The Interpretation of Scripture

The spirit who lies concealed behind the material world, has given us, through the inspiration of great seers, the Scriptures as helpers and guides to unapparent truth, lamps of great power that send their rays into the darkness of the unknown beyond which He dwells, tamasah parastat. They are guides to knowledge, brief indications to enlighten us on our path, not substitutes for thought and experience. They are shabdam Brahma, the Word, the oral expression of God, not the thing to be known itself nor the knowledge of Him. Shabdam has three elements, the word, the meaning and the spirit. The word is a symbol, vak or nama; we have to find the artha, the meaning or form of thought which the symbol indicates. But the meaning itself is only the indication of something deeper which the thought seeks to convey to the intellectual conception. For not only words, but ideas also are eventually no more than symbols of a knowledge which is beyond ideas and words. Therefore it comes that no idea by itself is wholly true. There is indeed a rupa, some concrete or abstract form of knowledge, answering to every name, and it is that which the meaning must present to the intellect. We say a form of knowledge, because according to our philosophy, all things are forms of an essentially unknowable existence which reveals them as forms of knowledge to the essential awareness in its Self, its Atman or Spirit, the Chit in the Sat. But beyond nama and rupa is swarupa, the essential figure of Truth, which we cannot know with the intellect, but only with a higher faculty. And every swarupa is itself only a symbol of the one essential existence which can only be known by its symbols because in its ultimate reality it defies logic and exceeds perception, — God.

Since the knowledge the Scripture conveys is so deep, difficult and subtle, — if it were easy what would be the need of the Scripture? — the interpreter cannot be too careful or too
perfectly trained. He must not be one who will rest content in the thought-symbol or in the logical implications of the idea; he must hunger and thirst for what is beyond. The interpreter who stops short with the letter, is the slave of a symbol and convicted of error. The interpreter who cannot go beyond the external meaning, is the prisoner of his thought and rests in a partial and incomplete knowledge. One must transgress limits & penetrate to the knowledge behind, which must be experienced before it can be known; for the ear hears it, the intellect observes it, but the spirit alone can possess it. Realisation in the self of things is the only knowledge; all else is mere idea or opinion.

The interpretation of the Veda is hampered by many human irrelevancies. Men set up an authority and put it between themselves and knowledge. The orthodox are indignant that a mere modern should presume to differ from Shankara in interpreting the Vedanta or from Sayana in interpreting the Veda. They forget that Shankara and Sayana are themselves moderns, separated from ourselves by some hundreds of years only, but the Vedas are many thousands of years old. The commentator ought to be studied, but instead we put him in place of the text. Good commentaries are always helpful even when they are wrong, but the best cannot be allowed to fetter inquiry. Sayana's commentary on the Veda helps me by showing what a man of great erudition some hundreds of years ago thought to be the sense of the Scripture. But I cannot forget that even at the time of the Brahmanas the meaning of the Veda had become dark to the men of that prehistoric age. Shankara's commentary on the Upanishads helps me by showing what a man of immense metaphysical genius and rare logical force after arriving at some fundamental realisations thought to be the sense of the Vedanta. But it is evident that he is often at a loss and always prepossessed by the necessity of justifying his philosophy. I find that Shankara had grasped much of Vedantic truth, but that much was dark to him. I am bound to admit what he realised; I am not bound to exclude what he failed to realise. Aptavakyam, authority, is one kind of proof; it is not the only kind: pratyaksha is more important.
The heterodox on the other hand swear by Max Muller and the Europeans. It is enough for them that Max Muller should have found henotheism in the Vedas for the Vedas to be henotheistic. The Europeans have seen in our Veda only the rude chants of an antique and primitive pastoral race sung in honour of the forces of Nature, and for many their opinion is conclusive of the significance of the *mantras*. All other interpretation is to them superstitious. But to me the ingenious guesses of foreign grammarians are of no more authority than the ingenious guesses of Sayana. It is irrelevant to me what Max Muller thinks of the Veda or what Sayana thinks of the Veda. I should prefer to know what the Veda has to say for itself and, if there is any light there on the unknown or on the infinite, to follow the ray till I come face to face with that which it illumines.

There are those who follow neither Sayana and Shankara nor the Europeans, but interpret Veda and Vedanta for themselves, yet permit themselves to be the slaves of another kind of irrelevancy. They come to the Veda with a preconceived and established opinion and seek in it a support for some trifling polemic; they degrade it to the position of a backer in an intellectual prizefight. Opinions are not knowledge, they are only sidelights on knowledge. Most often they are illegitimate extensions of an imperfect knowledge. A man has perhaps travelled to England and seen Cumberland and the lakes; he comes back and imagines England ever after as a country full of verdant mountains, faery woodlands, peaceful and enchanted waters. Another has been to the manufacturing centres; he imagines England as a great roaring workshop, crammed with furnaces and the hum of machinery and the smell of metal. Another has sojourned in the quiet country-side and to him England is all hedges and lanes and the daisy-sprinkled meadow and the well-tilled field. All have realised a little, but none have realised England. Then there is the man who has only read about the country or heard descriptions from others and thinks he knows it better than the men who have been there. They may all admit that what they have seen need not be the whole, but each has his little ineffaceable picture which, because it is all he has realised,
persists in standing for the whole. There is no harm in that, no harm whatever in limitation if you understand and admit the limitation. But if all the four begin quarrelling, what an aimless confusion will arise! That is what has happened in India because of the excessive logicality and too robust opinionativeness of Southern metaphysicians. We should come back to a more flexible and rational spirit of inquiry.

What then are the standards of truth in the interpretation of the Scripture? The standards are three, the knower, knowledge and the known.

The known is the text itself that we seek to interpret. We must be sure we have the right word, not an emendation to suit the exigency of some individual or sectarian opinion; the right etymology and shade of meaning, not one that is traditional or forced to serve the ends of a commentator; the right spirit in the sense, not an imported or too narrow or too elastic spirit.

The knower is the original drashta or seer of the mantra, with whom we ought to be in spiritual contact. If knowledge is indeed a perishable thing in a perishable instrument, such contact is impossible; but in that case the Scripture itself must be false and not worth considering. If there is any truth in what the Scripture says, knowledge is eternal and inherent in all of us and what another saw I can see, what another realised I can realise. The drashta was a soul in relation with the infinite Spirit, I am also a soul in relation with the infinite Spirit. We have a meeting-place, a possibility of communion.

Knowledge is the eternal truth, part of which the drashta expresses to us. Through the part he shows us, we must travel to the whole, otherwise we shall be subject to the errors incidental to an imperfect knowledge. If even the part is to be rightly understood, it must be viewed in the terms of the whole, not the whole in the terms of the part. I am not limited by the Scriptures; on the contrary I must exceed them in order to be master of their knowledge. It is true that we are usually the slaves of our individual and limited outlook, but our capacity is unlimited, and, if we can get rid of abankara, if we can put ourselves at the service of the Infinite without any reservation of predilection
or opinion, there is no reason why our realisation should be limited. *Tasmin vijnate sarvam vijnatam*. He being known, all can be known. To understand Scripture, it is not enough to be a scholar, one must be a soul. To know what the *drashta* saw one must oneself have *drishti*, sight, and be a student if not a master of the knowledge. *Atha para yaya tad aksbaram adhigamyate*. Grammar, etymology, prosody, astronomy, metaphysics, logic, all that is good; but afterwards there is still needed the higher knowledge by which the Immutable is known.