

Visva Sahitya

Rabindranath Tagore

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All the talents that we possess within ourselves are only for reaching out to everyone else. Through such relationships we realize ourselves, we attain truth. Otherwise, it does not matter whether I am or anything else is.

Our link to the reality of the world is of three kinds: the connection made by the intellect, the connection arising out of need, and the connection found in joy.

Among these, the connection of the intellect can be thought of as a kind of contest. It is as the tie between the hunter and his quarry. The intellect places truth in a witness box of its own making and interrogates it to extract its secrets, bit by bit. This is why the intellect grows proud of its truths. The more of truth it knows, the more power it arrogates to itself.

¹ *Rabindra Racahanabali X* “Prabandha,”: 324–33. Kolkata: Shiksha Sachib Government of West Bengal, 1989. For years, the essay was only available in English in summaries or sections, such as the translation of the last few paragraphs by Buddhadev Bose. Comparatists like Bose and Sisir Kumar Das quoted from it as the first call for an Indian Comparative Literature. Bose quoted his translation of a few paragraphs in the mission statement of the first Department of Comparative Literature that he founded in Jadavpur University. His remarks and translation were available on the website of the Department of Comparative Literature, Jadavpur University (<http://www.complitju.org/World%20Literature/WorldLiterature.html>) accessed 12 July 2011; the site is translation of this essay, see “World Literature” in Rabindranath Tagore, *Selected Writings on Literature and Language*, eds Sisir Kumar Das and Sukanta Chaudhuri (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001; 2nd ed., 2010).

Given its importance, we have tried to offer a new translation of the essay. In our translation, we have, for most part, retained the more accurate rendering of Tagore’s words, which Swapan Chakravorty (Das and Chaudhuri 2001: 138–150) has often rendered into more idiomatic English paraphrase. While the Chakravorty translation makes Tagore seem more direct and modern, even contemporary, our attempt has been to retain the aesthetic flavour of the original, instead of rendering it merely as a text of ideas. Chakravorty’s translation simplifies sentences, rephrasing some considerably, aiming not only at lucidity and simplicity, but also offers, at times, a gist or even interpretation of Tagore’s meaning, without being true to his original style of expression. We, on the other hand, have consciously tried to maintain Tagore’s somewhat complicated syntax, rather than simplifying his sentences into “plain” English, sticking to his sentence and paragraph breaks, rather than combining and rewriting them to clarify and simply his meaning. We have also avoided gender neutral alterations, translating *manush* as “man” rather than “human” mostly because such usage was characteristic of Tagore’s times. Tagore almost certainly included the woman in his notion of man, though in specifically speaking of woman in one section of his

Next is the connection of need. In this connection, truth joins forces with our own strengths. In this relationship of self-interest, truth further reveals itself to us. But still our separation from truth does not disappear. Just as the English trader bowed before the Nawab, offered him gifts, and having secured his own interests, ascended the throne himself, we too use truth to achieve our ends and think we have the ownership of the world. Then we declare that nature is our slave, water, air and fire—our unpaid servants.

Finally, the connection of joy: this is a connection of beauty or bliss in which all differences dissolve; there remains no pride; we do not hesitate to give ourselves to the very small, to the weak. There the king of Mathura [Krishna] is at his wits' end trying to find a way to hide his royal dignity from the lowly milkmaid of Vrindavan. Where the connection is that of joy, we are not limited by the power of the intellect or the power of work; we only experience ourselves. There remains no cover or calculation in between.

To put it in one sentence, the connection of the intellect is our school, the connection of need our office, and the connection of joy our home. We do not live completely in the school, nor do we fully manifest ourselves in the office; it is only in our homes that we spread our whole selves out and live. The school is devoid of ornamentation, the office remains undecorated, but we do beautify our homes.

What is this connection of joy? It is to know another as our very own, and to know ourselves as if we were another's. When we know in this manner, no questions remain. We do not ask, Why do I love myself? The joy in our experience of ourselves is self-evident. Similarly, when we experience ourselves in another, we do not need to ask, why have we liked them.

Yajnavalkya tells Gargi:

Naba are putrasya kamay putrah priyo bhabati
 Atmanastu kamay putrah priya bhabati.
 Naba are bittasya kamay bittam priyam bhabati. Atmanastu kamay bittyam priyam
 bhabati.²

Footnote 1 (continued)

essay, he acknowledges that much of the other references referred to masculine roles and occupations; at the level of abstraction, then, "man" may be understood as human, but in its practical application, Tagore was quite aware of its gendered implications.

Another feature of this translation is that several important or technical words from the original have been included in parenthesis so that the reader who knows Bangla or any other modern Indian language may have some notion of the original word used by the author. Conversely, when we retain the original word in the sentence, we provide the translation in parenthesis. Extraneous items, often connectives or explanatory phrases, have been placed in square brackets to indicate that they were not in the original. Moreover, because it is being published in India, we have avoided glossing references to deities such as Krishna, Siva, Parvati, or Kubera.

² Tagore quotes the same lines in his book *Sadhana* too: *The Realisation of Life* (1913; London: Macmillan, 1915):

It is said in one of the Upanishads: It is not that thou lovest thy son because thou desirest him, but thou lovest thy son because thou desirest thine own soul. (Footnote: *Na va are putrasya kamaya putrah priyo bhavati, atmanastu kamaya putrah priyo bhavati.*) The meaning of this is, that whomsoever we love, in him we find our own soul in the highest sense. The final truth of our existence lies in this. *Paramatma*, the supreme soul, is in me, as well as in my son, and my joy in my son is the realisation of this truth. It has become quite a commonplace fact, yet it is wonderful to think upon, that the joys and sorrows of

The son is dear not because we long for the son, but because we long for the *atma*, our true self. Property is dear not because we desire the property but because we desire the *atma*, or the self. This means that in whatever we experience ourselves more fully, we desire that. The son eliminates my shortcomings; I find myself all the more in my son. In him, I become more of myself. This is why he is my dearest kin; he is a manifestation of my self outside of me. It is the truth I experience so certainly within myself that makes me experience love; that very same truth I know in my son and therefore my love for him expands. That is why to be close to someone is to know what they love. It is thus that we understand where, in this wide world, they have located themselves and how far they have spread their souls. Where my affection does not lie, my soul only skirts the rim of its own boundary.

A child laughs at the sight of light or movement. The child finds in that light, that movement, a magnification of its own consciousness; that is why it experiences joy.

But beyond the senses, when the child's consciousness starts to manifest itself in the various levels of its heart and mind, then a little movement does not give him joy. It is not as if he experiences no joy, but only a bit of it. In this way, the more a soul blossoms, the more it wants to experience its own truth in a greater way.

Man can experience his innermost soul outside himself most easily and completely in another. In sight, in sound, in the mind's emotions, in the play of imagination, in the many tugs of the heart, it exerts itself among other people. This is why in knowing others, coming close to others, and in doing others' work does

Footnote 2 (continued)

our loved ones are joys and sorrows to us—nay they are more. Why so? Because in them we have grown larger, in them we have touched that great truth which comprehends the whole universe. (29)

The dialogue in the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad (II.iv) is actually between Yajnavalkya and Maitreyi and not between him and Gargi as Tagore attributes it. Yajnavalkya says:

It is not for the sake of the husband, my dear, that he is loved, but for one's own sake that he is loved. It is not for the sake of the wife, my dear, that she is loved, but for one's own sake that she is loved. It is not for the sake of the sons, my dear, that they are loved, but for one's own sake that they are loved. It is not for the sake of wealth, my dear, that it is loved, but for one's own sake that it is loved. It is not for the sake of the Brahmana, my dear, that he is loved, but for one's own sake that he is loved. It is not for the sake of the Kshatriya, my dear, that he is loved, but for one's own sake that he is loved. It is not for the sake of the worlds, my dear, that they are loved, but for one's own sake that they are loved. It is not for the sake of the gods, my dear, that they are loved, but for one's own sake that they are loved. It is not for the sake of beings, my dear, that they are loved, but for one's own sake that they are loved. It is not for the sake of all, my dear, that all is loved, but for one's own sake that it is loved. The Self, my dear Maitreyi, should be realised – should be heard of, reflected on and meditated upon. By the realisation of the Self, my dear, through hearing, reflection and meditation, all this is known (<http://www.messagefrommasters.com/upanishads/brihadaranyaka5.htm>).

Tagore quotes selectively from the Upanishad. The standard interpretation of these verses is that all love springs from the *atma* or the self and it is because the same self resides in others that we love them; they are, in other words, loved not for their own sakes, but for the sake of the self. The simpler explanation is that we love others for our own selfish reasons, not for themselves but for ourselves.

it fill to the brim. Consequently, in every nation and in every period, whoever has been able to disseminate his soul mostly widely among the people, thus realizing and expressing it most fully, has become a great man. He is the real *mahatma*. The success of my soul lies in the whole of humanity—whosoever has not understood even a little of this at some point of time, has received a little less of humanity. In knowing the *atma* merely within himself, he knows it in a diminished form.

To know oneself among others—such is the natural disposition of the human soul—to which selfishness is one impediment, pride another. Before these impediments of *samsara* the natural flow of our soul breaks into pieces; we do not see the beauty of humanity in its undivided glory.

But I know that some people will argue, if this be the natural dharma (inclination) of the human soul, then why does the world disrespect it so? The things you dismiss as impediments, the self-interest, the pride, why will you not call these our natural dharma as well?

In fact many people say such things. That is because we are more likely to see the impediments to our nature than our nature itself. When a man first starts riding a two wheeler, he is greeted more with falling than riding. At that time if someone says, this man is practicing falling down, not riding, it is profitless to argue with him. In every step I take in this world I can see the impediments of self-interest and pride, but in spite of that if I cannot see man's deep effort to safeguard *svadharma* (one's true nature), which is to come together with others, if I decree merely the fall as natural, then that would be pointless nitpicking.

Indeed, to recognize the dharma that is natural to us, to know it as such, to realize its full powers, we need to encounter impediments in its way. It is only thus that it realizes itself consciously, and the more its consciousness deepens, the more profound its joy is. Everything follows a similar pattern.

Consider the intellect. The dharma of the intellect is to ascertain the causes of things. When it is able to do so obviously, it does not quite see itself clearly. But the causal relations of this universe are so deeply and secretly rooted that to excavate them the intellect must labour night and day. In this effort to eliminate impediments, the intellect experiences itself deeply in the discovery of scientific knowledge—in doing so its grandeur increases. Indeed if one thinks deeply, science is nothing but the realization of the intellect in material reality. Where it discovers its own rules, it perceives itself and matter in conjunction. This is called understanding. In this seeing is the joy of the intellect. Otherwise to find that the reason apples fall to the ground is the same as why the sun attracts the earth would not have made men so happy. So what if the sun attracts the earth, what is it to me? It matters to me because my intellect has been able to capture this immense phenomenon of the universe and I have exerted and established my own intellect over the whole universe in doing so. Everything from a particle of dust to the Sun, Moon, and stars thus encounters my intellect. In this way endless secrets of the universe are bringing out man's intellect and expressing it in a magnified way to him; after this meeting with the universe, man's intellect returns to him once again, augmented. This confluence of intellect with outer objects is intelligence. And in this confluence is the joy of our capacity to understand.

Similarly, to find completely one's own humanity among other people is the natural dharma of the human soul and in that is its joy. To achieve this dharma fully and consciously, it must go through impediments and obstructions within and without. This is why self-interest is so strong, pride in oneself so unshakable, and the path of samsara so difficult. In the face of so many difficulties, wherever the dharma of humanity expresses itself in brilliance, strength, and complete beauty, it is so joyful. There we find ourselves enhanced.

This is why we wish to read the biographies of great men. In their characters we see our flawed and cloaked selves freed and uncovered. We derive pleasure from history when we see our own character manifest in many people, many nations, many eras, many incidents, many varieties, and many shapes. Then whether I understand it clearly or not, in my heart I accept that I am one with all men—to whatever degree I experience that unity, to that degree is my well-being and joy.

But in biographies and histories we do not see the whole clearly nor in its full range from the top to the bottom. It appears before us covered with many problems, many obscurities. Even if the face of humanity that we see is itself immense, to dress up that face according to our tastes, to immortalize it in language, is the natural propensity of our hearts. As if in doing that, we make it more specially our own. In expressing my own affection for it in beautiful language and skilled craftsmanship, I transform it into an object of everyone's heart. It is no more afloat in this samsara's ebb and flow.

In this way, all that manifests itself so luminously on the outside, be that the Sun's bright rays or the brightness of a great character or the emotion of our own hearts—whatever kindles our emotions from one moment to another, that, the heart entwines in a creation of its own and clings to as its own. In such instances it is the heart that expresses itself more and more concretely.

[To recapitulate] man's self-expression in the world is of two kinds. One kind is his work, the other his literary creativity. These two modes have always proceeded by side. Man has poured himself forth both in the compositions of his work and in the creations of his imagination. These two have progressed completing each other. Through them we know man in history and literature.

In his work arena man has built home, state, and religion with all the might and knowledge of his body, mind, and heart. In its building is manifested all that man has learned, achieved, and desired. In this way man's nature entwines with the world and manifests itself in many images in the midst of everything else. This is how all that was vague in the realm of ideas manifests itself in material form in the world, what was weak in one, becomes many-limbed and definite in union with the many. That is why it has so happened that no individual is able to express himself clearly or completely without home, society, state, and religion, all of which have been built by the many over a long period of time. These things have become the means for the self-expression of man. Without them we cannot consider ourselves civilized or fully human. Whether as individuals or as societies, to the extent we remain without a link to the whole, to that extent are we barbaric. Therefore, in civilized societies, if the state is affected, broadly speaking, every individual is also

affected; if the society is constricted, every individual's self-blossoming is stunted. The more liberal man's composition of his larger world, the more is he at liberty to express his humanity. To the degree he is inhibited, to that same degree is man's self-expression impoverished; that is why samsara has devised the expedient of work so that man may in his self-expression find his only joy.

But the expression of himself in the work sphere is not man's primary objective—it is merely a by-product. The homemaker expresses herself in her house work but it is not the express intention of her mind to do so. Through house work she fulfils many of her desires; these desires are reflected by her work and illuminate her true nature.

There are, however, occasions on which we wish chiefly to celebrate our self-expression. Imagine a wedding day. On the one hand there are all the arrangement to be made, on the other, there is the need to express one's innermost emotions; on that day people of the house cannot but announce to the world their happiness and joy. What is the way to announce this? Flutes play, lamps are lit, and every room decorated with flowers. Through beautiful music, beautiful aromas, beautiful sights, and dazzling spectacle, the heart spills over like a multi-fauceted fountain. Through all these signs it attempts to spread its joy among others and thereby make it real.

[Similarly] the mother cannot but take care of her child. But it is not merely that; not only in her tending to her child, but of its own accord and without any other reason does a mother's love wish to express itself in the world outside. Then it brims over in so many games, caresses, and words. Then she dresses her child in so many colours, so many ornaments, and simply, needlessly, wants to extend her own largesse in even more plenitude, her comeliness in even more beauty.

From this we understand that such is the dharma of our heart. It wants to disseminate its emotions into the world. It is not complete in its self. It always wants to make its own truths the truths of the world. The house it inhabits is not merely a structure of bricks and mortar—it attempts to make it a home and colours it in its own hues. The country in which the heart lives does not remain as earth, water and sky—instead, only when that country manifests itself as the mother-image of God's life giving force, then it finds joy. Otherwise the heart cannot see itself in the external world. If this self-expression does not happen, the heart becomes indifferent and indifference is the death of the heart.

In this manner does the heart develop its savoury relationships with truth. Where relationships are full of flavour, there is give and take. Our heart-goddess's (Hridaya-Lakshmi's) pride is hurt when she cannot send back an offering equal to what she receives from the world. To manifest the pride of her reciprocal hospitality she fashions her tray of offerings with many ingredients, many languages, sounds, brushes, and blocks of stone [for carving]. In so doing, if any of her needs be served, well and good, but often, even at their expense, she is eager to express herself. She wants to display her lavishness even if the price is bankruptcy. Self-expression is that department in man's nature which is the chief site of incautious spending—it is here that the accountant of the intellect laments over his losses, striking his forehead in frustration.

The heart says, how will I be as true as I am within in the without? Where is that material, that opportunity, in the outside world? It cries out, I cannot show myself, cannot establish myself in the outside. When the rich person becomes aware of his own wealth, he may blow up all of Kuber's gold to show that richness to the world. When the lover feels true love in his heart, then to express that love, that is, to make that love real in the world, he is ready to sacrifice in an instant his wealth, soul, and self-respect. In this way the heart's desire to make the external an object of the internal and vice versa continues persistently. Balaramdas' verse declares: *Tomay hiyar bhiton hoite ke koilo bahir*. [You being inside my heart, who has drawn you out?] Meaning, a dear object such as belongs to the interiors of the heart, somehow has been brought outside, hence the desire to return it back to the inside. There is also the reverse. When the heart does not perceive the correlate of its inner desires and emotions in the outer world, then it tries desperately to create those images with its own hands. In this way the heart works to make the world its own and to make itself over to the world. To express itself in the outside is a part of this work. That is why the heart can convince us to give up everything in its compulsion to express itself.

When a barbaric militia goes to war, it does not simply try to defeat the enemy. It dons war paint, it screams and struts its dance of destruction—this is a manifestation in the outer world of the violence within. As if the violence would be incomplete without this display. Violence fulfils its need in warfare, but offers a seemingly pointless performance of hostility for the sheer satisfaction of the pleasure [of self-expression].

Even in the contemporary wars in the West, it is not as if there is no opportunity for the expression of aggression. However, in these modern wars the play of intellect has become prominent, with the imperative of the human heart gradually fading away. When in Egypt the English army was attacked, they did not simply die to win a war. They died to express the ignited flame of their hearts. Those who merely want to win the war do not do such unnecessary things. Even in suicide the heart wants to express itself. Who else could think of such needless expenditure?

The puja (religious ritual) we perform is done by the thinking person in one way and by the devoted one in another. The intelligent person thinks that by praying I will receive good fortune for myself; and the man of faith thinks that without puja my devotion knows no completeness. Even if the offering has no other value than the outer expression of my heart's devotion, I shall have found solace for my devotion. In this way devotion expresses itself in a puja and fulfils itself. The mentality of the calculating person's puja is akin investing money for interest, while the devotee's puja is merely an expenditure. To express itself, the heart hardly notices the losses it incurs.

Wherever in the world we see the possibility of such a correlate of our heart, our heart unquestioningly gives itself there. Beauty in the world is a manifestation of such largesse. The flower, we see, is in no hurry to become the seed; it transcends its need and blooms beautifully; the clouds do not rush off after raining, they languorously and needlessly catch our eyes with their colours; the trees do not stick-like spread their arms outwards as beggars for light and shower, but

green thickets of leaves fill the horizon with their bounty; the sea, we notice, is not an immense office that transports water to the atmosphere in the form of clouds but awes us in its fathomlessness; and the mountain not only feeds water to the rivers of the earth but like *Rudra*, deep in yoga, stills the fears of those who cross the skies—thus we discover the *hriday-dharma* (the heart's-purpose) of the world. The over-wizened intellect might ask, why this careless expenditure in needless efforts? The ever-young heart answers, just because it pleases me; I see no other reason. The heart knows: there is one heart that expresses itself every moment in the universe. Why else would there be so much beauty, music, gestures, signs, and signals, so much decoration across creation? The heart is not taken in by the miserliness of business: that is why to entice it need has been so elaborately hidden from the earth, the water, and the skies, in so many needless arrangements. If the world was not flavourful (*rasamay*) we would have been small, insulted beings. Our hearts would say, "I am not invited to the world's sacrifice (*yajna*)."³ But the whole world, surpassing its various duties, has brimmed over with joy and is telling the heart, in so many different ways, I want you: in laughter I want you, in tears I want you, in fear I want you, in assurance I want you, in anger I want you, in peace I want you.

Thus in the world, we witness two things—the expression of work and the expression of emotion. But that which is being expressed through work we cannot witness in its totality or understand fully. We cannot fathom with our own knowledge the eternal power of knowledge that lies therein.⁴

But the expression of being (*bhava*) is a palpable expression. What is beautiful, is beautiful. Whatever is immense, is immense. The *Rudra* (wrathful) is frightening. The *rasas* (emotional states) of the world enter our hearts and bring out the *rasa* of our own hearts. Whatever be the hide and seek of this confluence, whatever be the impediments on its way, there is nothing but this expression and this confluence to be found there.

Therefore we see the similarity between this world-samsara and the human-samsara (the macrocosm and the microcosm). God's truth and knowledge are manifest in the work of the world, and his joy is instantiated in the flavours of the world. It is difficult to grasp his wisdom through work, but there is no difficulty in experiencing his joy in the *rasas*. Because, in these pleasures is He expressing himself.

In the human-samsara too, the powers of our knowledge are busy working, while the powers of our joy are engaged in the creation of delight. In work lies the power of our self-preservation, in pleasure our power of self-expression. Self-preservation is necessary for us, but self-expression is more than the necessary.

³ Refers to one of Tagore's songs, "I have been invited," where he speaks of the world's joy-sacrifice, *ananda-yajna*.

⁴ Tagore is suggesting that the mysteries of even the material world cannot be fully unraveled or mastered by the intellect; the quest of science will forever be incomplete because no matter how much we know, what remains to be known is still infinite.

Necessity hampers expression and vice versa; the example of war shows us that. Self-interest discourages heedless expenditure but joy expresses itself in prodigality. That is why, in the realm of self-interest such as the office, the lesser we express ourselves, the more respectable we are; on the other hand, the more we forget about our self-interests in a festival of joy, the brighter the celebration becomes.

That is why there is no bar on man's self-expression in literature. Self-interest is far from it. Here, pain pours a cloud of tears upon our hearts, but it does not interfere with our household duties (*samsara*); fear sways our heart but does not harm our bodies; happiness fills our hearts with the touch of mirth but does not awaken our greed. In this way man has woven alongside his household of necessities a need-free habitation of literature. There he is able to experience his own nature through various *rasas* without harming himself in any practical sense; here he can discover expression unhampered by obstacles. There is no obligation here, only happiness. There are no sentries here, only the emperor himself.

So what is it that we recognize in literature? Man's plenitude, his affluence—that by which he has exceeded his necessities, that which could not be consumed in his household.

This is why in an essay of mine I have said that though every child and man is well acquainted with the pleasures of gastronomy, this has never acquired a status higher than that of farce in literature. Because, the pleasure in eating does not transcend its satiation. After filling our stomachs we reward it with a deep sigh and send it on its way. We do not invite it to the princely gates of literature. But that which cannot be contained in the pots of our store rooms, those pleasures course through the waves of literature with great aplomb. Since man cannot consume them fully in work, he heaves a sigh of relief to be able to express them in literature with all the force of his full heart.

In this plenitude is the befitting expression of man. It is true that man loves to eat but his heroism is truer still. Who will withstand this force of man's truth? Like the Ganga (Bhagirathi), it has demolished rocks, flooded the cloud-elephant (*airavat*), satiated the thirst of villages, cities, and fields, and cascaded into the ocean. Man's heroism has fulfilled all the necessities of his *samsara* and brimmed over.

In this way whatever is great in man, whatever is constant, whatever is as yet unconsumed in work and errands—all this has been captured in literature and by itself has built man's image of immensity.

There is one more reason [for the value of literature]. In this world, whatever we see, we see in a scattered way; we see it a little here and there, a little now and then; we see it mixed up with ten other things. But in literature those gaps, those adulterations do not exist. There all the light shines upon that which is being expressed. For that time being nothing else is allowed to be seen. Through many contrivances such a place is created that allows only that to be luminous.

That is why one places nothing that cannot withstand such stark individuality and luminosity in the space of literature. Because, to place the undeserving in such a location is to humiliate it. In the many veils of the world the glutton often escapes notice but to place him in the concentrated light of literature is to make

of him an object of derision. Consequently, that expression of humanity which is not insignificant, that which the human heart in its mercy or heroism, wrath or peace, considers without inhibition to be a worthy representation of itself, that which while standing within the girdle of artistic craftsmanship can withstand the continuous stare of eternal time—that is what man naturally places in literature. Otherwise its oddity becomes painful to us. Our hearts rebel to see anyone but the rightful emperor seated on the throne.

But not all men have broadness of feeling or discretion, neither do all societies, and there comes a time when fleeting and small desires diminish man. In that hour of crisis the distorted mirror magnifies the small and in the literature of such a time man augments his pettiness, floods his own shortcomings with audacious light. Then craftiness takes the place of art, pride substitutes glory and Tennyson is replaced by Kipling.

But eternal time (*mahakal*) reigns supreme. He must strain everything. Through his sieve all that is petty and withered slips through and loses itself in the dust, becoming the dust. Through ages and generations of men only that survives wherein all men can perceive themselves. Through this process of careful filtering what remains is man's treasure of all times and all nations.

In such demolishing and re-making of literature the eternal ideal of man's nature and self-expression builds up on its own. That ideal also embodies the hull which guides the literature of a new age. If we judge literature according to that ideal then we have made use of all humanity's powers of discretion.

Now is the time for me to come to the main point—and this is it—to see literature through the mirror of nation, time and people is to diminish it, not see it fully. If we understand that in literature the universal man (*vishva-manav*) expresses himself, then we can perceive what is truly worthy of observing in literature. Where the author has not been simply the pretext of literary composition, his literature has failed. Where the author has experienced in his own being the being of all men, whose writing expresses the pain of every man, that writing has found a place in literature. Thus must one view literature as a temple that the universal man (*vishva-manav*) has built; writers have come from all times and all nations to work as labourers in that project. The plan of the building is not available to us, but whatever is wrong is immediately demolished; every labourer has to use his natural competence to integrate his own composition into the whole and thereby complete the invisible plan. In this is expressed his power and the reason why no one pays him a pittance like an ordinary labourer but respects him like a maestro.

You have called the topic I have been entrusted to discuss as "Comparative Literature" in English. In Bangla I shall call it *Visva Sahitya* (world literature).

What does man say through his work, what is his direction, what is he trying to accomplish? To understand this one needs to follow man's intention through history. The reign of Akbar or Gujarat's history or Elizabeth's character—such piecemeal viewing only satiates our curiosity for information. The one who knows that Akbar and Elizabeth are merely pretexts, who knows man has tried to fulfil his intentions across history through many efforts at realization (*sadhana*), many mistakes, and many corrections, who knows that man is trying in every way to

connect with everyone else in the broadest way in order to free himself, who knows that the individual is struggling to succeed in politics (*rajtantra*) and from politics progress to democracy—man is breaking and re-making himself only to voice himself in the universal, to realize himself in the many—such a person tries to see not the individual but the deeper intention in the striving soul's constant endeavour to transcend his personal history. He does not return after seeing the pilgrims—he looks for the deity that all the pilgrims have congregated to see.

Similarly, how man expresses his joy in literature, how and in what form the human soul chooses to manifest its diverse, variegated, multiple images of self-expression, that is the only thing worth considering in world literature. Literature must actually enter the world—whether it pleases to express itself in the form of the diseased, the accomplished, or the ascetic person—to know how far man can find his kinship in the world, and to what extent he can realize truth. It will not do to know it as an artificial construct; it is a world in itself. Its essence exceeds the individual's grasp. It is in continuous creation, like the material universe itself, but in the innermost core of that unfinished creation is a perfected ideal that remains unmoving.

The substance of the Sun's core is recreating itself in many liquid and solid forms that we cannot see, but the corona of light that surrounds the sun ceaselessly proclaims its existence to the world. Thus it constantly bestows itself and unites itself with everyone. If we could perceive the totality of humanity in a visual metaphor, we would see it as a vision of the Sun. We would see its matter slowly arranging itself in many layers within itself, surrounding itself in a halo of joyful expression, shedding its light in every direction.⁵ Regard literature for once as that halo of expression composed in language and enfolding humanity. Here is a tempest of light, the source of radiance, here are clashes of brilliant spray.

Walking through a neighbourhood you notice how busy everybody is: the grocer tending his shop, the blacksmith hammering on the anvil, the labourer carrying his load, the merchant balancing his accounts—what may at first be invisible, you may perceive with your heart—on both sides of the road, in every home, in bazaar and shop, in lanes and by-lanes, how the torrent of *rasa* (relish) floods through so many streams and tributaries, overrunning so much shabbiness, wretchedness, and poverty. The nectar of the universal soul of man is apportioned out among all men through the Ramayan—Mahabharat, tales and fables, *kirtans* and *panchalis*; Ram—Lakshman appear to prop up the most insignificant actions of the pettiest of men; the merciful breeze of Panchavati blows in the darkest home; man's heart-creations and self-expressions enclasp the penury and stringency of the workplace of the labouring man, with arms bejewelled with bracelets of beauty and beneficence. For once we need to see literature as embracing all of humanity. We have to see that in his emotional self man has expanded his practical being

⁵ Rabi, the poet's own name, means sun; in several of his poems, Tagore uses the metaphor of the sun to represent himself and his creativity. It is not unlikely that a similar self-referentiality is subtly in operation here.

so far in manifold and multi-directional ways. The monsoons that bless him are composed of so many rains of songs and showers of poetry, so many *Meghdutams*, so many Vidyapatis; the pains and joys of his small home have been augmented with the tales of the pains and joys of so many great monarchs of the solar and lunar dynasties! How the humblest man engirds the pains of his daughter with the consummate compassion of Princess Parvati, daughter of the King of the mountains; how in the glory of Kailasha's poverty-stricken Lord, he glorifies the pain of his own poverty! In this way man advances, surpassing himself, intensifying himself, burnishing himself with a halo of brightness as he struggles on. Though sorely straightened by his circumstances, man has created for himself an augmented thought-creation, a second *samsara* (universe) of literary composition that surrounds this worldly *samsara*.

Do not so much as imagine that I will show you the way to such a world literature. Each of us must make his way forward according to his own means and abilities. All I have wanted to say is that just as the world is not merely the sum of your plough field, plus my plough field, plus his plough field—because to know the world that way is only to know it with a yokel-like parochialism—similarly world literature is not merely the sum of your writings, plus my writing, plus his writings. We generally see literature in this limited, provincial manner. To free oneself of that regional narrowness and resolve to see the universal being in world literature, to apprehend such totality in every writer's work, and to see its interconnect-edness with every man's attempt at self-expression—that is the objective we need to pledge ourselves to.

—*Translated by Rijula Das and Makarand R. Paranjape*