

• PART I •

The Matter and Mattering of Literature

MAKING SAHITYA MATTER

The most ingenious way of becoming foolish is by a system.

—Third Earl of Shaftesbury

No biases are more insidious than those leading to the neglect of things everyone knows about in principle.

—Stephen Jay Gould

Rabindranath Tagore (1860–1941), the Indian poet-thinker, describes a delightful experience on the river Padma:

It was a beautiful evening in autumn. The sun had just set: the silence of the sky was full to the brim with ineffable peace and beauty. The vast expanse of water was without a ripple, mirroring all the changing shades of the sunset glow. Miles and miles of a desolate sandbank lay like a huge amphibious reptile of some antediluvian age, with its scales glistening in shining colours. As our boat was silently gliding by the precipitous river-bank, riddled with the nest-holes of a colony of birds, suddenly a big fish leapt up to the surface of the water and then disappeared, displaying on its vanishing figure all the colours of the evening sky. It drew aside for a moment the many-coloured screen behind which there was a silent world full of the joy of life. It came up from the depth of its mysterious dwelling with a beautiful dancing motion and added its own music to the silent symphony of the dying day. I felt as if I had a friendly greeting from an alien world in its own language, and it touched my heart with a flash of gladness. Then suddenly the man at the helm exclaimed with a distinct note of regret, “Ah, what a big fish!” It at once brought before his vision the picture of the fish caught and made ready for his supper. He could only look at the fish through his desire, and thus missed the whole truth.¹

The poet was disappointed to see this disconnect with nature. For the helmsman, greed and utility eclipsed a glimpse of the other world. What

is this other world? Which world had the poet seen that the boatman had missed?

An incident related to one of Chuang-tzu's (an important Chinese philosopher who lived around the fourth century BC) revealing walks echoes Tagore's experience.

Chuang-tzu was walking on a mountain, when he saw a large tree with huge branches and luxuriant foliage. A wood-cutter was resting by its side, but he would not touch it. When he was asked about the reason, he said it was good for nothing. Then Chuang-tzu said: "This tree, because of its uselessness, is able to complete its natural term of existence." Having left the mountain, Chuang-tzu lodged in the house of his friend. The friend was glad and ordered his waiting lad to kill a goose and boil it. The lad said: "One of our geese can cackle, and the other cannot; which of them shall I kill?" The host said: "Kill the one that cannot cackle." Next day, his disciple asked Chuang-tzu, saying: "Yesterday we saw the mountain tree that can complete its natural term of existence because of its uselessness. Now for the same reason, our host's goose died. Which of these positions would you, master, prefer to be in?" Chuang-tzu laughed and said: "I would prefer to be in a position which is between the useful and the useless. This seems to be the right position, but is really not so. Therefore, it would not put me beyond trouble."²

There is a uselessness that is celebrated in both the events. The boatman found the fish useless because it could not be caught right then, and the fish could not complete its natural term of existence because it was useful as food. What then do we say of a world that resides in the liminality of the useful and the useless? What does it mean to say, like Chuang-tzu, that succeeding in the useless comes to be of greatest use? This takes us beyond the acquisitive and the rational (events) to choose *sahit* (connection and communication) with the useless leaping of the fish, the fading beauty of the setting sun on the river, the value of the useless goose, and the nonutility of the luxuriant tree for the woodcutter. These can be termed as nonevents that combine, as I shall argue in the course of this chapter, with events to produce the sacred of *sahitya*.

In Sanskrit, *sahitya* is derived from the word *sahita*, "united together." V. Raghavan argues:

The concept of *Sahitya* had a grammatical origin. It became a poetic concept even as early as Rajasekhara [an eminent Sanskrit dramatist,

poet, critic]; as far as we can see at present, the *Kavyamimamsa* [880–920 CE] is the earliest work to mention the name Sahitya and *Sahitya-vidya* as meaning Poetry and Poetics. Even after Rajasekhara, grammatical associations were clinging to the term up to Bhoja’s time. Kuntaka [950–1050, Sanskrit poetician and literary theorist], about the time of Bhoja himself, was responsible for divesting Sahitya of grammatical associations and for defining it as a great quality of the relation between *Sabda* [word] and *Artha* [meaning] in Poetry. Sometime afterwards, Ruyyaka or Mankhuka wrote a work called *Sahitya-mimamsa*, which was the first work on Poetics to have the name Sahitya. Afterwards, Sahitya became more common and we have the notable example of the *Sahitya-darpana* of Visvanatha [a famous Sanskrit poet, scholar, rhetorician writing between 1378 and 1434].³

The word *sahitya* retains its Sanskrit origin but is now commonly understood as literature encompassing poetry, plays, poetics, and other forms of creative writing. Although *sahita* means “united together,” this does not point to fusion or intermolding but connection (the across-momentum), a kind of being-with. By *sacred* I mean a mystery and a meaning, a substance and a secret. I have used the word *sacred* in a sense that is completely different from what we commonly understand (holy, consecrated, pertaining to or connected to religion). The sacred of *sahitya* is the substance that stays withheld, a kind of withdrawal from its readers, a febrile anxiety to see itself exhausted at the hands of its readers. What kind of *sahit* does *sahitya* create? How does this *sahit* matter in helping *sahitya* matter meaningfully? With what matters does *sahitya* concern itself, to help us understand its mattering? Do the complexities of *sahit* confer upon *sahitya* the status of being sacred? Is *sahit* the troubling feature that has never deserted the attempt to understand *sahitya*? Is there a way of completing the natural process of *sahitya*, just as Chuang-tzu’s tree was allowed its full lifespan because it was useless?

Sahitya and the Sacred

Paul Hernadi rightly observes that there inevitably has to be a vigorous dissensus over “whether or not the question ‘what is literature?’ should be answered. Given the multiplicity of ways literature has been intended, produced, transmitted, stored, and mentally processed since prehistoric times, it is hardly surprising that no definition commands widespread acceptance.”⁴ Lacking a fixed definition, and hence a constant, the Dao of lit-

erature, I would contend, is puzzling. To borrow figures from the Chinese text *Tao Te Ching* (a Chinese text ascribed to Laozi, an ancient Chinese philosopher and poet usually dated to around the sixth century BC and reckoned a contemporary of Confucius), sahitya can be described to turn within itself to emerge and prance backward to establish a solid ground for moving forward. The Dao, or the sacred, is amenable to being named, identified, and discoursed about (*daokedo*), but that naming exists in a creative opposition to being considered unnamable, ineffable, and infinite (*chang-dao*). This begets both a resistance (guarding the secret) and a surrender (exposed to or making allowance for meaning) in sahitya, as it submits to the realities of human understanding and also to our troubling anxiety about the incomprehensibility of experiences. Here are a few lines from *Tao Te Ching*. It must be pointed out that this Chinese text does not talk about what literature should be. But frameworked within my understanding of across poetics of reading, where varied sources come into making unlikely and yet productive correspondences, my arguments here appropriate (in)fusionally a few concepts from this Chinese text to make a different sense of sahitya.

The way that can be spoken of
Is not the constant way;
The name that can be named
Is not the constant name.
The nameless was the beginning of heaven and earth;
The named was the mother of the myriad creatures.
Hence always rid yourself of desires in order to observe its secrets;
But always allow yourself to have desires in order to observe its
 manifestations.
These two are the same
But diverge in name as they issue forth.
Being the same they are called mysteries,
Mystery upon mystery—
The gateway of the manifold secrets.⁵

The way of sahitya results in two kinds of desires: one makes sahitya express itself in forms, images, and thoughts, and the other is the desire to stay unnamed and avoid making itself a desire machine of theoretical formulations. These two forms of desire are not incompatible and divergent but dialectical. Sahitya cannot be an experience in explorative desires alone—the fierce urge to investigate what it really means, establishing the

institution of *sahitya* as something that is constant. But *sahitya*'s sacredness is its power to avoid being named always; it is a desire that *sahitya* has about keeping up with its regenerative abilities. These are the mysteries: the meaning generated through desires (the assigned, the assertive, and the ascribed, the Chinese *you*) and the meaning sans desires (the surprise and seduction, "follow a way that cannot be walked," the *wu*, which has no somethingness, no conscious design or prejudice): "Mystery upon mystery—/ The gateway of the manifold secrets." I choose to implicate the nonaction of *sahitya* (this is another dimension of *sahitya*'s sacredness), where

Something and Nothing (*you* and *wu*) produce each other;
 The difficult and the easy complement each other;
 The long and the short off-set each other;
 The high and the low incline towards each other;
 Note and sound harmonize with each other;
 Before and after follow each other.

Therefore the sage keeps to the deed that consists in taking nonaction and practices "the teaching that uses no words."⁶

Sahitya is deeply invested in words and yet speaks and teaches beyond words. The sacredness of *sahitya* holds and projects "manifold secrets" that involve what language can represent (events), the failure of language, the rationalization of meaning and representation (events), and spaces that do not listen to the strictures of language, formulation, and theorization (the nonevents). It is beholden to a variety of *sahit*, to what we understand and benefit from, to what refuses our categories of understanding and, consequently, contributes to the development of a different aesthetic of meaning and affect.

The sacredness of *sahitya* creates the ability to fraternize intimately (the desire to network, *sahit*) with—and to extend boundaries to include—whatever it engages. In fact, the pleasure and puzzlement that Miller points out in the next chapter are owed, in my opinion, to the imaginary that literature is able to generate and inhere within. Tennyson's "Tears, Idle Tears" bears out the dialectical dimension of *sahitya*'s sacredness. Miller experiences the poem both in its constancy and inconstancy of meaning. The sacredness of the poem becomes on one hand the power (the hermeneutical strength) that enables Miller to make sense of the poem, and on the other hand it generates a secret (the levels that the poem did not allow Miller to touch and experience) that makes him undertake several visits

to garner more meaningful experiences. Miller, in my reading, has grown a different kind of *sahit* with the poem.

The *sahit* comes to matter differently when Miller tries to demonstrate our experiences of literature through the intricate exchanges between man and machine. Tennyson's poem read on a Kindle, or imagine Tagore's typing his poems on an iPad, cannot just qualify as an exciting event. It is predominantly about changing the dynamics of experiencing literature by encountering it through a different material medium. Caught in such "prestdigitalization" when something speaks—"some impersonal inner voice"—to Miller through the medium, we encounter an excess. This is what I see as the surplus that literature in its complicated matrices, with a newfound medium, is able to deliver to us. This is another level of mystery, somewhat spiritualist and spooky, that makes literature transmit telepathically. Miller's idea of prestdigitalization, the "migration of the literarity" to digital media, sees new modes of finding *sahit* between the reader, his body, his mind, his understanding, and his emotions. There is, thus, an excess that things bring to our understanding of literature: the materiality of matter that is how the *dravya* (things) contribute to the *visaya* (the subject of *sahitya*), about which I have spoken at length in my discussion of ethics of *sahitya* in chapter 9.

Rabindranath Tagore observes that "man daily extends in literature the field of what is dear to him, that is, the field of his clear realisation. Literature is the realm of his unresisted, strange and vast play (*lila*)."⁷ The *lila* (it can also be interpreted as a pervasive kinetic energy, an unpredictability that makes something happen with surprise and excess) of *sahitya* is its norm, the quintessential paradigm to achieve its natural process, whereas hermetic entrapments of meaning resemble, metaphorically, the woodcutter's chopping a useful tree and the goose's being served for dinner. For Tagore, when art focuses on nature, it is a humanized nature whose relationship with man is touched by human emotions that constitute its content. For him, *sahitya* has never gone beyond man. Yet the nonprivate self, the surplus in man (Kant's "supersensible substratum" and Schiller's *ästhetische Zugabe*, the aesthetic supplement) is the source of creation.⁸ The deepening of world consciousness is coterminous with self-consciousness. *Sahitya* owes its origin and texturing to a connection between the artist's self and the Greater Being or the Great Further. (These are Tagore's words for the Infinite self; Infinite is not God or divinity. Rather, it is a spirit of creation that exists beyond the realm of our creaturely and material needs.) This is a process that is more invested in becoming (a sense of the not-yet)

than knowing. Metaphorically speaking, it is not the fish that leaped out of the water, but the greater world beyond the fish, which is always alluringly yet to be.

Sahitya is about knowing man, the world, and knowing beyond man and the world. In sahitya, man is engaged in the “work of knowing himself,” and “the truth of his knowing rests on his actual realisation and not on the verity of any objective fact.”⁹ The poetic truth is truer than factual truth; the poet’s imagination is truer than Ayodhya, as Tagore notes in his poem “Balmiki.” (Ayodhya is the birthplace of Lord Rama in the Hindu epic *Ramayana* and a small town in the state of Uttar Pradesh, in India; here it becomes an aesthetic imaginary beyond the geography of the place.) To know about the rose is one thing, and to feel something about it is another. In one case, we have a truth-value, in another the issue is taste-value. The truth about the rose comprises both these values: “We must not merely know it, and then put it aside, but we must feel it because by feeling it, we feel ourselves.”¹⁰ Tagore argues that rocks and crystals are “complete definitely in what they are and keep a kind of dumb dignity in their stolidly limited realism. But human beings are teased by their creative ideal, and if divested of it, they are turned into a rock or crystal like being. In fact, God has decorated the peacock in a wide range of quaint colours. He has not done so to man; rather, has installed a bowl of colour inside him and said, ‘you have to deck yourself in your own hues.’ He has said, ‘I have put everything in you, but with all those ingredients you have made yourself strong, beautiful and wonderful. I shall not prepare it for you.’”¹¹ Sahitya is the manifestation of those ingredients inside man. Consequent upon its creation, sahitya builds its own sacredness, its own bowl of colors, which starts to color the mind of the readers. Readers are often successful in identifying the colors of sahitya but, with the bowl of color inside it, sahitya can deliver a new set of colors, resulting in fresh experiences for the readers.¹²

Pointing to an inner power of creativity, the force that is less visible or rationalizable, Tagore writes in “The Wakening of Shiva”:

By the force that drives my feelings, roses open;
By the impulse of ecstatic discovery that opens new leaves,
I hurl forth my songs.¹³

The sacredness of the songs lies in the force that does not merely help us to see the roses and the leaves, but makes us a part of their opening. This likewise makes us a part of both the natural process of the fish, and

its termination as envisioned by the boatman. Poetic reality embodies a vision that encompasses matter and spirit, being and nonbeing. This vision is due to a superabundance that is free from Platonic doubt and able to perform beyond “the claims of necessity, the thrift of usefulness.”¹⁴ For Tagore, utility is just a state of dark heat. The excess of pure utility is like white heat that is expressive. The excess feeds the disclosive power of art and translates into *ananda*, “the power of feeling delight”¹⁵ in *sahitya*. So *ananda* is experienced in submitting to an Infinite, revealing that “aspect of our personality which overflows in excess of all our creaturely needs and [is] exhausted by all pressures of practical living. It is this excess in which man is most truly revealed.”¹⁶ The Infinite is love. It is the unnameable and a power. Our finite self connects with it to generate more meaning and keep up its liveliness. The presence of the Infinite implicates the incompleteness of the finite ways of existence. The sense of incompleteness does not change the reality of life to a great extent, but the reality of poetic truth and truth in art keep changing their form and expression. Creativity becomes a continual reconstruction of the artist’s personality—the “encroachment of man’s personality has no limit.”¹⁷ So the conflict and conflation with the Infinite result in the giving, which, as Tagore notes, is a process that “can be classified and generalized by science” but is itself “not the gift.”¹⁸ *Sahitya*’s sacredness shows the significance of the giving (the named, the useful) and also the importance of not being overpowered by the gift. This is another invitation to the useless.

Sahitya is our *sadhana* to unbind ourselves (*sadhana* is about accomplishing something through a meditative commitment; the word is used here not in the religious sense but in a performative sense that approximates the combined effect of *abhyasa*, practice through reflection and observation, and *kriya*, action). Tagore writes: “What then is revealed through literature? It is our wealth, our plenitude, that part of our being which overflows in excess of our actual needs, which has not been exhausted in the process of practical life. In such excess is humanity truly expressed. That man hungers is true, but that he is brave is still more. The superman, the ideal toward which man is progressing, is being evolved by his literature, and such permanent ideal is being accumulated therein as a guide for each succeeding generation.”¹⁹ On most occasions, the excess emerging from the useless goes untapped, resulting in *sahitya*’s being understood as an “artificial product” (in Tagore’s words) incarcerated within certain codes and modes. Consequently, *sahitya* is limited to becoming a tree that the woodcutter always finds useful or a fish that the boatman would always

enjoy eating. Tagore observes that “art and literature belong to that revolutionary region of freedom where need is reduced to unimportance, the material is shown to be unsubstantial, and the ideal alone is revealed as the truth; there all burdens are lightened, all things are made man’s very own.”²⁰ Indeed, the value of uselessness prevents sahitya from performing as a moral teacher. Sahitya cannot just take up the “job of school masters.”²¹ Tagore notes: “What I have to remark is, that it does not amount to the whole truth to say that the Good pleases because of what it does for us. That which is really good is both useful and beautiful, that is to say, it has a mysterious attraction for us over and above that of such purposes of ours as it may serve. The moralist declares its value from the ethical standpoint, the poet seeks to make manifest its unutterable beauty.”²² The sacredness of sahitya produces the unutterable quotient that exists outside the parameters of pragmatism and didacticism.

The struggle to connect with the Infinite, the bountiful other world that the fish reveals in a glimpse, is endowed with a surplus of imagination that Tagore considers love. This love is transformative and enabling, exhausting and fulfilling. Therein lies an extinction and an exfoliation, a loss “which leads to greater gain.” It “turns the emptiness of renunciation into fulfilment by his own fullness” and upholds the complexities invested in “what is in us and what is beyond us; between what is in the moment and what is ever to come.” Loving, as joy, becomes the means of loving more, of finding “abounding joy” and ways of enhancing love. This love has a rhythm that does not encourage the knowledge of a rose by merely learning about the constitutive chemistry of its petals; rather, it espouses the rose as *maya*, an image, an experience that is not confined to what we merely see and materially experience, whose “finality has the touch of the infinite.”²³ For Tagore, the rhythm, the finding of proportion in apparent irrelevancies, is a kind of manifestation of surplus. This rhythm in literature is like the “stars which in their seeming stillness are never still, like a motionless flame that is nothing but movement.”²⁴

Sahitya has survived by expressing itself and also by continually guarding and extinguishing itself. This guarding attests to a continuity, the *lila* about which I have spoken extensively in chapter 5. However, sahitya does not exhaust itself to a point where love of the Infinite ends. The Infinite transcribes the everyday, wherein repetition (say, watching the sun rise every day) is not without infinite possibilities. Tagore observes that forms must always move and change and that “they must necessarily die to

reveal the deathless.”²⁵ What is the deathless in literature, then? Isn’t this what Miller expresses when he writes about the endless approach to the unapproachable imaginary? Do we exhaust our uses of *sahitya* to reveal the useless, a category that leads us to interact with the Infinite? The fish has to be useless to the boatman to become deathless in its interface with the Infinite. The tree has to die in the woodcutter’s view in order to emerge in its deathlessness.

The surplus, or the deathless, in *sahitya* comes close to being expressed in an idea of the early Chinese painter and art theorist Gu Kaizhi (346–407) concerning the “blank eye pupil.” Ming Dong Gu explains that long before Gu Kaizhi’s time, the eye was viewed in the Chinese tradition as “the window to a person’s inner spirit.”²⁶ According to a legend, Gu Kaizhi left the pupils of a portrait unpainted for years, so that he might have ample time to contemplate how to paint them. This notion of the eye as the element that transmits the spiritual essence of the represented person or animal has persisted in Chinese aesthetic thought. In the sixth century, Emperor Wu, of the Liang dynasty, erected many Buddhist temples. A famous artist painted four dragons on the wall of Anle Temple, in Jinling, but left their pupils unpainted. When queried, he responded that if he had painted the pupils, the dragons would have flown away. Under pressure, he later added pupils to two of the four dragons. Almost immediately a violent storm struck the wall. The two dragons with pupils flew away, while the other two remained. Thereafter the expression “to bring the painted dragon to life by adding the pupils” came to refer to the finishing touch that brings a work of art to life.²⁷ *Sahitya* can at times be left with an eye painted without pupils. If painting the dragon’s pupils made it fly, this demonstrates how *sahitya*’s sacredness lies in securing an eye without pupils. It invites us to make sense of waste, which is the other name for excess. The blank eye of *sahitya* is its mystery, the restless sacredness in both the *daokedo* (the finite) and *changdao* (infinite).

Sahitya’s Mattering

Understanding the sacred brings me closer to the *Su P’u*, the Uncarved Block (*p’u*, or *pu*, literally translated, means “uncut wood”). Wai-Lim Yip argues:

When Lao-tzu said, “Tao, told, is not the constant Tao. Name, named, is not the Constant Name” and proposed to return to the *Su P’u* (Uncarved Block) or the “Great Undivided Institution” he intended to implode the

so-called kingly Tao, the heavenly Tao, as well as the naming system of the feudalistic ideology of the Chou Dynasty, so that memories of the repressed, exiled, and alienated natural self could be fully reawakened. The Taoist project, from the point of view of the naming system, is a negating, abandoning, and even an escapist act; but from the point of view of “no naming” (that is, before the territorialisation of power) and that of the Uncarved Block, it helps to break the myth of the reductive and distortive naming activities, affirm the concrete total world that is free from and unrestricted by concepts, and move toward reclaiming the natural self as well as Nature as it is. Thus we can say that the Taoist project is a counterdiscourse to the territorialisation of power, an act to disarm the tyranny of language; it is not, as most superficial readers believe, a passive philosophy.²⁸

Uncarved wood, in its totality, unrestricted by pre-given concepts or sanctioned structures of use, comes with all possibilities. Each piece territorializes, rather, canonizes a certain advantage or a use. The apparent passivity of the Uncarved Block conceals radiant and vibrant possibilities of creation made possible through negating and abandoning. While negating creates the possibility of *sahitya* to name the nameless (profanization) and make naming a continuous game, abandoning, holding the noun *abandon* within it, foregrounds acts that lack inhibition and restraint. This keeps the naming game alive. Arthur Danto observes that “to treat the work of art as Leonardo treated his spotted wall as an occasion for critical invention which knows no limit” is not to say that literature is about perennial unmasking or unveiling.²⁹ But efforts to unwrap *sahitya* concern both meaning that we create out of literature, and the meaning that literature imperceptively creates in us. *Sahitya*’s use is not merely what readers subjectively create, not the blasé acceptance of “Yes-Yuh,” like Zarathustra’s ass. *Sahit* is inscribed in a kinesis, in a consciousness of something waiting to appear and waiting to be found.

It is in the intricacies of coming together that the sacredness of *sahitya* lies. *Sahit* performs itself in ways that remind us of what Jacques Rancière calls the paradox of the mute pebbles. In speaking of the new democracy of literature that blossomed in the nineteenth century, Rancière writes:

Literature is this new regime of writing in which the writer is anybody and the reader anybody. This is why its sentences are “mute pebbles.” They are mute in the sense that they had been uttered long ago by Plato when he contrasted the wandering of the orphan letter to the living

logos, planted by a master as a seed in the soul of a disciple, where it could grow and live. The “mute letter” was the letter that went its way, without a father to guide it. It was the letter that spoke to anybody, without knowing to whom it had to speak, and to whom it had not. The “mute” letter was a letter that spoke too much and endowed anyone at all with the power of speaking.³⁰

Rancière’s “democratic disorder of literariness” is closely connected with the “uncanny.”³¹ Mute pebbles are the uncanny that haunt literature to speak across time periods and cultures. Experiences of literature become ways of appreciating the fraught relations between literary influences, literary history, and a transcultural poetics of reading. The disorder speaks through reiteration, repression, and the reanimation of meaning. These are separate processes that make literature speak beyond the already spoken, clearing spaces across different contexts, backgrounds, eras, and cultural specificities. Literary texts, then, are both part of a historical, literary continuum and a disorder that lives and flourishes outside it. They acknowledge their moment of composition, their background and time-sense, but cannot forget that they have a life outside these coordinates.

In “What Does Poetry Communicate?” a reading of Herrick’s “Corrina’s Going A-Maying,” Cleanth Brooks writes: “I think our initial question, ‘What does the poem communicate?’ is badly asked. It is not that the poem communicates nothing. Precisely the contrary. The poem communicates so much and communicates it so richly and with such delicate qualifications that the thing communicated is mauled and distorted if we attempt to convey it by any vehicle less subtle than that of the poem itself.”³² Sahitya becomes the frissive point of exhaustion and subtlety. Tagore sees the leaping fish and the fish becomes a desiring machine. But this desire is not about trying to exhaust and maul the fish but is a sahit with everything that exists beyond its species-state. The lumber that the woodcutter chops out is meant for use and profit. But to leave the living tree to fulfill its cycle is to find communion with the mystery of its other side, the love of the Infinite. The tree found useless by the woodcutter can also be a useful site for nesting birds, blooming flowers, a tangled kite, a possible lightning strike, the shadows of clouds, or a climbing boy. Of what use are these for the woodcutter? The woodcutter’s indifference makes the tree manifest with a difference. The birch trees in Robert Frost’s “Birches” are not meant and willed for firewood, nor desired to be used to make fences

and furniture. They exist for swinging, a carefree and useless activity. But this swinging inheres in a power that effectuates a variety of *sahit*. So a string of questions disturbs the poem from within: What is the “truth” and “love” in the poem? What is this going and coming back? How can earth be the right place for love? What does it mean to keep one’s poise and yet be a swinger of birches? How can one learn that learning is about not launching out too soon? What does it mean to ask, “Am I free to be poetical?”

Frost’s “Birches” and Uselessness

Early editions of Robert Frost’s “Birches” included this question, set apart by parentheses like an ironic aside: (“Am I free to be poetical?”) It followed line twenty-two, introducing the transition from the factual account of ice storms to the evocation of his boyhood swinging. The poet chose to delete it from subsequent editions of the poem.

I was going to say when Truth broke in
With all her matter-of-fact about the ice-storm
(Am I free to be poetical?)
[. . .]
So was I once myself a swinger of birches.
And so I dream of going back to be.
It’s when I’m weary of considerations,
And life is too much like a pathless wood
Where your face burns and tickles with the cobwebs
Broken across it, and one eye is weeping
From a twig’s having lashed across it open.
I’d like to get away from earth awhile
And then come back to it and begin over.
May no fate willfully misunderstand me
And half grant what I wish and snatch me away
Not to return. Earth’s the right place for love:
I don’t know where it’s likely to go better.
I’d like to go by climbing a birch tree,
And climb black branches up a snow-white trunk
Toward heaven, till the tree could bear no more,
But dipped its top and set me down again.
That would be good both going and coming back.
One could do worse than be a swinger of birches.³³

The birches swing into play what is seen and what is seen as, which is the Heideggerian way of trying to see the poem as a faceoff between undifferentiated contemplation and a differentiated experience. “Birches” addresses a system of thought and is also a contemplation that cannot be compartmentalized conceptually. It speaks of an act of conceptualizing or an act of perception that is useless, an experience without understandable direction. Such moments of uselessness, in fact, precede grounding in history. We cannot ignore the experience that precedes historical exegesis and our surrender to taxonomic frames of reality and existence. The poem also has a strategy of clear expression to boost its place within the canons of readerly acceptance. Sahitya’s sacredness does not always reside in blocks, however; rather, it is in the continuity and discontinuity (“going and coming back”) of the natural process of meaning. Hence the lines “Earth’s the right place for love” and “(Am I free to be poetical?)” can be seen to have moved out of the contextual immediacy of the poem, to have moved beyond any kind of block of understanding (in both senses of the word). Frost anxiously questions the wholesome efficacy of being poetical. The word *free* suggests that freedom can lead to an exciting and intense activity of the poetic mind, expressing thereby the struggle between life and art. Freedom here is also about self-interrogation; the anxiety to be poetically free is vexatiously related to Earth (the “right” place for love), to a faith in life as represented by Earth, and to a desire to be poetical that goes beyond Earth. The query that hangs over the freedom to be poetical leads us to the ambiguity of the poetic mind in its ways of creation.

Frost’s creative mind is like the boy whose movements are simultaneously creative, destructive, and deformative. Creation comes with caution, care, and cheer. So how much daring can the boy afford? The birches under the swinging impact of the boy are a part of the transmutative everyday. They participate in the ideal of rebeginning, coming back and beginning again, a combination of pragmatism and metaphysics. The boy is both a captive of the birches and a swinger who seeks liberation from them. The sacredness of the birches is in the swinging that only the boy can effect. He tries to conquer the alienation that the birches in their reality bring, their stiffness and the snow crust. At the beginning of the poem, the boy interacts with the birches as a human would traditionally meet a nonhuman, a tree. But we see a change as the poem progresses. The boy becomes the poet and the trees are transformed into art. This transformation resembles the way Stephen Dedalus, in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, describes a transition: “Out of the sluggish matter of the earth

a new soaring impalpable imperishable being emerges.”³⁴ Swinging renews the apparently unchanging earth as much as it revisions the stiff and stern heaven—“alchemistically enhanced.”³⁵ This is not *conjunctio oppositorum* but is about questioning the eternal good of flying away from earth, as well as the goodness of staying rooted to it, the problematic of subjecting imagination to truth. Is swinging an achievement in wholeness or does it have the undertow of skepticism? Does the boy, through the urge to be poetical, become part of a romantic ideal, or is he a skeptic who struggles to occupy fixed positions? Life, as a pathless wood, is a skepticism that does not expire in disappointment but expresses the dialectical merit of being matter of fact and at the same time being poetical. The swinging suggests a skepticism about receiving life at the level of the plain, the ordinary.³⁶ The birches resist being ordinary and soar out of the sluggish matter of the earth into a new being, becoming poetical.

The birches and swinging bid certain thoughts into existence. The boy “whose only play was what he found himself” combines what has been with what awaits to be. He engages nearness by being afar; the swinging gives him more spaces to explore the now and the after and then return with a certain openness. In fact, the swinging confuses the point of origin and telos, in that it becomes a continuity. This continuity does not allow anyone to understand the swinging in the form of a narrative that has an exclusive point of origin, followed by the next point of progress, before a series of points leads to the end. With poetic creativity understood as a continuity, the boy-poet meaningfully makes the connection among the poetical, earth, place, and love. The boy “learned all there was / To learn about not launching out too soon” and swings in communication (nearness, proximity to meaning) and muteness (afar, the unnamed and indeterminateness of meaning) in uncertain ways of being and acting that I would call, in mock solemnity, the metapolitics of swinging. Coming close is not always about coming near. The sacredness of literature regulates its closeness and nearness with readers and reception.

The birches, in their transformation into art, offer moments of revealed truth that the boy communicates through the nearness he creates in swinging. This enables the birches to speak.³⁷ The swinging enables the birches to break their silence because the boy, through his imagination and craft, attends to their silence. In the process, he learns from the birches the art and the pleasure of becoming poetical. Annie Dillard notes that “we have drained the light from the boughs in the sacred grove and snuffed it in the high places and along the banks of sacred streams. We as a people have

moved from pantheism to pan-atheism. Silence is not our heritage but our destiny; we live where we want to live.”³⁸ The birches, like Tagore’s fish and the tree the woodcutter chose to ignore, achieve, on the contrary, the status of the deathless. They have sublated into new spheres of meaning.

The analysis I have provided does not come anywhere close to the canonical codes of understanding the poem. Settled and structured forms of understanding (the useful) include the autobiographical, like, say, Frost’s own childhood experiences with swinging on birches, a popular game for children in rural areas of New England during his time, and his own children were enthusiastic about it (see daughter Lesley’s journal). The established understanding also includes the thematic, like the notion of “borders” (one can trace this in many of his other poems, such as “After Apple Picking”), where the trees serve to provide the link between earth or humanity and the sky or divine. The stylistic is also widely agreed and structured: as when the poem is read through what Frost calls the “sound of sense.” The psychoanalytic is settled in the dominant sexual connotations of the poem. The philosophical is understood in the dialectic (we may term this as “swinging”) between youthful innocence (the imagination to reach beyond Earth) and adult responsibilities (the truth being that Earth is the right place for love), the worries over aging and loss pitted against a carefree youth—the “going and coming back.” But do such paradigms of reading exhaust the poem of all it can deliver? Would my reading have helped Frost to come closer to his intended meaning in the poem? Does it give the reader easy access to the center of the poem, making her enjoyment memorable? The answers are not encouragingly positive. However, these negatives, the points of extinguishment, bring us to the use of the useless and render the encouragements to configure the completion of its natural process.

The Mattering and the Matter

The swinger of birches fabulizes, arriving at truths that make us undergo a kind of self-forgetfulness, what Hans-Georg Gadamer calls “being outside oneself.” This state is a prelude to connecting “wholly with something else.” The self-forgetfulness that *sahitya* produces in us is a state in which the reality of our understanding comes into question, since, as Gadamer points out, “what we experience in a work of art and what invites our attention is how true it is—that is, to what extent one knows and recognizes something and oneself.”³⁹ *Sahitya* creates the perceiver’s space, where the ordinary breaks into an aesthetic that revises our understanding of

the ordinary. Perhaps *sahitya* does not make things happen all the time. Most often it leaves things at the point of happening, on the edge of possible multiple happenings. Experiences emerging out of such happenings are, on most occasions, beyond our actual realizations of life experiences. “It [literature] creates after the finite,” as Laurent Dubreuil notes, “in order to signify in spite of all. For our joy.”⁴⁰

Heidegger considers poetry the “most innocent of occupations,” language the most dangerous of possessions, and the foundation of being poetic.⁴¹ I am tempted to replace *poetry* with *sahitya*. Arguably, *sahitya*’s sacredness is poetic. It affirms its own existence and upholds an intimacy in which the writer, the text, and the reader grow in a relationship of possession, communication, and contradiction. There is a contradiction in what the reader wants from *sahitya* and what she gets in the end, making for a conversation involving both the outside (stylistics, imagery, words, figures of speech, background, biography, etc.) and the inside (silence, waste, and uselessness) of *sahitya*. The profanization of the sacred is what makes *sahitya* continue with its meaning and worth and yet preserve its own enticement, a deep intimacy with language, resulting in what Heidegger calls “opening.” Heidegger writes: “Without this relation an argument too is absolutely impossible. But the one and the same can only be manifest in the light of something perpetual and permanent. Yet permanence and perpetuity only appear when what persists and is present begins to shine. But that happens in the moment when time opens and extends. After man has placed himself in the presence of something perpetual, then only can he expose himself to the changeable, to that which comes and goes; for only the persistent is changeable.”⁴²

The sacred is perpetual and, on occasion, is the apolitical in literary experiences. The sacred evokes the before and after of literature. “Literature each time says,” as Dubreuil argues, “all literature again; so, it is never ‘the same.’”⁴³ Caught in the across, “Birches” is surely presence and opening, corroborating Heidegger’s observation: “Poetry rouses the appearance of the unreal and of dream in the face of the palpable and clamorous reality, in which we believe ourselves at home. And yet in just the reverse manner, what the poet says and undertakes to be, is the real.”⁴⁴ “Birches” has this unreal yet near-tangible reality to it. It exemplifies how poetry creates a reality that we struggle to control, a fulfillment that in reality has always eluded us. It embodies a kind of mute writing that Rancière says “would no longer be the silent language engraved in the flesh of material things.” Rather, the birches have the “radical muteness of things.”⁴⁵ They express

not only meaning and will but nonsense too, an indifference to our clock-work life lived in partitions of the sensible, the visible, and the sayable.

Too much thought has perhaps been expended on what sahitya is capable of doing. Not enough leeway is allowed for sahitya to be left, as it is hanging in the sacredness of its existence, in the swinging between the event and the nonevent. The Zen way of life, qualifying the nonevent, would say, "The moon is reflected deep inside the lake but the water shows no sign of penetration."⁴⁶ We continue to brush up against and miss the sacred, the event that is a nonevent. Although the frisking fish exists both as a material and an aesthetic object, it can also open a mode of experience where these identities collapse into each other. The fish can be perceived beyond both these approaches, which is its closeness to the Infinite. It is at this point that Frost's query, "Now am I free to be poetical?" can be answered in the affirmative.