves utterly, than give up, even for a little while, that delight of tumbling into the ditch. If the mind were truly our own kin, and behaved as kin ought to behave, could we possibly feel such deep ingratitude toward so useful a friend?

Why do we place genius on a higher seat than intellect? Intellect performs a thousand tasks for us every day, every moment—without it, the very preservation of our lives would be well nigh impossible—while genius comes to our aid only rarely, and often does us no service at all, sometimes even harm. But intellect belongs to the mind; it must move step by careful step; while genius, disregarding all the rules of the mind, comes like the wind—obeying no one's summons, heeding no one's prohibition. Nature has no such mind, and this is exactly why Nature is so utterly charming to us. In Nature, one thing does not lodge itself inside another. No firefly perches upon the shoulder of the cockroach to suck out its life. From the very earth up to that light-drenched sky, in this vast household of hers, no foreign, alien child has gained entry to work its mischief.

She is alone, whole and undivided, tranquil, untroubled. Upon her boundless blue brow there is not a single line of intellect—only the everlasting light of genius forever shining. Just as effortlessly as some perfectly formed cluster of blossoms unfolds itself, so, with equal carelessness, a violent storm arrives and, like some pleasant dream, shatters everything and passes on. All things seem to occur by pure

will, not by effort. That will sometimes caresses, sometimes strikes. Sometimes it sings like some beloved nymph, sometimes it roars like a ravenous demoness.

To a man tormented by thought, torn by doubt, this unhesitating, unregulated power of will holds an overwhelming attraction. Loyalty to king, devotion to master, is one proof of this. Far more men have willingly given their lives for a king who could, at his mere pleasure, take life or grant it, than are ever moved to voluntary self-sacrifice for the law-bound sovereign of the present age.

Those born to be the leaders of mankind—their minds cannot be seen at all. Why, on what deliberation, by what reasoning, they act as they do, can never at once be understood; and men, emerging from the small doubt-darkened cave of their own uncertainty, fling themselves in swarms, moth-like, to their own destruction, into the flame of such greatness.

Woman, too, is like Nature. The Mind has not come and split her in two. She is, from head to foot, one single, undivided thing, like a flower. This is precisely why her movements, her conduct, are so effortlessly whole and complete. This is why, to a man torn by hesitation, woman is "certain death." Like Nature, woman too possesses only will—within her there is no place for argument, deliberation, or the weighing of why and wherefore. At one moment she distributes food with four generous hands; at another, she rises in a form of utter destruction, ready to annihilate all. Devotees, with folded hands, cry out: Thou art Mahamaya, thou art the Willed One, thou art Nature, thou art Shakti!

The moment Samir paused to catch his breath, Kshiti said, with a grave face—Excellent! Splendid! But I swear to you, upon my very body, that I have not understood a single syllable of it! I suppose that this thing you call mind and intellect, of which Nature is said to be devoid, is equally absent in me too—but in exchange, I have received no praise from anyone for genius either, and there is no direct evidence that I possess any great power of attraction.

Dipti said to Samir—You have spoken just like a Muslim—their scriptures too declare that women have no soul.

Srotaswini said, thoughtfully—If you use the words mind and intellect in the same sense, and if you say that we are deprived of both, then I cannot agree with you.

Samir said—What I have said is not really fit for a proper argument. The sandbank the Padma throws up in the first flood of the rains is mere sand; take a plough to it at once and you gain nothing by tearing it apart; only when, flood after flood for two or three years, layer upon layer of soil has settled upon it, will it bear the plough. I too, carried along by the current of talk, have merely set up a first, tentative notion. Perhaps the next flood will wash it clean away, or perhaps silt will settle and make it fertile in time. In any case, let the whole of the accused's statement be heard before judgment is passed.—

The human heart has two divisions. One is unconscious, vast, hidden, and inert; the other is conscious, active, restless, ever-changing. Like continent and ocean. Whatever the ocean, in its restlessness, gathers up and casts away, settles, layer upon layer, in ever-growing accumulation, fixed and motionless, upon the hidden seabed. In just the same way, whatever our consciousness brings in and casts off, day by day, gradually accumulates, unconsciously, in the form of impression, memory, and habit, within some vast hidden reservoir. That reservoir is the enduring foundation of our life and character. No one can plumb its full depth, layer by layer. We see only so much as rises visibly to the surface, or such hidden portions as are suddenly thrown up by the shock of some unexpected earthquake.

It is upon this continent that grain, flower, and fruit, beauty and life spring up so easily. It appears, outwardly, still and inert, but within it, some effortless skill, some hidden vital force, works in deep secrecy. The ocean does nothing but swell and toss, floats merchant ships and sinks them, gathers much and destroys much—its strength knows no bound—but it possesses no vital, no sustaining power; it can give birth to nothing, and nurture nothing.

If no one objects to the metaphor, I would say that this restless outer part of ours is man, and this vast, hidden, unconscious inner part is woman.

This stillness and this motion have been divided, in society, between woman and man. All of society's gatherings, its earnings, its knowledge and learning flow into woman and there attain fixed, settled form. This is why she has such easy wit, such natural grace, such untaught skill. In human society, woman has been long in the making; and so her impressions are so firm and so ancient, and all her duties proceed with such long-accustomed, effortless ease. Man, in ceaseless pursuit of

present necessity, changes continually with the flow of time, but the whole restless, ancient history of all that change is being perpetually stored, layer upon layer, within woman.

Man is partial, fragmentary, lacking harmony. But woman is like a piece of music which, coming round again to the beat, achieves a beautiful, rounded completeness; however many new phrases, however many fresh variations you may add to it one after another, that same recurring beat comes round and encloses the whole within one perfect, rounded circle. Resting upon a fixed centre at its core, the whirlpool extends its own circumference—and that is precisely why she can draw to herself, with such graceful skill, whatever lies close at hand, and make it truly her own.

This centre is not intellect—it is a natural power of attraction. It is a single point of unity. Wherever that thing called Mind comes peeping in, this beautiful unity is instantly shattered into a hundred pieces.

Byom, growing impatient, suddenly broke in—What you call unity, I call the soul (atma); its very nature is this: it draws five separate things around itself and, giving them form, builds them into one. And what you call mind is drawn toward those same five things, and, in the process, shatters both itself and them. This is precisely why the first step of true spiritual union (yoga) is to restrain the mind.

The comparison Samir drew between the mind and the Englishman holds true here as well. The Englishman seizes upon everything by pressing forward, driving on, chasing it down. His ambition knows no bound—I have heard it said that even the sun-god himself, having once risen in his empire, has never since been able to set. We, on the other hand, remain settled, centred, like the soul; we wish to seize nothing, but only to draw close to ourselves whatever surrounds us on every side, and shape it into form. This is why, within our society, our households, our personal lives, one finds such closely-woven intimacy of construction. The mind gathers; the soul creates.

I do not know all the truths of yogic discipline, but it is said that yogis, by the power of yoga, could create. The creation of genius is of the same order. Poets, by some natural gift, quiet the mind and, in a state of half-unconsciousness, drawn as if by

the pull of some soul, gather together feeling, flavour, image, colour, and sound, heap them up, clothe them in living form, and raise them up before us.

The great deeds of great men are accomplished in this same manner. Whatever belongs where, seems drawn, as by some divine power, line to line, hue to hue, until it stands forth as one accomplished, complete work. That unruly little boy called Mind, youngest-born of Nature, is not wholly rebuked and cast out—but he works on, as if enchanted, under the unfailing magic-spell of some higher, greater genius; it seems as though everything is happening by sorcery—as if every event, every outward circumstance too, were being arranged, by the power of that union, exactly where it belongs, according to some unseen will. It was thus that Garibaldi re-established broken, shattered Italy anew; thus that Washington drew the forest-and-mountain-scattered America around himself and shaped it into an empire.

Every such achievement is itself a kind of spiritual union (yoga).

Just as the poet composes his poem, just as Tansen used to create, out of tune, tempo, and rhythm, each separate song, so too does woman compose the very fabric of her own life. Just as unconsciously, by just such a spell of enchantment. Binding father and son, brother and sister, guest and visitor within a beautiful bond, she builds and adorns all that surrounds her; with the most skilful hand she raises up a home out of the most varied materials; and not merely a home—wherever woman goes, she binds everything around her within one restrained harmony of beauty. Her own movements, her dress, her speech, her every gesture, take on an indescribable form. That we call grace (shri). This is surely not the work of intellect, but of some indefinable genius; not the power of mind, but the unerring, hidden power of the soul. That the right note falls exactly in the right place, the right word comes to rest exactly where it belongs, the right deed is accomplished at exactly the right moment—this is a crystal stream welling up naturally from some deeply mysterious centre of the whole universe. That centre ought to be called not unconscious, but super-conscious.

What in Nature is beauty, in great and gifted men is genius, and in woman is grace—is womanhood itself. It is but the same thing differently unfolded according to the vessel that holds it.

At this, Byom looked at Samir's face and said—And then? Finish what you were writing.

Samir said—What further need is there? What I began, you have, in a manner, already brought to its conclusion.

Kshiti said—The physician began the treatment, and the surgeon has finished it off; now let us all say our farewells and depart in peace. What mind is, what intellect is, what soul is, what beauty is, and what indeed genius may be called—these truths I never understood in all my life, but at least I had some hope of understanding them one day; and today, it seems, even that hope has been offered up as a libation to the departed.

Just as one bends the head and carefully, gently, with cautious fingers, unravels a tangled skein of wool, so Srotaswini sat silent, seeming to unpick these words within her mind, with great and patient care.

Dipti, too, remained silent; Samir asked her—What are you thinking?

Dipti said—I am wondering by what power of genius the women of Bengal ever managed to produce such an extraordinary creation as the men of Bengal.

I said—Not every lump of clay, however skilfully handled, succeeds in becoming a Shiva.

PROSE AND VERSE

I was saying—At the sound of the flute, in the light of the full moon, poets tell us, memory awakens within the heart. But of what that memory consists, no one can say. Since it has no fixed shape at all, there is no particular reason why, of all things, it should be called memory rather than forgetfulness. Yet to say "forgetfulness awakens" sounds strangely incongruous to the ear. And yet the phrase is not without foundation. The countless thousand memories of our past life, having relinquished their separateness and merged into one, so that no single one among them can any longer be told apart—these lie in silent slumber, encircling the conscious continent of our heart like a vast ocean of forgetfulness; and sometimes, at moonrise, or at the touch of the southern breeze, they all stir and heave together into waves, and then our conscious heart feels the shock and impact of that tide of forgetfulness, senses the mysterious, fathomless presence of that vastness, and hears rising up the single, unified sound of weeping from that great, utterly forgotten immensity.

Kshiti, unable to restrain his laughter at this sudden outburst of feeling on my part, said—My dear fellow, what are you about! Stop now, while there is still time. Poetry is pleasant enough to hear in verse—and not even always then. But if the five of you insist on mixing poetry into plain prose at every turn, it becomes quite unfit for everyday use. One may add water to milk and still drink it, but one cannot add milk to water and expect it to serve for one's daily bath and drink. A little prose mixed into poetry makes it easier for plain prose-eating folk like us to digest—but poetry mixed into prose is simply intolerable.

That was that. No more heartfelt outpourings. My dear friend Kshiti, with a single stroke of his sharp hoe, uprooted entirely the tender sprout of feeling that had just budded within me on that autumn morning. When one suddenly hears an opposing view in the course of an argument, one does not feel quite so helpless; but when someone interrupts in the midst of an outpouring of feeling, one is left utterly disarmed. For feeling depends solely upon the listener's sympathy. If the listener cries out, "What foolishness is this!" no system of logic offers any answer to it. This is precisely why the old masters, before venturing upon matters of feeling, would first fall at the feet of their audience, so to speak. They would say: the wise, like the swan, leave the water and take only the cream. They would confess their own inadequacy, and throw themselves entirely upon the goodwill of the assembled

company. Or sometimes, like Bhavabhuti, they would begin with such magnificent arrogance as to overawe the audience from the very first line. And even after all this, returning home, they would curse themselves, saying: hail to that land where glass and gem fetch the same price! They would pray to the gods: "O four-faced Brahma, whatever punishment you ordain for sin, I am prepared to bear it—but spare me, spare me, spare me the fate of speaking of sentiment to one devoid of feeling." Truly, there is no punishment greater than that. One cannot pray to the gods that there be no unfeeling people left in the world at all, for then the population of the earth would be drastically reduced. It is the unfeeling who accomplish most of the world's business; they are indispensable to society—without them, meetings would cease, committees would grind to a halt, newspapers would fall silent, and the quota of criticism would run entirely dry; and so I hold them in the highest respect. But just because pressing mustard-seed in the oil-press yields oil in abundance, no one can expect honey by throwing flowers into it instead—and so, O four-faced Brahma, preserve the oil-press in this world forever, but do not throw flowers into it, and do not cast into it the hearts of those with true feeling.

Srotaswini's tender heart is always on the side of the afflicted. Somewhat troubled by my sorry plight, she said—But why should prose and verse be so utterly divided?

I said—Verse is the inner chamber, prose the outer hall. Each has its own appointed place. It is not that a helpless woman is bound to come to harm merely by wandering abroad. But should some rough, ill-mannered fellow insult her, she has no weapon but tears. And so the inner chamber is, for her, a safe fortress. Verse is the inner chamber of poetry. No one suddenly assails it within the ramparts of metre. Setting itself apart from the everyday speech of every man, it has built for itself a difficult yet beautiful boundary. Had I been able to establish the feeling of my heart within that boundary, then not Kshiti alone, but no lord of the earth, could have come and mocked it so easily.

Byom, lowering the pipe of his hookah from his mouth, said with half-closed eyes—I am a believer in unity. Prose alone could have served all our needs; it is verse that has come between and introduced an unnecessary division into man's mental kingdom—it has created a separate tribe called "poets." When common property falls into the hands of a particular guild, it becomes that guild's interest to keep it beyond the reach of others. Poets, too, have built hard barriers around feeling and

manufactured that artificial thing called "poetic art." The common folk, dazzled by this craft, find no room left for their own wonder. Their habits have grown so distorted that unless metre and rhyme come and hammer away at them again and again, their hearts feel nothing at all; feeling must abandon its natural, simple language and don a garish, many-coloured disguise. Nothing could be more degrading to feeling than this. Verse, they say, is a modern invention, and so, like some upstart nabob, it goes about forever fanning out its plumage and dancing—I cannot bear the sight of it.

So saying, Byom put the hookah-pipe to his mouth again and resumed his smoking.

Dipti, casting a scornful glance at Byom, said—Science has produced a theory called natural selection. The law of natural selection applies not only among animals, but also within human creation. It is by that very force of natural selection that the peahen has had no need of a train, while the peacock's plumage has gradually spread and grown. The plumage of poetry, too, is the result of that same natural selection, not some conspiracy among poets. From the most savage to the most civilised land, where is the country in which poetic feeling has not naturally blossomed forth in metre?

Samir had, all this while, been sitting silently, listening with a faint smile. When Dipti joined our discussion, an idea occurred to him. He introduced a most fantastical notion. He said—Artificiality is man's chief glory. No one but man has the right to be artificial. The tree need not manufacture its own leaves; the sky need not construct its own blue; the peacock's tail Nature herself paints with her own hand. Only man has the Creator made an apprentice in His own workshop of creation, entrusting him with small tasks of creation of his own. Whoever has shown the greatest skill in that task has won the greatest esteem. Verse is, indeed, more artificial than prose; it contains more of human creation; more colour has had to be worked into it, more care bestowed upon it. There dwells within our mind a Vishwakarma, who sits in the secret creative chamber of our inmost being, ever occupied with various forms, various arrangements, various endeavours, various efforts at expression—and it is his skilled handiwork that appears more abundantly in verse. That is verse's chief glory. The unwrought language belongs to the murmur of water, to the rustle of leaves; but wherever mind is present, there language is wrought with much care and labour.

Srotaswini listened to all that Samir said like an attentive student. A new light seemed to fall upon her lovely, gentle face. Unlike other days, when she would hesitate before offering an opinion of her own, today she began at once without hesitation—Samir's words have given rise to a thought in my mind—I do not know if I can express it quite clearly. That portion of creation with which our heart has a bond—that is, that portion of creation which does not merely convey knowledge to our mind, but instills feeling into our heart, such as the beauty of a flower, the grandeur of a mountain—into that portion, how much skill has had to be brought to bear, how much colour worked in, how much preparation made! With what care has every single petal of a flower been made round and shapely, made to stand upon its stem in so graceful and curving a pose; with what majesty has the mountain been crowned with eternal snow and seated within the blue sky; how many brush-strokes of how many colours have fallen upon that canvas of sunset over the western sea. From the surface of the earth to the vault of the sky, how much adornment, how much colour, how much play of feeling has been needed merely to captivate this small mind of ours! Wherever God has revealed love, beauty, and grandeur in His creation, there He too has had to exercise His art. There too He has had to arrange sound and rhythm, colour and fragrance, with the greatest care. In the flower He has caused to bloom in the forest, how many alliterations of petals has He employed; and to cast down but a single ray of light across the canvas of the sky, what precise and perfectly ordered metre has He had to compose—science itself is now counting its feet and syllables. Man, too, must resort to various arts to express feeling. Music must be brought into words, rhythm must be brought in, beauty must be brought in—only then does the mind's message truly enter into another mind. If this be called artifice, then the whole creation of the universe is artifice.

So saying, Srotaswini turned to me, as though seeking help—her eyes seemed to say: I have rambled on without quite knowing what I meant—will you not put it more clearly? At that moment Byom suddenly broke in—There is indeed a school of thought that holds the whole creation of the universe to be artifice. What Srotaswini describes as the expression of feeling—that is, sight, sound, fragrance, and the rest—is held by some to be mere illusion (maya), that is, an artificial construction of our own mind; and this is a very difficult thing to disprove.

Kshiti, thoroughly exasperated, rose and said—All of you together have set out to husk rice and ended up singing hymns to Shiva instead. The question at hand was

this: is verse at all necessary for the expression of feeling? And from that you have crossed an entire ocean and landed in the quicksand of cosmology, dissolution theory, and the doctrine of illusion. My own belief is that rhythm was not created for the expression of feeling at all. Just as small children love nursery rhymes, not for any sweetness of meaning, but purely for their rhythmic sound, so too, in the savage state, mere meaningless jingling of sound pleased the ear. This is why meaningless rhyme is mankind's very first poetry. As man and nation grow older, they cease to be fully satisfied unless meaning is joined to rhythm. And yet, even in maturity, there often remains, in some hidden, shadowy corner of a man, a residue of childhood; the love of sound, the love of rhythm, is the nature of that hidden child. The grown part of us demands meaning, demands feeling; the immature part of us demands sound, demands rhythm.

Dipti, tilting her head, said—It is fortunate that not all of us grows up entirely. I give heartfelt thanks to that immature part of man—it is thanks to that alone that there remains any sweetness at all in this world.

Samir said—Whoever has ripened entirely into full maturity is the veriest old fogey of the world. No sort of play, no sort of childishness, suits his taste. Our modern Hindu race is the greatest fogey race on earth, affecting far too much sophistication, and yet remaining utterly green in so many other respects. It is exceedingly hard for a fogey child, or a fogey nation, ever to progress; for there is no humility in their hearts. This remark of mine is strictly private. Let it not be repeated anywhere. People's tempers these days are none too good.

I said—When machinery is used to mend the city streets, a wooden signboard reads: Machinery at work!

Beware! Let me warn Kshiti in advance—I mean to set the machinery running. He fears the steam-engine above all else, but it is precisely by that vapour of imagination that motion comes most easily to me. On the subject of prose and verse, I mean once more to sing my hymn to Shiva. Listen, if you please.

There is a very precisely measured law governing motion. The pendulum swings in regular measure. As a man walks, his feet rise and fall keeping time, and along with them, all his limbs fall into the same rhythm, maintaining the harmony of motion.

There is a vast rhythm within the waves of the sea. And the earth circles the sun in one great cosmic metre—

Byom suddenly interrupted me in the middle of my sentence and began—Stillness alone is truly free; it abides in its own unshaken majesty; but motion, at every step, must bind itself with rule in order to proceed. And yet there exists among common people a mistaken notion that motion is the true form of freedom, and stillness mere bondage. The reason is this: will is the mind's sole form of motion, and the ignorant call following one's will freedom. But our sages knew that will is the root cause of all our motion, the very origin of all our bondage; and so, to attain liberation—that is, ultimate stillness—they prescribed that this very will be cut off at the root; the arresting of every motion of body and mind is the whole discipline of yoga.

Samir, laying a hand on Byom's back, said with a laugh—When a man has just introduced a subject, to arrest his motion midway is properly called the creation of confusion.

I said—Our scientist Kshiti well knows that there exists a close kinship between one motion and another, between one vibration and another. When the string tuned to Sa is struck, the string tuned to Ma trembles in response. Among light-waves, heat-waves, sound-waves, nerve-waves, and all other kinds of waves, there exists just such a bond of kinship. Our own consciousness, too, is a state of vibration, of trembling; and this is why it has communion with the manifold vibrations of the universe. Sound comes and sets its nervous swing in motion; the ray of light comes and strikes its supernatural finger upon the strings of its nerves. Its ever-trembling web of nerves keeps it bound, by countless threads, awake and alive to the rhythm of every pulsation in the universe.

That faculty of the heart which in English is called emotion is the surge, that is, the motion, of our heart; and it too shares a vast unity with all the other vibrations of the universe. It has a bond of pulsation, a harmony of tune, with light, with colour, with sound.

This is why music can touch our hearts so immediately—so little delay occurs before the union of the two takes place. Just as the storm and the sea rage together in wild abandon, so too does an intense communion arise between song and soul.

For music, by transmitting its own vibration, sets our whole inward being trembling. It fills our life with some indescribable surge of feeling. The mind grows detached, absent. Many poets have given this rare feeling the name of "longing for the infinite." I too have sometimes felt such a thing, and have perhaps used such language myself. Not music alone—how often has the glow of sunset in the evening sky sent throbbing through my inmost being the very heartbeat of the infinite universe; that indescribable, vast symphony it has sounded has no connection whatever with my own daily joys and sorrows—it is the hymn of the whole moving and unmoving creation, sung as it circles the temple of the Lord of the Universe. Not music and sunset alone—when some love stirs our whole being to its depths, that too severs us from the petty bonds of the world and unites us with the infinite. It takes on the form of some vast act of worship, and, splitting open the rock-face of time and space, gushes forth like a spring toward the infinite.

In this way, by powerful vibration, it unites us with the vibration of the universe. Just as a great army draws from one another a shared frenzy of feeling and becomes one single life, so too, when the vibration of the universe is transmitted into our heart through the medium of beauty, we begin to fall into step with the whole world, and, merging into one single company with every trembling atom of the universe, rush forward with irresistible passion toward the infinite.

Poets have tried, in how many languages, by how many means, to express this feeling, and how many people have failed utterly to understand it, taking it for nothing more than the poetic fog of poets.

The reason is that language has no direct bond with the heart—it must pierce through the brain before it can enter the inner being. It is a mere messenger; it has no access to the private chambers of the heart, but comes only to the public hall, delivers its message, and departs. Time is needed to understand it, to grasp its meaning. But music embraces the heart in a single gesture, all at once.

This is why poets attach a music to their words. By its magic touch, it throws open the doors of the heart. When the heart is naturally stirred by rhythm and sound, the work of language becomes much easier. When the flute is playing somewhere in the distance, when the flower-garden has burst into bloom before one's very

eyes, how easily then is the meaning of a lover's words understood! Nothing else can, in a single instant, make the heart acquainted with feeling as beauty can.

Melody and rhythm, metre and sound, are the two components of music. The Greeks spoke of a thing called "the music of the spheres," and Shakespeare too makes mention of it. The reason, as I said before, is that one motion has a very close relation to another. Across the boundless sky, moon and sun, planet and star move in a dance, keeping perfect time. That universal symphony of theirs seems not to be heard by the ear, but seen by the eye. Rhythm is one form of music. In poetry, that rhythm and that sound join together to make feeling tremble and come alive, turning outward language too into the very wealth of the heart. If anything here is artificial, it is language alone that is artificial—beauty is not artificial. Language belongs to man; beauty belongs to the whole universe, and to the Creator of that universe.

Srotaswini said, her face bright with joy—In the performance of drama, many instruments for stirring our hearts are all present together. Music, light, scenery, beautiful costume—all combine to strike our minds from many directions at once and set them trembling; within it, a single ceaseless current of feeling takes on many forms, flows through many actions—our mind, utterly helpless amid that dramatic current, surrenders itself entirely, and is borne swiftly along. In the theatre one sees how great is the cooperation among the different arts—there, music, literature, painting, and dramatic art unite for a single purpose—nowhere else, I think, can such a thing be seen.

THE MEANING OF POETRY

Srotaswini said to me—I should like to hear, from your own lips, that poem you wrote on the dialogue between Kacha and Devayani.

Hearing this, I felt a certain pride stir within me; but Madhusudan, the slayer of pride, was wide awake at that moment, and so Dipti broke in impatiently—Don't be offended, but I really could not make out any purpose or meaning in that poem at all. It hasn't come off very well.

I remained silent; to myself I thought, had she expressed her opinion with a little more courtesy, no great harm would have come to the world, nor would truth have been any the worse for it—for a flaw in the writing is no more improbable a thing than a certain dullness in the reader's poetic sense. Aloud, I said—Though an author often holds a quite unwavering opinion of his own work, history offers ample proof that such an opinion may nonetheless be mistaken; and on the other hand, history offers no lack of proof that the tribe of critics is not infallible either. And so this much, at least, may be said without doubt: this piece of mine has not turned out exactly to your liking; that is certainly my misfortune, and perhaps yours as well.

Dipti said, gravely and very briefly—So it may be. And, drawing a book toward her, she began to read. After that, Srotaswini did not ask me a second time to read that poem aloud.

Byom, gazing out the window as though addressing some imaginary figure in the far distant sky, said—If it is meaning you speak of, I have found a meaning in that poem of yours.

Kshiti said—First tell us what the story is. I have kept it hidden all this while, for fear of our esteemed poet, that I never actually heard the poem read—now I must confess it.

Byom said—To learn the science of Sanjivani, the art of restoring the dead to life, from Shukracharya, the gods sent Kacha, son of Brihaspati, to the hermitage of the preceptor of the demons. There Kacha, for a thousand years, delighted Shukra's daughter Devayani with dance, song, and music, and thereby acquired the science

of Sanjivani. At last, when the time for his departure arrived, Devayani declared her love for him and forbade him to leave the hermitage. Despite his own inward attachment to Devayani, Kacha, disregarding her prohibition, departed for the world of the gods. Such, in brief, is the tale. It differs somewhat from the account in the Mahabharata, but the difference is slight.

Kshiti said, with a rather anxious look—The tale itself may be no bigger than a twelve-cubit gourd, but I fear it is about to yield a thirteen-cubit meaning. Byom, paying no attention to Kshiti's remark, went on—The matter concerns body and soul.

At this, everyone grew apprehensive.

Kshiti said—I shall now, with your permission, take my leave of both body and soul while there is yet time. Samir seized his coat with both hands and pulled him back into his seat, saying—Where do you think you're going, abandoning us at such a critical moment?

Byom said—The living soul (jiva) comes down from heaven into this hermitage of the world. Here it learns its lessons through joy and sorrow, through fortune and misfortune. So long as it remains in the condition of a student, it must go about pleasing the mind of this daughter of the hermitage—the body. It possesses a wondrous art of pleasing. Upon the vina of the body's senses, it plays so heavenly a music that upon this earth the mirage-paradise of beauty spreads wide, and every sound, every fragrance, every touch, forsaking the mechanical laws of its own material force, begins to throb with a strange, unearthly dance.

As he spoke, Byom's eyes grew dreamy and vacant, and, brightening, he sat up straight in his chair and said—If you look at it in this way, you will see, within every human being, an eternal drama of love being played out. See how the jiva drives its simple, trusting, dependent companion to distraction. Into every atom of the body it instills such a longing as the very nature of the body can never satisfy. It brings to her eyes a beauty which the power of sight itself cannot fully encompass, and so she cries, "From my very birth I have gazed upon this beauty, yet my eyes have never been satisfied"; it brings to her ears a music which the power of hearing cannot fully contain, and so, in distress, she says, "That sweet voice I heard with my ears, yet it never truly reached the pathway of my hearing." And this life-kindled,

simple companion, too, spreads out, like a creeper, her thousand branches and tendrils, enveloping and concealing the jiva within the tender, love-warmed bonds of her embrace, charming him little by little, tending him with unwearied care like his own shadow, ever attentive with her eyes, ears, hands, and feet, that his sojourn here should never feel like exile, that no fault of hospitality should ever occur. And yet, after all this love, one day the jiva lays low in the dust this ever-faithful, single-hearted creeper of a body, and departs. He says: Beloved, I have loved you as my very own self, and yet, with but a single sigh, I shall leave you and go. Then the body clings to his feet and says: Friend, if in the end you mean to cast me down into the dust like a mere handful of earth and depart, why then did your love once make me so glorious? Alas, I was not worthy of you—but why, then, did you once, on some mysterious dark night, cross the boundless ocean and come as a lover to this secret golden temple, kindled with the lamp of my life? By what merit of mine did I ever charm you? To this piteous question the stranger gives no answer, and no one knows where he has gone. Where, in any love-poem, is there so pitiful a scene of parting as that ending of the union bound since the very hour of birth, that day of farewell on the journey to Mathura, that last meeting between the body and the lord of the body!

Seeing from Kshiti's expression that mockery was imminent, Byom said—Do not think of this as mere love; do not think I am speaking only in figures of speech. It is not so. This is the very first love in all creation, and just as the first love of a life is ever the most intense, so is this first love of the world equally simple and equally intense. When this primal love, this love of the body, first appeared in the world, land and water had not yet even been divided. No poet was present on that day, no historian had yet been born, but on that day it was first proclaimed, upon this watery, muddy, unformed earth, that this world is no mere mechanism; that a certain indescribable, joy-and-sorrow-filled power of will called love was awakening a forest of lotuses out of the very mud—and upon that forest of lotuses today, in the eyes of the devotee, sits enthroned Lakshmi in the form of beauty, and Saraswati in the form of feeling.

Kshiti said—I am delighted to hear that so vast an epic is unfolding within each one of us, but it must be admitted that the fickle soul's treatment of the simple, faithful body is scarcely commendable. I devoutly hope that my own soul will refrain from such inconstancy, and will dwell, for a good long while at least, in permanent residence at the hermitage of my body-Devayani! You must all give me your

blessing to that end. Samir said—My dear Byom, I have never before heard you say anything contrary to scripture. Why do you speak today like a Christian? This notion that the soul is sent down from heaven into the household of the world, gains the company of the body, and comes gradually to maturity through joy and sorrow—this does not agree at all with your former views.

Byom said—Do not trouble yourself trying to reconcile these matters with any doctrine. On such fundamental questions, I quarrel with no particular view at all. In the business of living, every nation raises its capital using whatever currency is current in its own land—the only question is whether the business itself runs successfully. The view that the jiva has been sent to this school of the world to gain instruction through joy and sorrow, through fortune and misfortune—if life proceeds smoothly upon that capital, then, to my mind, that currency is not counterfeit. And when occasion arises, I shall show you, too, that the very banknote with which I have entered upon the business of life is also accepted at the Bank of the Creator of the Universe. Kshiti said plaintively—For heaven's sake, brother, your talk of love alone was hard enough to bear—if you now bring in talk of banking as well, then I too must be carried out of here; I am beginning to feel quite faint. If I get the chance, I too can offer a meaning of my own.

Byom leaned back in his chair and put both feet up on the windowsill. Kshiti said—It seems to me that the whole substance of the theory of evolution lies concealed within this poem. The Sanjivani vidya means simply the science of staying alive. It is plain enough that someone is forever practising that very science in this world—not merely for a thousand years, but for hundreds of thousands of years together. But toward that very lineage of living creatures by whose means he practises this science, he shows only the most fleeting love. The moment one chapter is finished, this cruel, fickle lover and guest abandons it without a qualm to destruction, and moves on. In layer upon layer of the earth's strata lies inscribed, in stone, the lament of this pitiless parting.—

Before Kshiti had even finished speaking, Dipti broke in, exasperated—If you go on extracting meanings in this fashion, there will be no end to meaning at all. The fire's departure after consuming the wood, the butterfly's flight after cutting free of its cocoon, the fruit's emergence after the wilting of the flower, the sprout's rising after the splitting of the seed—one could heap up meanings like this without number.

Byom went on gravely—Quite true. Those are not meanings, but mere illustrations. The real point underlying them all is this: in this world, we cannot move at all without using at least two feet. While the left foot is fixed behind, the right foot advances forward; and when the right foot in turn becomes fixed ahead, the left foot must break its own binding and rush forward. We bind ourselves once, and the very next moment we must sever that same binding. We must love, and we must also sever that love—this is the greatest sorrow of this world, and it is only through this very great sorrow that we are able to advance at all. The same holds true of society. When some new rule, in the course of time, becomes an old custom binding us fast in one place, then social revolution comes and, uprooting it, sets us free once more. Whatever foot we set down, we must, the very next moment, lift up again, or else we cannot walk at all—and so it is the ordinance of the Creator that at every single step of our advance there lies the pain of parting.

Samir said—None of you has mentioned the curse that comes at the very end of the story. When Kacha, having gained his learning, broke the bond of Devayani's love and set out on his way, Devayani cursed him, saying: the science you have learned, you shall be able to teach to others, but you shall never be able to use it yourself. I have drawn out a meaning that includes even this curse—if you have the patience for it, I shall tell you.

Kshiti said—I cannot say beforehand whether I shall have the patience or not. One may make a vow and sit down to it, and yet fail to keep that vow in the end. Go on and begin, at any rate; if, seeing how things stand, compassion should later stir in you, you may simply stop there.

Samir said—Let us call the art of living life well the Sanjivani vidya. Suppose some poet has come into this world having learned that art himself, in order to bestow it upon others. By his natural, heaven-given power he enchants the world, and wrests that art from it. It is not that he did not love the world—but when the world said to him, "Surrender yourself to my bonds," he replied, "If I surrender, if I am drawn into your whirlpool, then I shall no longer be able to teach this Sanjivani vidya; I must remain apart even while dwelling among all." Then the world cursed him, saying: the art you have received from me, you shall be able to give to others, but you shall never be able to use it yourself. Because of this curse of the world's, one very often finds that a teacher's instruction proves of great use to his pupils, while

he himself remains as clumsy as a child in applying worldly wisdom to his own life. The reason is that one may learn an art thoroughly by studying it from a detached, outside vantage, but the skill of applying it can only be learned by remaining constantly immersed in actual practice. This is why, in ancient times, the Brahmin served as minister, while it was the Kshatriya king who put his counsel into actual practice. Had the Brahmin himself been seated upon the throne, he would have found himself out of his depth, and would have set the kingdom itself adrift upon a shoreless sea.

The points you have all raised are far too general to be of much use. Suppose one were to say that the meaning of the Ramayana is simply that many who are born in a king's house suffer great sorrow, or that the meaning of Shakuntala is simply that, given the right occasion, it is not impossible for love to spring up between the hearts of man and woman—such a thing could hardly be called a new teaching, or any particular message at all.

Srotaswini said, with some hesitation—It seems to me that it is precisely such general truths that constitute the very substance of poetry. Though born in a king's house, though every possibility of happiness lay open to him, Rama, together with Sita, was hunted like game by boundless sorrow, from one calamity to the next, until the very end of his life; it is this utterly ordinary, this utterly ancient tale of sorrow in human destiny that has drawn and moistened the reader's heart. There is, in truth, no new teaching, no special message, in the love-scene of Shakuntala—there is only this exceedingly old and ordinary truth: that in a fortunate or unfortunate hour, love comes unseen, with irresistible force, and binds the hearts of man and woman fast together as one. It is precisely because of this most ordinary truth that people everywhere have, through all ages, tasted its sweetness. Some might say that the disrobing of Draupadi carries the special meaning that death is forever tugging at the garment of this earth, clothed as she is in beast and bird, tree and creeper and grass, and yet, by the blessing of the Creator, the end of her garment is never reached, and she remains forever adorned in ever-fresh robes of life and beauty. But in that scene in the assembly-hall, where our very hearts surged with blood, and where at last, by the mercy of the god upon his imperilled devotee, our eyes brimmed over with tears—was it because of that new and special meaning? Or was it because of the shame of an outraged woman, and the relief of that shame—an utterly ordinary, natural, and ancient theme? In the dialogue of Kacha and Devayani, too, there is set forth one of the most eternal and ordinary

tales of sorrow in the human heart; and those who consider such a tale worthless, giving precedence instead to some special doctrine, have no true claim upon the essence of poetry.

Samir laughed and, turning to me, said—Srotaswini has just banished us entirely from the domain of poetic taste—let us now hear what the poet himself has to say in judgment.

Srotaswini, greatly abashed and repentant, repeatedly protested against this charge.

I said—This much I can say: when I sat down to write that poem, no particular meaning was in my mind at all; but thanks to all of you, I now see that the piece has not turned out quite so meaningless after all—indeed, its meaning seems to exceed what any dictionary could hold. One virtue of poetry is this: that the creative power of the poet awakens the creative power of the reader; and then, according to each one's own nature, one discovers beauty, another morality, another philosophy. It is rather like setting a flame to fireworks—poetry is that flame, and the minds of readers are fireworks of many different kinds. The moment the fire catches, one shoots straight up into the sky like a rocket, another bursts forth like a fountain of sparks, another goes off with a bang like a cracker. And yet, on the whole, I find myself in no real disagreement with Srotaswini. Many say that the stone is the principal part of a fruit, and this can even be proven by scientific argument. And yet many a connoisseur eats the flesh of the fruit and discards the stone. So too, even if some particular lesson lies within a poem, no one can fault the true lover of poetry who takes only its rich poetic essence and casts aside the lesson. But as for those who eagerly wish to extract nothing but that lesson—I wish them every success, and every happiness, too. Joy cannot be forced upon anyone. From the safflower, one man extracts its dye, another presses oil from its seed, another simply gazes, entranced, upon its beauty. From poetry, one man draws out history, another excavates philosophy, another morality, another practical worldly knowledge—while yet another can extract nothing whatever from poetry except poetry itself. Whoever finds whatever he finds may return home content with it; I see no need for quarrel with anyone over this—nor would any quarrel serve the least purpose.

LUCIDITY

Srotaswini, mentioning some well-known English poet, said—I do not know why, but I simply cannot bring myself to like his work.

Dipti seconded Srotaswini's opinion with even greater vehemence.

Samir, as a rule, never openly contradicts anything the ladies say if he can help it. And so, smiling a little and hesitating, he said—But a good many great critics rank him very highly indeed.

Dipti said—One does not need a critic's help to understand properly that fire burns; the tip of one's own left little finger will teach one that much; if I cannot recognise the goodness of a good poem just as effortlessly, then I see no need to go reading criticism about it.

Samir knew well enough the burning power of fire, and so he held his peace; but poor Byom, having not the least worldly tact in such matters, at once launched loudly into a soliloquy of his own.

He said—The human mind runs on ahead of man himself; very often it cannot be overtaken at all—

Kshiti interrupted him, saying—In the Treta age, Hanuman's tail of a hundred yojanas would stretch far, far beyond the good Hanumanji himself; and if a louse happened to settle on the very tip of that tail, one would have had to send out a call by horseback to summon it back for a good scratching. Man's mind is longer even than Hanuman's tail, and this is why, wherever the mind sometimes wanders off to, no hand can reach it save by dispatching the critic's horseback messenger. The difference between the tail and the mind is this: the mind goes on ahead, while the tail lags behind. And that is precisely why, in this world, the tail is held in such contempt, and the mind in such high honour.

When Kshiti had finished, Byom took up again—The purpose of science is to know, and the purpose of philosophy is to understand; but matters have come to such a pass that knowing that science and understanding that philosophy have become harder than knowing or understanding anything else in the world! What schools,

what books, what elaborate apparatus have become necessary for it! The purpose of literature is to give joy, but even receiving that joy is no simple matter at all; various kinds of education and assistance are needed for that too. This is precisely why I was saying that the mind advances so far, so quickly, that one needs to set up a ladder merely to catch up with it. If anyone should proudly declare that whatever cannot be known without instruction is not science, that whatever cannot be understood without effort is not philosophy, and that whatever fails to give joy without discipline is not literature, then such a person must resign himself to lagging far behind, contenting himself with folk-sayings, proverbs, and popular ballads alone.

Samir said—Everything, in man's hands, grows steadily more complicated. Savages feel a thrill simply by shouting as they please, and yet it is our peculiar fate that we can find no pleasure except in music requiring long practice and careful training—and it is our peculiar fate, further, that just as singing well requires training, so too does the very capacity to take pleasure in good singing require training. The result is that whatever once belonged to the common people gradually comes to belong only to the specially trained. Anyone can shout, and by shouting, every uncultivated person feels the pleasure of excitement; but not everyone can sing, nor does everyone take pleasure in singing. And so, the further society advances, the more it divides itself into two camps—the initiated and the uninitiated, those of taste and those without it.

Kshiti said—Poor man has been fashioned in such a way that the more he seeks after easy methods, the more entangled he becomes in difficulty. He builds machines to make his work easier, but the machine itself turns out to be a fearfully complicated affair; he creates science in order to reduce all natural knowledge to simple, orderly principles, but that very science becomes a difficult thing to master; in seeking an easy method of ensuring fair judgment, he ends up creating law—and in the end, merely to understand that law properly, even a long-lived man must sacrifice three-quarters of his life; to facilitate easy exchange, money was invented, and in the end the problem of money has become such a problem that who has the wit to solve it! In the effort to make everything easier, man's knowing, his eating, his amusements—everything—has grown impossibly difficult.

Srotaswini said—By that same reasoning, poetry too has grown difficult. Now mankind has plainly split into two—now the few are rich and the many are poor,

the few are gifted and the many ungifted—and now poetry, too, belongs no longer to everyone, but to particular people alone. I understand all this well enough. But the point is this: the particular poem we brought up in this connection is not in the least difficult; there is nothing in it that even people like ourselves could fail to understand—it is utterly simple. And so, if it does not please us, that cannot be blamed on any failure of our understanding.

Kshiti and Samir, after this, had no wish to say anything further. But Byom, quite undaunted, went on—It is by no means true that whatever is simple is therefore easy. Very often it is precisely the simple thing that is exceedingly difficult; for it employs no cheap device whatsoever to make itself understood—it simply stands there in silence; and if one walks away without understanding it, it employs no trick to call one back. The chief virtue of lucidity is precisely this: that it establishes a wholly unmediated relation with the mind—there is no intermediary between them at all. But to minds that can accept nothing without the aid of some intermediary, that must be lured and drawn in by some charm, lucidity appears exceedingly obscure. The water-carrier fashioned by the craftsman of Krishnanagar, with all its gaudy paint and its water-skin and its lifelike posture, can slip quickly into our minds through the aid of our senses and habits—but the Greek marble statue has no such colour, no such theatrical pose; it is lucid, and utterly free of contrivance. Yet that does not make it easy. Precisely because it resorts to no trivial external device, it must possess all the more richness of feeling within.

Dipti, somewhat annoyed, said—Do leave your Greek marble statue out of it. I have heard a great deal about that subject already, and, if I live long enough, shall no doubt hear a great deal more. The trouble with good things is that they must forever stand exposed before the world's eye; everyone talks about them; they have no veil left, no modesty left; no one need discover them anew, or understand them freshly, or even look properly at them with open eyes—one need only hear and repeat the same set phrases about them, over and over. Just as the sun ought, now and then, to be veiled in cloud—for otherwise the glory of the unclouded sun could never be appreciated—so, I think, the great reputations of this world ought, now and then, to be shadowed over by neglect. It would do us good if, now and then, it became fashionable to criticise the Greek statue; it would do us good if, now and then, it were proved to everyone's satisfaction that Chanakya was a greater poet than Kalidasa. Otherwise it all becomes quite unbearable. However, that is beside the point. What I wish to say is this: very often poverty of feeling,

crudeness of manner, is mistaken for simplicity—very often a mere lack of the power of expression is imagined to be a sign of an excess of feeling—and that too is worth bearing in mind.

I said—In the fine arts, simplicity accompanies the highest order of mental development. Crudeness is not simplicity. Crudeness makes an excessive show of pomp and preparation. Civilization is comparatively unadorned. Excessive ornament catches the eye, but repels the mind. In our Bengali language, whether in the newspapers or in high literature, one finds a lack of simplicity and of restraint—everyone loves to say more than is needed, to shout, to strike an attitude; scarcely anyone feels inclined to state a plain truth clearly, without pomp. The reason is that a certain primitive crudeness still lingers among us; when truth arrives in a lucid guise, we fail to perceive its depth and its rarity—unless the beauty of a thought comes weighed down under every kind of artificial adornment and excess, its dignity is lost upon us.

Samir said—Restraint is one of the chief marks of true refinement. Persons of true refinement do not proclaim their own existence through any brazen excess; they preserve their own dignity through modesty and restraint. Very often, to the ordinary observer, pomp and theatrical excess prove more attractive than restrained, composed refinement—but that is not the misfortune of refinement itself; it is the misfortune of the ordinary observer's taste. Restraint in literature, and restraint in conduct, are marks of advancement—it is crudeness alone that seeks to catch the eye through excess.

I said—You must forgive an English word or two. Just as among refined people, so too in refined literature, there is manner, but no mannerism. Good literature undoubtedly has a particular form and character of its own; but its harmony is so perfectly measured that the peculiarity of that form and character does not strike the eye as anything unusual. Within it there is feeling, there is a hidden power, but no extraordinary posturing. For want of visible turbulence, completeness itself often escapes people's notice; and, conversely, for want of true completeness, mere turbulence often stirs people deeply—but let no one, on that account, fall into the error of supposing that the lucidity of true completeness is easy, while the posturing of shallowness is difficult.

Turning to Srotaswini, I said—High literature of a simple kind is often difficult to understand precisely because the mind must grasp it for itself—the work does not go on explaining itself.

Dipti said—My humble respects. We have all been thoroughly instructed today. Never again shall I disgrace myself by voicing an opinion of my own on works of high literature before such high-minded scholars.

Srotaswini, naming that English poet once more, said—Argue and scold as much as you like—I still cannot bring myself to like that poet's verse in the least.

LAUGHTER AND HUMOUR

It was a winter morning, and date-palm sap was being carried past along the road. The hazy fog of dawn had lifted, and, with the young sunlight, the beginning of the day had turned pleasantly warm. Samir was drinking tea, Kshiti was reading the newspaper, and Byom had just arrived, a preposterously bright blue-and-green muffler wound round and round his neck, an incongruously stout walking-stick in his hand.

Not far off, standing near the door, Srotaswini and Dipti, arms about each other's waists, were laughing helplessly over some mysterious joke, again and again. Kshiti and Samir assumed that this comfortably seated, blithely unconcerned Byom, wrapped in that garish heap of blue-green wool, was himself the root cause of all that merriment.

Just then, even Byom's wandering attention was drawn by the sound of laughter. Turning his chair slightly toward us, he said—A man observing those two friends from a distance might well mistake it for laughter provoked by some particular jest. But that is illusion. A partial Providence has denied to the male sex the power of laughing without cause, but why women laugh, the gods themselves know not, much less mere mortals. Flint, by nature, holds no light; struck properly, it flings off sparks with a loud crack—but a fragment of ruby glows with light of its own accord, needing no proper occasion whatever. Women know how to weep at the slightest cause, and can laugh for no cause at all; for the stern law of this world, that no effect occurs without a cause, applies, it seems, only to men.

Samir, refilling his empty cup a second time, said—Not only women's laughter, but the very sense of humour strikes me as somewhat incongruous. That we weep at sorrow, and laugh at joy—that much is understood readily enough. But why do we laugh at what is merely comic? The comic is not, properly speaking, joy at all. When a fat man breaks his chair and falls down, I cannot say that any joy results to us from it—but that it provokes laughter is a tested fact. Thought about carefully, there is something quite extraordinary in this.

Kshiti said—Spare us, my friend. There are plenty of things in this world extraordinary enough without our having to think about them at all; finish off those first, and then begin thinking about the rest. There was once a madman who,

wishing to rid his courtyard of dust, first swept it thoroughly with a broom, and, not fully satisfied with the result, began scraping away the very earth with a spade. He imagined that if he swept away this whole dusty earth entirely into the sky, he would end up with a perfectly clean courtyard; needless to say, for all his great effort, he never succeeded. My dear Samir, if you go on sweeping away the surface layer of wonder only to arrive, in the end, at some deeper wonder still to think about, then we, your friends, had better take our leave at once. Time, they say, is endless—but that endless time is not ours to spend.

Samir laughed and said—My dear Kshiti, you have far more cause for thought than I do. Think about it long enough, and you too might come to seem one of creation's great wonders—but you would need to think a good deal harder still before you could imagine any resemblance between me and that ideal courtyard-sweeper of yours.

Kshiti said—Forgive me, my friend; it is only because you are so long and so particular a friend of mine that such a fear arose in my mind. However, the point is this: why do we laugh at what is comic? Very strange indeed! But there is a further question: whatever the cause, why do we laugh at all? The moment something pleasing presents itself before us, a peculiar sound at once issues from our throat, and all the muscles of our face contort until the row of front teeth is bared—for a supposedly dignified creature like man, is not so unrestrained, so unseemly a performance, more than a little strange and demeaning? A European gentleman feels ashamed to show any outward sign of fear or of sorrow; we of the East, likewise, in polite society, regard any outward display of mirth as a plain mark of ill-breeding. Samir, without letting Kshiti finish, broke in—The reason is that, in our view, taking pleasure in something merely comic is utterly unreasonable. It suits only children. This is precisely why our elders, almost without exception, despise the sense of humour as mere silliness. I once heard in a song how Krishna, waking from sleep in the morning, hookah in hand, came to Radhika's cottage to beg a few live coals—and everyone who heard it burst out laughing. Yet the image of Krishna holding a hookah is neither beautiful nor pleasing to anyone in itself—so is it not indeed strange and groundless that we should laugh and be amused by it? This is precisely why such levity finds no sanction among our sober, learned elders. It is, in a way, largely a physical thing—merely a nervous excitation. It has no connection with our sense of beauty, our intellect, or even our sense of self-interest. And so, for the intellect to be so utterly, if briefly, overthrown by so trivial and groundless

a cause, for composure to be so completely upset—this is, without doubt, a matter of some shame for any serious-minded creature.

Kshiti reflected a moment and said—That is true enough. You perhaps know this verse, composed by some obscure poet—

"Thirsty, I asked for a pot of water.

In great haste, they brought me half a wood-apple."

When a thirsty man asks for a pot of water, and, in great haste, someone brings him half a wood-apple instead, there is no reasonable or logical cause why anyone else should find amusement in it. If we bring the thirsty man the pot of water he asked for, we feel pleasure through simple fellow-feeling—but if instead we suddenly bring him half a wood-apple, by what faculty we come to feel such abundant amusement, I do not know. Since there is a difference in kind between this pleasure and this amusement, the two ought properly to manifest themselves differently. But such is Nature's housekeeping—needless extravagance in one place, stinginess where it is most needed in another. It was hardly proper of her to settle both pleasure and amusement with the very same currency of laughter.

Byom said—You do Nature an injustice. In pleasure we smile gently; in amusement we burst into loud laughter. In the physical world, light and lightning offer a fitting comparison. One arises from steady vibration, the other from sudden collision. I daresay that once the underlying cause is discovered by which the very same ether produces both light and lightning, the corresponding causes of our pleasure-laughter and our amusement-laughter will likewise come to light.

Samir, paying no heed to Byom, went on—Amusement and comic pleasure are not, properly speaking, joy at all; rather, they are a mild form of pain. A small measure of pain or irritation striking our consciousness can, in fact, give us pleasure. Every day, at the regular hour, we eat the food the cook has prepared, without any trouble at all—and we do not call that amusement. But on the day of a picnic, breaking our usual routine, enduring some hardship, eating at odd hours, and perhaps eating food that is scarcely fit to eat, we call that amusement. The measure of trouble and discomfort we willingly stir up for the sake of amusement serves precisely to stimulate our faculty of feeling. The comic, too, is pain of that same pleasurable kind. Our long-held image of Krishna receives a sudden shock when he

is brought before us with a hookah in hand, standing at Radhika's cottage door. That shock is mildly painful; but the degree of that pain is so nicely measured that, though it pains us somewhat, it stirs our consciousness so suddenly into activity that it ends up pleasing us rather more than it pains us. Exceed that boundary even slightly, and the comic turns into genuine pain. Had some humour-addled young fellow, in the very midst of a solemn devotional kirtan, suddenly broken into a song about Krishna's craving for a smoke of tobacco, no one would have found it amusing at all; for the shock would have been so severe that it would have instantly taken the form of a raised fist, rushing with violent retribution toward that witty young man's back. And so, in my view, the comic is a form of stimulation through pain; and so is amusement. This is precisely why true joy expresses itself in a gentle smile, while amusement and the comic express themselves in loud laughter—laughter that seems to burst suddenly upward with a noise, propelled by the force of some quick, sharp shock.

Kshiti said—When you are able to attach a theory that pleases you to a metaphor that pleases you equally, joy leaves no room for judging truth from falsehood. Everyone knows well enough that we do not laugh loudly at the comic alone—we also smile faintly at it, and indeed sometimes merely laugh inwardly, in our minds. But that is beside the point. The real matter is this: the comic is a cause of excitement in our mind, and a mild excitement of the mind is pleasurable to us. Within us and around us reigns the dominion of a well-reasoned order and rule; everything is long familiar, long expected; and when our mind flows unimpeded across this smooth, well-regulated plain of reason, we cannot particularly feel it—but if, in the midst of it, some incongruous event suddenly intrudes upon that surrounding propriety and proportion, our mental current is abruptly checked, and stirred into an irresistible wave of laughter. That check is neither pleasant, nor beautiful, nor convenient—yet neither is it a source of any great sorrow—and it is precisely this pure, unmixed excitation of the comic that gives us amusement.

I said—Every act of feeling is, in itself, pleasurable, unless it is mixed with some grave fear of sorrow or loss of interest. Even fear itself can be pleasurable, if no real cause for fear is actually involved. Children feel an intense fascination in hearing ghost-stories, for there is pleasure even in the agitation of mind produced by the excitement of a pounding heart. In the Ramayana, we grieve at Rama's sorrow over the loss of Sita; Othello's groundless jealousy pains us; we feel the anguish of mad Lear, pierced by the arrows of his daughters' ingratitude—yet had these sorrows

and pains failed to stir any feeling in us, such poetry would have seemed trivial to us. Indeed, we hold poetry of sorrow in higher regard than poetry of joy, precisely because the experience of sorrow stirs a greater agitation in our minds. The comic strikes suddenly within the mind and awakens our ordinary faculty of feeling. This is why many a wit regards a sudden physical jolt as itself a kind of jest; many use abuse as a form of banter; the ladies of Bengal have settled upon ear-twisting and other such playful torments in the bridal chamber as a particular species of humour; the sudden bursting of a loud firecracker forms part of festivity in our country, and the deafening clash of cymbal and drum, driving the mind to utter distraction like bees smoked out of a hive, is used to induce the very rapture of devotion.

Kshiti said—Enough, my friends. The matter is, in a manner, settled. You have exceeded the degree of pain that gives pleasure, and sorrow is now growing stronger and stronger. We understand well enough now that the laughter of comedy and the tears of tragedy both depend upon the varying degree of pain involved—

Byom said—Just as, when the first sunlight falls upon snow, it glitters and sparkles, but as the heat of the sun increases, it melts away entirely. Name me a few farces and a few tragedies, and I shall prove the point from them directly—

At that moment Dipti and Srotaswini arrived, still laughing.

Dipti said—What is it you two are so eager to prove?

Kshiti said—We were proving that you two have been laughing all this while for no reason at all.

Hearing this, Dipti looked at Srotaswini's face, Srotaswini looked at Dipti's face, and both of them burst once more into peals of tinkling laughter.

Byom said—I was about to prove that in comedy we laugh at another's mild suffering, and in tragedy we weep at another's greater suffering.

Once more the room rang with the sweet, mingled laughter of Dipti and Srotaswini, and, each blaming the other for provoking such needless mirth, scolding one

another amid their laughter, the two friends left the room, laughing still, in shy confusion.

The male members of our assembly sat in smiling bewilderment at this spectacle of causeless merriment. Only Samir said—Byom, it's getting rather late in the morning; I see no danger to your health now in unwinding that many-coloured serpent's coil from around your neck.

Kshiti picked up Byom's walking-stick, examined it attentively for some while, and said—Tell me, Byom, is this club of yours a subject fit for comedy, or an instrument fit for tragedy?

THE MEASURE OF COMIC LAUGHTER

Having read our discussion on comic laughter in that day's diary entry, Srimati Dipti has written to us:

One morning by the flowing stream, she and I had laughed together. Blessed be that morning, and blessed the laughter of two friends. Since the creation of the world, many women have displayed such capriciousness, and history records its consequences—good and ill—in countless enduring forms. A woman's laughter may spring from nothing at all, yet it is said to have been the primal cause of many a mandakranta, many an upendravajra, even the shardulavikridita metre, and countless tercets, quatrains, and sonnets besides. Woman, being of a fickle nature, laughs without reason; meanwhile, many a man, witnessing this, weeps without reason, many a man sits down to compose verses, many a man puts a rope round his neck and dies—and now, this time, I observed that at woman's laughter, a fresh philosophy blossomed in the head of a seasoned philosopher. But to speak the truth, we prefer the three former conditions to this business of determining truth.

Thus does Srimati Dipti demonstrate that the conclusion we reached that day regarding laughter was without foundation and unproven.

My first response is this: Srimati Dipti ought not to be vexed that our theory that day lacked the rigor of sound argument. For among all the mischief that woman's laughter wreaks upon this earth, the derangement of a wise man's wits is but one variety. In the state to which our philosophizing had reduced us, had we but resolved upon it, we might easily have written verses too, nor would the rope round the neck have been beyond us.

My second point is this: just as they never imagined we would extract any theory from their laughter, so too we never imagined they would sit down to extract logical rigor from our theory.

Newton, after a lifetime's pursuit of truth, said: I have only been picking up pebbles on the shore of the ocean of knowledge. We four wise ones, in a brief exchange of words, do not even aspire to pick up pebbles—we merely build castles of sand. Our purpose, under pretext of this game, is to breathe a little of the sea-air blowing off that ocean of knowledge. We do not bring back jewels; we bring back a measure of

health—and thereafter, whether that sand-castle stands or crumbles is a matter of no consequence to anyone.

I do not hold that health is of less worth than jewels. Jewels often prove counterfeit, but health cannot be called anything other than what it is. Whether we five elements gathered in our elemental assembly have, up to this point, managed to collect a single conclusion worth a copper coin, I much doubt; and yet, however many times our assembly has convened, though we have returned empty-handed, there is no doubting that the blood has coursed vigorously through our minds, and from this we have gained both joy and healthful vigor.

Not a grain of corn grows upon the parade-ground, and yet so much open space is not without its use. Our elemental assembly, too, is the parade-ground of us five—we do not come here to harvest the grain of truth, but to gather for the joy of truth.

For this reason, it matters not if no question is settled fully in this assembly; it suffices that we obtain some portion of truth. Indeed, our very purpose is to pass lightly over the field of truth rather than to plough it deeply.

The matter might be made clearer by another sort of comparison, from a different angle. In sickness, the physician's medicine is beneficial, but the nursing of a loved one brings far greater comfort. The final conclusions of metaphysical truth found in the volumes of German scholars may be called medicinal pills, but they contain no mental nursing. What we do by way of discussing truth in our elemental assembly cannot be called the treatment of disease, but it may be called the nursing of the patient.

I shall press the comparison no further. The essence of the matter is this: none of what we four wise ones raised that day concerning laughter was meant as a final word. Had we attempted to arrive at final words, we should have violated the chief rule of conversational assembly.

One principal rule of a conversational gathering is this: to advance easily and swiftly—that is, to take a mental stroll. Had we no soles to our feet, had our two legs been like two sharp-pointed rods, we might have found it easy to penetrate deep into the earth, but advancing even one step forward would have proved difficult. In our conversational society, had we tried to plumb the depths of every

fragment of speech to its very end, we should have found ourselves so helplessly transfixed in one spot that further movement would become impossible. Sometimes it happens that, walking along, one suddenly steps into mud; wherever one then plants a foot, it sinks to the knee, and progress becomes a trial. There are certain subjects in which one must sink deeper into profundity with every step; in conversation, it is best not to set foot upon such uncertain, doubt-fluid ground. Such terrain does not suit those out for a breath of air, but suits well enough those whose business is tillage.

However that may be, the question we raised that day, taken as a whole, was this: just as there is weeping born of sorrow, so there is laughter born of joy—but whence, then, comes this laughter of the comic? The comic is a somewhat mysterious thing. Animals too feel joy and sorrow, but they do not feel the comic. Of all the rasas enumerated in the treatises on rhetoric, every rasa may be found, in immature and unformed shape, within the crude literature of the animal world—only the comic rasa is absent. Perhaps in the nature of the monkey some faint hint of this rasa may be glimpsed, but the monkey resembles man in many other respects as well.

That which is incongruous ought properly to cause man sorrow; there is no reason at all why it should cause laughter. If a man, thinking there is a chair behind him where in fact there is none, sits down and falls to the ground, there is no logically sound reason why the onlookers should experience pleasure at the sight. Why cite such an example—within every instance of the comic there resides something which, by rights, should cause man sorrow rather than joy.

In the course of our talk that day, we ventured to name a cause for this. We said that the laughter of the comic and the laughter of amusement are of one kind, for in both kinds of laughter there is a certain intensity. Hence we suspected there might exist a natural kinship between amusement and the comic; and could we but uncover that kinship, the mystery of comic laughter might be resolved. There is a distinction between joy in its ordinary sense and amusement. Unless there be some slight pain in the breaking of a rule, amusement cannot arise. Amusement is not a thing daily, easy, and rule-bound; it comes now and again, on this day or that; it requires effort. It is from the friction of that pain and that effort that a certain excitement of mind arises—and that excitement is our chief ingredient.

We said further that in the comic too there is a pain arising from the breaking of a rule; and provided that pain does not exceed a certain measure, it provokes in our minds a pleasurable excitement, and it is at the shock of that sudden excitement that we burst into laughter. That which is congruous is bound by the rule of every day; that which is incongruous is the breaking of the rule for a moment only. Where a thing happens as it ought to happen, there is no excitement of mind in it at all; but where suddenly it does not happen, or happens otherwise, then, under that sudden and not overly intense oppression, the mind feels a particular thrill of awareness and takes pleasure in it, and we burst into laughter.

Thus far we had gone that day—no further. But it does not follow that no further progress can be made. There is more to be said.

Srimati Dipti has asked: if the conclusion reached by us four sages be true, then surely a slight stumble while walking, or a faint whiff of some foul odor suddenly encountered on the road, ought at the very least to produce in us that pleasure born of excitement, if not laughter outright.

This question does not overturn our conclusion; it merely limits it. It shows only this much—that not every instance of pain gives birth to comic excitement; therefore it becomes necessary now to determine what precisely is the particular ingredient of comic pain.

In the realm of inert matter there exists neither the pathetic rasa nor the comic. Though a great stone crush a small one to powder, no tears come to our eyes; and walking across level ground, should we suddenly behold some incongruous mountain peak, we feel no urge to laugh. Amid rivers, waterfalls, mountains, and seas, one may now and again observe sudden incongruities—these may prove obstructive, vexing, painful, but nowhere are they comic. Save in matters pertaining to sentient beings, mere inert matter, however incongruous its behavior, cannot move us to laughter.

Why this should be so is difficult to state with precision, but there is no harm in examining the question.

In our language, the words kautuk (comic amusement) and kautuhal (curiosity) share a kinship of meaning. In Sanskrit literature, the two words are frequently

used interchangeably in the same sense. From this I infer that the faculty of curiosity bears a particular relation to the comic.

A principal element of curiosity is the craving for novelty, and novelty is likewise a principal ingredient of the comic. In the incongruous there exists a pure, unmixed novelty such as does not exist in the congruous.

But true incongruity is bound up with the power of will; it does not exist in inert matter. If, walking along a clean path, I suddenly catch a foul odor, I know at once that somewhere nearby there must lie some foul-smelling thing—hence this has occurred; there is no violation of any rule here, it is inevitable. In the realm of inert nature, whatever happens from a given cause could not possibly happen otherwise—this much is certain. But if, walking along, I suddenly behold some venerable old gentleman dancing a jig, that indeed strikes me as truly incongruous—for it is not bound by inevitable rule. We never expect such conduct of an old man, because he is a being possessed of will—he dances of his own choosing, and by choosing otherwise, he might well have refrained. Inert matter, having no will of its own, can never behave incongruously or comically. This is why an unexpected stumble or an unexpected foul odor is not laughable. If a teaspoon should chance to slip from a teacup into an inkpot, that is no laughing matter for the spoon—it cannot transgress the law of gravity; but if an absent-minded writer should dip his teaspoon into the inkpot and attempt to drink his tea from it, that indeed is a matter for laughter. Just as morality does not exist in inert matter, neither does incongruity exist there. It is only where mind has entered and created a rift that we find the proper and the improper, the congruous and the strange.

Curiosity is, in many instances, a cruel thing; the comic too contains within it an element of cruelty. It is related that Siraj-ud-Daulah would bind two men together by their beards and stuff snuff up the noses of both—and when the two began to sneeze, Siraj-ud-Daulah would find great amusement in it. Where lies the incongruity here? Surely snuff in the nose is bound to bring on sneezing. But here too there is incongruity between will and act. It is not the will of those receiving the snuff that they should sneeze, for sneezing must give a sudden painful tug to their bound beards—and yet sneeze they must.

Such incongruity between will and circumstance, between purpose and means, between word and deed—in all these there is cruelty. Often, that at which we

laugh, the sufferer himself does not regard as a laughing matter. This is precisely why Byomkesh remarked, in our elemental assembly, that comedy and tragedy differ only in the degree of the pain inflicted. Whatever measure of cruelty comedy reveals moves us to laughter, and whatever further degree tragedy carries moves us to tears. The self-abandonment with which many a Titania, under strange enchantment, surrenders herself before an ass becomes, according to the degree and the person involved, a cause of heart-rending grief.

Incongruity is the subject-matter of comedy; incongruity is likewise the subject-matter of tragedy. In comedy too, incongruity between will and circumstance is revealed. Falstaff advances with perfect confidence in pursuit of the amorous favours of the merry wife of Windsor, but emerges having reaped nothing but the utmost humiliation; while Rama, having slain Ravana, fulfilled his vow of exile, returned to his kingdom, and ascended to the very summit of conjugal happiness—suddenly, as though thunder had struck from a clear sky, was compelled to banish the pregnant Sita into the forest. In both instances, incongruity is revealed between hope and outcome, between will and circumstance. Thus it is plainly evident that incongruity is of two kinds—one productive of laughter, the other of sorrow. Vexation, astonishment, and wrath we likewise place in this latter category.

That is to say, when incongruity strikes at the shallower stratum of our minds, we perceive it as comic; when it strikes a deeper stratum, we perceive it as sorrowful. When a hunter, after long aiming, fires upon some distant white object mistaken for a swan, and rushing up finds it to be nothing but a torn scrap of cloth, we laugh at his disappointment; but when a man, who has regarded some object as the supreme treasure of his life and pursued it with single-minded devotion and utmost effort throughout his years, at last attains it, only to find in his hands a paltry deception, then at his disappointment our hearts are wounded with pain.

When, in time of famine, men die in multitudes, none regards it as an occasion for farce. Yet we may easily imagine that to some witty devil, this presents itself as a supremely comic spectacle; he might cast a laughing, sidelong glance at these withered bodies bearing their immortal souls, and say: There lie your six systems of philosophy, your Kalidasa's poetry, your three hundred thirty million gods, untouched—only two fistfuls of paltry grains of rice are lacking, and see how your immortal soul, your world-conquering humanity, comes fluttering and gasping right up to your very throat!

The essence of the matter is this: as the pitch of incongruity is raised, string by string, astonishment gradually turns to laughter, and laughter, by degrees, is transformed into tears.

CONTENTMENT REGARDING BEAUTY

Dipti and Srotaswini were not present; only we four were there.

Samir said—Look here, in connection with that discussion of comic laughter the other day, a thought has arisen in my mind. Most instances of comedy bring before our minds some particular grotesque image, and it is this that provokes our laughter. But those who by nature do not perceive images, whose intellect wanders among abstract matters, cannot be suddenly moved by the comic.

Kshiti said—First, your point is not clearly understood; second, the word "abstract" is English.

Samir said—I shall attempt to answer the first charge, though I see no escape from the second, and so the learned company must pardon that of their own grace. What I meant to say was this: those who can effortlessly set aside the object entirely and take up merely its quality are not, by nature, connoisseurs of the comic rasa.

Kshiti shook his head and said—No, still not clear.

Samir said—Let me give an example. Observe, first, that in our literature, when describing some beautiful woman, there is no attention paid to depicting the image of any particular person; rather, certain qualities are extracted from Mount Sumeru, the pomegranate, the kadamba, the bimba fruit, and so forth, and a mere catalogue of these is given, to be applied indiscriminately to any and every beauty. We do not see anything with the clarity of a picture, nor do we paint pictures—and for this reason we are deprived of one principal element of the comic. In our ancient poetry, by way of praise, the beauty's languid gait is compared to the gait of a mighty elephant. Such a comparison would surely be judged laughable in the literature of another land. But why did such a curious comparison arise and become current among our people? The chief reason is that the people of our country can effortlessly dissociate a quality from its object. At will, they can erase the elephant entirely and extract merely its languid gait—and so, when they attribute an elephant's gait to a sixteen-year-old beauty, they do not see that enormous creature at all. When a poet's purpose is to describe the beauty of some lovely object, he must choose a beautiful metaphor, for it is not merely the point of resemblance in a metaphor but its other aspects too that cannot but arise in our

minds. This is why comparing a woman's hands and feet to an elephant's trunk is no small audacity. Yet the readers of our country neither laughed at this comparison nor took offense; the reason being that from the elephant's trunk we can take only its roundness and discard everything else—we possess this remarkable power. What resemblance a vulture bears to an ear I cannot say, for I lack the requisite imagination; but I do not lack such numbness of imagination that I should fail to laugh at the thought of two vultures dangling on either side of a beautiful face. I suppose it is from reading English that our natural capacity for not-laughing has become so distorted that such mishaps as this occur to us.

Kshiti said—In our country's poetry, wherever it has been necessary to convey height or roundness in describing a woman's body, poets have effortlessly and with perfect gravity brought forth Mount Sumeru and the Earth itself; the reason being that in the realm of the abstract there is no need to judge proportion. The hump on a cow's back is high, and so is the peak of Kanchenjunga; therefore, if one is grasping only at abstract "height," the hump of a cow's back may indeed be compared to Kanchenjunga. But for the unfortunate soul who, upon merely hearing the comparison to Kanchenjunga, sees painted upon the canvas of his imagination the very peak of the Himalayas—for that poor fellow who cannot lightly lift only the height from the mountain-peak and screen away all the rest—it becomes a very great difficulty indeed. My friend Samir, this remark of yours today strikes me as exactly right—I am most sorry that I cannot find grounds to contradict it.

Byom said—I cannot say there is nothing at all to contradict. Samir's point needs restating in a somewhat altered form. The essential matter is this: we are wanderers of the inner world. The outer world does not hold sway over us. Whatever we construct within our minds, if the outer world offers protest against it, we simply do not heed that protest. Just as the light tail of a comet, should it fall across some planet's path, may suffer damage to itself while the planet proceeds on its way unimpeded—so too, no proper collision ever occurs between our inner world and the outer world; and if it does occur, it is the outer world that must give way. Those for whom the elephant is an intensely immediate and overwhelming reality cannot, in the metaphor of an elephant's gait, so neatly discard the elephant and retain only the gait—the elephant, spreading its vast bulk, stands immovably blocking the path of the poem. But to us, whether you say elephant or mighty elephant, it is nothing whatsoever. It is not so intensely vivid to us that, in order to retain merely its gait, we must also feed and maintain the whole beast.

Kshiti said—We build within ourselves a bamboo fortress and, like Titu Mir, tell the entire external world to "fire away, then!"—and so, call it mighty elephant, call it Mount Sumeru, call it the Earth, nothing can dislodge us. Why speak only of poetry—even in the realm of knowledge we pay scarcely any heed to the external world. A simple example comes to mind. It has long been a tradition in Indian musical treatises that our seven notes derive from the calls of various beasts and birds—and to this day no doubt whatsoever has arisen in the minds of our master musicians on this account, even though the outer world offers its contradiction to our ears every single day. How it ever occurred to any connoisseur of music, by what supremely wondrous flight of fancy, that the first note of the musical scale is stolen from the braying of an ass, is a thing most difficult for us to determine.

Byom said—To the Greeks, the outer world was not vapor-like, not a mere mirage; it was immediate and intensely vivid, and for this reason they were compelled to maintain, with the utmost care, a harmony between the creations of the mind and the creations of the outer world. Should proportion be violated in any matter, the outer world would shame them with its own measuring-rod. This is why they were compelled to fashion the images of their gods and goddesses beautiful and natural—for otherwise a violent collision would occur between the creation of the physical world and the creation of their minds, obstructing their devotion and their joy. We have no such worry. Whatever form we may give our deity, no conflict arises with our imagination or with the outer world. The image of the god with a mouse for a mount, four arms, a single tusk, a pendulous belly, and an elephant's face is not laughable to us, because we behold that image within the sentiment of our minds, and do not compare it with the outer world, with the truth surrounding us on every side. This is because the outer world is not so overpowering to us, immediate truth is not so firmly fixed for us—we can, by seizing upon any pretext whatsoever, keep the sentiment of our own minds alive and burning.

Samir said—We consider it unnecessary to adorn with completeness, beauty, or naturalness the pretext by which we enjoy or cultivate love or devotion. We can look upon a badly formed image before us and yet, in our minds, perceive it as beautiful. The deep blue-black color of a man may not naturally strike us as beautiful, and yet we are put to no effort whatsoever in conceiving as beautiful the image of Krishna painted in that deep blue-black hue. Those who do not know how to efface, at their own will, the standard of the outer world can never, when

attempting to give form to the sentiment of beauty in their minds, introduce any element of the unnatural or the unbeautiful. To Greek eyes, this dark-blue color would have caused the most extreme distress.

Byom said—This peculiarity of our Indian nature may well hinder the higher forms of art, but it carries a certain convenience too. For devotion, affection, love, and even the enjoyment of beauty, we need not become slaves to external circumstance, nor sit waiting in expectation of favorable opportunity. In our country, the wife worships her husband as a god—but for that feeling of devotion to arise, there is no need whatsoever that the husband possess divinity or greatness; even if he possesses the very depths of brutishness, her worship is not thereby hindered. On the one hand she may abuse and revile him as a mere man, and on the other hand worship him as a god—and the one does not overwhelm the other. This is because the collision between our inner world and the outer world is never so very forceful.

Samir said—Why speak only of the husband-god? Regarding the gods and goddesses of the Puranas too, our minds hold these same two contrary sentiments—and neither can drive out the other. The scriptural tales and popular legends current about our gods are not in keeping with the higher ideals of our moral sense; indeed, in our literature and in our songs there is much censure and mockery directed at precisely such disparaging tales of the gods—yet it is not the case that because we mock and rebuke, we therefore do not worship. We know the cow to be a mere animal, we cast aspersions even upon her intelligence and judgment, we chase her off with a stick should she enter our fields, we make her stand knee-deep in the mire of the cow-shed—yet when the time comes to worship her as the Divine Mother, none of this so much as crosses our minds.

Kshiti said—And observe further: we have, from time immemorial, compared the tone-deaf man to an ass, and yet we also declare that it is the ass who first taught us our musical scale. When we say the one thing, we do not call to mind the other; when we say the other, we do not call to mind the first. This is doubtless a peculiar power of ours, but I do not regard as a convenience the advantage which Byom mentions as arising from this peculiar power. Because we can spin out imaginary creations at will, we harbor a certain contentment tinged with indifference regarding the acquisition of wealth, of knowledge, and the enjoyment of beauty. We feel no particular need for anything further. Europeans test their scientific

hypothesises a thousand times over through rigorous proof, and yet their doubt refuses to be laid to rest—whereas if we can but erect within our minds some neatly coherent and well-formed notion, then that very coherence and symmetry is accepted by us as the highest possible proof, and we deem it superfluous to test it against the outer world. As with the intellectual faculty, so too with the faculty of the heart. We wish to cultivate the *rasa* of beauty, but we do not feel it necessary to labor with great care to give that mental ideal outward form—we remain content with whatever comes to hand, however makeshift; indeed, following the exaggerations of rhetorical convention, we erect some distorted image, and, converting in our own minds this incongruous, misshapen, unsightly affair into whatever form we please, we rest satisfied with it—we make no effort to render our own deity, our own ideal of beauty, truly and actually beautiful. We wish to cultivate the *rasa* of devotion, but feel no need whatsoever to seek out a worthy object of that devotion—we remain content even bestowing our devotion upon the unworthy. This is why we say, "The guru is worthy of our worship," rather than saying, "He who is worthy of worship is our guru." Perhaps the guru who has whispered a mantra into my ear does not himself understand its meaning in the least; perhaps that same reverend guru is chief false witness in some false lawsuit of mine—yet the dust of his feet remains sacred upon my head. Adopting such an attitude, one need not go searching for an object worthy of devotion in order to feel devotion—one may practice devotion in perfect, undisturbed comfort.

Samir said—Under the influence of English education, an exception to this is now occurring among us. Bankim's *Krishna-Charitra* is one example of this. Before worshipping Krishna and propagating the worship of Krishna, Bankim endeavored to render Krishna pure and beautiful. He even discarded whatever was unnatural or supernatural in Krishna's character. He attempted to establish Krishna upon the foundation of his own highest ideal. He did not say that a deity can commit no fault, that all things are pardonable in one of great power. He initiated a new species of discontent; before distributing his worship, he sought out his deity with all his strength, and did not content himself with bowing down before whomsoever happened to lie within easy reach.

Kshiti said—Because this discontent has been absent, our society has for a very long time felt no need for the deity to become truly divine, for the worshipped to rise to a higher plane, for the image to correspond to the ideal it represents. We know the Brahmin to be a god, and therefore he receives worship without the least effort on

his part, and our own devotional faculty too finds its fulfillment with the utmost ease. If the husband is called a god, the husband need acquire not the slightest merit in order to receive his wife's devotion, nor need the wife feel any discontent at the absence of a husband truly worthy of genuine devotion. This state of supreme contentment—wherein no beautiful object is needed in order to perceive beauty, no worthy object is needed in order to bestow devotion—I do not consider a convenience at all. It brings about nothing but the poverty, the degradation, and the decline of society. When one proceeds to progressively efface the outer world in order to grant supreme dominion to the inner world alone, it is as though one sits upon a branch and strikes at that very branch with an axe.

THE STANDARD OF REFINEMENT

Srotaswini said—Look here, there's a family ceremony at home; do tell Byom to come dressed in somewhat more presentable attire.

Hearing this, we all burst into laughter. Dipti, somewhat vexed, said—No, this is no laughing matter; it is only because none of you ever caution Byom that he comes into polite society dressed like a madman. There ought to be some measure of social discipline in these matters. Samir, wishing to draw the subject out further, asked—Why ought there to be?

Dipti said—Just as the poet's discipline in the realm of poetry is exacting—just as the poet will pardon no slackness of metre, no flaw in rhyme, no harshness of diction—so too ought the discipline of society regarding our manners, conduct, dress, and adornment be equally exacting; otherwise the rhythm and beauty of the whole of society can never be preserved.

Kshiti said—If poor Byom, instead of being a man, were a word, one could say with certainty that he would find no place even in the Bhattikavya; without doubt he would be condemned to dwell within the rules of the Mugdhabodha grammar.

I said—I grant that it is the duty of us all to render society beautiful, well-mannered, and well-ordered, but when poor absent-minded Byom, forgetting that duty, strides off with his long steps, I confess I do not find it displeasing.

Dipti said—He would look better still were he to wear proper clothes.

Kshiti said—Tell me truly, would good clothes actually make Byom look better? If an elephant grew a tail exactly like a peacock's, would that enhance its beauty? Nor, again, does an elephant's tail become a peacock. In just the same way, Samir's attire does not suit our Byom—and if Samir, in turn, came dressed in Byom's fashion, he would not be permitted to enter the house. Samir said—The truth of the matter is that lapses in dress and manners appear repulsive only where they betray slovenliness, ignorance, or torpor. This is precisely why our Bengali society has so little grace. Just as one abandoned by fortune is cast out of society, so too does Bengali society seem cast out of the society of the world. The Bengali has no common form of greeting, as the Hindustani has his salaam. The reason is that the

Bengali is merely a child of the household, merely a man of the village; he knows only his domestic ties and his village ties, and has no relation whatsoever with the wider world—hence, in unfamiliar company, he can find no rule of courtesy to follow. A Hindustani can offer his salaam in courtesy to anyone at all, be he Englishman or Chinaman—we, in such a situation, can neither offer a namaskar nor a salaam; there we stand as barbarians. The Bengali woman is not adequately covered, and remains always in disarray—the reason being that she remains always within the household; hence she possesses in ample measure all those artificial modesties customary within the home with regard to elder brother-in-law and father-in-law, yet displays complete laxity regarding the modesty proper to general polite society. Bengali men too show an excessive indifference as to whether or not cloth covers the body; having spent the greater part of their lives always moving among intimate acquaintance, a certain carelessness in this regard has become firmly rooted in their minds. Thus, through deficiency of dress, deportment, and bearing, the Bengali reveals an unmeasured indolence, laxity, self-indulgence, and lack of self-respect—and there can be no doubt that this amounts to pure barbarism.

I said—But we feel no shame on this account. Just as, in certain diseases, whatever a man eats turns to sugar within his body, so too, by some strange perversion of mind, everything—good or ill—about our country turns into a matter for the sweetest self-congratulation. We are wont to say that our civilization is a spiritual civilization, not a civilization of food and dress, and it is for this very reason that we remain so indifferent to such material matters.

Samir said—No one thinks of blaming those who, having fixed their gaze constantly upon the highest matters, come to forget and neglect the lower ones. In every civilized society there exists such a class of persons dwelling upon society's rare and lofty peaks. In ancient India, the Brahmin devoted to study and teaching belonged to this class; no one expected him to occupy himself with dress, adornment, and worldly business as did the Kshatriya or Vaishya. In Europe too such a class existed, and exists still. Leaving aside the teachers of the Middle Ages, even in modern Europe, if a man like Newton attends some gathering unable to manage the very latest fashion of evening dress, and fails to observe every single rule of etiquette to the letter, society still does not discipline him, does not even dare to mock him. In every land and every age, a small number of great souls dwell within society and yet remain outside it; otherwise they could not accomplish their work, and society

too refrains from exacting from them the petty tolls of sociability. But the wonder of it is this: in Bengal, it is not merely a certain number of persons, but all of us, the entire country together, forgetting every variety of individual distinction, who have carelessly climbed up and seated ourselves upon that very peak of spirituality beyond society. We enjoy our holiday in perfect comfort, clad in loose garments and in even looser manners—however we behave, however we conduct ourselves, no one has any right to pass judgment upon us—for we, the excellent, the middling, and the base alike, sit ready, clad in our short dhotis and grimy shawls, prepared for absorption into the qualityless Brahman.

At this moment Byom arrived, his great walking-stick in hand. His attire was more extraordinary even than usual; the reason being that, since today's household bore a ceremonial occasion, he had thrown over his everyday dress a garment of indeterminate shape resembling a sort of long coat; and from all around it, the edges of the ill-matched clothes beneath were plainly visible. Seeing this, it became well-nigh impossible for us to restrain our laughter, and in the minds of Dipti and Srotaswini there arose no small measure of contempt.

Byom asked—What are you all discussing? Samir related a portion of our discussion in brief, saying—We have concluded that the whole country, every one of us, has donned the garb of renunciation.

Byom said—Without renunciation no great work can ever be accomplished. Just as shadow is forever joined to light, so is renunciation forever joined to action. To whatever degree a man possesses a claim to renunciation, to that same degree can he accomplish work in this world.

Kshiti said—That is precisely why, while the whole world was engaged in a thousand endeavors in pursuit of happiness, the ascetic Darwin renounced the thousand endeavors of worldly life merely to prove that man's first ancestor was an ape. To gather this piece of news, Darwin had to practice no small measure of renunciation.

Byom said—Had Garibaldi not freed himself from a multitude of attachments, he could never have freed Italy either. It is the lesser nations who truly know renunciation. Those who, in pursuit of knowledge, count as nothing life and every comfort of life, and rush again and again to batter at the ice-locked, unyielding

gates of that frozen chamber of death in the polar regions; those who, in order to spread their faith, bear perpetual exile in the land of cannibal savages; those who, at their motherland's call, rise in an instant from the soft couch of wealth, kinship, and youth to fling themselves into unbearable suffering and the most merciless of deaths—these alone know what true renunciation means. But this workless, graceless, inert, lifeless renunciation of ours is nothing but the swoon of a fallen people—it is mere torpor, not a matter for pride.

Kshiti said—And this swoon of ours we take to be the attainment of some spiritual "state," and sit overwhelmed with reverence for our own selves.

Byom said—The man of action must abide by the hard laws of action, and it is on the pretext of observing the laws of his own work that he may set aside many of society's lesser obligations—but the man of no action can claim no such right. Society does not expect lengthy and elaborate courtesies from a man hurrying off to his office. When the English gardener removes his coat and rolls up his sleeves to labor in the garden, his aristocratic lady employer has no cause to feel shame at the sight of him. But when we, having no task, no work whatsoever, sit for long days at the roadside beside our own doorway, our thick round bellies exposed, our clothes rolled up above the knee, smoking our tobacco like fools—by what great renunciation, by what lofty spirituality, do we then justify to the whole world this unsightly barbarism! Renunciation unaccompanied by any greater, active striving is nothing but another name for incivility. Hearing these words from Byom's own mouth, Srotaswini was astonished. After remaining silent a while, she said—Until we, every one of us who calls himself a gentleman, keep constantly in mind the duty of preserving our own gentility, and strive to render ourselves in every respect refined in dress, in conduct, in dwelling, we shall gain neither self-respect nor respect from others. We have ourselves reduced our own worth exceedingly.

Kshiti said—To raise that worth would require raising wages on the other side, and that lies in the hands of our masters.

Dipti said—It is not an increase in wages but an increase in awareness that is needed. That even our wealthy countrymen live in so unbecoming a manner is due merely to torpor and stupidity, not to want of money. He who has money believes that without a carriage-and-pair his wealth cannot be proven, and yet, should one enter his inner apartments, one finds them unfit even for a gentleman's cow-shed.

We keep our eyes fixed upon whatever arrangements are necessary for the display of pride, but when it comes to what is necessary for self-respect, for wholesome and graceful living, our money somehow will not stretch that far. Our women never once consider that to wear ornaments beyond what is needed to enhance beauty, merely to flaunt one's wealth, is a vulgarity befitting the low-born—and for the satisfaction of that pride, money is never lacking; yet for clearing away the rubbish heaped in the courtyard, or the oil-blackened grime upon the walls of the bedchamber, they show not the slightest urgency. It is not want of money—it is that the true standard of refinement has not yet been established in our country.

Srotaswini said—The chief reason for this is that we are indolent. With money one can play the great man; and even without money, one can borrow and still play the nabob—but to become truly refined, one must renounce indolence and neglect, must keep oneself constantly prepared and fit for a higher social standard, must accept discipline and offer up self-sacrifice.

Kshiti said—But we consider ourselves children of nature, and therefore supremely simple and artless. In dust, in mud, in nakedness, in every kind of lawlessness, we feel no shame at all—everything about us is unaffected, and everything about us is spiritual.

AN EXTRAORDINARY RAMAYANA

There was some auspicious occasion in the household that day, and so, toward evening, from a nearby dais, the nahabat was playing the raga Barwan. Byom had remained for some time with his eyes closed; then, suddenly opening them, he began to speak—

There runs through all these native ragas of ours a pervasive strain of the sorrow of death; the notes weep and weep, saying that nothing in this world endures. That nothing in this world endures is no new thing to one who dwells in the world, nor is it a pleasant thing—it is an immovable, hard truth; and yet why does it sound so sweet when spoken through the mouth of a flute? Because the flute utters this harshest of all the world's truths in the most melodious of tones—and it seems to us then that death, sorrowful though it be like this raga, is also beautiful like this raga. Upon whatever massive boulder presses down heaviest upon the breast of this world, the melody of this song, by some strange enchantment, lightens its weight. That grief which, welling up from the hollow of a single heart, would have rung out as a scream, would have burst forth as weeping, the flute instead sounds forth from the mouth of the whole universe, fashioning of it a melody brimming with fathomless sorrow and yet infinite consolation.

Dipti and Srotaswini, having just finished their duties as hostesses, had barely come to sit down when, hearing talk of death from Byom's mouth on this very day of auspicious celebration, they rose in considerable annoyance and left. Byom, failing to notice their displeasure, continued speaking on with an unruffled, undimmed countenance. The nahabat sounded very sweet, and we did not argue much that day.

Byom said—Listening to this flute today, a certain thought arises in me with particular force. Every poem contains within it a particular rasa—which the treatises of rhetoric divide into various named categories such as the erotic, the pathetic, the peaceful. It occurs to me that if the making of the universe be viewed as a poem, then death is its principal rasa; it is death alone that has bestowed upon it true poetic quality. Had there been no death, had whatever stood wherever in the world remained standing there forever unchanged, then this universe would have become an eternal sepulcher—exceedingly cramped, exceedingly hard, exceedingly closed in. To bear the everlasting weight of such infinite immobility

would have proved a very grievous burden for living creatures. Death has forever lightened this terrible weight of existence, and has granted the world a boundless field in which to wander freely. Wherever death lies, there lies the world's infinity. It is toward that eternal realm of mystery that all of man's poetry, all his music, all his systems of religion, all his unsatisfied longing, fly forth in search of a nest, like birds crossing the sea. On the one hand, whatever is immediate, whatever is present, weighs upon us with tremendous force; and yet, were that very thing to endure forever, there would be no end to its tyranny as sole sovereign—then to what court could one appeal against it? Then who would point out that beyond it too lies infinity? How could this world bear the weight of the eternal, if death did not keep that eternity ever afloat upon its own ceaseless current? Samir said—Were there no need to die, life itself would possess no dignity whatsoever. Even now, that very death which the whole world holds in contempt is precisely what lends life its glory, simply because death exists.

Kshiti said—I am not so troubled by that; to my mind, the far greater cause for concern is that, in the absence of death, there would be no way anywhere to put a full stop to anything. In such a state, were Byom to raise a discussion on the doctrine of non-dualism, no one could fold their hands and say, "Friend, there is no more time now, so kindly desist." Were there no death, there would be no end to leisure. As it is, a man begins his studies at the age of seven or eight and, by twenty-five, either takes his college degree or fails handsomely and settles into contentment; but in that other state, there would be no reason to begin at any particular age, nor any urgency to finish by any particular age either. Every comma, semicolon, and full stop in the whole business of work and the conduct of life would simply vanish altogether.

Byom, without paying much heed to these remarks, pursued the thread of his own thought and continued—Death alone, in all this universe, is everlasting—and it is for this very reason that we have established all our everlasting hopes and desires within death itself. Our heaven, our virtue, our immortality—all of it lies there. Those things so precious to us that we can never even imagine their destruction, we surrender into the hands of death, and wait out the remainder of our lives. On this earth there is no true justice—true justice comes after death; on this earth our desperate longings come to nothing—fulfillment waits beneath death's wishing-tree. In every other direction in this world, hard and gross masses of matter obstruct our mental ideals, disprove our immortality, our infinity—but at that

boundary of the world where death stands, where all things come to their end, there our dearest, our most powerful desires, our purest, most beautiful imaginings, meet with no obstacle whatsoever. Our Shiva dwells in the cremation ground—the highest ideal of our welfare has its abode in the house of death.

The nahabat, having finished Multan-Barwan, now began to play Puravi amid the golden dusk of sunset. Samir said—Whatever hopes and longings man has banished to the far shore of death, this flute's melody brings back again, all those eternally tear-laden treasures of the heart, into the realm of the living. Literature and music and all the fine arts bring back every enduring possession of the human heart from the far shore of death's afterlife and re-establish it in the very midst of this present existence. They declare: the earth must be made heaven, reality must be made beautiful, and this fleeting life itself must be made immortal. Just as death has revealed the infinite form of the universe, binding it fast in eternal wedlock with some supreme mystery upon an everlasting nuptial bed, so from the secret casement of that closed bridal chamber the fragrance and music of infinite beauty come forth and touch us; even so do the essence of literature and the essence of art, within our scattered, matter-burdened daily lives, forge a union between the visible and the invisible, between the transient and the eternal, between the trivial and the beautiful, between our small private joys and sorrows and the vast, world-encompassing melody. Whether to withdraw all our love from this earth and dispatch it to the far shore of death, or to keep it here upon this earth—this is the very matter in dispute. Our ancient creed of renunciation declares that the true abode of love lies only in the life beyond; the new literature and the fine arts declare that it is here, in this very world, that we shall show love its rightful place.

Kshiti said—On this very subject, I wish to relate an extraordinary tale from the Ramayana, and thereby bring our gathering to a close. King Ramachandra—that is to say, Man—having rescued Love, named Sita, from the clutches of many a demon, brought her home and dwelt with her in supreme happiness in his city of Ayodhya. But then certain scriptures of doctrine, banding together, spread a slander against this very Love. They said: he has dwelt together with a thing impermanent, and he must renounce her. But who shall now prove that this princess, born of divine lineage, though confined within the house of the transient, never once was touched by that slander? True, there exists the ordeal of fire—and that trial has already been undergone; the fire, far from destroying her, only rendered her more radiant still. And yet, at the whispered insinuations of scripture, this king at last banished

Love one day to the far bank of the river of death's darkness. Meanwhile, sheltered under the protection of the great poet and his disciples, this forsaken woman gave birth to twin children, Kusha and Lava—that is, Poetry and the Fine Arts. And it is those very two children who, having learned their melodies at the poet's feet, have now come into the royal court to sing today the glory of their forsaken mother. At the song of these new-found singers, the heart of the grieving, separated king grows restless, and his eyes fill with tears. The Uttara Kanda is not yet fully complete. It still remains to be seen—whether victory shall belong to the venerable creed of renunciation, preacher of abandonment, or to those two immortal children who sing the glad tidings of love.

SCIENTIFIC CURIOSITY

A great debate had broken out between Byom and Kshiti concerning the primal origin and ultimate aim of science. On this occasion Byom said—Though science indeed arises from our faculty of curiosity, I nevertheless believe that our curiosity did not set out precisely in search of science; rather, its longing is entirely unscientific in nature. It goes searching for the philosopher's stone, and stumbles instead upon the withered thumb-bone of some ancient creature; it wants Aladdin's wondrous lamp, and gets a box of matches. Alchemy is its heart's true purpose, chemistry its unsought-for accomplishment; it casts its net across the heavens for astrology, but astronomy is what comes up in its hands. It does not seek laws; it has no wish to count the ever-new links of the chain of cause and effect—what it seeks is a breach in that very law; it imagines that at some moment, in some place, it will suddenly discover there is no endless repetition of cause and effect there at all. It craves the utterly unprecedented, the wholly new—but old Science comes creeping silently behind it and turns everything new into something old, proving its rainbow to be but an enlarged edition of the alphabet scattered by a prism, and the earth's motion to be of a kind with the fall of a ripened palm fruit.

The law that governs our speck of dust is the very same law extended throughout infinite space and infinite time; over this discovery we nowadays express great joy and wonder. But this joy, this wonder, is not truly natural to man; when he sent forth his messengers of inquiry into the infinite sky, into the realm of the heavenly bodies, he had cherished a great hope that in that luminous, dark abode there would be no law of dust, that there instead reigned some marvelous celestial festival of lawlessness—but now he finds that yonder moon and sun, planets and stars, that constellation of the Seven Sages, those lunar mansions of Ashwini, Bharani, and Krittika, are but the elder and younger siblings, brothers and sisters, of this very speck of dust of ours. The joy we now express over this new-found fact is a new and artificial habit of ours; it is not native to our primal nature.

Samir said—That is not far from the truth. Every man of natural disposition harbors a deep, hidden attraction toward the philosopher's stone and Aladdin's lamp. In my boyhood I once read, in a book of moral tales, of a farmer who, upon dying, told his son: I have left buried treasure for you in such-and-such a field. The poor boy dug and dug but found no buried treasure; yet, by virtue of all that digging, the land yielded such an abundance of crops that he never again knew want. Every child of

a childlike nature feels a certain pang of disappointment upon reading this tale. Every farmer in the whole world gets his crop by farming—but the buried treasure, precisely because it remains hidden, escapes him; it is a breach in the universal law, it is something accidental—and it is for that very reason that it is, by nature, so much more desirable to man. Whatever the moral tale may say, there can be no doubt whatsoever that the farmer's son felt no gratitude toward his father. We find proof every single day of how natural it is for man to disdain scientific law. Of a physician who cures many patients through skillful treatment, we say that the man has "a healing hand." The statement that the doctor cures disease through the scientifically established rules of treatment brings us no inward satisfaction at all; we remain content only once we have attributed to it some mystery, some exception to the general rule. I said—The reason for this is that law, however far it may extend through infinite time and infinite space, remains bounded; it cannot deviate even an atom's breadth from its own marked line—and it is precisely for this reason that it is called "law," and precisely for this reason that it wounds the imagination of man. We cannot expect too much from scientifically sanctioned treatment—there exist diseases that lie beyond the reach of medicine; but the boundaries of that mysterious affair called "the healing hand" have never yet been precisely determined, and so it never offers any hard obstruction anywhere to our hope, to our imagination. This is precisely why unscientific remedies hold a greater attraction than the physician's medicine. Our expectation of how far its results might extend knows no limit. As man's experience continues to grow, and the more he strikes himself against the iron wall of inexorable law, the more he narrows down his own natural, boundless hope, restrains the natural craving for novelty inherent in his faculty of curiosity, establishes law upon the throne, and gradually cultivates toward it—first unwillingly, and then by habit—a certain feeling of loyal reverence.

Byom said—But that reverence is not true reverence of the heart; it is a reverence extracted by necessity. When it becomes utterly certain that the workings of the universe are bound by unalterable law, then, for the sake of one's belly, for the sake of one's very life, one is compelled to bow one's neck before it; then one no longer dares to surrender oneself into the hands of uncertainty, outside the bounds of science; then, in order to accept amulets, charms, and blessed water, one must first console oneself by glimpsing upon them the trademark seal of science—electricity, magnetism, hypnotism, and the like. There is a fundamental reason why we love disorder more than order. Somewhere within ourselves we perceive a

breach in law. Our will lies outside the reach of all law—it is free; or at least, so we feel it to be. It is only natural that we should take delight in discovering, within external nature, some resemblance to that freedom inherent in our own inner nature. The attraction of will toward will is exceedingly powerful; whatever gift we receive bound up with will is dearer to us; however much service we may receive, if it carries no connection with will, it does not strike us as pleasing. This is why, when we once knew that Indra was granting us rain, that Marut was supplying us with wind, that Agni was bestowing upon us his radiance, there was within that knowledge a certain inward satisfaction; now we know that in sunshine, rain, and wind there is neither will nor unwillingness, that they perform their work, indifferent and unchanging, according to law, without any discrimination between the worthy and the unworthy, the beloved and the unloved; that the moment water-vapor in the sky condenses upon contact with cold air, it will rain down upon the sacred head of the saint and give him a cold, and will not hesitate in the least to sprinkle water likewise upon the pumpkin-vine trellis of the wicked man. Through the study of science this gradually becomes, in a manner, tolerable to us—but in truth, we do not really like it at all.

I said—Where formerly we had assumed the sovereignty of free will, we now perceive instead the blind rule of law; and this is precisely why, upon studying science, the universe comes to seem joyless, devoid of any connection with will. But so long as will and joy exist within my own inner self, that long must I feel compelled to perceive them within the inner self of the universe as well—if not exactly where I had formerly imagined them, then at least I must know them to be established in some innermost, deepest recess, or else I commit a betrayal against my own innermost nature. That the one breach which exists within me, in the whole system of universal law, should have no original prototype anywhere in the universe—this our inmost soul refuses to accept. This is why our will cannot live without some hidden dependence upon a universal Will, nor our love without some hidden dependence upon a universal Love.

Samir said—Throughout the whole of inert nature, the wall of law stands firmer, broader, and loftier than the Great Wall of China; and then, suddenly, in human nature, a tiny crevice has appeared, and it is by placing our eye to that very crevice that we have made an astonishing discovery—we have seen that beyond that wall lies an infinite disorder; it is through this crevice-passage that our connection with it is maintained; it is from that very point that all beauty, freedom, love, and joy

come flowing forth to us. This is why beauty and love could never be bound within the laws of any science. At this moment Srotaswini entered the room and said to Samir—Do you know what has become of that book of piano notation Dipti was searching for so hard the other day?

Samir said—No.

Srotaswini said—During the night, a mouse has gnawed it to shreds and scattered the pieces among the piano wires. One cannot find any purpose whatsoever for such needless destruction.

Samir said—That particular mouse, I daresay, must be a scientist of exceptional ability among the race of mice; through extensive research, it has managed to surmise some connection between the outer casing of the instrument and its wires. It is now conducting experiments the whole night through, attempting to penetrate the wondrous mystery of that richly harmonious music. With the sharp points of its teeth it continually analyzes the outer casing of the instrument, bringing it together with the piano wires in various combinations to observe the results. Now it has begun by cutting up the sheet music; next it will cut the piano wires, then the wood, will riddle the instrument with a hundred holes, and through those very holes will insert its fine snout and its restless curiosity—and all the while the music itself will only recede further and further beyond reach. It occurs to me to wonder whether the method adopted by this paragon of mousedom may perhaps lead to the discovery of some new theory regarding the composition of wire and paper, but whether the true relation between that paper and that wire will ever be uncovered, even after a hundred thousand years. Will it not happen, in the end, that among the skeptical young mice of some future generation a debate will arise as to whether paper is merely paper, and wire merely wire—and that the joyous bond of purpose supposedly established between them by some intelligent being is nothing but a baseless superstition of their ancestors, the sole beneficial outcome of that superstition being that, prompted by it, their forebears undertook research that yielded a great many experiments on the relative hardness of wire and paper. And yet, some days, while thus engaged in the labor of gnawing in the depths of that dark cavity, a strain of extraordinary music now and then enters the chamber of its ear and, for a fleeting moment, casts a spell of enchantment over its innermost being. What can this phenomenon possibly be? It is indeed a mystery.

But that mystery will surely, in time, be laid open, riddled through with a hundred holes, by continued research into the nature of paper and wire.