
BOOKS AMONG FRIENDS

Why

— Not —

Fiction?

SATSVARUPA DASA GOSWAMI

Why Not Fiction?

Satsvarūpa dāsa Goswami

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Author's Note

The first book in our new "Books Among Friends" series, *A Litany For The Gone*, was intensely relevant to our concerns as guru and disciple in ISKCON. It was not necessary for me to explain why I was sharing with you on that topic. *Why Not Fiction?* is different. It is about my personal pre-occupation with my writing service, specifically, about whether I should write Kṛṣṇa conscious fiction.

It was important to me to write this little book. Since one of the principles of loving exchange is to reveal one's mind to close friends, I decided to share it with you. I think you can apply the same searching introspection in your own specific service to Kṛṣṇa.

Chapter One

Why don't I write fiction? It's a long story. I don't want to bore you, dear reader, but let me tell it quickly anyway.

Sure, I've read fiction and I have seen that it can be truer than nonfiction. By "fiction" I mean the great authors we studied in English and World Lit. classes. I used to want to be like them. I began trying my hand at loosely veiled autobiographical fiction, influenced by Salinger, Kerouac, Thomas Wolfe, and others. Sometimes I called my pretension love. I so much wanted to be an intellectual, literary man that I read Joyce and Proust and Dickens and Dostoyevsky and talked about them with select friends. It was my religion.

Of course, that all happened before I met Prabhu-pāda. After meeting him I renounced those authors. He didn't seem to like fiction, even when written in Kṛṣṇa consciousness.

Fiction can be used, however. Bhaktivinoda Ṭhākura wrote the "novel," *Jaiva Dharma*. I have tried writing fiction too and with some success. Occasionally I think

of trying my hand at it again. The idea of following a career as a fiction writer tempts me, but whenever I think too closely about it, I never take it up.

Here are some reasons: I'm lazy. I'm afraid I can't measure up to great fiction artists like Joseph Conrad. I don't believe it's worth the effort it would require. Conrad said, "Life is short and art is long." I need to direct my time in a more devotional way by hearing *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam*.

Other reasons: I'm attracted to improvisation and free-writing. They suit my temperament and my lifestyle. After all, I'm not a full-time writer. I don't have time between traveling, preaching in ISKCON, reading, chanting, and taking care of disciples, to develop the craft.

Therefore, I tend to write nonfiction, at least as it is categorized by those who lump things into sections of the public library. But my nonfiction is creative and it employs fictive touches; it allows for anything to happen. I also tend more toward poetry (another elusive genre to categorize) and expression rather than narrative.

Still, the offer is there: why not write fiction? I would like to address this challenge in these pages.

Or maybe I'll sail off elsewhere. Would you like to come with me, you who read this, my friends?

(Are you wondering where I'll take you? Does this constitute a fictive excursion? Well, I don't deny that. I guess I am a fiction writer after all.)

My friend Madhu advocates that I write fiction. He tells me that good fiction is irresistible. It can take us beyond the monotonous tale of one life or it can present ideals through symbolism and metaphor.

We are in a house in Sicily. Our van is parked outside. Yesterday, I was trying to decide whether or not to start another timed book. I couldn't find the inspiration. Finally, I asked Madhu to bring me one of my timed books along with Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. I haven't read *Darkness* in years (not since my World Lit. course in '59).

Madhu and I discussed the power of the story Marlowe, Conrad's fictional man, tells. Conrad experienced similar events to the ones he fictionalized in his own life. Madhu says I could do that too, take bits of my life and fictionalize them. Last year, I wrote a story whose main character was a "visiting *sannyāsi*." Of course, I was the basis of the *sannyāsi*'s character and Madhu was a second character called Narahari. It was a story about a *sannyāsi* who was also a closet poet and how he went on writing poetry even though most people thought it was an indulgence on his part. Although parts of the story were true to life, others were definitely fictionalized.

Where does that leave me now? Thinking more about what Madhu said about fictionalizing life experience. I could write a story that revealed the thin line between being a devotee and being a *karmī*. *The Heart of Darkness* does that. It shows us that under a thin veneer of civilization, man is drawn to the savage darkness lurking in each of our hearts. If I did a Kṛṣṇa conscious treatment of this theme, I could characterize an imperfect devotee, striving to attain pure devotional service. This devotee

would have to appear solid in his Kṛṣṇa consciousness—*sannyāsa* cloth, shaved head, *tilaka*, speech and activities all ISKCON-approved. Then a series of incidents in his life would show that he still harbors *anarthas* in his heart. At the beginning of the story, he would take the attitude that *karmīs* are contemptuous and far below him. By the end, he would come to see that in many ways, he too is still a *karmī*.

It's a nice idea, but I can't do it. I already told you why.

Chapter Two

I haven't given up on fiction yet. *The Heart of Darkness* is fascinating. Perhaps a sane approach would be to read Conrad, take some notes, examine Conrad's expertise, think deeply about how to apply it to my own style, and then, when I am ready, begin my own story. I certainly don't want to simply snatch a look at *Darkness* and then tell you the appalling details of white colonization in Africa. *Darkness* was written in 1902. I bet it's not used in schools these days because Conrad uses the word "nigger" and has other outmoded attitudes.

Here's my story: Jagannātha Swami was a *sannyāsi* in FISKON. . . . No, I can't muster up the whole fictive thing. It's too much.

What should I write instead? Should I tell you what Jaya Govinda dāsa bought yesterday in Erice? Of course, I can't mention his indecision. Should he do book distribution here or not?

That's a point against Madhu's argument that I can write fiction by taking from my life experience. My

experience involves other people, but they don't like to be written about. How can I fictionalize if I'm always on the alert to censor the material?

I remember a poem by William Stafford in which he was praying to know his muse. A voice spoke to him and said, "It is your own unique way of seeing things. Be true to this and you will gain salvation."

That's like the Post-it I wrote earlier this morning: "Take heart in your own way of seeing things. Tell it. That's the story."

We went out for a walk this morning, Jaya Govinda, Madhumangala, and me. We didn't see another human being for the thirty-five minutes we were out. We did hear owls hooting. We are high up on a mountain in the village of Erice. There is a lot of old stone architecture, a church built for the monks of St. John the Baptist from the 14th century (its dome reminds me of the Ulysses S. Grant memorial in New York City), and a tall, formidable castle built in the 12th century. I tried to imagine soldiers crawling up its sides and being thrown down from above. We walked to a park. We saw a nervous cat on top of a dumpster, but no other beings except pine and other trees. We were so high up the mountain that looking down reminded me of being in an airplane. We could see the lights in the valley below, the coast, a promontory rock, the ocean. The sky was bathed in a gray-blue dawn light and only slowly changed in the time we were out.

We didn't exchange any words although we noticed words written on signs: "La Ciclopes" (a restaurant),

“La Pineta.” We chanted and chanted the holy names: Hare Kṛṣṇa Hare Kṛṣṇa, Kṛṣṇa Kṛṣṇa Hare Hare/ Hare Rāma Hare Rāma, Rāma Rāma Hare Hare.

And I thought about my own way of seeing. How do we gain access to that? Does it make a good enough story? Is it the truest story or just the same old thing? I answered that for myself. It’s not the same old thing. It’s new and fresh and changing. We have to see it clearly and stand up for it, our own little life, our life attached to Kṛṣṇa. We who have nothing to do with this town, we have to see things in our own Kṛṣṇa conscious way as we walk through it.

We did not go down to the tourist village and I did not ask why this place is advertised as the town of science. I was here about four years ago and I barely remember it. There is a man who lives near here who is lending us his house. He is the same man who lent us the house four years ago. I asked him four years ago why they call this town the town of science, but I don’t remember what he said. I imagine him coming to see us before we leave and us going through the exact same ritual—sitting together and me asking him that question before I thank him for his kindness. This man is friendly to ISKCON, but he doesn’t consider himself a Vaiṣṇava. He says he’s a Buddhist. Not really, of course, but he collects books—a rich man’s esoteric hobby.

As for Conrad’s tale, Marlowe also walked, but he walked through the jungle, not for a morning, but for days. And he saw horrible things, not ancient stone architecture. Once he came upon a white man with his

black slaves. The man told him that it was his job to improve the roads, but Marlowe saw no sign of improvement. Later, he found a black native with a bullet in his head. Marlowe thought that maybe this was the sign of the white man's "improvement" of the roads.

All I can recall from my 1959 reading is the scene where Marlowe hides on the beached boat and overhears a conversation. He practically stops breathing because he hears the others talking about him and creating an intrigue. This is a tale of adventure and dread.

I over-ate a few days ago. That night I had a dream that Prabhupāda leniently told me that I didn't have to remain a *sannyāsi*, but could become a householder. He said it as if he knew it was my heart's desire. As a result of that dream, I decided not to eat sweets while I'm here. I want to show Prabhupāda that I'm earnest about remaining a *sannyāsi* so he doesn't have to tell me I can be released.

That is an inner happening. To describe it may sound silly.

Walking the dawn park
it took less time than we planned.
I carried my cane and then used it.
Tomorrow we'll spend more time in the lanes,
looking at the signs on buildings saying
what century it was, 13th, 14th,
so long ago and yet we walk.

The cat is young.
Dawn is for the first time, fresh
and when I go back to the house
I may read *Srīmad-Bhāgavatam*
and live in it. The clock
striking 6 now, this is
first poem in this book.

Chapter Three

I just read the *Bhāgavatam*, Tenth Canto, Chapter 46, “Uddhava Visits Vṛndāvana.” I didn’t jump to that chapter; I have been reading progressively and came to it this morning. It is a sublime account of Lord Kṛṣṇa sending His dearmost servant in Dvārakā to pacify the Vrajavāsis. One reason Kṛṣṇa sent Uddhava was so that Uddhava could witness the superiority of Vraja-prema. Uddhava would then return and report to Kṛṣṇa, and everyone in Dvārakā and the whole world would hear of Kṛṣṇa’s topmost devotees in Vṛndāvana. No one has ever experienced love of Kṛṣṇa to the degree it is experienced in Vṛndāvana.

As *Bhāgavatam* readers, we are also reassured that Kṛṣṇa has not forgotten Vṛndāvana. This chapter brings us back to the scenes we loved in earlier chapters of the Tenth Canto and reminds us that these pastimes are the best. I cling to my *śraddhā* as I read these chapters. Now is the time for me to pay attention. I have made it this far. Now I want to hear it and treasure it.

“As we remember the wonderful deeds Kṛṣṇa performed, His playful sidelong glances, His smiles and His words, O Uddhava, we forget all our material engagements. When we see the places where Mukunda enjoyed His sporting pastimes—the rivers, hills and forests He decorated with His feet—our minds become totally absorbed in him.” (*Bhāg.* 10.46.21–2)

Reading this is my life, my story. I could poke fun at myself because I am such a sedentary fellow who doesn't see anything of the world except what I observe on a pre-dawn walk through empty streets, but I live this kind of life in order to focus all my energy and attention on hearing about Kṛṣṇa in the *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam*. When I manage to keep my attention focused, my life is perfect.

“Śrī Kṛṣṇa, the Personality of Godhead, who is the Paramātmā [Supersoul] in everyone's heart and the benefactor of the truthful devotee, cleanses desire for material enjoyment from the heart of the devotee who has developed the urges to hear His messages, which are in themselves virtuous when properly heard and chanted.” (*Bhāg.* 1.2.17)

It might be hard for you to believe, but all this is connected to the question about whether or not I should write fiction. I want to tell a devotional story and I want it to be preaching. Therefore, I am not against fiction on principle. I could perhaps tell the story of a neophyte devotee who feels dissatisfied despite engagement in the Kṛṣṇa consciousness movement. His friend tells him that dissatisfaction comes from not placing Kṛṣṇa directly in the center of one's life. Even Vyāsadeva was

dissatisfied when he neglected to glorify Kṛṣṇa. Nārada, his spiritual master, had to redirect him: “You have not actually broadcast the sublime and spotless glories of the Personality of Godhead. That philosophy which does not satisfy the transcendental senses of the Lord is considered worthless.” (*Bhāg.* 1.5.8)

I could write such a story. The dissatisfied devotee could then ask how to always remember Kṛṣṇa—how to do it practically. Is it just a matter of reading *Bhāgavatam* for an hour a day? What about the rest of the hours in the day? What about the fact that he has so many duties and he cannot find the time to concentrate on Kṛṣṇa? Perhaps the older devotee would advise him to preach. Kṛṣṇa says there is no servant more dear to Him than one who preaches His message. For it to be a story, I’d have to develop a plot, the characters would have to come to life, there would have to be some suspense. Maybe they would go out preaching together and the older devotee would become dissatisfied. Then they could preach to each other. Hmm.

I’m living that story. It’s already nonfiction. I am the neophyte and also the older voice who knows what’s best—*kṛṣṇa-kathā*. I’m facing the fact that I can’t read twenty-four hours a day and that I don’t have the gumption to preach constantly in an outward way. Some of that story is touchy. I mean, I feel private about it. For better or worse, I descend from the sublime nectar of Nanda Mahārāja and Yaśodā’s separation from Kṛṣṇa in Vṛndāvana to Conrad’s tale of savagery in the human heart and my struggle for craft and honest expression.

As I read more in *Darkness*, one question keeps coming up: "If it's as horrible as Marlowe says it is, why does he work for the African trading company? Why be implicated in their inhuman treatment of the natives? Why not get out?"

Marlowe goes into the heart of darkness, up the river on his tinpot steamboat. He wants to "do the job well" because he's a seaman, a river man now, in charge of a boat. He is also a man of adventure.



Conrad describes the jungle, the cannibals, the pestiferous humans greedy for ivory and profit, and who die like flies—all tiny beings in the immensity of the savage continent. No, it's not only Africa at the turn of the century; it's the darkness that is both metaphysical and within each of our hearts. At the same time, it is Africa, the natives, the jungle, the greed, the ivory—that story is enough in itself.

Conrad is a master storyteller, but what will he give us in the end? Of course, there won't be a spiritual reward. We'll only feel the thrill of having been in the grip of a consummate master of narrative and psychological insight.

. . . No, it is impossible; it is impossible to convey the life-sensation of any given epoch of one's existence—that which makes its truth, its meaning—its subtle and penetrating essence. It is impossible. We live, as we dream—alone . . .

It had become so pitch dark that we listeners could hardly see one another. For a long time already, he, sitting apart, had been no more to us than a voice. There was not a word from anybody. The others might have been asleep, but I was awake. I listened, I listened on the watch for the sentence, for the word, that would give me the clue to the faint uneasiness inspired by this narrative that seemed to shape itself without human lips in a heavy night air of the river.

We'll go out and do more preaching when we leave Erice. (Influenced by Conrad, do I want to describe my van travels as if they are an adventure up the Congo? Do I want to infuse my simple prose with mystery, something inexplicable? I wouldn't mind.) After a few stops, we plan to see a doctor in Switzerland. Madhu wants to send him a small medical resume from both of us so the doctor won't have to waste his time or ours. M.'s list is alarming. It includes falling out eyelashes, severe back pain, asthma, addiction to sweets. He wrote a short list for me and asked me to fill in the details: headaches, constipation, poor circulation, "vaso-motor deficiency." Yes, you could add that I'm also addicted to sweets, addicted to that fiction.

(Hey, what's this stuff doing in my book? But I told you, this is a real-life story. I have a skinny body, I'm a little stooped standing before the mirror, going up the river in my brain. I'm that fellow who reads *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam*, who wants to write an interesting chapter, the clown, the serious face, the renunciant, the counselor at ease, the simple servant going through his day demanding and complaining.)

Now I have to stop writing this and go worship my Prabhupāda *mūrti*. I don't write all day long.

Chapter Four

When I follow my schedule, I have two private reading sessions a day. Nowadays, I read *Bhagavad-gītā* in the early morning (12–1 a.m.) and *Bhāgavatam* at 9 a.m. I take notes during both sessions, compressed summaries and some occasional remarks. Over the last few days, I've added an afternoon reading session which I'm calling "random reading." I allow myself to choose any book by Prabhupāda and then read from anything that attracts me—a verse here, a purport there—moving forward or backwards in the volume. I take notes too, but of a random nature, like this:

"Seems important in this type of reading to go slowly and not attempt to complete anything. Linger, look around, find interest, pray. But don't fall into tedium."

"I desire to know and feel the reality of Kṛṣṇa and myself as His servant when reading and chanting and writing."

"Read and merge into, read and like it. Lose taste for other things. This is my wish. And it will happen. Whatever you work at and sincerely desire, you can

have. You can have exclusive attraction to the Bhakti-vedanta purports and be fully satisfied with them."

"This can only happen if Kṛṣṇa awards me mercy, but I think He will like to do it if He sees I am persistent and submissive."

This is part of the non-fictive story. It also lacks drama because it works best when the afternoons are uneventful. I can simply sit with the *Bhāgavatam* and try to gain access. "Everything is here," Śrīla Prabhupāda said, referring to the *Bhagavad-gītā*, "and when one is well established in the teachings of *Bhagavad-gītā*, he can take up the study of *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* for further enlightenment in self-realization."

"This ship is the message of Lord Śrī Kṛṣṇa in the shape of *Bhagavad-gītā* or the *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam*."

Once upon a time, a devotee had the measles. Then he got over them. He dressed in regular Vaiṣṇava attire and took up his prescribed services. Then he fell into a well. He recovered from that too. He began to learn that life is hard, but devotional service is easy if you turn to it regularly, submissively.

This devotee I'm talking about was a *brahmacārī*. He had a regular service, but I can't tell you more about it. He was not Everyman, but a particular person. While eating his breakfast of hot milk and hot cereal with a little honey, he found himself enjoying it. He noticed, though, that even though he was enjoying it, there was still a lot in his bowl. As he ate, the cereal in his bowl diminished. "I accept that," he told himself. "I can't

live to eat." And it occurred to him that as the cereal gradually disappeared before his eyes, so his life duration would do the same. (He didn't dwell on that.)

Of course, the most famous line in *Heart of Darkness* is, "Mistah Kurtz—he dead." T.S. Eliot quotes that line at the beginning of his long, famous poem. I haven't reached that line yet; it comes at the end of the book. I just read how our hero Marlowe navigated the dilapidated steamer the last miles toward Kurtz's station. His boat was attacked by natives shooting arrows from the shore. Marlowe's men shot back with guns, but the natives dispersed only when Marlowe pulled the steam whistle rope and they were afraid of its shriek.

Some of Marlowe's crewmen are cannibals. Although they are hungry, Marlowe reasons that they don't attack and eat the white men onboard because of *restraint*. He's amazed by that and cannot explain why they are restraining themselves. As I said, Conrad's use of a word like "niggers" and his references to the aboriginal nature of the savages wouldn't make it in today's world.

The steamboat, the adventure, bravery—Conrad often talks about that. I can't identify with Marlowe's obsession to go and hear from Kurtz, the man who is supposed to have some morals, to be an extraordinary person, unlike the usual greedy idiots in the trading company. Marlowe's wanting to reach Kurtz and to hear his voice, hear who he actually is, is what builds the suspense in the story. I'm sure a Ph.D. in literature could tell me in hundreds of pages why Marlowe is compelled to do this, but it's obvious that it won't be enlightening in terms of basic God consciousness, the

relationship between soul and Supersoul, transmigration, karma, yoga, and *bhakti*. There's nothing of that sort in this story because Conrad suffers from a poor fund of knowledge.

Then why am I reading him? I told you, the master storyteller is at work and I am trying to learn from him. He is so expert that before my eyes, I see the desperate steamer with its leaky pipes and Marlowe patching them. Marlowe is looking for snags in the river up ahead and giving orders to his helmsmen, tolerating the presence of the company manager and his men, and the talk of the savage darkness.

Madhu thinks Kṛṣṇa conscious fiction could enthrall Kṛṣṇa conscious readers. Well and good. I'm sure someone will write some in the future. Reading Conrad makes me realize that a fiction writer has to dig up passions, his and others'. Even to tell the story I mentioned, I would have to show how the neophyte devotee is tempted (by a woman? By intoxication?). I might even have to relive it a little the way Conrad relives his experience in the life of his characters. Not only does he relive it, but he induces his reader to live it with him. I prefer to be more peaceful. I mentioned how last night thinking about writing fiction agitated my mind. It was because I knew if I had to tell such a story, I would have to enter a more passionate world. Why would I want to do that? Why make believe I am in *māyā*? For a higher purpose? To tell a story? To express vicarious fears? Why play with fire?

Therefore, despite this discussion back and forth on the value of Kṛṣṇa conscious fiction, I find myself relating the story of my peaceful day, especially my

treasured reading of the scriptures and my life in conformity to the Vaiṣṇava code. I want safety and to cross over the already perilous age of Kali, which destroys all the good qualities of a human being.

He said he wanted peace.
 That was the reason he could not tell a story.
 But here is a story—Nārada went
 to Vyāsadeva and told him,
 Once during the four months of the rainy season
 when I was just a boy of five years old
 living at the inn with my mother,
 there came some *bhaktivēdaṅtas* and
 they stayed with us. I served them.
 My senses were controlled and I was not
 naughty. They were kind to me and once
 with their permission, I ate from their plate
 and the coverings of ignorance and passion
 were removed. At once
 I felt the nature of the transcendentalist.
 Then once in a lonely place,
 Nārada meditated. Tears rolled down his
 cheeks. The Lord gave him *darsana*.
 That is a true story and
 very, very good. Another is the time Kṛṣṇa
 blew His flute on the autumn evening
 when the moon was full.
 That is the best of all.

There are many true stories,
brave and learned devotees
and dialogues superior
in *Bhāgavatam*.
I'll tell them and retell them
as I savor them in
a peaceful life.

Or instead of telling a passionate story, I could tell a triumphant story like how I chanted and liked it very much. I didn't eat in the afternoon. Jaya Govinda dāsa went out to the village of Erice to distribute books. I asked him when he returned how it went. Italy is a special country. People are not adverse to devotees stopping them and asking them to take a book. It's a rare culture. They eat a lot of pasta, though, and they always talk loud if they happen to be near you when it's time to take rest. But the good qualities outweigh the bad. Too bad more devotees don't join and too bad that many who joined were disappointed and have scattered. There are already so many stories to be told. Better I stick to the ones that I know. and through them, as they grow quiet and I put aside the particulars, the *Bhāgavatam* can shine.

I am glad to be away from America
on the 4th of July where
firecrackers would split my composure.

You make a big thing about this composure,
sir.
Well, I like it.

But you can't expect the world
to be quiet while you pass by.
I didn't say that. I just said I'm glad
not to be in a 4th of July neighborhood
today and to be instead in Sicily,
quiet for a change.

Quiet, not for its own sake
or impersonal stillness but
so I can think clearly
and return more often to the *Bhāgavatam*
and another round of chanting.

Be quiet while you can
because it's soon going to be noisy again.
Instill quiet within you so you
can be strong in the fight
in the stress and the rattle and noise.
You will be exposed to it.

Thunder I like,
that natural sound, but not the loud
stupid talking, the guy who
pulls up in his car with
tape blasting that same rock song,
"I'll be there for You!"
I don't need it. I prefer the kids
don't bang that door again and again
when I'm trying to sleep.
You blame me for that?

I like to chant *japa* and hear my voice
and hear Prabhupāda's voice. In quiet
you can walk through and hear the music
of Nārada and Vyāsa
and hear the thoughts and the
Bhāgavatam talks you want to give when
you can again sing "Jaya Rādhā-Mādhava"
with harmonium unamplified.

The sound of breeze,
the sound of silence when you open
the window at 1 a.m. in this neighborhood.
I like that better than a
cherry bomb exploded under the window
and crash-bang heavy rock metal.

Let me turn to You
and hear what You say.

Chapter Five

Dreams could be a source for fiction. They are compelling, well made, and they go beyond the life I know when I'm awake. They are so "illogical," however, that most people would find them difficult to accept if offered as stories straight from the dream producer. The whole point in storytelling is to deliver Kṛṣṇa consciousness, and where is the Kṛṣṇa consciousness in my dreams? Last night, for example, I dreamt I was playing a tenor sax. I very much wanted to be a great saxophone player. I had a sax, but I didn't know whether it was a toy or a real one. I played it, but was afraid it didn't sound good, that I wasn't making real music. Madhumaṅgala assured me, "The first notes you played sounded frustrated, but it sounded good and definitely like a saxophone." I played and played and other ISKCON leaders also took up instruments. Mukunda Mahārāja was playing a trombone. We played our instruments separately and we had our own followings. Someone reviewed my playing and said it was good, but I still wasn't sure. Was it a bluff? A hoax? Was I playing a real horn?

ISKCON authorities came to me and said, "This lady disciple of yours was able to see others at this gathering, but was not able to see you. You are her guru." I played the sax for her. She said, "You are playing it according to a record you've heard." I said, "I'm going beyond that. Hear the compassionate notes I am able to play."

A strange dream of ISKCON leaders trying to offer their music to Kṛṣṇa, even though it was not a *kīrtana* as we know it and did not use the words of the Hare Kṛṣṇa mantra. I can't just hand over a dream as a story when it has no literal Kṛṣṇa conscious meaning (or very little). I don't expect to have anything to do with a saxophone in waking life. We would have to see the dream as symbolic. "Playing a sax" means doing my own thing for Kṛṣṇa. In my waking state, "my own thing" is writing, reading, and lecturing. That's how I blow my horn. The dream may be taken as an expression of the fact that ISKCON leaders are doing their own thing as preachers, making pleasing art forms or careers.

As a writer, using the dream stuff presents the same problems I have already mentioned in storytelling. Therefore, I'm content to offer it frankly—"I had a dream"—and not rework it into some artistic, Kṛṣṇa conscious "story."

I read *Bhagavad-gītā* from 12–1 a.m. It's serious, clear, and sublime. But where is the story? That I took notes? I just finished reading the seventh chapter where Arjuna asks, "How may those engaged in devotional service think of You at the time of death?" I read and then look

at the study guides, one *bhakti-sāstra* course by Jagadīśa Goswami and an overview by Bhūrijana Prabhu (two renowned ISKCON saxophone players). Maybe my reading is getting a bit more into “study” than I wanted. What did I expect? I want to ask myself, “Did you meet Kṛṣṇa in the pages of *Bhagavad-gītā*? How does it feel?” I don’t seem eligible to feel much. Kṛṣṇa consciousness is rare and deep. You have to be free of sins and their reaction in this life and past lives, your interest completely undiluted. *Bhagavad-gītā* proves me to be a beginner and not a pure devotee. So I study.

Still, I like to savor Kṛṣṇa’s pure devotional service as He conveys it in His talk to Arjuna. It’s a great story, not a fiction, these verses and purports of the preliminary book in Kṛṣṇa consciousness.

Another reason I mentioned for avoiding fiction is that I love to free-write, to be a sax player who improvises. I run free in my writing and that’s important to me. I don’t like to play rehearsed thoughts, even if they create a well rehearsed and orchestrated story. I don’t even like writing that is too much re-written and polished, too well crafted. I would rather hear something as it was, as it flowed, how it is sometimes broken with sobs and yet restrained—bent notes curve and yet you get overtaken. It’s sometimes out of your control. After all, we are not the doer. We are not God in control of the story called reality, so why pretend? Words come flowing, flawed, aching, loving, crooning.

I am happy in Kṛṣṇa consciousness. Marlowe and his mechanic danced a jig on the metal bridge of their steamboat, waking the people in the settlement. A

crazy, joyful act of excess (when they thought they would soon get rivets to repair the boat's hull).

I write "timed books" (as I call them). They are not well told stories. In *Progresso*, I boasted (or at least openly admitted) that the book has no theme. No need to worry about that. Yet I tried in each chapter to find a theme related to "May Lord Kṛṣṇa see a sincerity in me." As for story, theme, forget it.

Is that wrong? Is it my way? That dream last night, playing the sax—it woke me with a start at 9 p.m. and I couldn't get back to sleep. I had been glad to resist agitation the previous night. I wanted peace, not insomnia to meditate on ideas for a story. Here I was, though, startled by the apparent relevance or suggestiveness of my dream. I trust the dream producer to give meaningful messages, even if I have to learn to understand their symbolism.

In improvised, timed books, I don't bother to always analyze everything. From *Progresso*: "You do hope by fresh starts to go beyond. Constant tries. You feel satisfied when it seems to work."

After reading *Bhagavad-gītā* this morning, I felt serious and wanted to give straight Kṛṣṇa consciousness, nothing less. I wrote this note to myself: "Story or not, planned or spontaneous, give us Kṛṣṇa—words by Him or topics about Him. That devotee asked me, 'Please write about Kṛṣṇa.' Should I excuse myself from that request just because I'm not on the level of Sanātana Gosvāmī? No, anyone can preach. It's not difficult. Just tell what Kṛṣṇa and Śrīla Prabhupāda have said."

This morning's walk was ruined by dogs. First we met three large friendly ones. They were like gallant youths coming home from being out on the town all night. They wagged their tails and greeted us silently. Then they split up and went their separate ways. At the end of a long lane, another dog set up a terrible barking. The three of us carried sticks, so we relentlessly approached him as we walked, spread out across the road. His bark was high-pierced and echoed, and it got louder as we approached. His eyes were shining. When we came right up to him, his tail and back half cowered and he shut up. Then he began to follow us.

Owls called out eerily, one to another. "We can't see them, but they can see us," Madhu said.

Now they are familiar sights—the Carmelite convent built in the 15th century, St. John's monastery, and the high military tower. (I got a better look at the tower. It was built on top of a solid mass of stone.)

Into the park—statues, one of a professor, "*erudito*." Where is he now? I thought of Śrīla Prabhupāda's example of Nehru. People worship him and they have built museums and statues in his name. Nehru, though, has probably become one of two dogs owned by a man in Scandinavia. The statues in this park have been covered in graffiti.

More dogs barked at us on the way back. A brown mongrel with his tail sticking up growled and walked beside us in an unfriendly way. He was accompanied by a larger, non-committal black dog.

The whole time out we chanted and I sometimes thought about the fact that I cannot sustain a devotional mood. Lord Caitanya tells us why we are so un-

fortunate. I looked at the sky, the comforting, out-of-reach, God-given sky. Blue dark clouds moved in it. It wasn't quite dawn. This chanting, this chanting, this prayer. In one sense, it is not unlike other chanting. It is the holy name, the holy name, the holy name. Is it brown like a Franciscan's robe? Is it green like the leaves on the trees? Is it blue like Śrī Kṛṣṇa Himself?

I also thought of the writing I want to do, how it lives in me like an ebullient being, a secret surprise. When I get back to the house . . .

"My dear Lord, Your holy name alone can render all benediction." I'm sorry I couldn't chant with You so nicely when we walked this morning, but it was certainly nice that You accompanied us. We are like those rude and ignorant dogs who sniffed and barked and know nothing of spiritual life compared to You and Your pure devotees who live in the mellows of the holy names. I thank You for appearing as *harināma* above the parapets of the castle and in the old stone walls. We saw lamp lights in the parks and walked where no one would disturb us. It was nice only because of You. Otherwise, why walk around before dawn? We would feel as lonely and lost as I used to feel, up all night on drugs, loveless. That's how it used to be, before I met You.

After chanting three rounds, I turned to Jaya Govinda and asked how yesterday's *saṅkīrtana* went. He said it was nice and that he was glad he went out. I asked if he met any interested people. He said he met a boy to whom he gave a Hare Kṛṣṇa cookbook two years ago. That boy has become a vegetarian.

I told him that Trai dāsa, an American living in Italy, told me that Italian *saṅkīrtana* is so much nicer than American *saṅkīrtana*. The people are so much more receptive in Italy. Jaya Govinda smiled and said, "Their tendency is to be pious. They like to talk."

"When we were coming from Napoli, we had to go through customs twice, once when getting on the boat and again when getting off. They saw our van and asked, 'What's this?' Each time Madhu said, 'Religioso,' they immediately said, 'Oh,' and waved us through. You couldn't expect the police to do that in other countries."

I like Jaya Govinda's smile. He said he tells people he is a "missionario" and "they like it very much."

Back to the house. The dogs accompanied us the whole way. They remind me of policemen who escort you to the edge of town and tell you never to come back. The dogs can't do that because they are subordinate to us, but their accompanying us wasn't exactly out of affection. When we opened the door, the large black dog walked up slowly as if he wanted to come in with us if only we gave him the sign. We shut him out.

This nonfiction or whatever it is. The Buddhists say
it is all just
distant waves
that seem to come
seem to go
I have lived my whole life
leaving everything to the blowing wind.

This is not Nothing, not illusion or disappointment. It is a life lived to serve Lord Kṛṣṇa. I know I live it imperfectly, but Kṛṣṇa is present everywhere, in everyone.

Now let me seek Him especially in the words of scripture and my spiritual master, and learn to understand that He is my best friend. He is a person, an intimate of the residents of Vṛndāvana. He comes with me wherever I go, if I would just turn and see Him.

Chapter Six

Reading of the *gopīs*' talks to Uddhava on his visit to Vṛndāvana. Śrīmatī Rādhārāṇī sees a honey bee and imagines it is a messenger from Kṛṣṇa. She speaks Her heart out in "crazy" talks, expressing all the symptoms of the topmost lover of Kṛṣṇa. She criticizes Kṛṣṇa's cheating behavior toward the *gopīs* and criticizes His messenger, the bee. Rādhā criticizes Kṛṣṇa's behavior in His former incarnations as Rāma and Vāmanadeva. She says it is better that the *gopīs* not even speak of or think about Kṛṣṇa. "But here is the difficulty: in spite of His being so cruel and hard-hearted, it is very difficult for us to give up talking about Him."

I wrote this in my reading notes: "This is a way that Rādhā pleases Kṛṣṇa. It is not born of even a trace of displeasure toward Kṛṣṇa or a desire to hurt or reject Him, just as He has no tinge of negative feeling toward Her. I can only read it with awareness that this purity and intensity of *kṛṣṇa-prema* between Them is inconceivable to me. Someday (in future lives) I may come to

understand it because it is the fruit of all devotional activities I may perform and the result of Kṛṣṇa's mercy."

Another section from *Heart of Darkness* that remains with me from my reading thirty-four years ago is Marlowe's description of how he felt when the natives were howling and dancing in the jungle while he passed through on his steamboat. He says that although he is repelled by it, something in him is also drawn toward it. He says it's difficult to describe and yet he does a fascinating job describing it:

They howled and leaped, and spun, and made horrid faces; but what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity—like yours—the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar. Ugly. Yes, it was ugly enough; but if you were man enough you would admit to yourself that there was in you just the faintest trace of a response to the terrible frankness of that noise, a dim suspicion of there being a meaning in it which you—you so remote from the night of first ages—could comprehend.

These feelings of the steamboat captain Marlowe are also symbolic; Conrad plants them in his story. He is trying to say something about civilized people and their acts of humanity and kindness toward one another, their civility, and so on. He is also trying to say that we too could go the way of the naked, howling savage. We have our own primal screams, and we could easily give vent to all kinds of bestial drives, including man-slaughter, cannibalism, etc.

What is it that restrains us from acting like the savages when we hear their drums and howling and spy their dancing on the jungle shore? Marlowe tells us:

He must meet that truth with his own true stuff—with his own inborn strength. Principles won't do. Acquisitions, clothes, pretty rags—rags that would fly off at the first good shake. No; you want a deliberate belief. An appeal to me in this fiendish row—is there? Very well; I hear; I admit, but I have a voice, too, and for good or evil mine is the speech that cannot be silenced.



Aside from this “true stuff” that Marlowe finds within himself, he also says that he was simply too busy with the external reality of putting bandages on his leaky pipes and steering to avoid snags in the river, so “there was surface truth enough in these things to save a wiser man.”

He doesn't mention that his inner nature is to be spirit soul and that this is why he could rise above the aborigine. Conrad explores and advocates the restraint which a human being employs to keep himself from killing his fellow being, but he doesn't give good enough reason for it. It seems to be an enigma to him, just as it was for Marlowe when he couldn't figure out why the cannibals didn't eat the white crewmen.

By contrast, Kṛṣṇa advocates the higher nature in the *Bhagavad-gītā*, based on the constitutional make-up of the self as pure spirit soul. Arjuna asks Kṛṣṇa what it is that impels a man, as if by force, to commit sinful acts. Kṛṣṇa tells him that it's anger born out of lust, the all-devouring enemy of the world. In another place Kṛṣṇa says that if he makes his mind his friend, he can resist this lower nature. In the beginning, this is done by following the rules and regulations of Vedic culture. Ultimately, however, it is done when one finds his "true stuff," his taste for serving Kṛṣṇa, a taste which is naturally sinless and pure. "The embodied soul may be restricted from sense enjoyment, though the taste for sense objects remains. But, ceasing such engagements by experiencing a higher taste, he is fixed in consciousness." (Bg. 2.59) Remembering Kṛṣṇa and remembering guru, one does not yield to the lower, animal-like impulses. This is also stated as one of the attainments of yoga: "Being situated in such a position, one is never shaken, even in the midst of greatest difficulty. This indeed is actual freedom from all miseries arising from material contact." (Bg. 6.23)

Conrad, however, is indirectly teaching his brand of existentialism: be good and decent, but for no good rea-

son, while we live in a savage world. Don't be greedy or cruel. Be good even though there is no God and no eternal self. Make up your own goodness. That's all there is and it is noble.

Could the Kṛṣṇa conscious version of these themes be turned into fiction? Yes, so I continue to mull over whether it's a task for me or for someone else. So far, I think it's for someone else.

I asked Madhu to look at *Heart of Darkness* and answer two questions: "1. How did you feel as you read it? 2. You said I shouldn't reject Kṛṣṇa conscious fiction. After looking at *Heart of Darkness*, and knowing me as a writer, what do you suggest? Do you have a specific idea of a story to be told?"

What I did not tell Madhu is that my ship is pretty much on the course of creative nonfiction. By putting these questions to him, however, I feel like a novelist who traps readers in a pit he has set for them. I'm already affected by the fictive mood (you can call it the consuming mood of the creative writer, fictive or not). Everything becomes grist for the mill. Even as I read in the Tenth Canto this morning, I thought that I would be able to put my feelings toward this section into my new book. When I am not considering fiction, I'm more able to forget the audience and to write from a simple motive. Although it seems naive, the descriptions of my daily routine and thoughts may be the most potent method of writing, the best for me, and my way of winning readers and implanting my message into their hearts. That "simple" method, however, cannot be done in a

cagey, calculated way. Someone could say that an author is always pulling some deceit over on the reader, but why should I participate in that deceit?

Conrad's discussion on restraint is fascinating and relevant both for those practicing Kṛṣṇa consciousness and those who are not. He explains it in the extraordinary context of Mr. Kurtz "who lacked restraint in the gratification of his various lusts . . . there was something wanting in him—some small matter which, when the pressing need arose, could not be found under his magnificent eloquence."

The story goes that Mr. Kurtz, about whom we have heard so much from the beginning of the story, who seems to not only be extraordinarily successful at gathering ivory, but also a philosopher and moralist, turns out to be mad. He gradually used the white man's power over the savages—a power that comes mostly from his possession of firearms—and allowed himself to be worshipped by them. The natives even held midnight rites in which unspeakable offerings of sacrifice were made to the "god" Kurtz. Kurtz organized his own tribe and went around raiding the neighboring villages, mostly out of greed for ivory.

Conrad attributes this to an inherent weakness in Kurtz, but also to what would happen to any human being who is left alone without the support of his natural society. Kurtz lived deep in the jungle in "utter solitude without a policeman—by the way of silence—utter silence, where no warning voice of a kind neighbor can be heard whispering of public opinion. These little things make all the difference. When they are gone you must

fall back upon your own innate strength, upon your own capacity for faithfulness."

Kurtz wrote an essay on the request of a so-called International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs. His essay was eloquent, stating how the white man was looked to by the natives as a supernatural being, a deity, and "by the simple exercise of our will we can exert a powerful good practically unbounded." At the end of his idealistic essay, however, Kurtz had scrawled a P.S. in an unsteady hand: "Exterminate all the brutes!"

Marlowe finds Kurtz living in the madness of his being a deity to the savages, in his little settlement surrounded by posts. The posts are topped by the skulls of those he and his tribe have slaughtered.

It's so bizarre, and in this presumably fictional context, it's hard to make the mild applications we might normally make to Kṛṣṇa conscious persons. The story shows us how a person who is worshipped as good as God can become corrupt and fall into madness. It is also sobering to think that the social pressures we sometimes find bothersome actually has a good effect. Conrad claims that we have nothing but public opinion, the police, and the "true stuff" to keep us from becoming degraded. If the social pressure in a movement like ISKCON helps us to follow the rules and regulations, then it is useful. Of course, anything can be misused, but Conrad's fictional expose of the human heart makes us think that it is indeed dangerous to go on our own without a guide. It becomes more dangerous still if for some reason, because of our austerities or opulence, some

“rudimentary” people start to look up to us and accept whatever we say as The Truth.

What am I doing? I’m here essay-ing in response to the messages of the master storyteller. I couldn’t help but think out what it means to me. This is a far cry from writing a story of my own. Because Conrad made powerful statements, I, an ISKCON person, felt the necessity to respond and put forward our values and how they stack up with those presented in *Heart of Darkness*. I guess you could say I’m indirectly attesting to the influence of this indirect method of instruction. A tale of adventure with a point can be more cogent than an expository essay.

Anyway, it’s five after 11 and time for me to worship my Prabhupāda mūrti.

Chapter Seven

True story of this one person: I am a reader of my master's books, a writer, chanter, and also a *sannyāsī* who travels and lectures. Next Sunday I'll be speaking to the "Friends of Lord Kṛṣṇa" who will gather at the ISKCON Palermo temple. They all work full-time at "*karmī*" jobs, live with their families in their own homes, and try to practice Kṛṣṇa consciousness. Today I looked at the essay on *karma-yoga* Śrīla Prabhupāda wrote in India before he came to America. I thought this essay would make a nice presentation to those who have to work, but who also want to serve Kṛṣṇa. I want to encourage them. I know the philosophy and I'll try to give it to them.

In *Message of Godhead*, Prabhupāda recommends offering food to fulfill Kṛṣṇa's order that the results of work should be given to Viṣṇu. This is the diet part of the formula. The medicine is to chant Hare Kṛṣṇa and to hear His pastimes. Jaya Govinda dāsa can give me particular applications for the Sicilians. Can they get up early to practice *sādhana* before going to work? Is it

possible? When do they eat? Can all their food be offered on an altar at home? How can they get experienced devotees' association (the Palermo temple closes for the summer)? Can they preach?

Śrīla Prabhupāda encourages them to at least set a good example—that can be their preaching—work and offer the results to Kṛṣṇa. *How* can they offer the results of their work? I don't want to say too baldly (or boldly) that they should give us their money, but can they preach? Can they invite friends to their homes for *kṛṣṇa-kathā*? Do they run into opposition from family members? (That's a tough one.) Can they avoid unnecessary association with nondevotees? What are some of their "favorite" bad habits and how can I help?

But you, dear reader—dear imagined-by-me objective critic of these chapters—you may ask me, "What does this lecture preparation have to do with the logical progression of your book?" Trust me. They are related. This is my life, my non-fictive life.

Then you may ask, "Why keep focusing the attention on yourself? This is the very smallness that fiction could help you overcome. Instead of scraping the barrel of Satsvarūpa dāsa's day, you could tell us how another person—perhaps someone facing more dramatic crises or someone more interesting and daring and wonderful—how he or she or they are faring on a stage of dramatic action? You could retire. You could be only the author instead of the author *and* the character."

Well said, dear critic. You argue well. Anyway, at least I know this one character and how he perceives the world. I am not the Supersoul that I can see into the hearts of others. I cannot devise "themes" and then find

their unity in the plot, the climax, and the *denouement* even in my own life. Then what to speak of others'? I can make puppets and a puppet theater, but is that what we want?

I would like to tell you how I try to write not for performance, but nakedly. That involves writing what comes. I have worked at this form of writing considerably in recent years. If you want to sell me fiction writing as an occupation, you should know what you're up against. I have tried fiction, but I prefer to write with deliberate non-attention to an audience's demands. I even wrote a long-ish book filled with strong writing. I called it *Forgetting the Audience*. It was filled with strong writing precisely because I didn't pander to an audience. I wrote it with an open heart by the sea.

Such writing is not necessarily selfish or egotistical simply because it focuses on my own life. I accept my life as God has given it to me. I accept it as my lot to work with and explore, to find my sense of surrender to Kṛṣṇa. It is the stage upon which I act out my efforts to become a devotee. I can't do that by creating interesting characters, but by living, confessing, singing, praying, even complaining and sometimes being a bore.

Later:

I'm finished with the Conrad book. How he must have worked at it! "The horror! The horror!" Kurtz's last words. Marlowe felt these words as "an affirmation, a moral victory paid for by innumerable defeats, by abominable terrors, by abominable satisfactions. But it

was a victory! That is why I have remained loyal to Kurtz to the last . . . ”

Marlowe chose to favor Kurtz over the despicable company manager and his crew. This vindicates Marlowe as a character (why else does he allow himself to work for these people?), but it almost costs him his life.

When they found Kurtz in the jungle, he was about to die of illness, but also of everything. One night he crawled on all fours away from the white men to join the village of his worshippers. Marlowe stopped him and said, “You’ll be lost, utterly lost” if you go join them and be accepted as God unto your death. Marlowe fetched him back. It’s not my duty to repeat the rest of the story.

Reading it grips you as much as any well produced movie. It changes your view of life. You experience the classic emotions—you feel the tragedy, the horror. When the show is over, though, you have to go back into the streets of your own life, adjust to the natural light out there, to the air, and get back into your mortal groove. In my case, it means getting back into the groove of my Kṛṣṇa conscious activities, including this writing.

It would be great to pull such emotions out of people, but to offer them a devotional conclusion. It would be great preaching. Each of us can only do his best. Conrad did his, according to his limited understanding and the power of his association. Although he met many unusual people during his life at sea, he never met a genuine guru. I did. Since it’s my duty to serve him, I keep asking myself how I can do that best. Is writing fiction the answer?

Kurtz was a great sinner. Marlowe mentions that Kurtz was fighting for his soul in his last moments, but you can't save your soul only by seeing the horror of your sin. You have to call out to God as Ajāmila did ("Nārāyaṇa!"), as Gandhi did ("He Rāma!"), and as I hope to do.

5 p.m.

No more Conrad crutch

You are on your own

no matter what Madhu says

I'm not likely to suddenly become the author
of a work that's fiction.

I'll be telling this with a sigh—

I took the road I traveled on

and that has made all the difference.

I for one will be eager

to hear what dogs and owls

you meet tomorrow. I don't mind

to hear what you read in the *Gītā*.

I know it's all you've got.

And if you want to tell a little

childlike story

a whopper of your own,

who's going to stop you?

Since no one cares anyway . . .

When Marlowe met the Intended (the girl Kurtz was going to marry), she asked what Kurtz had spoken at the end. Marlowe said to himself, "*Can't you hear them? They seem to be shouting in the air.*" But Marlowe lied,

"He said your name." She cried out, "I knew it!" (Kurtz actually had another woman in the jungle, but Marlowe couldn't tell her.) "The horror! The horror!" was the one thing about Kurtz that he admired. Why didn't he tell her? Because Conrad says women should be left to think beautiful things even if they are illusory. He says we need women to think like that.

What kind of bosh is that? Why should women be in illusion? Conrad might answer that: because the truth is unspeakable or too painful to bear. We say something different. There are horrors and worse horrors and hells and worse hells; the Absolute Truth will liberate us from all that.

I am scheduled to go to Belfast for Janmāṣṭamī, scheduled for other things as well. Got a date with death, although dear friends may die before me. Therefore, I want to be prepared to live the rest of my life, and be prepared to write my way through it until the end.

Chapter Eight

I would like to tell you Madhu's response to my questions on Conrad's book, but this will probably be one of the last references I make to *Darkness*.

I asked him how he felt while he read it. He said he was hooked. He was challenged. It churned up his emotions. He accepted the story as reality—"It didn't matter if it was true or not. I don't care whether such a boat ever existed. Marlowe's thoughts were true."

It roused in Madhu feelings of anger toward pseudo-righteousness and the insensitivity greed produces. "All these things are true now just as they were true a hundred years ago."

I asked him how I might use this book in my own writing. He said that my big obstacle in writing fiction seems to be that I don't want to be caught up in fabrication, but when he read how Conrad began the story and quickly handed it over to Marlowe, Madhu thought this was the answer to my dilemma. He meant that it was like my style to stay near a fictional character, just as Marlowe actually speaks for Conrad. Madhu said he

liked it when Conrad wrote at the beginning, "We were fated to hear about one of Marlowe's inconclusive experiences." My stories are often like that too.

Madhu suggested I write on the theme of darkness in society, but he added that I would probably have to be more involved in the world to do it. He mentioned Thomas Merton, who didn't find it incompatible to be a monk and yet be involved in the anti-nuclear and civil rights movements in America. I could write about darkness. (Yes, it's true. I live in a monk's world. But do I want it otherwise? Is living otherwise required for a novelist? Can I know darkness from a devotee's life? But do I want to?)

He mentioned some examples of the world's "darkness": Hitler's death camps, England's enforced famine on India, the Mafia's killing and protection racket, how America controls its interests and how people get killed when they go against them, and a personal incident for Madhu about the British agents who killed a friend of his in the IRA and how no investigation was ever held.

He said if I didn't want to take on social darkness, then I could still explore the darkness in my own heart. He said that I'm capable of perceiving darkness without prejudging it in others.

The *Vedas* state, *tamasi mā jyotir gamah*, "Come out of the darkness into the light." "This *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* is as brilliant as the sun . . . Persons who have lost their vision due to the dense darkness of ignorance in the age of Kali shall get light from this *Purāṇa*." Gaura-Nitāi rise like the simultaneous appearance of the sun and moon to drive out the dense darkness within people's hearts. *Om ajñāna-timirāndhasya*: "I was standing in

darkness with my eyes shut, but my spiritual master has opened my eyes by the torch light of knowledge.” *Kṛṣṇa-sūrya-sama*, “Kṛṣṇa is light.” Where there is light, there cannot be nescience.

Devotees have already climbed out of the darkness at least to some degree. We’re already enlightened with transcendental knowledge, thanks to Śrīla Prabhupāda. We’re no longer engaged in our lower natures and being dragged to hell. (“The living entity . . . sometimes . . . merges into the dark material nature and identifies himself with matter, and sometimes he identifies himself with the superior, spiritual nature. Therefore he is called the Supreme Lord’s marginal energy.” [Bg. 8.3, purport])

Yes, we’re enlightened as long as we stay as the servant of the servant of the Lord. That is our eternal *svarūpa*. To recognize that is liberation. Then, having received the light by which we can see ourselves and the world, we are obliged to give it to others.

It’s when a devotee goes to preach that he encounters darkness. It can be frightening. Some transcendentalists prefer not to confront the ignorance of the bewildered and evil-prone conditioned souls. If we take the risk to enlighten them, however, we become dearmost servants of Kṛṣṇa.

The dirtiness, the horror is material life. Vyāsadeva saw it in a vision where he saw the material miseries of the living beings. He also saw their deliverance by the linking process of devotional service. Therefore, he compiled the *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam*, which is in relation to the Supreme Truth. Our spiritual master wants us to distribute that knowledge in the mood of humble ser-

vants to the previous *ācāryas*. Śrīla Prabhupāda did this on a grand scale and I must always serve him as he desires.

Whatever darkness there is in me is my leaning toward material desires and my failure to follow my spiritual master's order for my own and others' deliverance. In recent years, I have been concentrating on delivering myself. It seems logical to me that if I am convinced and strong and honest and exemplary, I'll automatically become a good preacher. Still, one has to actually put one's body on the preaching field and confront the darkness. Kṛṣṇa will help us. "To show them special mercy, I, dwelling in their hearts, destroy with the shining lamp of knowledge the darkness born of ignorance."

It's all right to be afraid of the darkness of material life and to avoid Kali's haunts—the gambling houses, the brothels, the liquor shops, the meat-serving restaurants. Prahlāda Mahārāja said he was afraid of the wheel of time. We may have a respectful fear of Māyā-devī's trident, but we shouldn't be afraid to preach or of the angry demon's reaction to our preaching. March with the forces of light against the darkness. In that sense, the preacher enters the heart of darkness to save souls and he is never affected by the darkness himself.

The preacher is compassionate. He sees that the conditioned souls are all going to hell because they are killing their chances for human life. As the *Īsopaniṣad* states, "The killer of the soul, whomever he may be, must enter into the planets known as the worlds of the faithless, full of darkness and ignorance."

Śrīla Prabhupāda saw the darkness in our faces, in New York City and San Francisco, in the park in Amsterdam where thousands of hippies were too intoxicated and unruly to hear him. "It is the darkness," Prabhupāda commented, when a crazy girl spoke out against him in a meeting, but the pure devotee does not abandon lost souls. He cannot bear to see humans descending into darkness, taking their next lives in animal or plant species. He preaches against all odds.

Conrad describes the darkness as incomprehensibly deep and overwhelming. Certainly it can swallow up any man or all men. Although the unknowable material darkness is great, however, it is limited. It is not all-powerful. It is only a small part of Kṛṣṇa's total energies. He is above the darkness. He wants us to come back to Him and that is also our heart's desire. Śrīla Prabhupāda says the *jīva* hankers to get beyond the walls of the universe; he wants freedom, light, but he is imprisoned. Those who are imprisoned along with him cannot get him out. Only Kṛṣṇa's liberated pure devotee can help him.

Once there was a devotee, in fact, a batch of them, who were left in the world by their spiritual master. Their spiritual master had gone back to Godhead, or to preach on behalf of his beloved Lord. He left precious and durable instructions for his disciples. Many of them floundered without his personal presence. The boat of his spiritual institution rocked on the ocean. Even those whom he designated to lead his mission fell into error, fell into *kāma* and greed. His mission was pure, but his disciples were not yet pure. That's a long,

sad story, but the good news is that the boat is still afloat and it appears to have survived twenty years of storming. Go on, brave boat, and may your sailors be enlightened.

Once there was a free-writer who wanted to be responsible. He woke and felt the urge to write. He could hardly contain it, yet he calmed himself and read *Bhagavad-gītā*. There Lord Kṛṣṇa advised all to remember Him at the end of life and come back to Him. Lord Caitanya ordered the same thing by saying, "Chant Hare Kṛṣṇa," and demonstrated it. The free-writer wanted to respond.

Shouldn't the urge to write be more organized? Shouldn't one take counsel from peers and go forward a step at a time after having everything approved by councils and boards before he dares to share it with others?

Sometimes you have to go *now*. You have heard sufficiently. It's already approved.

I have heard the voices of mundane, non-Kṛṣṇa conscious persons, or at least they never uttered the word "Kṛṣṇa," and hardly ever said God in reverence or devotion. I heard them enough or too much.

Better to chant Hare Kṛṣṇa constantly, incessantly, if you want to remember Kṛṣṇa at the time of death. Do you know those verses in the eighth chapter of *Bhagavad-gītā*? I mean verses 5–8 especially. Prabhupāda constantly recommends chanting Hare Kṛṣṇa as the best means to remember Lord Kṛṣṇa. I copied Prabhupāda's words down on an index card: "There may be so

many impediments for a person who is chanting Hare Kṛṣṇa. Nonetheless, tolerating all these impediments, one should continue to chant Hare Kṛṣṇa Hare Kṛṣṇa, Kṛṣṇa Kṛṣṇa Hare Hare/ Hare Rāma Hare Rāma, Rāma Rāma Hare Hare, so that at the end of one's life one can have the full benefit of Kṛṣṇa consciousness." (Bg. 8.5, purport) Sometimes I say it aloud. This is my life. This is what we do.

I chose *Bhagavad-gītā* 8.7 to speak on to the workers who will come to the temple on Sunday. I chose it because Prabhupāda says, "This instruction to Arjuna is very important for all men engaged in material activities. . . . By chanting Kṛṣṇa's names, one will be transferred to the supreme planet, Kṛṣṇaloka, without a doubt."

Another point about writing fiction: if I tell of my own little life, people will get only a certain impression. I know I am on the *bhajanānandī* side, reclusive. If I take to fiction, I can show many worlds.

I wonder if that's true. A writer can only write what he knows, who he is. For example, yesterday afternoon I noticed clouds moving down the street, something you rarely see. You may see mist or fog, but when do you see an actual cloud moving down your street? It happens here because we are so high up on the mountain. These clouds are not like the Irish mist where the whole sky is overcast. This morning, the air and sky were clear, but a cloud came sailing down the street. It looked like smoke, except it didn't choke us or smell. Just white wisps. You see them sometimes from airplanes, but you

cannot reach out and touch them. Here they mingle with your body. It turns out to be no big deal, I guess.

This morning we stopped at a scenic overview where the tourist bureau has placed some benches. We saw many clouds, all at a lower elevation. They looked like a herd of cows (Kṛṣṇa's cows?) moving from sea to land. Such wonders in Lord Keśava's universe, and to think that this is only the earth planet.

From here, I could drift into fiction and not too carefully examine the dividing line between fact and fancy. After all, the main thing is to write and through writing, to enter Kṛṣṇa consciousness.

But what actually happens? I find myself pouring out words for Kṛṣṇa's pleasure, seeing the universe as a reflection of His glory, and at the same time, being careful not to think I am a madman or a genius or even a guru taking a morning walk with his disciples and discoursing about the meaning of congregation and how ISKCON has to grow by recognizing that devotees may live outside as well as inside the temples. Do you see how it happens? Whatever a writer is slips into his writing. If I expect disciples to take my words seriously (although not to the extent that Mr. Kurtz's "disciples" took his words seriously), if I like to hear myself speak, if I think I make interesting analogies and click my cane along the walk while I tell them that the steps leading up to the castle here remind me of the entrance to the Madana-mohana temple in Vṛndāvana, then how far from that dividing line am I? Perhaps the disciples think that their spiritual master is always thinking of Vṛndāvana. Is that fiction?

I used to think Sicilians were dark, swarthy, and low-class. I got that idea from the Northern Italians and the Italian-Americans, especially the Guarinos. My family was from Napoli, which is pretty far south, but they looked down on Sicilians. Here we are with one of them, Jaya Govinda dāsa, and he is a gentle and sensitive person, fair-skinned, mannerly, interested in spiritual development, and a book distributor, a *missionario* . . . so much for the stereotype.

I walked and lost my trains of thought
didn't notice when we were at the castle or
where we were when at that designated end.
He had to turn me around. I'm like a
child sometimes and then like the adult
and they are the children. Were you thinking
of Kṛṣṇa in Vṛndāvana? No, I was mostly glad
we met no dogs. A dogless walk.

The dogs we met yesterday were bums
pretending to be the owners of the street.
They didn't bluff us as respectable
yet I thought they belonged to someone.
They belong only to the material nature,
the souls inside the bodies
of all creatures are *jīvātmās*,
the true self in the body,
they don't know.

I decided fiction or not is not the point.
Better to drift with the "clouds." Once
there was a man who eschewed military service
and they came after him. He slid down an alley.
Then he took a course on hotel management
and finally they let him alone.
He lit a match and it flared.
He met a gentle Sicilian missionary
who sold him a book.
It said, "Kṛṣṇa is the Supreme
Personality of Godhead and we are His
parts and parcels." This man
was hungry and that's good.
He wanted spiritual knowledge.
It is a story. It happened but maybe
not exactly like this. He went home and wrote
rubber, hoses, Norway. These random words
came to him. Was he a real man?
These are stories that could be true.

Chapter Nine

If not fiction, then tell us of your little day, the things that are actually true to it, and find Kṛṣṇa therein. One literary historian said of the *haiku* poet Issa, “Not gifted with genius, but honestly holding his experience deep in his heart, he kept his simplicity and humanity.” So the clock is striking ten and here I am, the same lad who wrote *Progresso* all-out a year ago.

I have just come from a nice reading session. That’s my private life. I’m still reading the chapter about Uddhava and the *gopīs*. I am grateful they—the *gopīs*, Uddhava, the *ācāryas*, Prabhupāda, and the BBT men—have given us this chapter. It makes me remember that of all the devotees, the *gopīs* are the best. We won’t stay with them right now though. When this chapter ends, we will rejoin Kṛṣṇa in His pastimes in the Vāsudeva form. Śrīla Prabhupāda says there is no distinction between Kṛṣṇa in Mathurā and Kṛṣṇa in Vṛndāvana. He is always Kṛṣṇa. We will follow this path. Yet while reading Chapter 47 of the Tenth Canto, we can note that the *gopīs* didn’t think like that. They thought

Kṛṣṇa had been tricked by the Yadus to leave Vṛndāvana and that Nanda was so simple that he couldn't prevent it. They thought Kṛṣṇa could not possibly be happy in Mathurā away from His most beautiful Vṛndāvana and His *rāsa* dance with the *gopīs*. They called out to Kṛṣṇa not with lust, but in disappointment that He was not enjoying Himself in beautiful Vraja. They turned to Mathurā and called to Him directly, "O master, O master of the goddess of fortune, O Vrajanātha, please come back and rescue Your Gokula, which is drowning in an ocean of distress."

Fictionette:

Once a man read the forty-seventh chapter of the Tenth Canto and thought about it. He then went and told a friend and they discussed it. Then he went into another room and did some typing. As he typed, voices in the street distracted him. He tried to concentrate and lo and behold . . . did a leprechaun from Ireland hop over and tell him something? No. Did he decide then and there to write a trilogy? Did the entire plot become revealed to him and he immediately start on Chapter One? No. Did he suddenly remember the smell of bubble gum from his youth? No. Did he suddenly remember scenes from a time in his life that had no relationship to Kṛṣṇa? No. Everything is in relation to Kṛṣṇa. That was part of Kṛṣṇa's message to the *gopīs*. He said in effect that if we look at the world deeply enough, we will see that Kṛṣṇa is everywhere. He is never absent because He is the cause of everything and He is all-pervading, present everywhere. This is, of course, a *jñāna-yoga* understanding, but underneath it is a spe-

cial message for the *gopis*. Kṛṣṇa told them that He lives in their hearts within their special relationship and that Kṛṣṇa left them just to increase their devotion to Him. Absence makes the heart grow fonder.



The man typed and thought these points over. He also thought of disciples who write to him, but he didn't pour that out onto the page because it's private stuff. Besides, it's not relevant.

He didn't see a UFO. He didn't read Conrad. He didn't ask to see Dostoyevsky's *The Devils*. He doesn't seem able to take flight in either fiction or memory. He is sitting at a table and there is a big, empty, clay bowl in the center of it.

What else? I don't have to tell you about the spiritualized dictionary or boxing shorts or movie shorts . . . It is perilous to look inside at the jumble or as Madhu calls it, the darkness. Give us the light.

Fictionette:

Once a girl—no, let's make it his sister—phoned him long distance. Amazing, that she was the same person, nothing changed—still mocking and cynical. Why did she call? She said, "I heard you wanted to find out where in Ireland our grandparents were born. Well, keep the hell out of our family affairs. Don't intrude, you bum younger brother. You're probably looking to get some of our fortune. Well, you won't get a penny."

He asked, "Has anybody died yet?"

"We can't tell you nothing."

"I remember that your birthday is September 13. I remember you once said you liked the novels of Nathaniel West, even though he was not adored by the literature professors. I figure, sister, that maybe even *that* was pretense on your part. Oh, how we made believe we were this or that. What were we at heart? Do we even know to this day what we are? For example, I've been in the Hare Kṛṣṇa movement for almost thirty years, but am I really a devotee? Of course I am, but what *kind* of a devotee?"

"Oh, Stevie, you haven't changed. You're still ranting like you're drunk. You're still a romantic. We are what we are and we don't have to keep pushing to find out more about it. It gets revealed. All we have to do is stick to our comforts and try to keep cruel fate and Communists and terrorists and death at arm's length.

And of course, we don't want to have any accidents. What can we know? What can *you* know? Speaking of pretense, I can see you still think of yourself as some tragic figure in a Eugene O'Neill play. Well . . . ”

Nothing changes, but everything changes. What am I trying to say? I don't remember, but something Kṛṣṇa conscious. I can go back to what I was reading in Śrīla Prabhupāda's books.

Chapter Ten

Random reading is nice because you develop taste for and attention to the verses and purports of *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam*. How much longer will I live and be able to hear the *Bhāgavatam* in this form I know so well? Reading of Śrī Kṛṣṇa's activities is "meditation on Brahman in the most convenient and palatable form." Don't take it for granted.

The other day, I slowed down to read. There was nowhere I had to be, no quota of pages to read or write. I savored the philosophy a little at a time. It felt like prayer, meditation.

The one benefit of this sort of writing and living is how it facilitates your entering unrehearsed honesty. It may be that you are not normally so honest. It also helps you face the fact that you cannot expect the *Bhāgavatam* to tally with your notions or experience in this middle planet we call earth.

Vignette:

Someone once asked me, "Are you a pure devotee?" He wanted me to say yes. I laughed in his face.

Twenty minutes to six:

We were selecting excerpts from Prabhupāda's lectures. I will play the excerpts in the classroom and then explain why I chose them. Prabhupāda's presentations have a sometimes mysterious, sometimes sweet air to them. I think of my playing the tapes as a duet: the master speaks and one of his students responds. Others will also be invited to comment.

I hope to sleep well tonight because my life is set for waking at midnight. The alarm goes off at ten to 12, I get up, wet my eyes with cold water, take a spoon of psyllium seed husk downed with two cups of water, clean my eyeglasses, and begin reading.

One wants to have slept before that.

"Is that all you wanted to say, such a small thing?"

Yes. Śrīla Prabhupāda said a humble life of God consciousness is more valuable than a colossal hoax of altruism.

Nighttime story:

Once two kittens rolling over each other tumbled past Prabhupāda and he pointed out that there is love even in the animal world.

We are choosing excerpts. I told you that.

Yes to the miracle of loaves and fishes
and the miracle of Lord Caitanya
making mangoes sprout at once.
No to the doubt and ignorance
and fanaticism
and my own giving up.
Yes to the alphabet used in His service.
No to cow slaughter and whores and money
that makes the mode of passion the main activity.

Yes to celibacy, yes to preaching
yes to gentleness and purity not as abstract
but practiced as best you can.
No to violence and isms, unless they
are centered on God.

Yes to *Īsopaniṣad* and careful reading and
random reading, babies born into
Kṛṣṇa consciousness movement and no to
completely giving up the attempt
to work in his movement.

Yes to the pilot of the ship being Śukadeva
or Sūta or Prabhupāda. No to anyone else
taking the helm who doesn't love him
as the guru-founder.
No also to indulgence
in nondevotee books.

Yes to me and you trying to work it
out according to Vaiṣṇava etiquette.
No to bad politics and cigarettes and Cokes and beer
and no to dishonesty. Admit who we are.
No to breaking the rules.
Yes to forgiving those who want to come back.

No to careless service, yes to loving service,
yes to Sanāt Kumāra dāsa begging
the fire inspector to
let him sleep alone in the temple on religious grounds
so that Rādhā-Gopīvallabha
wouldn't have to be moved.

Yes to privacy and
to the summer and the death that
has to come, that's the real question—
can you say yes when it has to be,
when you have to give up services you love?
Can you say, "Yes, Kṛṣṇa, order me. Take
me. Make me broken-hearted but
You be pleased"? Can we say the yes
that will please Him and the no
that will please Him?

Yes to Kṛṣṇa conscious ISKCON,
no to be its enemy,
yes to reforms and being honest,
no, no
to giving up.

To this chapter I say yes it will stay,
it will do, it will suffer on account of me.
I have writ it and have to move on.

Yes to the heart of the palm tree
and to olives in Italy.
Yes to Kṛṣṇa yes to
Kṛṣṇa and no to His enemies the *mūḍhas*.

I beg Him
to give me strength
to say no to the temptations
and fears and denying my own
Kṛṣṇa consciousness,
please Lord
yes to renunciation and wisdom
and what You want, yes
yes.

Chapter Eleven

It was colder and darker on the walk today. Madhu brought his camera. He and Jaya Govinda left me to walk ahead of them. I was not chanting as well as when I was sitting in my room in the early morning. Thinking? I don't think when I chant. I just walk and let my left arm swing.

When we first started out on the walk, I felt strong attachment to life itself. I want to go on living, to write more books, to live in more places. Then I noticed how quickly summer is moving toward fall. One week of July is already gone. The black shadows of tree branches were reflected on the ground under the yellow street lights. Bunches of leaves swayed in the breeze. No dogs, just a cat. The bright yellow lights are meant to prevent muggings. We walk when the park is most deserted. We went to one section of the park, a quiet place that reminded me of a prayer grotto. There was a fountain in the center with a statue of a sea goddess or a mermaid or something. In India, we would have found a secret place to pray associated with Kṛṣṇa's pastimes.

I began writing seriously at midnight but then wrote, "I can't keep this up." It seems impossible. The *gopīs* always think of Kṛṣṇa; they are mad after Kṛṣṇa. Their

love is the pinnacle of Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava philosophy. We want to understand their love and we want to always think of God not as the majestic ruler, but as our dearest friend and lover.

The *gopīs* don't think of anything *but* Kṛṣṇa. He is not boring or an old man set up to judge the universe. Neither is He the impersonal beauty of outer space, the mountains, the breathtaking power of nature. He is the lover who plays His flute and steals our minds. Kṛṣṇa: His name stuns us. His lotus feet, His flute, the aromas and sounds and touches and tastes of Kṛṣṇa. Kṛṣṇa's name and Kṛṣṇa philosophy.

There is no need to write fiction. We simply have to live with our minds and work on improving our meditation. Stave off the onslaught of the material nature. Live as simply as possible. Stay close to devotional activities. Learn to dedicate your efforts to Kṛṣṇa and be relieved of karmic reactions. If we are linked in *bhakti* and trained in Kṛṣṇa consciousness, then our work becomes *tapo divyam*. Then it purifies us.

Can we keep it up, never deviating an inch? But we have to relax sometimes, or so we feel. We are breathing such rare air when we live always in Kṛṣṇa consciousness, always ingesting the *sāstras* of Nārāyaṇa, always talking *kṛṣṇa-kathā* and *kṛṣṇa-upadeśa*.

We can keep it up, not by our own power, but by touching Kṛṣṇa's lotus feet. It's like riding a bicycle and catching onto the back of a moving truck—you are quickly pulled forward by the truck's power.

So catch on to Kṛṣṇa. You don't have to be so learned or even pure. You can repeat Śrī Kṛṣṇa's words—even a child can.

And our actual day? Our days are full of waiting, blank spaces. How to convert the energy? We beg for taste and sometimes sigh and need to relax and look a turtle in the eye in our prose. In honesty, we say, I should tell you this too.

I'm going to be honest and tell of my travail on the path. We like it if in a writer's *parikrama* journal, the author tells us how he actually felt and not just what the guide said at each place. If the diarist tells us he has blisters on his feet, fine. We don't want to hear about blisters endlessly, but some of it is welcome because then we know we are with a true person who lives and suffers and strives as we do. We want the cut of truth. We want to see how our imperfection is striving for perfection, then we laugh, collapse a little, take our legs out of the lotus position and groan. But we don't deviate. We share our humble, true attempts at Kṛṣṇa consciousness together.

Very early in the morning outside that neighbor's house, I picked a red geranium for Prabhupāda's altar. I went upstairs, took off my shoes and foot brace, approached the typewriter, and didn't want to make up anything make-believe. "O Lord of Mathurā . . ." The *Bhāgavatam* rhetoric stays with me. Akrūra went to Hastināpura. Dhṛtarāṣṭra spoke diplomatically to him, saying, "Yes, your words are nectar, but I cannot follow them because I am prejudiced toward my sons. Besides, the Supreme Lord will decide what happens." That latter remark by Dhṛtarāṣṭra is not exactly correct. Kṛṣṇa cannot be blamed for what we do or the reactions we suffer because of it.

