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My dear Sukla.

You want a brief account of my life and work for the next issue of your journal.

I was born on 27th January 1903 and had a severe cardiac attack in October 1973, from which I have not recovered and never shall. No wonder that at my age and in my situation, everything, particularly my own work, seems to be unreal, and yet everything, the affection of my pupils, for example, seems to have value. So I embark on this autobiographical venture gladly but not without a sense of embarrassment.

The first thing that strikes me is that I am old-fashioned in my tastes, studies and attitudes. Reviewing my first English book, *The Art of Bernard Shaw 1936*, *The London Mercury* ended a commendatory note with the rider that it was 'somewhat lacking in contemporaneity.' About three decades after, when I published *Shakespeare's Historical Plays* (1964), a continental journal—I forget the name just now—wrote deprecatingly that criticism such as mine was 'anaemic' but added a consolatory tag that the book nevertheless appeared to the reviewer to possess 'an old fashion charm.' Was I born like Sir John Falstaff 'with a white head and something of a round belly'? Or, was it a part of my training? Professor P. C. Ghose, my most distinguished teacher, who was a master of many languages and literatures, used to say with visible pride, 'when I see a new book, I read an old one'!

My first teacher was my father, a lover of English, who regarded writing good English as the noblest aim of life and praise of one's English style as the most covetable distinction. By 'good English' he did not mean gaudiness or verbosity, but a happy turn of phrasing, common things felicitously expressed. He would in his own modest way value expression more than idea, put form above content. So whenever he met with a beautiful sentence in a book or even in a newspaper,

he would write it out somewhere, on margins of books, on doors and walls, on any other thing that might seem handy. So any one entering any room in our thatched village house would at first be bewildered by an array of detached sentences which none but my father could decipher. But even while I was under his tutelage, I had moments of doubt about what was primary or more valuable : the meaning or the expression.

It was in this state of mind that in 1920 I entered Presidency College, Calcutta, then the most important seat of learning in Bengal, might be in the whole of India. Here I felt that I was under wider horizons, could browse amongst books in a magnificent library that had been making its collections for more than a century, and I also came in touch with teachers who were not only eminent scholars but men with original insights, who approached literature, each in his distinctive way. I would first mention J. W. Holme, whose introduction to *As You Like It* in the (Old) Arden Shakespeare is a standard piece of criticism. My contact with Holme was brief, because largely on account of political agitation, an Englishman had by then become somewhat of a misfit in an Indian college, and Holme was, I believe, an aloof and detached sort of man who left as soon as he sensed the wind of change. An 'unfledged' teenager, I could not get out of him all that he had to give me. Yet I retain even today vivid impressions of his lectures and more pointedly, of his comments on my essays. Taking a common sense view of literature, he was very hard on padding, on decoration and overemphasis. He frowned whenever he saw the adverb 'very', and the use of 'very' as an adjective he looked upon as a culpable offence. He wanted us to think clearly and to express ourselves concisely and with precision, never allowing us to use a word too many. A year's work with him cured me of my inherited love for beauty of expression as an end in itself. I have heard that at Liverpool, where he was a pupil of Oliver Elton, he had specialized in Spenser, but his attitude to literature was un-romantic and unmystical. Although I treasure my association with this teacher, I felt even then that there are heights and depths in poetry which one cannot reach along the path of common sense.

At the opposite extreme stood another teacher— Srikumar Banerjee, author of *Critical Theories and Poetic Practice in 'The Lyrical Ballads'*, who taught romantic poetry with distinction, analysing its subtlest filaments in the poems of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley and Keats and contrasting their depth and subtlety with the more pedestrian and meretricious features of the poetry of Byron and Swinburne. This, you might say, is old-fashioned now, but I want to put on record that

intimate contact with this teacher, which lasted till his death in 1970, made me eager to probe the deeper meaning of poetry. I was drawn to his lectures and later to his writings because although he attempted interpretation and exegesis, his mind was as creative as critical. In the terminology of Indian poetics, he was a true *Sahṛdaya* ('like-minded'); his mind was like a transparent mirror on which the poet's imagination was clearly reflected. Even so I felt that he stopped short somewhere; he would analyse the product of the imagination rather than the imagination itself.

Greater than J. W. Holme or S. K. Benerjee was Professor P. C. Ghosh, a vastly learned man, a polymath with the voice of an angel. In his lectures Chaucer and Shakespeare were so wonderfully re-created that I wished these poets had been my class-fellows and felt the full impact of their poetry. His lectures on Shakespeare particularly were an overwhelming experience for all his pupils, not merely for those who like me have dabbled in literature. It was a part of P. C. Ghosh's greatness as well as his weakness that he was absorbed in the concrete and never bothered about generalities. Nobody could analyse and interpret Hamlet, Iago, Bottom or Shylock in greater detail or re-create fourteenth century England as reflected in Chaucer's poetry better than he, but if he were asked to dwell on Shakespearian tragedy or Chaucer's humour, he would have fumbled, because he did not look at literature in that way at all.

If in my old age, I could be a little irreverent about people whom I adored then and whose memory I cherish now, I felt a certain 'indolence about fundamentals' in their attitude to and interpretation of literature. S. K. Banerjee considered my inquiry into the problem of meaning an obsession. All poems, except *Kubla Khan*, which was composed in a dream, have a meaning, he said. That is all that we need to know. But why do then people bother, I wondered, about the meaning of *Kubla Khan*, too? And if *Kubla Khan*, which had no meaning, could be great poetry, why bother about the meaning of other poems? Rather should we not discover that intangible essence which independently of meaning, makes *Kubla Khan* great poetry? J. W. Holme, I still remember vividly, said once that he would not care to undertake a definition of romanticism. All that he might say would be that certain lines are indubitably romantic, and he rehearsed:

The same that oft-times hath
Charm'd magic casements, opening on the foam
Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn.

P. C. Ghosh was so absorbed in exploring meanings and so lustily jeered at those

who fought shy of them that I thought questioning him about their relevancy would be an impertinence.

In Calcutta University, the full degree course in my time covered four years (two years for B. A. followed by two years for M. A.). As I proceeded to take the second part of the course, I met in the University a teacher very different from the three I have described above. He was K. C. Mukherji, who after a triple Honours (English, Sanskrit and Philosophy) and M. A. (English) in Calcutta, went to London where he took a degree in English and then proceeded to Oxford where he read Greek and had the distinction of becoming a John Locke Scholar. For some time he also taught Neo-Platonism at Oxford and then returned in the early twenties to practice as a barrister at the Calcutta High Court. His chief distinction from the teachers I have named above was that he was an unsuccessful lecturer, or I might say, that he did not lecture at all. He used to examine our essays which he would riddle with strictures and ask us questions which he himself would not care to answer. But the questions themselves were very illuminating. While other teachers trod the primrose path to beauty, he would take us to the roughhewn world of aesthetics — the thorny problems of form and content, meaning and expression, the justification for literary kinds and the relationship between life and literature. He was supposed to teach Aristotle, but more importantly, he introduced me to Croce, and when later on, I asked him guidelines for a dissertation on Bernard Shaw, he asked me to read Plato — not once or twice, but fifty times ! One thing is certain. In 1924 he set me problems which have kept me occupied for the last fiftyfive years.

The first considerable work I undertook in English was, as I have said, on Shaw whom I selected because here I would have to grapple with the problem of meaning. As is well known, claiming an apostolic succession from Aeschylus to himself, Shaw said that he wrote his plays to convert the world to his opinions and that for the sake of art alone he would not face the toil of writing a single line. Nevertheless, his work has been recognized as great art, and he knew it ; otherwise he would have claimed succession from Saint Peter rather than from Aeschylus. Shaw rejected Shakespeare's ideas but admitted that there could not be a more consummate dramatist than Shakespeare. This ambivalence is noticeable in every sphere of literature — amongst great artists, critics and ordinary readers. In a professedly autobiographical epistle, I make no apology for constantly referring to my own books. Accepting the advice of Frederick Page, then Reader to the Oxford University Press and later Editor of *Notes and Queries*, I named my Shaw book *The Art of Bernard Shaw*, but the reviewer of the *Times Literary Supplement*, who liked it, said that 'Shaw the Philosopher-Artist' would have been a more appropriate title.

My five books on Shakespeare must have been deeply influenced by the interpretations of Professor P.C. Ghosh who showed to us how in the plays every scene, every speech, nay, every word was palpitated with life. But I have also wandered into paths he would never care to tread. Not only have I accepted the general principle of the Folio classification but also elaborated in my own way what, in my opinion, are the characteristics of Shakespearian Comedy, Shakespeare's Histories, and via Bradley, Shakespearian Tragedy. I have returned to the theory of literary kinds in *A Shakespeare Manual* (1977), in which, among other things, I have tried to draw the line of distinction between tragedy and comedy and pastoral romance. I have also tried to reconstruct Shakespearian characters in their totality—this was implicit in the Master's teaching—and their movement and development through the plot. I admit this is old-fashioned criticism, and I guess only old-fashioned people have liked it. Incidentally, here I have in a large measure departed from Croce who laughs away the theory of literary kinds, saying that the comic, tragic etc. 'is *everything* that is or shall be so called by those who have employed or shall employ these *words*'.

One day when P.C. Ghosh was reading *Othello* with us (1923), one of my friends, a brilliant man, asked him when exactly Othello became jealous in the modern conventional acceptance of the term. The Professor stopped and the lecture ended there on that day. I wonder if he pondered the matter again. To him a Shakespeare play was a seamless unity and he would occasionally refer to the old texts, particularly the Folio, in support of his belief that even the scene-and-act divisions were a later theatrical addition. * To him my friend's question must have seemed to be irrelevant. But to me it occurred off and on. The Double Time Theory developed by Christopher North did not appeal to me, for I thought it to be undramatic. And Danile's Time-Analysis, in spite of all his ingenuity, seemed to me to be somewhat mechanical. About forty years after my friend's question, I enunciated a theory about Duration in Shakespeare's plays in my book *The Whirligig of Time* (1961). I confess it has not found favour with readers and critics. So I can only quote Touchstone and say, '...an ill favoured thing, sir, but mine own : a poor humour of mine, sir, to take that no man else will.'

My teachers laid emphasis on the meaning of poetry and the intensity of emotion and expression that characterises it, but only K.C. Mukherji faced the problem whether meaning could be seen in isolation from expression. Croce, who defines aesthetic as the science of expression, would not concede that poetry has any content, neither can there be in his view any intensity in poetry, for as soon

as our vague impressions are expressed, poetry is complete and there can be no degree of completeness. A wag might ask, 'Why then do we hunt Roget's *Thesaurus* for the most appropriate words for the ideas clamouring for expression in our minds?' Walter Pater, while reducing the content of art and poetry to nothingness, nevertheless accepts *quality*, burning with a hard gem-like flame as the criterion of beauty in life and art, but another name for this quality is intensity of thought, emotion and expression. T. S. Eliot, who has nothing else in common with Pater or Croce, is also of the opinion that meaning is indifferent to poetry; it is like the piece of meat given by the burglar to the dog, for it keeps the mind engaged while poetry, which consists in the intensity of the fusion of ideas, feelings etc., does its work stealthily. I was attracted to Eliot but as, to my mind, he has nowhere clearly explained what he means by this intensity of fusion, he could not hold me in thrall for long. Pater, who is one of the finest critics of literature, aspired to bring content under the domination of form, but when he made a distinction between great art and good art on the basis of subject or content, he received back by one door what he had driven out by another. A philosopher by profession, Croce is more cautious in drawing conclusions and more thorough-going than most literary critics in his analysis, but he, too, gives away half his case when he says that the difference between one work of art and another is one of extension, that is to say, the larger the area or subject-matter, the greater the work of art. No wonder his practical criticism, intended to illustrate his theories, not unoften also modifies them.

The quest of meaning or the uneasy co-existence of content and form took me somewhat late in life to the intricacies of Indian poetics. My attention was drawn to this subject by the fascinating exposition of *rasa* and *dhwani*¹ given by the eminent Bengali philosopher-critic Atulchandra Gupta, a true spiritual descendant of the eleventh century Kashmirian exponent of this theory — the great Abhinava Gupta. Here, too, I reacted against my guide for while Atulchandra Gupta emphasized the transcendental quality of *rasa*, its independence of earthly concerns and made no secret of his aversion for detailed analysis, criticism and judgement, I could never get away from my pre-occupation with meaning and my innate conviction that this meaning or content is an organic component of the work of art, and even if *rasa* soars to transcendental (*alaukika*) regions, it has its feet firmly planted on the earth. These problems have haunted me all my life; I have stated them as clearly as I could and also tried to answer them in *Towards A Theory of the Imagination* (1959) and in several Bengali books. It is from this point of view, again that I have interpreted 'imitation',

poetic 'universality', 'Thought' as a constituent of Tragedy, in my *Introduction to Aristotle's Poetics* (1971).

I started with a reference to reviews of two books of mine — one written early in life, the other during what may be called the late middle period, because I have written several books after it. I shall conclude by adapting words used by *Shakespeare Survey* in its review of one of my latest books, *Aspects of Shakespearian Tragedy* (1972). A persistent concern with the relationship between ideas and expression and between reality and forms of imaginative truth probably give a tenuous unity to my adventures in the field of aesthetic theory and practical criticism.

Yours Sincerely
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* His partiality for the Folio and the "good Quartos" is reflected in my essay on the Textual Problem in *A Shakespeare Manual* (1977). 1. An inadequate English synonym for 'rasa' would be 'taste'; some critics call it 'flavour'. 'Dhvani' is untranslatable; it means the secondary meaning that emerges out of the primary dictionary meaning which it sometimes contradicts.