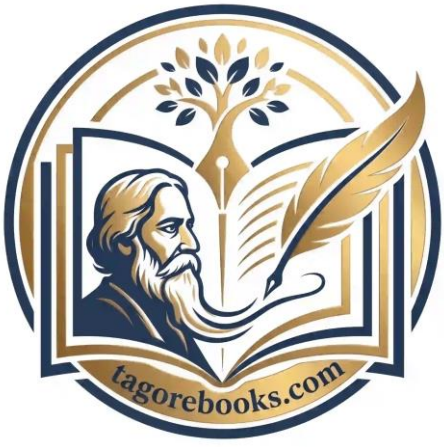
ESSAY

THE NATURE OF LITERATURE

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THE ESSENCE OF LITERATURE

I have been asked to say a few words on this question: what is poetry?

I have discussed the essence of literature elsewhere, on occasion. That discussion arose from an inner realization, not from outward experience or analysis. Poetry is an inward urge—and what that urge might be, I have put to myself as a question. The answer I have received is not easy to render simply. In the circles of the learned there has accumulated, on this subject, a great store of fixed phrases which press forward the moment the topic is raised; to make way for one's own felt conviction, these must first be held in check.

Right at the outset, confusion arises over the word "beautiful." That the purpose of poetry is to render the perception of beauty intelligible—this, the moment some authority intones it, we are inclined, out of habit, to repeat unquestioningly; and indeed, so far it is true enough. But when I set about gathering proof, I am thrown into confusion, and sit down to consider what, precisely, is meant by "beautiful." The standard by which a bridegroom's guardian, in viewing a prospective bride, makes her stand, makes her walk, has her hair loosened, has her speak—should that very standard be applied to the testing of poetry, one meets obstruction at every step. We find that Falstaff bears no comparison with Cupid, and yet, were Cupid removed from literature's treasury of images, there would be no loss—whereas the loss would be real indeed if Falstaff were removed. We see that Sita's character is glorified in the Ramayana, but the heroic Hanuman himself—the bigger his tail, the greater the dignity he has won.

At such moments of doubt, the poet's words come to mind: Truth is beauty—that is, the true alone is beautiful. But it is only when I find in truth the flavour of beauty, when I find within myself its intense realization—not in knowledge, but in acknowledgment—that I call it real. The rash and impulsive Bhima is more real than the all-virtuous Yudhishthira; Lakshmana is more real than Rama, who remains composed, bound by scriptural ordinance—Lakshmana, who, unable to bear injustice, flares up in fury and stands ready to set right its unscriptural wrong. Our dark, elderly servant Nilmani—the fellow who means one thing and does another,

who is told one thing and does something else, and who, when scolded, smiles faintly and says, "A mistake was made"—how he might look got up in Benares silk, playing the bridegroom, is a trivial matter; yet he is far more real than many a famous name, names which, in this context, I hesitate to mention. That is to say, were one to write a poem, making him its hero or secondary hero would prove far more satisfying than making some eloquent public man its hero.

It is not that something becomes real merely by being very familiar; but whatever, though but little known, I must nonetheless acknowledge as indispensable—that, for me, is real. By precisely what quality this is so, is difficult to say through analysis. One might say: they are organic, they are living; there may be an obstacle of taste or will against embracing them, but no other obstacle exists. As with foodstuffs—some bitter, some sweet, some pungent; though in use they differ in degree of desirability, yet among them all there is a certain equality—they are organic, fit to serve in the building of the body's fabric. For the body, they belong to the party of "yes," the party of acceptance, not the party of "no."

In this world, all of us have around us, on every side, this assembly of the "yes"-natured—this retinue of the real; by binding them to ourselves, our being has made itself manifold, has extended itself. They are not only human beings: they are dogs, cats, horses, parrots, cockatoos; they are moss-grown ponds hedged with thorny shrubs; they are the half-wild madar trees enclosed by a crumbling wall in the derelict garden of Gonsai-para; the smell of the straw-stack in the cowshed yard; the narrow lane through the neighbourhood leading to market; the ring of hammering in the blacksmith's forge; the heap of long-fallen, crumbling bricks upon which a peepul tree has taken root; the gathering of the neighbourhood elders at cards beneath the hog-plum tree by the roadside; and how much more besides—things that find no place in any history, that leave no mark in the corner of any map.

Joining these is the company of literary "reals" come from every quarter of the globe, in every tongue. Crossing the fence of language, when we come to know any among them, we cry with delight, "Ah, how fine!"—meaning that it has met with our life, our mind. Among them are kings and emperors, the poor and the afflicted, men of handsome form, women of beauty, and also the blind, the lame, the hunchbacked, the ugly; and alongside these are strange creatures outside all

creation, upon whom the Creator's hand has never once fallen, whose existence agrees with neither biology nor physiology, and whose incongruity with established custom is vast. And there are those who step onto the stage putting on the airs of historicity—some in Mughal turbans, some in Jodhpuri trousers—but whose history is nine parts forged, who, when asked for proof, shamelessly declare: "I care nothing for proof—only look, and see if you like me."

Besides these there is the reality of feeling—sorrow and joy, parting and union, shame and fear, valour and cowardice. These compose the very atmosphere of literature: here sun and rain, here light and shadow, here the vexation of mist, the painted illusion of the mirage. This gathering which man has made his own from without, this creation which man has fashioned to accord with himself from within—this is his realm of the real; amid the wide universe, this is his intimate human world. Within it are the beautiful and the unlovely, the good and the bad, the fitting and the unfitting, the harmonious and the discordant—all are present; and whenever, within themselves, they bring such testimony that I am compelled to acknowledge them, then alone do I rejoice. Let science and history call them untrue if they will; man, out of the utter feeling of his own heart, calls them certain truth. This sense of truth yields joy, and in that joy lies its final worth.

How then can I simply say that the purpose of poetry is to render the perception of beauty intelligible?

Besides the realization of its subject's reality, poetry has another aspect: its artistry. What is comprehensible to reason must be proven; what is filled with joy, we wish to express. What is susceptible of proof is easy to prove; what is filled with joy is not easy to express. To convey the words "I am glad" requires melody, requires a certain cast of feeling. This utterance must be beautifully adorned—as a mother adorns her child, as a lover adorns his beloved, as a dwelling must be adorned with a garden, as a bridal chamber is decked with garlands of flowers. The art of words lies in its rhythm, in the music of sound, in the arrangement and selection of diction. The vehicle of this joy cannot be trifling; what I feel so intensely must, through the artistry of craft, proclaim itself no matter for neglect.

Often this artistry, overleaping the thing fashioned, makes its own independence the principal matter—for within it too dwells the impulse to create. In playful, ornamented language a distinct form manifests itself, exceeding even meaning, in its sound-dominated, song-like quality. Pure music has its sovereignty in its own domain, with no need to share partnership with language's meaning. But the music manifested through rhythm, through the arrangement of words, through the slanting play of sonorous chime, must of necessity answer to meaning. Yet the intoxication of rhythm, the intoxication of sonic adornment, seizes many a poet with an addict's excess; a turbid incoherence descends upon their language—and like an impotent husband, their poetry, in the feebleness of its cowardice, grows unworthy of respect.

The final word is this: Truth is beauty. In poetry this truth is the truth of form, not of fact. If the form of a poem does not carry the utmost conviction as truth, then though it stand proven blameless in the court of fact, it shall be condemned at the tribunal of poetry. Even if, in the arena meant to charm the mind, its mass of ornament resounds ever so loudly—even if it plays the slave to beauty in eloquent language—this only proclaims its unreality the more. And as for those who raise applause at this, harsh though it sounds, one must say: the childishness of their minds has not yet passed.

Lastly, I feel bound to say one more thing. From the drift of present thought, it seems that for many these days the definition of the real has become "anything whatever." But the truth of the matter is this: the real is whatever man, knowingly or unknowingly, has selected for himself. In science, without distinction, all things whatever bear equal worth. But from that universal whatever, what has been selected and comes to stand around us bearing our own signature—that alone is our real. And all those countless things that go scattered about the marketplace bearing various prices, bereft of the worth of the real, remain for us mere shadows.

In the neighbourhood there stands a liquor shop; and should one bring it into verse-making, whether in metre or without, there is hope of winning cheap applause in certain quarters. The denizens of that quarter say: for ages poets have made much of wine-drinking in the realm of the gods, yet in their verses have never granted so much as a whiff of the tavern—though their actual comings and goings at the

tavern were, perhaps, frequent enough. On this I may judge without partiality, for to me the drinking-den at the tavern is no closer than the nectar-assembly of the gods' realm—that is, so far as direct acquaintance goes. What I wish to say is this: by the magic of the pen, by the touch of imagination's philosopher's stone, the drinking-den may become real, and so may the nectar-assembly. But that transformation must actually occur. Yet the times have come to such a pass that merely to introduce, in broken metre, a scene of drunkards in a liquor shop is enough for the seeker of the modern brand to say, "Ah yes, a true poet," to say, "This is what is called Realism." I say—it is no such thing.

Invoking Realism as an excuse, such cheap poetizing has grown far too prevalent. Art is not so cheap. One could certainly write a poem on a laundryman's list of soiled linen, and in the language of realism pour into it sackloads of the erotic, the pathetic, and the grotesque. A husband and wife who quarrel and tear at each other's hair twice daily, whose two garments are pounded clean together at the same ghat, and who at last ride off together on the back of a single donkey—such a subject might sit admirably in some newfangled quatrain. But its realism does not lie in the choice of subject; realism must bloom through the magic of composition. And even there, the labour of selection must be thoroughly present—for without it, such a thing can be nothing but trifling rubbish. Without further scolding on this score, my request to the editor is simply this: prove that realistic poetry is poetry indeed—not because it is realistic, but because it is poetry.

If the aforesaid example does not please, let me suggest another: the long autobiography of a much-trodden, long-used rice-pedal. In ancient times, you might grant this greater dignity than the matter of a beautiful woman's foot touching an Ashoka tree—especially if the footfall be deliberately chosen from among the unlovely. And should you wish to write of a withered date-palm, you might tell how that tree, in the years of its sap, brought varied intoxications into varied lives—among them laughter, and weeping too, and terror as well. And among the class of persons that intoxication touches, there is no king or emperor, nor even some absent-minded young man cramming for his examinations, wristwatch on his arm, spectacles on his eyes, hair combed back with his fingers.

Speaking of which, another subject comes to mind: a little bottle holding the last dregs of hair-oil, its label peeled away, journeying forth in search of its lost world, accompanied by a comb with broken teeth and a thin, worn sliver of soap. The poem might be called "A Modern Fairy-Tale." In its broken metre would rise this long sigh: that nowhere could that lost world be found. Taking this chance, these three leftover relics of a bankrupted past might deliver a sharp mockery to the Creator and his cosmic order; they might say: "Decked in the borrowed costume of a dainty mirage, that clown upon the stage of eternal Time used to play the fine gentleman—peer behind the scenes today, and he can no longer be recognized at all. In such a world of pretence, if truth is to be told to anyone, its emblem is we few, cast outside the market price—this bottle of oil-dregs, this broken comb, this worn-down sliver of soap; we are the real ones, we who supply the stuff of modernity from the sweepings-basket. The moment our tale is told, lo—the tale is done."

Time's cowshed door stands open; its cow gives no milk, and yet the tale comes to its end. Thus today, in the marketplace of poetic craft, the concluded tale of all mankind's hope and love has risen so greatly in price. The cow too must be gaunt-boned, horns broken, back scarred by the pecking of crows, its tail, wrenched and twisted by the carter's hand, left with loosened joints. Should this, through the writer's inattention, turn out wholesome and fair, it will be branded with the reproach of belonging to a mid-Victorian age, and hounded out of the field of modern letters to perish in the critic's slaughterhouse.

Baishakh, 1345

THE MEASURE OF LITERATURE

That human nature has changed in the present age from what it was in ages past admits of no dispute. The problems of life that modern man seeks to resolve are approached through a mode of thought chiefly scientific, his bent inclined toward analysis; and for this reason the matter of his thought has accumulated in manifold forms and vast quantity. It is not possible for all of this to find room within the compass of poetry.

In former times, when the weaver made cloth, everything—from the spinning of thread upon the wheel to the weaving of the cloth itself—proceeded in harmony with the simple current of rustic life. By the grace of science, the modern system of commerce proceeds with vast production of goods, requiring for this an enormous factory, which has no easy accord with the surrounding world of human life. Thus, around a single factory, a town swells into being, wrapped and girded in smoke and soot, in the machine's roar and its refuse; and alongside it, clusters of workers' slums have sprung up like so many explosions. On the one hand, vast mechanical power belches forth immeasurable masses of matter; on the other, squalor and harshness pile into heaps, in sound, in smell, in sight. No one can deny its force and magnitude.

That force and magnitude of the factory-house has made its appearance in literature, in the novel, with all its copious attendant circumstance. Whether we like it or not, modern civilization has been unable to mark out a well-measured place for its factory-marketplace. This lifeless matter, swelling enormous through many a branch, crowds the dwelling-place of life into a corner. Such, too, is the fate of the literature of the novel: the form of man's living spirit lies buried beneath heaps of thought. You may say this is, at present, unavoidable; but you cannot, for that reason, say that it is literature. That man has had to abandon his home to widen the marketplace does not mean the marketplace has thereby become his dwelling.

I shall not deny that the bent of modern man is turned toward intellectual problems. In his thought, his speech, his conduct, this ferment of intellect proceeds.

Chaucer's Canterbury Tales reveals to us the human world of that age. It is not that such a world is wholly absent among men today—in feeling, much of it remains; but in thought, man has gone far beyond the bounds of that earlier day. And so, when man appears in contemporary literature, to imitate the thought and speech of that earlier day would be wholly incongruous. The matter of thought will inevitably rise up continually in his life. Hence the modern novel will appear charged with thought, by the very demand of the modern age. Let it be so; yet the fundamental principle of literature remains eternal. That is: the law governing the enjoyment of rasa belongs to man's permanent nature. If man comes to the gathering of storytelling, he will wish to hear a story, if he remains in his natural senses. And what is the vehicle of that story? Nothing but living human character.

We wish to know it as utterly true—that is, the person within me is eager to receive, in its entirety, the acquaintance of another person. But in the course of time, that person within me may perhaps have become excessively overshadowed by politics. And so, perhaps, even in literature, having relegated character to a secondary place, the mind thrills to hear the political dicta it favours. In such a state of mind, we cannot accept from it a fair assessment of literature. Of course, if a story must portray a character inclined to politics, political jargon must indeed be put in his mouth; but the writer's zeal should remain fixed upon the fashioning of character, not lean toward the mere supplying of slogans. The reason this tendency—making the arrangement of slogans primary while relegating the creation of character to a secondary place—has come to dominate present-day literature so excessively, is that the man of this age is far too occupied with loosening the tangled knot of life's problems. For this reason there is no need to please him in order to be a true man of letters.

When Prahlad began learning his alphabet, no sooner did the sound of the letter ka reach his ears than he was overwhelmed, remembering Krishna. It is necessary to make him understand that, judged from the standpoint of the pure alphabet, the letter ka is present just as much in the word for crow, or for Calcutta, or for cuckoo, as in the name Krishna. So too with doctrine in literature—it is impersonal; and to be overwhelmed by it is to leave the judgment of character no longer willing to advance. It is the form of character alone that belongs to the literature of feeling; formless doctrine does not.

Let me give an example from the Mahabharata. Over various ages, no doubt, many hands have touched it. From the standpoint of literature it has suffered endless irrelevant blows, and survives only because of its extraordinarily robust construction. It is plainly seen that Bhishma's character inclines to moral doctrine—had this trait been revealed in its proper place, through hint and suggestion, in due measure, in conflict with opposing characters and circumstances, Bhishma's individual form ought to have shone the brighter for it. This is what we desire when reading poetry. But it appears that, at some particular time, interest in moral doctrine, for particular reasons, grew excessively strong in our country. And so, without the reader's objection, Bhishma, lying upon his bed of arrows, flooded an entire long chapter of the Kurukshetra war with moral discourse, by which his character went under, submerged beneath a mass of sound counsel. Compare this with the novel of today. The difficulty is that these moral discourses, which once so stirred the hearts of that age, no longer have that effect. Today's jargon is different, and it too shall, in time, grow stale. Whatever doctrine enters literature—however urgent its present need—if it transgresses the measure proper to literature, it cannot be excused. But to bring the Kurukshetra war to a halt in order to recite the whole of the Gita is, by the standard of literature, unquestionably an offence. There exists a literary method of imbuing Krishna's character with the spirit of the Gita; but to say that, through the temptation of sound teaching, this method has been departed from, does not diminish the Gita itself.

The Rama we encounter in the Ramayana, up through the War-Book, is a revelation of character itself. In him there is good and bad, self-contradiction, abundant weakness. Though Rama is the chief hero, he has not been arranged, in unnatural conformity, to any time-honoured fixed rule of excellence; he does not stand in the reader's court as a witness summoned to furnish flawless proof of some scriptural doctrine. If, in the zeal of honouring a father's pledge, the taking of that father's life arose from scriptural reasoning, the slaying of Bali is neither scripturally nor morally justifiable. And again, on one occasion, the harsh words Rama directed at Lakshmana concerning Sita likewise fail to maintain any ideal of excellence. The standard by which the Bengali critic tests the full measure of ideal excellence, judging thereby the truth of character in literature, does not apply here. The poet of the Ramayana did not construct Rama's character by the logic of doctrinal

consistency; this character belongs to nature, to literature—it is not the character of an advocate's brief.

But the Uttarakanda arrived bearing the jargon of a particular age, and like the mite that kills the cockroach, it struck down and killed the character. The heavy demand of social necessity descended—the problem of that particular day. In that age, as the days arrived for binding fast the proprieties of conduct, it was no longer permissible to take Sita back without protest, despite her long sojourn in Ravana's house. That this was unjust, and yet that there was need—giving precedence to public opinion—to send her into exile, and at last to subject her to the ordeal by fire: this solution to a social problem settled upon the character like a possessing spirit. The ordinary listener of that age, regarding the whole affair as a thing of high order, applauded the poet; and by the force of that applause, this patched-together fragment still clings to the living body of the original Ramayana.

Let us consider, by way of example, a problem of our own day. Suppose some devoted Hindu wife has been abducted into a Muslim's house, and later recovered. Both the traditionalist and the modernist writer, taking up this problem in support of their own positions, may pile up heap upon heap of lengthy argument in their novels. A certain clamour has arisen, to the effect that such an outrage, though condemned in poetry, is permissible in the novel. We observe in society that the burden of preserving pure Hindu-ness is laid upon Hindu women, but not upon Hindu men. But if Hindu-ness is indeed a true substance, then its violation is as blameworthy in women as in men. The ethics of literature is a similar thing: everywhere it must proceed guarding its own truth. We will always demand of literature the living form of character; and if economics, social policy, or political theory does not come in meek subordination to character, then, however great its intellectual worth, it must be condemned and cast out. There is no rule that a book must be turned into an examination answer-sheet merely because some character must be proven an intellectual, or the intellectual's taste gratified. Those who suffer the disease of reading theses into storybooks are, I would say, rutting elephants rampaging through literature's lotus-grove. A man of particular character may, according to his nature, take back a wife recovered from a Muslim's house, or he may not; in the storybook, whichever way it goes must be true to character—not true from the standpoint of any problem.

Life has a natural measure of rhythm, and within that measure alone lie its health, its fulfilment, its grace. Man may, by force, exceed this measure. This is called feats of strength—astonishing, but not wholesome, and certainly not beautiful. Such strength proceeds, beating its drum toward the transgression of limits, accomplishing the near-impossible—but at some point it collapses. Today, throughout the whole world, this dread of collapse has grown acute. Civilization has outstripped nature by such a distance that at every step it must proceed by breaking through one problem after another—that is, it does nothing but perform feats of strength. Its total burden grows ever more enormous, and its refuse piles into heaps. Man's vital rhythm is being pursued in the rhythm of the demonic. Today we suddenly find the beat can in no way return to its resolution. All this while man has gone on in the pride of doubling and quadrupling his pace—today, at least in the domain of economics, he begins to understand that this prowess is no fulfilment: in the machine's horse-race, horse after horse falls, pitching forward on its face. Life, in the excitement and arrogance of this economic prowess, had forgotten that it was, through the tangled excess of its own pace, tormenting the very joy of living; the monstrous modern world has grown sick, and has overwhelmed the principle of life's equilibrium.

The impact of this bloated, incongruous mode of Western life has struck literature too. Poetry has become bloodless; novels, by contrast, have swollen grossly fat. There, scorning the work of creation, writers have busied themselves with feats of intellectual gymnastics. In this there is no grace, no measure, no form—only an abundant mass of words. That is, this is literature of demonic weight, not human weight; astonishingly intellectual, perhaps serviceable to some purpose, but not spontaneous, not alive. The world's colossal creatures perished from the very excess of their own bone and flesh; these too are dying from their own excess. The law of life is measure; so too is the law of art. In due measure lies the health and joy of life; in due measure lies the grace and completeness of art. Greed transgresses measure, unable to see the limit of its own excess; greed calls "life" only abundance of means—it does not call that the nectar of immortality. The pride of means lies in its abundance; the fulfilment of nectar lies in its inherent harmony. The nectar of art, too, lies in its own well-measured harmony. Its sudden pretence

of lordliness is mere intellectual pomp; that is not true nobility—it is short-lived, doomed to perish.

The Meghaduta is alive; within it, its harmony is well-measured. One can extract a doctrine from within it—I myself have done so—but that doctrine remains invisibly subordinate. In the Raghuvamsha, Kalidasa openly declares, in his preface, his purpose: to furnish, in verse, instances of what constitutes the glory of kingly duty, and what its downfall. For this reason, viewed as a whole, the Raghuvamsha is overwhelmed by the weight of its own burden; it does not possess, as the Meghaduta does, completeness of form. As a poem, the Kumarasambhava ought to have stopped where it should have stopped, and there it does stop—but as logic, as a problem, it cannot stop there; only once Kartika is born and heaven redeemed does the problem find its resolution. But art has no need to resolve the problem; its task is only to complete its own form. The untying of a problem's knot is the triumph of intellect, but to grant completeness to form is the work of creative, imaginative power. Art dwells within the domain of imagination, not within the domain of logic.

In your letter you mentioned my novels Gora, Ghare-Baire, and others. I have no right to critique my own writing, and so cannot speak of them at length. I must admit that these two novels contain discussion of various subjects—psychology, political theory, and the like. Judged from the standpoint of literature, one must ask whether these have found their proper place, or merely usurped space. When food is taken within and digested, its living unity with the body is achieved; but if it is instead carried upon the head in a basket, it may serve some outward purpose, yet achieves no harmony with the living body. If, in the story of Gora, the matters of argument have been merely carried in a basket, then, however great their worth, this is blameworthy. If the matters discussed are not the utter, living, character-born substance of Gora and Binoy, then problem and life, essay and story, remain a patched-together thing, which will not long endure in literature. First, the value of the doctrine under discussion diminishes with time; and then, if it has worn the story threadbare, the whole tangled mass accumulates, as rubbish, in literature's refuse-heap. Ibsen's plays, after all, were once held in no small regard—but has not their colour already begun to fade even now? Will they, some while hence, even catch the eye? What speaks of man's living spirit is a thing of eternal joy; what

speaks of intellectual argument, however novel it may seem in its particular time and place, has its day run out even as we watch. If literature still clings to it even then, it becomes a bearer of the dead, and meets its own ruin. Life does, to some degree, carry the lifeless—as with our garments, our ornaments—but, in order to move in accord with life, its weight must not overtake life itself. In Europe, the burden of the lifeless has pressed upon life to excess; this cannot be borne. Such, too, is the state of its literature. By the force of its own powerful momentum, Europe can even now bear this enormous load; but there is no doubt that, under the pressure of this burden, the force of that momentum will gradually diminish. Incongruous and unmeasured vastness exacts so great a toll from life that, one day, it reduces life to bankruptcy.

Shraban, 1340

THE MODERNITY OF LITERATURE

The living current of literature flows through the vein of language; disturb that vein, and the heartbeat of the original composition stops. In such literature the subject-matter grows lifeless, if it lacks its own vitality. This thought has come to me again and again of late, as I have been going through my own old translations.

You probably know that when a calf dies, and the cow, missing it, refuses to give milk, the skin of the dead calf is stripped off and stuffed with straw to make an artificial figure; by its smell and its likeness of form, milk begins to flow from the cow's udder once more. Translation is just such a figure of a dead calf—it has no true call of life, only a semblance. This gives rise, in my mind, to shame and remorse. If the work I have done in literature is not merely momentary and local, then whoever truly needs it will, sooner or later, gain acquaintance with it in my own language. There is no other path to such acquaintance. If such rightful acquaintance is delayed, the loss belongs to the one thereby deprived; the author bears no responsibility for it.

In every great literature, states of expansion and contraction occur in alternation, as day follows night; after Milton come Dryden and Pope. When we first came into contact with English literature, it happened to be in an age of its expansion. The shock that the French Revolution gave to the human mind in Europe was the shock of fences being torn down. And so, even as we watched, literature's hospitality then revealed itself as universal in nature. It was as though a universal sacrifice of creative beauty were being performed, within which the visitor from every land freely gained the right to partake of joy. It was our great fortune that, at that very time, Europe's call reached our ears, bearing within it the message of liberation for all mankind. We, for our part, were not slow to answer. In that joy, the inspiration of new creation came to our minds as well, and guided our awakened minds toward the world. We easily came to hold the firm conviction that not science alone, but the wealth of literature too, transcends its own place of origin and extends itself toward all countries and all ages; that if its generosity is circumscribed, if it lacks the virtue of hospitality, then however enjoyable it may be for the people of its own land, it remains poor. We know for certain that the English literature we have

received is not poor; its wealth is not locked away, deed-bound, in some iron coffer belonging solely to its own race.

Those who, once upon a time, step by step, brought forward the French Revolution were men of deep faith in a universal human ideal. Whether it was religion or royal power, whatever was greedy for dominion, whatever stood as an obstacle to freedom—against all this was their crusade directed. In the climate of that will toward universal welfare arose a literature that was great: a literature of the open door, for the people of every country and age; it brought light, it brought hope. Meanwhile, with the aid of science, Europe's worldly intellect ushered in the age of the merchant-class. Tearing through the vital core of both its own people and foreign peoples, streams of wealth, through diverse channels, began to circulate among Europe's newly risen plutocracy. Worldly intellect, in every sphere, is the intellect of division, prone to envy. That very envy, that very policy of division, belonging to those who are the vehicles of self-interest, had long smouldered, suppressed, within Europe's inmost heart; that destructive force suddenly tore through every barrier and flooded Europe in a molten torrent. At the root of this war lay the passions that destroy society, the mistrust of generous humanity. And so the gift that this war bestowed is a demon's gift; its poison refuses, by any means, to die—it has brought no peace.

Since then, Europe's spirit has been contracting ever more harshly—every country busies itself with multiplying the bolts upon its own door. I can think of no clearer mark of barbarism than this suspicion, this prohibition grown so powerful against one another. In political governance, we once knew Europe as the very hermitage of the common people's quest for freedom—and suddenly we find the whole thing collapsing into ruin. There, country after country, chains have tightened upon the throat and limbs of the common people; and those who feel no scruple whatsoever about savagery have become the leaders of the state. At the root of this lies cowardice—the cowardice of worldly calculation. Fear lest obstruction occur in the competition for wealth; fear lest such a breach appear in the treasury through which the evil star of loss might widen its path of entry. For this reason, the people of a country stand ready to sell off their own freedom, their own self-respect, to mighty and powerful watchmen. Indeed, even while watching their own nation's time-honoured culture diminished, they have bowed their heads and accepted the

barbarity of the ruling order. This cowardice of the mercantile age destroys the nobility of man; the marks of his baser nature come to reveal themselves shamelessly.

This wealth-hungry Europe, pilgrim to the marketplace of goods, who has bowed her head in confession of her own diminished humanity, and built her own prison as a means of self-protection—does not the influence of this gradually come to possess her literature as well? The unhesitating welcome that we, as foreigners, once received in English literature—does it exist any longer today? It goes without saying that the literature of each country is principally for its own readers; but within it we expect that natural generosity by which it furnishes a seat for every guest, far and near alike. The literature in which that seat is extended is truly great literature; the people of every age render certain its enduring survival; its foundation is laid in the field of all humanity's heart.

It is not safe to judge our contemporary foreign literature with absolute certainty. Whatever I perceive regarding modern English literature comes from my own limited experience, much of which may well be ignorance. Many parts of this literature may possess sufficient literary worth; their assessment will continue, in time to come. What I can say comes only from the boundary of my own personal perception. I speak as a foreigner—or rather, not even that, but as a single foreign poet—when I say that my right of entry into modern English poetry is severely obstructed. If this remark carries any broader validity, it would prove that this literature may possess many other virtues, but lacks one quality that might be called universality—the quality by which I too, from abroad, might accept it without reservation. We have, after all, accepted the older English literature with joy; from it we gained not only savour, but light upon the path of life's journey. Its influence has not, even today, departed from the mind.

Today I feel, in modern English literature, the fortress-walled impregnability of a Europe behind closed doors. Its harshness strikes me as illiberal; it has its origin in the hard soil of a scornful, mocking faithlessness. Within it one finds no such surplus as calls, unstinting, beyond its own threshold. This literature has withdrawn its heart from the world; I find in it no utterance which, on hearing, I might take to be

my own message, received as an eternal word from the divine. It would be unjust to say there are no exceptions, one or two.

Among the young men of our own country, I have seen some who not only understand modern English poetry, but take genuine delight in it. Being nearer than I to the present age, Europe's modern literature is perhaps, for them, not so distant. For this reason I hold their testimony in esteem, as something of real worth. Only one doubt refuses to leave my mind. When the new, with insolence, scorns and defies the old that came before it, the applause that the bold young mind grants does not always carry the authenticity of eternal truth. The rebellion of the new is, many a time, mere insolence. I say this: in science, natural truth, for man, continually lays bare new foundations of knowledge—but man's realm of joy, though it may extend its own borders age after age, does not change its foundation. That beauty, that love, that grandeur by which man has ever, by his very nature, been awakened, has no limit of age; no Einstein can come and disprove it, cannot say, "He who takes unfeigned joy in the blossoming abundance of spring is an old-fashioned Philistine." If the man of some particular age can say such outlandish things, if his lips twist in mockery of the beautiful, if his zeal grows fierce in insulting the venerable, then one must say: this disposition stands against the eternal nature of man.

Literature, in every country, has always borne witness to this one truth: that man's abode of joy is forever ancient. In Kalidasa's Meghaduta, man rejoices in tasting his own ever-ancient sorrow of separation. It is the ever-renewed newness of that eternal antiquity which man's literature, man's art, bears and carries forward. For this very reason, man's literature and man's art belong to the whole of humankind.

And so, again and again, this thought has come to my mind: present-day English poetry is insolently new, rebelliously new against the old. The young mind that delights in iconoclasm is intoxicated by its heady draught of novelty; but this very novelty is the mark of its transience. That novelty I cannot welcome, of which the old song says:

Since birth I have gazed upon this beauty, yet my eyes know no content,

For a hundred thousand ages have I held it to my heart, yet my heart finds no peace—

let me not mistake it, in truth, for the new; it arrives already bearing its own decay within the very moment of its birth. Whatever star presides over its span of life, however brilliant that star may shine, it remains, nonetheless, a baleful one.

Magh, 1341

POETRY AND METER

A debate is stirring in the minds of sceptical readers concerning prose-poetry. There is nothing surprising in this.

It must be admitted that there is a certain momentum within metre, and the impact of that momentum carries a sentence laden with feeling easily into the heart, setting the mind swaying.

But that is not all. The world of poetry stands apart from the world where prose toils at its many divided tasks in the varied business of daily life. The distinctive character of verse-language makes this separateness plain; and once it is made plain, the mind can ready itself to receive that poetry as something apart, something set in its own realm. When a sannyasi appears in ochre robes, he announces thereby that he is distinct from the householder; the devotee's mind advances to his feet that very instant—otherwise the sannyasi's traffic in devotion would suffer loss.

But it goes without saying that the essential truth of the sannyasi's calling does not lie in his ochre cloth, but in the genuineness of his discipline. Whoever understands this is drawn all the more by the very absence of the ochre cloth. He says: I shall recognize truth by my own power of discernment, not by that ochre cloth beneath which so much falsehood lies concealed.

It is not metre alone that makes poetry, unconditionally. The essential matter of poetry lies in its rasa, its flavour; metre merely lends that rasa its character, incidentally.

Metre assists from two directions. First, it naturally possesses the power to sway; second, there is the reader's long-ingrained habituation. This habituation deserves thought. Once, metre divided into regular segments was held to be the sole legitimate currency of refined poetic language. In that age our ears, too, were trained to favour it. Rhyme in metre was then held indispensable.

It was at such a time that Madhusudan brought into Bengali literature, against the grain of our habituation, blank verse. It kept no rhyme. The lines in it were divided into equal measures, true, but the metrical stride ran on continually, leaping over the line's edge. That is, in posture it resembled verse, but in usage it moved like prose.

Let me offer another proof of how transient our habituation can be. Once, the definition of a woman of good family was that she dwelt within the inner apartments. When the first such women stepped out unhesitatingly from the antahpur, it had become customary to wound the sentiments of the general public by regarding them with suspicion, by insulting them openly or covertly, by making them figures of mockery, the butt of ridicule in farces. It is known how cowardly was the conduct shown toward those women who, in that era, dared to take their lessons alongside the male students of the university.

Gradually the definition has been changing. Today women of good family remain unquestionably so, even though they are free from the confinement of the antahpur.

In just the same way, no one today considers the rhyme-less irregularity of blank verse to be contrary to the canons of poetic art. And yet this metre transgressed, by a wide margin, the earlier rule.

The matter proved easy, because readers schooled in English in that era were compelled to hold the metre of Milton and Shakespeare in reverence.

In the matter of admitting blank verse into the fold, the literary traditionalists will say this: that although this metre runs past the boundary of its fourteen syllables, still it does not disobey the measure of the foot.

That is to say, by preserving the laya—the rhythmic beat—this metre has preserved the law of poetry; this much belief regarding blank verse people still cling to. They wish to say that without this thread of connection to the beat, poetry cannot be poetry at all. But what can be and what cannot be depends upon what actually comes to exist, not upon people's habituation—this very truth blank verse itself

proved earlier. Today the burden of proof has fallen upon prose-poetry, to show that in prose too the movement of poetry is not impossible.

A cavalry soldier is a soldier, and so too is a foot-soldier a soldier—where lies their essential commonality? In this: that wherever they fight and win, the attainment of both is achieved through discipline.

The aim of poetry is to conquer the heart—whether riding the steed of verse, or walking on foot in prose. It must be judged by its capacity to achieve that end. Defeat is defeat, whether on horseback or afoot. That metrical composition is not poetry—of this a thousand proofs exist; that prose composition bearing the name of poetry will not become poetry—of this, abundant proof will continue to surface.

One advantage of metre is this: that metre inherently possesses a certain sweetness; and if nothing else, that in itself is a gain. In a cheap sweet, the quality of the cottage cheese may be negligible, but at least one tastes the sugar.

But there exist certain obstinate people, not easily satisfied, who feel ashamed to let themselves be charmed by sugar. Their stubbornness is such that they would win only by genuine substance, setting aside all the mind-beguiling ingredients. What they wish to say is this: the true thing called poetry does not depend wholly upon metre or its absence; its glory lies in its inward success.

Whether prose or verse, every composition carries within it a natural rhythm. In verse this is plainly evident; in prose it lies hidden. To violate that hidden rhythm is to wound the poetry itself. The discipline of understanding verse-metre can proceed along a fixed path of rules, but if the sense of proportion in prose-rhythm does not exist naturally within the mind, then no help from the treatises on rhetoric can carry one across its difficult terrain. Yet many forget that because prose is easy, prose-rhythm is not thereby easy. In the temptation of ease lies grave danger; carelessness creeps in unnoticed. Carelessness alone insults the Goddess of Letters, and she exacts her revenge through failure. There is cause to fear that in careless writers' hands, prose-poetry will pile up material for contempt and ridicule in great heaps. But this simple truth must still be spoken: that which is genuine poetry is poetry whether in verse or in prose.

One final word remains to be said: poetry is no longer as distant from the unpolished reality of everyday life as it once was. Now it wishes to carry everything across into its own realm of rasa—now, even in the moment of its ascension to heaven, it does not abandon the dog at its side. In achieving the reconciliation of the world of reality with the world of rasa, prose will prove useful; for prose is not afflicted by fastidiousness.

12 November, 1936

PROSE-POETRY

There are certain subjects whose atmosphere is so subtle that they refuse easily to take manifest form. On matters that can be grasped and touched, argument may strike and counter-strike freely. But when the subject-matter arrives at the threshold of the inexpressible, by what means it can be made clear is something the heart alone knows, or does not know. For this, one must possess a natural capacity for liking and disliking, and a wide experience. To master science requires discipline. But taste is a thing that might be called discipline-transcending; the path to attaining it is "neither by learning, nor by much hearing." In simple, personal terms of taste, one can only say: this, to me, feels good.

Joining with that taste come one's own nature, the habits of thought, the surroundings of society, and one's education. If these are generous, expansive, and possessed of a subtle discernment, then that taste may be accepted as a light upon the path of literature. But whether the fair confluence of taste has anywhere arrived at a true culmination or not—this too must be judged by some other, true standard of taste's own cultivation. Thus an element of uncertainty remains within the judgment of taste. We have witnessed proof of this, age after age, in the realm of literature. The man who has not duly studied science and philosophy says, quite humbly, "I have no right to an opinion." Seeing the uproar of conflicting opinions in the assembly of those who create rasa in literature and art, one is at last driven to despair and feels compelled to say, bhinna-ruchirhi lokah—men differ in taste. There, since discipline carries no weight, an unchecked audacity reigns, and it is for this very reason that disputes over differences of taste often come to blows. Hence one recalls the lament of the connoisseur: arasikeshu rasasya nivedanam shirasi mā likha mā likha mā likha—do not, do not, do not inscribe upon the head of the unappreciative an offering of rasa. Even to the poet himself, the matter of who possesses the right taste and who does not comes easily. Whose writing pleased whom, and whose did not—this distinction of classes rides upon that very test. For this reason, down through the ages, a quarrel has continued between the seekers of entertainment and the artists. Even the poet Kalidasa himself, without doubt, had to suffer grief on this account; it is said that in the Meghaduta there is an allusion to the crude touch of thick-fingered hands. In those poems where

traditional language and metre are followed, readers are at least not hindered outwardly, in their coming and going. But sometimes, in pursuit of some particular rasa, a poet crosses beyond the path of habit. Then, at least for some time, the readers' comfort is disturbed, and they, denying the new importation of rasa, declare their displeasure. Until the path, as one walks along it, becomes marked and known, a quarrel arises among the travellers against the path-maker. In that season of discontent the poet declares his defiance; he says, "My own judgment is more authoritative than yours." The readers say, in reply, that he who supplies has less claim than he who consumes. But history does not bear this out. It has always been seen that it is precisely through neglecting the new that the path has been widened for the new's eventual welcome.

For some time now I have begun writing certain poems in prose. It would be unreasonable to expect that this will win general acceptance right away. But neither can I accept that the absence of immediate acceptance is proof of its failure. In this dilemma, the poet is bound to honour his own conviction. I have long practised the creation of rasa; I have perhaps given joy to many, and perhaps failed to give it to many others. Yet, invoking the testimony of my long-accumulated experience in this matter, I shall say a word or two; I hold no claim that you must accept it entirely.

The argument runs thus: can poetry defend itself while clothed in the form of prose? The form in which poetry has been seen all this while, and the accompaniment of pleasure attending that sight, has met with an exception in prose-poetry. Not merely a departure in ornamentation—its very essential form has suffered disruption. Now the matter under debate is this: does the essential nature of poetry depend wholly upon metrically-bound arrangement? Some believe it does; I believe it does not. That poetry can, freed from the outer garb of ornamentation, express itself with ease—on this point I shall offer an illustration from my own experience.

You are all aware that I composed a poem based on the tale of Satyakama, son of Jabala. When I read this story in the simple prose of the Chandogya Upanishad, I had not the slightest hesitation in accepting it as genuine poetry. It is merely a narrative—a judge of poetry, looking at it from outside, might refuse to grant it a

place in the ranks of poetry; for it was not composed in anushtubh, trishtubh, or mandakranta metre. I say: it became the finest poetry precisely because it was not so composed, and for no other accidental reason. Had this tale of Satyakama been bound and composed in metre, it would have grown light and trivial.

In the seventeenth century, certain anonymous writers translated the Greek and Hebrew Bible into English. It must be admitted that the Song of Solomon and the lamentations of David are genuine poetry. The astonishing power of this translated language has brought forth, beyond all doubt, the rasa and the form of poetry within them. If the free stride of prose-rhythm present in these songs had been bound in the chains of the verse-tradition, utter ruin would have resulted.

That exalted metre we encounter in the Yajurveda we do not call verse; we call it mantra. We all know that the aim of mantra is to carry the meaning of words, through sound, into the depths of the mind. There, it is not merely meaningful but also sonorous. I can say without doubt that many have felt within their minds the success of this prose-mantra, for though its sound ceases, its resonance does not cease.

Once, in some unguarded moment, I translated my Gitanjali into English prose. In those days distinguished English literary figures accepted my translation as part of their own literature. Indeed, they lavished such praise upon the English Gitanjali that, finding it excessive, I felt embarrassed. I was a foreigner; my poetry bore no trace of rhyme or metre at all; yet when they found within it the complete rasa of poetry, there was no denying that fact. It occurred to me that rendering my poetry's form into English prose had done it no harm—rather, had I translated it into verse, it might well have been condemned, found contemptible.

I recall once having said to the esteemed Satyendra: "You are the king of metre; try, I pray, letting the stream of poetry flow, breaking its dam, with the power of un-metred verse." There are very few in Bengali who possess Satyendra's gift for varied metre. Perhaps habit stood in the way of his path, for he did not accept my proposal. I myself attempted this kind of poetic composition in Lipika; though, to be sure, I did not break the lines as one does in verse. After writing Lipika, I did not

write prose-poetry again for a long while. I suppose it was simply that I lacked the courage.

Poetic language has a certain weight, a certain restraint; that is what we call metre. Prose has no such discrimination—it proceeds with its chest thrown open. For that very reason, matters of everyday affairs such as politics can be written in lucid prose. But prose can be disciplined through the influence of poetry. Then something is revealed in the movement of that poetry which lies beyond the everyday usage of prose. Precisely because it is prose, it cannot harbour within it the intoxication of excessive sweetness, excessive indulgence. In the meeting of the soft and the hard, a disciplined manner arises of itself. In the dancer's performance there is a trained, ornamented step. On the other hand, in the gait of some young woman who walks well, there exists a natural rule of balance. In this simple, graceful manner of walking there is an untaught rhythm—a rhythm that lies in her blood, a rhythm that lies in her body. The movement of prose-poetry is of that very kind—not an irregular, unruly motion, but a disciplined stride.

Only today I saw, in the Mohammadi journal, someone writing that he found the rasa of Rabindranath's prose-poems in his plain prose itself. As illustration, the writer said that in Shesher Kabita ("The Last Poem"), something essentially foreign to poetic rasa had crept in. If that is so, then—who, I ask, in trying to escape the inner chambers, has lost the caste of poetry? Here my question is this: who among us has not read poetry that spoke what is properly the content of prose, as, say, in Browning? And again, who has not read prose in whose midst lingered the trace of poetic imagination? I do not recognize any relationship of elder-brother-in-law and younger sister-in-law between prose and poetry. To me they are like brother and sister; and so, when I see the rasa of poetry exchanged easily with the gravity of prose, I raise no objection.

There is no profit in disputing over differences of taste. I can only say this much: I have written many prose-poems whose subject matter I could not have expressed in any other form. Within them there is a simple, everyday quality; perhaps there is no ornamentation, but there is form, and for this very reason I consider them to belong truly to the family of poetry. The question may arise: what is prose-poetry? I shall say: I do not know what or how, I know only that its poetic rasa is a thing not

to be proven by logic. Whatever gives me the taste of the inexpressible, whether it comes in the form of prose or verse, I shall not turn away from accepting it as poetry.

Santiniketan. 29 August, 1332

LITERARY JUDGMENT

That which subtle perception gathers as rasa is not always universal. This is the inevitable poverty of literature. It must depend, for its reward, upon individual judgment. Even its lower court's verdict is not scientifically fixed and determined, and its appellate court's ruling, too, is inconsistent. Here our chief reliance is upon the approval of a large number of educated tastes. But who does not know that the scope of the educated man's taste is bounded by the fence of his own era, and that with the passage of time, it changes utterly? The measuring-rod of literary judgment is a living thing. With the passage of time it grows and shrinks, becomes lean, and also grows coarse. It is by means of this ever-changing scale of measurement that it must judge literature—there is no other way. But judges do not acknowledge this rise and fall as impermanent; they feign, with scientific airs, an unwavering steadiness; but this is mock science, not genuine—a homespun science, not an eternal one. When, in the present moment, some one person or some one school pronounces a verdict upon a writer, then, according to that momentary, shifting ideal, the division of the writer's punishments and rewards occurs. There is no higher court for him; even when his sentence is death, he still hopes, deep in his heart, that perhaps, while he lives on, the noose may yet slip loose—for the course of a planet sometimes changes, sometimes does not. Even Shakespeare himself has not escaped this unstable uncertainty in critical judgment. At the time of determining the value of goods, men quarrel and argue, citing the taste of this person or that to support their claim—building their foundation upon water. For water is not still, human taste is not still, time is not still. In such a case, if, instead of feigning a fixed ideal, literature's measure can be taken by literature itself, then peace is preserved. That is to say, if the judge's own verdict is itself skilled in the art, then the measuring-rod itself may become worthy of being honourably enshrined in the court of literature.

While reading books of literary criticism, one notices, more or less, in almost every case, a particular thing—namely, the critic's own peculiar bias; this bias arises from the company of his group, the pull of his class, the particular bent of his education. No one can wholly escape this influence. It goes without saying that this bias is not the unqualified follower of any eternal ideal for all time. A bias exists even in the

mind of a judge, but he restrains himself with the help of the discipline of law. Unfortunately, in literature this law comes to be fashioned at the behest of particular periods, particular factions, particular education, or particular individuals. This law cannot be universal and eternal for all time. It is for this reason that, in the society of readers, at particular times a particular season arrives—as, for instance, the Tennyson season, the Kipling season. It is not that this merely pushes a small group; the vast body of the reading public comes to be driven by this season, until, at some point, the season changes altogether. In the pursuit of scientific truth, no one permits such personal partiality. In that judgment, to invoke one's own particular bias is called folly in science. And yet, in literature, no one much condemns this personal contagion. What is good in literature, what is bad—that, in most cases, declares itself by taking shelter under a worthy or unworthy critic or his coterie. In the present age, the affection or the pride of wealth is attempting to institute a penal code while feigning a universal ideal. That this too may be largely a borrowed foreign fashion, a contagious season, partisan people cannot admit. In literature, this sort of critic's arrogance sits enthroned in the thirty-two letters of print. Of course, those whose minds are not wholly overtaken by partiality of class, group, or period possess comparatively unbiased judgment. But who they are, who shall decide—the very snake summoned to exorcise a ghost ends up possessed by that same ghost. We determine the superiority of a critic by our pride in the superiority of our own opinion. On the whole, to refrain from feigning security, to make the criticism of literature itself into literature—that alone is what matters. Such literature does not gain its ultimate worth from the absolute truth of its opinion. Its worth lies in its literary rasa itself.

In the writings of critics I often sense a sly hint, as though I, at least here and there, am making a clumsy attempt to keep pace with the stride of the modern, and that this does not sit well with the nature of my poetry. On this occasion let me state my own position on the matter.

I recall that when I wrote Kshanika, a certain group of readers were baffled. Had the fashion of "modernism" existed then, no one would have hesitated to say that in those writings I had begun to don the garb of modernity. Upon the shoulders of

man's power of judgment, the inherited bias of the past sits heavily. I recall that some time ago a certain critic wrote that humour lay outside the territory of my writing. In his view this was bound to be so, for lyric poets naturally lack a sense of humour. Nevertheless he had to make mention of my Chirakumar Sabha and other farces, but in his view that humour was shallow—because—there was no need to say anything further, because of his own prejudice, a prejudice beyond the reach of argument.

I have often searched for who, in literature, might be handed the helmsman's task—that is, whose rudder does not sway with the waves to right and left. One name comes vividly to mind: it is Pramatha Chowdhury. Pramatha's name comes to my mind particularly for this reason: I am indebted to him. The capacity to accept a debt in literature may be acknowledged with pride. Those who, for a long time, could neither accept nor admit such a debt, I have long regarded with disrespect. What has drawn my mind in him is the aristocratic quality of his mental disposition, free of excess—a quality shining forth brilliantly in his intellectually inclined reflective nature. This reflective faculty remains uncovered precisely upon that highest peak of the mind which is free of the vapour of sentimentality. The alertness of his mind is, to me, a matter of wonder. So I have often thought: had he taken up the helm of Bengali literature, this literature would have been spared much refuse. So utterly unswayed is his mind that Bengali readers for a long time could not even bring themselves to acknowledge him. The trouble is that a Bengali reader cannot understand anyone unless he can place him within some faction. As for myself, in gatherings for serious discussion my own speech grows vocal with the jingling of rhetorical ornament. This fact has become too well known, for which I am ashamed and fall silent. Therefore, in the assembly of criticism, I can have no seat at all. But the excess of rasa is entirely absent from Pramatha Chowdhury's writing. For all these qualities, I had, in my own mind, seated him in the judge's chair. But I realize now that it is too late. The danger in this is that in literature, whoever pleases may sit upon the unoccupied throne. And those seeking to snatch away his sceptre keep running close behind him.

Here let me say my final word. To those who complain that they find no trace of the middle class in my writings, the time has come for me to offer a certain explanation. Alluvial soil cannot bear the foundation of any lasting monument. In

the Gangetic plains of Bengal, no such grandeur can be found as might rival antiquity. In this country, aristocracy belongs to that very class. Those whom we style as belonging to ancient noble lineage—their roots do not reach very deep. They raise their heads within a brief span of time, and thereafter do not delay in mingling again with the soil. For this very reason aristocracy is here a merely relative term. To set its momentary, fleeting splendour too high is vain folly, for that artificial loftiness becomes merely the target of time's mockery. For this reason, the aristocratic lineage of our country cannot, in its mentality, remain very distinct from the common people. This is true: the self-awareness of this short-lived accumulation of wealth often erects, out of insufferable pride, a show of keeping itself apart from the general populace. This laughable inflation of the chest was, in our family—at least in our generation—entirely absent. And so we have never performed the farce of the wealthy. Therefore, if any mark of a certain innate peculiarity lies pressed into my mind, it is not due to the abundance of wealth, nor to the dearth of it either.

It can be traced to the particular family's cultural heritage carried down through generations, and such distinctiveness may perhaps manifest itself, through some hereditary habit, in other families as well. In truth, this is incidental. What is strange is that, in literature, this pride in the middle class has suddenly grown so intense. Not long ago the word "young"—tarun—raised its hood in this very fashion. In our country, this kind of jostling for place has lately begun in literature. When I went to Moscow, trying to express my favourable estimation of Chekhov's writing, I suddenly stumbled upon the discovery that Chekhov's writing had been found guilty, in the harmony of literature, of a lapse of caste-propriety—so that his plays found no place upon the stage. This mentality in literature is so artificial that I hear now, again, the wind has changed. At one time, month after month, I wrote stories of rural life. I believe that before this, the picture of rural life had never been presented so continuously in Bengali literature. There was, at that time, no lack of middle-class writers; nearly all of them were absorbed in the meditation of Pratapsingha or Pratapaditya. I fear that at some point "Galpaguchchha" (my collection of short stories) will, through association with a "bourgeois" writer, become untouchable as non-literature. Even now, when the classification of my writings is undertaken, these pieces receive no more than a passing mention, as

though they did not exist at all. This jostling for caste lies in our very blood, so I fear; it will prove difficult to uproot this weed.

For some time I have been enduring an unbearable illness; if, on that account, I were to say, "Only if those who tend me also smear their faces with a dark hue and don the distorted appearance of ill health would it be comfortable for me"—then one would have to suspect a disturbance of mind. In nature there exists a flawless serenity. In individual life, revolutions of circumstance occur, but in this universal gift, no corruption occurs—that is our good fortune. If a group should form to object to this, one would have to say: those who are destitute ought to establish colonies in the desert, for otherwise their satisfaction is impossible. Must literature, too, establish a desert colony for its destitute readers?

Santiniketan. 1347?

THE VALUE OF LITERATURE

That day, with Anil, I discussed the ever-shifting ideal of literature's value; and alongside it, I said that language is the vehicle of literature, and that from age to age, the very form of that language undergoes transformation. Hence the intimacy of its connotation is always subject to varying degrees of change. This point requires a little further clarification.

Lyric poets, such as myself, deal especially in their writing with the inexpressibility of rasa. The taste of this rasa upon people's tongues does not remain the same from age to age; its appeal gradually sinks, like the water of a drying river, down to the riverbed. For this reason, the trade in rasa always remains on the verge of failure. One does not feel inclined to take pride in boasting of its glory.

But this presentation of rasa is not the sole support of literature. It has another aspect, which is the creation of form. There, direct perception enters in—not mere conjecture, not hint, not the mere jingling of sound. In my boyhood I once gave a book the title "Pictures and Songs." On reflection, it will be seen that by these two names alone the entire boundary of literature can be marked out. A picture is not excessively obscure—it is clearly visible. Though rasa may be mingled with it, its line and arrangement of colour do not grow hazy under the coating of that rasa. For this reason, its standing is firmer. Through literature we receive many an evocation of human feeling, and this, too, is soon forgotten. But where, within literature, the figure of a human being emerges vivid in bright outline, there remains no path toward forgetting. In this ever-moving world, whatever moves, whatever shifts, moves along a great highway. For that very reason the taste of Shakespeare's Lucrece and Venus and Adonis may today not seem pleasing upon our tongues—I say this whether boldly or not; but if anyone were to say such a thing of Lady Macbeth, or King Lear, or Antony and Cleopatra, I would say that his palate has suffered an unhealthy corruption, that he is not in a natural condition. Shakespeare has flung open the doors of the gallery of human character; there, age after age, crowds will gather. In the same way I can say that the Himalaya-description in the Kumarasambhava is highly artificial; it may possess, perhaps, the dignity of Sanskrit sonority, but its truth of form is utterly absent; yet Shakuntala,

surrounded by her companions, is eternal. Dushyanta may reject her, but no reader of any age can. Man has arisen, awakened; man's welcome he shall find in every age and every land. Thus I say: in the assembly of literature, this seat of form-creation is fixed, immutable. All the sentences of Kabikankan's poetry may, with time, fall into neglect, but his "handful of grain" shall remain. The value of A Midsummer Night's Dream as a play may diminish, but the influence of Falstaff will remain ever unshaken.

Life is the great artist. Age after age, in country after country, it fashions human beings into manifold distinctive forms. The faces of millions of men are today vanished into the darkness of oblivion, and yet hundreds remain that are vivid, bright in history. If this creative work of life can find lodging in literature with due skill, then it becomes imperishable. Such literature alone is blessed—blessed is Don Quixote, blessed is Robinson Crusoe. In our homes, from room to room, the form-making of the artist of life lies preserved, its images drawn. Some are hazy, incomplete, and unfinished; others, again, are vivid. Wherever in literature the influence of life rises above all the artificiality current in a particular period and becomes vividly alive—there lies literature's immortal city. But life, just as it is a sculptor of forms, is also a connoisseur of rasa. It deals, in particular, in rasa too. If the vessel of that rasa does not bear the signature of life, if it expresses merely the peculiarity of a particular period, or merely displays technical craftsmanship, then in literature that store of rasa grows corrupt, or withers and dies. Where the serving of rasa carries the gift of life's own unfeigned savouring, there is no fear of the invitation to that feast of rasa being spurned. In the line "Ten moons weep, falling at the touch of her anklet-bell-adorned feet," there is verbal cleverness, but no taste of life. On the other hand—

"That colour glowing at the crown of your head—
With that colour, dye the bodice upon my breast—"

In this I find the touch of life; this may be accepted without doubt.

Santiniketan. Midday. 25 April.

CHARACTER-PORTRAYAL IN LITERATURE

We have already said that if, in literature, the portrayal of character is signed by the artist of life, then there remains no doubt as to the permanence of its form. Those pictures that have been drawn bearing the stamp of life's own imagination have, line by line, colour by colour, spread across the pages of literature in every land and every age, for all mankind. Some of these, too, have faded; torn pages float about, scattered within the boundary of their own era's current, and outside that boundary they cannot even be seen. And there are others that remain, forever bright, before the eyes of all mankind. We are familiar with one picture—that of Ramachandra. He banished the guiltless Sita for the sake of pleasing his subjects. Such a great falsehood of a picture exists, but rarely, in the gallery of literature. But that Lakshmana who, whenever his own heart's anguish conflicted with his elder brother's indulgence, was ready to cast aside with impatience the teachings of the scriptures and the path of his elder brother—and yet, unable to overcome the bondage of deep-rooted convention, was compelled to deal a cruel blow to his own righteous judgment—than which no harsher blow exists in the world—that all-renouncing Lakshmana's picture shall, surpassing his brother's, remain forever bright in literature. Look, on the other hand, at Bhishma: there is no end to the praise of his virtues, and yet, in the gallery of the Kaurava assembly, his picture left no imprint. He sits there merely as a passive symbol of moral instruction. Look again at Karna: generous as a hero, and yet, like the most ordinary of men, repeatedly forgetful of himself in petty meanness. Look, on this side, at Vidura: he is a flawless follower of righteousness—so flawless that he does nothing but speak, yet no one is willing to heed his words. On the other hand, Dhritarashtra himself, though tormented every moment by the pain of righteous awareness, has, weakened by affection, let that awareness drift away so helplessly that, though he knew this consequence of unrighteousness would prove disastrous for the objects of his affection, he could not, by any means, firmly restrain his wavering heart. This is life's own imagined picture—not the broad brush of the Manusmriti's moral precepts. This Dhritarashtra lost his kingdom, lost sons dearer than life itself, but upon the throne of literature, this blind, erring figure remains fixed forever.

When we look at the literature of form alone, we see that wherever a poet has crossed the boundary of the real to magnify the stature of his hero, we naturally pare it down. Our world's Bhima never once uproots a palm tree to do battle—one club suffices him. In the kingdom of form, man beguiled the child when man himself was childlike. Since then, popular tradition has continued, no doubt, but sifted through the hands of time, its true essence of form remains within the mind. Thus Hanuman's leap across the ocean we still hear of, but can no longer see with our eyes, for our vision has changed.

The same is true of the banquet of rasa. There, at that banquet, where life itself serves with its own hand, there is no corruption of rasa. When the infant Krishna, wishing to see the moon, broke into weeping, the literature that held up a mirror before him, showing him his own reflection, and thus consoled him—there, however much the devotees of narrow literalism may cry out in protest at that artistry of composition, the artificiality of this rasa of parental tenderness, even if it gains some value in the market of some country's habit, has no value at all in the marketplace of eternity. If you wish to taste the cure for this artificiality in poetry, read this poem—

[The quoted verse about Krishna, Yashoda, and the butter is included in the original]

This is our own home's child, not the moon at all. This rasa has been accumulating in our minds, age after age. The mother has always enticed him by showing him this illusion, but she has never beguiled him by showing him "the moon."

In the creation of rasa, there is everywhere room for hyperbole, but even that hyperbole gains release only by preserving the measure of life. When that hyperbole declares, "The very stone dissolves in the breeze of the body," the mind says: there can be no truer statement than this falsehood. When in the hyperbole of rasa resounds, "For lakhs upon lakhs of ages I have kept you in my heart, yet my heart's thirst is not quenched"—then the mind says: in the heart where I feel the presence of my beloved, no mark of the boundary of ages upon ages can be found. By what else, except impossible hyperbole, can this feeling be expressed? This is

the distinction between the creation of rasa and the creation of form: form gains the seat of truth precisely by preserving its own boundary, while rasa gains that seat by effortlessly disregarding reality.

Thus I see that, in the gallery of literature, wherever the skill of the artist of life has shone brilliantly, there the door to death is closed. There, the uncertainty of popular fame is banished forever. Thus I was saying, wherever in literature true form has awakened, there is no fear. Looking closely, one sees what immense figures there are—some, perhaps, like the wretched vulture, like Mantharā; some, like Bhima, like Draupadi—the astonishing, imperishable fame of man, forever signed by life. In this immortal city of literature, those who have taken the seat of the creator—of some, the name is known, of some, it is not; but their touch remains within the minds of men. When I look toward them, doubt arises regarding my own claim.

Today, on this birthday, this is the thought to ponder: in the banquet of rasa, or in the gallery of form, in which letter has my name been inscribed? If this question, bypassing all the clamour of worldly fame, could reach my ear carried by a divine voice, only then would the age of my birthday be truly determined. Today it remains entangled, confused by abundant conjecture.

Santiniketan. Baishakh, 1348

HISTORICITY IN LITERATURE

We have heard, again and again, that we are governed wholly by history, and again and again we have nodded our heads most emphatically in inward agreement. But the resolution of this debate lies within my own heart, where I am nothing else—only a poet. There I am the creator, there I am solitary, I am free; I am not bound in the net of the countless external events around me. When the historian-scholar drags me out from that centre of my poetic creation and casts me elsewhere, I find it unbearable. Let us go once to the very beginning of a poet's life.

A winter night—dawn—pale light has begun to pierce the darkness and appear. Our manner of living was like that of the poor. There was no abundance at all of winter clothing. Wearing a single shirt upon my body, I would come out from under the warm quilt. But there was no real need to come out in such haste. Like everyone else, I could have lain curled up comfortably till at least six in the morning. But I had no such option. The garden within our house—that, too, was as poor as myself. Its chief wealth was a row of coconut trees hugging the eastern wall. Light would fall upon the trembling leaves of those coconut trees, the dewdrops would glisten—lest this daily sight of mine be hindered, such was my haste. I used to think that this joy of the morning's welcome would awaken eager interest in the mind of every child. Had this been true, then the matter would have found easy resolution within the universal nature of childhood itself. Had I known that I was not at all distinct from others in this intense eagerness, that I was ordinary—no further explanation would have been needed. But once I had grown a little older, I came to see that in the mind of no other boy existed such eagerness merely to watch the trembling of light upon the foliage. Those who grew up with me, I saw, did not fall anywhere within the scope of this madness. Why, indeed—there was no one around who, had he failed even once to see this play of light by shedding his winter clothes before the usual hour, would have felt himself deprived. Behind this lies no pattern of history at all. Had there been one, then in the morning that neglected garden would have grown crowded; a competition would have arisen as to who would arrive first to receive the whole scene into himself. The poet is precisely there. I had come home from school at half-past three. On arriving, I had seen above the third floor of our house a mass of dense blue cloud—what a wondrous sight that

was! That particular day I remember even now, but in that day's history, I know no second person who saw that cloud with his own eyes and felt a thrill of delight. Here, there appeared a solitary Rabindranath. One day, coming home from school, I stood on our western veranda and witnessed a most astonishing event. Donkeys had come from the washerman's house and were grazing on the grass—these donkeys were not donkeys fashioned by British imperial policy; they were our society's eternal donkeys, whose behaviour has shown no deviation since time immemorial—and another, a cow, was affectionately licking its body. This attraction of life toward life, which caught my eye, remains unforgettable to this day. But this I know for certain: amid all the history of that day, one Rabindranath alone watched this sight with rapt eyes. No other person in that day's history has ever spoken of the profound significance of that sight in such a way. In his own field of creation, Rabindranath stands alone; no history binds him to the common run of men. Where history is common, there the British subject existed, but Rabindranath did not. There, the strange drama of political change was unfolding, but the light that flickered upon the coconut leaves was no political import of the British Government. It blossomed within some mysterious history of my inner soul, and kept expressing itself, in myriad ways, as its own joy, day after day. In our Upanishads it is said: Na vā are putrāṇām kāmāya putrāḥ priyā bhavantyātmanastu kāmāya putrāḥ priyā bhavanti—the soul wishes to express itself in the guise of creator within the love of a son; that is why the love of a son is valuable to it. Though the creator may draw, for the material of his creation, something from history, something from his social surroundings, this material does not fashion him. Through the use of this material he expresses himself as creator. There are many events that await knowledge, and that knowledge itself is accidental. Once, when I came to know the Buddhist tales and the historical narratives, they, taking on clear pictorial form, brought within me the inspiration for creation. Suddenly the stories of Kathā o Kāhinī gushed forth like a fountain, overflowing into manifold channels. In the education of that time there was opportunity to know these accounts, and so one might say that Kathā o Kāhinī is a work peculiar to that very era. But the form and rasa of Kathā o Kāhinī raised a wave of joy in the mind of Rabindranath alone; history is not its cause. Rabindranath's own inner soul is its cause—for indeed, has it not said: the soul alone is the agent? To make a show, in the background, of historical material is, for certain minds, a matter of pride, and there, to some degree, it steals away for itself a portion of the creator's joy. But all this is

secondary; the creator knows. The ascetic Upagupta—amid the whole array of Buddhist history, what grandeur, what compassion, was revealed uniquely to Rabindranath alone. Had this been truly historical, the entire land would have scrambled for the "scattered grain" of Kathā o Kāhinī. And no second person, either before him or after him, has been able to see these images in precisely this way. In truth, they found joy for this very reason—from the distinctiveness of the poet's creative agency. Once, when I felt the play of life's current moving through the rivers of Bengal, my inner soul, in its own joy, gathering within the heart these varied glimpses of joy and sorrow, composed, month after month, that picture of rural Bengal—no one before me had done this. For the creator works alone in his workshop of creation. He creates, giving of himself, like Vishwakarma himself. The rural picture the poet saw that day undoubtedly contained within it the clash and counter-clash of political history. But in his creation, that history of human joy and sorrow which, surpassing all history, has continued unbroken in the fields of cultivation, in village festivals, carrying its own daily joys and sorrows—sometimes under Mughal rule, sometimes under English rule—its utterly simple expression of humanity flowing on eternally—it was this that was reflected in "Galpaguchchha," no feudal system, no political system. The critics of today, who roam freely through vast tracts of history, of that I know not even a fraction—perhaps twelve annas of it. I suppose it is for this very reason that I feel particular irritation. My mind says: "Away with your history." The helm of my ship of creation is held by that very soul for whom the son's affection is a necessity for self-expression, who, absorbing into itself the world's many sights, its many joys and sorrows, finds joy in manifold creation, and distributes joy. Not all that could be said of the history of life has been said here, but that history is secondary. It is solely in the yearning of man-the-creator for self-expression that this long procession of ages has been engaged. Look deeply, and see that history travels as charioteer to man-the-creator, within the vast—he is beyond history's reach, at the very centre of man's soul. Our Upanishads knew this truth, and the message I have received from those Upanishads, I myself have taken up; within it lies my own agency.

Santiniketan. May, 1941

TRUTH AND REALITY

Man has not chosen for himself his own self, nor his surroundings. He is wealth that has fallen into his lap unsought. But accompanying him is man's mind, and this mind is not satisfied with that. It wants what is after its own heart. Man has obtained himself as he is, but what is after his own heart he must fashion through much striving. This current of his heart's desire, man has carried, in age after age, lending it varied forms in country after country. Its value to him is far greater than the wealth bestowed by his own nature. He is not born complete in form; and so, in his own creation, he has continually been gathering his own completeness, making himself whole. In art and in literature, this—this form after his own heart—by means of its very image, he sees, amid a fragmented, scattered life, his own complete truth; he recognizes himself. In the great epics, through great heroes, man gathers his own self-understanding as he proceeds, seeking, beyond himself, the object of his fulfillment. That is his art, his literature. In country after country, man has preserved his true nature from the clutches of his own false meanness. Man knows his own baseness, his own corruption, to be real, but does not believe it to be true. His truth he establishes within his own creation. Its worth exceeds even that of a kingdom or an empire. If, under any circumstance, for any reason, he mocks that glory with disdain, he brings down the whole of society. Those who dismiss art and literature as artificial do not know truth. In fact, everyday man, in his many patched-together coverings, in his many distortions, is artificial; he has found his seat in eternal completeness in the hermitage of literature, in the wealth of meditation. Wherever there is disrespect for man's self-expression, there man loses himself. One may call that "real," but man is not merely real. Much of him is unreal—that is to say, he is true. He remains eager, through many paths, for the pursuit of truth. His literature, his art, is one great path. Though it sometimes travels the road of reality, its final destination points, in the end, toward truth.

Santiniketan. June, 1941