

Letters on Poetry and Art



Sri Aurobindo

VOLUME 27

THE COMPLETE WORKS OF SRI AUROBINDO

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Published by Sri Aurobindo Ashram Publication Department

Printed at Sri Aurobindo Ashram Press, Pondicherry

PRINTED IN INDIA

Letters on Poetry and Art

Publisher's Note

Letters on Poetry and Art comprises letters written by Sri Aurobindo on poetry and other forms of literature, painting and the other arts, beauty, aesthetics and the relation of these to the practice of yoga. He wrote most of these letters to members of his ashram during the 1930s and 1940s, primarily between 1931 and 1937. Only around a sixth of the letters were published during his lifetime. The rest have been transcribed from his manuscripts.

The present volume is the first collection of Sri Aurobindo's letters on poetry, literature, art and aesthetics to bear the title *Letters on Poetry and Art*. It incorporates material from three previous books: (1) *Letters on Poetry, Literature and Art*; (2) *Letters on "Savitri"*, and (3) *On Himself* (section entitled "The Poet and the Critic"). It also contains around five hundred letters that have not appeared in any previous collection published under his name. The arrangement is that of the editors. The texts of the letters have been checked against all available manuscripts and printed versions.

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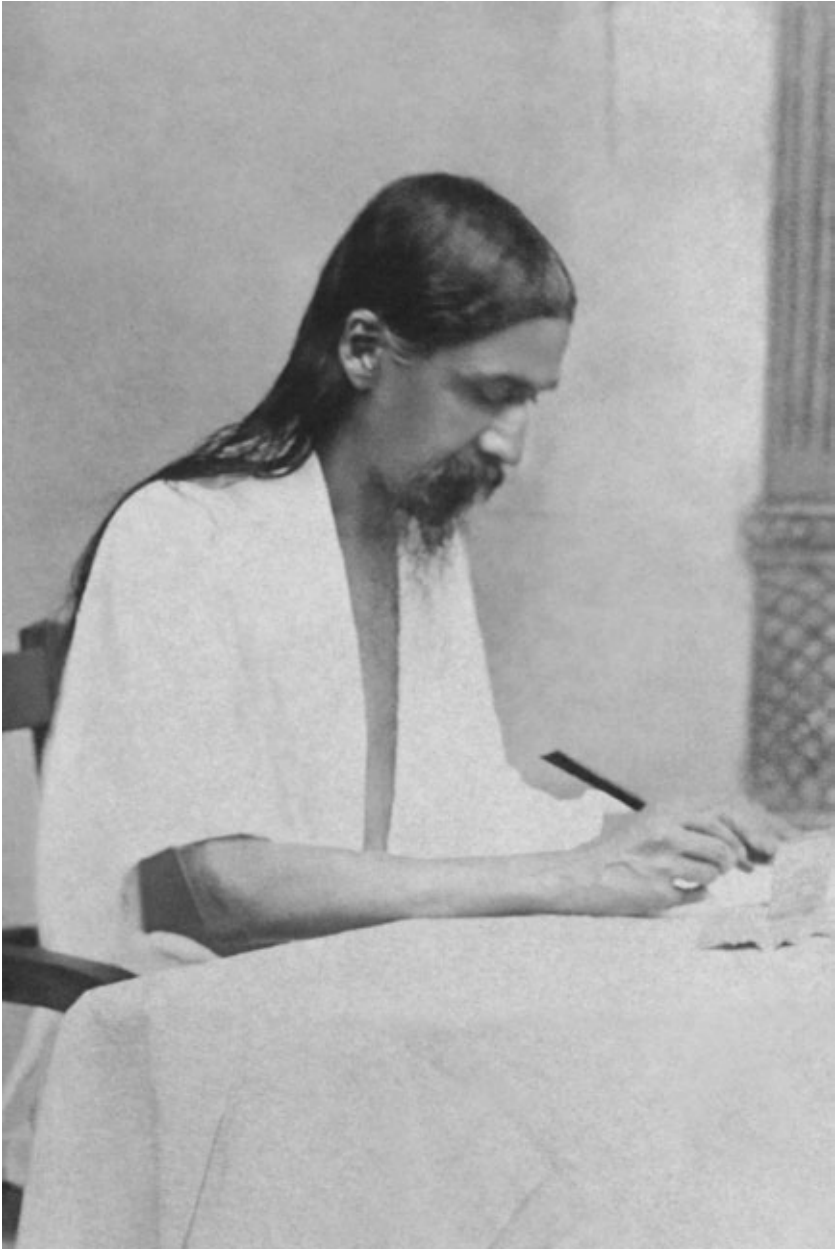
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Sri Aurobindo in Pondicherry

Part One

Poetry and Its Creation

Section One

The Sources of Poetry

Poetic Creation

Three Elements of Poetic Creation

Poetry, or at any rate a truly poetic poetry, comes always from some subtle plane through the creative vital and uses the outer mind and other external instruments for transmission only. There are three elements in the production of poetry; there is the original source of inspiration, there is the vital force of creative beauty which contributes its own substance and impetus and often determines the form, except when that also comes ready made from the original sources; there is, finally, the transmitting outer consciousness of the poet. The most genuine and perfect poetry is written when the original source is able to throw its inspiration pure and undiminished into the vital and there takes its true native form and power of speech exactly reproducing the inspiration, while the outer consciousness is entirely passive and transmits without alteration what it receives from the godheads of the inner or the superior spaces. When the vital mind and emotion are too active and give too much of their own initiation or a translation into more or less turbid vital stuff, the poetry remains powerful but is inferior in quality and less authentic. Finally, if the outer consciousness is too lethargic and blocks the transmission or too active and makes its own version, then you have the poetry that fails or is at best a creditable mental manufacture. It is the interference of these two parts either by obstruction or by too great an activity of their own or by both together that causes the difficulty and labour of writing. There would be no difficulty if the inspiration came through without obstruction or interference in a pure transcript — that is what happens in a poet's highest or freest moments when he writes not at all out of his own external human mind, but by inspiration, as the mouthpiece of the Gods.

The originating source may be anywhere; the poetry may arise or descend from the subtle physical plane, from the higher or lower vital itself, from the dynamic or creative intelligence, from the plane of dynamic vision, from the psychic, from the illumined mind or Intuition, — even, though this is the rarest, from the Overmind widenesses. To get the Overmind inspiration is so rare that there are only a few lines or short passages in all poetic literature that give at least some appearance or reflection of it. When the source of inspiration is in the heart or the psychic there is more easily a good will in the vital channel, the flow is spontaneous; the inspiration takes at once its true form and speech and is transmitted without any interference or only a minimum of interference by the brain-mind, that great spoiler of the higher or deeper splendours. It is the character of the lyrical inspiration, to flow in a jet out of the being — whether it comes from the vital or the psychic, it is usually spontaneous, for these are the two most powerfully impelling and compelling parts of the nature. When on the contrary the source of inspiration is in the creative poetic intelligence or even the higher mind or the illumined mind, the poetry which comes from this quarter is always apt to be arrested by the outer intellect, our habitual thought-production engine. This intellect is an absurdly overactive part of the nature; it always thinks that nothing can be well done unless it puts its finger into the pie and therefore it instinctively interferes with the inspiration, blocks half or more than half of it and labours to substitute its own inferior and toilsome productions for the true speech and rhythm that ought to have come. The poet labours in anguish to get the one true word, the authentic rhythm, the real divine substance of what he has to say, while all the time it is waiting complete and ready behind; but it is denied free transmission by some part of the transmitting agency which prefers to translate and is not willing merely to receive and transcribe. When one gets something through from the illumined mind, then there is likely to come to birth work that is really fine and great. When there comes with labour or without it something reasonably like what the poetic intelligence wanted to say, then there is

something fine or adequate, though it may not be great unless there is an intervention from the higher levels. But when the outer brain is at work trying to fashion out of itself or to give its own version of what the higher sources are trying to pour down, then there results a manufacture or something quite inadequate or faulty or, at the best, “good on the whole”, but not *the* thing that ought to have come.

2 June 1931

Creation by the Word

The word is a sound expressive of the idea. In the supra-physical plane when an idea has to be realised, one can by repeating the word-expression of it, produce vibrations which prepare the mind for the realisation of the idea. That is the principle of the Mantra and of japa. One repeats the name of the Divine and the vibrations created in the consciousness prepare the realisation of the Divine. It is the same idea that is expressed in the Bible, “God said, Let there be Light, and there was Light.” It is creation by the Word.

6 May 1933

Creative Power and the Human Instrument

A poem may pre-exist in the timeless as all creation pre-exists there or else in some plane where the past, present and future exist together. But it is not necessary to presuppose anything of the kind to explain the phenomena of inspiration. All is here a matter of formation or creation. By the contact with the source of inspiration the creative Power at one level or another and the human instrument, receptacle or channel get into contact. That is the essential point, all the rest depends upon the individual case. If the substance, rhythm, form, words come down all together ready-formed from the plane of poetic creation, that is the perfect type of inspiration; it may give its own spontaneous gift or it may give something which corresponds to the idea or the aspiration of the poet, but in either case the human being is only a channel or receptacle, although he feels the joy of the creation and the joy of the *āveśā*, *enthousiasmos*, elation of the

inrush and the passage. On the other hand it may be that the creative source sends down the substance or stuff, the force and the idea, but the language, rhythm etc. are formed somewhere in the instrument; he has to find the human transcription of something that is there in diviner essence above; then there is an illumination or excitement, a conscious labour of creation swift or slow, hampered or facile. Something of the language may be supplied by the mind or vital, something may break through from somewhere behind the veil, from whatever source gets into touch with the transcribing mind in the liberating or stimulating excitement or uplifting of the consciousness. Or a line or lines may come through from some plane and the poet excited to creation may build around them constructing his material or getting it from any source he can tap. There are many possibilities of this nature. There is also the possibility of an inspiration not from above, but from somewhere within on the ordinary levels, some inner mind, emotional vital etc. which the mind practised in poetical technique works out according to its habitual faculty. Here again in a different way similar phenomena, similar variations may arise.

As for the language, the tongue in which the poem comes or the whole lines from above, that offers no real difficulty. It all depends on the contact between the creative Power and the instrument or channel, the Power will naturally choose the language of the instrument or channel, that to which it is accustomed and can therefore readily hear and receive. The Power itself is not limited and can use any language, but although it is possible for things to come through in a language unknown or ill-known — I have seen several instances of the former — it is not a usual case, since the *sanskāra* of the mind, its habits of action and conception would normally obstruct any such unprepared receptiveness; only a strong mediumistic faculty might be unaffected by this difficulty. These things however are obviously exceptional, abnormal or supernormal phenomena.

If the parts of a poem come from different planes, it is because one starts from some high plane but the connecting consciousness cannot receive uninterruptedly from there and as

soon as it flickers or wavers it comes down to a lower, perhaps without noticing it, or the lower comes in to supply the continuation of the flow or on the contrary the consciousness starts from a lower plane and is lifted in the *āveśa*, perhaps occasionally, perhaps more continuously higher for a time or else the higher force attracted by the creative will breaks through or touches or catches up the less exalted inspiration towards or into itself. I am speaking here especially of the overhead planes where this is quite natural; for the Overmind for instance is the ultimate source of intuition, illumination or heightened power of the planes immediately below it. It can lift them up into its own greater intensity or give out of its intensity to them or touch or combine their powers together with something of its own greater power — or they can receive or draw something from it or from each other. On the lower planes beginning from the mental downwards there can also be such variations or combinations, but the working is not the same, for the different powers here stand more on a footing of equality whether they stand apart from each other, each working in its own right, or cooperate.

29 April 1937

*

Human creation comes from the vital planes into the physical — but there is often enough something more behind it than is expressed — it gets altered or diminished in the human physical transcription.

9 March 1933

Joy of Poetic Creation

Poetry takes its start from any plane of the consciousness, but, like all art, one might even say all creation, it must be passed *through* the vital, the life-soul, gather from it a certain force for manifestation if it is to be itself alive. And as there is always a joy in creation, that joy along with a certain *enthousiasmos* — not enthusiasm, if you please, but an invasion and exultation of creative force and creative ecstasy, *ānandamaya āveśa* — must always be there, whatever the source. But where the inspiration

comes from the linking of the vital creative instrument to a deeper psychic experience, that imparts another kind of intensive originality and peculiar individual power, a subtle and delicate perfection, a linking on to something that is at once fine to etheriality and potent, intense as fire yet full of sweetness. But this is exceedingly rare in its absolute quality, — poetry as an expression of mind and life is common, poetry of the mind and life touched by the soul and given a spiritual fineness is to be found but more rare; the pure psychic note in poetry breaks through only once in a way, in a brief lyric, a sudden line, a luminous passage. It was indeed because this linking-on took place that the true poetic faculty suddenly awoke in you, — for it was not there before, at least on the surface. The joy you feel, therefore, was no doubt partly the simple joy of creation, but there comes also into it the joy of expression of the psychic being which was seeking for an outlet since your boyhood. It is this inner expression that makes the writing of poetry a part of sadhana.

29 May 1931

Essence of Inspiration

There can be inspiration also without words — a certain intensity in the light and force and substance of the knowledge is the essence of inspiration.

18 June 1933

Inspiration and Effort

Inspiration is always a very uncertain thing; it comes when it chooses, stops suddenly before it has finished its work, refuses to descend when it is called. This is a well-known affliction, perhaps of all artists, but certainly of poets. There are some who can command it at will; those who, I think, are more full of an abundant poetic energy than careful for perfection; others who oblige it to come whenever they put pen to paper but with these the inspiration is either not of a high order or quite unequal in its level. Again there are some who try to give it a habit of coming by always writing at the same time; Virgil with his nine

lines first written, then perfected every morning, Milton with his fifty epic lines a day, are said to have succeeded in regularising their inspiration. It is, I suppose, the same principle which makes gurus in India prescribe for their disciples a meditation at the same fixed hour every day. It succeeds partially of course, for some entirely, but not for everybody. For myself, when the inspiration did not come with a rush or in a stream, — for then there is no difficulty, — I had only one way, to allow a certain kind of incubation in which a large form of the thing to be done threw itself on the mind and then wait for the white heat in which the entire transcription could rapidly take place. But I think each poet has his own way of working and finds his own issue out of inspiration's incertitudes. 26 January 1932

*

Merciful heavens, what a splashing and floundering! When you miss a verse or a poem, it is better to wait in an entire quietude about it (with only a silent expectation) until the true inspiration comes, and not to thrash the inner air vainly for possible variants — like that the true form is much more likely to come, as people go to sleep on a problem and find it solved when they awake. Otherwise, you are likely to have only a series of misses, the half-gods of the semi-poetic mind continually intervening with their false enthusiasms and misleading voices. 11 July 1931

*

Few poets can keep for a very long time a sustained level of the highest inspiration. The best poetry does not usually come by streams except in poets of a supreme greatness though there may be in others than the greatest long-continued wingings at a considerable height. The very best comes by intermittent drops, though sometimes three or four gleaming drops at a time. Even in the greatest poets, even in those with the most opulent flow of riches like Shakespeare, the very best is comparatively rare.

13 February 1936

Aspiration, Opening, Recognition

Impatience does not help — intensity of aspiration does. The use of keeping the consciousness uplifted is that it then remains ready for the inflow from above when that comes. To get as early as possible to the highest range one must keep the consciousness steadily turned towards it and maintain the call. First one has to establish the permanent opening — or get it to establish itself, then the ascension and frequent, afterwards constant descent. It is only afterwards that one can have the ease. 21 April 1937

*

Perhaps one reason why your mind is so variable is because it has learned too much and has too many influences stamped upon it; it does not allow the real poet in you who is a little at the back to be himself — it wants to supply him with a form instead of allowing him to breathe into the instrument his own notes. It is besides too ingenious. . . . What you have to learn is the art of allowing things to come through and recognising among them the one right thing — which is very much what you have to do in Yoga also. It is really this recognition that is the one important need — once you have that, things become much easier. 3 July 1932

Self-criticism

It is no use being disgusted because there is a best you have not reached yet; every poet should have that feeling of “a miraculous poetic creation existing on a plane” he has not reached, but he should not despair of reaching it, but rather he has to regard present achievement not as something final but as steps towards what he hopes one day to write. That is the true artistic temper. 1 May 1934

*

It is precisely the people who are careful, self-critical, anxious for perfection who have interrupted visits from the Muse. Those

who don't mind what they write, trusting to their genius, vigour or fluency to carry it off are usually the abundant writers. There are exceptions, of course. "The poetic part caught in the mere mind" is an admirable explanation of the phenomenon of interruption. Fluent poets are those who either do not mind if they do not always write their very best or whose minds are sufficiently poetic to make even their "not best" verse pass muster or make a reasonably good show. Sometimes you write things that are good enough, but not your best, but both your insistence and mine — for I think it essential for you to write your best always, at least your "level best" — may have curbed the fluency a good deal.

The check and diminution forced on your prose was compensated by the much higher and maturer quality to which it attained afterwards. It would be so, I suppose, with the poetry; a new level of consciousness once attained, there might well be a new fluency. So there is not much justification for the fear.

6 October 1936

*

You seem to suffer from a mania of self-depreciatory criticism. Many artists and poets have that; as soon as they look at their work they find it awfully poor and bad. (I had that myself often varied with the opposite feeling, Arjava also has it); but to have it while writing is its most excruciating degree of intensity. Better get rid of it if you want to write freely.

14 December 1936

Correction by Second Inspiration

It is a second inspiration which has come in improving on the first. When the improving is done by the mind and not by a pure inspiration, then the retouches spoil more often than they perfect.

8 August 1936

Sources of Inspiration

Sources of Inspiration and Variety

If there were not different sources of inspiration, every poet would write the same thing and in the same way as every other, which would be deplorable. Each draws from a different realm and therefore a different kind and manner of inspiration — except of course those who make a school and all write on the same lines. 18 July 1936

*

Different sources of inspiration may express differently the same thing. I can't say what plane is imaged in the poem [*submitted by the correspondent*]. Planes are big regions of being with all sorts of things in them. 17 October 1936

Poetry of the Material or Physical Consciousness

The Vedic times were an age in which men lived in the material consciousness as did the heroes of Homer. The Rishis were the mystics of the time and took the frame of their symbolic imagery from the material life around them. 20 October 1936

*

Homer and Chaucer are poets of the physical consciousness — I have pointed that out in *The Future Poetry*. 31 May 1937

*

You can't drive a sharp line between the subtle physical and the physical like that in these matters. If a poet writes from the outward physical only his work is likely to be more photographic than poetic. 1937

Poetry of the Vital World

I had begun something about visions of this kind and A.E.'s and other theories but that was a long affair — too long, as it turned out, to finish or even do more than begin. I can only now answer your questions rather briefly.

There is an earth-memory from which one gets or can get things of the past more or less accurately according to the quality of the mind that receives them. But this experience is not explicable on that basis — for the Gopis here are evidently not earthly beings and the place Raihana saw was not a terrestrial locality. If she had got it from the earth-mind at all, it could only be from the world of images created by Vaishnava tradition with perhaps a personal transcription of her own. But this also does not agree with all the details.

It is quite usual for poets and musicians and artists to receive things — they can even be received complete and direct, though oftenest with some working of the individual mind and consequent alteration — from a plane above the physical mind, a vital world of creative art and beauty in which these things are prepared and come down through the fit channel. The musician, poet or artist, if he is conscious, may be quite aware and sensitive of the transmission, even feel or see something of the plane from which it comes. Usually, however, this is in the waking state and the contact is not so vivid as that felt by Raihana.

There are such things as dream inspirations — it is rare however that these are of any value. For the dreams of most people are recorded by the subconscious. Either the whole thing is a creation of the subconscious and turns out, if recorded, to be incoherent and lacking in any sense or, if there is a real communication from a higher plane, marked by a feeling of elevation and wonder, it gets transcribed by the subconscious and what that forms is either flat or ludicrous. Moreover, this was seen between sleep and waking — and things so seen are not dreams, but experiences from other planes — either mental or vital or subtle physical or more rarely psychic or higher plane experiences.

In this case it is very possible that she got into some kind of connection with the actual world of Krishna and the Gopis — through the vital. This seems to be indicated first by the sense of extreme rapture and light and beauty and secondly by the contact with the “Blue Radiance” that was Krishna — that phrase and the expressions she uses have a strong touch of something that was authentic. I say through the vital, because of course it was presented to her in forms and words that her human mind could seize and understand; the original forms of that world would be something that could hardly be seizable by the human sense. The Hindi words of course belong to the transcribing agency. That would not mean that it was a creation of her personal mind, but only a transcription given to her just within the bounds of what it could seize, even though unfamiliar to her waking consciousness. Once the receptivity of the mind awakened, the rest came to her freely through the channel created by the vision. That her mind did not create the song is confirmed by the fact that it came in Hindi with so much perfection of language and technique.

To anyone familiar with occult phenomena and their analysis, these things will seem perfectly normal and intelligible. The vision-mind in us is part of the inner being, and the inner mind, vital, physical are not bound by the dull and narrow limitations of our outer physical personality and the small scope of the world it lives in. Its scope is vast, extraordinary, full of inexhaustible interest and, as one goes higher, of glory and sweetness and beauty. The difficulty is to get it through the outer human instruments which are so narrow and crippled and unwilling to receive them.

9 June 1935

*

I may say that purely vital poetry can be very remarkable. Many nowadays in Europe seem even to think that poetry should be written only from the vital (I mean from poetic sensations, not from ideas) and that that is the only pure *poetry*. The poets of the vital plane seize with a great vividness and extraordinary force of rhythm and phrase the life-power and the very sensation of the

things they describe and express them to the poetic sense. What is often lacking in them is a perfect balance between this power and the other powers of poetry: intellectual, psychic, emotional etc. There is something in them which gives an impression of excess — when they are great in genius, splendid excess, but still not the perfect perfection.

*

In purely or mainly vital poetry the appeal to sense or sensation, to the vital thrill, is so dominant that the mental content of the poetry takes quite a secondary place. Indeed in the lower kinds of vital poetry the force of word and sound and the force of the stirred sensation tend to predominate over the mental sense or else the nerves and blood are thrilled (as in war-poetry) but the mind and soul do not find an equal satisfaction. But this does not mean that there should be no vital element in poetry — without the vital nothing living can be done. But for a deeper or greater appeal the vital element must be surcharged with something more forward or else something from above, an element of superior inspiration or influence.

Poetry essentially psychic can have a strong vital element, but the psychic being is always behind it; it intervenes and throws its self-expression into what is written. There comes an utterance with an inner life in it, a touch perhaps even of the spiritual, easily felt by those who have themselves an inner life, but others may miss it.

The World of Word-Music

Nishikanta seems to have put himself into contact with an inexhaustible source of flowing word and rhythm — with the world of word-music, which is one province of the World of Beauty. It is part of the vital World no doubt and the joy that comes of contact with that beauty is vital — but it is a subtle vital which is not merely sensuous. It is one of the powers by which the substance of the consciousness can be refined and prepared for sensibility to a still higher beauty and Ananda. Also it can be

made a vehicle for the expression of the highest things. The Veda, the Upanishad, the Mantra, everywhere owe half their power to the rhythmic sound that embodies their inner meanings.

6 December 1936

Mental and Vital Poetry

All poetry is mental or vital or both, sometimes with a psychic tinge; the power from above mind comes in only in rare lines and passages lifting up the mental and vital inspiration towards its own light or power. To work freely from that higher inspiration is a thing that has not yet been done, though certain tendencies of modern poetry seem to be an unconscious attempt to prepare for that. But in the mind and vital there are many provinces and kingdoms and what you have been writing recently is by no means from the ordinary mind or vital; its inspiration comes from a higher or deeper occult or inner source. 17 May 1937

Poetic Intelligence and Dynamic Sight

On the plane of poetic intelligence the creation is by thought, the Idea force is the inspiring Muse and the images are constructed by the idea, they are mind-images; on the plane of dynamic vision one creates by sight, by direct grasp either of the thing in itself or of some living significant symbol or expressive body of it. This dynamic sight is not the vision that comes by an intense reconstruction of physical seeing or through a strong vital experience; it is a kind of inner occult sight which sees the things behind the veil, the forms that are more intimate and expressive than any outward appearance. It is a very vivid sight and the expression that comes with it is also extremely vivid and living but with a sort of inner super-life. To be able to write at will from this plane is sufficiently rare, — but a poet habitually writing from some other level may stumble into it from time to time or it may come to him strongly and lift him up out of his ordinary sight or intelligence. Coleridge had it with great vividness at certain moments. Blake's poems are full of it, but it

is not confined to the poetry of the occult or of the supernatural; this vision can take up outward and physical things, the substance of normal experience, and recreate them in the light of something deep behind which makes their outward figure look like mere symbols of some more intense reality within them. In contemporary poetry there is an attempt at a more frequent or habitual use of the dynamic vision, but the success is not always commensurate with the energy of the endeavour. 9 July 1931

Poetic Eloquence

It [*poetic eloquence*] belongs usually to the poetic intelligence, but, as in much of Milton, it can be lifted up by the touch of the Higher Mind rhythm and largeness. 29 November 1936

Overhead Poetry

Higher Mind and Poetic Intelligence

I mean by the Higher Mind a first plane of spiritual [consciousness] where one becomes constantly and closely aware of the Self, the One everywhere and knows and sees things habitually with that awareness; but it is still very much on the mind-level although highly spiritual in its essential substance; and its instrumentation is through an elevated thought-power and comprehensive mental sight — not illumined by any of the intenser upper lights but as if in a large strong and clear daylight. It acts as an intermediate state between the Truth-Light above and the human mind; communicating the higher knowledge in a form that the Mind intensified, broadened, made spiritually supple, can receive without being blinded or dazzled by a Truth beyond it. The poetic intelligence is not at all part of that clarified spiritual seeing and thinking — it is only a high activity of the mind and its vision moving on the wings of imagination, but still akin to the intellect proper, though exalted above it. The Higher Mind is a spiritual plane, — this does not answer to that description. But the larger poetic intelligence like the larger philosophic, though in a different cast of thinking, is nearer to the Higher Mind than the ordinary intellect and can more easily receive its influence. When Milton starts his poem

Of Man's first disobedience and the fruit
Of that forbidden tree —

he is evidently writing from the poetic intelligence. There is nothing of the Higher Mind knowledge or vision either in the style or the substance. But there is often a largeness of rhythm and sweep of language in Milton which has a certain distant kinship to the manner natural to a higher supra-intellectual vision,

and something from the substance of the planes of spiritual seeing can come into this poetry whose medium is the poetic intelligence and uplift it.

Milton is a classical poet and most classical poetry is fundamentally a poetry of the pure poetic intelligence. But there are other influences which can suffuse and modify the pure poetic intelligence, making it perhaps less clear by limitation but more vivid, colourful, vivid with various lights and hues; it becomes less intellectual, more made of vision and a flame of insight. Very often this comes by an infiltration of the veiled inner Mind which is within us and has its own wider and deeper fields and subtler movements, — and can bring also the tinge of a higher afflatus to the poetic intelligence, sometimes a direct uplifting towards what is beyond it. It must be understood however that the greatness of poetry as poetry does not necessarily or always depend on the level from which it is written. Shelley has more access to the inner Mind and through it to greater things than Milton, but he is not the greater poet. 19 October 1936

Higher Mind and Inner Mind

When I say that the inner Mind can get the tinge or reflection of the higher experience I am not speaking here of the “descent” in Yoga by which the higher realisation can come down into the inferior planes and enlighten or transform them. I mean that the Higher Mind is itself a spiritual plane and one who lives in it has naturally and normally the realisation of the Self, the unity and harmony everywhere, and a vision and activity of knowledge that proceeds from this consciousness but the inner Mind has not that naturally and in its own right, yet can open to its influence more easily than the outer intelligence. All the same between the reflected realisation in the mind and the automatic and authentic realisation in the spiritual mental planes there is a wide difference.

. . . There is also a plane of dynamic Vision which is a part of the inner Mind and perhaps should be called not a plane but a province. There are many kinds of vision in the inner Mind and

not this dynamic vision alone. So to fix invariable characteristics for the poetry of the inner Mind is not easy or even possible; it is a thing to be felt rather than mentally definable. A certain spontaneous intensity of vision is usually there, but that large or rich sweep or power which belongs to the illumined Mind is not part of its character. Moreover it is subtle and fine and has not the wideness which is the characteristic of the planes that rise towards the vast universality of the Overmind level.

. . . That is why the lower planes cannot express the Spirit with its full and native voice as the higher planes do — unless something comes down into them from the higher and overrides their limitations for the moment.

October 1936

Poetic Intelligence and Illumined Mind

Certainly, if you want to achieve a greater poetry, more unique, you will yourself have to change, to alter the poise of your consciousness. At present you write, as you do other things, too much with the brain, the mere human intelligence. To get back from the surface vital into the psychic and psychic vital, to raise the level of your mental from the intellect to the illumined mind is your need both in poetry and in Yoga. I have told you already that your best poetry comes from the illumined mind, but as a rule it either comes from there with too much of the transcription diminished in its passage through the intellect or else is generated only in the creative poetic intelligence. But so many poets have written from that intelligence. On the other hand if you could always write direct from the illumined mind — finding not only the substance, as you often do, but the rhythm and language, that indeed would be a poetry exquisite, original and unique. The intellect produces the idea, even the poetic idea, too much for the sake of the idea alone; coming from the illumined mind the idea in a form of light and music is itself but the shining body of the Light Divine.

On the other hand to cease writing altogether might be a doubtful remedy. By your writing here you have at least got rid of most of your former defects, and reached a stage of preparation

in which you may reasonably hope for a greater development hereafter. I myself have more than once abstained for some time from writing because I did not wish to produce anything except as an expression from a higher plane of consciousness, but to do that you must be sure of your poetic gift, that it will not rust by too long a disuse. 4 September 1931

Poetry of the Illumined Mind and of the Intuition

The poetry of the illumined mind is usually full of a play of lights and colours, brilliant and striking in phrase, for illumination makes the Truth vivid — it acts usually by a luminous rush. The poetry of the Intuition may have play of colour and bright lights, but it does not depend on them — it may be quite bare; it tells by a sort of close intimacy with the Truth, an inward expression of it. The illumined mind sometimes gets rid of its trappings, but even then it always keeps a sort of lustrousness of robe which is its characteristic. 1934

Overmind Touch

What super-excellence?¹ As poetry? When I say that a line comes from a higher or overhead plane or has the Overmind touch, I do not mean that it is superior in pure poetic excellence to others from lower planes — that Amal's lines outshine Shakespeare or Homer for instance. I simply mean that it has some vision, light, etc. from up there and the character of its expression and rhythm are from there.

You do not appreciate probably because you catch only the surface mental meaning. The [*first*] line is very fine from the technical point of view, the distribution of consonantal and

¹ Sri Aurobindo was asked: "You said that these two lines of Amal's poem:
*Flickering no longer with the cry of clay,
The distance-haunted fire of mystic mind*
have an Overmind touch. . . . Can you show me where their super-excellence lies?"

vowel sounds being perfect. That however is possible on any level of inspiration.

These [*assonance, etc.*] are technical elements, the Overmind touch does not consist in that, but in the undertones or overtones of the rhythmic cry and a language which carries in it a great depth or height or width of spiritual truth or spiritual vision, feeling or experience. But all that has to be felt, it is not analysable. If I say that the second line is a magnificent expression of an inner reality most intimate and powerful and the first line, with its conception of the fire once “flickering” with the “cry” of clay, but now no longer, is admirably revelatory — you would probably reply that it does not convey anything of the kind to you. That is why I do not usually speak of these things in themselves or in their relation to poetry — only with Amal who is trying to get his inspiration into touch with these planes. Either one must have the experience — e.g., here one must have lived in or glimpsed the mystic mind, felt its fire, been aware of the distances that haunt it, heard the cry of clay mixing with it and the consequent unsteady flickering of its flames and the release into the straight upward burning and so known that this is not mere romantic rhetoric, not mere images or metaphors expressing something imaginative but unreal (that is how many would take it perhaps) but facts and realities of the self, actual and concrete, or else there must be a conspiracy between the “solar plexus” and the thousand-petalled lotus which makes one feel, if not know, the suggestion of these things through the words and rhythm. As for technique, there is a technique of this higher poetry but it is not analysable and teachable. If for instance Amal had written “No longer flickering with the cry of clay”, it would no longer have been the same thing though the words and mental meaning would be just as before — for the overtone, the rhythm would have been lost in the ordinary staccato clipped movement and with the overtone the rhythmic significance. It would not have given the suggestion of space and wideness full with the cry and the flicker, the intense impact of that cry and the agitation of the fire which is heard through the line as it is. But to realise that one must have the inner sight and inner ear for these things;

one must be able to hear the sound-meaning, feel the sound-spaces with their vibrations. Again if he had written “Quivering no longer with the touch on clay”, it would have been a good line, but meant much less and something quite different to the inner experience, though to the mind it would have been only the same thing expressed in a different image — not so to the solar plexus and the thousand-petalled lotus. In this technique it must be the right word and no other, in the right place, and in no other, the right sounds and no others, in a design of sound that cannot be changed even a little. You may say that it must be so in all poetry; but in ordinary poetry the mind can play about, chop and change, use one image or another, put this word here or that word there — if the sense is much the same and has a poetical value, the mind does not feel that all is lost unless it is very sensitive and much influenced by the solar plexus. In the overhead poetry these things are quite imperative, it is all or nothing — or at least all or a fall.

8 May 1937

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Rhythms may come from the same source and yet be entirely dissimilar. It would be a very bad job if the overmind touch made all rhythms similar.

14 February 1934

Overmind Rhythm and Inspiration

In the lines you quote from Wordsworth² the overmind movement is not there in the first three lines; in the last line there is something of the touch, not direct but through some high intuitive consciousness and, because it is not direct, the fully characteristic rhythm is absent or defective. The poetic value or perfection of a line, passage or poem does not depend on the plane from which it comes; it depends on the purity and authenticity and power with which it transcribes an intense

² *The cataracts blow their trumpets from the steep;
No more shall grief of mine the season wrong;
I hear the Echoes through the mountains throng,
The Winds come to me from the fields of sleep,*

vision and inspiration from whatever source. Shakespeare is a poet of the vital inspiration, Homer of the subtle physical, but there are no greater poets in any literature. No doubt, if one could get a continuous inspiration from the overmind, that would mean a greater, sustained height of perfection and spiritual quality in poetry than has yet been achieved; but it is only in short passages and lines that even a touch of it is attainable. One gets nearer the overmind rhythm and inspiration in another line of Wordsworth —

a mind . . .

Voyaging through strange seas of Thought, alone

or in a line like Milton's

Those thoughts that wander through eternity.

One has the sense here of a rhythm which does not begin or end with the line, but has for ever been sounding in the eternal planes and began even in Time ages ago and which returns into the infinite to go sounding on for ages after. In fact, the word-rhythm is only part of what we hear; it is a support for the rhythm we listen to behind in "the Ear of the ear", *śrotrasya śrotram*. To a certain extent, that is what all great poetry at its highest tries to have, but it is only the overmind rhythm to which it is altogether native and in which it is not only behind the word-rhythm but gets into the word-movement itself and finds a kind of fully supporting body there.

P.S. Lines from the highest intuitive mind-consciousness, as well as those from the overmind, can have a mantric character — the rhythm too may have a certain kinship with mantric rhythm, but it may not be the thing itself, only the nearest step towards it.

10 July 1931

The Mantra

The *mantra* as I have tried to describe it in *The Future Poetry* is a word of power and light that comes from the Overmind

inspiration or from some very high plane of Intuition. Its characteristics are a language that conveys infinitely more than the mere surface sense of the words seems to indicate, a rhythm that means even more than the language and is born out of the Infinite and disappears into it, and the power to convey not merely the mental, vital or physical contents or indications or values of the thing uttered, but its significance and figure in some fundamental and original consciousness which is behind all these and greater. The passages you mention from the Upanishad and the Gita have certainly the Overmind accent. But ordinarily the Overmind inspiration does not come out pure in human poetry — it has to come down to an inferior consciousness and touch it or else to lift it by a seizure and surprise from above into some infinite largeness. There is always a mixture of the two elements, not an absolute transformation though the higher may sometimes dominate. You must remember that the Overmind is a superhuman consciousness and to be able to write always or purely from an overmind inspiration would mean the elevation of at least a part of the nature beyond the human level.

But how then do you expect a supramental inspiration to come down here when the Overmind itself is so rarely in human reach? That is always the error of the impatient aspirant, to think he can get the Supermind without going through the intervening stages or to imagine that he has got it when in fact he has only got something from the illumined or intuitive or at the highest *some kind* of mixed overmind consciousness. 22 June 1931

The Overmind and Aesthetics

Obviously, the Overmind and aesthetics cannot be equated together. Aesthetics is concerned mainly with beauty, but more generally with *rasa*, the response of the mind, the vital feeling and the sense to a certain “taste” in things which often may be but is not necessarily a spiritual feeling. Aesthetics belongs to the mental range and all that depends upon it; it may degenerate into aestheticism or may exaggerate or narrow itself into some version of the theory of “Art for Art’s sake”. The Overmind is

essentially a spiritual power. Mind in it surpasses its ordinary self and rises and takes its stand on a spiritual foundation. It embraces beauty and sublimates it; it has an essential aesthesis which is not limited by rules and canons; it sees a universal and an eternal beauty while it takes up and transforms all that is limited and particular. It is besides concerned with things other than beauty or aesthetics. It is concerned especially with truth and knowledge or rather with a wisdom that exceeds what we call knowledge; its truth goes beyond truth of fact and truth of thought, even the higher thought which is the first spiritual range of the thinker. It has the truth of spiritual thought, spiritual feeling, spiritual sense and at its highest the truth that comes by the most intimate spiritual touch or by identity. Ultimately, truth and beauty come together and coincide, but in between there is a difference. Overmind in all its dealings puts truth first; it brings out the essential truth (and truths) in things and also its infinite possibilities; it brings out even the truth that lies behind falsehood and error; it brings out the truth of the Inconscient and the truth of the Superconscient and all that lies in between. When it speaks through poetry, this remains its first essential quality; a limited aesthetical artistic aim is not its purpose. It can take up and uplift any or every style or at least put some stamp of itself upon it. More or less all that we have called overhead poetry has something of this character whether it be from the Overmind or simply intuitive, illumined or strong with the strength of the higher revealing Thought; even when it is not intrinsically overhead poetry, still some touch can come in. Even overhead poetry itself does not always deal in what is new or striking or strange; it can take up the obvious, the common, the bare and even the bald, the old, even that which without it would seem stale and hackneyed and raise it to greatness. Take the lines:

I spoke as one who ne'er would speak again
And as a dying man to dying men.

The writer is not a poet, not even a conspicuously talented versifier. The statement of the thought is bare and direct and the rhetorical device used is of the simplest, but the overhead touch

somehow got in through a passionate emotion and sincerity and is unmistakable. In all poetry a poetical aesthesis of some kind there must be in the writer and the recipient; but aesthesis is of many kinds and the ordinary kind is not sufficient for appreciating the overhead element in poetry. A fundamental and universal aesthesis is needed, something also more intense that listens, sees and feels from deep within and answers to what is far behind the surface. A greater, wider and deeper aesthesis then which can answer even to the transcendent and feel too whatever of the transcendent or spiritual enters into the things of life, mind and sense.

The business of the critical intellect is to appreciate and judge and here too it must judge; but it can judge and appreciate rightly here only if it first learns to see and sense inwardly and interpret. But it is dangerous for it to lay down its own laws or even laws and rules which it thinks it can deduce from some observed practice of the overhead inspiration and use that to wall in the inspiration; for it runs the risk of seeing the overhead inspiration step across its wall and pass on leaving it bewildered and at a loss. The mere critical intellect not touched by a rarer sight can do little here. We can take an extreme case, for in extreme cases certain incompatibilities come out more clearly. What might be called the Johnsonian critical method has obviously little or no place in this field, — the method which expects a precise logical order in thoughts and language and pecks at all that departs from a matter-of-fact or a strict and rational ideative coherence or a sober and restrained classical taste. Johnson himself is plainly out of his element when he deals crudely with one of Gray's delicate trifles and tramples and flounders about in the poet's basin of goldfish breaking it with his heavy and vicious kicks. But also this method is useless in dealing with any kind of romantic poetry. What would the Johnsonian critic say to Shakespeare's famous lines

Or take up arms against a sea of troubles
And by opposing end them?

He would say, "What a mixture of metaphors and jumble of

ideas! Only a lunatic could take up arms against a sea! A sea of troubles is a too fanciful metaphor and, in any case, one can't end the sea by opposing it, it is more likely to end you." Shakespeare knew very well what he was doing; he saw the mixture as well as any critic could and he accepted it because it brought home, with an inspired force which a neater language could not have had, the exact feeling and idea that he wanted to bring out. Still more scared would the Johnsonian be by any occult or mystic poetry. The Veda, for instance, uses with what seems like a deliberate recklessness the mixture, at least the association of disparate images, of things not associated together in the material world which in Shakespeare is only an occasional departure. What would the Johnsonian make of this *rk* in the Veda: "That splendour of thee, O Fire, which is in heaven and in the earth and in the plants and in the waters and by which thou hast spread out the wide mid-air, is a vivid ocean of light which sees with a divine seeing"? He would say, "What is this nonsense? How can there be a splendour of light in plants and in water and how can an ocean of light see divinely or otherwise? Anyhow, what meaning can there be in all this, it is a senseless mystical jargon." But, apart from these extremes, the mere critical intellect is likely to feel a distaste or an incomprehension with regard to mystical poetry even if that poetry is quite coherent in its ideas and well-appointed in its language. It is bound to stumble over all sorts of things that are contrary to its reason and offensive to its taste: association of contraries, excess or abruptness or crowding of images, disregard of intellectual limitations in the thought, concretisation of abstractions, the treating of things and forces as if there were a consciousness and a personality in them and a hundred other aberrations from the straight intellectual line. It is not likely either to tolerate departures in technique which disregard the canons of an established order. Fortunately here the modernists with all their errors have broken old bounds and the mystic poet may be more free to invent his own technique.

Here is an instance in point. You refer to certain things I wrote and concessions I made when you were typing an earlier draft of the first books of *Savitri*. You instance my readiness

to correct or do away with repetitions of words or clashes of sound such as “magnificent” in one line and “lucent” in the next. True, but I may observe that at that time I was passing through a transition from the habits of an old inspiration and technique to which I often deferred and the new inspiration that had begun to come. I would still alter this clash because it was a clash, but I would not as in the old days make a fixed rule of this avoidance. If lines like the following were to come to me now,

His forehead was a dome magnificent,
And there gazed forth two orbs of lucent truth
That made the human air a world of light,

I would not reject them but accept “magnificent” and “lucent” as entirely in their place. But this would not be an indiscriminating acceptance; for if it had run

His forehead was a wide magnificent dome
And there gazed forth two orbs of lucent truth

I would not be so ready to accept it, for the repetition of sound here occurring in the same place in the line would lack the just rhythmical balance. I have accepted in the present version of *Savitri* several of the freedoms established by the modernists including internal rhyme, exact assonance of syllable, irregularities introduced into the iambic run of the metre and others which would have been equally painful to an earlier taste. But I have not taken this as a mechanical method or a mannerism, but only where I thought it rhythmically justified; for all freedom must have a truth in it and an order, either a rational or an instinctive and intuitive order.

26 April 1946

The Overmind Aesthesis

Something more might need to be said in regard to the overhead note in poetry and the overmind aesthesis; but these are exactly the subjects on which it is difficult to write with any precision or satisfy the intellect's demand for clear and positive statement.

I do not know that it is possible for me to say why I regard one line or passage as having the overhead touch or the overhead note while another misses it. When I said that in the lines about the dying man the touch came in through some intense passion and sincerity in the writer, I was simply mentioning the psychological door through which the thing came. I did not mean to suggest that such passion and sincerity could of itself bring in the touch or that they constituted the overhead note in the lines. I am afraid I have to say what Arnold said about the grand style; it has to be felt and cannot be explained or accounted for. One has an intuitive feeling, a recognition of something familiar to one's experience or one's deeper perception in the substance and the rhythm or in one or the other which rings out and cannot be gainsaid. One might put forward a theory or a description of what the overhead character of the line consists in, but it is doubtful whether any such mentally constructed definition could be always applicable. You speak, for instance, of the sense of the Infinite and the One which is pervasive in the overhead planes; that need not be explicitly there in the overhead poetic expression or in the substance of any given line: it can be expressed indeed by overhead poetry as no other can express it, but this poetry can deal with quite other things. I would certainly say that Shakespeare's lines

Absent thee from felicity awhile,
And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain

have the overhead touch in the substance, the rhythm and the feeling; but Shakespeare is not giving us here the sense of the One and the Infinite. He is, as in the other lines of his which have this note, dealing as he always does with life, with vital emotions and reactions or the thoughts that spring out in the life-mind under the pressure of life. It is not any strict adhesion to a transcendental view of things that constitutes this kind of poetry, but something behind not belonging to the mind or the vital and physical consciousness and with that a certain quality or power in the language and the rhythm which helps to bring out that deeper something. If I had to select the line in European

poetry which most suggests an almost direct descent from the overmind consciousness there might come first Virgil's line about "the touch of tears in mortal things":

sunt lacrimae rerum et mentem mortalia tangunt.

Another might be Shakespeare's

In the dark backward and abysm of time

or again Milton's

Those thoughts that wander through eternity.

We might also add Wordsworth's line

The Winds come to me from the fields of sleep.

There are others less ideative and more emotional or simply descriptive which might be added, such as Marlowe's

Was this the face that launched a thousand ships,
And burnt the topless towers of Ilium?

If we could extract and describe the quality and the subtle something that mark the language and rhythm and feeling of these lines and underlie their substance we might attain hazardously to some mental understanding of the nature of overhead poetry.

The Overmind is not strictly a transcendental consciousness — that epithet would more accurately apply to the supramental and to the Sachchidananda consciousness — though it looks up to the transcendental and may receive something from it and though it does transcend the ordinary human mind and in its full and native self-power, when it does not lean down and become part of mind, is superconscient to us. It is more properly a cosmic consciousness, even the very base of the cosmic as we perceive, understand or feel it. It stands behind every particular in the cosmos and is the source of all our mental, vital or physical actualities and possibilities which are diminished and degraded derivations and variations from it and have not, except in certain formations and activities of genius and some intense self-exceeding, anything of the native overmind quality and

power. Nevertheless, because it stands behind as if covered by a veil, something of it can break through or shine through or even only dimly glimmer through and that brings the overmind touch or note. We cannot get this touch frequently unless we have torn the veil, made a gap in it or rent it largely away and seen the very face of what is beyond, lived in the light of it or established some kind of constant intercourse. Or we can draw upon it from time to time without ever ascending into it if we have established a line of communication between the higher and the ordinary consciousness. What comes down may be very much diminished but it has something of that. The ordinary reader of poetry who has not that experience will usually not be able to distinguish but would at the most feel that here is something extraordinarily fine, profound, sublime or unusual, — or he might turn away from it as something too high-pitched and excessive; he might even speak depreciatingly of “purple passages”, rhetoric, exaggeration or excess. One who had the line of communication open, could on the other hand feel what is there and distinguish even if he could not adequately characterise or describe it. The essential character is perhaps that there is something behind of which I have already spoken and which comes not primarily from the mind or the vital emotion or the physical seeing but from the cosmic self and its consciousness standing behind them all and things then tend to be seen not as the mind or heart or body sees them but as this greater consciousness feels or sees or answers to them. In the direct overmind transmission this something behind is usually forced to the front or close to the front by a combination of words which carries the suggestion of a deeper meaning or by the force of an image or, most of all, by an intonation and a rhythm which carry up the depths in their wide wash or long march or mounting surge. Sometimes it is left lurking behind and only suggested so that a subtle feeling of what is not actually expressed is needed if the reader is not to miss it. This is oftenest the case when there is just a touch or note pressed upon something that would be otherwise only of a mental, vital or physical poetic value and nothing of the body of the overhead power shows itself through the veil, but at

most a tremor and vibration, a gleam or a glimpse. In the lines I have chosen there is always an unusual quality in the rhythm, as prominently in Virgil's line, often in the very building and constantly in the intonation and the association of the sounds which meet in the line and find themselves linked together by a sort of inevitable felicity. There is also an inspired selection or an unusual bringing together of words which has the power to force a deeper sense on the mind as in Virgil's

sunt lacrimae rerum.

One can note that this line if translated straight into English would sound awkward and clumsy as would many of the finest lines in Rig Veda; that is precisely because they are new and felicitous turns in the original language, discoveries of an unexpected and absolute phrase; they defy translation. If you note the combination of words and sounds in Shakespeare's line

And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain

so arranged as to force on the mind and still more on the subtle nerves and sense the utter absoluteness of the difficulty and pain of living for the soul that has awakened to the misery of the world, you can see how this technique works. Here and elsewhere the very body and soul of the thing seen or felt come out into the open. The same dominant characteristic can be found in other lines which I have not cited, — in Leopardi's

l'insano indegno mistero delle cose

“The insane and ignoble mystery of things”

or in Wordsworth's

Voyaging through strange seas of Thought, alone.

Milton's line lives by its choice of the word “wander” to collocate with “through eternity”; if he had chosen any other word, it would no longer have been an overhead line, even if the surface sense had been exactly the same. On the other hand, take Shelley's stanza —

We look before and after,
 And pine for what is not:
 Our sincerest laughter
 With some pain is fraught;
 Our sweetest songs are those that tell of saddest thought.

This is perfect poetry with the most exquisite melody and beauty of wording and an unsurpassable poignancy of pathos, but there is no touch or note of the overhead inspiration: it is the mind and the heart, the vital emotion, working at their highest pitch under the stress of a psychic inspiration. The rhythm is of the same character, a direct, straightforward, lucid and lucent movement welling out limpidly straight from the psychic source. The same characteristics are found in another short lyric of Shelley's which is perhaps the purest example of the psychic inspiration in English poetry:

I can give not what men call love,
 But wilt thou accept not
 The worship the heart lifts above
 And the Heavens reject not, —
 The desire of the moth for the star,
 Of the night for the morrow,
 The devotion to something afar
 From the sphere of our sorrow?

We have again extreme poetic beauty there, but nothing of the overhead note.

In the other lines I have cited it is really the overmind language and rhythm that have been to some extent transmitted; but of course all overhead poetry is not from the Overmind, more often it comes from the higher thought, the illumined mind or the pure intuition. This last is different from the mental intuition which is frequent enough in poetry that does not transcend the mental level. The language and rhythm from these other overhead levels can be very different from that which is proper to the Overmind; for the Overmind thinks in a mass; its thought, feeling, vision is high or deep or wide or all these things together:

to use the Vedic expression about fire, the divine messenger, it goes vast on its way to bring the divine riches, and it has a corresponding language and rhythm. The higher thought has a strong tread often with bare unsandalled feet and moves in a clear-cut light: a divine power, measure, dignity is its most frequent character. The outflow of the illumined mind comes in a flood brilliant with revealing words or a light of crowding images, sometimes surcharged with its burden of revelations, sometimes with a luminous sweep. The intuition is usually a lightning flash showing up a single spot or plot of ground or scene with an entire and miraculous completeness of vision to the surprised ecstasy of the inner eye; its rhythm has a decisive inevitable sound which leaves nothing essential unheard, but very commonly is embodied in a single stroke. These however are only general or dominant characters; any number of variations is possible. There are besides mingled inspirations, several levels meeting and combining or modifying each other's notes, and an overmind transmission can contain or bring with it all the rest, but how much of this description will be to the ordinary reader of poetry at all intelligible or clearly identifiable?

There are besides in mental poetry derivations or substitutes for all these styles. Milton's "grand style" is such a substitute for the manner of the Higher Thought. Take it anywhere at its ordinary level or in its higher elevation, there is always or almost always that echo there:

Of man's first disobedience, and the fruit
Of that forbidden tree

or

On evil days though fallen, and evil tongues

or

Blind Thamyras, and blind Maeonides,
And Tiresias, and Phineus, prophets old.

Shakespeare's poetry coruscates with a play of the hues of imagination which we may regard as a mental substitute for the

inspiration of the illumined mind and sometimes by aiming at an exalted note he links on to the illumined overhead inspiration itself as in the lines I have more than once quoted:

Wilt thou upon the high and giddy mast
Seal up the ship-boy's eyes and rock his brains
In cradle of the rude imperious surge.

But the rest of that passage falls away in spite of its high-pitched language and resonant rhythm far below the overhead strain. So it is easy for the mind to mistake and take the higher for the lower inspiration or *vice versa*. Thus Milton's lines might at first sight be taken because of a certain depth of emotion in their large lingering rhythm as having the overhead complexion, but this rhythm loses something of its sovereign right because there are no depths of sense behind it. It conveys nothing but the noble and dignified pathos of the blindness and old age of a great personality fallen into evil days. Milton's architecture of thought and verse is high and powerful and massive, but there are usually no subtle echoes there, no deep chambers: the occult things in man's being are foreign to his intelligence, — for it is in the light of the poetic intelligence that he works. He does not stray into "the mystic cavern of the heart", does not follow the inner fire entering like a thief with the Cow of Light into the secrecy of secrecies. Shakespeare does sometimes get in as if by a splendid psychic accident in spite of his preoccupation with the colours and shows of life.

I do not know therefore whether I can speak with any certainty about the lines you quote; I would perhaps have to read them in their context first, but it seems to me that there is just a touch, as in the lines about the dying man. The thing that is described there may have happened often enough in times like those of the recent wars and upheavals and in times of violent strife and persecution and catastrophe, but the greatness of the experience does not come out or not wholly, because men feel with the mind and heart and not with the soul; but here there is by some accident of wording and rhythm a suggestion of something behind, of the greatness of the soul's experience and

its courageous acceptance of the tragic, the final, the fatal — and its resistance; it is only just a suggestion, but it is enough: the Overhead has touched and passed back to its heights. There is something very different but of the same essential calibre in the line you quote:

While sad eyes watch for feet that never come.

It is still more difficult to say anything very tangible about the overmind aesthesis. When I wrote about it I was thinking of the static aesthesis that perceives and receives rather than of the dynamic aesthesis which creates; I was not thinking at all of superior or inferior grades of poetic greatness or beauty. If the complete Overmind power or even that of the lower overhead plane could come down into the mind and entirely transform its action, then no doubt there might be greater poetry written than any that man has yet achieved, just as a greater superhuman life might be created if the supermind could come down wholly into life and lift life wholly into itself and transform it. But what happens at present is that something comes down and accepts to work under the law of the mind and with a mixture of the mind and it must be judged by the laws and standards of the mind. It brings in new tones, new colours, new elements, but it does not change radically as yet the stuff of the consciousness with which we labour.

Whether it produces great poetry or not depends on the extent to which it manifests its power and overrides rather than serves the mentality which it is helping. At present it does not do that sufficiently to raise the work to the full greatness of the worker.

And then what do you mean exactly by greatness in poetry? One can say that Virgil is greater than Catullus and that many of Virgil's lines are greater than anything Catullus ever achieved. But poetical perfection is not the same thing as poetical greatness. Virgil is perfect at his best, but Catullus too is perfect at his best: even, each has a certain exquisiteness of perfection, each in his own kind. Virgil's kind is large and deep, that of Catullus sweet and intense. Virgil's art reached or had from its beginning

a greater and more constant ripeness than that of Catullus. We can say then that Virgil was a greater poet and artist of word and rhythm but we cannot say that his poetry, at his best, was more perfect poetry and that of Catullus less perfect. That renders futile many of the attempts at comparison like Arnold's comparison of Wordsworth's *Skylark* with Shelley's. You may say that Milton was a greater poet than Blake, but there can always be people, not aesthetically insensitive, who would prefer Blake's lyrical work to Milton's grander achievement, and there are certainly things in Blake which touch deeper chords than the massive hand of Milton could ever reach. So all poetic superiority is not summed up in the word greatness. Each kind has its own best which escapes from comparison and stands apart in its own value.

Let us then leave for the present the question of poetic greatness or superiority aside and come back to the overmind aesthesis. By aesthesis is meant a reaction of the consciousness, mental and vital and even bodily, which receives a certain element in things, something that can be called their taste, *Rasa*, which passing through the mind or sense or both, awakes a vital enjoyment of the taste, *Bhoga*, and this can again awaken us, awaken even the soul in us to something yet deeper and more fundamental than mere pleasure and enjoyment, to some form of the spirit's delight of existence, *Ananda*. Poetry, like all art, serves the seeking for these things, this aesthesis, this *Rasa*, *Bhoga*, *Ananda*; it brings us a *Rasa* of word and sound but also of the idea and, through the idea, of the things expressed by the word and sound and thought, a mental or vital or sometimes the spiritual image of their form, quality, impact upon us or even, if the poet is strong enough, of their world-essence, their cosmic reality, the very soul of them, the spirit that resides in them as it resides in all things. Poetry may do more than this, but this at least it must do to however small an extent or it is not poetry. Aesthesis therefore is of the very essence of poetry, as it is of all art. But it is not the sole element and aesthesis too is not confined to a reception of poetry and art; it extends to everything in the world: there is nothing we can sense, think

or in any way experience to which there cannot be an aesthetic reaction of our conscious being. Ordinarily, we suppose that aesthesis is concerned with beauty, and that indeed is its most prominent concern: but it is concerned with many other things also. It is the universal Ananda that is the parent of aesthesis and the universal Ananda takes three major and original forms, beauty, love and delight, the delight of all existence, the delight in things, in all things. Universal Ananda is the artist and creator of the universe witnessing, experiencing and taking joy in its creation. In the lower consciousness it creates its opposites, the sense of ugliness as well as the sense of beauty, hate and repulsion and dislike as well as love and attraction and liking, grief and pain as well as joy and delight; and between these dualities or as a grey tint in the background there is a general tone of neutrality and indifference born from the universal insensibility into which the Ananda sinks in its dark negation in the Inconscient. All this is the sphere of aesthesis, its dullest reaction is indifference, its highest is ecstasy. Ecstasy is a sign of a return towards the original or supreme Ananda: that art or poetry is supreme which can bring us something of the supreme tone of ecstasy. For as the consciousness sinks from the supreme levels through various degrees towards the Inconscience the general sign of this descent is an always diminishing power of its intensity, intensity of being, intensity of consciousness, intensity of force, intensity of the delight in things and the delight of existence. So too as we ascend towards the supreme level these intensities increase. As we climb beyond Mind, higher and wider values replace the values of our limited mind, life and bodily consciousness. Aesthesis shares in this intensification of capacity. The capacity for pleasure and pain, for liking and disliking is comparatively poor on the level of our mind and life; our capacity for ecstasy is brief and limited; these tones arise from a general ground of neutrality which is always dragging them back towards itself. As it enters the overhead planes the ordinary aesthesis turns into a pure delight and becomes capable of a high, a large or a deep abiding ecstasy. The ground is no longer a general neutrality, but a pure spiritual ease and happiness upon which the special

tones of the aesthetic consciousness come out or from which they arise. This is the first fundamental change.

Another change in this transition is a turn towards universality in place of the isolations, the conflicting generalities, the mutually opposing dualities of the lower consciousness. In the Overmind we have a first firm foundation of the experience of a universal beauty, a universal love, a universal delight. These things can come on the mental and vital plane even before those planes are directly touched or influenced by the spiritual consciousness; but they are there a temporary experience and not permanent or they are limited in their field and do not touch the whole being. They are a glimpse and not a change of vision or a change of nature. The artist for instance can look at things only plain or shabby or ugly or even repulsive to the ordinary sense and see in them and bring out of them beauty and the delight that goes with beauty. But this is a sort of special grace for the artistic consciousness and is limited within the field of his art. In the overhead consciousness, especially in the Overmind, these things become more and more the law of the vision and the law of the nature. Wherever the overmind spiritual man turns he sees a universal beauty touching and uplifting all things, expressing itself through them, moulding them into a field or objects of its divine aesthesis; a universal love goes out from him to all beings; he feels the Bliss which has created the worlds and upholds them and all that is expresses to him the universal delight, is made of it, is a manifestation of it and moulded into its image. This universal aesthesis of beauty and delight does not ignore or fail to understand the differences and oppositions, the gradations, the harmony and disharmony obvious to the ordinary consciousness: but, first of all, it draws a *Rasa* from them and with that comes the enjoyment, *Bhoga*, and the touch or the mass of the *Ananda*. It sees that all things have their meaning, their value, their deeper or total significance which the mind does not see, for the mind is only concerned with a surface vision, surface contacts and its own surface reactions. When something expresses perfectly what it was meant to express, the completeness brings with it a sense of harmony, a sense of

artistic perfection; it gives even to what is discordant a place in a system of cosmic concordances and the discords become part of a vast harmony, and wherever there is harmony, there is a sense of beauty. Even in form itself, apart from the significance, the overmind consciousness sees the object with a totality which changes its effect on the percipient even while it remains the same thing. It sees lines and masses and an underlying design which the physical eye does not see and which escapes even the keenest mental vision. Every form becomes beautiful to it in a deeper and larger sense of beauty than that commonly known to us. The Overmind looks also straight at and into the soul of each thing and not only at its form or its significance to the mind or to the life; this brings to it not only the true truth of the thing but the delight of it. It sees also the one spirit in all, the face of the Divine everywhere and there can be no greater Ananda than that; it feels oneness with all, sympathy, love, the bliss of the Brahman. In a highest, a most integral experience it sees all things as if made of existence, consciousness, power, bliss, every atom of them charged with and constituted of Sachchidananda. In all this the overmind aesthesis takes its share and gives its response; for these things come not merely as an idea in the mind or a truth-seeing but as an experience of the whole being and a total response is not only possible but above a certain level imperative.

I have said that aesthesis responds not only to what we call beauty and beautiful things but to all things. We make a distinction between truth and beauty; but there can be an aesthetic response to truth also, a joy in its beauty, a love created by its charm, a rapture in the finding, a passion in the embrace, an aesthetic joy in its expression, a satisfaction of love in the giving of it to others. Truth is not merely a dry statement of facts or ideas to or by the intellect; it can be a splendid discovery, a rapturous revelation, a thing of beauty that is a joy for ever. The poet also can be a seeker and lover of truth as well as a seeker and lover of beauty. He can feel a poetic and aesthetic joy in the expression of the true as well as in the expression of the beautiful. He does not make a mere intellectual or philosophical

statement of the truth; it is his vision of its beauty, its power, his thrilled reception of it, his joy in it that he tries to convey by an utmost perfection in word and rhythm. If he has the passion, then even a philosophical statement of it he can surcharge with this sense of power, force, light, beauty. On certain levels of the Overmind, where the mind element predominates over the element of gnosis, the distinction between truth and beauty is still valid. It is indeed one of the chief functions of the Overmind to separate the main powers of the consciousness and give to each its full separate development and satisfaction, bring out its utmost potency and meaning, its own soul and significant body and take it on its own way as far as it can go. It can take up each power of man and give it its full potentiality, its highest characteristic development. It can give to intellect its austere intellectuality and to logic its most sheer unsparing logicity. It can give to beauty its most splendid passion of luminous form and the consciousness that receives it a supreme height and depth of ecstasy. It can create a sheer and pure poetry impossible for the intellect to sound to its depths or wholly grasp, much less to mentalise and analyse. It is the function of Overmind to give to every possibility its full potential, its own separate kingdom. But also there is another action of Overmind which sees and thinks and creates in masses, which reunites separated things, which reconciles opposites. On that level truth and beauty not only become constant companions but become one, involved in each other, inseparable: on that level the true is always beautiful and the beautiful is always true. Their highest fusion perhaps only takes place in the Supermind; but Overmind on its summits draws enough of the supramental light to see what the Supermind sees and do what the Supermind does though in a lower key and with a less absolute truth and power. On an inferior level Overmind may use the language of the intellect to convey as far as that language can do it its own greater meaning and message but on its summits Overmind uses its own native language and gives to its truths their own supreme utterance, and no intellectual speech, no mentalised poetry can equal or even come near to that power and beauty. Here your intellectual

dictum that poetry lives by its aesthetic quality alone and has no need of truth or that truth must depend upon aesthetics to become poetic at all, has no longer any meaning. For there truth itself is highest poetry and has only to appear to be utterly beautiful to the vision, the hearing, the sensibility of the soul. There dwells and from there springs the mystery of the inevitable word, the supreme immortal rhythm, the absolute significance and the absolute utterance.

I hope you do not feel crushed under this avalanche of metaphysical psychology; you have called it upon yourself by your questioning about the Overmind's greater, larger and deeper aesthesis. What I have written is indeed very scanty and sketchy, only some of the few essential things that have to be said; but without it I could not try to give you any glimpse of the meaning of my phrase. This greater aesthesis is inseparable from the greater truth, it is deeper because of the depth of that truth, larger by all its immense largeness. I do not expect the reader of poetry to come anywhere near to all that, he could not without being a Yogi or at least a sadhak: but just as the overhead poetry brings some touch of a deeper power of vision and creation into the mind without belonging itself wholly to the higher reaches, so also the full appreciation of all its burden needs at least some touch of a deeper response of the mind and some touch of a deeper aesthesis. Until that becomes general the Overhead or at least the Overmind is not going to do more than to touch here and there as it did in the past, a few lines, a few passages, or perhaps as things advance, a little more, nor is it likely to pour into our utterance its own complete power and absolute value.

I have said that overhead poetry is not necessarily greater or more perfect than any other kind of poetry. But perhaps a subtle qualification may be made to this statement. It is true that each kind of poetical writing can reach a highest or perfect perfection in its own line and in its own quality and what can be more perfect than a perfect perfection or can we say that one kind of absolute perfection is "greater" than another kind? What can be more absolute than the absolute? But then what do we mean by the perfection of poetry? There is the perfection of

the language and there is the perfection of the word-music and the rhythm, beauty of speech and beauty of sound, but there is also the quality of the thing said which counts for something. If we consider only word and sound and what in themselves they evoke, we arrive at the application of the theory of art for art's sake to poetry. On that ground we might say that a lyric of Anacreon is as good poetry and as perfect poetry as anything in Aeschylus or Sophocles or Homer. The question of the elevation or depth or intrinsic beauty of the thing said cannot then enter into our consideration of poetry; and yet it does enter, with most of us at any rate, and is part of the aesthetic reaction even in the most "aesthetic" of critics and readers. From this point of view the elevation from which the inspiration comes may after all matter, provided the one who receives it is a fit and powerful instrument; for a great poet will do more with a lower level of the origin of inspiration than a smaller poet can do even when helped from the highest sources. In a certain sense all genius comes from Overhead; for genius is the entry or inrush of a greater consciousness into the mind or a possession of the mind by a greater power. Every operation of genius has at its back or infused within it an intuition, a revelation, an inspiration, an illumination or at the least a hint or touch or influx from some greater power or level of conscious being than those which men ordinarily possess or use. But this power has two ways of acting: in one it touches the ordinary modes of mind and deepens, heightens, intensifies or exquisitely refines their action but without changing its modes or transforming its normal character; in the other it brings down into these normal modes something of itself, something supernormal, something which one at once feels to be extraordinary and suggestive of a superhuman level. These two ways of action when working in poetry may produce things equally exquisite and beautiful, but the word "greater" may perhaps be applied, with the necessary qualifications, to the second way and its too rare poetic creation.

The great bulk of the highest poetry belongs to the first of these two orders. In the second order there are again two or perhaps three levels; sometimes a felicitous turn or an unusual

force of language or a deeper note of feeling brings in the overhead touch. More often it is the power of the rhythm that lifts up language that is simple and common or a feeling or idea that has often been expressed and awakes something which is not ordinarily there. If one listens with the mind only or from the vital centre only, one may have a wondering admiration for the skill and beauty of woven word and sound or be struck by the happy way or the power with which the feeling or idea is expressed. But there is something more in it than that; it is this that a deeper, more inward strand of the consciousness has seen and is speaking, and if we listen more profoundly we can get something more than the admiration and delight of the mind or Housman's thrill of the solar plexus. We can feel perhaps the Spirit of the universe lending its own depth to our mortal speech or listening from behind to some expression of itself, listening perhaps to its memories of

old, unhappy, far-off things,
And battles long ago

or feeling and hearing, it may be said, the vast oceanic stillness and the cry of the cuckoo

Breaking the silence of the seas
Among the farthest Hebrides

or it may enter again into Vyasa's

"A void and dreadful forest ringing with the crickets' cry"
Vanam pratibhayam śūnyam jhillikāgaṇanāditam.

or remember its call to the soul of man,

Anityam asukham lokam imam prāpya bhajasva mām
"Thou who hast come to this transient and unhappy world,
love and worship Me."

There is a second level on which the poetry draws into itself a fuller language of intuitive inspiration, illumination or the higher thinking and feeling. A very rich or great poetry may then emerge and many of the most powerful passages in Shakespeare,

Virgil or Lucretius or the Mahabharata and Ramayana, not to speak of the Gita, the Upanishads or the Rig Veda, have this inspiration. It is a poetry "thick inlaid with patines of bright gold" or welling up in a stream of passion, beauty and force. But sometimes there comes down a supreme voice, the overmind voice and the overmind music and it is to be observed that the lines and passages where that happens rank among the greatest and most admired in all poetic literature. It would be therefore too much to say that the overhead inspiration cannot bring in a greatness into poetry which could surpass the other levels of inspiration, greater even from the purely aesthetic point of view and certainly greater in the power of its substance.

A conscious attempt to write overhead poetry with a mind aware of the planes from which this inspiration comes and seeking always to ascend to those levels or bring down something from them, would probably result in a partial success; at its lowest it might attain to what I have called the first order, ordinarily it would achieve the two lower levels of the second order and in its supreme moments it might in lines and in sustained passages achieve the supreme level, something of the highest summit of its potency. But its greatest work will be to express adequately and constantly what is now only occasionally and inadequately some kind of utterance of the things above, the things beyond, the things behind the apparent world and its external or superficial happenings and phenomena. It would not only bring in the occult in its larger and deeper ranges but the truths of the spiritual heights, the spiritual depths, the spiritual intimacies and vastnesses as also the truths of the inner mind, the inner life, an inner or subtle physical beauty and reality. It would bring in the concreteness, the authentic image, the inmost soul of identity and the heart of meaning of these things, so that it could never lack in beauty. If this could be achieved by one possessed, if not of a supreme, still of a sufficiently high and wide poetic genius, something new could be added to the domain of poetry and there would be no danger of the power of poetry beginning to fade, to fall into decadence, to fail us. It might even enter into the domain of the infinite and inexhaustible, catch some word of

the Ineffable, show us revealing images which bring us near to the Reality that is secret in us and in all, of which the Upanishad speaks,

*Anejad ekam manaso javīyo nainad devā āpnuvan pūrvam
arṣat. . . .*

Tad ejati tan najati tad dūre tad u antike.

“The One unmoving is swifter than thought, the gods cannot overtake It, for It travels ever in front; It moves and It moves not, It is far away from us and It is very close.”

The gods of the overhead planes can do much to bridge that distance and to bring out that closeness, even if they cannot altogether overtake the Reality that exceeds and transcends them.

29 July 1946

Examples of Overhead Poetry

Examples from Various Poets Evaluations of 1932–1935

Does Wordsworth's ode on immortality contain any trace,
however vague, of the Overmind inspiration?

I don't remember, but I think not.

And what about the rhythm and substance of

solitary thinkings; such as dodge
Conception to the very bourne of heaven.

No. The substance may be overmind, but the rhythm is ordinary
and the expression intellectual and imaginative.

and of

I come, O Sea,
To measure my enormous self with thee.

No; the poem "To the Sea" was produced by a collaboration of
the dynamic poetic intelligence with the higher vital urge.

April 1932

*

I shall be obliged if you will indicate the origin of the few
examples below—only the first of which is from my own
work.

Plumbless inaudible waves of shining sleep.

Illumined mind.

The diamond dimness of the domèd air.

Illumined mind.

Withdrawn in a lost attitude of prayer.

Intuition.

This patter of time's marring steps across the solitude
Of Truth's abidingness, self-blissful and alone.

Illumined mind with an intuitive element and strong overmind
touch.

Million d'oiseaux d'or, ô future Vigueur!

Illumined mind.

Rapt above earth by power of one fair face.

Difficult to say. More of higher mind perhaps than anything else
— but something of illumination and intuition also.

Measuring vast pain with his immortal mind.

Don't know.

Piercing the limitless unknowable,
Breaking the vacancy and voiceless peace.

Don't know — the substance is overmental, but for the rest I
cannot judge.

2 March 1934

*

From what plane do these lines by Vaughan come?

I see them walking in an air of glory,
Whose light doth trample on my days:
My days, which are at best but dull and hoary,
Mere glimmering and decays.

I thought they were from the illumined mind.

It is a mixture. Something of the illumined mind, something
of the poetic intelligence diluting it and preventing the full
sovereignty of the higher expression.

17 March 1935

*

What about these lines of Vaughan's— are they from the illumined mind?

1) But felt through all this fleshly dress
Bright shoots of everlastingness . . .

2) I saw Eternity the other night
Like a great Ring of pure and endless light,
All calm, as it was bright . . .

This Ring the Bridegroom did for none provide
But for his Bride.

Yes, for the first two. In (1) there is something from the Intuition also and in (2) from the Overmind. 21 March 1935

*

Is this table showing the degrees of style and rhythm of revelation in mystic poetry correct? —

1) solitary thinkings; such as dodge
Conception to the very bourne of heaven
(Higher Mind)¹

2) I saw Eternity the other night
Like a great Ring of pure and endless light,
All calm, as it was bright.
(Illumined Mind)

3) Your spirit in my spirit, deep in the deep,
Walled by a wizardry of shining sleep
(Intuition)

4) Voyaging through strange seas of Thought, alone.
(Overmind)

Though the expression and the rhythm differ, the substance of 1, 2, 4 is Overmind: what about 3? I suppose the table would be more consistent if the substance came in each case from the Overmind.

¹ combined with Illumined [*Sri Aurobindo's addition*]

Overmind is very various in its expression. All forms and rhythms are there in the Overmind.

From what planes are these lines?

Withdrawn in a lost attitude of prayer . . .

The lonely waters of eternal ease . . .

A hush dew-drenched with immortality . . .

A sea unheard where spume nor spray is blown . . .

Eternal truth's time-measuring sun-blaze . . .

The first two are intuitive. The last is higher mind mixed with illumination. The other two are mixed. 23 March 1935

**Examples from Amal Kiran
Evaluations of 1934–1937**

Madonna Mia

I echo her life's rhythm of reverie
By spacious vigil-lonelinesses drawn
From star-birds winging through the vacancy
Of night's incomprehensible spirit-dawn.

My whole heart fills but with the glowing gloom
Where God-love blossoms her ethereal grace:
The sole truth my lips bear is the perfume
From the ecstatic flower of her face.

Will you please tell me its effect as a whole and, if possible,
where the inspiration comes from?

It is good. I could not very definitely say from where the inspiration comes. It seems to come from the Illumination through the higher Mind — but there is an intuitive touch here and there, even some indirect touch of “mental overmind”² vision hanging

² There are two ranges of overmind which might be called “mental” and “gnostic” overmind respectively — the latter in direct touch with supermind, the former more like a widened and massive intuition.

about the first stanza.

9 February 1934

*

May I ask whether, when you speak of inspiration, you mean the substance only or the rhythm as well? I had the impression that lines 2 and 3 of the first stanza had some mantric quality, but I felt it would be too presumptuous to ask you about it before you had indicated their source.

Yes, that was what I meant by the touch of the overmind.

10 February 1934

*

Is it only lines 2 and 3 that have a touch of the Overmind, or line 4 also?

Line 4 also though 2 and 3 have most of it.

Have you felt that touch anywhere else in my poetry? And is this rhythm in any way similar to that of Wordsworth's

Voyaging through strange seas of Thought, alone?

No — it is quite a different rhythm — a rhythm of flight through sky-space not of ploughing lonely seas.

Of course by "similarity" I mean the source of inspiration being more or less the same.

There may have been other lines, but I do not remember any.

12 February 1934

*

What I should have said is: "Does that line of Wordsworth's have those special qualities which mark out the substance, language and rhythm of a line from the mental Overmind — the same qualities which are to be found in the three lines of my poem, which you consider to have an Overmind touch?" I am no competent judge, but I think that it contains all those qualities in a more intense and undiluted form: is that true?

Probably you are right.

Of my three lines, only

From star-birds winging through the vacancy
seems to be somewhere near it in pure inspiration from the
mental Overmind.

I am not sure about the *pure* inspiration — I said a *touch* from
the *mental* overmind. But perhaps I am overcautious in these
matters.

*

To help me distinguish the planes of inspiration, would you
just indicate where the following lines from various poems of
mine have their sources?

What visionary urge
Has stolen from horizons watched alone
Into thy being with ethereal guile?

[*Second line*] Intuitive with overmind touch.

[*Third line*] Imaginative poetic intelligence.

A huge sky-passion sprouting from the earth
In branchèd vastnesses of leafy rapture.

Ditto with something of the higher Mind.

The mute unshadowed spaces of her mind.

Intuitive with overmind touch.

A sea unheard where spume nor spray is blown.

Intuitive.

Irradiant wing-waft through eternal space,
Pride of lone rapture and invincible sun-gaze.

Higher Mind with mental overmind touch.

Born nomad of the infinite heart!
Time-tamer! star-struck debauchee of light!

Warrior who hurls his spirit like a dart
 Across the terrible night
 Of death to conquer immortality!

Illumined Mind with mental overmind touch.

. . . And to the earth-self suddenly
 Came through remote entranced marvelling
 Of adoration ever-widening
 A spacious sense of immortality.

Mixture of higher and illumined mind — in the last line the
 mental overmind touch.

Here life's lost heart of splendour beats immense.

Illumined mind with mental overmind touch.

The haunting rapture of the vast dream-wind
 That blows, star-fragrant, from eternity.

Ditto.

An ocean-hearted ecstasy am I
 Where time flows inward to eternal shores.

Intuitive, illumined, overmind touch all mixed together.

I have analysed but very imperfectly — because these influences
 are so mixed together that the descriptions are not exhaustive.

Also remember that I speak of a *touch*, of the *mental* over-
 mind touch and that when there is the touch it is not always
 complete — it may be more apparent from something either in
 the language or substance or rhythm than in all three together.

Even so perhaps some of my descriptions are overhasty and
 denote the impression of the moment. Also the poetical value of
 the poetry exists independent of its source. 13 February 1934

*

It was extremely kind of you to analyse, as you did, a few
 weeks back, the influences of different planes in my poetry.
 I seem to have some feeling now for the qualities in them.

I should like to know whether you intend any distinction when you speak of “Overmind touch” and “mental Overmind touch.”

Yes — the overmind proper has some gnostic light in it which is absent in the mental overmind. 2 March 1934

*

Overself

All things are lost in Him, all things are found:
He rules an infinite hush that hears each sound.

But fragmentary quivers blossom there
To voice on mingling voice of shadowless air,

Bodies of fire and ecstasies of line
Where passion’s mortal music grows divine —

For in that vasty region glimmers through
Each form one single trance of breakless blue!

Well, the first and third couplets are quite admirable. The rest not quite as inevitable as it should be though lines 4 and 8 could be so if coupled with perfect lines that made them also perfect. Your emendations do not mend matters; the first [*“rules” changed to “makes”*] only spoils the second line of the couplet without bringing the first up to level. . . . “Vasty region” does not appeal to me — it sounds pseudo-Miltonic and ineffective.

P.S. Higher mind throughout, illumined. 10 October 1936

*

I understand your objection to “vasty region” . . . though I don’t know if Milton ever used “vasty”. It is a Shakespearean word, a famous instance being in that line about calling “spirits from the vasty deep” . . .

I am describing, of course, the Overmind, but does the fact that the poem is only from the Higher Mind, however illumined, come in the way?

I know very well the Shakespearean line and I don’t think Milton

uses “vasty”; but I did not at all mean that the choice of the word “vasty” was Miltonic. I meant that the phrase here gave a pseudo-Miltonic effect and so do “lofty region” and “myriad region” [*proposed by the poet as emendations*]; in some other context they might give some other impression, but that is the effect here. . . .

I don’t think the lines express distinctively the Overmind — they would apply equally to any plane where the unity of the Self governed the diversity of its creation, — so the illumined Higher Mind is quite appropriate for the purpose.

P.S. By pseudo-Miltonic I mean a certain kind of traditional poetic eloquence which finds its roots in Milton but even when well done lacks in originality and can easily be vapid and sonantly hollow. In the last line there is inspiration but it has to be brought out by this preceding line; that must be inspired also. An expression like “lofty region”, “vasty region”, “myriad region” even expresses nothing but a bare intellectual fact with no more vision in it than would convey mere wideness without any significance in it.

13 October 1936

*

[*after revision of line 7 to “For in that spacious revel glimmers through”*]

There is nothing to be altered in what I said about the poem. It is a fine poem — in the first and third couplets exceedingly fine, perfect poetic expressions of what they want to say, — the other couplets are less inevitable, although the second lines in both are admirable. Line 2, lines 5, 6 are among the best you have written; they have a certain revelatory power.

17 October 1936

*

Consummation

Immortal overhead the gold expanse —
 An ultimate crown of inexhaustible joy!
 But a king-power must grip all passion numb

And with gigantic loneliness draw down
This large gold throbbing on its silver hush.
For only an ice-pure peak of trance can bear
The benediction of that aureole.

I would suggest “a gigantic loneliness”. “With” makes the line rather weak; the loneliness must be brought out in its full effect and “with” subordinates it and prevents it from standing out.

There is something wrong in the fifth line. Perhaps it is the excess of sibilants — not that one cannot have a sibilant line, but the sounds must be otherwise dispersed. Besides your style of consonant and vowel harmonisation is of the liquid kind and here such combinations as “its silver hush” are best avoided. How would “the large gold throbbing in a silver hush” do?

The second line is strong and dignified, but it impresses me as too mental and Miltonic. Milton has very usually (in *Paradise Lost*) some of the largeness and rhythm of the higher mind, but his substance except at certain heights is mental, mentally grand and noble. The interference of this mental Miltonic is one of the great stumbling-blocks when one tries to write from “above”.

17 November 1936

*

[after revision]

It is very fine now — it is the higher mind vision and movement throughout, except that in the fifth line a flash of illumination comes through. Intense light-play and colour in this kind of utterance is usually the illumined mind’s contribution.

18 November 1936

*

Mere of Dream

The Unknown above is a mute vacancy —
But in the mere of dream wide wings are spread,
An ageless bird poising a rumour of gold
Upon prophetic waters hung asleep.

A ring of hills around a silver hush,
 The far mind haloed with mysterious dawn
 Treasures in the deep eye of thought-suspense
 An eagle-destiny beaconing through all time.

You say this poem is “not as a whole quite as absolute as some that went before.” . . . I am glad you have mentioned that the highest flight is not present here on the whole, for I am thereby stung to make an intenser effort. I should like, however, to have a formulation from you of the ideal you would like me to follow.

What you are writing now is “overhead” poetry — I mean poetry inspired from those planes; before you used to write poems very often from the intuitive mind — these had a beauty and perfection of their own. What I mean by absoluteness here is a full intensely inevitable expression of what comes down from above. These lines are original, convincing, have vision, they are not to be rejected, but they are not the highest flight except in single lines. Such variations are to be expected and will be more prominent if you were writing longer poems, for then to keep always or even usually to that highest level would be an extraordinary feat — no poet has managed as yet to write always at his highest flight and here in that kind of poetry it would be still more difficult. The important point is not to fall below a certain level.

12 May 1937

*

A Poet's Stammer

My dream is spoken
 As if by sound
 Were tremulously broken
 Some oath profound.

A timeless hush
 Draws ever back
 The winging music-rush
 Upon thought's track.

Though syllables sweep
Like golden birds,
Far lonelihoods of sleep
Dwindle my words.

Beyond life's clamour,
A mystery mars
Speech-light to a myriad stammer
Of flickering stars.

It is a very true and beautiful poem — the subject of the outward stammer seems to be only a starting point or excuse for expressing an inner phenomenon of inspiration. Throughout the inspiration of the poem is intuitive.

You have said before I used to write poems very often from the intuitive mind, but the term you have employed connotes for us the plane between the Illumined Mind and the Overmind. But that would be an overhead source of inspiration. Do you mean the intuitivised poetic intelligence? If so, what is its character as compared to the mystic or inner mind?

The intuitive mind, strictly speaking, stretches from the Intuition proper down to the intuitivised inner mind — it is therefore at once an overhead power and a mental intelligence power. All depends on the amount, intensity, quality of the intuition and how far it is mixed with mind or pure. The inner mind is not necessarily intuitive, though it can easily become so. The mystic mind is mind turned towards the occult and spiritual, but the inner mind can act without direct reference to the occult and spiritual, it can act in the same field and in the same material as the ordinary mind, only with a larger and deeper power, range and light and in greater unison with the Universal Mind; it can open also more easily to what is within and what is above. Intuitive intelligence, mystic mind, inner mind intelligence are all part of the inner mind operations. In today's poem, for instance, it is certainly the inner mind that has transformed the idea of stammering into a symbol of inner phenomena and into that operation a certain strain of mystic mind enters, but what is

prominent is the intuitive inspiration throughout. It starts with the intuitive poetic intelligence in the first stanza, gets touched by the overhead intuition in the second, gets full of it in the third and again rises rapidly to that in the two last lines of the fourth stanza. This is what I call poetry of the intuitive Mind.

13 May 1937

Bengali Overhead Poetry

We are sorry to hear that you can't decide about Bengali overhead poetry. I consider it a defect, Sir, in your poetic supramental make-up, which you should try to mend or remove!

Why a defect? In any case all qualities have their defects, which are also a quality. For the rest, by your logic, I ought to be able to pronounce on the merits of Czechoslovakian or Arabic poetry. To pronounce whether a rhythm is O.P. or not, one must have an infallible ear for overtones and undertones of the sound music of the language — that expertness I have not got with regard to Bengali.

23 September 1938

Overhead Poetry: Re-evaluations of 1946

It is a bit of a surprise to me that Virgil's

sunt lacrimae rerum et mentem mortalia tangunt

is now considered by you "an almost direct descent from the overmind consciousness" [*see page 33*]. I was under the impression that, like that other line of his —

O passi graviora, dabit deus his quoque finem

it was a perfect mixture of the Higher Mind with the Psychic; and the impression was based on something you had yourself written to me in the past [*see page 295*]. Similarly I remember you definitely declaring Wordsworth's

The Winds come to me from the fields of sleep

to be lacking precisely in the Overmind note and having only the note of Intuition in an intense form [*see pages 25–26*].

What you write now means a big change of opinion in both the instances — but how and why the change?

Yes, certainly, my ideas and reactions to some of the lines and passages about which you had asked me long ago, have developed and changed and could not but change. For at that time I was new to the overhead regions or at least to the highest of them — for the higher thought and the illumination were already old friends — and could not be sure or complete in my perception of many things concerning them. I hesitated therefore to assign anything like overmind touch or inspiration to passages in English or other poetry and did not presume to claim any of my own writing as belonging to this order. Besides, the intellect took still too large a part in my reactions to poetry; for instance, I judged Virgil's line too much from what seemed to be its surface intellectual import and too little from its deeper meaning and vision and its reverberations of the Overhead. So also with Wordsworth's line about the "fields of sleep": I have since then moved in those fields of sleep and felt the breath which is carried from them by the winds that came to the poet, so I can better appreciate the depth of vision in Wordsworth's line. I could also see more clearly the impact of the Overhead on the work of poets who wrote usually from a mental, a psychic, an emotional or other vital inspiration, even when it gave only a tinge.

The context of Virgil's line has nothing to do with and cannot detract from its greatness and its overhead character. If we limit its meaning so as to unify it with what goes before, if we want Virgil to say in it only, "Oh yes, even in Carthage, so distant a place, these foreigners too can sympathise and weep over what has happened in Troy and get touched by human misfortune," then the line will lose all its value and we would only have to admire the strong turn and *recherché* suggestiveness of its expression. Virgil certainly did not mean it like that; he starts indeed by stressing the generality of the fame of Troy and the interest in her misfortune but then he passes from the particularity of this idea and suddenly rises from it to a feeling of the universality of mortal sorrow and suffering and of the chord

of human sympathy and participation which responds to it from all who share that mortality. He rises indeed much higher than that and goes much deeper: he has felt a brooding cosmic sense of these things, gone into the depth of the soul which answers to them and drawn from it the inspired and inevitable language and rhythm which came down to it from above to give to this pathetic perception an immortal body. Lines like these seldom depend upon their contexts, they rise from it as if a single Himalayan peak from a range of low hills or even from a flat plain. They have to be looked at by themselves, valued for their own sake, felt in their own independent greatness. Shakespeare's lines upon sleep³ depend not at all upon the context which is indeed almost irrelevant, for he branches off into a violent and resonant description of a storm at sea which has its poetic quality, but that quality has something comparatively quite inferior, so that these few lines stand quite apart in their unsurpassable magic and beauty. What has happened is that the sudden wings of a supreme inspiration from above have swooped down upon him and abruptly lifted him for a moment to highest heights, then as abruptly dropped him and left him to his own normal resources. One can see him in the lines that follow straining these resources to try and get something equal to the greatness of this flight but failing except perhaps partly for one line only. Or take those two lines in *Hamlet*.⁴ They arise out of a rapid series of violent melodramatic events but they have a quite different ring from all that surrounds them, however powerful that may be. They come from another plane, shine with another light: the close of the sentence — "to tell my story" — which connects it with the thread of the drama, slips down in a quick incline to a lower inspiration. It is not a dramatic interest we feel when we read these lines; their appeal does not arise from the story but would be the same anywhere and in any context. We have passed from

³ *Wilt thou upon the high and giddy mast
Seal up the ship-boy's eyes, and rock his brains
In cradle of the rude imperious surge,*

⁴ *Absent thee from felicity awhile,
And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain*

the particular to the universal, to a voice from the cosmic self, to a poignant reaction of the soul of man and not of Hamlet alone to the pain and sorrow of this world and its longing for some unknown felicity beyond. Virgil's

O passi graviora, dabit deus his quoque finem. . . .
 . . . forsan et haec olim meminisse iuvabit

is only incidentally connected with the storm and wreck of the ships of Aeneas; its appeal is separate and universal and for all time; it is again the human soul that is speaking moved by a greater and deeper inspiration of cosmic feeling with the thought only as a mould into which the feeling is poured and the thinking mind only as a passive instrument. This applies to many or most of the distinctly overhead lines we meet or at least to those which may be called overhead transmissions. Even the lines that are perfect and absolute, though not from the Overhead, tend to stand out if not away from their surroundings. Long passages of high inspiration there are or short poems in which the wing-beats of some surpassing Power and Beauty gleam out amidst flockings of an equal or almost equal radiance of light. But still the absolutely absolute is rare; it is not often that the highest peaks crowd together.

As to the translations of Virgil's great line I may observe that the English translation you quote repeats the "here too" of the previous line and so rivets his high close to its context, thus emphasising unduly the idea of a local interest and maiming the universality.⁵ Virgil has put in no such close riveting, he keeps a bare connection from which he immediately slips away; his single incomparable line rises sheer and abrupt into the heights both in its thought and in its form out of the sustained Virgilian elegance of what precedes it. The psychological movement by which this happens is not at all mysterious; he speaks first of the local and particular, then in the penultimate line passes to the general — "here too as wherever there are human beings are

⁵ *Here, too, virtue has its due rewards; here, too, there are tears for misfortune and mortal sorrows touch the heart.* — H. R. Fairclough

rewards for excellence”, and then passes to the universal, to the reaction of all humanity, to all that is human and mortal in a world of suffering. In your prose translation also there are superfluities which limit and lower the significance.⁶ Virgil does not say “tears for earthly things”, “earthly” is your addition; he says nothing about “mortal fortune” which makes the whole thing quite narrow. His single word *rerum* and his single word *mortalia* admit in them all the sorrow and suffering of the world and all the affliction and misery that beset mortal creatures in this transient and unhappy world, *anityam asukham lokam imam*. The superfluous words bring in a particularising intellectual insistence which impoverishes a great thought and a great utterance. Your first hexametric version⁷ is rather poor; the second⁸ is much better and the first half is very fine; the second half is good but it is not an absolute hit. I would like to alter it to

Haunted by tears is the world and our hearts by the touch of things
mortal.

But this version has a density of colour which is absent from the bare economy and direct force Virgil manages to combine with his subtle and unusual turn of phrase. As for my own translation — “the touch of tears in mortal things” — it is intended not as an accurate and scholastic prose rendering but as a poetic equivalent. I take it from a passage in *Savitri* where the mother of Savitri is lamenting her child’s fate and contrasting the unmoved and unfeeling calm of the gods with human suffering and sympathy. I quote from memory,

We sorrow for a greatness that has passed
 And feel the touch of tears in mortal things.
 Even a stranger’s anguish rends my heart,
 And this, O Narad, is my well-loved child.

⁶ Here too there is reward for honour, there are tears for earthly things and mortal fortunes touch the heart.

⁷ Tears are in all things and touched is our heart by the fate of the mortals.

⁸ Haunted by tears is the world; on our heart is the touch of things mortal.

In Virgil's line the two halves are not really two separate ideas and statements; they are one idea with two symmetrical limbs; the meaning and force of *mortalia tangunt* derives wholly from the *lacrimae rerum* and this, I think, ought to be brought out if we are to have an adequate poetic rendering. The three capital words, *lacrimae*, *mortalia*, *tangunt*, carry in them in an intimate connection the whole burden of the inner sense; the touch which falls upon the mind from mortal things is the touch of tears *lacrimae rerum*. I consider therefore that the touch of tears is there quite directly enough, spiritually, if not syntactically, and that my translation is perfectly justifiable.

As to the doubt you have expressed, I think there is some confusion still about the use of the word "great" as distinct from the beautiful. In poetry greatness must, no doubt, be beautiful in the wider and deeper sense of beauty to be poetry, but the beautiful is not always great. First, let me deal with the examples you give, which do not seem to me to be always of an equal quality. For instance, the lines you quote from Squire⁹ do not strike me as deserving supreme praise. There is one line "on rocks forlorn and frore" which is of a very high beauty, but the rest is lofty and eloquent poetry and suggestive of something deep but not more than that; above all, there is a general lack of the rhythm that goes home to the soul and keeps sounding there except indeed in that one line and without such a rhythm there cannot be the absolute perfection; a certain kind of perfection there may be with a lesser rhythmic appeal but I do not find it here, the pitch of sound is only that of what may be described as the highly moved intellect. In the lines from Dryden¹⁰ the second has

⁹ *And that aged Brahmopootra
Who beyond the white Himalayas
Passes many a lamasery
On rocks forlorn and frore,
A block of gaunt grey stone walls
With rows of little barred windows,
Where shrivelled monks in yellow silk
Are hidden for evermore. . . . — J. C. Squire*

¹⁰ *In liquid burnings or on dry to dwell
Is all the sad variety of hell. — Dryden*

indeed the true note but the first is only clever and forcible with that apposite, striking and energetic cleverness which abounds in the chief poets of that period and imposes their poetry on the thinking mind but usually fails to reach deeper. Of course, there can be a divine or at least a deified cleverness, but that is when the intellect after finding something brilliant transmits it to some higher power for uplifting and transfiguration. It is because that is not always done by Pope and Dryden that I once agreed with Arnold in regarding their work as a sort of half poetry; but since then my view and feeling have become more catholic and I would no longer apply that phrase, — Dryden especially has lines and passages which rise to a very high poetic peak, — but still there is something in this limitation, this predominance of the ingenious intellect which makes us understand Arnold's stricture. The second quotation from Tennyson¹¹ is eloquent and powerful, but absolute perfection seems to me an excessive praise for these lines, — at least I meant much more by it than anything we find here. There is absolute perfection of a kind, of sound and language at least, and a supreme technical excellence in his moan of doves and murmur of bees.¹² As to your next comparison, you must not expect me to enter into a comparative valuation of my own poetry¹³ with that of Keats;¹⁴ I will only say that the “substance” of these lines of Keats is of the highest kind and the expression is not easily surpassable, and even as regards the plane of their origin it is above and not below the boundary of the overhead line. The other lines you quote have their own perfection; some have the touch from above while

¹¹ *Well is it that no child is born of thee.
The children born of thee are sword and fire,
Red ruin, and the breaking up of laws.* — Tennyson

¹² *The moan of doves in immemorial elms,
And murmuring of innumerable bees.* — Tennyson

¹³ *Above the reason's brilliant slender curve,
Released like radiant air dimming a moon,
White spaces of a vision without line
Or limit . . .* — Sri Aurobindo

¹⁴ *. . . solitary thinkings; such as dodge
Conception to the very bourne of heaven,
Then leave the naked brain.* — Keats

others, it might be said, touch the Overhead from below.

But what is the point? I do not think I have ever said that all overhead poetry is superior to all that comes from other sources. I am speaking of greatness and said that greatness of substance does count and gives a general superiority; I was referring to work in the mass and not to separate lines and passages. I said, practically, that art in the sense of perfect mastery of technique, perfect expression in word and sound was not everything and greatness and beauty of the substance of the poetry entered into the reckoning. It might be said of Shakespeare that he was not predominantly an artist but rather a great creator, even though he has an art of his own, especially an art of dramatic architecture and copious ornament; but his work is far from being always perfect. In Racine, on the other hand, there is an unflinching perfection; Racine is the complete poetic artist. But if comparisons are to be made, Shakespeare's must surely be pronounced to be the greater poetry, greater in the vastness of its range, in its abundant creativeness, in its dramatic height and power, in the richness of his inspiration, in his world-view, in the peaks to which he rises and the depths which he plumbs — even though he sinks to flatnesses which Racine would have abhorred — and generally a glory of God's making which is marvellous and unique. Racine has his heights and depths and widenesses, but nothing like this; he has not in him the poetic superman, he does not touch the superhuman level of creation. But all this is mainly a matter of substance and also of height and greatness in language, not of impeccable beauty and perfection of diction and rhythm which ought to rank higher on the principle of art for art's sake.

That is one thing and for the sake of clarity it must be seen by itself in separation from the other points I put forward. The comparison of passages each perfectly beautiful in itself but different in their kind and source of inspiration is a different matter. Here it is a question of the perfection of the poetry, not of its greatness. In the valuation of whole poems Shelley's *Skylark* may be described as a greater poem than his brief and exquisite lyric — "I can give not what men call love" — because of its

greater range and power and constant flow of unsurpassable music, but it is not more perfect; if we take separate lines and passages, the stanza "We look before and after" is not superior in perfection or absoluteness to that in the other poem "The desire of the moth for the star", even though it strikes a deeper note and may be said to have a richer substance. The absolute is the absolute and the perfect perfect, whatever difference there may be in the origin of the inspiration; but from the point of view of greatness one perfection may be said to be greater, though not more perfect than another. I would myself say that Wordsworth's line about Newton is greater, though not more perfect than many of those which you have put side by side with it. And this I say on the same principle as the comparison between Shakespeare and Racine: according to the principle of art for art's sake Racine ought to be pronounced a poet superior to Shakespeare because of his consistent and impeccable flawlessness of word and rhythm, but on the contrary Shakespeare is universally considered greater, standing among the few who are supreme. Theocritus is always perfect in what he writes, but he cannot be ranked with Aeschylus and Sophocles. Why not, if art is the only thing? Obviously, because what the others write has an ampler range, a much more considerable height, breadth, depth, largeness. There are some who say that great and long poems have no true value and are mainly composed of padding and baggage and all that matters are the few perfect lines and passages which shine like jewels among a mass of inferior half-worked ore. In that case, the "great" poets ought to be debunked and the world's poetic production valued only for a few lyrics, rare superb passages and scattered lines that we can rescue from the laborious mass production of the artificers of word, sound and language.

I come now to the question of the Overmind and whether there is anything in it superior or more perfectly perfect, more absolutely absolute than in the lower planes. If it is true that one can get the same absolute fully on any plane and from any kind of inspiration, whether in poetry or other expressions of the One, then it would seem to be quite useless and superfluous

for any human being to labour to rise above mind to Overmind or Supermind and try to bring them down upon earth; the idea of transformation would become absurd since it would be possible to have the “form” perfect and absolute anywhere and by a purely earthly means, a purely earthly force. I am reminded of Ramana Maharshi’s logical objection to my idea of the descent of the Divine into us or into the world on the ground, as he put it, that “the Divine is here, from where is He to descend?” My answer is that obviously the Divine is here, although very much concealed; but He is here in essence and He has not chosen to manifest all His powers or His full power in Matter, in Life, in Mind; He has not even made them fit by themselves for some future manifestation of all that, whereas on higher planes there is already that manifestation and by a descent from them the full manifestation can be brought here. All the planes have their own power, beauty, some kind of perfection realised even among their imperfections; God is everywhere in some power of Himself though not everywhere in His full power, and if His face does not appear, the rays and glories from it do fall upon things and beings through the veil and bring something of what we call perfect and absolute. And yet perhaps there may be a more perfect perfection, not in the same kind but in a greater kind, a more utter revelation of the absolute. Ancient thought speaks of something that is highest beyond the highest, *parātparam*; there is a supreme beyond what is for us or seems to us supreme. As Life brings in something that is greater than Matter, as Mind brings in something that is greater than Life, so Overmind brings in something that is greater than Mind, and Supermind something that is greater than Overmind, — greater, superior not only in the essential character of the planes, but in all respects, in all parts and details, and consequently in all its creation.

But you may say each plane and its creations are beautiful in themselves and have their own perfection and there is no superiority of one to the other. What can be more perfect, greater or more beautiful than the glories and beauties of Matter, the golden splendours of the sun, the perpetual charm of the moon,

the beauty and fragrance of the rose or the beauty of the lotus, the yellow mane of the Ganges or the blue waters of the Jamuna, forests and mountains, and the leap of the waterfall, the shimmering silence of the lake, the sapphire hue and mighty roll of the ocean and all the wonder and marvel that there is on the earth and in the vastness of the material universe? These things are perfect and absolute and there can be nothing more perfect or more greatly absolute. Life and mind cannot surpass them; they are enough in themselves and to themselves: Brindavan would have been perfect even if Krishna had never trod there. It is the same with Life: the lion in its majesty and strength, the tiger in its splendid and formidable energy, the antelope in its grace and swiftness, the bird of paradise, the peacock with its plumes, the birds with their calls and their voices of song, have all the perfection that Life can create and thinking man cannot better that; he is inferior to the animals in their own qualities, superior only in his mind, his thought, his power of reflection and creation: but his thought does not make him stronger than the lion and the tiger or swifter than the antelope, more splendid to the sight than the bird of paradise or the human beauty of the most beautiful man and woman superior to the beauty of the animal in its own kind and perfect form. Here too there is a perfection and absoluteness which cannot be surpassed by any superior greatness of nature. Mind also has its own types of perfection and its own absolutes. What intrusion of Overmind or Supermind could produce philosophies more perfect in themselves than the systems of Shankara or Plato or Plotinus or Spinoza or Hegel, poetry superior to Homer's, Shakespeare's, Dante's or Valmiki's, music more superb than the music of Beethoven or Bach, sculpture greater than the statues of Phidias and Michael Angelo, architecture more utterly beautiful than the Taj Mahal, the Parthenon or Borobudur or St. Peter's or of the great Gothic cathedrals? The same may be said of the crafts of ancient Greece and Japan in the Middle Ages or structural feats like the Pyramids or engineering feats like the Dnieper Dam or inventions and manufactures like the great modern steamships and the motor car. The mind of man may not

be equally satisfied with life in general or with its own dealings with life, it may find all that very imperfect, and here perhaps it may be conceded that the intrusion of a higher principle from above might have a chance of doing something better: but here too there are sectional perfections, each complete and sufficient for its purpose, each perfectly and absolutely organised in its own type, the termite society for instance, the satisfying structure of ant societies or the organised life of the beehive. The higher animals have been less remarkably successful than these insects, though perhaps a crows' parliament might pass a resolution that the life of the rookery was one of the most admirable things in the universe. Greek societies like the Spartan evidently considered themselves perfect and absolute in their own type and the Japanese structure of society and the rounding off of its culture and institutions were remarkable in their pattern of perfect organisation. There can be always variations in kind, new types, a progress in variation, but progress in itself towards a greater perfection or towards some absolute is an idea which has been long indulged in but has recently been strongly denied and at least beyond a certain point seems to have been denied by fact and event. Evolution there may be, but it only creates new forms, brings in new principles of consciousness, new ingenuities of creation but not a more perfect perfection. In the old Hebrew scriptures it is declared that God created everything from the first, each thing in its own type, and looked on his own creation and saw that it was good. If we conclude that Overmind or Supermind do not exist or, existing, cannot descend into mind, life and body or act upon them or, descending and acting, cannot bring in a greater or more absolute perfection into anything man has done, we should, with the modification that God has taken many ages and not six days to do his work, be reduced to something like this notion, at any rate in principle.

It is evident that there is something wrong and unsatisfying in such a conclusion. Evolution has not been merely something material, only a creation of new forms of Matter, new species of inanimate objects or animate creatures as physical science has at first seen it: it has been an evolution of consciousness,

a manifestation of it out of its involution and in that a constant progress towards something greater, higher, fuller, more complete, ever increasing in its range and capacity, therefore to a greater and greater perfection and perhaps finally to an absolute of consciousness which has yet to come, an absolute of its truth, an absolute of its dynamic power. The mental consciousness of man is greater in its perfection, more progressive towards the absolute than the consciousness of the animal, and the consciousness of the overman, if I may so call him, must very evidently be still more perfect, while the consciousness of the superman may be absolute. No doubt, the instinct of the animal is superior to that of man and we may say that it is perfect and absolute within its limited range and in its own type. Man's consciousness has an infinitely greater range and is more capable in the large, though less automatically perfect in the details of its work, more laborious in its creation of perfection: the Overmind when it comes will decrease whatever deficiencies there are in human intelligence and the Supermind will remove them altogether; they will replace the perfection of instinct by the more perfect perfection of intuition and what is higher than intuition and thus replace the automatism of the animal by the conscious and self-possessed automatic action of a more luminous gnosis and finally, of an integral truth-consciousness. It is after all the greater consciousness that comes in with mind that enables us to develop the idea of values and this idea of the quality of certain values which seem to us perfect and absolute is a viewpoint which has its validity but must be completed by others if our perception of things is to be entire. No single and separate idea of the mind can be entirely true by itself, it has to complete itself by others which seem to differ from it, even others which seem logically to contradict it, but in reality only enlarge its viewpoints and put its idea in its proper place. It is quite true that the beauty of material things is perfect in itself and you may say that the descent of Overmind cannot add to the glory of the sun or the beauty of the rose. But in the first place I must point out that the rose as it is is something evolved from the dog-rose or the wild rose and is largely a creation of man

whose mind is still creating further developments of this type of beauty. Moreover, it is to the mind of man that these things are beautiful, to his consciousness as evolution has developed it, in the values that mind has given to them, to his perceptive and sometimes his creative aesthesis: Overmind, I have pointed out, has a greater aesthesis and, when it sees objects, sees in them what the mind cannot see, so that the value it gives to them can be greater than any value that the mind can give. That is true of its perception, it may be true also of its creation, its creation of beauty, its creation of perfection, its expression of the power of the absolute.

This is in principle the answer to the objection you made, but pragmatically the objection may still be valid; for what has been done by any overhead intervention may not amount for the present to anything more than the occasional irruption of a line or a passage or at most of a new still imperfectly developed kind or manner of poetry which may have larger contents and a higher or richer suggestion but is not intrinsically superior in the essential elements of poetry, word and rhythm and cannot be confidently said to bring in a more perfect perfection or a more utter absolute. Perhaps it does sometimes, but not so amply or with such a complete and forcible power as to make it recognisable by all. But that may be because it is only an intervention in mind that it has made, a touch, a partial influence, at most a slight infiltration: there has been no general or massive descent or, if there has been any such descent in one or two minds, it has been general and not yet completely organised or applied in every direction; there has been no absolute transformation of the whole being, whole consciousness and whole nature. You say that if the Overmind has a superior consciousness and a greater aesthesis it must also bring in a greater form. That would be true on the overmind level itself: if there were an overmind language created by the Overmind itself and used by overmind beings not subject to the limitations of the mental principle or the turbidities of the life principle or the opposition of the inertia of Matter, the half light of ignorance and the dark environing wall of the Inconscient, then indeed all things might be transmuted

and among the rest there might be a more perfect and absolute poetry, perfect and absolute not only in snatches and within boundaries but always and in numberless kinds and in the whole: for that is the nature of Overmind, it is a cosmic consciousness with a global perception and action tending to carry everything to its extreme possibility; the only thing lacking in its creation might be a complete harmonisation of all possibles, for which the intervention of the highest Truth-Consciousness, the Supermind, would be indispensable. But at present the intervention of Overmind has to take mind, life and matter as its medium and field, work under their dominant conditions, accept their fundamental law and method; its own can enter in only initially or partially and under the obstacle of a prevailing mental and vital mixture. Intuition entering into the human mind undergoes a change; it becomes what we may call the mental intuition or the vital intuition or the intuition working inconsciously in physical things: sometimes it may work with a certain perfection and absoluteness, but ordinarily it is at once coated in mind or life with the mental or vital substance into which it is received and gets limited, deflected or misinterpreted by the mind or the life; it becomes a half intuition or a false intuition and its light and power gives indeed a greater force to human knowledge and will but also to human error. Life and mind intervening in Matter have been able only to vitalise or mentalise small sections of it, to produce and develop living bodies or thinking lives and bodies but they have not been able to make a complete or general transformation of the ignorance of life, of the inertia and inconscience of Matter and large parts of the minds, lives and forms they occupy remain subconscious or inconscient or are still ignorant, like the human mind itself or driven by subconscious forces. Overmind will certainly, if it descends, go further in that direction, effect a greater transformation of life and bodily function as well as mind but the integral transformation is not likely to be in its power; for it is not in itself the supreme consciousness and does not carry in it the supreme force: although different from mind in the principle and methods of its action, it is only a highest kind of mind with the pure intuition, illumination

and higher thought as its subordinates and intermediaries; it is an instrument of cosmic possibilities and not the master. It is not the supreme Truth-Consciousness; it is only an intermediary light and power.

As regards poetry, the Overmind has to use a language which has been made by mind, not by itself, and therefore fully capable of receiving and expressing its greater light and greater truth, its extraordinary powers, its forms of greatness, perfection and beauty. It can only strain and intensify this medium as much as possible for its own uses, but not change its fundamental or characteristically mental law and method; it has to observe them and do what it can to heighten, deepen and enlarge. Perhaps what Mallarmé and other poets were or are trying to do was some fundamental transformation of that kind, but that incurs the danger of being profoundly and even unfathomably obscure or beautifully and splendidly unintelligible. There is here another point of view which it may be useful to elaborate. Poets are men of genius whose consciousness has in some way or another attained to a higher dynamis of conception and expression than ordinary men can hope to have, — though ordinary men often have a good try for it, with the result that they sometimes show a talent for verse and an effective language which imposes itself for a time but is not durable. I have said that genius is the result of an intervention or influence from a higher consciousness than the ordinary human mental, a greater light, a greater force; even an ordinary man can have strokes of genius resulting from such an intervention but it is only in a few that the rare phenomenon occurs of a part of the consciousness being moulded into a habitual medium of expression of its greater light and force. But the intervention of this higher consciousness may take different forms. It may bring in, not the higher consciousness itself but a substitute for it, an uplifted movement of mind which gives a reflection of the character and qualities of the overhead movement. There is a substitute for the expression of the Higher Thought, the Illumination, the pure Intuition giving great or brilliant results, but these cannot be classed as the very body of the higher consciousness. So also there can be a mixed move-

ment, a movement of mind in its full force with flashes from the overhead or even a light sustained for some time. Finally, there can be the thing itself in rare descents, but usually these are not sustained for a long time though they may influence all around and produce long stretches of a high utterance. All this we can see in poetry but it is not easy for the ordinary mind to make these distinctions or even to feel the thing and more difficult still to understand it with an exact intelligence. One must have oneself lived in the light or have had flashes of it in oneself in order to recognise it when it manifests outside us. It is easy to make mistakes of appreciation: it is quite common to miss altogether the tinge of the superior light even while one sees it or to think and say only, "Ah, yes, this is very great poetry."

There are other questions that can arise, objections that can be raised against our admission of a complete equality between the best of all kinds in poetry. First of all, is it a fact that all kinds of poetry actually stand on an equal level or are potentially capable by intensity in their own kind, of such a divine equality? Satirical poetry, for instance, has often been considered as inferior in essential quality to the epic or other higher kinds of creation. Can the best lines of Juvenal, for instance, the line about the *graeculus esuriens* be the equal of Virgil's *O passi graviora*, or his *sunt lacrimae rerum*? Can Pope's attack on Addison, impeccable in expression and unsurpassable in its poignancy of satiric point and force and its still more poignant conclusion

Who would not laugh, if such a man there be?

Who would not weep if Atticus were he?

be put on a same poetical level with the great lines of Shakespeare which I have admitted as having the overmind inspiration? The question is complicated by the fact that some lines or passages of what is classed as satirical verse are not strictly satirical but have the tone of a more elevated kind of poetry and rise to a very high level of poetic beauty, — for instance Dryden's descriptions of Absalom and Achitophel as opposed to his brilliant assault on the second duke of Buckingham. Or can we say that apart

from this question of satire we can equal together the best from poetry of a lighter kind with that which has a high seriousness or intention, for instance the mock epic with the epic? There are critics now who are in ecstasies over Pope's *Rape of the Lock* and put it on the very highest level, but we could hardly reconcile ourselves to classing any lines from it with a supreme line from Homer or Milton. Or can the perfect force of Lucan's line

Victrix causa deis placuit sed victa Catoni

which has made it immortal induce us to rank it on a level of equality with the greater lines of Virgil? We may escape from this difficulty of our own logic by pointing out that when we speak of perfection we mean perfection of something essential for poetic beauty and not only perfection of speech and verse however excellent and consummate in its own inferior kind. Or we may say that we are speaking not only of perfection but of a kind of perfection that has something of the absolute. But then we may be taxed with throwing overboard our own first principle and ranking poetry according to the greatness or beauty of its substance, its intention and its elevation and not solely on its artistic completeness of language and rhythm in its own kind.

We have then to abandon any thorough-going acceptance of the art for art's sake standpoint and admit that our proposition of the equality of absolute perfection of different kinds, different inspirations of poetry applies only to all that has some quintessence of highest poetry in it. An absolutely accomplished speech and metrical movement, a sovereign technique, are not enough; we are thinking of a certain pitch of flight and not only of its faultless agility and grace. Overmind or overhead poetry must always have in its very nature that essential quality, although owing to the conditions and circumstances of its intervention, the limitations of its action, it can only sometimes have it in any supreme fullness or absoluteness. It can open poetry to the expression of new ranges of vision, experience and feeling, especially the spiritual and the higher mystic, with all their inexhaustible possibilities, which a more mental inspiration could not so fully and powerfully see and express except

in moments when something of the overhead power came to its succour; it can bring in new rhythms and a new intensity of language: but so long as it is merely an intervention in mind, we cannot confidently claim more for it. At the same time if we look carefully and subtly at things we may see that the greatest lines or passages in the world's literature have the overmind touch or power and that they bring with them an atmosphere, a profound or an extraordinary light, an amplitude of wing which, if the Overmind would not only intervene but descend, seize wholly and transform, would be the first glimpses of a poetry, higher, larger, deeper and more consistently absolute than any which the human past has been able to give us. An evolutionary ascent of all the activities of mind and life is not impossible.

20 November 1946

Section Two

The Poetry of the Spirit

Psychic, Mystic and Spiritual Poetry

Inspiration from the Illumined Mind and from the Psychic

Your question — “What distinguishes, in manner and quality, a pure inspiration from the illumined mind from that which has the psychic for its origin?” — reads like a poser in an examination paper. Even if I could give a satisfactory definition, Euclideanly rigid, I don’t know that it would be of much use or would really help you to distinguish between the two kinds: these things have to be felt and perceived by experience. I would prefer to give examples. I suppose it would not be easy to find a more perfect example of psychic inspiration in English literature than Shelley’s well-known lines,

I can give not what men call love,
But wilt thou accept not
The worship the heart lifts above
And the Heavens reject not, —
The desire of the moth for the star,
Of the night for the morrow,
The devotion to something afar
From the sphere of our sorrow?

— you will find there the true rhythm, expression and substance of poetry full of the psychic influence. For full examples of the poetry which comes from the illumined mind purely and simply and that in which the psychic and the spiritual illumination meet together, one has to go to poetry that tries to express a spiritual experience. You have yourself written things which can illustrate the difference. The lines

The longing of ecstatic tears
From infinite to infinite

will do very well as an instance of the pure illumination, for here what would otherwise be a description of a spiritual heart-experience, psychic therefore in its origin, is lifted up to a quite different spiritual level and expressed with the vision and language sufficiently characteristic of a spiritual-mental illumination. In another passage there is this illumination but it is captured and dominated by the inner heart and by the psychic thrill, a certain utterance of the yearning and push of psychic love for the Divine incarnate.

If Thou desirest my weak self to outgrow
 Its mortal longings, lean down from above,
 Temper the unborn light no thought can trace,
 Suffuse my mood with a familiar glow!
 For 'tis with mouth of clay I supplicate.
 Speak to me heart to heart words intimate,
 And all Thy formless glory turn to love
 And mould Thy love into a human face.

July 1931

Psychic and Overhead Inspiration

There is too the psychic source of inspiration which can give a beautiful spiritual poetry. The psychic has two aspects — there is the soul principle itself which contains all soul possibilities and there is our psychic personality which represents whatever soul-power is developed from life to life or put forward for action in our present life-formation. The psychic being usually expresses itself through its instruments, mental, vital and physical; it tries to put as much of its own stamp on them as possible. But it can seldom put on them the full psychic stamp — unless it comes fully out from its rather secluded and overshadowed position and takes into its hands the direct government of the nature. It can then receive and express all spiritual realisations in its own way and manner. For the tone of the psychic is different from that of the overhead planes, — it has less of greatness, power, wideness, more of a smaller sweetness, delicate beauty; there is an intense beauty of emotion, a fine subtlety of true perception,

an intimate language. The expression “sweetness and light” can very well be applied to the psychic as the kernel of its nature. The spiritual plane, when it takes up these things, gives them a wider utterance, a greater splendour of light, a stronger sweetness, a breath of powerful authority, strength and space.

20 October 1936

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To get the psychic being to emerge is not easy, though it is a very necessary thing for sadhana and when it does it is not certain that it will switch on to the above-head planes at once. But obviously anyone who could psychicise his poetry would get a unique place among the poets.

20 October 1936

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I don't suppose the emergence of the psychic would interfere at all with the inspiration from above. It would be more likely to help it by making the connection with these planes more direct and conscious. . . . The direct psychic touch is not frequent in poetry. It breaks in sometimes — more often there is only a tinge here and there.

20 October 1936

Psychic and Esoteric Poetry

These poems are quite new in manner — simple and precise and penetrating.¹ What you describe is the psychic fire, *agni pāvaka*, which burns in the deeper heart and from there is lighted in the mind, the vital and the physical body. In the mind Agni creates a light of intuitive perception and discrimination which sees at once what is the true vision or idea and the wrong vision or idea, the true feeling and the wrong feeling, the true movement and the wrong movement. In the vital he is kindled as a fire of right emotion and a kind of intuitive feeling, a sort of tact which makes for the right impulse, the right action, the right sense of things and reaction to things. In the body he initiates a similar

¹ *Certain poems in Bengali by Dilip Kumar Roy: Agni Disha, Agni Bedan, etc. — Ed.*

but still more automatic correct response to the things of physical life, sensation, bodily experience. Usually it is the psychic light in the mind that is first lit of the three, but not always — for sometimes it is the psycho-vital flame that takes precedence.

In ordinary life also there is no doubt an action of the psychic — without it man would be only a thinking and planning animal. But its action there is very much veiled, needing always the mental or vital to express it, usually mixed and not dominant, not unerring therefore; it does often the right thing in the wrong way, is moved by the right feeling but errs as to the application, person, place, circumstance. The psychic, except in a few extraordinary natures, does not get its full chance in the outer consciousness; it needs some kind of Yoga or sadhana to come by its own and it is as it emerges more and more “in front” that it gets clear of the mixture. That is to say, its presence becomes directly felt, not only behind and supporting, but filling the frontal consciousness and no longer dependent on or dominated by its instruments — mind, vital and body, but dominating them and moulding them into luminosity and teaching them their own true action.

It is not easy to say whether the poems are esoteric; for these words “esoteric” and “exoteric” are rather ill-defined in their significance. One understands the distinction between exoteric and esoteric religion — that is to say, on one side, creed, dogma, mental faith, religious worship and ceremony, religious and moral practice and discipline, on the other an inner seeking piercing beyond the creed and dogma and ceremony or finding their hidden meaning, living deeply within in spiritual and mystic experience. But how shall we define an esoteric poetry? Perhaps what deals in an occult way with the occult may be called esoteric — e.g., the *Bird of Fire*, *Trance*, etc. *The Two Moons*² is, it is obvious, desperately esoteric. But I don't know whether an intimate spiritual experience simply and limpidly told without veil or recondite image can be called esoteric — for the word usually brings the sense of something kept back

² Now called *Moon of Two Hemispheres*. — Ed.

from the ordinary eye, hidden, occult. Is *Nirvana* for instance an esoteric poem? There is no veil or symbol there—it tries to state the experience as precisely and overtly as possible. The experience of the psychic fire and psychic discrimination is an intimate spiritual experience, but it is direct and simple like all psychic things. The poem which expresses it may easily be something deeply inward, esoteric in that sense, but simple, unveiled and clear, not esoteric in the more usual sense. I rather think, however, the term “esoteric poem” is a misnomer and some other phraseology would be more accurate. 30 April 1935

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I don't think your poetry is more “esoteric” than in the earlier poems—for esoteric means something that only the initiated in the mysteries can understand; to be concerned with spiritual aspiration does not make a poem esoteric, such poems can be perfectly well understood by those who are not mystics or Yogis. Yours are certainly not more esoteric or Yogic than Nishikanta's with his frequent incursions into the occult and if Tagore could be knocked over by the Rajahansa poem, that shows that Yogic poetry can be appreciated by him and by others. I take it that it is a transition to a new style of writing that meets with so much opposition and these are only excuses for the refusal of the mind to appreciate what is new. On the other hand those who have not the prejudice have not the difficulty. With time the obstacle will disappear. 24 July 1936

Mystic Poetry

Mystic poetry does not mean anything exactly or apparently; it means things suggestively and reconditely,— things that are not known and classified by the intellect.

What you are asking is to reduce what is behind to intellectual terms, which is to make it something quite different from itself. 3 December 1936

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Mystic poetry has a perfectly concrete meaning, much more than intellectual poetry which is much more abstract. The nature of the intellect is abstraction; spirituality and mysticism deal with the concrete by their very nature. 8 December 1936

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The difficulty most people feel is that they expect an intellectual meaning quite clear on the surface and through that they get at the *bhāva* of the deeper significance (if there is any) — but in mystic poetry, often though not always, one has to catch the *bhāva* of the deeper significance directly through the figures and by that arrive at the form of the intellectual meaning or else share in the inner vision, whichever may be the thing to be conveyed by the poem.

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Mystic poetry can be written from any plane, provided the writer gets an inspiration from the inner consciousness whether mind, vital or subtle physical. 20 October 1936

The Aim of the Mystic Poet

There are truths and there are transcriptions of truths; the transcriptions may be accurate or may be free and imaginative. The truth behind a poetic creation is there on some plane or other, supraphysical generally — and from there the suggestion of the image too originally comes; even the whole transcription itself can be contributed from there, but ordinarily it is the mind's faculty of imagination which gives it form and body. Poetic imagination is very usually satisfied with beauty of idea and image only and the aesthetic pleasure of it, but there is something behind it which supplies the Truth in its images, and to get the transcription also direct from that something or somewhere behind should be the aim of mystic or spiritual poetry. When Shelley made the spirits of Nature speak, he was using his imagination, but there was something behind in him which felt and knew and believed in the truth of the thing he was expressing —

he felt that there were forms more real than living man behind the veil. But his method of presentation was intellectual and imaginative, so one misses the full life in these impalpable figures. To get a more intimate and spiritually concrete presentation should be the aim of the mystic poet. 16 November 1933

Symbolism and Allegory

There is a considerable difference between symbolism and allegory; they are not at all the same thing. Allegory comes in when a quality or other abstract thing is personalised and the allegory proper should be something carefully stylised and deliberately sterilised of the full aspect of embodied life, so that the essential meaning or idea may come out with sufficient precision and force of clarity. One can find this method in the old mystery plays and it is a kind of art that has its value. Allegory is an intellectual form; one is not expected to believe in the personalisation of the abstract quality, it is only an artistic device. When in an allegory as in Spenser's *Faerie Queene* the personalisation, the embodiment takes first place and absorbs the major part of the mind's interest, the true style and principle of this art have been abandoned. The allegorical purpose here becomes a submerged strain and is really of secondary importance, our search for it a by-play of the mind; we read for the beauty and interest of the figures and movements presented to us, not for this submerged significance. An allegory must be intellectually precise and clear in its representative figures as well as in their basis, however much adorned with imagery and personal expression; otherwise it misses its purpose. A symbol expresses on the contrary not the play of abstract things or ideas put into imaged form, but a living truth or inward vision or experience of things, so inward, so subtle, so little belonging to the domain of intellectual abstraction and precision that it cannot be brought out except through symbolic images—the more these images have a living truth of their own which corresponds intimately to the living truth they symbolise, suggests the very vibration of the experience itself, the greater becomes the art of the symbolic

expression. When the symbol is a representative sign or figure and nothing more, then the symbolic approaches nearer to an intellectual method, though even then it is not the same thing as allegory. In mystic poetry the symbol ought to be as much as possible the natural body of the inner truth or vision, itself an intimate part of the experience. 16–18 November 1933

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Lord, what an incorrigible mentaliser and allegorist you are! If the bird were either consciousness or the psychic or light, it would be an allegory and all the mystic beauty would be gone. A living symbol and a mental allegorical symbol are not the same thing. You can't put a label on the Bird of Marvel any more than on the Bird of Fire or any other of the fauna or flora or population of the mystic kingdoms. They can be described, but to label them destroys their life and makes them only stuffed specimens in an allegorical museum. Mystic symbols are living things, not abstractions. Why insist on killing them? Jyoti has described the Bird and told you all that is necessary about him — the rest you have to feel and live inside, not dissect and put the fragments into neatly arranged drawers. 8 August 1936

Symbolic Poetry and Mystic Poetry

I suppose the poem you sent me might be described as the poetic rendering of a symbolic vision—it is not a mystic poem. A poem can no doubt be symbolic and mystic at the same time. For instance Nishikanta's English poem of the vision of the Lion-flame and the Deer-flame, beauty and power, was symbolic and mystic at once. It is when the thing seen is spiritually lived and has an independent vivid reality of its own which exceeds any conceptual significance it may have on the surface that it is mystic. Symbols may be of various kinds; there are those that are concealing images capable of intellectual interpretation but still different from either symbolic or allegorical figures — and there are those that have a more intimate life of their own and are not conceptual so much as occultly vital in their significance; there

are still others that need a psychic or spiritual or at least an inner and intuitive insight to identify oneself fully with their meaning. In a poem which uses conceptual symbols the mind is more active and the reader wants to know what it means to the mind; but as minds differ, the poet may attach one meaning to it and the reader may find another, if the image used is at all an enigmatic one, not mentally clear and precise. In the more deeply symbolist — still more in the mystic — poem the mind is submerged in the vividness of the reality and any mental explanation falls far short of what is felt and lived in the deeper vital or psychic response. This is what Housman in his book tries to explain with regard to Blake's poetry, though he seems to me to miss altogether the real nature of the response. It is not the mere sensation to which what he calls pure poetry appeals but to a deeper inner life or life-soul within us which has profounder depths than the thinking mind and responds with a certain kind of soul-excitement or ecstasy — the physical vibrations on which he lays stress are merely a very outward result of this sudden stir within the occult folds of the being. Mystic poetry can strike still deeper — it can stir the inmost and subtlest recesses of the life-soul and the secret inner mind at the same time; it can even, if it is of the right kind, go beyond these also to the pure inmost psyche.

Some Mystic Symbols

If you expect matter of fact verisimilitude from N. or a scientific ornithologically accurate swan, you are knocking at the wrong door. But I don't see exactly the point of your objection. The lake [*in a poem*] is not a lake but a symbol; the swan is not a swan but a symbol. You can't expect the lake merely to ripple and do nothing else or the swan simply to swim and eat and do nothing else. It is as much a symbol as the Bird of Fire or the Bird of the Vedic poet who faced the guardians of the Soma and brought the Soma to Indra (or was it to a Rishi? I have forgotten) — perhaps carrying a pot or several pots in his claws and beak!! for I don't know how else he could have done it. How is he to use his symbol if you do not make allowances

for a miraculous Swan? If the swan does nothing but what an ordinary swan does, it ceases to be a symbol and becomes only a metaphor. The animals of these symbols belong not to earth but to Wonderland.

13 March 1936

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The objection that stars do not get নত stands only if the poem describes objective phenomena or aims at using purely objective images. But if the vision behind the poem is subjective, the objection holds no longer. The mystic subjective vision admits a consciousness in physical things and gives them a subtle physical life which is not that of the material existence. If a consciousness is felt in the stars and if that consciousness expresses itself in subtle physical images to the vision of the poet, there can be no impossibility of a star being নত আপনহারা — such expressions attribute a mystical life to the stars and can appropriately express this in mystic images. I agree with you about the fineness of the line.

27 May 1936

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Surely the image of a “last star of the night” is not so difficult to understand. It is not a physical star obviously. It is a light in the night and the night is not physical. There is no variation.

Star is a light in the night, I suppose — night is the night of ignorance here, very evidently — so a star is an illumination of the ignorance which is very different from the illumination of dawn and must disappear in the dawn. That is common sense, it seems to me. I am not aware that I have set up “deer” as a symbol of beauty. It was Nishikanta who did so in his fable of the deer and the lion. Every poet can use symbols in his own way, he is not bound by any fixed mathematics of symbolism.

26 January 1937

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A symbol must always convey a sense of reality to the feeling (not the intellect), but here (if it has the meaning I give it) it is obviously only a metaphorical figure for a ray of Light, Consciousness etc.

29 December 1936

Some Problems in Writing Mystic Poetry

This is the real stumbling-block of mystic poetry and specially mystic poetry of this kind. The mystic feels real and present, even ever-present to his experience, intimate to his being, truths which to the ordinary reader are intellectual abstractions or metaphysical speculations. He is writing of experiences that are foreign to the ordinary mentality. Either they are unintelligible to it and in meeting them it flounders about as in an obscure abyss or it takes them as poetic fancies expressed in intellectually devised images. He uses words and images in order to convey to the mind some perception, some figure of that which is beyond thought. To the mystic there is no such thing as an abstraction. Everything which to the intellectual mind is abstract has a concreteness, substantiality which is more real than the sensible form of an object or of a physical event. To him, consciousness is the very stuff of existence and he can feel it everywhere enveloping and penetrating the stone as much as man or the animal. A movement, a flow of consciousness is not to him an image but a fact. What is to be done under these circumstances? The mystical poet can only describe what he has felt, seen in himself or others or in the world just as he has felt or seen it or experienced through exact vision, close contact or identity and leave it to the general reader to understand or not understand or misunderstand according to his capacity. A new kind of poetry demands a new mentality in the recipient as well as in the writer.

Another question is the place of philosophy in poetry or whether it has any place at all. Some romanticists seem to believe that the poet has no right to think at all, only to see and feel. I hold that philosophy has its place and can even take a leading place along with psychological experience as it does in the Gita. All depends on how it is done, whether it is a dry or a living philosophy, an arid intellectual statement or the expression not only of the living truth of thought but of something of its beauty, its light or its power.

The theory which discourages the poet from thinking or at

least from thinking for the sake of the thought proceeds from an extreme romanticist temper; it reaches its acme on one side in the question of the surrealist, "Why do you want poetry to mean anything?" and on the other in Housman's exaltation of pure poetry which he describes paradoxically as a sort of sublime nonsense which does not appeal at all to the mental intelligence but knocks at the solar plexus and awakes a vital and physical rather than intellectual sensation and response. It is of course not that really but a vividness of imagination and feeling which disregards the mind's positive view of things and its logical sequences; the centre or centres it knocks at are not the brain-mind, not even the poetic intelligence but the subtle physical, the nervous, the vital or the psychic centre. The poem he quotes from Blake is certainly not nonsense, but it has no positive and exact meaning for the intellect or the surface mind; it expresses certain things that are true and real, not nonsense but a deeper sense which we feel powerfully with a great stirring of some inner emotion, but any attempt at exact intellectual statement of them sterilises their sense and spoils their appeal. This is not the method of the highest spiritual poetry. Its expression aims at a certain force, directness and spiritual clarity and reality. When it is not understood, it is because the truths it expresses are unfamiliar to the ordinary mind or belong to an untrodden domain or domains or enter into a field of occult experience; it is not because there is any attempt at a dark or vague profundity or at an escape from thought. The thinking is not intellectual but intuitive or more than intuitive, always expressing a vision, a spiritual contact or a knowledge which has come by entering into the thing itself, by identity.

It may be noted that the greater romantic poets did not shun thought; they thought abundantly, almost endlessly. They have their characteristic view of life, something that one might call their philosophy, their world-view, and they express it. Keats was the most romantic of poets, but he could write "To philosophise I dare not yet"; he did not write "I am too much of a poet to philosophise." To philosophise he regarded evidently as mounting on the admiral's flag-ship and flying an almost royal banner.

Spiritual philosophic poetry is different; it expresses or tries to express a total and many-sided vision and experience of all the planes of being and their action upon each other. Whatever language, whatever terms are necessary to convey this truth of vision and experience it uses without scruple, not admitting any mental rule of what is or is not poetic. It does not hesitate to employ terms which might be considered as technical when these can be turned to express something direct, vivid and powerful. That need not be an introduction of technical jargon, that is to say, I suppose, special and artificial language, expressing in this case only abstract ideas and generalities without any living truth or reality in them. Such jargon cannot make good literature, much less good poetry. But there is a "poeticism" which establishes a sanitary cordon against words and ideas which it considers as prosaic but which properly used can strengthen poetry and extend its range. That limitation I do not admit as legitimate.

I am justifying a poet's right to think as well as to see and feel, his right to "dare to philosophise". I agree with the modernists in their revolt against the romanticist's insistence on emotionalism and his objection to thinking and philosophical reflection in poetry. But the modernist went too far in his revolt. In trying to avoid what I may call poeticism he ceased to be poetic; wishing to escape from rhetorical writing, rhetorical pretension to greatness and beauty of style, he threw out true poetic greatness and beauty, turned from a deliberately poetic style to a colloquial tone and even to very flat writing; especially he turned away from poetic rhythm to a prose or half-prose rhythm or to no rhythm at all. Also he has weighed too much on thought and has lost the habit of intuitive sight; by turning emotion out of its intimate chamber in the house of Poetry, he has had to bring in to relieve the dryness of much of his thought, too much exaggeration of the lower vital and sensational reactions untransformed or else transformed only by exaggeration. Nevertheless he has perhaps restored to the poet the freedom to think as well as to adopt a certain straightforwardness and directness of style.

Now I come to the law prohibiting repetition. This rule aims at a certain kind of intellectual elegance which comes into poetry when the poetic intelligence and the call for a refined and classical taste begin to predominate. It regards poetry as a cultural entertainment and amusement of the highly civilised mind; it interests by a faultless art of words, a constant and ingenious invention, a sustained novelty of ideas, incidents, word and phrase. An unfailing variety or the outward appearance of it is one of the elegances of this art. But all poetry is not of this kind; its rule does not apply to poets like Homer or Valmiki or other early writers. The Veda might almost be described as a mass of repetitions; so might the work of Vaishnava poets and the poetic literature of devotion generally in India. Arnold has noted this distinction when speaking of Homer; he mentioned especially that there is nothing objectionable in the close repetition of the same word in the Homeric way of writing. In many things Homer seems to make a point of repeating himself. He has stock descriptions, epithets always reiterated, lines even which are constantly repeated again and again when the same incident returns in his narrative, e.g. the line,

doupēsen de pesōn arabēse de teuche' ep' autōi.

“Down with a thud he fell and his armour clangoured upon him.”

He does not hesitate also to repeat the bulk of a line with a variation at the end, e.g.

bē de kat' Oulumpoio karēnōn chōomenos kēr.

And again the

bē de kat' Oulumpoio karēnōn aixasa.

“Down from the peaks of Olympus he came, wrath vexing his heart-strings” and again, “Down from the peaks of Olympus she came impetuously darting.” He begins another line elsewhere with the same word and a similar action and with the same nature of a human movement physical and psychological in a scene of Nature, here a man's silent sorrow listening to the roar of the ocean:

bē d'akeōn para thina poluphloisboio thalassēs

“Silent he walked by the shore of the many-rumoured ocean.”

In mystic poetry also repetition is not objectionable; it is resorted to by many poets, sometimes with insistence. I may note as an example the constant repetition of the word *Ritam*, truth, sometimes eight or nine times in a short poem of nine or ten stanzas and often in the same line. This does not weaken the poem, it gives it a singular power and beauty. The repetition of the same key ideas, key images and symbols, key words or phrases, key epithets, sometimes key lines or half lines is a constant feature. They give an atmosphere, a significant structure, a sort of psychological frame, an architecture. The object here is not to amuse or entertain but the self-expression of an inner truth, a seeing of things and ideas not familiar to the common mind, a bringing out of inner experience. It is the true more than the new that the poet is after. He uses *āvṛtti*, repetition, as one of the most powerful means of carrying home what has been thought or seen and fixing it in the mind in an atmosphere of light and beauty. Moreover, the object is not only to present a secret truth in its true form and true vision but to drive it home by the finding of the true word, the true phrase, the *mot juste*, the true image or symbol, if possible the inevitable word; if that is there, nothing else, repetition included, matters much. This is natural when the repetition is intended, serves a purpose; but it can hold even when the repetition is not deliberate but comes in naturally in the stream of the inspiration. I see, therefore, no objection to the recurrence of the same or similar image such as sea and ocean, sky and heaven in a lone long passage provided each is the right thing and rightly worded in its place. The same rule applies to words, epithets, ideas. It is only if the repetition is clumsy or awkward, too burdensomely insistent, at once unneeded and inexpressive or amounts to a disagreeable and meaningless echo that it must be rejected. 19 March 1946

Repetition of Images in Mystic Poetry

What she writes has a living beauty in it. But this constant repetition of the same images has been there since the beginning. It is perhaps inevitable in a restricted mystic vision; for you find it in the Veda and the Vaishnava poets and everywhere almost. To be more various one must get a wide consciousness where all is possible.

17 February 1937

Mystic Poetry and Spiritual Poetry

I do not remember the context of the passage you quote from *The Future Poetry*,³ but I suppose I meant to contrast the veiled utterance of what is usually called mystic poetry with the luminous and assured clarity of the fully expressed spiritual experience. I did not mean to contrast it with the mental clarity which is aimed at usually by poetry in which the intelligence or thinking mind is consulted at each step. The concreteness of intellectual imaged description is one thing and spiritual concreteness is another. “Two birds, companions, seated on one tree, but one eats the fruit, the other eats not but watches his fellow” — that has an illumining spiritual clarity and concreteness to one who has had the experience, but mentally and intellectually it might mean anything or nothing. Poetry uttered with the spiritual clarity may be compared to sunlight — poetry uttered with the mystic veil to moonlight. But it was not my intention to deny beauty, power or value to the moonlight. Note that I have distinguished between two kinds of mysticism, one in which the realisation or experience is vague, though inspiringly vague, the other in which the experience is revelatory and intimate, but the utterance it finds is veiled by the image, not thoroughly revealed by it. I do not know to which Tagore’s recent poetry belongs, I have not read it.

³ “. . . mysticism in its unfavourable or lesser sense comes when either we glimpse but do not intimately realise the now secret things of the spirit or, realising, yet cannot find their direct language, their intrinsic way of utterance, and have to use obscurely luminous hints or a thick drapery of symbol, when we have the revelation, but not the inspiration, the sight but not the word.” — Sri Aurobindo, *The Future Poetry*, volume 26 of THE COMPLETE WORKS OF SRI AUROBINDO, pp. 213–14.

The latter kind of poetry (where there is the intimate experience) can be of great power and value — witness Blake. Revelation is greater than inspiration — it brings the direct knowledge and seeing, inspiration gives the expression, but the two are not always equal. There is even an inspiration without revelation, when one gets the word but the thing remains behind the veil; the transcribing consciousness expresses something with power, like a medium, of which it has not itself the direct sight or the living possession. It is better to get the sight of the thing itself than merely express it by an inspiration which comes from behind the veil, but this kind of poetry too has often a great light and power in it. The highest inspiration brings the *intrinsic* word, the spiritual mantra; but even where the inspiration is less than that, has a certain vagueness or fluidity of outline, you cannot say of such mystic poetry that it has no inspiration, not the inspired word at all. Where there is no inspiration, there can be no poetry.

10 June 1936

Spiritual Poetry

The spiritual vision must never be intellectual, philosophical or abstract, it must always give the sense of something vivid, living and concrete, a thing of vibrant beauty or a thing of power. An abstract spiritual poetry is possible but that is not Amal's manner. The poetry of spiritual vision as distinct from that of spiritual thought abounds in images, unavoidably because that is the straight way to avoid abstractness; but these images must be felt as very real and concrete things, otherwise they become like the images used by the philosophic poets, decorative to the thought rather than realities of the inner vision and experience.

28 May 1937

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Spiritual imagery is perfectly free. Occult imagery usually fixes itself to a system of symbols, otherwise it can't be understood even by the initiates. But spiritual imagery is usually simple and clear.

26 January 1937

Use of "High Light" Words in Spiritual Poetry

A. E.'s remarks about "immensity" etc. are very interesting to me; for these are the very words, with others like them, that are constantly recurring at short intervals in my poetry when I express, not spiritual thought, but spiritual experience. I knew perfectly well that this recurrence would be objected to as bad technique or an inadmissible technique; but this seems to me a reasoning from the conventions of a past order which cannot apply to a new poetry dealing with spiritual things. A new art of words written from a new consciousness demands a new technique. A. E. himself admits that this rule makes a great difficulty because these "high light" words are few in the English language. This solution may do well enough for him, because the realisations which they represent are in him *mental* realisations or intuitions occurring on the summits of the consciousness, rare "high lights" over the low tones of the ordinary natural or occult experience (ordinary, of course, to him, not to the average man), and so his solution does not violate the truth of his vision, does not misrepresent the balance or harmony of its natural tones. But what of one who lives in an atmosphere full of these high lights — in a consciousness in which the finite, not only the occult but even the earthly finite is bathed in the sense of the eternal, the illimitable and infinite, the immensities or intimacies of the timeless. To follow A. E.'s rule might well mean to falsify this atmosphere, to substitute a merely aesthetic fabrication for a true seeing and experience. Truth first — a technique expressive of the truth in the forms of beauty has to be found, if it does not exist. It is no use arguing from the spiritual inadequacy of the English language; the inadequacy does not exist and, even if it did, the language will have to be made adequate. It has been plastic enough in the past to succeed in expressing all that it was asked to express, however new; it must now be urged to a new progress. In fact, the power is there and has only to be brought out more fully to serve the full occult, mystic, spiritual purpose.

5 February 1932

Spiritual Poetry in India

But what a change in India. Once religious or spiritual poetry held the first place (Tukaram, Mirabai, Tulsidas, Surdas, the Tamil Alvars and Shaiva poets, and a number of others) — and now spiritual poetry is not poetry, altogether অচল! But luckily things are সচল and the movability may bring back an older and sounder feeling.

Poet, Yogi, Rishi, Prophet, Genius

The Poet, the Yogi and the Rishi

It is quite natural for the poets to vaunt their *métier* as the highest reach of human capacity and themselves as the top of creation; it is also natural for the intellectuals to run down the Yogi or the Rishi who claims to reach a higher consciousness than that which they conceive to be the summit of human achievement. The poet indeed lives still in the mind and is not yet a spiritual seer, but he represents to the human intellect the highest point of mental seership where the imagination tries to figure and embody in words its intuition of things, though that stands far below the vision of things that can be grasped only by spiritual experience. It is for that the poet is exalted as the real seer and prophet. There is too, helping the idea, the error of the modern or European mentality which so easily confuses the mentalised vital or life being with the soul and the idealising mind with spirituality. The poet imaging mental or physical beauty is for the outer mind something more spiritual than the seer or the God-lover experiencing the eternal peace or the ineffable ecstasy. Yet the Rishi or Yogi can drink of a deeper draught of Beauty and Delight than the imagination of the poet at its highest can conceive. (রসো বৈ সঃ — *The Divine is Delight.*) And it is not only the unseen Beauty that he can see but the visible and tangible also has for him a face of the All-Beautiful which the mind cannot discover.

10 November 1934

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You seem almost to say that the poet is necessarily not a seer or Rishi. But if the mere poet is not a Rishi, the Rishi after all can be a poet — the greater can contain the less, even though the less is not the greater.

11 November 1934

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A Rishi is one who *sees* or discovers an inner truth and puts it into self-effective language — the mantra. Either new truth or old truth made new by expression and intuitive realisation.

He [*Ramana Maharshi*] has experienced certain eternal truths by process of Yoga — I don't think it is by Rishilike intuition or illumination, nor has he the mantra.

10 February 1936

*

A Rishi may be a Yogi, but also he may not; a Yogi too may be a Rishi, but also he may not. Just as a philosopher may or may not be a poet and a poet may or may not be a philosopher.

Poetic intuition and illumination is not the same thing as Rishi intuition and illumination.

11 February 1936

The Poet and the Prophet

Essentially the poet's value lies in his poetic and not in his prophetic power. If he is a prophet also, the intrinsic worth of his prophecy lies in its own value, his poetic merit does not add to that, only it gives to its expression a power that perhaps it would not have otherwise.

7 November 1934

The Poet and the Verse Writer

No poet feels his poetry as a "normal phenomenon" — he feels it as an inspiration — of course anybody could "make" poetry by learning the rules of prosody and a little practice. In fact many people write verse, but the poets are few. Who are the ordinary poets? There is no such thing as an ordinary poet.

30 June 1936

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All that is written in metre is called verse. If it is written with inspiration, it is poetry.

27 May 1937

The “Born” Poet

You must remember that you are not a “born” poet — you are trying to bring out something from the Unmanifest inside you. You can’t demand that that should be an easy job. It may come out suddenly and without apparent reason like the Ananda — but you can’t demand it. The pangs of delivery cannot always be avoided.

8 June 1934

*

A born poet is usually a genius, poetry with any power or beauty in it implies genius.

13 February 1936

Poetic Genius

Poetic genius — without which there cannot be any originality — is inborn, but it takes time to come out — the first work even of great poets is often unoriginal. That is in ordinary life. In Yoga poetic originality can come by an opening from within, even if it was not there before in such a way as to be available in this life.

22 March 1934

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For poetry one must have a special inspiration or genius. With literary capacity one can write good verse only.

Genius usually means an inborn power which develops of itself. Talent and capacity are not genius, that can be acquired. But that is the ordinary rule, by Yoga one can manifest what is concealed in the being.

22 September 1934

Genius

I never heard of anyone getting genius by effort. One can increase one’s talent by training and labour, but genius is a gift of Nature. By sadhana it is different, one can do it; but that is not the fruit of effort, but either of an inflow or by an opening or liberation of some impersonal power or manifestation of unmanifested

power. No rule can be made in such things; it depends on persons and circumstances how far the manifestation of genius by Yoga will go or what shape it will take or to what degree or height it will rise. 28 July 1938

*

Of course it is quite possible to be an idiot and a genius at the same time — one can, that is to say, be the medium of a specialised and specific force which leaves the rest of the being brute stuff, unchanged and undeveloped. Genius is a phenomenon *sui generis* and many anomalies occur in its constitution by Nature.

13 February 1936

The Poet and the Poem

Power of Expression and Spiritual Experience

All depends on the power of expression of the poet. A poet like Shakespeare or Shelley or Wordsworth though without spiritual experience may in an inspired moment become the medium of an expression of spiritual Truth which is beyond him and the expression, as it is not that of his own mind, may be very powerful and living, not merely aesthetically agreeable. On the other hand a poet with spiritual experience may be hampered by his medium or by his transcribing brain or by an insufficient mastery of language and rhythm and give an expression which may mean much to him but not convey the power and breath of it to others. The English poets of the 17th century often used a too intellectual mode of expression for their poetry to be a means of living communication to others — except in rare moments of an unusual vision and inspiration; it is these that give their work its value.

8 July 1935

Experience and Imagination

But is it necessary to say which is which?¹ It is not possible to deny that it was an experience, even if one cannot affirm it — not being in the consciousness of the writer. But even if it is an imagination, it is a powerful poetic imagination which expresses what would be the exact feeling in the real experience. It seems to me that that is quite enough. There are so many things in Wordsworth and Shelley which people say were only mental feelings and imaginations and yet they express the deeper

¹ *Someone said to the correspondent, in regard to a certain poem: "This may not be an experience at all; who knows if it is not an imagination, and how are we to say which is which?" — Ed.*

seings or feelings of the seer. For poetry it seems to me the point is irrelevant. 27 May 1936

Poetic Expression and Personal Feeling

What you say is quite true. Poets are mediums for a force of vision and expression that is not theirs, so they need not feel except by reflection the emotions they utter. But of course that is not always the case — sometimes they express what they feel or at any rate what a part of their being feels. 25 September 1934

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What the poets feel when writing (those who are truly inspired) is the great Ananda of creation, possession by a great Power superior to their ordinary minds which puts some emotion or vision of things into a form of beauty. They feel the emotion of the thing they express, but not always as a personal feeling, but as something which seizes hold of them for self-expression. But the personal feeling also may form a basis for the creation.

26 September 1934

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These designations, a magnified ego, an exalted outlook of the vital mind, apply in sadhana, but hardly to poetic expression which lifts or ought to lift to a field of pure personal-impersonal *bhāva*. An utterance of this kind can express a state of consciousness or an experience which is not necessarily the writer's personal position or ego attitude but that of an inner spirit. So long as it is so the question of ego does not arise. It arises only if one turns away from the poem to the writer and asks in what mood he wrote it and that is a question of psychological fact alien to the purpose of poetry. 29 June 1935

The Two Parts of the Poetic Creator

Your poem² is forcible enough, but the quality is rather rheto-

² To a German Soldier Left Behind in Retreat by Arjava. — Ed.

rical than poetic. Yet at the end there are two lines that are very fine poetry

Gay singing birds caught in a ring of fire

and

A silent scorn that sears Eternity.

If you could not write the whole in that strain, which would have made it epic almost in pitch, it is, I think, because your indignation was largely mental and moral, the emotion though very strong being too much intellectualised in expression to give the poetic intensity of speech and movement. Indignation, the *saeva indignatio* of Juvenal, can produce poetry, but it must be either vividly a vital revolt which stirs the whole feeling into a white heat of self-expression — as in Milton's famous sonnet — or a high spiritual or deep psychic rejection of the undivine. Besides, it is well known that the emotion of the external being, in the raw as it were, does not make good material for poetry; it has to be transmuted into something deeper, less externally personal, more permanent before it can be turned into good poetry. There are always two parts of oneself which collaborate in poetry — the instrumental which lives and feels what is written, makes a sort of projective identification with it, and the Seer-Creator within who is not involved, but sees the inner significance of it and listens for the word that shall entirely express this significance. It is in some meeting-place of these two that what is felt or lived is transmuted into true stuff of poetry. Probably you are not sufficiently detached from this particular life-experience and the reactions it created to go back deeper into yourself and transmute it in this way. And yet you have done it in the two magnificent lines I have noted, which have the virtue of seizing the inner significance behind the thing experienced in the poetic or interpretative and not in the outward mental way. The first of these two lines conveys the pathos and tragedy of the thing and also the stupidity of the waste much more effectively than pages of denunciation or comment and the other stresses with an extraordinary power in a few words the problem as

flung by the revolting human mind and life against the Cosmic Impersonal.

The detachment of which you speak, comes by attaining the poise of the Spirit, the equality, of which the Gita speaks always, but also by sight, by knowledge. For instance, looking at what happened in 1914 — or for that matter at all that is and has been happening in human history — the eye of the Yogin sees not only the outward events and persons and causes, but the enormous forces which precipitate them into action. If the men who fought were instruments in the hands of rulers and financiers, these in turn were mere puppets in the clutch of those forces. When one is habituated to see the things behind, one is no longer prone to be touched by the outward aspects — or to expect any remedy from political, institutional or social changes; the only way out is through the descent of a consciousness which is not the puppet of these forces but is greater than they are and can compel them either to change or disappear.

17 July 1931

Personal Character and Creative Work

The statement that a man's poetry or art need not express anything that has happened in his outer personal life is too obvious to be made so much of; the real point is how far his work can be supposed to be a transcript of his inner mind or mental life. It is obvious that his vital cast, his character may have very little to do with his writing, it may be its very opposite. His physical mind also does not determine it; the physical mind of a romantic poet or artist may very well be that of a commonplace respectable bourgeois. One who in his fiction is a benevolent philanthropist and reformer full of sentimental pathos, gushful sympathy or cheery optimistic sunshine may have been in actual life selfish, hard, even cruel. All that is now well known and illustrated by numerous examples in the lives of great poets and artists. It is evidently in the inner mental personality of a man that the key to his creation must be discovered, not in "his" outward mind or life or not solely or chiefly these. But a poem or work of art need not be (though it may be) an exact transcription of a

mental or spiritual experience; even, if the creating mind takes up an incident of the life, a vital impression, emotion or reaction that had actually taken place, it need not be anything more than a starting point for the poetic creation. The "I" of a poem is more often than not a dramatic or representative I, nothing less and nothing more. But it does not help to fall back on the imagination and say that a man's poetry or art is only the web of his imagination working with whatever material it may happen to choose. The question is how the imagination of a poet came to be cast in this peculiar mould which differentiates him as a creator not only from the millions who do not create but from all other poetic creators. There are two possible answers. A poet or artist may be merely a medium for a creative Force which uses him as a channel and is concerned only with expression in art and not with the man's personality or his inner or outer life. Or, man being a multiple personality, a crowd of personalities which are tangled up on the surface, but separate within, the poet or artist in him may be only one of these many personalities concerned solely with its inner and creative function; it may retire when the creative act is over leaving the field to the others. In his work the poet personality may — or may not — use the experiences of the others as material for his work, but he will then modify them to suit his own turns and tendencies or express his own ideal of self or ideal of things. He may too take a hand in the life of the composite personality, meddle with the activity of the others, try to square their make-up and action with his own images and ideals. In fact there is a mixture of the two things that makes the poet. Fundamentally he is a medium for the creative Force, which acts through him and uses or picks up anything stored up in his mind from its inner life or its memories or impressions of outer life and things, or anything subconscious, subliminal or superconscious in him, anything it can or cares to make use of and it moulds it as it chooses for its purpose. But still it is through the poet personality in him that it works and this poet personality may be either a mere reed through which the Spirit blows but which is laid aside after the tune is over or it may be an active power having some say even in the surface

mental composition and vital and physical activities of the total composite creature. In that general possibility there is room for a hundred degrees and variations and no rule can be laid down that covers all possible or actual cases. 7 November 1935

Literary Style and Hereditary Influences

It seems to me that this statement³ is quite untrue. A man's style expresses himself, not the sum and outcome of his ancestors.

24 January 1937

Life-Experience and Literary Creation

Emotion alone is not enough for producing anything that can be called great creation. It can bring out something lyrical and slight or subjectively expressive and interpretative; but for a great or significant creation there must be a background of life, a vital rich and stored or a mind and an imagination that has seen much and observed much or a soul that has striven and been conscious of its strivings. These or at least one or other of them are needed, but a limited and ignorant way of living is not likely to produce them. There may indeed be a lucky accident even in the worst circumstances — but one cannot count on accidents. A George Eliot, a George Sand, a Virginia Woolf, a Sappho, or even a Comtesse de Noailles grew up in other circumstances.

30 April 1933

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What a stupidly rigid principle!⁴ Can Buddhadev really write nothing except what he has seen or experienced? What an

³ "For style in the full sense is more than the deliberate and designed creation, more even than the unconscious and involuntary creation, of the individual man who therein expresses himself. The self that he thus expresses is a bundle of inherited tendencies that came the man himself can never entirely know whence." — Havelock Ellis, *The Dance of Life* (London: Constable, 1923), p. 175.

⁴ The Bengali writer Buddhadev Bose remarked that great literature could not be produced by people living in entire seclusion in Pondicherry. — Ed.

unimaginative man he must be! And how dull his stories must be and how limited.

I wonder whether Victor Hugo had to live in a convicts' prison before he created Jean Valjean. Certainly one has to look at life, but there is no obligation to copy faithfully from life. The man of imagination carries a world in himself and a mere hint or suggestion from life is enough to start it going. It is recognised now that Balzac and Dickens created out of themselves their greatest characters which were not at all faithful to the life around them. Balzac's descriptions of society are hopelessly wrong, he knew nothing about it, but his world is much more striking and real than the actual world around him which he misrepresented — even life has imitated the figures he made rather than the other way round.

Besides who is living in entire seclusion in Pondicherry? There are living men and women around you and human nature is in full play here as much as in the biggest city — only one has to have an eye to see what is within them and the imagination that takes a few bricks and can make out of them a great edifice — one must be able to see that human nature is one everywhere and pick out of it the essential things or the interesting things that can be turned into great art.

26 May 1934

The Illusion of Realism

I am afraid your correspondent is under the grip of what I may call the illusion of realism. What all artists do is to take something from life — even if it be only a partial hint — and transfer it by the magic of their imagination and make a world of their own; the realists, e.g., Zola, Tolstoy, do it as much as anybody else. Each artist is a creator of his own world — why then insist on this legal fiction that the artist's world must appear as an exact imitation of the actual world around us? Even if it does so seem, that is only a skilful make-up, an appearance. It may be constructed to look like that — but why must it be? The characters and creations of even the most sternly objective fiction, much more the characters and creations of poetry live by

the law of their own life, which is something in the inner mind of their creator — they cannot be constructed as copies of things outside.

30 January 1933

Section Three

Poetic Technique

Technique, Inspiration, Artistry

Inspiration and Technique

You do not need at all to afflict your inspiration by studying metrical technique — you have all the technique you need, within you. I have *never* studied prosody myself — in English, at least, — what I know I know by reading and writing and following my ear and using my intelligence. If one is interested in the technical study of prosody for its own sake, that is another matter — but it is not at all indispensable.

28 April 1934

Knowledge of Technique and Intuitive Cognition

As for the technique, there are two different things, the intellectual knowledge which one applies, the intuitive cognition which acts in its own right, even if it is not actually possessed by the worker. Many poets for instance have little knowledge of metrical or linguistic technique and cannot explain how they write or what are the qualities and elements of their success, but they write all the same things that are perfect in rhythm and language. Intellectual knowledge of technique helps of course, provided one does not make of it a mere device or a rigid fetter. There are some arts that cannot be done well without some technical knowledge, e.g. painting, sculpture.

14 May 1936

Artistry of Technique

I don't know that Swinburne failed for this reason — before assenting to such a dictum I should like to know which were these poems he spoiled by too much artistry of technique. So far as I remember, his best poems are those in which he is most perfect in artistry, most curious or skilful, most subtle. I think

his decline began when he felt himself too much at ease and poured himself out in an endless waste of melody without caring for substance and the finer finenesses of form. Attention to technique harms only when a writer is so busy with it that he becomes indifferent to substance. But if the substance is adequate, the attention to technique can only give it greater beauty. Even devices like a refrain, internal rhymes, etc. can indeed be great aids to the inspiration and the expression — just as can ordinary rhyme. It is in my view a serious error to regard metre or rhyme as artificial elements, mere external and superfluous equipment restraining the movement and sincerity of poetic form. Metre, on the contrary, is the most natural mould of expression for certain states of creative emotion and vision, it is much more natural and spontaneous than a non-metrical form; the emotion expresses itself best and most powerfully in a balanced rather than in a loose and shapeless rhythm. The search for technique is simply the search for the best and most appropriate form for expressing what has to be said and once it is found, the inspiration can flow quite naturally and fluently into it. There can be no harm therefore in close attention to technique so long as there is no inattention to substance.

24 August 1935

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There are only two conditions about artistry: (1) that the artistry does not become so exterior as to be no longer art and (2) that substance (in which of course I include *bhāva*) is not left behind in the desert or else art and *bhāva* not woven into each other.

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Swinburne's defect is his preference of sound to sense, but I would find it difficult to find fault with his music or his rhythmic method. There is no reason why one should not use assonance and alliteration, if one knows how to use them as Swinburne did. Everybody cannot succeed like that and those who cannot must be careful and restrained in their use.

2 November 1934

Art for Art's Sake

Art for Art's sake? But what after all is meant by this slogan and what is the real issue behind it? Is it meant, as I think it was when the slogan first came into use, that the technique, the artistry is all in all? The contention would then be that it does not matter what you write or paint or sculpt or what music you make or about what you make it so long as it is beautiful writing, competent painting, good sculpture, fine music. It is very evidently true in a certain sense, — in this sense that whatever is perfectly expressed or represented or interpreted under the conditions of a given art proves itself by that very fact to be legitimate material for the artist's labour. But that free admission cannot be confined only to all objects, however common or deemed to be vulgar — an apple, a kitchen pail, a donkey, a dish of carrots, — it can give a right of citizenship in the domain of art to a moral theme or thesis, a philosophic conclusion, a social experiment; even the Five Years' Plan or the proceedings of a District Board or the success of a drainage scheme, an electric factory or a big hotel can be brought, after the most modern or the still more robustious Bolshevik mode, into the artist's province. For, technique being all, the sole question would be whether he as poet, novelist, dramatist, painter or sculptor has been able to triumph over the difficulties and bring out creatively the possibilities of his subject. There is no logical basis here for accepting an apple and rejecting the Apple-Cart. But still you may say that at least the object of the artist must be art only, — even if he treats ethical, social or political questions, he must not make it his main object to wing with the enthusiasm of aesthetic creation a moral, social or political aim. But if in doing it he satisfies the conditions of his art, shows a perfect technique and in it beauty, power, perfection, why not? The moralist, preacher, philosopher, social or political enthusiast is often doubled with an artist — as shining proofs and examples there are Plato and Shelley, to go no farther. Only, you can say of him on the basis of this theory that as a work of art his creation should be judged by its success of craftsmanship and not by its contents; it is not

made greater by the value of his ethical ideas, his enthusiasms or his metaphysical seekings.

But then the theory itself is true only up to a certain point. For technique is a means of expression; one does not write merely to use beautiful words or paint for the sole sake of line and colour; there is something that one is trying through these means to express or to discover. What is that something? The first answer would be—it is the creation, it is the discovery of Beauty. Art is for that alone and can be judged only by its revelation or discovery of Beauty. Whatever is capable of being manifested as Beauty, is the material of the artist. But there is not only physical beauty in the world—there is moral, intellectual, spiritual beauty also. Still one might say that Art for Art's sake means that only what is aesthetically beautiful must be expressed and all that contradicts the aesthetic sense of beauty must be avoided,— Art has nothing to do with Life in itself, things in themselves, Good, Truth or the Divine for their own sake, but only in so far as they appeal to some aesthetic sense of beauty. And that would seem to be a sound basis for excluding the Five Years' Plan, a moral sermon or a philosophical treatise. But here again, what after all is Beauty? How much is it in the thing itself and how much in the consciousness that perceives it? Is not the eye of the artist constantly catching some element of aesthetic value in the plain, the ugly, the sordid, the repellent and triumphantly conveying it through his material,— through the word, through line and colour, through the sculptured shape?

There is a certain state of Yogic consciousness in which all things become beautiful to the eye of the seer simply because they spiritually are— because they are a rendering in line and form of the quality and force of existence, of the consciousness, of the Ananda that rules the worlds,— of the hidden Divine. What a thing is to the exterior sense may not be, often is not beautiful for the ordinary aesthetic vision, but the Yogin sees in it the something More which the external eye does not see, he sees the soul behind, the self and spirit, he sees too lines, hues, harmonies and expressive dispositions which are not to the first surface sight visible or seizable. It may be said that he brings into

the object something that is in himself, transmutes it by adding out of his own being to it — as the artist too does something of the same kind but in another way. It is not quite that however, — what the Yogin sees, what the artist sees, is there — his is a transmuting vision because it is a revealing vision; he discovers behind what the object appears to be the something More that it is. And so from this point of view of a realised supreme harmony all is or can be subject-matter for the artist because in all he can discover and reveal the Beauty that is everywhere. Again we land ourselves in a devastating catholicity; for here too one cannot pull up short at any given line. It may be a hard saying that one must or may discover and reveal beauty in a pig or its poke or in a parish pump or an advertisement of somebody's pills, and yet something like that seems to be what modern Art and literature are trying with vigour and a conscientious labour to do. By extension one ought to be able to extract beauty equally well out of morality or social reform or a political caucus or allow at least that all these things can, if he wills, become legitimate subjects for the artist. Here too one cannot say that it is on condition he thinks of beauty only and does not make moralising or social reform or a political idea his main object. For if with that idea foremost in his mind he still produces a great work of art, discovering Beauty as he moves to his aim, proving himself in spite of his unaesthetic preoccupations a great artist, it is all we can justly ask from him — whatever his starting point — to be a creator of Beauty. Art is discovery and revelation of Beauty and we can say nothing more by way of prohibition or limiting rule.

But there is one thing more that can be said, and it makes a big difference. In the Yogin's vision of universal beauty all becomes beautiful, but all is not reduced to a single level. There are gradations, there is a hierarchy in this All-Beauty and we see that it depends on the ascending power (*vibhuti*) of consciousness and Ananda that expresses itself in the object. All is the Divine, but some things are more divine than others. In the artist's vision too there are or can be gradations, a hierarchy of values. Shakespeare can get dramatic and therefore aesthetic

values out of Dogberry and Malvolio, and he is as thorough a creative artist in his treatment of them as in his handling of Macbeth or Lear. But if we had only Dogberry or Malvolio to testify to Shakespeare's genius, no Macbeth, no Lear, would he be so great a dramatic artist and creator as he now is? It is in the varying possibilities of one subject or another that there lies an immense difference. Apelles' grapes deceived the birds that came to peck at them, but there was more aesthetic content in the Zeus of Phidias, a greater content of consciousness and therefore of Ananda to express and with it to fill in and intensify the essential principle of Beauty even though the essence of beauty might be realised perhaps with equal aesthetic perfection by either artist and in either theme.

And that is because just as technique is not all, so even Beauty is not all in Art. Art is not only technique or form of Beauty, not only the discovery or the expression of Beauty,— it is a self-expression of Consciousness under the conditions of aesthetic vision and a perfect execution. Or to put it otherwise there are not only aesthetic values but life-values, mind-values, soul-values, that enter into Art. The artist puts out into form not only the powers of his own consciousness but the powers of the Consciousness that has made the worlds and their objects. And if that Consciousness according to the Vedantic view is fundamentally equal everywhere, it is still in manifestation not an equal power in all things. There is more of the Divine expression in the Vibhuti than in the common man, *prākṛto janah*; in some forms of life there are less potentialities for the self-expression of the Spirit than in others. And there are also gradations of consciousness which make a difference, if not in the aesthetic value or greatness of a work of art, yet in its contents value. Homer makes beauty out of man's outward life and action and stops there. Shakespeare rises one step farther and reveals to us a life-soul and life-forces and life-values to which Homer had no access. In Valmiki and Vyasa there is the constant presence of great Idea-Forces and Ideals supporting life and its movements which were beyond the scope of Homer and Shakespeare. And beyond the Ideals and Idea-Forces even there are other presences,

more inner or inmost realities, a soul behind things and beings, the spirit and its powers, which could be the subject-matter of an art still more rich and deep and abundant in its interest than any of these could be. A poet finding these and giving them a voice with a genius equal to that of the poets of the past might not be greater than they in a purely aesthetical valuation, but his art's contents-value, its consciousness-values could be deeper and higher and much fuller than in any achievement before him. There is something here that goes beyond any considerations of Art for Art's sake or Art for Beauty's sake; for while these stress usefully sometimes the indispensable first elements of artistic creation, they would limit too much the creation itself if they stood for the exclusion of the something More that compels Art to change always in its constant seeking for more and more that must be expressed of the concealed or the revealed Divine, of the individual and the universal or the transcendent Spirit.

If we take these three elements as making the whole of Art, perfection of expressive form, discovery of beauty, revelation of the soul and essence of things and the powers of creative consciousness and Ananda of which they are the vehicles, then we shall get perhaps a solution which includes the two sides of the controversy and reconciles their difference. Art for Art's sake certainly — Art as a perfect form and discovery of Beauty; but also Art for the soul's sake, the spirit's sake and the expression of all that the soul, the spirit wants to seize through the medium of beauty. In that self-expression there are grades and hierarchies — widenings and steps that lead to the summits. And not only to enlarge Art towards the widest wideness but to ascend with it to the heights that climb towards the Highest is and must be part both of our aesthetic and our spiritual endeavour.

17 April 1933

Rhythm

Two Factors in Poetic Rhythm

If your purpose is to acquire not only metrical skill but the sense and the power of rhythm, to study the poets may do something, but not all. There are two factors in poetic rhythm, — there is the technique (the variation of movement without spoiling the fundamental structure of the metre, right management of vowel and consonantal assonances and dissonances, the masterful combination of the musical element of stress with the less obvious element of quantity, etc.), and there is the secret soul of rhythm which uses but exceeds these things. The first you can learn, if you read with your ear always in a *tapasyā* of vigilant attention to these constituents, but without the second what you achieve may be technically faultless and even skilful, but poetically a dead letter. This soul of rhythm can only be found by listening in to what is behind the music of words and sounds and things. You will get something of it by listening for that subtler element in great poetry, but mostly it must either grow or suddenly open in yourself. This sudden opening can come if the Power within wishes to express itself in that way. I have seen more than once a sudden flowering of capacities in every kind of activity come by a rapid opening of the consciousness, so that one who laboured long without the least success to express himself in rhythm becomes a master of poetic language and cadences almost in a day. Poetry is a question of the right concentrated silence or seeking somewhere in the mind with the right openness to the Word that is trying to express itself — for the Word is there ready to descend in those inner planes where all artistic forms take birth, but it is the transmitting mind that must change and become a perfect channel and not an obstacle.

How can rhythm be explained? It is a matter of the ear, not of the intellect. Of course there are the technical elements, but you say you do not understand yet about them. But it is not a matter of technique only, — the same outer technique can produce successful or unsuccessful rhythms (live or dead rhythms). One has to learn to distinguish by the ear, and the difficulty for you is to get the right sense of the cadences of the English language. That is not easy, for it has many outer and inner elements.

8 September 1938

Rhythmical Overtones and Undertones

I was speaking of rhythmical overtones and undertones. That is to say, there is a metrical rhythm which belongs to the skilful use of metre — any good poet can manage that; but besides that there is a music which rises up out of this rhythm or a music that underlies it, carries it as it were as the movement of the water carries the movement of a boat. They can both exist together in the same line; but it is more a matter of the inner than the outer ear and I am afraid I can't define farther. To go into the subject would mean a long essay. But to give examples

Journeys end in lovers' meeting,
Every wise man's son doth know,

is excellent metrical rhythm, but there are no overtones and undertones. In

Golden lads and girls all must
As chimney-sweepers come to dust

there is a beginning of undertone, but no overtone, while the "Take, O take those lips away" (the whole lyric) is all overtones. Again

Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears;
I come to bury Caesar, not to praise him

has admirable rhythm, but there are no overtones or undertones. But

In maiden meditation fancy-free
has beautiful running undertones, while

In the deep backward and abysm of Time
is all overtones, and

Absent thee from felicity awhile
And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain

is all overtones and undertones together. I don't suppose this will
make you much wiser, but it is all I can do for you at present.

11 May 1937

Rhythm and Significance

You seem to suggest that significance does not matter and need
not enter into the account in judging or feeling poetry! Rhythm
and word music are indispensable, but are not the whole of
poetry. For instance lines like these —

In the human heart of Heligoland
A hunger wakes for the silver sea;
For waving the might of his magical wand
God sits on his throne in eternity,

have plenty of rhythm and word music — a surrealist might pass
it, but I certainly would not. Your suggestion that my seeing the
inner truth behind a line magnifies it to me, i.e. gives a false value
to me which it does not really have as poetry, may or may not be
correct. But, certainly, the significance and feeling suggested and
borne home by the words and rhythm are in my view a capital
part of the value of poetry. Shakespeare's lines

Absent thee from felicity awhile
And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain,

have a skilful and consummate rhythm and word combination,
but this gets its full value as the perfect embodiment of a pro-
found and moving significance, the expression in a few words of

a whole range of human world-experience.¹ 1 September 1938

English Metre and Rhythm

English metre is simple on the contrary. It is the management of the rhythm that makes a more difficult demand on the writer.

5 May 1937

¹ *This is an abbreviated and lightly revised version of a letter published in full on pages 496–97 — Ed.*

English Metres

Octosyllabic Metre

The regular octosyllabic metre is at once the easiest to write and the most difficult to justify by a strong and original rhythmic treatment; it may be that it is only by filling it with very original thought-substance and image and the deeper tones and sound-significances which these would bring that it could be saved from its besetting obviousness. On the other hand, the melody to which it lends itself, if raised to a certain intensity, can be fraught with a rescuing charm that makes us forget the obviousness of the metre.

4 February 1932

Iambic Pentameter

An inspiration which leans more on sublimated or illumined thought than on some strong or subtle or very simple psychic or vital intensity and swiftness of feeling, seems to call naturally for the iambic pentameter, though it need not confine itself to that form. I myself have not yet found another metre which gives room enough along with an apposite movement — shorter metres are too cramped, the longer ones need a technical dexterity (if one is not to be either commonplace or clumsy) for which I have not leisure.

8 March 1932

Blank Verse

I have often seen that Indians who write in English, immediately they try blank verse, begin to follow the Victorian model and especially a sort of pseudo-Tennysonian movement or structure which makes their work in this kind weak, flat and ineffective. The language inevitably suffers by the same faults, for with a

weak verse-cadence it is impossible to find a strong or effective turn of language. But Victorian blank verse at its best is not strong or great, though it may have other qualities, and at a more common level it is languid or crude or characterless. Except for a few poems, like Tennyson's early *Morte d'Arthur*, *Ulysses* and one or two others or Arnold's *Sohrab and Rustam*, there is nothing of a very high order. Tennyson is a perilous model and can have a weakening and corrupting influence and the *Princess* and *Idylls of the King* which seem to have set the tone for Indo-English blank verse are perhaps the worst choice possible for such a role. There is plenty of clever craftsmanship but it is mostly false and artificial and without true strength or inspired movement or poetic force — the right kind of blank verse for a Victorian drawing-room poetry, that is all that can be said for it. As for language and substance his influence tends to bring a thin artificial decorative prettiness or picturesqueness varied by an elaborate false simplicity and an attempt at a kind of brilliant, sometimes lusciously brilliant sentimental or sententious commonplace. The higher quality in his best work is not easily assimilable; the worst is catching but undesirable as a model.

Blank verse is the most difficult of all English metres; it has to be very skilfully and strongly done to make up for the absence of rhyme, and if not very well done, it is better not done at all. In the ancient languages rhyme was not needed, for they were written in quantitative metres which gave them the necessary support, but modern languages in their metrical forms need the help of rhyme. It is only a very masterly hand that can make blank verse an equally or even a more effective poetic movement. You have to vary your metre by a skilful play of pauses or by an always changing distribution of caesura and of stresses and supple combinations of long and short vowels and by much weaving of vowel or consonant variation and assonance; or else, if you use a more regular form you have to give a great power and relief to the verse as did Marlowe at his best. If you do none of these things, if you write with effaced stresses, without relief and force or, if you do not succeed in producing harmonious variations in your rhythm, your blank

verse becomes a monotonous vapid wash and no amount of mere thought-colour or image-colour can save it.

28 April 1931

Blank Verse Technique

I don't know any factors by which blank verse can be built up. When good blank verse comes one can analyse it and assign certain elements of technique, but these come in the course of the formation of the verse. Each poet finds his own technique — that of Shakespeare differs from Marlowe's, both from Milton's and all from Keats'. In English I can say that variations of rhythm, of lengths of syllable, of caesura, of the structure of lines help and neglect of them hinders — so too with pause variations if used; but to explain all that would mean a treatise. Nor could anyone make himself a great blank verse writer by following the instructions deliberately and constructing his verse. Only if he knows, the inspiration answers better and if there is failure in the inspiration he can see and call again and the thing will come. But I am no expert in Bengali blank verse.

30 April 1937

*

Building of each line, building of the passage, variation of balance, the arrangement of tone and stress and many other things have to be mastered before you can be a possessor of the instrument — unless you are born with a blank verse genius; but that is rare.

7 July 1933

*

It is in order to make it more flexible — to avoid the “drumming decasyllabon” and to introduce other relief of variety than can be provided by differing caesura, enjambement etc.¹ There are four possible principles for the blank verse pentameter.

(1) An entirely regular verse with sparing use of enjambements — here an immense skill is needed in the variation of

¹ *The question was: “Why is so much irregularity in the rhythm of consecutive lines permissible in blank verse?” — Ed.*

caesura, use of long and short vowels, closed and open sounds, all the devices of rhythm. Each line must be either sculptured and powerful, a mighty line — as Marlowe tried to write it — or a melodious thing of beauty by itself as in much of Shakespeare's earlier blank verse.

(2) A regular iambic verse (of course with occasional trochees and rare anapaests) and frequent play of enjambement etc.

(3) A regular basis with a frequent intervention of irregular movements to give the necessary variety and surprise to the ear.

(4) A free irregular blank verse as in some of Shakespeare's later dramas (*Cymbeline* if I remember right).

The last two principles, I believe, are coming more and more to be used as the possibilities of the older forms have come to be exhausted — or seem to be — for it is not sure that they are.

24 January 1933

*

In English variation of pauses is not indispensable to blank verse. There is much blank verse of the first quality in which it is eschewed or minimised, much also of the first quality in which it is freely used. Shakespeare has both kinds. 30 April 1937

The Alexandrine

I suppose the Alexandrine has been condemned because no one has ever been able to make effective use of it as a staple metre. The difficulty, I suppose, is its normal tendency to fall into two monotonously equal halves while the possible variations on that monotony seem to stumble often into awkward inequalities. The Alexandrine is an admirable instrument in French verse because of the more plastic character of the movement, not bound to its stresses, but only to an equality of metric syllables capable of a sufficient variety in the rhythm. In English it does not work so well; a single Alexandrine or an occasional Alexandrine couplet can have a great dignity and amplitude of sweep in English, but a succession fails or has most often failed to impose itself on the

ear. All this, however, may be simply because the secret of the right handling has not been found: it is at least my impression that a very good rhythmist with the Alexandrine movement secretly born somewhere in him and waiting to be brought out could succeed in rehabilitating the metre. 5 February 1932

The Loose Alexandrine

I do not understand how this² can be called an accentual rhythm except in the sense that all English rhythm, prose or verse, is accentual. What one usually means by accentual verse is verse with a fixed number of accents for each line, but here accents can be of any number and placed anywhere as it would be in a prose cut up into lines. The only distinctive feature is thus of the number of “effective” syllables. The result is a kind of free verse movement with a certain irregular regularity in the lengths of the lines. 1936

The Caesura

Voltaire’s dictum is quite baffling,³ unless he means by caesura any pause or break in the line; then of course a comma does create such a break or pause. But ordinarily caesura is a technical term meaning a rhythmical (not necessarily a metrical) division of a line in two parts equal or unequal, in the middle or near the middle, that is, just a little before or just a little after. I think in my account of my Alexandrines I myself used the word caesura

² *“The novelty (in English) [of Robert Bridges’s “loose alexandrine”] is to make the number of syllables the fixed base of the metre; but these are the effective syllables, those which pronunciation easily slurs or combines with following syllables being treated as metrically ineffective. The line consists of twelve metrically effective syllables; and within this constant scheme the metre allows of any variation in the number and placing of the accents. Thus the rhythm obtained is purely accentual, in accordance with the genius of the English language; but a new freedom has been achieved within the confines of a new kind of discipline.”* — Lascelles Abercrombie, *Poetry: Its Music and Meaning* (London: Oxford University Press, 1932), p. 35.

³ The “dictum” of Voltaire that the correspondent sent to Sri Aurobindo was the following: “la césure . . . rompt le vers . . . partout où elle coupe la phrase.”

in the sense of a pause anywhere which breaks the line in two equal or unequal parts, but usually such a break very near the beginning or end of a line would not be counted as an orthodox caesura. In French there are two metres which insist on a caesura — the Alexandrine and the pentameter. The Alexandrine always takes the caesura in the middle of the line, that is after the sixth *sonant* syllable, the pentameter always after the fourth, there is no need for any comma there, e.g.

Ce que dit l'aube || et la flamme à la flamme.

This is the position and all the Voltaires in the world cannot make it otherwise. I don't know about the modernists however, perhaps they have broken this rule like every other.

As for caesura in English I don't know much about it in theory, only in the practice of the pentameter decasyllabic and hexameter verses. In the blank verse decasyllabic I would count it as a rule for variability of rhythm to make the caesura at the fourth, fifth, sixth, or seventh syllable, e.g. from Milton:

- | | | |
|-----|-------------------------------------------------|-------|
| (1) | for who would lose | |
| | Though full of pain, this intellectual being, | (4th) |
| | Those thoughts that wander through eternity, | |
| | To perish rather, swallowed up and lost? | (5th) |
| (2) | Here we may reign secure, and in my choice | (6th) |
| | To reign is worth ambition though in hell: | (7th) |
| | Better to reign in hell, than serve in heaven. | |

Or from Shakespeare:

- | | | |
|-----|--------------------------------------------|-------|
| (1) | Sees Helen's beauty in a brow of Egypt | (5th) |
| (2) | To be or not to be, that is the question | (6th) |

But I don't know whether your prosodist would agree to all that. As for the hexameter, the Latin classical rule is to make the caesura either at the middle of the third or the middle of the fourth foot, e.g. (you need not bother about the Latin words but follow the scansion only):

- (1) Quadrupe|dante pu|trem || cur|su quatit | ungula | campum.
(Virgil)

Horse-hooves | trampled the | crumbling | plain || with
a | four-footed | gallop.

- (2) O pass|i gravi|ora, || dab|it deus | his quoque | finem. (Virgil)
Fiercer | griefs you have | suffered; || to | these too | God will
give | ending.

- (3) Nec fa|cundia | deseret | hunc || nec | lucidus | ordo
(Horace)

Him shall not | copious | eloquence | leave || nor | clearness
and | order.

In the first example, the caesura comes at the third foot; in the second example, it comes at the third foot but note that it is a trochaic caesura; in the third example the caesura comes at the fourth foot. In the English hexameter you can follow that or you may take greater liberties. I have myself cut the hexameter sometimes at the end of the third foot and not in the middle, e.g.

- (1) Opaline | rhythm of | towers, || notes of the | lyre of the | Sun
God . . .

- (2) Even the | ramparts | felt her, || stones that the | Gods had
e|rected . . .

and there are other combinations possible which can give a great variety to the run of the line as if standing balanced between one place of caesura and another.

Some Questions of Scansion

Words like “tire”, “fire” etc. can be scanned as a dissyllable in verse as well as a monosyllable, though it is something of a licence nowadays, but a still well-recognised licence. Of course, it would not do to do it always. 19 November 1930

*

You have taken an anapaestic metre varied by an occasional

iambus or spondee. But you have inserted sometimes four syllables in a foot instead of three — this is not allowed in normal anapaestic verse which is always $\cup\cup\perp$ and never $\cup\cup\cup\perp$. But I have accepted this and put occasionally an amphibrach foot $\cup\perp\cup$ instead of $\cup\cup\text{—}$ as Arjava and myself are trying to vary the normal metre in this way.

In ordinary English scansion no account is taken of naturally short and long syllables. All unaccented syllables are treated as short, all accented syllables as long, thus bright-|nightēd dāy | [*in a poem by the correspondent*] would count metrically as bright-|nightēd dāy | in the scansion, but the variation of natural long and natural short syllables is a very important element in the beauty or failure of beauty of the *rhythm* as opposed to mere scansion of *metre*. So I have indicated the naturally long and short syllables — if you study it, you may get an idea of this important element in the rhythm.

18 October 1933

*

I certainly think feet longer than the three syllable maximum can be brought in and ought to be. I do not see for instance why a foot like this $\cup\cup\cup\text{—}$ should not be as legitimate as the anapaest. Only, of course, if frequently used, they would mean the institution of another principle of harmony not provided for by the essentially melodic basis of English prosody in the past; as

Interspersed | in the immense | and unavailing void, | winging
their light through the | darkness inane. |

Or,

Interspersed | in the immense | and unavailing void, | scattering |
their light through | the darkness | inane. |

I agree that this freedom would be more pressingly needed in longer metres than in short ones, but they need not be excluded from the short ones either.

Iambics and Anapaests — Free Verse

Iambics and anapaests can be combined in English verse at any time, provided one does not set out to write a purely iambic or a purely anapaestic metre. Mixed anapaest and iamb make a most beautifully flexible lyric rhythm. It has no more connection with free verse than the constellation of the Great Bear has to do with a cat's tail! "Free" verse indicates verse free from the shackles of rhyme and metre, but rhythmic (or trying to be rhythmic) in one way or another. If you put rhymes, that will be considered a shackle and the "free" will kick at the chain.

10 December 1935

The Problem of Free Verse

The problem of free verse is to keep the rhythm and afflatus of poetry while asserting one's liberty as in prose to vary the rhythm and movement at will instead of being tied down to metre and to a single unchangeable form throughout the whole length of a poem. But most writers in this kind achieve prose cut up into lines or something that is half and half and therefore unsatisfying. I think few have escaped this kind of shipwreck.

18 September 1936

Prose Poetry and Free Verse

Prose poetry or free verse, if it is to be effective, must be very clear-cut in each line so that the weight of the thought and expression may compensate for the absence of the supporting metrical rhythm. From that standpoint the weakness here [*in two poems submitted by the correspondent*] would be too much profusion of word and image, preventing a clear strong outline of the significance.

5 November 1936

Greek and Latin Classical Metres

Acclimatisation of Classical Metres in English

In the attempt to acclimatise the classical scansion in English, everything depends on whether they are acclimatised or not. That is to say, there must be a spontaneous, natural, seemingly native-born singing or flowing or subtly moving rhythm. The lines must glide or run or walk easily or, if you like, execute a complex dance, stately or light, but not stumble, not shamble and not walk like the Commander's statue suddenly endowed with life but stiff and stony in its march. Now the last is just what happens to classical metres in English when they are not acclimatised, naturalised, made to seem even natively English, although new. It is like cardboard cut into measures, there is no life or movement of life. . . . It was this inability to naturalise that ruined the chances of the admission of classic metres in the attempts of earlier poets — we must avoid that mistake.

23 November 1933

The Hexameter in English

Former poets failed in the attempt at hexameter because they did not find the right basic line and measure; they forgot that stress and quantity must both be considered in English; even though in theory the stress alone makes the quantity, there is another kind of true quantity which must be given a subordinate but very necessary recognition; besides, even in stress there are kinds, true and fictitious, major and minor. In analysing the movement of an English line, one could make three independent schemes according to these three bases and the combination would give the value of the rhythm. You can ignore all this in an established metre and go safely by the force of instinct and habit; but for

making so difficult an innovation as the hexameter instinct and habit were not enough, a clear eye upon all these constituents was needed and it was not there. Longfellow, even Clough, went on the theory of accentual quantity alone and in spite of their talent as versifiers made a mess — producing something that discredited the very idea of the creation of an English hexameter. Other poets made no serious or sustained endeavour. Arnold was interesting so long as he theorised about it, but his practical specimens were disastrous. I have not time to make my point clearer for the moment; I may return to it hereafter.

23 July 1932

Hexameters, Alcaics, Sapphics

Lines from [*an early version of*] *Ilion*, an unfinished poem in English hexameter (quantitative):

Ida | rose with her | god-haunted | peaks^{||} into | diamond | lustres, |
 Ida, | first of the | hills,^{||} with the | ranges | silent beyond her |
 Watching the | dawn in their | giant^{||} companies, | as since the | ages |
 First began they had | watched her,^{||} upbearing | Time on
 their | summits. |

Triumph and agony changing hands in a desperate measure
 Faced and turned, as a man and a maiden trampling the grasses
 Face and turn and they laugh for their joy in the dance and each other.
 These were gods and they trampled lives. But though Time is immortal,
 Mortal his works are and ways and the anguish ends like the rapture.
 Artisans satisfied now with their works in the plan of the transience,
 Beautiful, wordless, august, the Olympians turned from the carnage.
 Vast and unmoved they rose up mighty as eagles ascending,
 Fanning the world with their wings. In the bliss of a sorrowless ether
 Calm they reposed from their deeds and their hearts were inclined to
 the Stillness.

Less now the burden laid on our race by their star-white presence,
 There was a respite from height; the winds breathed freer, delivered.

But their immortal content from the struggle titanic departed.
 Vacant the noise of the battle roared like a sea on the shingles;
 Wearily hunted the spears their quarry, strength was disheartened;
 Silence increased with the march of the months on the tents of the
 leaguer.

The principle is a line of six feet, preponderantly dactylic, but anywhere the dactyl can be replaced by a spondee; but in English hexameter a trochee can be substituted, as the spondee comes in rarely in English rhythm. The line is divided by a caesura, and the variations of the caesura are essential to the harmony of the verse.

An example of Alcaics from the *Jivanmukta* (Alcaics is a Greek metre invented by the poet Alcaeus):

There is | a si|lence | greater than | any | known |
 To earth's | dumb spi|rit, | motionless | in the | soul |
 That has | become | eter|nity's foot|hold
 Touched by the | infini|tudes for | ever. |

In the Latin it is:

— — | — — | — | — — — | — — | — |
 — — | — — | — | — — — | — — | — |
 — — | — — | — — | — — | — |
 — — — | — — — | — — | — — |

But in English, variations (modulations) are allowed, only one has to keep to the general plan.

Swinburne's Sapphics are to be scanned thus:

All the | night sleep | came not u|pon my | eyelids, |
 Shed not | dew, nor | shook nor un|closed a | feather, |
 Yet with | lips shut | close and with | eyes of | iron
 Stood and be|held me. |

Two trochees at the beginning, two trochees at the end, a dactyl

separating the two trochaic parts of the line — that is the Sapphics in its first three lines, then a fourth line composed of a dactyl and a trochee.

May 1934

Quantitative Metre in English and Bengali

English Quantitative Verse — Rhythm in English and Bengali

There have been attempts to write in English quantitative verse on the Greek and Latin principle with the classical metres, attempts which began in the Elizabethan times, but they have not been successful because the method was either too slipshod or tried to adhere too rigidly to the rules of quantity natural to Greek and Latin but not to the English tongue instead of making an adaptation of it for the English ear or, still better, discovering directly in English itself the true principle of an English quantitative metre. I believe it is perfectly possible to acclimatise the quantitative principle in English and with great advantage. I have not seen Bridges' attempts, but I do not see why his failure — if it was one — should damn the possibility. I think one day it will be done.

It is true that English rhythm falls most naturally into the iambic movement. But I do not admit the adverse strictures passed on the other bases of metre. All depends on how you handle them, — if as much pain is bestowed as on the iambic, the fault attributed to them will disappear. Even as it is, the trochaic metre in the hands of great poets like Milton, Shelley, Keats does not pall — I do not get tired of the melody of the *Skylark*. Swinburne's anapaestic rhythms, as in *Dolores*, are kept up for pages without difficulty with the most royal ease, without fatigue either to the writer or the reader. Both trochee and anapaest are surely quite natural to the language. The dactyl is more difficult to continue, but I believe it can be done, even in a long dactylic metre like the hexameter, if interspersed with spondees (as the metre allows) and supported by subtle modulations of rhythm, variations of pause and caesura. The iambic metre itself was at first taxed with monotony in a drumming beat until it was used

in a more plastic way by Shakespeare and Milton. All depends on the skill which one brings to the work and the tool is quarrelled with only when the workman does not know how to use it.

The English language is not naturally melodious like the Italian or Bengali — no language with a Teutonic base can be — but it is capable of remarkable harmonic effects and also it can by a skilful handling be made to give out the most beautiful melodies. Bengali and Italian are soft, easy and mellifluous languages — English is difficult and has to be struggled with in order to produce its best effects, but out of that very difficulty has arisen an astonishing plasticity, depth and manifold subtlety of rhythm. These qualities do not repose on metrical building alone but much more on the less analysable elements of the entire rhythmic structure. The metrical basis itself is a peculiar and subtle combination on which English rhythm depends without explicitly avowing it, a skilful and most extraordinarily variable combination of three elements — the numeric foot dependent on the number of syllables, the use of the stress foot and a play of stresses, and a recognisable but free and plastic use of quantitative play (not quantitative feet), all three running into each other.

I am afraid your estimate here is marred by the personal or national habit. One is always inclined to make this claim for one's own language because one can catch every shade and element of it while in another language, however well-learned, the ear is not so clair-audient. I cannot agree that the examples you give of Bengali melody beat hollow the melody of the greatest English lyrists. Shakespeare, Swinburne's best work in *Atalanta* and elsewhere, Shelley at his finest and some others attain a melody that cannot be surpassed. It is a different kind of melody, but not inferior.

Bengali has a more melodious basis, it can accomplish melody more easily than English, it has a freer variety of melodies now, for formerly as English poetry was mostly iambic, Bengali poetry used to be mostly *akṣaravṛtta*. (I remember how my brother Manmohan would annoy me by denouncing the absence of melody, the featureless monotony of Bengali rhythm

and tell me how Tagore ought to be read to be truly melodious — like English in stress, with ludicrous effects. That however is by the way.) What I mean is that variety of melodic bases was not conspicuous at that time in Bengali poetry. Nowadays this variety is there and undoubtedly opens possibilities such as perhaps do not exist in other languages.

I do not see, however, how the metrical aspect by itself can really be taken apart from other more subtle elements. I do not mean the spirit and feeling or the sense of the language only, though without depth or adequacy there metrical melody is only a melodious corpse, but the spirit and feeling or subtle (not intellectual) elements of rhythm and it is on these that English depends for the greater power and plasticity of its harmonic and even if to a less extent of its melodic effects. In a word there is truth in what you say but it cannot be pushed so far as you push it.

May 1934

Bengali and English Quantitative Poetry

Nishikanta's poem in *laghu-guru* is splendid. But perhaps Girija would say that it is a pure Bengali rhythm, which means I suppose that it reads as well and easily in Bengali as if it were not written on an unusual rhythmic principle. I suppose that must necessarily be the aim of a new metre or metrical principle; it is what I am trying to do with quantitative efforts in English.

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Is it true that the *laghu-guru* is to the Bengali ear as impossible as would be to the English ear the line made up by Tagore: "Autumn flaunteth in his bushy bowers"? In English such a violence could not be entertained for a moment. It was because Spenser and others tried to base their hexameters and pentameters on this flagrant violation of the first law of English rhythm that the first attempt to introduce quantitative metres in English proved a failure. Accent cannot be ignored in English rhythm — it is why in my attempts at quantitative metre I always count a strongly accentuated syllable, even if the vowel is short, as a long one —

for the stress does really make it long for metrical purposes.

21 July 1936

English Prosody and Bengali Metrics

You have set me two very intricate subjects to wrestle with — English prosody and the *yaugmika-akṣara* tangle! English prosody is neither syllabic nor quantitative nor anything else; it is simply English prosody — that is to say, everything together, except what it pretends to be. As to the other, you and Prabodh Sen and Anilbaran and Tagore and the rest are already in such a tangle of controversy from which there seems no hope of your ever getting out that I don't propose to add any cord of my own to the knot, and probably, if I tried, it would be a very incorrect cord indeed. However I will try to explain myself as soon as possible. . . .

4 June 1934

Metrical Experiments in Bengali

New Metres in Bengali

Of course, Prabodh Sen is right. I suppose what Buddhadev means is that none of the very great poets invented a metre — they were all too lazy and preferred stealing other people's rhythms and polishing them up to perfection, just as Shakespeare stole all his plots from wherever he could find any worth stealing. But all the same, if that applies to Shakespeare, Homer, Virgil, what about Alcaeus, Sappho, Catallus, Horace? they did a good deal of inventing or of transferring — introducing Greek metres into Latin, for example. I can't spot a precedent in modern European literature, but there must be some. And after all, hang precedents! A good thing — I mean, combining metric invention with perfect poetry — would be still a good thing to do, even if no one had had the good sense to do it before.

4 November 1932

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It is certainly not true that a good metre must necessarily be an easy metre — easy to read or easy to write. In fact even with old established perfectly familiar metres how many of the readers of poetry have an ear which seizes the true movement and the whole subtlety and beauty of the rhythm — it is only in the more popular kind of poems that it gets in their hearing its full value. It is all the more impossible when you bring in not only new rhythms but a new principle of rhythm — or at least one that is not very familiar — to expect it to be easily followed at first by the many. It is only if you are already a recognised master that by force of your reputation you can impose whatever you like on your public — for then even if they do not catch your drift, they will still applaud you and will take some pains to learn

the new principle. If you are imposing a principle not only of rhythm but of scansion to which the ear in spite of past attempts is not trained so as to seize the basic law of the movement in all its variations, a fair amount of incomprehension, some difficulty in knowing how to read the verse is very probable. Easier forms of a new rhythm may be caught in their movement, — even if some will not be able to scan it; but other more difficult forms may give trouble. All that is no true objection to the attempt at something new; novelty is difficult for the human mind — or ear — to accept, but novelty is asked for all the same in all human activities for their growth, amplitude, richer life. As you say, the ear has to be educated — once it is trained, familiar with the principle, what was a difficulty becomes easy, the unusual, — first condemned as abnormal or impossible, — becomes a normal and daily movement.

As for the charge of being cryptic, that is quite another matter. Obscurity due to inadequate expression is one thing, but the cryptic may be simply the expression of more than can be seized at first sight by the ordinary mind. It may be that the ideas are not of a domain in which that mind is accustomed to move or that there is a new turn of expression other than the kind which it has been trained to follow. Again the ordinary turn of a language, as in French or Bengali, may be lucid, direct, easy: if you bring into it a more intricate and suggestive manner in which the connections or transitions of thought are less obvious, that may create a difficulty. A poet can be too easy to read, because there is not much in what he writes and it is exhausted at the first glance, — or too difficult because you have to burrow for the meaning. But otherwise it makes no difference to the excellence of the work, if the reader can catch its burden at the first glance or has to dwell a little on it for the full force of it to come to the surface. The feeling, the way of expression, the combinations of thought, word or image tend often to be new and unfamiliar, but that can very well be a strength and a merit, not an element of failure.

28 January 1933

I am, as you know quite in agreement with you as regards the principle. At the same time there is a greater difficulty in Bengali than in Hindi and Gujerati. For in these languages the stylisation is a long-accepted fact and the ear of the writer and reader are trained to appreciate it, but in Bengali the trend has been on the contrary to more and more naturalism in metre and such stylisation as there was was not quantitative. Now the writer has the double difficulty of finding out how to stylise successfully in detail and of getting the ear of the public to train itself also. . . .

Quantitative Metre in Bengali

This question of quantity is one in which I find it difficult to arrive at a conclusion. You can prove that it can be done and has been successfully done in Bengali, and you can prove and have proved it yourself over again by writing these poems and bringing in the rhythm, the কন্ঠোল, which is absent in Satyen Datta. It is quite true also that stylisation is permissible and a recognised form of art — I mean professed and overt stylisation and not that which hides itself under a contrary profession of naturalness or faithful following of external nature. The only question is how much of it Bengali poetry can bear. I do not think the distinction between song and poem goes at all to the root of the matter. The question is whether it is possible to have ease of movement in this kind of quantitative metre. For a few lines it can be very beautiful or for a short poem or a song; that much cannot be doubted. But can it be made a spontaneous movement of Bengali poetry like the ordinary *mātrā-ṛtta* or the others, in which one can walk or run at will without looking at one's steps to see that one does not stumble and without concentrating the reader's mind too much on the technique so that his attention is diverted from the sense and *bhāva*? If you can achieve some large and free structure in which quantity takes a recognised place as part of the foundation, — it need not be reproduction of a Sanskrit metre, — that would solve the problem in the affirmative.

31 May 1932

Quantity in Classical and Modern Languages

I can't agree with your statement about Sanskrit अ, ए, ओ, that they are long by stylisation only! In fact, I don't quite understand what this can mean; for in Sanskrit आ at least is the corresponding long to the short vowel अ and is naturally as long as the devil — and the other two are in fact no better. The difference between ए and ऐ and ओ and औ is the difference between long and ultra-long, not between short and long. Take for instance the Sanskrit phrase येन तेन प्रकारेण; I can't for the life of me see how anyone can say that the ये ते रे or the का there are naturally short to the ear, but long by stylisation. The classical languages (Sanskrit, Greek, Latin) are perfectly logical, coherent and consistent in the matter of quantity; they had to be because quantity was the very life of their rhythm and they could not treat longs as shorts and shorts as longs as it is done, at every step, in English. Modern languages can do that because their rhythm rests on intonation and stress, quantity is only a subordinate element, a luxury, not the very basis of the rhythmic structure. In English you can write “thē ōld rōad rūns” pretending that “road” is short and “runs” is long, or “ă grēat hăte” — where the sound corresponding to Sanskrit ए (grēat hăte) or that corresponding to Sanskrit ओ (ōld rōad) is made short or long at pleasure; but to the Sanskrit, Greek or Latin ear it would have sounded like a defiance of the laws of Nature. Bengali is a modern language, so there this kind of stylisation is possible, for there ए can be long, short or doubtful.

All this, not to write more about stylisation, but only as a protest against forcing modern ideas of language sound on an ancient language. Bengali can go on its way very freely without that, Sanskritising when it likes, refusing to Sanskritise when it doesn't like.

2 June 1932

Akṣara-ṛtta and Mātrā-ṛtta

I have read your account of the *tridhārā* and my mind is now clear about it; I have not yet read Anilbaran's contentions, so

there I am still in the dark. But here are certain points that I want to make clear.

(1) Prabodh Sen's rule of the *yaugika-ṛtta* does not agree with what I was taught about the *akṣara-ṛtta*. When I first heard of Bengali metre in England, my informant was quite at sea. He confidently described Michael's blank verse as a 14 syllable line (8+6), but when asked to give examples we found that the lines as pronounced were of 12, 13, 14 or more syllables and when my brother Manmohan asked him to explain this discrepancy, he could merely gape — no explanation was forthcoming! However, when I took up seriously the study of the literature, it was explained to me by competent people, themselves poets and *littérateurs* — thus

“The line is strictly a line of 14 syllables, no more, no less (i.e. it is a true *akṣara-ṛtta*), but the *akṣara* or syllable here is not the sonant Bengali syllable as it is actually pronounced, but the syllable as it is understood on the Sanskrit principle. In Sanskrit each consonant letter (*akṣara*) is supposed to make a separate sound (syllable), either with the aid of other vowels or by force of the short *a* sound inherent in it — except in two cases. First, if there is a conjunct consonant, e.g. *gandha*, the *n* is not sonant, not separate, but *yukta* to the *dh*, and therefore does not stand for a separate syllable; secondly, if there is a *virāma-cihna* as in *daibāt*, then also it loses its sonant force, there is no third syllable — it is a dissyllable, not a trisyllable. Bengali has applied this rule, dropping only the last part of it, in disregard of the actual pronunciation. Thus দান or ধন is in Sanskrit (as in Oriya) a dissyllable, in Bengali also it is treated as such in poetry, although in fact it is a monosyllable to the ear. Externally this sounds artificial and false to fact, but rhythmically it is unexceptionable, the cadence of the voice supplying a double metre there. গন্ধ will be a dissyllable as in Sanskrit, because *ndh* is a *yuktākṣara*. On the other hand দৈবাৎ will be a trisyllable because there is no distinction made of a *virāma-cihna*, no distinction therefore between সরিৎ and নিধন, each is a trisyllable.”

According to this explanation and the rule it supplies, it is

true that a *yugma-dhvani* at the close of a word has always two *mātrās*, but the other part of Prabodh Sen's rule is not always true, viz. that in the middle of a word it counts only as one. That would be invariably true of an indubitable যুক্তাক্ষর, as in গন্ধ, but not otherwise. On this principle there is no difficulty at all about মহাভারতের কথা, the line is of 14 syllables and cannot be reckoned in *akṣara-ṛtta* as anything else. There is no difficulty about such lines as Michael's

রাবণ শশুর মম মেঘনাদ স্বামী, —

10 *svaras*, but 14 *akṣaras*, — because the মেঘ, though in the middle of a word, must be two *mātrās*, since the *ghn* in Meghnad is not a compound consonant, but two separate *akṣaras*. There is a difficulty about দিক্প্রান্তে and মৃৎপাত্র, but that is because one is undecided whether to treat it as a compound ক্প্রা and a compound ত্পা or as two separate words joined together, দিক্, মৃৎ being kept apart as with the *t* of সরিৎ or the *k* of স্বক্. In the latter case মৃৎ and দিক্ are dissyllables, in the former, trisyllables. And so on, as regards other doubtful points like চাওয়া.

This, I say, was what I was taught and it is according to this rule that I have hitherto scanned the *akṣara-ṛtta*. I am quite prepared to adopt a new principle if it is more scientific, but I think that *historically* this explanation is not unsound, that it represents the idea Michael and Nabin Sen and the rest had of the basis of their verse and shows why it was considered as of a syllabic character.

(2) I did not think or hear that Tagore invented the *mātrā-ṛtta* — I could not, because I never heard of the *mātrā-ṛtta* at that time. What I understood was that the *svara-ṛtta* was not recognised as a serious or poetic metre before Tagore, — it was used only for nursery rhymes etc. or in some kinds of loose popular verse. Tagore did not invent, but he popularised the *svara-ṛtta* as a vehicle for serious poetry — it was at least professedly under his banner that a violent attack was made on the supremacy of the *akṣara-ṛtta*. I remember reading articles even in which it was reviled as a nonsensical conventional fiction: Oriya Bengali. “If you want to keep it” thundered the

polemist, “let us all learn to read like Oriyas, ‘Rabana swasura mama, Meghanada swami’, but let us rather be Bengalis and drop this absurd convention of a pseudo-Sanskritic past.” The article amused me so much by its violence in spite of my prepossession for the *akṣara-ṛtta* that I remember it as if I had read it yesterday — and it was only one of a numerous type. At any rate as a result of this campaign, *svara-ṛtta* fixed itself on an equal throne by the side of *akṣara-ṛtta*. I mention it only as a point of literary history of which I was a contemporary witness. I suppose, as usually happens, Tagore’s share in the revolution was exaggerated and there were others who played a large part in its success.

(3) *Mātrā-ṛtta* is therefore to me a new development, not as an invention perhaps, but as a clearly understood distinct principle of metre. But it exists, if I have understood your explanation, by a thorough extension of the principle which the *akṣara-ṛtta* applied only with restrictions. As the Sanskrit limitation about the *virāma-cihna* was swept away in the *akṣara-ṛtta*, so now in the *mātrā-ṛtta* the limitation about conjuncts like ऋ is swept away and all *yugma-dhvanis* are reckoned as two *mātrās*. In that sense Anilbaran’s description of it as সগোত্র of the *akṣara-ṛtta* would have some meaning, but at the same time it would not diminish the validity of your contention that it is a new opening with endless possibilities in a new principle of metrical rhythm. Two men may be cousins or brothers or near relatives, but one a conservative, the other a revolutionary creating a new world and a new order.

All this is no part of my final formed opinion in the matter. I have not yet gone through either Anilbaran’s writing or Prabodh Sen’s letter. It is only to put down my present understanding of the situation and explain what I meant in my letter.

Mātrā-ṛtta

I am quite convinced of the possibilities of the *mātrā-ṛtta* — which would exist even if Anilbaran is right in insisting that it is the সগোত্র of the *akṣara-ṛtta*. Two people may be cousins and

yet have different characters, possibilities and destinies — and so may two metres. 9 September 1932

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I shall go through Prabodh Sen's letter, but it may take me some time. What is the exact scope of the discussion with Anilbaran, is it that he does not recognise the reality of the *mātrā-ṛtta* as a separate principle of Bengali metre? That I suppose was the position before. Originally, indeed, there was only one stream recognised, — that I remember very well, for it was the time when I was learning and assiduously reading Bengali literature; at that time what you now call *svara-ṛtta* was regarded as mere popular verse or an old irregular verse-form. Afterwards with the advent and development of Tagore's poetry, one began to hear of two recognised principles of Bengali metre, Swara (I was going to say Kshara) and Akshara. Is it Anilbaran's contention that only these two are real and legitimate? Whatever it be Anilbaran is a born fighter and if you tell him that all the *Mahārathas* are against him and his squashing defeat a foregone conclusion, he will only gallop faster towards the battle. My own difficulty is that I have not yet grasped the principle of the *mātrā-ṛtta* — *what* is it that determines the long or the short *mātrā* in Bengali?

Mātrā-ṛtta and Laghu-guru

I return you the former letter from Prabodh Sen which I managed to find time to read only today. He has a most acute, ingenious and orderly mind, and what he says is always thought-provoking and interesting; but I am not persuaded that the form of Bengali *mātrā-ṛtta* and Sanskrit *laghu-guru* is *really and intrinsically* the same. Equivalent, no doubt, in a way, — if we substitute Bengali metre for Sanskrit quantity; but not the same because Bengali metre and Sanskrit quantity are two quite different things. It is something like the equivocation by which one pretends that an English iambic metre or any other with a Greek name is the same as a Latin or Greek metre with that name — an equivocation based on the fiction that a stressed and an unstressed English syllable are

quantitatively long and short. There is a certain kind of general equivalence, but a fundamental difference — as those who have tried to find an equivalent in the English stress system to the quantitative Latin or Greek hexameter, alcaic or sapphic metres have discovered — they could not be transplanted, because it is only in true quantity that they can live. 23 September 1932

Laghu-guru

If you can establish *laghu-guru* as a recognised metrical principle in Bengali, you will fulfil one of my two previsions for the future with regard to the language. When I was first introduced to Bengali prosody, I was told that Madhusudan's blank verse was one of fourteen syllables, but to my astonishment found that sometimes ten syllables even counted as fourteen — e.g.

রাবণ শশুর মম মেঘনাদ স্বামী

Of course, it was afterwards explained to me that the syllables were counted on the Sanskrit system, and I got the real run of the rhythmic movement; but I always thought: why not have an alternative system with a true sonant syllabic basis — and, finally, I saw the birth (I mean as a recognised serious metre) of the *svara-ṛtta*. Afterwards I came across Hemchandra's experiments in bringing in a quantitative element and fell in love with the idea and hoped somebody would try it on a larger scale. But up till now this attempt to influence the future did not materialise. Now perhaps in your hands it will — even apart from songs. 20 October 1932

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It [*a song composed by a disciple*] is good. But there is a tendency to run into a conventional model. Originality, plasticity, vigour, a new utterance and a new music are needed to give the *laghu-guru* an undisputed standing equal to that of the other rhythms.

4 June 1934

Gadya-chanda

I can't say that I have studied or even read Bengali গদ্যছন্দ, so I am unable to pronounce. In fact what is গদ্যছন্দ? Is it the equivalent of European free verse? But there the essence of the thing is that you model each line freely as you like — regularity of any kind is out of court there. Is it Nishikanta's aim to create a kind of rhymed prose metre? On what principle? He seems to want a movement which will give more volume, strength and sonority than Bengali verse can succeed in creating but which is yet poetry, not prose arranged in lines and not even, at the best, poetic prose cut into lines of different lengths. All things can be tried — the test is success, true poetic excellence. Nishikanta has sent me some of his গদ্যছন্দ before. It seemed to me to have much flow and energy, but there is something hanging on to it which weighs, almost drags — is it the ghost of prose? But that is only a personal impression; as I have said, on this subject I am not a qualified judge.

29 September 1936

Rhyme

Rhyme and Inspiration

Some rhyme with ease — others find a difficulty. The coming of the rhyme is a part of the inspiration just like the coming of the form of the language. The rhyme often comes of itself and brings the language and connection of ideas with it. For all these things are quite ready behind somewhere and it is only a matter of reception and transmission — it is the physical mind and brain that make the difficulty.

2 February 1934

Imperfect Rhymes

These [*“life” and “cliff”, “smile” and “will”*] are called in English imperfect rhymes and can be freely but not too freely used. Only you have to understand the approximations and kinships of vowel sounds in English, otherwise you will produce illegitimate children like *“splendour”* and *“wonder”* which is not a rhyme but an assonance.

19 December 1935

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It is no use applying a Bengali ear to English rhythms any more than a French ear to English or an English ear to French metres. The Frenchman may object to English blank verse because his own ear misses the rhyme or the Englishman to the French Alexandrine because he finds it rhetorical and monotonous. Irrelevant objections both. Imperfect rhymes are regarded in English metre as a source of charm in the rhythmic field bringing in possibilities of delicate variation in the constant clang of exact rhymes.

21 November 1935

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“Lure” and “more” are rhymes? It is enough to make the English prosodists of the past turn in their graves or if they are in heaven to make their imaginative hair angelic or archangelic stand up erect on their beatified heads. I am aware that modernist poets rhyme anything with everything. They would not shudder even in rhyming “hand” with “fiend” or “heat” with “bit” or “kid”, — probably they would do it with a wicked leer of triumph. But all the same crime is crime even if it becomes fashionable.

21 May 1937

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I never heard of two pronunciations of “lure” and “pure” one of which approximates to “lore” and “pore” — of course they may exist in some dialect, but anything that would make “pure” rhyme with “more” seems to be horribly impure and “lure” rhyming with “gore” does not lure me at all. I am aware of Arjava’s rhyming of “bore” and “law” etc., — but that is quite new as a permissible imperfect rhyme — “dawn” and “morn” were in my time held up as a vulgarism, the type of all that is damnable. As for “decrease” and “earthiness” that is quite a different matter from “lure” and “more”; the former are long and short of the same vowel sounds, long e sound and short e sound, the latter are two quite different vowel sounds. If you can rhyme a pure long u sound with a pure long o sound, there is no reason why you should not rhyme Cockney fashion “day” with “high”, “paid” with “wide”, and by a little extension why not “jade” with “solitude”. Finally we can come to the rhyming of any word with any word provided there is the same or a similar consonant at the end. Modernism admits imperfect — very imperfect rhymes, but that is really a different principle and cannot be extended to blank verse, mongrelising all similar ending sounds.

22 May 1937

English Poetic Forms

The Sonnet — Regular and Irregular Rhyme Schemes

The two regular sonnet rhyme-sequences are (1) the Shakespearean ab ab cd cd ef ef gg — that is three quatrains with alternate rhymes with a closing couplet and (2) the Miltonic with an octet abba abba (as in your second and third quatrains) and a sestet of three rhymes arranged according to choice. The Shakespearean is closer to the natural lyric rhythm, the Miltonic to the ode movement — i.e. something large and grave. The Miltonic is very difficult for it needs either a strong armoured structure of the thought or a carefully developed unity of the building which all poets can't manage. However there have been attempts at an irregular sonnet rhyme-sequence. Keats tried his hand at one a century ago and I vaguely believe (but that may be only an illusion of Maya) that modern poets have played loose fantastic tricks of their own invention; but I don't have much first-hand knowledge of modern (contemporary) poetry. Anyhow I have myself written a series of sonnets with the most heterodox rhyme arrangements, so I couldn't very well go for you when you did the same. One who has committed many murders can't very well rate another for having done a few. All the same, this sequence is rather rather — a Miltonic octet with a Shakespearean close would be more possible; I think I have done something of the kind with not too bad an effect, but I have no time to consult my poetry file and am not sure. In the sonnet too it might be well for you to do the regular thing first, soberly and well, and afterwards when you are sure of your steps, frisk and dance.

22 February 1936

Sonnet and Satire

In a sonnet thought should be set to thought, line added to line in a sort of architectural sequence, or else there should be a progression like the pressing of waves to the shore, with the finality of arrival swift in a closing couplet or deliberate as in the Miltonic form.

As to your other proposition, I am not sure that satiric verse and the metaphysical lyrical can rightly be put together. Naturally, a great poetic genius could or might do it with success; but genius can do anything. Satire is more often than not a kind of half-poetry, because its inspiration comes primarily from the critical mind and a not very high part of it, not from the creative vision or a moved intensity of poetic feeling. Creative vision or the moved intensity can come in to lift this motive but, except rarely, it does not lift it very high.

It is Dryden and Juvenal who have oftenest made something like genuine poetry out of satire, the first because he often changes satire into a vision of character and the play of psychological forces, the other because he writes not from a sense of the incongruous but from an emotion, from a strong poetic "indignation" against the things he sees around him. Aristophanes is a comic creator — like Shakespeare when he turns in that direction — the satiric is only a strong line in his creation; that is a different kind of inspiration, not the ordinary satire. Pope attempted something creative in his *Rape of the Lock*, but the success, if brilliant, is thin because the deeper creative founts and the kindlier sources of vision are not there. 27 April 1931

The Ode

A successful ode must be a perfect architectural design and Keats' Odes are among the best, if not the best in English poetry, as I think they are, at any rate from the point of view of artistic creation, because of the perfect way in which the central thought is developed and each part related to the whole like the design of the masses in a perfect building — each taking its inevitable place

in the whole. In yours the ideas, words, images flow like your “Ocean” with a certain fluent grandeur of diction and richness of colour, but there is not any inevitable beginning, middle, connections and end. An ode in that respect should be like a sonnet though on a bigger scale and with a different principle of structure — but it must be, like the sonnet, a perfect structure.

4 March 1935

The Ballad

I have not much taste for the English ballad form; it is generally either too flat or too loud and artificial and its basic stuff is a strenuous popular obviousness that needs a very rare genius to transform it.

20 November 1932

Poem and Song

No, a song is not a kind of poem — or, at least, it need not be. There are some very good songs which are not poems at all. In Europe, song-writers as such or the writers of the librettos of the great operas are not classed among poets. In Asia the attempt to combine song-quality with poetic value has been more common; in ancient Greece also lyric poetry was often composed with a view to being set to music. But still poetry and song-writing, though they can be combined, are two different arts, because the aim and the principle of their building is not the same.

The difference is not that poetry has to be understood and music or singing has to be felt (*anubhūti*); that one has to reach the soul through the precise written sense and the other through the suggestion of sound and its appeal to some inner chord within us. If you only understand the intellectual content of a poem, its words and ideas, you have not really appreciated the poem at all, and a poem which contains only that and nothing else, is not true poetry. A true poem contains something more which has to be felt just as you feel music, and that is its more important and essential part. Poetry has a rhythm, just as music has, though of a different kind, and it is the rhythm that helps this

something else to come out through the medium of the words. The words by themselves do not carry it or cannot bring it out altogether, and this is shown by the fact that the same words written in a different order and without rhythm or without the proper rhythm would not at all move or impress you in the same way. This something else is an inner content or suggestion, a soul-feeling or soul-experience, a life-feeling or life-experience, a mental emotion, vision or experience (not merely an idea), and it is only when you can catch this and reproduce some vibration of the experience — if not the experience itself — in you that you have got what the poem can give you, not otherwise.

The real difference between a poem and a song is that a song is written with a view to be set to musical rhythm and a poem is written with the ear listening for the needed poetic rhythm or word-music. These two rhythms are quite different. That is why a poem cannot be set to music unless it has either been written with an eye to both kinds of rhythm or else happens to have (without especially intending it) a movement which makes it easy or at least possible to set it to music. This happens often with lyrical poetry, less often with other kinds. There is also this usual character of a song that it is satisfied to be very simple in its content, just bringing out an idea or feeling, and leaving it to the music to develop its unspoken values. Still this reticence is not always observed; the word claims for itself sometimes a larger importance.

4 July 1931

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No, a song need not have a less intricate metre than a poem; and if it appears usually more simple in its rhythmical turns, yet in that apparent simplicity a considerable, though very delicate subtlety is possible. A certain *liquidity* of sound is essential, but so long as you keep that, you can play variations to a great extent. I don't think an identical regularity or unbroken recurrence is imperative — though equivalence of sound values may be. It is a matter of the inner ear and its guidance rather than of any exact external measurements — especially in the English language, which is too free and plastic for the theories which

are sometimes imposed upon its movements. The theories don't matter much, because the language contrives to go its own way even while pretending to conform to the theories. I don't know what models to propose to you — old style English practice was too regular for the freer spirit of the modern lyric and my reading in contemporary poetry has been too fragmentary and unsystematic for me to remember the right models, though they must be there.

17 December 1931

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About French or German songs I know nothing — but as for the English, except for a few like Cardinal Newman's hymn "Lead, kindly Light" they don't exist so far as I know, — I mean of course as regards their contents, manner, style. I believe in European music the words are of a very minor importance, they matter only as going with the music. But I am not an expert on the subject, so I can't go farther into it. When religious songs were written in mediaeval Latin, they were very fine, but with the use of the modern languages the art was lost — the modern European hymnals are awful stuff.

13 May 1936

Nursery Rhymes and Folk Songs

The question you have put, as you put it, can admit of only one answer. I cannot agree that nursery rhymes or folk songs are entitled to take an important place or any place at all in the history of the prosody of the English language or that one should start the study of English metre by a careful examination of the rhythm of "Humpty Dumpty", "Mary, Mary, quite contrary" or the tale of the old woman in a shoe. There are many queer theories abroad nowadays in all the arts, but I doubt whether any English or French critic or prosodist would go so far as to dub "Who killed Cock Robin?" the true movement of English rhythm, putting aside Chaucer, Spenser, Pope or Shelley as too cultivated and accomplished or too much under foreign influence or to seek for his models in popular songs or the products of the *café chantant* in preference to Hugo or Musset or Verlaine.

But perhaps something else is meant — is it that one gets the crude indispensable elements of metre better from primitive just-shaped or unshaped stuff than from more perfect work in which these are overlaid by artistic developments and subtle devices — an embryo or a skeleton is more instructive for the study of men than the developed flesh-and-blood structure? That may have a certain truth in some lines of scientific research, but it cannot stand in studying the technique of an art. At that rate one could be asked to go for the basic principles of musical sound to the jazz or even to the hurdy-gurdy and for the indispensable rules of line and colour to the pavement artist or to the signboard painter. Or perhaps the suggestion is that here one gets the primary unsophisticated rhythms native to the language and free from the artificial movements of mere literature. Still, I hardly fancy that the true native spirit or bent of English metre is to be sought or can be discovered in

Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall,
Humpty Dumpty had a great fall

and is lost in

Rarely, rarely, comest thou,
Spirit of Delight.

Popular verse catches the child ear or the common ear much more easily than the music of developed poetry because it relies on a crude jingle or infantile lilt — not because it enshrines in its movement the true native spirit of the tongue. I hold it to be a fallacy to think that the real spirit and native movement of a language can be caught only in crude or primitive forms and that it is disguised in the more perfect work in which it has developed its own possibilities to their full pitch, variety and scope. It is as if one maintained that the true note and fundamental nature of the evolving soul were to be sought in the earthworm or the scarabaeus and not in the developed human being — or in the divinised man or *Jivanmukta*.

As for foreign influences, most of the elements of English prosody, rhyme, foot-scansion, line lengths, stanza forms and

many others have come in from outside and have altered out of all recognition the original mould, but the spirit of the language has found itself as much in these developments as in the first free alliterative verse — as much and more. The spirit of a language ought to be strong enough to assimilate any amount of imported elements or changes of structure and measure.

23 February 1933

Substance, Style, Diction

Form and Substance

On the general question [*of rhythm vs. substance*] the truth seems to me to be very simple. It may be quite true that fine or telling rhythms without substance (substance of idea, suggestion, feeling) are hardly poetry at all, even if they make good verse. But that is no ground for belittling beauty or excellence of form or ignoring its supreme importance for poetic perfection. Poetry is after all an art and a poet ought to be an artist of word and rhythm, even though, necessarily, like other artists, he must also be something more than that, even much more. I hold therefore that harshness and roughness, ককশতা, are not merits, but serious faults to be avoided by anyone who wants his work to be true poetry and survive. One can be strong and powerful, full of sincerity and substance without being harsh, rough or aggressive to the ear. Swinburne's later poetry is a mere body of rhythmic sound without a soul; but what of Browning's constant deliberate roughness or, let us say, excessive sturdiness which deprives much of his work of the claim to be poetry — it is already much discredited and it is certain there is much in it that posterity will carefully and with good reason forget to read. Energy enough there is and abundance of matter and these carry the day for a time and give fame, but it is only perfection that endures. Or, if the cruder work lasts, it is only by association with the perfection of the same poet's work at his best. I may say also that if mere rhythmic acrobacies of the kind to which you very rightly object condemn a poet's work to inferiority and a literature deviating on to that line to decadence, the drive towards a harsh strength and rough energy of form and substance may easily lead to other kind of undesirable acrobacy and an opposite road towards individual inferiority and general decadence. Why

should not Bengali poetry go on the straight way of its progress without running either upon the rocks of roughness or into the shallows of mere melody? Austerity of course is another matter — rhythm can be either austere to bareness or sweet and subtle, and a harmonious perfection can be attained in either of these extreme directions if the mastery is there.

As for rules, — rules are necessary but they are not absolute; one of the chief tendencies of genius is to break old rules and make departures, which create new ones. English poetry of today luxuriates in movements which to the mind of yesterday would have been insanity or chaotic licence, yet it is evident that this freedom of experimentation has led to discoveries of new rhythmic beauty with a very real charm and power and opened out possible lines of growth, — however unfortunate many of its results may be. Not the formal mind, but the ear must be the judge.

Moreover the development of a new note — the expression of a deeper yogic or mystic experience in poetry — may very well demand for its fullness new departures in technique, a new turn or turns of rhythm, but these should be, I think, subtle in their difference rather than aggressive.

4 January 1932

Richness of Image

Richness of image is not the whole of poetry. There are many “born poets” who avoid too much richness of image. There are certain fields of consciousness which express themselves naturally through image most — there are others that do it more through idea and feeling.

13 February 1936

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Poetry depends on power of thought, feeling, language — not on abundance of images. Some poets are rich in images, all need not be.

18 February 1936

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What is this superstition? At that rate Sophocles, Chaucer, Milton, Wordsworth are not good poets, because their poetry is not

full of images? Is Kalidasa a greater poet than Vyasa or Valmiki because he is fuller of images? 18 February 1936

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Poetry does not consist only in images or fine phrases. When Homer writes simply “Sing, Goddess, the baleful wrath of Achilles, son of Peleus, which laid a thousand woes on the Achaeans and hurled many strong souls of heroes down to Hades and made their bodies a prey for dogs and all the birds; and the will of Zeus was accomplished”, he is writing in the highest style of poetry. 13 June 1936

Conceit

When an image comes out from the mind not properly transmuted in the inner vision or delivered by the alchemy of language, it betrays itself as coin of the fancy or the contriving intellect and is then called a conceit.¹ 26 August 1931

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Conceit means a too obviously ingenious or far-fetched or extravagant idea or image which is evidently an invention of a clever brain, not a true and convincing flight of the imagination. E.g. Donne’s (?) comparison of a child’s small-pox eruptions to the stars of the milky way or something similar: I have forgotten the exact thing, but that will serve.

This hill turns up its nose at heaven’s height,
Heaven looks back with a blue contemptuous eye —

that’s a conceit.

O cloud, thou wild black wig on heaven’s bald head
would be another. These are extravagant specimens.

¹ *This sentence was extracted for separate publication from a letter given in full on pages 505–06. — Ed.*

I haven't time to think out any ingenious ones, nor to discuss trochees adequately — have given one or two hints in the margin.

Some more conceits, ingenious all of them.

Am I his tail and is he then my head?
But head by tail, I think, is often led.

Also

Like a long snake came wriggling out his laugh.

Also

How the big Gunner of the upper sphere
Is letting off his cannon in the sky!
Flash, bang bang bang! he has some gunpowder
With him, I think. Again! Whose big bow-wow
Goes barking through the hunting fields of Heaven?
What a magnificent row the gods can make!

And don't forget

The long slow scolopendra of the train.

Or if you think these are not dainty or poetic enough, here's another

God made thy eyes sweet cups to hold blue wine;
By sipping at them rapture-drunk are mine.

Enough? Amen!

16 May 1937

Oxymoron

An oxymoron often necessitates what you call echolalia — e.g.

For good like this can be
An obstacle against the highest Good
And light itself denial of the Light.

Whether such things make good poetry or not is a matter of opinion.

28 January 1934

Simplicity and Condensation

Simplicity is not the test. There can be a supreme beauty of simplicity and there can be the opposite. 10 November 1938

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Too violent condensations of language or too compressed thoughts always create a sense either of obscurity or, if not that, then of effort and artifice, even if a powerful and inspired artifice. It is why Yeats finds your sonnets stiff and laboured, I suppose. Yet very great poets and writers have used them, so great a poet as Aeschylus or so great a prose stylist as Tacitus. Then there are the famous “knots” in the Mahabharata, the recurrence of lines so compressed in thought and speech (although the normal style of the poem is of a crystal clearness,) that even the divine scribe Ganesha, lord of wisdom and learning who wrote the poem to Vyasa’s dictation, had to stop and cudgel his brains for minutes to find out their significance, — thus giving the poet a chance to breathe and compose his lines. For the condition laid down was that the inspiration must be continuous and Ganesha would not even once have to pause for want of lines to write! I think one can say that these condensations are justified when they say something with more power and depth and full, if sometimes recondite, significance than an easier speech would give, but to make it a constant element of the language (without a constant justification of that kind) would turn it into a mannerism or artifice. 1 October 1932

Bareness and Ruggedness

I am afraid the language of your appreciations or criticisms here is not apposite. There is nothing “bare and rugged” in the two lines you quote;² on the contrary they are rather violently figured — the *osé* image of a fire opening a door of a treasure-house would probably be objected to by Cousins or any other

² *A rhythmic fire that opens a secret door,
And the treasures of eternity are found;*

purist. The language of poetry is called bare when it is confined rigorously to just the words necessary to express the thought or feeling or to visualise what is described, without superfluous epithets, without images, without any least rhetorical turn in it. E.g. Cowper's

Toll for the brave,
The brave who are no more —

is bare. Byron's

Jehovah's vessels hold
The godless heathen's wine;

does not quite succeed because of a rhetorical tinge that he has not been able to keep out of the expression. When Baxter (I think it was Baxter) writes

I spoke as one who never would speak again
And as a dying man to dying men,

that might be taken as an example of strong and bare poetic language. I have written of Savitri waking on the day of destiny —

Immobile in herself she gathered force.
This was the day when Satyavan must die, —

that is designedly bare.

But none of these lines or passages can be called rugged; for ruggedness and austerity are not the same thing; poetry is rugged when it is rough in language and rhythm or rough and unpolished but sincere in feeling. Donne is often rugged, —

Yet dare I almost be glad, I do not see
That spectacle of too much weight for me.
Who sees God's face that is self-life must die;
What a death were it then to see God die?

but it is only the first line that is at all bare.

On the other side you describe the line of your preference

My moments pass with moon-imprinted sail

by the epithets “real, wonderful, flashing”. Real or surreal? It is precisely its unreality that makes the quality of the line; it is surreal, not in any depreciatory sense, but because of its supraphysical imaginativeness, its vivid suggestion of occult vision; one does not quite know what it means, but it suggests something that one can vividly see. It is not flashing — gleaming or glinting would be nearer the mark — it penetrates the imagination and awakens sight and stirs or thrills with a sense of beauty but it is not something that carries one away by its sudden splendour.

You say that it is more poetic than the other quotation — perhaps, but not for the reason you give, rather because it is more felicitously complete in its image and more suggestive. But you seem to attach the word poetic to the idea of something remotely beautiful, deeply coloured or strangely imaged with a glitter in it or a magic glimmer. On the whole, what you seem to mean is that this line is “real” poetry, because it has this quality and because it has a melodious sweetness of rhythm, while the other is of a less attractive character. Your solar plexus refuses to thrill where these qualities are absent — obviously that is a serious limitation in the plasticity of your solar plexus, not that it is wrong in thrilling to these things but that it is sadly wrong in thrilling to them only. It means that your plexus will remain deaf and dead to most of the greater poetry of the world — to Homer, Milton, Valmiki, Vyasa, a great part even of Shakespeare. That is surely a serious limitation of the appreciative faculty. What is strange and beautiful has its appeal, but one ought to be able also to stir to what is great and beautiful or strong and noble or simple and beautiful or pure and exquisite. Not to do so would be like being blind of one eye and seeing with the other only very vividly strange outlines and intensely bright colours.

I may add that if really I appreciate any lines for something which I see behind them but they do not actually suggest or express, then I must be a very bad critic. The lines you quote

not only say nothing about the treasures except that they are found but do not suggest anything more. If then I see from some knowledge that has nothing to do with the actual expression and suggestion of the lines all the treasures of eternity and cry "How rich" — meaning the richness, not of the treasures, but of the poetry, then I am doing something quite illegitimate which is the sign of a great unreality and confusion in my mind, very undesirable in a critic. It is not for any reason of that kind that I made a mark indicating appreciation but because I find in the passage a just and striking image with a rhythm and expression which are a sufficient body for the significance.

2 September 1938

Nobility and Grandeur

I am unable to agree with you that Chapman's poetry is noble or equal, even at its best, to Homer and it seems to me that you have not seized the subtler quality of what Arnold means by noble. "Muscular vigour, strong nervous rhythm" are forceful, not noble. Everywhere in your remarks you seem to confuse nobility and forcefulness, but there is between the two a gulf of difference. Chapman is certainly forceful, next to Marlowe, I suppose, the most forceful poet among the Elizabethans. Among the lines you quote from him to prove your thesis, there is only one that approaches nobility:

Much have I suffered for thy love, much laboured, wishèd much
and even then it is spoil for me by the last two words which are
almost feeble. The second quotation:

When the unmeasured firmament bursts to disclose her light
has a rhythm which does not mate with the idea and the diction;
these are exceedingly fine and powerful — but not noble. There
is no nobility at all in the third:

And such a stormy day shall come, in mind and soul I know,
When sacred Troy shall shed her towers, for tears of overthrow.

The first line of the couplet is rhetorical and padded, the second is a violent, indeed an extravagant conceit which does not convey any true and high emotion but is intended to strike and startle the intellectual imagination. One has only to compare Homer's magnificent lines absolute in their nobility of restrained yet strong emotion, in which the words and rhythm give the very soul of the emotion

essetai ēmar hot' an pot' olōlē Ilios hirē
(There shall be a day when sacred Ilios shall perish)

but in its depths, not with any outward vehemence. In the fourth quotation:

Heard Thetis' foul petition and wished in any wise
The splendour of the burning ships might satiate his eyes

the first line has the ordinary ballad movement and diction and cannot rank, the second is fine poetry, vivid and impressive, with a beginning of grandeur — but the nobility of Homer, Virgil or Milton is not there. The line strikes at the mind with a great vehemence in order to impress it — nobility in poetry enters in and takes possession with an assured gait, by its own right. It would seem to me that one has only to put the work of these greater poets side by side with Chapman's best to feel the difference. Chapman no doubt lifts rocks and makes mountains suddenly to rise — in that sense he has elevation or rather elevations; but in doing it he gesticulates, wrestles, succeeds finally with a shout of triumph; that does not give a noble effect or a noble movement. See in contrast with what a self-possessed grandeur, dignity or godlike ease Milton, Virgil, Homer make their ascensions or keep their high levels.

Then I come to Arnold's examples of which you question the nobility on the strength of my description of one essential of the poetically noble. Mark that the calm, self-mastery, beautiful control which I have spoken of as essential to nobility is a poetic, not an ethical or Yogic calm and control. It does not exclude the poignant expression of grief or passion, but it expresses it with a certain high restraint so that even when the mood is personal it

yet borders on the widely impersonal. Cleopatra's words³ are an example of what I mean; the disdainful compassion for the fury of the chosen instrument of self-destruction which vainly thinks it can truly hurt her, the call to death to act swiftly and yet the sense of being high above what death can do, which these few simple words convey has the true essence of nobility. "Impatience" only! You have not caught the significance of the words "poor venomous fool", the tone of the "Be angry and despatch", the tense and noble grandeur of the suicide scene with the high light it sheds on Cleopatra's character. For she was a remarkable woman, a great queen, a skilful ruler and politician, not merely the erotic *détraquée* people make of her. Shakespeare is not good at describing greatness, he poetised the *homme moyen*, but he has caught something here. The passage stands comparison with the words of Antony "I am dying, Egypt, dying" (down to "A Roman by a Roman, valiantly vanquished") which stand among the noblest expressions of high, deep, yet collected and contained emotion in literature — though that is a masculine and this a feminine nobility. There is in the ballad of Sir Patrick Spense the same poignancy and restraint — something that gives a sense of universality and almost impersonality in the midst of the pathetic expression of sorrow. There is a quiver but a high compassionate quiver, there is no wail or stutter or vehemence. As for the rhythm, it may be the ballad "alive", but it is not "kicking" — and it has the overtones and undertones which ballad rhythm has not at its native level. Then for the other example you have given — lines didactic in intention can be noble, as for instance, the example quoted by Arnold from Virgil,

Disce, puer, virtutem ex me verumque laborem,
Fortunam ex aliis

³ *If thou and nature can so gently part,
The stroke of death is as a lover's pinch
Which hurts and is desired. . . .
. . . Come, thou mortal wretch,
With thy sharp teeth this knot intricate
Of life at once untie. Poor venomous fool,
Be angry and despatch.*

— Shakespeare, Antony and Cleopatra

or the line quoted from Apollo's speech about the dead body of Hector and Achilles' long-nourished and too self-indulgent rage against it

tlēton gar Moirai thumon thesan anthrōpoisin.

These two lines

Still raise for good the supplicating voice,
But leave to heaven the measure and the choice,

are less fine and harmonious in their structure; there is something of a rhetorical turn and therefore it reaches a lower height of nobility, but nobility there is, especially in the second line of the couplet. I do not find it cold; there is surely a strong touch of poetic emotion there.

I may say however that grandeur and nobility are kindred but not interchangeable terms. One can be noble without reaching grandeur — one can be grand without the subtle quality of nobility. Zeus Olympius is grand and noble; Ravana or Briareus with the thousand arms is grand without being noble. Lear going mad in the storm is grand, but too vehement and disordered to be noble. I think the essential difference between the epic movement and ballad rhythm and language lies in this distinction between nobility and force — in the true ballad usually a bare, direct and rude force. The ballad metre has been taken by modern poets and lifted out of its normal form and movement, given subtle turns and cadences and made the vehicle of lyric beauty and fervour or of strong or beautiful narrative; but this is not the true original ballad movement and ballad motive. Scott's movement is narrative, not epic — there is also a lyrical narrative movement and that is the quality reached by Coleridge, perhaps the finest use yet made of the ballad movement. It is doubtful whether the ballad form can bear the epic lift for more than a line or two, a stanza or two — under the epic stress the original jerkiness remains while the lyric flow smooths it out. When it tries to lift to the epic height, it does so with a jerk, an explosive leap or a quick canter; one feels the rise, but there is still something of the old trot underneath the movement. It is at least what I feel

throughout in Chesterton — there is a sense of effort, of disguise with the crudity of the original material still showing through the brilliantly coloured drapery that has been put upon it. If there is no claim to epic movement, I do not mind and can take it for what it can give, but comparisons with Homer and Virgil and the classic hexameter are perilous and reveal the yawning gulf between the two movements. As to the line of fourteen syllables, Chapman often overcomes its difficulties but the jog-trot constantly comes out. It may be that all that can be surmounted, but Chapman and Chesterton do not surmount it — whatever their heights of diction or imagination, the metre interferes with their maintenance, even, I think, with their attaining their full eminence. Possibly a greater genius might wipe out the defect — but would a greater genius have cared to make the endeavour?

I have left myself no space or time for Chesterton as a poet and it is better so because I have not read the poem [*The Ballad of the White Horse*] and know him only by extracts. Your passages establish him as a poet, a fine and vivid poet by intervals, but not as a great or an epic poet — that is my impression. Sometimes I find your praise of particular passages extravagant, as when you seem to put Marlowe's mighty line

See, see where Christ's blood streams in the firmament

and Chesterton's facetious turn about the stretched necks and burned beards on a par. Humour can be poetic and even epic, like Kaikeyi's praise of Manthara's hump in the Ramayana; but this joke of Chesterton's does not merit such an apotheosis. That is ballad style, not mighty or epic. Again all that passage about Colan and Earl Harold is poor ballad stuff — except the first three lines and the last two — poor in diction, poor in movement. I am unable to enthuse over

It smote Earl Harold over the eye
And blood began to run.

The lines marrying the soft sentimentalism of the “small white daisies” with the crude brutality of the “blood out of the brain” made me at first smile with the sense of the incongruous, it

seemed almost like an attempt at humour — at least at the grotesque. I prefer Scott's *Marmion*; in spite of its want of imagination and breadth it is as good a thing as any Scott has written; on the contrary, these lines show Chesterton far below his best. The passage about the cholera and wheat is less flat; it is even impressive in a way, but impressive by an exaggerated bigness and forced attempt at epic greatness on one side and a forced and exaggerated childish sentimentalism on the other. The two do not fuse and the contrast is grotesque. This cholera image might be fine out of its context, it is at least powerful and vivid, but applied to a man (not a god or a demigod) it sounds too inflated — while the image of the massacrer muttering sentimentally about bread while he slew is so unnatural as to tread on or over the borders of the grotesque — it raises even a smile like the poor small white daisies red with blood out of Earl Harold's brain. I could criticise farther, but I refrain. On the other hand, Chesterton is certainly very fine by flashes. His images and metaphors and similies are rather explosive, sometimes they are mere conceits like the "cottage in the clouds", but all the same they have very often a high poetic quality of revealing vividness. At times also he has fine ideas finely expressed and occasionally he achieves a great lyrical beauty and feeling. He is terribly unequal and unreliable, violent, rocketlike, ostentatious, but at least in parts of this poem he does enter into the realms of poetry. Only I refuse to regard the poem as an epic — a sometimes low-falling, sometimes high-swinging lyrical narrative is the only claim I can concede to it.

2 February 1935

*

"Noble" has a special meaning, also "elevation" is used in a certain sense by Arnold. In that sense these words do not seem to me to be applicable either to Chapman or to the ballad metre. Strong, forceful, energetic, impressive they may be — but nobility is a rarer, calmer, more self-mastered, highly harmonious thing than these are. Also nobility and grandeur are not quite the same thing.

2 February 1935

Austerity and Exuberance

I am still at a loss what to answer about উচ্ছ্বাস, because I still don't understand exactly what your correspondent is aiming at in his criticism. There is not more *ucchvāsa* in Bengali poetry than in English, if by the word is meant rhetoric, free resort to imagery, prolix weaving of words and ideas and sentiments around what one has to say. Indian poetry in the Sanskrit languages — there are exceptions of course — was for the most part more restrained and classic in taste or else more impressionist and incisive than most English poetry; the qualities or defects noted above came into Bengali under the English influence. I don't see therefore the point of his remark that the English language cannot express the Indian temperament. It is true of course to a certain extent, first, because no foreign language can express what is intimate and peculiar in a national temperament, it tends at once to become falsified and seems exotic, and especially the imagery or sentiment of one language does not go well into that of another; least of all can the temperament of an Oriental tongue be readily transferred into a European tongue — what is perfectly simple and straightforward in one becomes emphatic or over-coloured or strange in the other. But that has nothing to do with *ucchvāsa* in itself. As to emotion — if that is what is meant, — your word effusiveness is rather unfortunate, for effusiveness is not praiseworthy in poetry anywhere; but vividness of emotion is no more reprehensible in English than in Bengali poetry. You give as examples of *ucchvāsa* among other things Madhusudan's style, Tagore's poem to me, a passage from Gobinda Das. I don't think there is anything in Madhusudan which an English poet writing in Bengali would have hesitated to father. Tagore's poem is written at a high pitch of feeling perfectly intelligible to anyone who had passed through the exaltation of the Swadeshi days, but not more high pitched than certain things in Milton, Shelley, Swinburne. In Gobinda Das's lines, — let us translate them into English

Am I merely thine? O Love, I am there clinging
 In every limb of thee — there ever is my creation and my
 dissolution,

the idea is one that would not so easily occur to an English poet, it is an erotic mysticism, easily suggested to a mind familiar with the experiences of Vedantic or Vaishnava mystics; but this is not effusiveness, it is intensity — and an English writer — e.g. Lawrence — could be quite as intense but would use a different idea or image. 1 October 1932

*

It is not easy to say precisely what is austerity in the poetic sense — for it is a quality that can be felt, a spirit in the writer and the writing, but if you put it in the strait-waistcoat of a definition — or of a set technical method — you are likely to lose the spirit altogether. In the spirit of the writing you can feel it as something constant, — self-gathered, grave and severe; it is the quality that one at once is aware of in Milton, Wordsworth, Aeschylus and which even their most fervent admirers would hardly attribute to Shakespeare, Shelley, Keats, Tennyson, Euripides. But there is also an austerity in the poetic manner and that is more difficult to describe or to fix its borders. At most one can say that it consists in a will to express the thing of which you write, thought, object or feeling, in its just form and exact power without addition and without exuberance. The austerer method of poetry avoids all lax superfluity, all profusion of unnecessary words, excess of emotional outcry, self-indulgent daub of colour, over-brilliant scattering of images, all mere luxury of external art or artifice. To use just the necessary words and no others, the thought in its simplicity and bare power, the one expressive or revealing image, the precise colour and nothing more, just the exact impression, reaction, simple feeling proper to the object, — nothing spun out, additional, in excess. Any rioting in words, colour, images, emotions, sound, phrase for their own sake, for their own beauty, attraction, luxury of abundant expression or creation would, I suppose, be what your friend means by

ucchvāsa. Even, an extreme contemporary tendency seems to condemn the use of image, epithet, colour, pitch or emphasis of any kind, except on the most sparing scale, as a vice. Length in a poem is itself a sin, for length means padding — a long poem is a bad poem, only brief work, intense, lyrical in spirit can be throughout pure poetry. Milton, for example, considered austere by the common run of mortals, would be excluded from the list of the pure for his sprawling lengthiness, his epic rhetoric, his swelling phrases, his cult of the grandiose. To be perfect you must be small, brief and restrained, meticulous in cut and style.

This extremism in the avoidance of excess is perhaps itself an excess. Much can be done by bareness in poetry — a poetic nudism if accompanied by either beauty and grace or strength and power has its excellence. There can be a vivid or striking or forceful or a subtle, delicate or lovely bareness which reaches to the highest values of poetic expression. There can be also a compact or a stringent bareness — the kind of style deliberately aimed at by Landor; but this can be very stiff and stilted as Landor is in his more ambitious attempts — although he did magnificent things sometimes, like his lines on Rose Aylmer, — you can see there how emotion itself can gain by a spare austerity in self-expression. But it is doubtful whether all these kinds — Wordsworth's lyrics, for example, the "Daffodils", the "Cuckoo" — can be classed as austere. On the other hand there can be a very real spirit and power of underlying austerity behind a considerable wealth and richness of expression. Arnold in one of his poems gives the image of a girl beautiful, rich and sumptuous in apparel on whose body, killed in an accident, was found beneath the sumptuousness, next to the skin, an under-robe of sackcloth. If that is admitted, then Milton can keep his claim to austerity in spite of his epic fullness and Aeschylus in spite of the exultant daring of his images and the rich colour of his language. Dante is, I think, the perfect type of austerity in poetry, standing between the two extremes and combining the most sustained severity of expression with a precise power and fullness in the language which gives the sense of packed riches — no mere bareness anywhere.

But after all exclusive standards are out of place in poetry; there is room for all kinds and all methods. Shakespeare was to the French classicists a drunken barbarian of genius; but his spontaneous exuberance has lifted him higher than their willed severity of classical perfection. All depends on the kind one aims at — expressing what is in oneself — and an inspired faithfulness to the law of perfection in that kind. That needs some explanation, perhaps, — but I have here perforce to put a dash and finish —

8 October 1932

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I said that Aeschylus like Milton was austere *au fond* — there is as in Dante a high serious restrained power behind all they write; but the outward form in Milton is grandiose, copious, lavish of strength and sweep, in Aeschylus bold, high-imaged, strong in colour, in Dante full of concise, packed and significantly forceful turn and phrase. These external riches might seem not restrained enough to the purists of austerity: they want the manner and not the *fond* only to be impeccably austere. I did not mean that Dante reached the summit of austerity in this sense; in fact I said he stood between the two extremes of bare austerity and sumptuousness of language. But even in his language there is a sense of *tapasyā*, of concentrated restraint in his expressive force. Amal in his translation [*from Dante*] has let himself go in the direction of eloquence more than Dante who is too succinct for eloquence, and he uses also a mystical turn of phrase which is not Dante's — yet he has got something of the spirit in the language, something of Dante's concentrated force of expression into his lines. You have spread yourself out more even than Amal, but still there is the Dantesque in your lines also, — very much so, I should say; with only this difference that Dante would have put it into fewer words than you do. It is the Dantesque stretching itself out a little — more large-limbed, permitting itself more space.

Aeschylus' manner cannot be described as *ucchvāsa*, at least in the sense given to it in my letter. He is not carefully restrained and succinct in his language like Dante, but there is a certain royal measure even in his boldness of colour and image which

has in it the strength of *tapasyā* and cannot be called *ucchvāsa*. I suppose in Bengali this term is used a little indiscriminately for things that are not quite the same in spirit. If mere use of bold image and fullness of expression, epithet, colour, splendour of phrase is *ucchvāsa*, apart from the manner of their use, I would say that austerity and *ucchvāsa* of a certain kind are perfectly compatible. At any rate two-thirds of the poetry hitherto recognised as the best in different literatures comes of a combination of these two elements. If I find time I shall one day try to explain this point with texts to support it.

I don't know the Bengali for austerity. গাভীর্য and other kindred things are or can be elements of austerity, but are not austerity itself. *Anucchvāsa* is not accurate; one can be free from উচ্ছ্বাস without being austere. The soul of austerity in poetry as in Yoga is আত্মসংযম all the rest is variable, the outward quality of the austerity itself may be variable. 9 October 1932

Sentimentality and Clichés

It is all right as it is except the first lines, “. . . so grief-hearted . . . *strangely* lone”, strike at once the romantically sentimental note of more than a hundred years ago which is dead and laughed out of court nowadays. Especially in writing anything about vital love, avoid like the plague anything that descends into the sentimental or, worse, the namby-pamby. 30 May 1932

*

“Young heart”, “thrilled companionship”, “warm hour . . . lip to lip”, “passionate unease” are here poorly sensuous *clichés* — they or any one or two of them might have been carried off in a more moved and inspired style, gathering colour from their surroundings or even a new and rich life; but here they stand out in a fashionable dressed-up insufficiency. This secret of fusing all in such a white heat or colour heat of sincerity of inspiration that even the common or often-used phrases and ideas catch fire and burn brilliantly with the rest is one of the secrets of the true poetic afflatus. But if you stop short of that inspiration and

begin to write only efficient poetry, then you must be careful about your “P”s and “Q”s.

19 March 1932

Undignified Words

I dispute the legitimacy of the comment.⁴ It is based on a conventional objection to undignified and therefore presumably unpoetic words and images — an objection which has value only when the effect is uncouth or trivial, but cannot be accepted otherwise as a valid rule. Obviously, it might be difficult to bring in “bobbing” in an epic or other “high” style, although I suppose Milton could have managed it and one remembers the famous controversy about Hugo’s “*mouchoir*”. But in poetry of a mystic (occult or spiritual) kind this does not count. The aim is to bring up a vivid suggestion of the thing seen and some significance of the form, movement, etc. through which one can get at the life behind and its meaning; a familiar adjective here can serve its purpose very well as a touch in the picture and there are occasions when no other could be as true and living or give so well the precise movement needed.

It is the same with the metre — an identical principle applies, a natural kinship between the subject or substance of the poem and its soul-movement. For instance, a certain lightness, a suggestion of faery dance or faery motion may be needed as one element and this would be lost by the choice of a heavier more dignified rhythm. After all, subject to a proper handling, that is the first important desideratum, an essential harmony between the metrical rhythm and the thing it has to express.

5 February 1932

Sensuousness and Vulgarity

পূর্ণক্ৰম, if it means the breasts, would be described in English as sensuous but not as vulgar. The word vulgar is only used for coarse and crude expressions of the sensual, trivial or ugly. But

⁴ Someone commented, apropos of a poem written by the correspondent: “There is one adjective I take objection to, ‘bobbing globelets’.” — Ed.

it does not seem to me that it should naturally be taken = breast, but indicate the whole vital and physical being regarded as a vessel or jar which can be filled with honey or water or poison. Nothing vulgar in that.

30 January 1937

Erotic Poetry

An expression of the lower vital lashed to imaginative fury is likely to produce not poetry but simply “sound and fury”, — “tearing a passion to tatters” — and in its full furiousness may even rise to rant and fustian. Erotic poetry more than any other needs the restraint of beauty and form and measure, otherwise it risks being no longer poetic but merely pathologic.

14 June 1932

Poetry and Philosophy

What does your correspondent mean by “philosophy” in a poem? Of course if one sets out to write a metaphysical argument or treatise in verse like the Greek Empedocles or the Roman Lucretius, it is a risky business and is likely to land you into prosaic poetry which is a less pardonable mixture than poetic prose! Even when philosophising in a less perilous way, one has to be careful not to be flat or heavy. It is obviously easier to be poetic when singing about a skylark than when one tries to weave a robe of verse to clothe the attributes of the Brahman! But that does not mean that there can be no spiritual thought or no expression of truth in poetry; there is no great poet who has not tried to philosophise. Shelley wrote about the skylark, but he also wrote about the Brahman. “Life, like a dome of many-coloured glass” is as good poetry as “Hail to thee, blithe Spirit!”. There are flights of unsurpassable poetry in the Gita and the Upanishads. These rigid dicta are always excessive and there is no reason why a poet should allow the expression of his personality or the spirit within him or his whole poetic mind to be clipped, cabined or stifled by any theories or “thou shalt not”s of that character.

7 December 1931

I can take no stock in your friend's theories — at that rate half the world's poetry would have to disappear. And what is meant by philosophy — there is none in your poem, there is only vision and emotion of spiritual experience, which is a different thing altogether. Truth and thought and sight cast into forms of beauty cannot be banished in that cavalier way. Music and art and poetry have striven from the beginning to express the vision of the deepest and greatest things and not the things of the surface only, and it will be so as long as there are poetry and art and music.

27 February 1932

*

The only remedy is to extend the philosophy through the whole poem so as to cure the disparateness. Also it must be a figured philosophy. Philosophy can become poetry if it ceases to be intellectual and abstract in statement and becomes figured and carries a stamp of poetic emotion and vision.

14 June 1938

Grades of Perfection in Poetic Style

Grades of Perfection in Poetry

I suppose “inevitability of expression” consists of two things producing one effect: (1) the rightness of individual words and phrases, (2) the rightness of the general lingual reconstruction of the poetic vision — that is, the manner, syntactical and psychological, of whole sentences and their coordination.

To the two requisites you mention which are technical, two others have to be added, a certain smiling sureness of touch and inner breath of perfect perfection, born not made, in the words themselves, and a certain absolute winging movement in the rhythm. Without an inevitable rhythm there can be no inevitable wording. If you understand all that, you are lucky. But how to explain the inexplicable, something that is self-existent? That simply means an absoluteness, one might say, an inexplicably perfect and in-fitting thusness and thereness and thatness and everything-elseness so satisfying in every way as to be unalterable. All perfection is not necessarily inevitability. I have tried to explain in *The Future Poetry* — very unsuccessfully I am afraid — that there are different grades of perfection in poetry: adequateness, effectivity, illumination of language, inspiredness — finally, inevitability. These are things one has to learn to feel, one can’t analyse.

All the styles, “adequate”, “effective”, etc. can be raised to inevitability in their own line.¹

The supreme inevitability is something more even than that, a speech overwhelmingly sheer, pure and true, a quintessential essence of convincingly perfect utterance. That goes out of

¹ This item is composed of parts of three letters that were typed together and revised by Sri Aurobindo in that form. This sentence is from a letter reproduced in full on page 191. — Ed.

all classifications and is unanalysable. Instances would include the most different kinds of style — Keats’ “magic casements”, Wordsworth’s [*lines on*] Newton and his “fields of sleep”, Shakespeare’s “Macbeth has murdered sleep”, Homer’s descent of Apollo from Olympus, Virgil’s “Sunt lachrimae rerum” and his “O passi graviora”.

16 September 1934

*

You write, in regard to a poem of mine, “it is difficult to draw the line” between the illumined and inspired styles. Was that a general statement, or was it meant to apply only in that particular instance? I suppose there must be some characteristic in the rhythm and the manner of expression to mark out the inspired style.

It is often a little difficult. The illumined is on the way to the inspired and a little more intensity of vision and expression is enough to make the difference.

24 September 1934

Grades of Perfection and Planes of Inspiration

Is there any coordination between the differences of style and the different planes of inspiration?

I don’t think so — unless one can say that the effective style comes from the higher mind, the illumined from the illumined mind, the inspired from the plane of intuition. But I don’t know whether that would stand at all times — especially when each style reaches its inevitable power.

23 September 1934

*

If one can write from the highest plane, i.e. overmind and supermind plane — as you have done in *Savitri* — is it evidently going to be greater poetry than any other poetry?

Nobody ever spoke of supermind plane poetry. Is *Savitri* all from overhead plane? I don’t know.

You lay down certain features of overhead poetry, e.g. greater depth and height of spiritual vision, inner life and experience

and character of rhythm and expression. But it won't necessarily outshine Shakespeare in poetic excellence.

Obviously if properly done it would have a deeper and rarer substance, but would not be necessarily greater in poetic excellence.

You say also that for overhead poetry technique, it must be the right word and no other in the right place, right sounds and no others in a design of sound that cannot be changed even a little. Well, is that not what is called sheer inevitability which is the sole criterion of highest poetry?

Yes, but mental and vital poetry can be inevitable also. Only in O.P. there must be a rightness throughout which is not the case elsewhere — for without this inevitability it is no longer fully O.P., while without this sustained inevitability there can be fine mental and vital poetry. But practically that means O.P. comes usually by bits only, not in a mass.

You may say that in overhead poetry expression of spiritual vision is more important. True, but why can't it be clothed in as fine poetry as in the case of Shakespeare? The highest source of inspiration will surely bring in all the characteristics of highest poetry, no?

It can, but it is more difficult to get. It can be as fine poetry as Shakespeare's if there is the equal genius, but it needn't by the fact of being O.P. become finer.

17 May 1937

Examples of Grades of Perfection in Poetic Style

Examples from Classical and Mediaeval Writers

Would you please tell me where in Homer the “descent of Apollo” occurs?¹

It is in the first fifty or a hundred lines of the first book of the Iliad.²

I don't suppose Chapman or Pope have rendered it adequately.

Of course not — nobody could translate that — they have surely made a mess of it.

Homer's passage translated into English would sound perfectly ordinary. He gets the best part of his effect from his rhythm. Translated it would run merely like this, “And he descended from the peaks of Olympus, wroth at heart, bearing on his shoulders arrows and doubly pent-in quiver, and there arose the clang of his silver bow as he moved, and he came made like unto the night.” His words too are quite simple but the vowelation and the rhythm make the clang of the silver bow go smashing through the world into universes beyond while the last words give a most august and formidable impression of godhead.

Would you consider this line of Dante's as miraculously inevitable as Virgil's “O passi graviora”?

e venni dal martiro a questa pace

That is rather the adequate inevitable.

¹ See page 186 — Ed.

² The passage begins with line 44 of the first book of the Iliad: bē de kat' Oulumpoio karēnōn chōomenos kēr. — Ed.

And, is it possible to achieve a prose-inevitability — with rhythm and everything as perfectly wonderful as in poetry? Take, for instance (I quote from memory):

O mors quam amara est memoria tua homini pacem
habenti in substantiis suis.

or

Fulcite me floribus stipate me malis quia amore languo

or

Et his malis omnibus mors furibunda succedit.

I don't think any of these has at all the same note as poetry gets — it is fine writing, but not the inevitable. 18 September 1934

*

What exactly is Dante's style? Is it the forceful adequate (of course at an "inevitable" pitch)? Or is it a mixture of the adequate and the effective? A line like —

e venni dal martiro a questa pace —

is evidently adequate; but has this the same style —

sí come quando Marsia traesti
della vagina delle membra sue?

The "forceful adequate" might apply to much of his writing, but much else is pure inevitable; elsewhere it is the inspired style as in the last lines quoted. I would not call the other line merely adequate; it is much more than that. Dante's simplicity comes from a penetrating directness of poetic vision, it is not the simplicity of an adequate style. 3 November 1936

Examples from Amal Kiran and Sri Aurobindo

I should like to know whether, when you call a poem very good, very fine, very beautiful, very powerful, or magnificent, you mean that it is inevitable — at least in its total impression, whatever slight declivities there may be in one or two places.

Not necessarily.

And does the difference of epithet in the above descriptions indicate levels of excellence or merely kinds of excellence on the same level?

Rather kinds than levels.

Also, if you say that a poem or part of it is very effective, do you always have in mind that which you have termed “effectivity” in the grade of perfections, as distinct from “adequateness”, “illumination of language”, “inspiredness” and “inevitability”?

No, I am not usually thinking of that classification.

For example, what do you think of these lines?

. . . For I have viewed,
Astir within my clay’s engulfing sleep,
An alien astonishment of light!
Let me be merged with its unsoundable deep
And mirror in futile farness the full height
Of a heaven barred for ever to my distress,
Rather than hoard life’s happy littleness!

This is indeed an example of the effective style at its best, that is to say rising to some touch of illumination, especially in the second, fourth and sixth lines. 16 September 1934

*

Do you find the lines of this sonnet any good?

Seeing You walk our little ways, they wonder
That I who scorn the common loves of life
Should kneel to You in absolute surrender,
Deeming Your visible perfection wife
Unto my spirit’s immortality.
They think I have changed one weakness for another,
Because they mark not the new birth of me —

This body which by You, the Mystic Mother,
Has now become a child of my vast soul!
Loving Your feet's earth-visitation, I
Find each heart-throb miraculously flower
Out of the unplumbable God-mystery
Behind dark clay, and hour by dreamful hour,
Upbear that fragrance like an aureole.

Exceedingly good. Here you have got to inevitability. I forgot to say that all the styles "adequate", "effective" etc. can be raised to inevitability in their own line.³ The octet here is adequateness raised to inevitability except the fourth and fifth lines in which the effective undergoes the same transformation. In the sestet on the other hand it is the illumined style that becomes inevitable.

17 September 1934

*

What kind of style are these lines?

Is the keen voice of tuneful ecstasy
To be denied its winged omnipotence,
Its ancient kinship to immensity
And the swift suns?

This seems to me the effective style at a high pitch.

Or these?

But plunged o'er difficult gorge and prone ravine
And rivers thundering between dim walls,
Driven by immense desire, until he came
To dreadful silence of the peaks and trod
Regions as vast and lonely as his love.

This is also high-pitch effective except the last line which is in the inspired style — perhaps!

23 September 1934

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³ This sentence was incorporated in the composite letter printed on pages 185–86, which was revised in that form by Sri Aurobindo. — Ed.

What about these lines?

Far-visaged wanderer, dost Thou rejoice
Straining towards the empty-hearted gloom
To kiss the cold lips of eternity?

Not with sage calm but thrilled vast hands I claim
The unfathomed dark which round my spirit lies —
And touch immortal rapturous loveliness!

All effective-illuminated.

O star of creation pure and free,
Halo-moon of ecstasy unknown,
Storm-breath of the soul-change yet to be,
Ocean self enraptured and alone!

Can't say.

Withdrawn in a lost attitude of prayer.

Illuminated passing into the inspired.

24 September 1934

*

I feel my poem *The Triumph of Dante* has now been sufficiently quintessenced. If it satisfies you, will you make whatever analysis is possible of its inspirational qualities?

These arms, stretched through ten hollow years, have
brought her

Back to my heart! A light, a hush immense
Falls suddenly upon my voice of tears,
Out of a sky whose each blue moment bears
The sun-touch of a rapt omnipotence.
Ineffable the secrecies supreme
Pass and elude my gaze — an exquisite
Failure to hold some nectarous Infinite!
The uncertainties of time grow shadowless
And never but with startling loveliness,
A white shiver of breeze on moonlit water,
Flies the chill thought of death across my dream.

For, how shall earth be dark when human eyes
Mirror the love whose smile is paradise? —
A smile that misers not its golden store
But gives itself and yearns to give yet more,
As though God's light were inexhaustible
Not for His joy but this one heart to fill!

There are three different tones or pitches of inspiration in the poem, each in its own manner reaching inevitability. The first seven lines up to “gaze” bear as a whole the stamp of a high elevation of thought and vision — height and illumination lifted up still farther by the Intuition to its own inspired level; one passage (lines 3, 4) seems to me almost to touch in its tone of expression an overmind seeing. But here “A light, a hush . . . a voice of tears” anticipates the second movement by an element of subtle inner intensity in it. This inner intensity — where a deep secret intimacy of feeling and seeing replaces the height and large luminosity — characterises the rest of the first part. This passage has a seizing originality and authenticity in it — it is here that one gets a pure inevitability. In the last lines the intuition descends towards the mental plane with a less revelatory power in it but more precise in its illumination. That is the difference between sheer vision and thought. But the poem is exceedingly fine as a whole; the close also is of the first order. 16 November 1936

Examples from Harindranath Chattopadhyaya

Your satisfaction with today's poems is certainly justified, for they are very fine — they are among the best. The conciseness and clarity — which, by the way, were always there in lyric and sonnet — have grown very rapidly and there is nothing here of their opposites. To quote particular lines is difficult, but I may instance

a tremulous drop of rain
Silverly slipped over the voiceless hill

as an example of some kind of inevitability, — for there are many kinds, — or again in another kind

His marvellous experiment of wings
Crowned with a rich assurance of the height;

or, in yet another

Unmemory yourself of sign and mark
Which draw you still towards the greying earth.

The mark of this inevitability or perfect perfection is the saying of a thing that has to be said with such a felicity of phrase and rhythm that it seems as if it could not be better or otherwise said in the highest poetic way, it sounds final and irrevocable. All in a poem cannot be like that; one has to be satisfied with a more ordinary perfection — some critics even hold that this should be so as a matter of deliberate technique so as to bring the greater moments of the poetry into relief — all ought not to be Himalayan peaks clustering one upon the other, there must be valleys, plains, plateaus from which they rise. But in any case these moments lift poetical expression to its highest possibilities. There are other lines that could be quoted, but these will suffice.

Examples from Nirodbaran

About yesterday's poem . . . I don't see what beauty is there to make you mark certain lines twice — e.g. "Into a heaven of light", which is a very simple, ordinary sort of line.

There is probably a defect in your solar plexus which makes it refuse to thrill unless it receives a strong punch from poetry — an ornamental, romantic or pathetic punch. But there is also a poetry which expresses things with an absolute truth but without effort, simply and easily, without a word in excess or any laying on of colour, only just the necessary. That kind of achievement is considered as among the greatest things poetry can do.

A phrase, word or line may be quite simple and ordinary and yet taken with another phrase, line or word become the perfect thing.

A line like "Life that is deep and wonder-vast" has what I have called the inevitable quality; with a perfect simplicity and

straightforwardness it expresses something in a definitive and perfect way that cannot be bettered; so does “lost in a breath of sound” with less simplicity but with the same inevitability. I don’t mean that highly coloured poetry cannot be absolutely inevitable, it can, e.g. Shakespeare’s “In cradle of the rude imperious surge” and many others. But most often highly coloured poetry attracts too much attention to the colour and its brilliancy so that the thing in itself is less felt than the magnificence of its dress. All kinds are legitimate in poetry. I only wanted to point out that poetry can be great or perfect even if it uses simple or ordinary expressions, e.g. Dante simply says “In His will is our peace” and in writing that in Italian produces one of the greatest lines in all poetic literature.

1 April 1938

Section Four

Translation

Translation: Theory

Literalness and Freedom

A translator is not necessarily bound to the exact word and letter of the original he chooses; he can make his own poem out of it, if he likes, and that is what is very often done. This is all the more legitimate since we find that literal translations more completely betray than those that are reasonably free — turning life into death and poetic power into poverty and flatness. It is not many who can carry over the spirit of a poem, the characteristic power of its expression and the turn of its rhythmical movement from one language to another, especially when the tongues in question are so alien in temperament to each other as English and Bengali. When that can be done, there is the perfect translation.

*

The proper rule about literalness, I suppose, is that one should keep as close as possible to the original provided the result is that the translation does not read like a translation but like an original poem in Bengali and as far as possible as if it were the original poem originally written in Bengali. Whether that ideal is always realisable is another matter. When it can't be done one has to dodge or deviate. I admit that I have not practised what I preached, — whenever I translated, I was careless of the hurt feelings of the original text and transmogrified it without mercy into whatever my fancy chose. But that is a high and mighty criminality which one ought not to imitate. Latterly I have tried to be more moral in my ways, I don't know with what success. But anyhow it is a case of "Do what I preach and avoid what I practise."

10 October 1934

Translation of Prose into Poetry

I think it is quite legitimate to translate poetic prose into poetry; I have done it myself when I translated *The Hero and the Nymph* on the ground that the beauty of Kalidasa's prose is best rendered by poetry in English, or at least that I found myself best able to render it in that way. Your critic's rule seems to me rather too positive; like all rules it may stand in principle in a majority of cases, but in the minority (which is the best part, for the less is often greater than the more) it need not stand at all. Pushed too far, it would mean that Homer and Virgil can be translated only in hexameters. Again, what of the reverse cases — the many fine prose translations of poets so much better and more akin to the spirit of the original than any poetic version of them yet made? One need not go farther than Tagore's English version of his *Gitanjali*. If poetry can be translated so admirably (and therefore legitimately) into prose, why should not prose be translated legitimately (and admirably) into poetry? After all, rules are made more for the convenience of critics than as a binding law for creators.

9 November 1931

Translation: Practice

Remarks on Some Translations

I do not think it is the ideas that make the distinction between European and Indian tongues — it is the turn of the language. By taking over the English turn of language into Bengali one may very well fail to produce the effect of the original because this turn will seem outlandish in the new tongue, but one can always by giving a right turn of language more easily acceptable to the Bengali mind and ear make the idea as natural and effective as in the original; or even if the idea is strange to the Bengali mind one can by the turn of language acclimatise it, make it acceptable. The original thought in the passage you are translating¹ may be reduced to something like this: “Here is all this beautiful world, the stars, the forest, the birds — I have not yet lived long enough to know them all or for them to know me so that there shall be friendship and familiarity between us and now I am thus untimely called away to die.” That is a perfectly human feeling, quite as possible, more easily possible, to an Indian than to a European (witness Kalidasa’s *Shakuntala*) and can very well be acceptable. But the turn given it in English is abrupt and bold though quite forcible and going straight home — in Bengali it may sound strange and not go home. If so you have to find a turn in Bengali for the idea which will be as forcible and direct; not here only but everywhere this should be the rule. Naturally one should not go too far away from the original and say something quite different in substance but, subject to that limitation, any necessary freedom is quite admissible. October 1934

*

¹ *I have not numbered half the brilliant birds
In one green forest . . .
Nor have I seen the stars so very often
That I should die.*

— *Sri Aurobindo*, Love and Death

It is not that I find the translations here satisfactory in the full sense of the word, but they are better than I expected. There is none of them, not even the best, which I would pronounce to be quite the thing. But this “quite the thing” is so rare a *trouvaille*, it is as illusive as the capture of eternity in the hours. As for catching the subtleties, the difficulty lies in one supreme faculty of the English language which none other I know possesses, the ease with which it finds the packed allusive turn, the suggestive unexpressed, the door opening on things ineffable. Bengali, like French, is very clear and luminous and living and expressive, but to such clear languages the expression of the inexpressible is not so easy — one has to go out of one’s way to find it. Witness Mallarmé’s wrestlings with the French language to find the symbolic expression — the right turn of speech for what is behind the veil. I think that even in these languages the power to find it with less effort must come; but meanwhile there is the difference.

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Your translations.

1. Translation of Baudelaire,² very good, third and fourth verse superb. Literalness here does not matter so long as you are faithful to the spirit and the sense. But I don’t think you are justified in inserting ইন্দ্রিয়ের — *volupté* here means bold and intense pleasure of the higher vital, not the lesser pleasure of the senses, — it is the *volupté* you do actually get when you rise, whether inwardly or outwardly like the aviators into the boundless heights.

2. Shelley.³ Good poetry, but as a translation vulnerable in the head and the tail. In the head because, it seems to me that your সে ধন and তা বলি lays or may lay itself open to the construction that human love is a rich precious thing which the poet unfortunately does not possess and it is only because of this deplorable poverty that he offers the psychic devotion, less warm and rich and desirable: but still in its own way rare and

² *Élévation* (*in Les fleurs du mal*) — *Ed.*

³ One word is too often profaned — *Ed.*

valuable! I exaggerate perhaps, but, still, if it is at all open to a meaning of this kind, then it says the very reverse of Shelley's intended significance. For in the English "what men call love" is strongly depreciatory, and can only mean something inferior, something that is poor and not rich, not truly love. Shelley says, in substance, "Human vital love is a poor inferior thing, a counterfeit of true love, which *I* cannot offer to *you*. But there is a greater thing, a true psychic love, all worship and devotion, which men do not readily value, being led away by the vital glamour, but which the heavens do not reject, though it is offered from something so far below them, so maimed and ignorant and sorrow-vexed as the human consciousness which is to the divine consciousness as the moth to the star, as night to the day. And will not you accept this from me, you who in your nature are kin to the heavens, you who seem to me to have something of the divine nature, to be something bright and happy and pure, far above the 'sphere of our sorrow'?" Of course all that is not said, but only suggested — but it is obviously the spirit of the poem. As to the tail, I doubt whether your last line brings out the sense of "something afar from the sphere of our sorrow". If I make these criticisms at all, it is not because your version is not good, but because you have accustomed me to find in you a power of rendering the spirit and sense of your original while turning it into fine poetry in its new tongue which I would not expect or exact from any other translator.

3. Amal.⁴ I think here you have not so much rendered the English lines into Bengali as translated Amal into Dilip. Is not that the sense of your plea for Bengali colour and simile? Amal's lines are not easily translatable, least of all, I imagine, into Bengali. There is in them a union or rather fusion of high severity of speech with exaltation and both with a pervading intense sweetness which it is almost impossible to transfer bodily without loss into another language. There is no word in excess, none that could have been added or changed without spoiling the expression, every word just the right revelatory one — no colour,

⁴ This errant life (*see page 501–02*) — *Ed.*

no ornamentation, but a sort of suppressed burning glow; no similes, but images which have been fused inseparably into the substance of the thought and feeling — the thought itself perfectly developed, not idea added to idea at the will of the fancy, but perfectly interrelated and linked together like the limbs of an organic body. It is high poetic style in its full perfection and nothing of all that is transferable. You have taken his last line and put in a lotus face and made divine love bloom in it, — a pretty image, but how far from the glowing impassioned severity of phrase, “And mould thy love into a human face”! So with your মধুর গোপনে and the “heart to heart words intimate”. I do not suppose it could have been done otherwise, however, or done better; and what you write now is always good poetry — which is what I suppose Tagore meant to say when he wrote “তোমার আর ভয় নাই”.

And after all I have said nothing about Huxley or Baude-
laire!

11 July 1931

*

Your translations are very good, but much more poetic than the originals: some would consider that a fault, but I do not. The songs of these Bhaktas (Kabir and others) are very much in a manner and style that might be called the “hieratic primitive”, like a picture all in intense line, but only two or three essential lines at a time; the only colour is the hue of a single and very simple strong spiritual idea or emotion or experience. It is hardly possible to carry that over into modern poetry; the result would probably be, instead of the bare sincerity of the original, some kind of ostensible artificial artlessness that would not be at all the same thing.

I have no objection to your substituting Krishna for Rama, and if Kabir makes any, which is not likely, you have only to sing to him softly, “*Rām Shyām judā mat karo bhāī*”, and he will be silenced at once.

The bottom reason for the preference of Rama or Krishna is not sectarian but psychological. The Northerner prefers Rama because the Northerner is the mental, moral and social man in

his type, and Rama is a congenial Avatar for that type; the Bengali, emotional and intuitive, finds all that very dry and plumps for Krishna. I suspect that is the whole mystery of the choice. Apart from these temperamental preferences and turning to essentials, one might say that Rama is the Divine accepting and glorifying a mould of the human mental, while Krishna seems rather to break the human moulds in order to create others from the higher planes; for he comes down direct from the Overmind and hammers with its forces on the mind and vital and heart of man to change and liberate and divinise them. At least that is one way of looking at their difference. March 1932

*

If your translations are read as independent poems they are very beautiful, but they have more of the true “eclogue” than Baudelaire. To be literal (grammatically) is hardly possible in a poetic version and the style of Baudelaire is not easy to transcribe into another language. There is an effect of masculine ease and grace which is really the result of the verbal economy and restraint of which you speak and has therefore at its base a kind of strong austerity supporting the charm and apparent ease — it is very difficult to get all that in together. It is what has happened in your translation — one element has been stressed at the expense of the other. Certain elements that are not Baudelaire have got in here and there, as in the lines you point out. On the other hand at other places by departing from closeness to the original you have got near to the Baudelaire manner at its strongest, e.g.

I'd have my eyrie hard against the sky.

20 March 1934

*

There is no question of defective poetry or lines. There are two ways of rendering a poem from one language into another — one is to keep strictly to the manner and turn of the original, the other to take its spirit, sense and imagery and reproduce them freely so as to suit the new language. Amal's poem is exceedingly

succinct, simply-direct and compact in word, form, rhythm, yet full of suggestion — it would perhaps not be possible to do the same thing in Bengali; it is necessary to use an ampler form, and this is what you have done. Your translation is very beautiful; only, side by side with the original, one looks like a delicate miniature, the other like a rich enlargement. If you compare his

Where is it calling
The eyes of night

with the corresponding lines in your poem, you can see the difference. I did not mean to suggest that it was necessary to change anything. 11 July 1937

The English Bible

The English Bible is a translation, but it ranks among the finest pieces of literature in the world. 27 February 1936

Part Two

On His Own and Others' Poetry

Section One

On His Poetry and Poetic Method

Inspiration, Effort, Development

Writing and Rewriting

It will be valuable knowledge to learn how *Six Poems* were written and the three recent sonnets and how *Savitri* is being led forward to its consummation.

There is no invariable how — except that I receive from above my head and receive changes and corrections from above without any initiation by myself or labour of the brain. Even if I change a hundred times, the mind does not work at that, it only receives. Formerly it used not to be so; the mind was always labouring at the stuff of an unshaped formation. The sonnets by the way are not recent, except *Nirvana* — two are some years old already. In any case, the poems come as a stream, beginning at the first line and ending at the last — only some remain with one or two changes only, others have to be recast if the first inspiration was an inferior one. *Savitri* is a work by itself unlike all the others. I made some eight or ten recasts of it originally under the old insufficient inspiration. Afterwards I am altogether rewriting it, concentrating on the first Book and working on it over and over again with the hope that every line may be of a perfect perfection — but I have hardly any time now for such work.

31 October 1934

*

Harin used to write ten or twelve poems in a day or any number more. It takes me usually a day or two days to write and perfect one or three days even, or if very inspired, I get two short ones out, and have perhaps to revise the next day. Another poet will be like Virgil writing nine lines a day and spending all the rest of his time polishing and polishing. A fourth will be like Manmohan

as I knew him setting down half lines and fragments and taking 2 weeks or 2 months to put them into shape. The time does not matter, getting it done and the quality alone matter. So forge ahead and don't be discouraged by the prodigious rapidity of Nishikanta.

8 December 1935

*

If Harin could receive his inspiration without any necessity for rewriting, why not you?

So could I if I wrote every day and had nothing else to do and did not care what the level of inspiration was so long as I produced something exciting.

Do you have to rewrite because of some obstruction in the way of the inspiration?

The only obstruction is that I have no time to put myself constantly into the poetic creative posture and if I write at all have to get out something in the intervals of quite another concentration.

With your silent consciousness, it should be possible to draw from the highest planes with the slightest pull.

The highest planes are not so accommodating as all that. If they were so, why should it be so difficult to bring down and organise the supermind in the physical consciousness? What happy-go-lucky fancy-web-spinning ignoramuses you all are. You speak of silence, consciousness, overmental, supramental etc. as if they were so many electric buttons you have only to press and there you are. It may be one day but meanwhile I have to discover everything about the working of all possible modes of electricity, all the laws, possibilities, perils etc., construct modes of connection and communication, make the whole far-wiring system, try to find out how it can be made fool-proof and all that in the course of a single lifetime. And I have to do it while my blessed disciples are firing off their gay or gloomy *a priori* reasonings at me from a position of entire irresponsibility

and expecting me to divulge everything to them not in hints —
but at length. Lord God *in omnibus!* 29 March 1936

*

Every time I complain of difficulty in writing, you quote
the names of Milton and Virgil, but you forget they had no
Supramental Avatar or Guru to push them on.

Considering that the Supramental Avatar himself is quite inca-
pable of doing what Nishikanta or Jyoti do, i.e. producing a
poem or several poems a day, why do you bring him in? In
England indeed I could write a lot every day but most of that
has gone to the Waste Paper Basket. 13 November 1936

*

A great bother and an uninteresting business, this chiselling,
I find. But perhaps it is very pleasant to you, as you cast and
recast *ad infinitum*, we hear, poetry or prose.

Poetry only, not prose. And in poetry only one poem, *Savitri*.
My smaller poems are written off at once and if any changes are
to be made, it is done the same day or the next day and very
rapidly done. 9 May 1937

*

After so much trouble and pain, yesterday's poem was
maimed! What a capricious Goddess is the Muse! But how
partial to you!

Not at all. I have to labour much more than you, except for
sonnets which come easily and short lyrics which need only a
single revision. But for the rest I have to rewrite 20 or 30 times.
Moreover I write only at long intervals. 3 October 1938

Pressure of Creative Formation

I know very well these pressures of a mental Power or creative
formation to express itself and be fulfilled. When it presses like
that, there is nothing to do but to let it have way, so as to leave

the mind unoccupied and clear; otherwise it will be pushed two ways and not in the condition of ease and clearness necessary for the concentration.

Inspiration and the Silent Mind

When I ask for “advice” I want to know how to direct my consciousness. Should I concentrate on anything in particular or just quiet my mind and turn it upwards and inwards? And I should like you also to tell me why it is that poetry seems to have fled.

I don't know why poetry has fled you — it seems to me to have intervals in its visits to you very often, is it not? I used to have the same malady myself when I was writing poetry. I rather think it is fairly common: Dilip and Nishikanta who can write whenever they feel inclined are rare birds, now-infant phenomena.

I don't know about the direction of consciousness. My own method is not to quiet the mind, for it is eternally quiet, but to turn it upward and inward. You, I suppose, would have to quiet it first which is not always easy. You have tried it?

5 October 1936

*

Do you mean that the method you advised [*to “sit in vacant meditation and see what comes from the intuitive Gods”*] can really do something?

It was a joke. But all the same that is the way things are supposed to come. When the mind becomes decently quiet, an intuition perfect or imperfect is supposed to come hopping along and jump in and look round the place. Of course, it is not the only way.

I understand that you wrote many things in that way, but people also say that Gods — no, Goddesses — used to come and tell you the meaning of the Vedas.

People talk a stupendous amount of rubbish. I wrote everything

I have written since 1909 in that way, i.e. out of or rather through a silent mind and not only a silent mind but a silent consciousness. But Gods and Goddesses had nothing to do with the matter.

22 October 1935

Reading, Yogic Force and the Development of Style

To manufacture your style, you will hardly deny that your enormous reading contributed to it.

Excuse me! I never manufactured my style; style with any life in it cannot be manufactured. It is born and grows like any other living thing. Of course it was fed on my reading which was not enormous — I have read comparatively little — (there are people in India who have read fifty times or a hundred times as much as I have) only I have made much out of that little. For the rest it is Yoga that has developed my style by the development of consciousness, fineness and accuracy of thought and vision, increasing inspiration and an increasing intuitive discrimination (self-critical) of right thought, word form, just image and figure.

29 October 1935

*

Methinks you are making just a little too much of Yogic Force. Its potency as regards matters spiritual is undeniable, but for artistic or intellectual things one can't be so sure about its effectiveness. Take Dilip's case; one could very well say: "Why give credit to the Force? Had he been as assiduous, sincere etc. elsewhere, he would have done just the same."

Will you explain to me how Dilip who could not write a single good poem and had no power over rhythm and metre before he came here, suddenly, not after long "assiduous" efforts, blossomed into a poet, rhythmist and metrist after he came here? Why was Tagore dumbfounded by the "lame man throwing away his crutches and running freely" and surely on the paths of rhythm? Why was it that I who never understood or cared for painting, suddenly in a single hour by an opening of vision

got the eye to see and the mind of understanding about colour, line and design? How was it that I who was unable to understand and follow a metaphysical argument and whom a page of Kant or Hegel or Hume or even Berkeley left either dazed and uncomprehending and fatigued or totally uninterested because I could not fathom or follow, suddenly began writing pages of the stuff as soon as I started the *Arya* and am now reputed to be a great philosopher? How is it that at a time when I felt it difficult to produce more than a paragraph of prose from time to time and more than a rare poem, short and laboured, perhaps one in two months, suddenly after concentrating and practising Pranayama daily began to write pages and pages in a single day and kept sufficient faculty to edit a big daily paper and afterwards to write 60 pages of philosophy every month? Kindly reflect a little and don't talk facile nonsense. Even if a thing can be done in a moment or a few days by Yoga which would ordinarily take a long, "assiduous, sincere and earnest" cultivation, that would of itself show the power of the Yoga force. But here a faculty that did not exist appears quickly and spontaneously or impotence changes into highest potency or an obstructed talent changes with equal rapidity into fluent and facile sovereignty. If you deny that evidence, no evidence will convince you, because you are determined to think otherwise.

So about your style too, it is difficult to understand how much the Force has contributed towards its perfection.

It may be difficult for you to understand, but it is not difficult for me, since I have followed my own evolution from stage to stage with a perfect vigilance and following up of the process. I have made no endeavours in writing. I have simply left the higher Power to work and when it did not work I made no efforts at all. It was in the old intellectual days that I sometimes tried to force things, but not after I started the development of poetry and prose by Yoga. Let me remind you also that when I was writing the *Arya* and also since whenever I write these letters or replies, I never think or seek for expressions or try to write in

good style; it is out of a silent mind that I write whatever comes ready-shaped from above. Even when I correct, it is because the correction comes in the same way. Where then is the place for even a slight endeavour or any room at all for “my great endeavours”? Well?

By the way, please try to understand that the supra-intellectual (not the supramental only) is the field of a spontaneous automatic action. To get it or to get yourself open to it needs efforts, but once it acts there is no effort. Your grey matter does not easily open; it closes up also too easily, so each time an effort has to be made, perhaps too much effort — if your grey matter would sensibly accommodate itself to the automatic flow there would not be the difficulty and the need of “assiduous, earnest and sincere endeavour” each time. Methinks. Well?

I challenge your assertion that the Force is more easily potent to produce spiritual results than mental (literary) results. It seems to me the other way round. In my own case the first time I started Yoga, Pranayama etc., I laboured 5 hours a day for a long time and concentrated and struggled for five years without any least spiritual result¹, but poetry came like a river and prose like a flood and other things too that were mental, vital or physical, not spiritual, riches and openings. I have seen in many cases an activity of the mind in various directions as the first or at least an early result. Why? Because there is less resistance, more cooperation from the confounded lower members for these things than for a psychic or a spiritual change. That is easy to understand at least. Well? 1 November 1935

*

To try to be a literary man and yet not to know what big literary people have contributed would be inexcusable.

Why is it inexcusable? I don't know what the Japanese or the Soviet Russian writers have contributed, but I feel quite happy and moral in my ignorance. As for reading Dickens in order to be

¹ N.B. When the spiritual experiences did come, they were as unaccountable and automatic as — as blazes.

a literary man, that's a strange idea. He was the most unliterary bloke that ever succeeded in literature and his style is a howling desert.

19 September 1936

*

You have nowhere said anything about Firdausi, the epic poet of Persia, author of *Shahnameh*? How is it that you who have made your own culture so wide by means of learning so many languages have allowed a serious gap in it by not knowing Persian?

I have read Firdausi in a translation long ago, but it gave no idea at all of the poetic qualities of the original. As for gaps in the culture — well, I don't know Russian or Finnish (missing the *Kalevala*) and have not read the *Nibelungenlied* in the original, nor for that matter Pentaur's poem on the conquests of Rameses in ancient Egyptian or at least the fragment of it that survives. I don't know Arabic either but I don't mind that having read Burton's translation of the *Arabian Nights* which is as much a classic as the original. Anyhow the gaps are vast and many.

13 July 1937

Old Forms into New Shapes

Jyoti doesn't want to rest content with the forms. The *yuga-dharma* must be satisfied.

I don't follow the যুগধর্ম myself in English poetry. There I have done the opposite, tried to develop old forms into new shapes instead of being gloriously irregular. In my blank verse, I have minimised or exiled pauses and overflows.

20 March 1937

Exceeding Past Formulas

I have crossed out "turned Rishi" [*in an essay called "Sri Aurobindo — the Poet"*], because that suggests an old formula of the past, and the future poet should exceed all past formulas.

5 February 1931

Early Poetic Influences

Influences on *Love and Death*

I shall be really happy if you will tell me the way in which you created *Love and Death* — the first falling of the seed of the idea, the growth and maturing of it, the influences assimilated from other poets, the mood and atmosphere you used to find most congenial and productive, the experience and the frequency of the afflatus, the pace at which you composed, the evolution of that multifarious, many-echoed yet perfectly original style . . . In my essay, “Sri Aurobindo — the Poet”, I tried to show the white harmony, so to speak, of *Love and Death* in a kind of spectrum analysis, how colours from Latin, Italian, Sanskrit and English verse had fused here together with an absolutely original ultra-violet and infra-red not to be traced anywhere. Among English influences the most outstanding are, to my mind, Shakespeare, Milton, Keats and Stephen Phillips, along with something of Shelley and Coleridge.

I cannot tell you much about it from that point of view; I did not draw consciously from any of the poets you mention except from Phillips. I read *Marpessa* and *Christ in Hades* before they were published and as I was just in the stage of formation then — at the age of 17 — they made a powerful impression which lasted until it was worked out in *Love and Death*. I dare say some influence of most of the great English poets and of others also, not English, can be traced in my poetry — I can myself see that of Milton, sometimes of Wordsworth and Arnold; but it was of the automatic kind — they came in unnoticed. I am not aware of much influence of Shelley and Coleridge, but since I read Shelley a great deal and took an intense pleasure in some of Coleridge’s poetry, they may have been there without my knowledge. The one work of Keats that influenced me was *Hyperion* — I dare say my blank verse got something of his stamp through that. The

poem itself was written in a white heat of inspiration during 14 days of continuous writing — in the mornings only of course, for I had to attend office the rest of the day and saw friends in the evening. I never wrote anything with such ease and rapidity before or after. Your other questions I can't very well answer — I have lived ten lives since then and don't remember. I don't think there was any falling of the seed of the idea or growth and maturing of it; it just came — from my reading about the story of Ruru in the *Mahabharata*; I thought, Well, here's a subject, and the rest burst out of itself. Mood and atmosphere? I never depended on these things that I know of — something wrote in me or didn't write, more often didn't, and that is all I know about it. Evolution of style and verse? Well, it evolved, I suppose — I assure you I didn't build it. I was not much of a critic in those days — the critic grew in me by Yoga like the philosopher, and as for self-criticism the only standard I had was whether I felt satisfied with what I wrote or not, and generally I felt it was very fine when I wrote it and found it was very bad after it had been written, but I could not at that time have given you a reason either for the self-eulogy or the self-condemnation. Nowadays it is different, of course, — for I am conscious of what I do and how things are done. I am afraid this will not enlighten you much but it is all I can tell you.

3 July 1933

General Influences on His Early Poetry

In that long letter on your own poetry, apropos of my friend's criticisms [*see pp. 332–57*], you have written of certain influences of the later Victorian period on you. Meredith's from *Modern Love* I have been unable to trace concretely — unless I consider some of the more pointed and bitter-sweetly reflective turns in *Songs to Myrtilla* to be Meredithian. That of Tennyson is noticeable in only a delicate picturesqueness here and there or else in the use of some words. Perhaps more than in your early blank verse the Tennysonian influence of this kind in general is there in *Songs to Myrtilla*. Arnold has influenced your blank verse in respect of particular constructions like two or three "buts" as in

No despicable wayfarer, but Ruru,
But son of a great Rishi,

or

But tranquil, but august, but making easy . . .

Arnold is also observable in the way you build up and elaborate your similes both in *Urvasie* and in *Love and Death*. Less openly, a general tone of poetic mind from him can also be felt: it persists subtly in even the poems collected in *Ahana*, not to mention *Baji Prabhau*. I don't know whether Swinburne is anywhere patent in your narratives: he probably does have something to do with *Songs to Myrtilia*. Stephen Phillips is the most direct influence in *Urvasie* and *Love and Death*. But as I have said in my essay on your blank verse he is assimilated into a stronger and more versatile genius, together with influences from the Elizabethans, Milton and perhaps less consciously Keats. In any case, whatever the influences, your early narratives are intensely original in essential spirit and movement and expressive body. It is only unreceptiveness or inattention that can fail to see this and to savour the excellence of your work.

The influences I spoke of were of course influences only such as every poet undergoes before he has entirely found himself. What you say about Arnold's influence is quite correct; it acted mainly however as a power making for restraint and refinement, subduing any uncontrolled romanticism and insisting on clear lucidity and right form and building. Meredith had no influence on *Songs to Myrtilia*; even afterwards I did not make myself acquainted with all his poetry, it was only *Modern Love* and poems like the sonnet on Lucifer and on the ascent to earth of the daughter of Hades [*The Day of the Daughter of Hades*] that I strongly admired and it had its effect in the formation of my poetic style and its after-effects in that respect are not absent from *Savitri*. It is only Swinburne's early lyrical poems that exercised any power upon me, *Dolores*, *Hertha*, *The Garden of Proserpine* and others that rank among his best work,—also *Atalanta in Calydon*; his later lyrical poetry I found too empty and his dramatic and narrative verse did not satisfy me.

One critic characterised *Love and Death* as an extraordinarily brilliant and exact reproduction of Keats: what do you say to that? I think Stephen Phillips had more to do with it.

7 July 1947

On Early Translations and Poems

Translation of the *Meghadut*

I did translate the *Meghadut*, but it was lost by the man with whom I kept it — so mention of it is useless. 28 January 1931

The Hero and the Nymph and Urvasie

On an old advertisement page of the *Arya* I find: “*The Hero and the Nymph*, a translation in verse of Kalidasa’s *Vikramorvasie*.”

Yes, I had forgotten the *Hero and the Nymph*.

Our library hasn’t got this translation, nor your poem *Urvasie*, both of which are out of print.

I don’t think I have the *Urvasie*, neither am I very anxious to have this poem saved from oblivion. 5 February 1931

Love and Death, Urvasie and *The Hero and the Nymph*

Was *Love and Death* your first achievement in blank verse, or did a lot of trial and experiment precede it? Was the brilliant success of your translation from Kalidasa its forerunner?

There was no trial or experiment — as I wrote, I did not proceed like that, — I put down what came, changing afterwards, but there too only as it came. At that time I had no theories, no methods or process. But *Love and Death* was not my first blank verse poem — I had written one before in the first years of my stay in Baroda which was privately published, but afterwards I got disgusted with it and rejected it. I made also some transla-

tions from the Sanskrit (in blank verse and heroic verse); but I don't remember to what you are referring as the translations of Kalidasa. Most of all that has disappeared into the unknown in the whirlpools and turmoil of my political career. 4 July 1933

The Hero and the Nymph and Baji Prabhau

It is curious how you repeatedly forget that you have so wonderfully Englished Kalidasa's *Hero and the Nymph*. Surely it cannot be that you want it to be rejected and forgotten? Its blank verse is excellent, and I shall be very much obliged if out of the three typed copies of it I sent you a couple of years ago you will kindly let me have one. Was this work composed before *Love and Death*? Does *Baji Prabhau* also antedate the latter?

Baji Prabhau was written much later. I do not remember just now about the *Hero and the Nymph* — it might have been earlier, but I am not sure. I shall see about the typed copy of the translation. No, I do not reject it. I had merely forgotten all about it. 5 July 1933

Urvasie

On Sunday also I shall look at the *Urvasie*. It is a poem I am not in love with — not that there is not some good poetry in it, but it seems to me as a whole lacking in originality and life. However, I may be mistaken; a writer's opinions on his productions generally are. 5 April 1935

Love and Death

Those that buy books like *Love and Death* do so to get the yogic knowledge — the mystery of death solved. I bought it for the same reason and was disappointed to find it is a story!

There is no Yogic knowledge there. It was written before I started Yoga.

The other day Arjava told me that he considered the long speech of the Love-god Kama or Madan about himself in *Love and Death* one of the peaks in that poem — he as good as compared it to the descent into Hell.¹ Somehow I couldn't at the time wax extremely enthusiastic about it. Except for the opening eight or ten lines and some three or four in the middle, I couldn't regard it as astonishing poetry — at least not one of the peaks. What is your own private opinion? I need not of course, quote it to anyone.

My private opinion agrees with Arjava's estimate rather than with yours. These lines may not be astonishing in the sense of an unusual effort of constructive imagination and vision like the descent into Hell; but I do not think I have, elsewhere, surpassed this speech in power of language, passion and truth of feeling and nobility and felicity of rhythm all fused together into a perfect whole. And I think I have succeeded in expressing the truth of the godhead of Kama, the godhead of vital love (I am not using "vital" in the strict Yogic sense; I mean, the love that draws lives passionately together or throws them into or upon each other) with a certain completeness of poetic sight and perfection of poetic power, which puts it on one of the peaks — even if not the highest possible peak — of achievement. That is my private opinion — but, of course, all do not need to see alike in these matters.

10 February 1932

Chitrangada

Months ago I typed out, from the last two numbers (I think) of *The Karmayogin*, part of a poem by you called *Chitrangada*. Is it possible to get the whole of it from you, so that I could type it for you as well as for the library and myself?

The publication of *Chitrangada* was a mistake. I wrote the poem hastily — a rough draught, intending to rewrite it and make it worth something. But the rewriting was never done. I am not

¹ See *Love and Death*, lines 409–53, in *Collected Poems*, Volume 2 of THE COMPLETE WORKS OF SRI AUROBINDO.

very anxious for the thing to survive in its present crude form.

21 May 1931

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Was *Chitrangada* ever finished?

It was certainly finished, but I suppose the MS is now lost.

24 June 1937

*

Am I to conclude either that your *Chitrangada* is not worth revising because it is a fragment or that whatever of it we have is already perfect poetry? Else why have you shelved the question of revision?

It is under consideration and will probably remain so for some time. As for perfect poetry, I don't know that it can be made into that — some revision here and there at the most is all that is possible. But this is not the moment.

25 June 1937

Iliad

Iliad is a fragment — and by no means *ne plus ultra* — only the verse is good; I imagine I have found the solution for introducing the hexameter into English verse which others have tried but, till now, without success. That is all I can say about it at present; we shall see hereafter.

19 September 1931

On Poems Published in *Ahana and Other Poems*

On Two Translations of *Revelation*

The rendering of *Revelation* is even better than the two others, well inspired from beginning to end; the colouring is not quite the same as in my poem, but that is hardly avoidable in a poetic version in another language. To alter it, as you propose, would be to spoil it. There is no point in rendering literally “wind-blown locks”, and it would be a pity to throw out *দিগ্ভিময়ী*, for it is just the touch needed to avoid the suggestion of a merely human figure. It *is* needed—for readers are often dense. An Indian critic (very competent, if a little academic) disregarding all the mystic suggestions and even the plain statement of the closing couplet, actually described the poem as the poet’s memory of a girl running past him on the seashore!!

25 January 1931

*

The translation is very good poetry. It is perhaps not quite the original, for what you describe is an obviously superhuman figure while the details in the poem might be those of a human figure and it is something subtle and not expressed but only hinted which gives the impression expressed only at the end that it is someone of the heavenly rout. That however does not matter; your version can be taken as an adaptation of the idea in the poem and not a strict translation of it.

On Two Translations of *The Vedantin’s Prayer*

You have made a very fine and true rendering of the *Vedantin’s Prayer*. Perhaps so hard and rocky a person as the Vedantin, who is very much of a converted Titan, would not have thought of such a sweet and luxurious word as *কুসুমি* in the midst of his

ascent and struggle, but these few alterations do not make any real difference to the spirit. There is a quite sufficient nobility and power in your translation. With that, it seems to me as literal as it can be.

6 May 1932

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Kshitish Sen's translation of the opening lines of the *Vedantin's Prayer* are magnificently done. He has quite caught the tone of the original, its austerity and elevation of thought and feeling and severe restraint of expression with yet a certain massiveness of power in it, — these at least were what tried to come out when I wrote it, and they are all unmistakably and nobly there in his rendering. If he can complete it without falling from the high force of this opening, it will be a *chef-d'oeuvre*. I notice he has got the exactly corresponding verse movement also.

24 June 1932

On a Translation of *God*

It is not a very satisfactory translation, but your changes improve it as far as it can be improved.

Why তবু in the fourth line? The idea is that work and knowledge and power can only obey the Divine and give him service; Love alone can compel him — because, of course, Love is self-giving and the Divine gives himself in return.

As for the second verse it does not give the idea at all. To have no contempt for the clod or the worm does not indicate that the non-despiser is the Divine, — such an idea would be absolutely meaningless and in the last degree feeble. Any Yogi could have that equality, or somebody much less than a Yogi. The idea is that, being omnipotent, omniscient, infinite, Supreme, the Divine does not scorn to descend even into the lowest forms, the obscurest figures of Nature and animate them with the divine Presence, — *that* shows his Divinity. The whole sense has fizzled out in the translation.

You need not say all that to the poetess, but perhaps you might very delicately hint to her that if she could bring in this

point, it would be better. Then perhaps she would herself change the verse. 25 December 1930

On a Word in *In the Moonlight*

What is the meaning of the word “ground” in these two lines from your poem *In the Moonlight*? —

. . . Are Nature’s bye-laws merely, meant to ground
A grandiose freedom building peace by strife.

Does “ground” mean “crush”?

“Ground” means here not to crush, but to make a ground or foundation for the freedom. What Science calls laws of Nature are not the absolute or principal laws of existence, but only minor rules meant to build up a material basis for the life of the Spirit in the body. On that has to be erected in the end, not a rule of material Law, but an immortal Liberty — not law of Nature, but freedom of the Spirit. The strife of forces which is regulated by these minor laws of Nature is only the battle through which man has to win the peace of Spirit. This is the sense.

February 1929

James Cousins on *In the Moonlight* and *The Rishi*

I hear that James Cousins said about your poem *The Rishi* that it was only spiritual philosophy, not poetry.

I never heard that. If I had I would have noted that Cousins had no capacity for appreciating intellectual poetry. But that I knew already — just as he had no liking for epic poetry either, only for poetic “jewellery”. His criticism was of *In the Moonlight* which he condemned as brain-stuff only except the early stanzas for which he had high praise. That criticism was of great use to me — though I did not agree with it. But the positive part of it helped me to develop towards a supra-intellectual style. As *Love and Death* was poetry of the vital, so *Ahana* [*Ahana and other Poems*] is mostly work of the poetic intelligence. Cousins’

criticism helped me to go a stage farther.

11 November 1936

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Amal says Cousins ignored *The Rishi* while speaking of the others. Isn't that far worse?

Neither worse nor better. What does Cousins' bad opinion about *The Rishi* matter to me? I know the limitations of my poetry and also its qualities. I know also the qualities of Cousins as a critic and also his limitations. If Milton had written during the life of Cousins instead of having an established reputation for centuries, Cousins would have said of *Paradise Lost* and still more of *Paradise Regained* "This is not poetry, this is theology." Note that I don't mean to say that *The Rishi* is anywhere near *Paradise Lost*, but it is poetry as well as spiritual philosophy.

13 November 1936

Metrical Experiments

The Genesis of *In Horis Aeternum*

Is there some way of keeping the loose swinging gait of anapaests within bounds? If one has used them freely in one or more lines, does it sound too abrupt to close with a strict iambic line — as in the final Alexandrine of:

The wind hush comes, the varied colours westward stream:
Were they joy-tinted coral, or song-light seen-heard in a
shell fitfully,
Drifted ashore by the hours as a waif from the day-wide sea
Of Loveliness that smites awake our sorrow-dream?

It is perhaps a pity that the rhythm of the first three lines runs in such well-worn familiar channels. Is this intensified by the sing-song of the second line, which slipped into the Saturnian metre lengthened out by anapaests? The third line might possibly be taken as four dactyls followed by the spondee “day-wide” and the monosyllabic foot “sea”. What do you think? And would the four dactyls make the earlier part of a passable hexameter, or would at least one spondee be needed to break up the monotony and too-obvious lilt?

These are things decided by the habit or training of the ear. The intervention of a dactylic (or, if you like, anapaestic) line followed by an Alexandrine would to the ear of a former generation have sounded abrupt and inadmissible. But, I suppose, it would not to an ear accustomed to the greater liberty — or even licence — of latter-day movements.

I do not find that the rhythm of the first three lines is well-worn, though that of the first and third are familiar in type. The second seems to me not only not familiar, but unusual and very effective.

The canter of anapaests can, I suppose, be only relieved

by variation or alternation with another metre, as you have done here — or by a very powerful music which would turn the canter into a torrent rush or an oceanic sweep or surge. But the proper medium for the latter up till now has been a large dactylic movement like the Greek or Latin hexameter; Swinburne has tried to get it into the anapaest, but with only occasional success because of his excessive facility and looseness, which makes the sound empty owing to want of spiritual substance. But this third line seems to be naturally dactylic and not anapaestic. Can one speak of catalectic and acatalectic hexameters? If so, this is a very beautiful catalectic hexameter.

I may say that the four lines seem to be in their variation very remarkably appropriate and effective, each exactly expressing by the rhythm the spirit and movement of the thing inwardly seen. I am speaking of each line by itself; the only objection that could be made is to the coming together of so many variations in so brief a whole (if it had been longer, I imagine it would not have mattered) as disturbing to the habit of the ear; but I am inclined to think that this objection would rest less on a reality than a prejudice. The habit of the ear is not fundamental, it can change. What is fundamental in the inner hearing is not, I think, disturbed by the swiftness of the change from the controlled flow of the first line to the wave dance and shimmer of the second, the rapid drift of the third and then the deliberate subtlety of the last line.

Is there in recent poetry an unconscious push towards a new metrical basis altogether for English poetry — shown by the outbreak of free verse, which fails because it is most often not verse at all — and the seeking sometimes for irregularity, sometimes for greater plasticity of verse-movement? Originally, Anglo-Saxon verse depended, if I remember right, on alliteration and rhythm, not on measured feet; Greece and Rome through France and Italy imposed the foot measure on English; perhaps the hidden seeking for freedom, for elbow-room, for the possibility of a varied rhythmic expression necessitated by the complexity of the inner consciousness might find some vent in a measure which would depend not on feet but on lengths

and stresses. I have sometimes thought that and it recurred to me while looking at your second line, for on that principle it might be read

Were they joy-tinted coral, or song-light seen-heard in a shell fitfully.

One could imagine a measure made of lines in a given number of lengths like that and each length allowed a given number of stresses; there would be many combinations and variations possible. For example (not of good poetry, but of the form),

A far sail on the unchangeable monotone of a slow slumbering sea,
 A world of power hushed into symbols of hue, silent unendingly;
 Over its head like a gold ball the sun tossed by the gods in their play
 Follows its curve, — a blazing eye of Time watching the motionless day.

Perhaps it is only a curious imagination, too difficult and complex to realise, but it came on me strongly, so I put it down on paper.

*

I have written two more stanzas of the stress-scansion poem so as to complete it and send them to you. In this scansion as I conceive it, the lines may be analysed into feet, as you say all good rhythm can, but in that case the foot measures must be regarded as a quite subsidiary element without any fixed regularity — just as the (true) quantitative element is treated in ordinary verse. The whole indispensable structure of the lines depends upon stress and they must be read on a different principle from the current view — full value must be given to the true stresses and no fictitious stresses, no weight laid on naturally unstressed syllables must be allowed — that is the most important point. Thus:

A far sail on the unchangeable monotone of a slow slumbering sea,
 A world of power hushed into symbols of hue, silent unendingly;
 Over its head like a gold ball the sun tossed by the gods in their play
 Follows its curve, — a blazing eye of Time watching the motionless day.

Here or elsewhere, — poised on the unreachable abrupt
snow-solitary ascent
 Earth aspiring lifts to the illimitable Light, then ceases broken and
spent,
 Or in the glowing expanse, arid, fiery and austere, of the desert's
hungry soul, —
 A breath, a cry, a glimmer from Eternity's face, in a fragment the
mystic Whole.

Moment-mere, yet with all eternity packed, lone, fixed, intense,
 Out of the ring of these hours that dance and die, caught by the spirit
in sense,
 In the greatness of a man, in music's outspread wings, in a touch, in a
smile, in a sound,
 Something that waits, something that wanders and settles not, a once
Nothing that was all and is found.

It is an experiment and I shall have to do more before I can be sure that I have caught the whole spirit or sense of this movement; nor do I mean to say that stress-scansion cannot be built on any other principle, — say, on one with more concessions to the old music or with less, breaking more away in the direction of free verse; but the essential, I think, is there.

P.S. It is with some hesitation that I write “a once Nothing”, because I am far from sure that the “once” does not overweight the rhythm and make the expression too difficult and compact; but on the other hand without it the sense appears ambiguous and incomplete, — for “a Nothing that was all” might be taken in a too metaphysical light and my object is not to thrust in a metaphysical subtlety but to express the burden of an experience. In the final form I shall probably risk the ambiguity and reject the intruding “once”.
19 April 1932

*The Genesis of **Winged with dangerous deity***

Your model is exceedingly difficult for the English language — for this reason that except in lines closing with triple rhymes the

language draws back from a regular dactylic ending — more still from a dactylic last foot to a stanza. It can be done perhaps in a rhymeless lyrical movement such as Arnold was fond of, taking his inspiration from the Greek choruses — a first unconscious step towards the licence of free verse. I have at any rate made the following attempt.

Winged with dangerous deity,
 Passion swift and implacable
 Arose and, storm-footed
 In the dim | heart of him,

 Ran, insatiate, conquering,
 Worlds devouring and hearts of men,
 Then perished, broken by
 The irres|istible

 Occult masters of destiny, —
 They who sit in the secrecy
 And watch un|moved ever
 Unto the |end of all.

But there are several snags here. Especially the tribrach is difficult to keep up: the average reader will turn it into a dactyl or amphibrach. I started a rhymed endeavour also, but had no time to pursue it; it is not easy either. 20 June 1934

The Genesis of Moon of Two Hemispheres

After two days of wrestling I have to admit that I am beaten by your last metre. I have written something, but it is a fake. I will first produce the fake.

À gold moon|-raft floats | and swings | slowly
 And it casts | a fire | of pale | holy | blue light
 On the drag|on tail | aglow | of the | faint night |

That glimm|ers far, | swimming,
 The illum|ined shoals | of stars | skimming,
 Overspread|ing earth | and drown|ing the | heart in sight |
 With the | ocean-de|pths | and bread|ths | of the | Infinite. |

That is the official scansion and except in the last foot of the two last lines it professes to follow very closely the metre of Nishikanta's poem. But in fact it is full of sins and the appearance is a counterfeit. In the first line the first foot is really a bacchius:

Å gold moon|-raft floats

and quantitatively though not accentually the second is a spondee which also disturbs the true rhythmic movement. "Slowly" and "holy" are in truth trochees disguised as pyrrhics, and if "slowly" can pass off the deceit a little, "holy" is quite unholy in the brazenness of its pretences. If I could have got a compound adjective like "god-holy", it would have been all right and saved the situation, but I could find none that was appropriate. The next three lines are, I think, on the true model and have an honest metre. But the closing cretic of the last two is nothing but a cowardly flight from the difficulty of the spondee. I console myself by remembering that even Hector ran when he found himself in difficulties with Achilles and that the Bhagavat lays down पलायनम् as one of the ordinary occupations of the Avatar. But the evasion is a fact and I am afraid it spoils the correspondence of the metres. I have some idea of adding a second stanza, — this one will look less guilty perhaps if it has a companion in sin — but if you use this at all, you need not wait for the other, as it may never take birth at all. 2 July 1934

The Genesis of *O pall of black Night*

At first sight your metre seemed to me impossible in English, especially because of the four short syllables at the end of two lines and the five short syllables in two others. English rhythm hardly allows of that — quantitatively it can be managed, but

The Genesis of *Thought the Paraclete* and *Rose of God*

I am sending you copies of two poems. One, *Thought the Paraclete*, is a development of four lines (now 3–6) originally written some time ago as an English metrical correspondence for a Bengali new metre of Dilip's. He had asked for some more lines and I thought the four I had written good enough to warrant a complete poem. Dilip's scheme was

— ◡ — | — — | ◡ ◡ | — ◡ — |,

but in English another arrangement might be preferable, either

— ◡ — | — — ◡ | ◡ — ◡ | —
 ◡ — ◡ |

or

— ◡ — | — — ◡ | ◡ — ◡ — |

It is not an easy metre and does not seem to admit of sufficient variations for a longer poem.

The other, *Rose of God*, is a lyric, an invocation. The metrical plan is — for the first two lines of the stanza, three parts with 2 main stresses in each, the first identical throughout, the other two variable at pleasure; for the last two lines, two parts of equal length, three stresses in each part.

On Some Poems Written during the 1930s

[*The first five letters were published together as an appendix to Six Poems of Sri Aurobindo in 1934*]

The Bird of Fire and Trance

These two poems are in the nature of metrical experiments. The first is a kind of compromise between the stress system and the foot measure. The stanza is of four lines, alternately of twelve and ten stresses. The second and fourth line in each stanza can be read as a ten-foot line of mixed iambs and anapaests, the first and third, though a similar system subject to replacement of a foot anywhere by a single-syllable half-foot could be applied, are still mainly readable by stresses.

The other poem is an experiment in the use of quantitative foot measures not following any existing model, but freely invented. It is a four-line stanza reading alternately

— — — | — — — | — — — |
— — — | — — — | — — — |
and — — — | — — — | — — — |

It could indeed be read otherwise, in several ways, but read in the ordinary way of accentual feet it would lose all lyrical quality and the soul of its rhythm.

The Bird of Fire is the living vehicle of the gold fire of the Divine Light and the white fire of the Divine Tapas and the crimson fire of Divine Love — and everything else of the Divine Consciousness.

Shiva — The Inconscient Creator

The quantitative metre of *Trance* is suited only for a very brief lyrical poem. For longer poems I have sought to use it as a base

but to liberate it by the introduction of an ample number of modulations which allow a fairly free variation of the rhythm without destroying the consistency of the underlying rhythmic measure. This is achieved in *Shiva* by allowing as the main modulations (1) a paeon anywhere in place of an amphibrach, (2) the substitution of a long for a short syllable either in the first or the last syllable of an amphibrach, at will, thus substituting a bacchius or anti-bacchius (3) the substitution of a dactyl for an initial amphibrach, (4) the substitution of a long instead of short syllable in the middle of the final anapaest, both this and the ultimate syllable to be in that case stressed in reading, e.g.,

deathless | and lone head —

a bacchius replacing the anapaest.

The suppression of the full value of long syllables to make them figure as metrical shorts has to be avoided in quantitative metre.

Scan:

Ā face on | the cold dire | mountain peaks
 Grand and still; | its lines white | and austere¹
 Match with the | unmeasured | snowy streaks
 Cutting heav|en, | implacā|ble and sheer.

The Inconscient as the source and author of all material creation is one of the main discoveries of modern psychology, but it agrees with the idea of a famous Vedic hymn. In the Upanishads, Prajna, the Master of Sushupti, is the Ishwara and therefore the original Creator out of a superconscient sleep. The idea of the poem is that this creative Inconscient also is Shiva creating here life in matter out of an apparently inconscient material trance as from above he creates all the worlds (not the material only) from a superconscient trance. The reality is a supreme Consciousness — but that is veiled by the appearance on one side of the superconscient sleep, on the other of the material Inconscience.

¹ Intermediate stress.

Here the emphasis is on the latter; the superconscient is only hinted at, not indicated, — it is the Infinity out of which comes the revealing Flame.

The Life Heavens

Further modulations have been introduced in this poem — a greater use is made of tetrasyllabic feet such as paeons, epitrites, di-iamb, double trochees, ionics and, once only, the antispast — and in a few places the foot of three long syllables (molossus) has been used, and in others a foot extending to five syllables (e.g., Dēlivered frōm grīef).

Scan:

Ā līfē ōf | ĩntēnsīfīfīes | wīdē, ĩmmūnē
 Flōats bēhīnd | thē ēarth and | hēr līfē-fret,
 Ā māgīc ōf | rēalms māstēred bī | spēll and rūnē,
 Grāndīōsē, blīss|ful, colōured, | ĩncrēatē.

There were two places in which at the time of writing there did not seem to me to be a satisfactory completeness and the addition of a stanza seemed to be called for — one at the end of the description of the Life Heavens, a stanza which would be a closing global description of the essence of the vital Heavens, the other (less imperatively called for) in the utterance of the Voice. There it is no doubt very condensed, but it cannot be otherwise. I thought, however, that one stanza might be added hinting rather than stating the connection between the two extremes. The connection is between the Divine suppressed in its opposites and the Divine eternal in its own unveiled and undescended nature. The idea is that the other worlds are not evolutionary but typical and each presents in a limited perfection some aspect of the Infinite, but each complete, perfectly satisfied in itself, not asking or aspiring for anything else, for self-exceeding of any kind. That aspiration, on the contrary, is self-imposed on the imperfection of Earth; the very fact of the Divine being there, but suppressed

in its phenomenal opposites, compels an effort to arrive at the unveiled Divine — by ascent, but also by a descent of the Divine Perfection for evolutionary manifestation here. That is why the Earth declares itself a deeper Power than Heaven because it holds in itself that possibility implied in the presence of the suppressed Divine here, — which does not exist in the perfection of the vital (or even the mental) Heavens.

Jivanmukta

Written in Alcaics. These Alcaics are not perhaps very orthodox. I have treated the close of the first two lines not as a dactyl but as a cretic and have taken the liberty in any stanza of turning this into a double trochee. In one closing line I have started the dactylic run with two short preliminary syllables and there is occasionally a dactyl or anapaest in unlawful places; the dactyls too are not all pure dactyls. The object is to bring in by modulations some variety and a more plastic form and easier run than strict orthodoxy could give. But in essence, I think, the alcaic movement remains in spite of these departures.

The basic form of this Alcaic would run,

1, 2 ≍= | ∪— | ≍ || — ∪ ∪ | = ∪ = ∪

3 ∪— | ∪— | ∪— | ∪— | ≍

4 — ∪ ∪ | — ∪ ∪ | — ∪ = ≍

but with an opening to other modulations.

The subject is the Vedantic ideal of the living liberated man — *jīvanmukta* — though perhaps I have given a pull towards my own ideal which the strict Vedantin would consider illegitimate.

In Horis Aeternum

This poem on its technical side aims at finding a halfway house between free verse and regular metrical poetry. It is an attempt to avoid the chaotic amorphousness of free verse and keep to a

regular form based on the fixed number of stresses in each line and part of a line while yet there shall be a great plasticity and variety in all the other elements of poetic rhythm, the number of syllables, the management of the feet, if any, the distribution of the stress-beats, the changing modulation of the rhythm. *In Horis Aeternum* was meant as a first essay in this kind, a very simple and elementary model. The line here is cast into three parts, the first containing two stresses, the second and third each admitting three, four such lines rhymed constituting the stanza.

The Bird of Fire

Your *Bird of Fire* is full of symbolic images, but if one can follow the *bhāva* behind or through them, I believe the appreciation becomes complete.

What do you mean by following the *bhāva* behind? Putting a label on the bird and keeping it dried up in your intellectual museum, for Professors to describe to their pupils — “this is the species and that’s how it is constituted, these are the bones, feathers etc. etc. and now you know all about the bird. Or would you like me to dissect it farther?”

3 December 1936

Replies to Questions on *The Bird of Fire*

Does the line

Late and slow you have come from the timeless Angel
mean that the sadhaka struggled long before the attainment?
Does the “timeless Angel” mean the transcendent?

There must be a mistake in the copy. There is a full stop at “timeless”. “Angel” begins a new sentence and is addressed to the bird. It is the Bird who went out to reach the Timeless Divine and comes late (while the Sadhak and the world have been long struggling and waiting in vain) with the gift.

Purani thinks that the “Bird of Fire” represents aspiration. Is this true?

No — the Bird is not merely aspiration.

Is the “Dancer in Time” Nataraja?

Yes.

The “flame-petalled love” you mention in one of the lines is, I think, possible only at some level near the Supermind.

It is possible in the psychic also.

The phrase “arrives at its luminous term thy flight” means, I suppose, the complete descent into the material consciousness after breaking the barriers of mind and life.

No. It reaches the Eternal and brings back to the material world that which is beyond Mind and Life. 25 October 1933

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The Dancer is not the Time-Spirit, but the Divine in Time.

1933

*

The flame means the Bird of Flame and the Bird is the symbol of an inner Power that rises from the “sacrifice” i.e. the Yoga. The last lines mean that it has the power of going beyond mind and life to that which is beyond mind and life. 2 December 1933

Replies to Questions on *Trance*

Were *Trance* and the *Bird of Fire* each composed at a single sitting and can the date be given?

The *Bird of Fire* was written on two consecutive days — and afterwards revised. The *Trance* at one sitting — it took only a few minutes. You may perhaps have the date as they were both completed on the same day and sent to you the next.

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In the line —

Halo-moon of ecstasy unknown —

is the “o” assonance satisfactory, or does the ear feel the two sounds come too close or for some reason are too insistent?

It seems to me that there is a sufficient space between to prevent the assonance from being too prominent; it came like that and I kept it because the repetition and prolongation of the full “o” sound seemed to me to carry in it a certain unexpressed (and inexpressible) significance.

What exactly does “Halo-moon” signify? In line 2 there was the concrete physical moon ringed with a halo. Is the suggestion of line 10 that a glory or indefinable presence is imaged by a lunar halo—the moon as a distinct object now being swallowed up in the halo? My difficulty is that if it is “halo” simply it cannot be a “moon” as well. But possibly the compound “halo-moon” is elliptical for “moon with its surrounding halo”.

Well, it is of course the “moon with its halo”, but I wanted to give a suggestion if not of the central form being swallowed up in the halo, at least of moon and halo being one ecstatic splendour as when one is merged in ecstasy.

*

The last line —

Ocean self enraptured and alone —

I took as meaning “self, who art symbolised by this ocean”, since otherwise you would probably have written “self-enraptured”?

Yes, that is right.

The Metre of *Trance*

Have you yourself invented the metre of *Trance* or is it adopted from some former poet?

No. I am not aware that anyone has used this metre before. It came to me just as I finished the *Bird of Fire* and I put it down.

23 October 1933

*

Is it not the case that, in the metre of *Trance* (quantitative trimeter) one must either keep a rather staccato movement, pausing with almost unbroken regularity at the end of each foot, or else risk the iambic pentameter approximation by the use of an easy and fluent movement? Thus it is your very beautiful line

Mute the body aureate with light,
that would seem least out of place if inserted amidst other
iambic pentameters.

Possibly — though the line does not read to my ear very well as an iambic pentameter — the movement sounds then common and rather lame. It goes better as a trochaic rhythm. It is true that there is this dilemma and the whole skill will then be in avoiding the staccato effect, but that necessitates a very light movement.

*

I think the principle of this metre should be to say a few very clear-cut things in a little space. At least it looks so to me at present — though a more free handling of the metre might show that the restriction was not justifiable.

*

I had chosen this metre — or rather it came to me and I accepted it — because it seemed to me both brief and easy, so suitable for an experiment. But I find now that it was only seemingly easy and in fact very difficult. The ease with which I wrote it only came from the fact that by a happy inspiration the right rhythm for it came into my consciousness and wrote itself out by virtue of the rhythm being there. If I had consciously experimented, I might have stumbled over the same difficulties as have come in your way.

On Some Words in *The Life Heavens*

The “last finite” is the material finite where finiteness reaches its acme (based on the atomic infinitesimal). It is this finite that on earth yearns and strives to reach the last (highest, farthest) infinity’s Unknown.

*

By the way in the last line “bore” does not mean “carried” but “endured”. I had written originally “through seas of light to epiphanies of love”. The epiphanies of love are above the seas of light and part of the goal reached. 1933

Tagore and *The Life Heavens*

The other day Prithwi Singh said that Tagore has said your *Life Heavens* was not poetry proper.

I am very much intrigued by Tagore’s dictum. I am always ready to admit and profit by criticism of my poetry however adverse, if it is justified — but I should like to understand it first. Why is it not poetry proper? Is it because it is not good poetry — the images, language are unpoetic or not sufficiently poetic, the rhythm harsh or flat? Or is it because it is too intellectual, dealing in ideas more than in vision and feelings? Or is it that the spiritual genre is illegitimate — spiritual subjects not proper for poetic treatment? But in that case much of Tagore’s poetry would be improper, not to speak of much of Donne (now considered a great poet), Vaughan, Crashaw etc., Francis Thompson and I do not know how many others in all climes and ages. Is it the dealing with other worlds that makes it not proper? But what then about Blake, whose work Housman declares to be the essence of poetry? I am at sea about this “poetry proper”. Did he only use this cryptic expression? Was there nothing elucidatory said which would make it intelligible? Or has Tagore by any chance thought that I was trying to convey a moral lesson or a philosophical tenet — there is nothing of the kind there, it is a frequent experience on the spiritual path that is being described

in its own proper, one might almost say, objective figures — and that is surely a method of poetry proper. Or is it that the expression is too bad or clear-cut for the soft rondures of poetry proper. I swim helplessly in conjectures. 1934

*

In regard to Tagore, I understand from Prithwi Singh that his objections to *The Life Heavens* were personal rather than in principle — that is, *he himself* had no such experience and could not take them as true (for himself), so they aroused in him no emotion, while *Shiva* was just the contrary. I can't say anything to that, as I could not say anything if somebody condemned a poem of mine root and branch because he did not like it or on good grounds — such as Cousins' objection to the inferiority of the greater part of *In the Moonlight* to the opening stanzas. I learned a great deal from that objection; it pointed me the way I had to go towards the Future Poetry. Not that I did not know before, but it gave precision and point to my previous perception. But still I don't quite understand Tagore's objection. I myself do not take many things as true in poetry — e.g. Dante's Hell etc. — of which I yet feel the emotion. It is surely part of the power of poetry to open new worlds to us as well as to give a supreme voice to our own ideas, experiences and feelings. *The Life Heavens* may not do that for its readers, but, if so, it is a fault of execution, not of principle. 4 October 1934

On Bengali Translations of *Shiva* and *Jivanmukta*

Your translation of *Shiva* is a very beautiful poem, combining strength and elegance in the Virgilian manner. I have put one or two questions relating to the correctness of certain passages as a translation, but except for the care for exactitude it has not much importance.

Anilbaran's translation [of *Shiva*] pleased me on another ground — he has rendered with great fidelity and, as it seemed to me, with considerable directness, precision and force the thought and spiritual substance of the poem — he has rendered,

of course in more mental terms than mine, exactly what I wanted to say. What might be called the “mysticity” of the poem, the expression of spiritual vision in half-occult, half-revealing symbols is not successfully caught, but that is a thing which may very well be untranslatable; it depends on an imponderable element which can hardly help escaping or evaporating in the process of transportation from one language to another. What he has done seems to me very well done. Questions of diction or elegance are another matter.

There remains Nishikanta’s two translations of *Jivanmukta*. I do not find the *mātra-ṛtta* one altogether satisfactory, but the other is a very good poem. But as a translation! Well, there are some errors of the sense which do not help, e.g., *mahimā* for splendour; splendour is light. Silence, Light, Power, Ananda, these are the four pillars of the Jivanmukta consciousness. So too the all-seeing, flame-covered eye gets transmogrified into something else; but the worst is the divine stillness surrounding the world which is not at all what I either said or meant. The lines:

Revealed it wakens when God’s stillness
Heavens the ocean of moveless Nature

express an exact spiritual experience with a visible symbol which is not a mere ornamental metaphor but corresponds to exact and concrete spiritual experience, an immense oceanic expanse of Nature-consciousness (not the world) in oneself covered with the heavens of the Divine Stillness and itself rendered calm and motionless by that over-vaulting influence. Nothing of that appears in the translation; it is a vague mental statement with an ornamental metaphor. . . .

I do not stress all that to find fault, but because it points to a difficulty which seems to me insuperable. This *Jivanmukta* is not merely a poem, but a transcript of a spiritual condition, one of the highest in the inner Overmind experience. To express it at all is not easy. If one writes only ideas about what it is or should be, there is failure. There must be something concrete, the form, the essential spiritual emotion of the state. The words chosen must be the right words in their proper place and each

part of the statement in its place in an inevitable whole. Verbiage, flourishes there must be none. But how can all that be turned over into another language without upsetting the apple-cart? I don't see how it can be easily avoided. For instance in the fourth stanza, "Possesses", "sealing", "grasp" are words of great importance for the sense. The feeling of possession by the Ananda rapture, the pressure of the ecstatic force sealing the love so that there can never again be division between the lover and the All-Beloved, the sense of the grasp of the All-Beautiful are things more than physically concrete to the experience ("grasp" is specially used because it is a violent, abrupt, physical word — it cannot be replaced by "In the hands" or "In the hold") and all that must have an adequate equivalent in the translation. But reading [*Nishikanta's Bengali line*] I no longer know where I am, unless perhaps in a world of Vedantic abstractions where I never intended to go. So again what has [*Nishikanta's Bengali line*] to do with the tremendous and beautiful experience of being ravished, thoughtless and wordless, into the "breast" of the Eternal who is the All-Beautiful, All-Beloved?

That is what I meant when I wrote yesterday about the impossibility — and also what I apprehended when I qualified my assent to Nolini's proposal [*to print Bengali translations of the poems*] with a condition.

3 June 1934

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These translations [*of the line "Although consenting here to a mortal body"*] only state what is true of everybody, not only of the jivanmukta. They have therefore no force. In the English the word "consenting" has a great force which makes the meaning of "He is the Undying" quite clear, viz. He is consciously that and his consenting to the mortal body does not diminish that consciousness — the consent being also free and quite conscious.

1934

In Horis Aeternum and The Bird of Fire

Is *The Bird of Fire* more of a compromise between a quan-

titative and a purely stress scansion than *In Horis Aeternum* (where the quantity-aspect seems to be less important than in *The Bird of Fire*)?

In the *In Horis Aeternum* I did not follow any regular scheme of quantities, letting them come as was needed by the rhythm. In *The Bird of Fire* I started with the idea of a quantitative element but abandoned it and remodelled the part of the poem in which I had used the quantitative system.

On a Bengali Translation of *In Horis Aeternum*

I think it is a very fine rendering.

In line 4 however I would note that there is no reference to day as a movement of time but one to the noon, the day as sunlit space rather than time, it is the fixed moment, as it were, the motionless scene of noon. The eye is of course the sun itself. I mark by the dash that I have finished with my first symbol of the gold ball and go off to a second, quite different one.

In the last line your translation is indeed very clear and precise in meaning, but it is perhaps too precise — the “something” twice repeated is meant to give a sense of just the opposite, an imprecise unseizable something which is at once nothing and all things at a time. It is found no doubt in the momentary things and all is there but the finding is less definite than your translation suggests. But the expression নাস্তিরূপে ছিল যে সর্বাস্তি is very good.

One point more. “Caught by the spirit in sense” means “there is a spirit in sense (sense not being sense alone) that catches the eternal out of the perishable hours in these things.”

*

But it is not the spirit in the body; it is the spirit in sense, why then দেহে? দেহ brings in something much too solid and it would mean the soul in the body which is not at all my meaning — it is a spiritual something in sight, sound, touch etc. that catches the eternal essential in what seems to be a thing of the moment.

I may add that “moment mere” does not and cannot mean

“merely one moment” — it means “something that seems to be merely of the moment”. It is not the moment that is caught but the essence of the momentary scene, etc. or as is next said something essential and eternal (not “fixed, intense”, but slight and fugitive) in a sound, smile, etc. 1934

On a Review of *Six Poems*

I dare say Swaminathan is a good critic of a sort. But I cannot see what is the objection to “O marvel bird”. His “raw metaphysics” refers I suppose to expressions like the “unthinkable Above”. But he is quite out there. It is a rendering not of metaphysics whether raw or ripe, but of a concrete experience, and for my part I don’t see how else it can be expressed unless one launches into literary circumvolutions and padding for which I have no inclination. “Moment mere” is an unusual combination but there again there is nothing else which will give the sense with the necessary compactness and it seems to me to be a very good phrase. Has Swaminathan a phobia for new or unusual or bold turns of language? “Good scholars” in a language very often have. For myself, I think they are necessary to keep the language alive.

I do not quite know what he wants me to do — is it to dilute my experiences or my seeing into diffuse intellectual expression? That seems to me what he means by electric light. It can be done, but it was not my purpose in writing these poems. I wrote what came as the closest expression of the thing seen and was not at all occupied with the repercussions or absence of repercussions in the ordinary reader. I dare say the critic is right in his view of what those repercussions would be. But what does he mean by his reference to the Vedas? The Vedas are the most enigmatic book in the world and nobody has the least idea what they mean; they out-Blake Blake all together. As for the Old Testament, it expresses not mystic but religious experience which is quite another affair altogether.

I am afraid Swaminathan’s capacities for responding to mystic poetry are not very brilliant. His reference to Blake shows

that — for Blake is an acid test for critics in this matter. However these are only passing comments. I shall consider the review more at leisure hereafter and defer till then the subject of metre.

15 February 1935

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About Swaminathan, I think his chief defect as a critic must be that he has no ear or very little of an ear. The man who can approve of the dictum “Take care of the sense and the metre will take care of itself”, ignoring the fact that the metre is only the basis of the rhythm without which poetry cannot exist or who says that the true quantity of “its” and of the last syllable of “delivered” cannot be short, must have something lacking in his auditory sense. He has also totally mistaken my phrase “Read in the ordinary way”² which means read in the way of the ordinary conventional iambic or trochaic metre. For instance

Ocean | self en|raptured | and a|lone.

If that is read as a trochaic line with a fictitious accent on “and”, the lyrical movement disappears. If it is read as it would be in ordinary speech with the natural stresses and quantities, you get the exact movement of my verse. If for example you find in prose “As he looked on the ocean’s radiant solitude, the seen passed into the unseen and he seemed to be looking on his own ocean self enraptured and alone”; the notation of the last words would be *ocean self | enraptured | and alone|*, which is just the metre of the even lines in my poem. The rhythm is at once accentual and quantitative. I quite agree that you cannot ignore the accentual basis of the English language, but what you can do is to take account of both stress accent and quantity, assuming it as a rule that a major and true accent (as opposed to minor and fictitious ones) is sufficient to transform a naturally short syllable into a long one for practical purposes. That is what I have done, and that is why the accented syllables in delivered, magic, implacable are taken as long. The result may be a success for this kind of

² See page 239.

quantitative verse or not, but the basis must be understood before it can be judged, and Swaminathan has missed the basis altogether. I shall have to write someday an essay on the data of the problem of quantitative verse in English and the true road to the solution of the difficulty — it is badly needed. 15 February 1935

On a Word in *Nirvana*

In *Nirvana*, does “reef” mean a piece of sail or a rock?

No, it is not a sail — it is a long rock. I was thinking especially of coral reefs which sometimes subside in the sea.

31 August 1934

On an Image in *Moon of Two Hemispheres*

I am unable to get the connection between the first three lines and the next three.

Connection of syntax or sense? It is the dragon tail of the Night illumined by the moon that goes swimming through the stars and imposing on the earth the sense of a dark Infinite.

2 September 1934

Thought the Paraclete

Thought the Paraclete is a difficult poem liable to many interpretations. I would be very happy if you could give a brief analysis of the thought-structure of the poem or at least indicate the main lines of the ascent.

Well, then leave each to find out one of the many interpretations for himself. Analysis! Well, well!

There is no thought-structure in the poem; there is only a succession of vision and experience; it is a mystic poem, its unity is spiritual and concrete, not a mental and logical building. When you see a flower, do you ask the gardener to reduce the flower to its chemical components? There would then be no flower left and no beauty. The poem is not built upon intellectual definitions or philosophical theorisings; it is something seen. When you ascend

a mountain, you see the scenery and feel the delight of the ascent; you don't sit down to make a map with names for every rock and peak or spend time studying its geological structure — that is work for the geologist, not for the traveller. Iyengar's geological account (to make one is part of his *métier* as a critic and a student and writer on literature) is probably as good as any other is likely to be; but each is free to make his own according to his own idea. Reasoning and argumentation are not likely to make one account truer and invalidate the rest. A mystic poem may explain itself or a general idea may emerge from it, but it is the vision that is important or what one can get from it by intuitive feeling, not the explanation or idea; it [*Thought the Paraclete*] is a vision or revelation of an ascent through spiritual planes, but gives no names and no photographic descriptions of the planes crossed. I leave it there.

The “pale blue” or intuitivised aspect of the face is only at the start; when it “gleamed” it had already overpassed the Overmind phase beyond which there are only the “world-bare summits”.

How do you know there are not many world-bare summits one above the other? Where do you place the self of the last line?

18 March 1944

*

As thought rises in the scale, it ceases to be intellectual, becomes illumined, then intuitive, then overmental and finally disappears seeking the last Beyond. The poem does not express any philosophical thought, however, it is simply a perception of a certain movement, that is all. “Pale blue” is the colour of the higher ranges of mind up to the intuition. Above it begins to be golden with the supramental light.

14 January 1935

*

Thought is not the giver of Knowledge but the “mediator” between the Inconscient and the Superconscient. It compels the world born from the Inconscient to reach for a Knowledge other

than the instinctive vital or merely empirical, for the Knowledge that itself exceeds thought; it calls for that superconscious Knowledge and prepares the consciousness here to receive it. It rises itself into the higher realms and even in disappearing into the supramental and Ananda levels is transformed into something that will bring down their powers into the silent Self which its cessation leaves behind it.

Gold-red is the colour of the supramental in the physical — the poem describes Thought in the stage when it is undergoing transformation and about to ascend into the Infinite above and disappear into it. The “flame-word rune” is the Word of the higher Inspiration, Intuition, Revelation which is the highest attainment of Thought.

29 December 1936

Rose of God

Two questions have arisen in the mind in connection with *Rose of God*.

(1) Does the rose of all flowers most perfectly and aptly express the divine ecstasies or has it not any symbolic allusion in the Veda or the Upanishad?

There were no roses in those times in India — roses came in with the Mahomedans from Persia. The rose is usually taken by us as the symbol of surrender, love etc. But here it is not used in that sense, but as the most intense of all flowers it is used as symbolic of the divine intensities — Bliss, Light, Love etc.

(2) Are the seven ecstasies referred to there the following: Bliss, Light, Power, Immortality, Life, Love and Grace?

No, it is not seven kinds, but seven levels of Ananda that are meant by the seven ecstasies.

2 January 1935

Overhead Inspiration in Some Poems of the 1930s

A long time ago, you wrote to me that the Overmind has two levels — the intuitive and the gnostic. There are surely several passages in your own poetry as well as in the Upanishads and

the Gita that sustain an inspiration from the former; but has no poetry ever come from the Overmind proper which is turned towards the full supramental Gnosis? Do you remember anything either in Sanskrit or in your own work which derives from there? If not, is it possible to give some idea as to what quality of rhythm, language and substance would constitute the difference between the expression of the Overmind Intuition and the Overmind Gnosis? Those four lines I quoted to you from yourself the other day — where do they hail from?

Arms taking to a voiceless supreme delight,
 Life that meets the Eternal with close breast,
 An unvalled mind dissolved in the Infinite,
 Force one with unimaginable rest?

It is really very difficult for me to say anything in this respect about my own poetry; there is too complex a working of the Consciousness for it to be possible for me to classify and define. As for the Overmind Gnosis, I cannot yet say anything — I am familiar with its workings, but they are not easily definable or describable and, as for poetry, I have not yet observed sufficiently to say whether it enters in anywhere or not. I should expect its intervention to be extremely rare even as a touch; but I refer at present all higher overmind intervention to the O.I. [*Overmind Intuition*] in order to avoid any risk of overstatement. In the process of overmental transformation what I have observed is that the Overmind first takes up the illumined and higher mind and intellect (thinking, perceiving and reasoning intelligence) into itself and modifies itself to suit the operation — the result is what may be called a mental Overmind — then it lifts these lower movements and the intuitive mind together into a higher reach of itself, forming there the Overmind Intuition, and then all that into the Overmind Gnosis awaiting the supramental transformation. The overmind “touch” on the Higher Mind and Illumined Mind can thus raise towards the O.I. or to the O.G. or leave it in the M.O.; but, estimating at a glance as I have to do, it is not easy to be quite precise. I may have to revise my estimates later on a little, though not perhaps very appreciably, when I am able to look at things in a more leisurely way and

fix the meeting lines which often tend to fade away, leaving an
indefinable border.

3 May 1937

*

I mentioned your recent poems as my aid to drawing inspiration from the Overhead planes. I quoted also the famous lines from other poets which have derived from the highest levels. Jyoti begged me to type for her all the lines of this character from your poems. I have chosen the following:

1. O marvel bird with the burning wings of light and the
unbarred lids that look beyond all space . . .
2. Lost the titan winging of the thought.
3. Arms taking to a voiceless supreme delight,
Life that meets the Eternal with close breast,
An unvalled mind dissolved in the Infinite,
Force one with unimaginable rest?
4. My consciousness climbed like a topless hill . . .
5. He who from Time's dull motion escapes and thrills
Rapt thoughtless, wordless into the Eternal's breast,
Unrolls the form and sign of being,
Seated above in the omniscient Silence.
6. Calm faces of the gods on backgrounds vast
Bringing the marvel of the infinitudes . . .
7. A silent unnamed emptiness content
Either to fade in the Unknowable
Or thrill with the luminous seas of the
Infinite.
8. Crossing power-swept silences rapture-stunned,
Climbing high far ethers eternal-sunned . . .
9. I have drunk the Infinite like a giant's wine.
10. My soul unhorizoned widens to measureless sight . . .
11. Rose of God, like a blush of rapture on Eternity's face,

Rose of Love, ruby depth of all being, fire-passion of
 Grace!
 Arise from the heart of the yearning that sobs in
 Nature's abyss:
 Make earth the home of the Wonderful and life
 beatitude's kiss.

I shan't ask you to tell me in detail the sources of all these lines — but what do you think in general of my choice? Only for one quotation I must crave the favour of your closer attention. Please do try to tell me something about it, for I like it so much that I cannot remain without knowing all that can be known: it is, of course, Number 3 here. I consider these lines the most satisfying I have ever read: poetically as well as spiritually, you have written others as great — but what I mean to say is that the whole essence of the truth of life is given by them and every cry in the being seems answered. So be kind enough to take a little trouble and give me an intimate knowledge of them. I'll be very happy to know their sources and the sort of *enthousiasmos* you had when writing them. How exactly did they come into being?

The choice is excellent. I am afraid I could not tell you in detail the sources, though I suppose they all belong to the overhead inspiration. In all I simply remained silent and allowed the lines to come down shaped or shaping themselves on the way — I don't know that I know anything else about it. All depends on the stress of the *enthousiasmos*, the force of the creative thrill and largeness of the wave of its Ananda, but how is that describable or definable? What is prominent in No. 3 is a certain calm, deep and intense spiritual emotion taken up by the spiritual vision that sees exactly the state or experience and gives it its exact revelatory words. It is an overmind vision and experience and condition that is given a full power of expression by the word and the rhythm — there is a success in “embodying” them or at least the sight and emotion of them which gives the lines their force.

4 May 1937

A General Comment on the Poems of the 1930s

Could you tell me what your object is in manifesting something through the form of poetry?

I am expressing spiritual truth or spiritual experience through poetry.

12 September 1934

On *Savitri*

On the Composition of the Poem Letters of 1931–1936

You once quoted to me two lines written by yourself:

Piercing the limitless unknowable,
Breaking the vacancy and voiceless peace.

Where do they occur? They produce such a wonderful impression of a slow, majestic widening out into infinity.

The lines I quoted from myself are not in any published poem, but in the unfinished first book of “*Savitri, A Legend and a Symbol*” which was in intention a sort of symbolic epic of the aim of supramental Yoga! I may send it to you for typing when I have completed it; but in view of my abundant absence of leisure, the completion seems still to lurk in the mists of the far-off future.

15 September 1931

*

As to *Savitri*, there is a previous draft, the result of the many retouchings of which somebody told you; but in that form it would not have been a magnum opus at all. Besides, it would have been only a legend and not a symbol. I therefore started recasting the whole thing; only the best passages and lines of the old draft will remain, altered so as to fit into the new frame. No, I do not work at the poem once a week; I have other things to do. Once a month perhaps, I look at the new form of the first book and make such changes as inspiration points out to me — so that nothing shall fall below the minimum height which I have fixed for it.

19 September 1931

*

I humbly pray that you may send me some quotations from your *Ilion* and, if I may dare name it, *Savitri*.

It is quite impossible for me to do it just now. If the sky clears a little, I shall see. 28 September 1932

*

What of the first version of *Savitri*? Do you consider it surpasses *Love and Death*, and if so in what respects? Is it less than crying for the moon to ask for a few passages from it? If it is in an untyped or ill-typed condition, I would deem it the seventh heaven of rapture to dedicate as many as possible of my bedridden hours as are needed to produce the neatest typed copy of it imaginable.

What is the first version of *Savitri*? What I wrote at first was only the first raw material of the *Savitri* I am evolving now. I made about ten versions of the first cantos and none were satisfactory — it is only now I have arrived at a stable something out of the nebula, — only for the first Canto — but it is still not *au point*.

4 July 1933

*

Will you be able after all to give quotations from *Savitri*?

Possibly — but in this world certitudes are few. Anyhow in the effort to quote I have succeeded in putting the first few hundred lines into something like a final form — which is a surprising progress and very gratifying to me — even if it brings no immediate satisfaction to you. 1 August 1933

*

If the first hundred lines or so of *Savitri* have attained their final form, it is indeed an occasion for great rejoicing — even for me, as you won't now be averse to quoting from it. If you like, I shall very carefully type out for you whatever you think does not need further improvement. In any case, please do send me the toes of the Hercules if not his whole foot.

The difficulty is that I had always an instinctive shrinking from

amputation or any other surgical operation of the kind in matters of art as well as the body.

2 August 1933

*

Dash it all! if you don't write for your disciples as well as for the Divine that is yourself, whom do you write for? I wonder if you realise how passionately I long to be in contact with the visions and vibrations that are the stuff of your highest poetry. Of course, anything you have written will be most welcome, but to get quotations from *Savitri*, if not all of it, is the top of my aspiration.

Well, I tried to do it — but the condition of timelessness = not enough time to do anything in which I am and have been for a long time, made it impossible. My box is full of things that ought to be done and are not done and, the box being insufficient, they are trailing all over the table and everywhere else — wherever there is a superficies capable of holding papers. Important correspondents are waiting for months for an answer. If I have a moment's leisure stern Duty, daughter of the voice of God, (or something of that kind) insists on my dealing with this labour of Sisyphus and if I even think of poetry she becomes as raucous and anathematous (don't consult Oxford — this is my own) as a revivalist preacher thundering about sin and hell-fire.

Once I promised you that I wouldn't send you any letter for a week if only you would employ the time thus saved in picking out a few things for me from your *Savitri*. I stuck to my part of the bargain and you did look at *Savitri* and even managed to give its first book a form that could at last satisfy you — but I got nothing! . . . You will say that you don't like sending fragments, but that excuse won't wash, for you *have* sent fragments: what about the opening lines of the *Iliad* which you sent Dilip?

A form that would at last satisfy me? No sir, that is a mistake. Part of the first book only and then also only "almost satisfy". "Fragments"? yes, but they should be perfected fragments. Perhaps some day I shall be able to throw a few lines at your head

from time to time which you can carefully collect? Oh, I promise nothing — it is only a wild, wandering idea. 5 October 1936

*

I shall consider it such a great favour if you will give me an instance in English of the inspiration of the pure Overmind — I don't mean just a line (like Milton's "Those thoughts . . ." or Wordsworth's "Voyaging . . .") which has only a touch of it, but something sustained and plenary. . . . Please don't disappoint me by saying that, as no English writer has a passage of this kind, you cannot do anything for me.

Good Heavens! how am I to avoid saying that when it is the only possible answer — at least so far as I can remember. Perhaps if I went through English poetry again with my present consciousness I might find more intimations like the line of Wordsworth, but a passage sustained and plenary? These surely are things yet to come — the "future poetry" perhaps, but not the past.

22 October 1936

*

I think the favour I asked was expressed in perfectly clear language. If no English poet has produced the passage I want, then who has done so in English? God alone knows. But who is capable of doing it? All of us know. Well, then why not be kind enough to grant this favour? If difficult metres could be illustrated on demand, is it impossible to illustrate in a satisfying measure something so natural as the Overmind? I am not asking for hundreds of lines — even eight will more than do.

I have to say Good Heavens again. Because difficult metres can be illustrated on demand, which is a matter of metrical skill, how does it follow that one can produce poetry from any blessed plane on demand? It would be easier to furnish you with hundreds of lines already written out of which you could select for yourself anything overmindish if it exists (which I doubt) rather than produce 8 lines of warranted overmind manufacture to order. All I can do is to give you from time to time some lines from *Savitri*, on condition you keep them to yourself for

the present. It may be a poor substitute for the Overmental, but if you like the sample, the opening lines, I can give you more hereafter — and occasionally better. E.g.

It was the hour before the Gods awake.
 Across the path of the divine Event
 The huge unslumbering spirit of Night, alone
 In the unlit temple of immensity,
 Lay stretched immobile upon silence' marge,
 Mute with the unplumbed prevision of her change.
 The impassive skies were neutral, waste and still.
 Then a faint hesitating glimmer broke.
 A slow miraculous gesture dimly came,
 The insistent thrill of a transfiguring touch
 Persuaded the inert black quietude
 And beauty and wonder disturbed the fields of God.
 A wandering hand of pale enchanted light
 That glowed along the moment's fading brink,
 Fixed with gold panel and opalescent hinge
 A gate of dreams ajar on mystery's verge.

There! Promise fulfilled for a wonder.

24 October 1936

On the Composition of the Poem Letters of 1936–1937

Sorry to impose on you this labour of Penelope, but new lines — unless the lightning-footed comes through whole-bodied, — generally need three or four revisions before I am reasonably satisfied, so again these scratchings and trans-shipments. I hope the latter won't baffle you.

10 November 1936

*

When shall I see more of your *Savitri*? It has been six days since you have sent anything.

It is because the Asuras refuse to enter into any harmonious expression; they are too jagged and discordant altogether. There are also the worlds of Mind and the Mind is always a cause of

trouble. But I haven't got so far yet. As soon as I have traversed this gulf I shall resume. 27 November 1936

*

Are the "Asuras" ready?

Not yet — the first part of them has got into some kind of form, but the latter half has still gaps to be filled etc. etc. and the whole thing has to be given its final revision. 5 December 1936

*

As for what awaits you on your return, I mean the typing work — Hell and the Asuras have been dealt with in a sort of way, I am now labouring in the mental worlds and trying to negotiate a passage through the psychic regions — beyond that things are more easy. 22 December 1936

*

Since I wrote to you I have been once more overwhelmed with correspondence, no time for poetry — so the Mind Worlds are still in a crude embryonic form and the Psychic World not yet begun. The remainder of the vital worlds is finished but only in a way — nothing yet final and a line missing here and there, but that last defect can be filled up *ambulando*. The revision of the last preceding section is also done, but that too in a way — not many changes, but a good number of lines added, and I shall have to wait and see whether all these will stand or not. But the whole thing has been lengthening out so much that I expect I shall have to rearrange the earlier part of *Savitri*, turning the Book of Birth into a Book of Beginnings and lumping together in the second a Book of Birth and Quest. 5 January 1937

*

Any climbing done in *Savitri* of the "mountains of mind"?

Not quite reached the summit yet — the lower heights are negotiated, but the tops are still too rough, have to be made more practicable. 27 January 1937

*

Is it possible to proceed with *Savitri*? Today is Sunday, so please try to do something, or at least let me have the third section, revised.

I have not had time to think even of *Savitri* or of poetry at all: so none of these things are ready. 28 February 1937

*

May I dare to hope that tomorrow you really will send me an instalment of *Savitri*?

Physically, mentally, psychologically and temporally impossible. 29 March 1937

*

But why is *Savitri* impossible — and in so many ways?

Physically, I have to expend too much energy continuously on other things to have any left for poetry. Psychologically, I have no push to poetry just now even if I had the time, which I haven't. Poetry needs time and space to be born and neither exists for me now. Temporally, your undeniable decrease in correspondence means only that instead of having no time to finish the correspondence except by a breakneck hurry — and even then not — I have just time to do it. Even so outside letters pile up in a neglected heap. Of course, if I give up the little time I have for concentration, I might by slaving all the day make all other ends meet — but that I have no intention of doing. 30 March 1937

*

If at present you can't get any further in *Savitri*, please do me the favour of sending back the third section, finally corrected. Surely you can find some time for that on Sunday. May I send you a big empty envelope on Sunday evening?

There is no surety about it. On Sunday I try to decrease the ever increasing mountain of unanswered outside correspondence. You can always send a big empty envelope, but God knows when you will get it back. 2 April 1937

*

If you have time please look at the third section of *Savitri*.

I have gone over it once more and made some more changes, but now I have to keep it in a drawer for some time and then look again to see whether new and old are all right. 24 April 1937

*

When shall I get the third section of *Savitri*? I'll be much obliged if you will give it a final luminous look kindling up all that remains a little below the mark. But are you sure anything does remain unkindled?

God knows. I am trying to kindle, but each time I find something that could be more up to the mark; I have some hope however that today's revision is the penultimate. Let us see. When you get it you will find yourself in an awful tangle and I can only hope you will see your way through the forest. 9 May 1937

*

When will you continue *Savitri*? Your bucking-up seems to take a long time.

No time for the buck to appear — I mean inner, not outer time. 25 May 1937

*

Don't you think it's a pretty long time since you touched *Savitri* last? You wrote to me once that if those psychic and mental worlds could be captured, the rest would be smooth sailing. Can't you put yourself in the right mood and have done with the obstacle for good and all?

It is not a question of mood at all but inability to take up any poetry till certain preoccupying things have been done. 4 July 1937

On the Composition of the Poem Letters of 1938

Is it not possible to send me, as you used to, new instalments

of *Savitri* as they get written? I'll send you the next day a typed copy to revise. Why not file this sheet?

Nothing quite ready yet. If "Mind" gets ready before you go, I shall send it. 12 February 1938

*

I have been kept too occupied with other things to make much headway with the poem — except that I have spoiled your beautiful neat copy of the "Worlds" under the oestrus of the restless urge for more and more perfection; but we are here for World-improvement, so I hope that is excusable. 12 March 1938

*

I have not been able to make any headway with *Savitri* — owing to lack of time and also to an appalled perception of the disgraceful imperfection of all the sections after the first two. But I have tackled them again as I think I wrote to you and have pulled up the third section to a higher consistency of level; the "Worlds" have fallen into a state of manuscript chaos, corrections upon corrections, additions upon additions, rearrangements on rearrangements out of which perhaps some cosmic beauty will emerge! 9 October 1938

*

I have done an enormous amount of work with *Savitri*. The third section has been recast if not rewritten — so as to give it a more consistent epic swing and amplitude and elevation of level. The fourth section, the Worlds, is undergoing transformation. The "Life" part is in a way finished, though I shall have to go over the ground perhaps some five or six times more to ensure perfection of detail. I am now starting a recasting of the "Mind" part of which I had only made a sort of basic rough draft. I hope that this time the work will stand as more final and definitive.

1938

*

Can't you send some of your poems? You owe me one, you know.

What poems? I am not writing any, except occasionally my long epic, *Savitri*, which cannot see the light of day in an embryonic state.¹

15 May 1938

On the Composition of the Poem Letters of 1945 – 1948

Don't wait for any poems for your Annual, I think the Pondicherry poets will have to march without a captain, unless you take the lead. I have been hunting among a number of poems which I perpetrated at intervals, mostly sonnets, but I am altogether dissatisfied with the inspiration which led me to perpetrate them, none of them is in my present opinion good enough to publish, at any rate in their present form, and I am too busy to recast, especially as poetically I am very much taken up with *Savitri* which is attaining a giant stature, she has grown immensely since you last saw the baby. I am besides revising and revising without end so as to let nothing pass which is not up to the mark. And I have much else to do. 18 March 1945

*

Your inference that ten books have been completed is unfortunately not correct. What has been completed, in a general way, with a sufficient finality of the whole form but subject to final changes in detail, is the first three books of the second part, The Book of Birth and Quest, The Book of Love, The Book of Fate; also in the same way, two books of the third part, The Book of Eternal Light and The Book of the Double Twilight. But a drastic recasting of the last two books still remains to be done and only a part of the eleventh has been subjected to that process. Worse still, the original Book of Death has not only to be recast but has to be split into two, The Book of Yoga and The Book of Death,

¹ This letter was written to a different correspondent from the one who was the recipient of all the other letters in this section. — Ed.

and the first of these exists only in its first canto and a confused multi-versioned draft of the second, while all the rest, and that means many long cantos, has still to be written quite new, no draft of them yet exists. 22 April 1947

*

The first reason [*for not writing*] is my inability to write with my own hand, owing to the failure of the sight and other temporary reasons; the sight is improving but the improvement is not so rapid as to make reading and writing likely in the immediate future. Even *Savitri* is going slow, confined mainly to revision of what has already been written, and I am as yet unable to take up the completion of Parts II and III which are not yet finally revised and for which a considerable amount of new matter has to be written. 10 July 1948

*

I am afraid I am too much preoccupied with the constant clashes with the world and the devil to write anything at length even about your new poems: a few lines must suffice. In fact as I had to explain the other day to Dilip, my only other regular correspondent, my push to write letters or to new literary production has dwindled almost to zero — this apart from *Savitri* and even *Savitri* has very much slowed down and I am only making the last revisions of the First Part already completed; the other two parts are just now in cold storage. 1948

On the Inspiration and Writing of the Poem

I have gone through your article. I have struck out “like that of *Savitri*” and changed “will be” into “would be”. Don’t make prophecies. And how do you know that *Savitri* is or is going to be supramental poetry? It is not, in fact — it is only an attempt to render into poetry a symbol of things occult and spiritual.

1933

*

You wrote to me the other day that *Savitri* is not supramental poetry, but I suppose there are lines in it which can be considered supramental. And why have you refrained from making it all supramental? . . . As everything in the universe, including human language, is derived at the highest from the Overmind, I wonder if it will not be necessary to introduce some radical change in language to express supramental idea and rhythm. Can supramental speech be understood or appreciated by those who haven't any glimmering of the influence of its source? Of course if it has a special symbology, one who is not supramentalised will find it very hard to grasp it, until explained, but will even its rhythm be incomprehensible?

All these are questions for the Supermind to settle when it has got down and settled into power.

2 August 1933

*

We have been wondering why you should have to write and rewrite your poetry — for instance *Savitri* — ten or twelve times.

That is very simple. I used *Savitri* as a means of ascension. I began with it on a certain mental level, each time I could reach a higher level I rewrote from that level. Moreover I was particular — if part seemed to me to come from any lower level, I was not satisfied to leave it because it was good poetry. All had to be as far as possible of the same mint. In fact, *Savitri* has not been regarded by me as a poem to be written and finished, but as a field of experimentation to see how far poetry could be written from one's own Yogic consciousness and how that could be made creative. I did not rewrite *Rose of God* or the Sonnets except for two or three verbal alterations made at the moment.

29 March 1936

*

In *Savitri* there is no attempt — as in the poetry of us lesser fry — to make things specially striking or strange or new, but a simple largeness of gesture which most naturally makes one surprising revelation after another of beauty and power.

Well, it is the difference of receiving from above and living in the

ambience of the Above — whatever comes receives the breadth of largeness which belongs to that plane. 26 October 1936

*

I don't know yet whether every line [*of a passage*] is final, but I send it all the same. 29 October 1936

*

Why shouldn't every line be final? . . . Do you ever have to pay attention to technique? That is, when revising do you think whether you have varied the pauses and the rhythm-modulations and the sentence-lengths? I suppose that if the expression satisfies you it automatically means a perfection of technique also, without your having to keep a special eye on it.

Every line was not sure of being final because three or four were newly written in the rebuilding, and I can never be certain of newly written stuff (I mean in this *Savitri*) until I have looked at it again after an interval. Apart from the quality of new lines, there is the combination with others in the whole which I have modified more than anything else in my past revisions. . . .

I don't think about the technique because thinking is no longer in my line. But I see and feel first when the lines are coming through and afterwards in revision of the work. I don't bother about details while writing, because that would only hamper the inspiration. I let it come through without interference; only pausing if there is an obvious inadequacy felt, in which case I conclude that it is a wrong inspiration or inferior level that has cut across the communication. If the inspiration is the right one, then I have not to bother about the technique then or afterwards, for there comes through the perfect line with the perfect rhythm inextricably intertwined or rather fused into an inseparable and single unity; if there is anything wrong with the expression that carries with it an imperfection in the rhythm, if there is a flaw in the rhythm, the expression also does not carry its full weight, is not absolutely inevitable. If on the other hand the inspiration is not throughout the right one, then there is an after examination and recasting of part or whole. The things

I lay most stress on then are whether each line in itself is the inevitable thing not only as a whole but in each word; whether there is the right distribution of sentence lengths (an immensely important thing in this kind of blank verse); whether the lines are in their right place, for all the lines may be perfect, but they may not combine perfectly together — bridges may be needed, alterations of position so as to create the right development and perspective etc., etc. Pauses hardly exist in this kind of blank verse; variations of rhythm as between the lines, of caesura, of the distribution of long and short, clipped and open syllables, manifold combinations of vowel and consonant sounds, alliteration, assonances, etc., distribution into one line, two line, three or four or five line, many line sentences, care to make each line tell by itself in its own mass and force and at the same time form a harmonious whole sentence — these are the important things. But all that is usually taken care of by the inspiration itself, for as I know and have the habit of the technique, the inspiration provides what I want according to standing orders. If there is a defect I appeal to headquarters till a proper version comes along or the defect is removed by a word or phrase substitute that flashes — with the necessary sound and sense. These things are not done by thinking or seeking for the right thing — the two agents are sight and call. Also feeling — the solar plexus has to be satisfied and, until it is, revision after revision has to continue. I may add that the technique does not go by any set mental rule — for the object is not perfect technical elegance according to precept, but sound-significance filling out word-significance. If that can be done by breaking rules, well, so much the worse for the rule.

30 October 1936

*

The poem was originally written from a lower level, a mixture perhaps of the inner mind, psychic, poetic intelligence, sublimised vital, afterwards with the Higher Mind, often illumined and intuitivised, intervening. Most of the stuff of the first book is new or else the old so altered as to be no more what it was; the best of the old has sometimes been kept almost

intact because it had already the higher inspiration. Moreover there have been made successive revisions each trying to lift the general level higher and higher towards a possible Overmind poetry. As it now stands there is a general Overmind influence, I believe, sometimes coming fully through, sometimes colouring the poetry of the other higher planes fused together, sometimes lifting any one of these higher planes to its highest or the psychic, poetic intelligence or vital towards them. 3 November 1936

*

It will take you exactly eight minutes to read the third section and two more minutes are enough for you to decide in the matter of alternatives.

You have queer ideas about poetic time! Sometimes it takes me months to get the right form of a line. 19 November 1936

*

As far as I know, you don't need to recast anything in the third section, except an occasional word which is too closely repeated. As for the rest you have only to decide in a few places which of the two alternatives already found by you is the right one — a problem which your solar plexus can polish off in a jiffy.

Allow me to point out that whatever I did in a jiffy would not be any more than provisionally final. It is not a question of making a few changes in individual lines, that is a very minor problem; the real finality only comes when all is felt as a perfect whole, no line jarring with or falling away from the level of the whole though some may rise above it and also all the parts in their proper place making the right harmony. It is an inner feeling that has to decide that and my inner feeling is not as satisfied in that respect with parts of the third section as it is with the first two. Unfortunately the mind can't arrange these things, one has to wait till the absolutely right thing comes in a sort of receptive self-opening and calling-down condition. Hence the months.

20 November 1936

On the Characters of the Poem

What a flight! — nobody can describe so marvellously our Mother. Isn't Savitri she and she only?

Savitri is represented in the poem as an incarnation of the Divine Mother. 3 November 1936

*

If Savitri is represented as an incarnation of the Divine Mother, Aswapati must be meant to represent Theon.

What has Theon to do with it?

If Aswapati is he, I'll learn about his role from the poem — but couldn't you say something about him in direct reference to Mother and yourself?

This incarnation is supposed to have taken place in far past times when the whole thing had to be opened, so as to "hew the ways of Immortality". Theon and the circumstances of this life have nothing to do with it. 10 November 1936

On the Verse and Structure of the Poem

Please send me some passages from *Savitri* together with my selections from the blank-verse poetry of Abercrombie that I sent you in order to help me distinguish at a glance "Hyperion from a satyr".

Savitri is built on another plan altogether. It is blank verse without enjambements (except rarely) — each line a thing by itself and arranged in paragraphs of one, two, three, four, five lines (rarely a longer series), in an attempt to catch something of the Upanishadic and Kalidasian movements, so far as that is a possibility in English. You can't take that as a model — it is too difficult a rhythm-sculpture to be a model. I shall myself know whether it is a success or not, only when I have finished 2 or 3 books. But where is the time now for such a work? When the

supramental has finished coming down — then perhaps.

25 December 1932

*

This First Book is divided into sections and the larger sections into subsections; you might wait till one section is with you before you type. E.g. the first section is “the last Dawn”, i.e. the dawn of the day of Satyavan’s death (but it must be remembered that everything is symbolic or significant in the poem, so this dawn also,) the next is the Issue — both of these are short. Then comes a huge section of the Yoga of the Lord of the Horse (Aswapati, father of Savitri) relating how came about the birth of Savitri and its significance — finally the birth and childhood of Savitri.

25 October 1936

*

Savitri was originally written many years ago before the Mother came as a narrative poem in two parts, Part I Earth and Part II Beyond (these two parts are still extant in the scheme) each of four books — or rather Part II consisted of 3 books and an epilogue. Twelve books to an epic is a classical superstition, but this new *Savitri* may extend to ten books — if much is added in the final revision it may be even twelve. The first book has been lengthening and lengthening out till it must be over 2000 lines, but I shall break up the original first four into five, I think — in fact I have already started doing so. These first five will be, as I conceive them now, the Book of Birth, the Book of Quest, the Book of Love, the Book of Fate, the Book of Death. As for the second Part, I have not touched it yet. There was no climbing of planes there in the first version — rather Savitri moves through the worlds of Night, of Twilight, of Day — all of course in a spiritual sense — and ended by calling down the power of the Highest Worlds of Sachchidananda. I had no idea of what the supramental World could be like at that time, so it could not enter into the scheme. As for expressing the supramental inspiration, that is a matter of the future.

31 October 1936

*

Here is the beginning of the second section which is entitled "The Issue" — that is of course the issue between Savitri and Fate or rather between the incarnate Light, the Sun Goddess, and Death the Creator and Devourer of this world with his Law of darkness, limitation, ignorance. 31 October 1936

*

I was trying doublets again because in the third Section, first subsection (Yoga of the Lord of the Horse — Ascent to Godhead) there is a long passage describing Aswapati's progress through the subtle physical, vital and mental worlds towards the Overmind which is far yet from being either complete or *au point*. It was only a brief interlude of a few lines formerly, but I had been lengthening it out afterwards with much difficulty in getting it right. I have now got the subtle physical and lower vital worlds into some kind of order, but the big dark Asuric vital and the vital heavens are still roaming about in a state of half solid incompleteness. Still I suppose as I am taking my vacation (from correspondence), I may have time to put all that right. 1 November 1936

*

Don't you consider it rather necessary that some interpretative hint ought to be given of the term "Horse" in this section? Otherwise the section title [*"The Yoga of the Lord of the Horse"*] may mystify somewhat.

No. The name is Aswapati, Lord of the Horse, and it will be explained elsewhere. I don't want to be allegorical, only mystic and allusive. 10 November 1936

*

I suppose the name of the section finished yesterday is "Aswapati, Lord of the Horse" and not, as originally conceived, "The Yoga of the Lord of the Horse"?

No. The proposed title would have no connection with the text except the name of the man which is not relevant as yet. "The Yoga of the Lord of the Horse" covers a number of sections

making the greater part of the first book, — it is not the title of one section only. This title is essential to the plan of the work. The subtitle “Ascent to Godhead” covers the two sections, the one just finished and the one now begun. 16 November 1936

*

I am not quite sure of the sections (titles) yet — the fourth section is obviously a continuation of the Ascent to Godhead — it is the realisation of Godhead with which it will ascend — after that the Unknowable Brahman, then the Purushottama and finally the Mother. 19 May 1937

*

You will see when you get the full typescript [*of the first three books*] that *Savitri* has grown to an enormous length so that it is no longer quite the same thing as the poem you saw then. There are now three books in the first part. The first, the Book of Beginnings, comprises five cantos which cover the same ground as what you typed but contains also much more that is new. The small passage about Aswapati and the other worlds has been replaced by a new book, the Book of the Traveller of the Worlds, in fourteen cantos with many thousand lines. There is also a third sufficiently long book, the Book of the Divine Mother. In the new plan of the poem there is a second part consisting of five books: two of these, the Book of Birth and Quest and the Book of Love, have been completed and another, the Book of Fate, is almost complete. Two others, the Book of Yoga and the Book of Death, have still to be written, though a part needs only a thorough recasting. Finally, there is the third part consisting of four books, the Book of Eternal Night, the Book of the Dual Twilight, the Book of Everlasting Day and the Return to Earth, which have to be entirely recast and the third of them largely rewritten. So it will be a long time before *Savitri* is complete.

In the new form it will be a sort of poetic philosophy of the Spirit and of Life much profounder in its substance and vaster in its scope than was intended in the original poem. I am trying of course to keep it at a very high level of inspiration, but in so

large a plan covering most subjects of philosophical thought and vision and many aspects of spiritual experience there is bound to be much variation of tone: but that is, I think, necessary for the richness and completeness of the treatment. 1946

Comments on Specific Lines and Passages of the Poem

As if solicited in an alien world
With timid and hazardous instinctive grace,
Orphaned and driven out to seek a home,
An errant marvel with no place to live,²

I see no sufficient reason to alter the passage; certainly, I could not alter the line beginning "Orphaned . . ."; it is indispensable to the total idea and its omission would leave an unfilled gap. If I may not expect a complete alertness from the reader, — but how without it can he grasp the subtleties of a mystical and symbolic poem? — he surely ought to be alert enough when he reads the second line to see that it is somebody who is soliciting with a timid grace and it can't be somebody who is being gracefully solicited; also the line "Orphaned etc." ought to suggest to him at once that it is some orphan who is soliciting and not the other way round: the delusion of the past participle passive ought to be dissipated long before he reaches the subject of the verb in the fourth line. The obscurity throughout, if there is any, is in the mind of the hasty reader and not in the grammatical construction of the passage. 1946

*

Then a faint hesitating glimmer broke.
A slow miraculous gesture dimly came,

² *Sri Aurobindo*, *Savitri: A Legend and a Symbol*, volume 33 of *THE COMPLETE WORKS OF SRI AUROBINDO*, p. 3. Subsequent page references are given in square brackets after the line or lines quoted. The passages *Sri Aurobindo* was asked to comment on were often revised later. Here the passages are reproduced from a version written at or near the time of *Sri Aurobindo's* comment. Where this version differs significantly from the final version, the page reference is preceded by "cf." (compare). The letters are arranged according to the order of the lines in the final text of *Savitri*. — Ed.

The insistent thrill of a transfiguring touch
Persuaded the inert black quietude
And beauty and wonder disturbed the fields of God.
A wandering hand of pale enchanted light
That glowed along the moment's fading brink,
Fixed with gold panel and opalescent hinge
A gate of dreams ajar on mystery's verge. [*cf. p. 3*]

Can't see the validity of any prohibition of double adjectives in abundance. If a slow rich wealth-burdened movement is the right thing, as it certainly is here in my judgment, the necessary means have to be used to bring it about — and the double adjective is admirably suited for the purpose. 25 October 1936

*

Now as to the double adjectives — well, man alive, your proposed emendations are an admirable exposition of the art of bringing a line down the steps till my poor “slow miraculous” above-mind line meant to give or begin the concrete portrayal of an act of some hidden Godhead finally becomes a mere metaphor thrown out from its more facile mint by a brilliantly imaginative poetic intelligence. First of all, you shift my “dimly” out of the way and transfer it to something to which it does not inwardly belong, make it an epithet of the gesture or an adverb qualifying its epithet instead of something that qualifies the atmosphere in which the act of the godhead takes place. That is a preliminary havoc which destroys what is very important to the action, its atmosphere. I never intended the gesture to be dim, it is a luminous gesture, but forcing its way through the black quietude it comes dimly. Then again the bald phrase “a gesture came” without anything to psychicise it becomes simply something that “happened”, “came” being a poetic equivalent for “happened” instead of the expression of the slow coming of the gesture. The words “slow” and “dimly” assure this sense of motion and this concreteness to the word's sense here. Remove one or both whether entirely or elsewhere and you ruin the vision and change altogether its character. That is at least what happens wholly in

your penultimate version and as for the last the “came” gets another meaning and one feels that somebody very slowly decided to let out the gesture from himself and it was quite a miracle that it came out at all! “Dimly miraculous” means what precisely or what “miraculously dim” — it was miraculous that it managed to be so dim or there was something vaguely miraculous about it after all? No doubt they try to mean something else — but these interpretations lurk in their way and trip them over. The only thing that can stand is the first version which is no doubt fine poetry, but the trouble is that it does not give the effect I wanted to give, the effect which is necessary for the dawn’s inner significance. Moreover what becomes of the slow lingering rhythm of my line which is absolutely indispensable?

Do not forget that the *Savitri* is an experiment in mystic poetry, spiritual poetry cast into a symbolic figure. Done on this scale, it is really a new attempt and cannot be hampered by old ideas of technique except when they are assimilable. Least of all by standards proper to a mere intellectual and abstract poetry which makes “reason and taste” the supreme arbiters, aims at a harmonised poetic-intellectual balanced expression of the sense, elegance in language, a sober and subtle use of imaginative decoration, a restrained emotive element etc. The attempt at mystic spiritual poetry of the kind I am at demands above all a spiritual objectivity, an intense psycho-physical concreteness. I do not know what you mean exactly here by “obvious” and “subtle”. According to certain canons epithets should be used sparingly, free use of them is rhetorical, an “obvious” device, a crowding of images is bad taste, there should be a subtlety of art not displayed but severely concealed — *summa ars est celare artem*. Very good for a certain standard of poetry, not so good or not good at all for others. Shakespeare kicks over these traces at every step, Aeschylus freely and frequently, Milton whenever he chooses. Such lines as

In hideous ruin and combustion down

or

Wilt thou upon the high and giddy mast
Seal up the ship-boy's eyes, and rock his brains
In cradle of the rude imperious surge

(note two double adjectives in three lines in the last) — are not subtle or restrained, or careful to conceal their elements of powerful technique, they show rather a vivid richness or vehemence, forcing language to its utmost power of expression. That has to be done still more in this kind of mystic poetry. I cannot bring out the spiritual objectivity if I have to be miserly about epithets, images, or deny myself the use of all available resources of sound significance.

The double epithets are indispensable here and in the exact order in which they are arranged by me. You say the rich burdened movement can be secured by other means, but a rich burdened movement of any kind is not my primary object, it is desirable only because it is needed to express the spirit of the action here; and the double epithets are wanted because they are the best, not only one way of securing it. The “gesture” must be “slow miraculous” — if it is merely miraculous or merely slow that does not create a picture of the thing as it is, but of something quite abstract and ordinary or concrete but ordinary — it is the combination that renders the exact nature of the mystic movement, with the “dimly came” supporting it, so that “gesture” is not here a metaphor, but a thing actually done. Equally a pale light or an enchanted light may be very pretty, but it is only the combination that renders the luminosity which is that of the hand acting tentatively in the darkness. That darkness itself is described as a quietude, which gives it a subjective spiritual character and brings out the thing symbolised, but the double epithet “inert black” gives it the needed concreteness so that the quietude ceases to be something abstract and becomes something concrete, objective, but still spiritually subjective. I might go on, but that is enough. Every word must be the right word, with the right atmosphere, the right relation to all the other words, just as every sound in its place and the whole sound together must bring out the imponderable significance

which is beyond verbal expression. One can't chop and change about on the principle that it is sufficient if the same mental sense or part of it is given with some poetical beauty or power. One can only change if the change brings out more perfectly the thing behind that is seeking for expression — brings out in full objectivity and also in the full mystic sense. If I can do that, well, other considerations have to take a back seat or seek their satisfaction elsewhere. 31 October 1936

*

A lonely splendour from the invisible goal
Almost was flung on the opaque Inane. [p. 4]

No word will do except “invisible”. I don't think there are too many “l's” — in fact such multiplications of a vowel or consonant assonance or several together as well as syllabic assonances in a single line or occasionally between line-endings (e.g. face–fate in the next instalment) are an accepted feature of the technique in *Savitri*. Purposeful repetitions also, or those which serve as echoes or key notes in the theme. 27 October 1936

*

I notice that you have changed “twixt” to “between” when substituting “link” for “step” in the line, “Air was a vibrant link between earth and heaven.” [p. 4] Is it merely because several lines earlier “twixt” has been used?

No, it is because “link twixt”, two heavy syllables (heavy because ending in two consonants) with the same vowel, makes an awkward combination which can only be saved by good management of the whole line — but here the line was not written to suit such a combination, so it won't do. 28 October 1936

*

Here where our half-lit ignorance skirts the gulfs
On the dumb bosom of the ambiguous earth,
Here where one knows not even the step in front
And Truth has her throne on the shadowy back of doubt,

An anguished and precarious field of toil
 Outspread beneath some large indifferent gaze,
 Our prostrate soil bore the awakening Light.
 Here too the glamour and prophetic flame
 Touched for an instant trivial daylong shapes,
 Then the divine afflatus, lost, withdrew,
 Dimmed, fading slowly from the mortal's range.
 A sacred yearning lingered in its trace,
 The worship of a Presence and a Power
 Too perfect to be held by death-bound hearts,
 The prescience of a marvellous birth to come.
 Affranchised from its respite of fatigue,
 Once more the rumour of the speed of Life
 Renewed the cycles of the blinded quest.
 All sprang to their unvarying daily acts;
 The thousand peoples of the soil and tree
 Obeyed the unforeseeing instant's urge,
 And, leader here with his uncertain mind,
 Alone who seeks the future's covered face,
 Man lifted up the burden of his fate. [*cf. pp. 5-6*]

A deep and large suggestive tone is here, with every word doing perfect expressive duty; but it would be interesting to know if there is some shifting of the plane — if the poetry is nearer the Higher Mind than in the preceding passages where a more direct luminosity seemed to be at work.

The former pitch continues, as far as I can see, up to “Light”, then it begins to come down to an intuitivised higher mind in order to suit the change of the subject — but it is only occasionally that it is pure higher mind — a mixture of the intuitive or illumined is usually there except when some truth has to be stated to the philosophic intelligence in as precise a manner as possible.

28 October 1936

*

[*As typed*] Its passive flower of love and doom it gave.

[*cf. p. 7*]

Good Heavens! how did Gandhi come in there? Passion-flower,
sir — passion, *not* passive. 30 October 1936

*

Into how many feet do you scan the line

Draped in the leaves' emerald vivid monotone [*cf. p. 13*]?

Five, the first being taken as a dactyl. A little gambol like that
must be occasionally allowed in an otherwise correct metrical
performance. 2 November 1936

*

The Gods above and Nature sole below
Were the spectators of that mighty strife. [*p. 13*]

The last line drops only in appearance, I think, towards Mil-
tonism.

Miltonism? Surely not. The Miltonic has a statelier more spread-
ing rhythm and a less direct more loftily arranged language.
Miltonically I should have written

Only the Sons of Heaven and that executive She
Watched the arbitrament of the high dispute.

1 November 1936

*

Is the *r*-effect in

Never a rarer creature bore his shaft [*p. 14*]
deliberate?

Yes, like Shakespeare's

. . . rock his brains
In cradle of the rude imperious surge.

Mine has only three sonant *r*'s, the others being inaudible —
Shakespeare pours himself 5 in a close space.

2 November 1936

*

All in her pointed to a nobler kind. [*p. 14*]

It is a “connecting” line which prepares for what follows. It is sometimes good technique, as I think, to intersperse lines like that (provided they don’t fall below standard) so as to give the intellect the foothold of a clear unadorned statement of the gist of what is coming, before taking a higher flight. This is of course a technique for long poems and long descriptions, not for shorter things or lyrical writing. 2 November 1936

*

I refuse entirely to admit that that [*“All in her pointed to a nobler kind”*] is poor poetry. It is not only just the line that is needed to introduce what follows but it is very good poetry with the strength and pointed directness, not intellectualised like Pope’s, but intuitive, which we often find in the Elizabethans, for instance in Marlowe supporting adequately and often more than adequately his “mighty lines”. But the image must be understood, as it was intended, in its concrete sense and not as a vague rhetorical phrase substituted for a plainer wording, — it shows Savitri as the forerunner or first creator of a new race. All poets have lines which are bare and direct statements and meant to be that in order to carry their full force; but to what category their simplicity belongs or whether a line is only passable or more than that depends on various circumstances. Shakespeare’s

To be or not to be, that is the question

introduces powerfully one of the most famous of all soliloquies and it comes in with a great dramatic force, but in itself it is a bare statement and some might say that it would not be otherwise written in prose and is only saved by the metrical rhythm. The same might be said of the well-known passage in Keats which I have already quoted in this connection:

“Beauty is truth, truth beauty” — that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.

The same might be said of Milton’s famous line,

Fallen Cherub! to be weak is miserable.

But obviously in all these lines there is not only a concentrated force, power or greatness of the thought, but also a concentration of intense poetic feeling which makes any criticism impossible. Then take Milton's lines,

Were it not better done as others use,
To sport with Amaryllis in the shade,
Or with the tangles of Neaera's hair?

It might be said that the first line has nothing to distinguish it and is merely passable or only saved by the charm of what follows; but there is a beauty of rhythm and a *bhāva* or feeling brought in by the rhythm which makes the line beautiful in itself and not merely passable. If there is not some saving grace like that then the danger of laxity may become possible. I do not think there is much in *Savitri* which is of that kind. But I can perfectly understand your anxiety that all should be lifted to or towards at least the minimum overhead level or so near as to be touched by its influence or at the very least a good substitute for it. I do not know whether that is always possible in so long a poem as *Savitri* dealing with so many various heights and degrees and so much varying substance of thought and feeling and descriptive matter and narrative. But that has been my general aim throughout and it is the reason why I have made so many successive drafts and continual alterations till I felt that I had got the thing intended by the higher inspiration in every line and passage. It is also why I keep myself open to every suggestion from a sympathetic and understanding quarter and weigh it well, rejecting only after due consideration and accepting when I see it to be well-founded. But for that the critic must be one who has seen and felt what is in the thing written, not like your friend Mendonça, one who has not seen anything and understood only the word surface and not even always that; he must be open to this kind of poetry, able to see the spiritual vision it conveys, capable too of feeling the overhead touch when it comes, — the fit reader. 22 April 1947

Are not these lines a snatch of the sheer Overmind?

All in her pointed to a nobler kind.
 Near to earth's wideness, intimate with heaven,
 Exalted and swift her young large-visioned spirit,
 Winging through worlds of splendour and of calm,
 O'erflew the ways of Thought to unborn things.
 Ardent was her self-poised un stumbling will,
 Her mind, a sea of white sincerity,
 Passionate in flow, had not one turbid wave.
 As in a mystic and dynamic dance
 A priestess of immaculate ecstasies,
 Inspired and ruled from Truth's revealing vault,
 Moves in some prophet cavern of the Gods,
 A heart of silence in the hands of joy
 Inhabited with rich creative beats
 A body like a parable of dawn
 That seemed a niche for veiled divinity
 Or golden temple-door to things beyond.
 Immortal rhythms swayed her time-born steps;
 Her look, her smile awoke celestial sense
 In this earth-stuff and their intense delight
 Poured a supernal beauty on men's lives.
 The great unsatisfied godhead here could dwell.
 Vacant of the dwarf self's imprisoned air,
 Her mood could harbour his sublimer breath
 Spiritual that can make all things divine:
 For even her gulfs were secrecies of light.
 At once she was the stillness and the Word,
 An ocean of untrembling virgin fire,
 A continent of self-diffusing peace.
 In her he met a vastness like his own;
 His warm high subtle ether he refound
 And moved in her as in his natural home. [*cf. pp. 14-16*]

This passage is, I believe, what I might call the Overmind Intuition at work expressing itself in something like its own rhythm and language. It is difficult to say about one's own poetry, but I think I have succeeded here and in some passages later on

in catching that very difficult note; in separate lines or briefer passages (i.e. a few lines at a time) I think it comes in not often.

3 November 1936

*

I shall answer in this letter only about the passage in the description of Savitri which has been omitted.³ The simplest thing would be to leave the description itself and the article as they are. I am unable to accept the alterations you suggest because they are romantically decorative and do not convey any impression of directness and reality which is necessary in this style of writing. A “sapphire sky” is too obvious and common and has no significance in connection with the word “magnanimity” or its idea and “boundless” is somewhat meaningless and inapt when applied to sky. The same objections apply to both “opulence” and “amplitude”; but apart from that they have only a rhetorical value and are not the right word for what I want to say. Your “life’s wounded wings of dream” and “the wounded wings of life” have also a very pronounced note of romanticism and do not agree with the strong reality of things stressed everywhere in this passage. In the poem I dwell often upon the idea of life as a dream, but here it would bring in a false note. It does not seem to me that magnanimity and greatness are the same thing or that this can be called a repetition. I myself see no objection to “heaven” and “haven”; it is not as if they were in successive lines; they are divided by two lines and it is surely an excessively meticulous ear that can take their similarity of sound at this distance as an offence. Most of your other objections hang upon your overscrupulous law against repetitions. I shall speak about that in a later letter; at present I can only say that I consider that this law has no value in the technique of a mystic poem of this

³ *This letter was written in response to suggestions made by K. D. Sethna (Amal Kiran) before he reproduced certain passages from Savitri in his article “Sri Aurobindo — A New Age of Mystic Poetry” (Sri Aurobindo Circle 2 [1946]). In that article Sethna omitted a number of lines from passages he quoted from the poem. The lines under discussion here are those that begin “Near to earth’s wideness, intimate with heaven” (pp. 14–16). — Ed.*

kind and that repetition of a certain kind can be even part of the technique; for instance, I see no objection to “sea” being repeated in a different context in the same passage or to the image of the ocean being resorted to in a third connection. I cannot see that the power and force or inevitability of these lines is at all diminished in their own context by their relative proximity or that that proximity makes each less inevitable in its place.

Then about the image about the bird and the bosom, I understand what you mean, but it rests upon the idea that the whole passage must be kept at the same transcendental level. It is true that all the rest gives the transcendental values in the composition of Savitri’s being, while here there is a departure to show how this transcendental greatness contacts the psychic demand of human nature in its weakness and responds to it and acts upon it. That was the purpose of the new passage and it is difficult to accomplish it without bringing in a normal psychic instead of a transcendental tone. The image of the bird and the bosom is obviously not new and original, it images a common demand of the human heart and does it by employing a physical and emotional figure so as to give it a vivid directness in its own kind. This passage was introduced because it brought in something in Savitri’s relation with the human world which seemed to me a necessary part of a complete psychological description of her. If it had to be altered, — which would be only if the descent to the psychic level really spoils the consistent integrality of the description and lowers the height of the poetry, — I would have to find something equal and better, and just now I do not find any such satisfying alteration.

As for the line about the strength and silence of the gods, that has a similar motive of completeness. The line about the “stillness” and the “word” gives us the transcendental element in Savitri, — for the Divine Savitri is the word that rises from the transcendental stillness; the next two lines render that element into the poise of the spiritual consciousness; this last line brings the same thing down to the outward character and temperament in life. A union of strength and silence is insisted upon in this poem as one of the most prominent characteristics of Savitri and

I have dwelt on it elsewhere, but it had to be brought in here also if this description of her was to be complete. I do not find that this line lacks poetry or power; if I did, I would alter it. Your objection to the substitution of wideness for vastness⁴ is quite justified though not because of any reason of repetition, but because vastness is the right word and wideness is much inferior; the change was not deliberate but came by inadvertence due to a lapse of memory. I have restored vastness in the poem.

But, for all this, it may perhaps be better to keep the passage as you have written it [*with omissions*] since it is a particular characteristic of poetic style at its highest which you want to emphasise, and anything which you feel to lower or depart from that height may very properly be omitted. So unless you positively want to include the omitted passage kept as I have written it, we will leave your article and quotations to stand in their present form. The rest in another letter.

P.S. One thing occurs to me that the lines you most want to include might be kept, while the passage about the bird and the "haven" down to the "warmth and colour's rule" could be left out. This would throw out all the things to which you object except the frequency of the sea and sky images and the recurrence of "great" after "greatness"; those have to remain, for I feel no disposition to alter those defects, if defects they are. Unless you think otherwise, we will so arrange it. In that case the alteration you want made in your article will find its place.

11 March 1946

*

As might a soul fly like a hunted bird,
Escaping with tired wings from a world of storms,
And a quiet reach like a remembered breast,
In a haven of safety and splendid soft repose
One could drink life back in streams of honey-fire,
Recover the lost habit of happiness, [p. 15]

⁴ *In her he met a wideness like his own; [cf. p. 16].*

“One” who is himself a soul is compared to “a soul” acting like a bird taking shelter, as if to say: “A soul who is doing so-and-so is like a soul doing something similar” — a comparison which perhaps brings in some loss of surprise and revelation.

The suggestion you make about the “soul” and the “bird” may have a slight justification, but I do not think it is fatal to the passage. On the other hand there is a strong objection to the alteration you propose; it is that the image of the soul escaping from a world of storms would be impaired if it were only a physical bird that was escaping: a “world of storms” is too big an expression in relation to the smallness of the bird, it is only with the soul especially mentioned or else suggested and the “bird” subordinately there as a comparison that it fits perfectly well and gets its full value. The word “one” which takes up the image of the “bird” has a more general application than the “soul” and is not quite identical with it; it means anyone who has lost happiness and is in need of spiritual comfort and revival. It is as if one said: “as might a soul like a hunted bird take refuge from the world in the peace of the Infinite and feel that as its own remembered home, so could one take refuge in her as in a haven of safety and like the tired bird reconstitute one’s strength so as to face the world once more.”

As to the sixfold repetition of the indefinite article “a” in this passage, one should no doubt make it a general rule to avoid any such excessive repetition, but all rules have their exception and it might be phrased like this, “Except when some effect has to be produced which the repetition would serve or for which it is necessary.” Here I feel that it does serve subtly such an effect; I have used the repetition of this “a” very frequently in the poem with a recurrence at the beginning of each successive line in order to produce an accumulative effect of multiple characteristics or a grouping of associated things or ideas or other similar massings.

22 April 1947

*

My remarks about the Bird passage [*in the above letter*] are written from the point of view of the change made and the new

character and atmosphere it gives. I think the old passage was right enough in its own atmosphere, but not so good as what has replaced it: the alteration you suggest may be as good as that was but the objections to it are valid from the new standpoint.

7 July 1947

*

Almost they saw who lived within her light
 The white-fire dragon-bird of endless bliss,
 Her playmate in the sempiternal spheres
 In her attracting advent's luminous wake
 Descended from his unattainable realms,
 Drifting with burning wings above her days. [*cf. p. 16*]

I suppose the repetition of adjective and noun in four consecutive line-endings is meant to create an accumulating grandiose effect.

Yes; the purpose is to create a large luminous trailing repetitive movement like the flight of the Bird with its dragon tail of white fire.

Will you please say something about this bird?

What to say about him? One can only see. 4 November 1936

*

About that bird, it is true that "one can only see"; but if not more than one can see, don't others need a bit of explanation? To *what region* does it belong? Is it any relation of the Bird of Fire with "gold-white wings" or the Hippogriff with a face "lustred, pale-blue-lined"?

All birds of that region are relatives. But this is the bird of eternal Ananda, while the Hippogriff was the divinised Thought and the Bird of Fire is the Agni-bird, psychic and tapas. All that however is to mentalise too much and mentalising always takes most of the life out of spiritual things. That's why I say it can be seen, but nothing said about it.

But joy cannot endure until the end:
 There is a darkness in terrestrial things
 That will not suffer long too glad a note. [pp. 16–17]

Are these lines the poetic intelligence at its deepest, say, like a mixture of Sophocles and Virgil? They may be the pure or the intuitivised higher mind.

I do not think it is the poetic intelligence any more than Virgil's *Sunt lacrimae rerum et mentem mortalia tangunt*, which I think to be the Higher Mind coming through to the psychic and blending with it. So also his *O passi graviora, dabit deus his quoque finem*. Here it may be the intuitive inner mind with the psychic fused together.

5 November 1936

*

One dealt with her who meets the burdened great. [p. 17]

Who is “One” here? Is it Love, the godhead mentioned before? If not, does this “dubious godhead with his torch of pain” correspond to “the image white and high of godlike Pain” spoken of a little earlier? Or is it Time whose “snare” occurs in the last line of the preceding passage?

Love? It is not Love who meets the burdened great and governs the fates of men! Nor is it Pain. Time also does not do these things — it only provides the field and movement of events. If I had wanted to give a name, I would have done it, but it has purposely to be left nameless because it is indefinable. He may use Love or Pain or Time or any of these powers, but is not any of them. You can call him the Master of the Evolution, if you like.

5 November 1936

*

Her spirit refused struck from the starry list
 To quench in dull despair the God-given light. [cf. p. 19]

Any punctuation missing in the first line? Perhaps a dash after “refused” as well as after “list”?

I omitted any punctuation because it is a compressed construc-

tion meant to signify refused to be struck from the starry list and quenched in dull despair etc. — the quenching being the act of assent that would make effective the sentence of being struck from the starry list. 7 November 1936

*

Beyond life's arc in spirit's immensities. [*p. 44*]

“Spirit” instead of “spirit’s” might mean something else, the word “spirit” as an epithet is ambiguous — it might be spiritistic and not spiritual. 1936

*

The calm immensities of spirit space,
The golden plateaus of immortal Fire,
The moon-flame oceans of unfallen Bliss. [*cf. p. 47*]

Less than 20 lines earlier you have

Beyond life's arc in spirit's immensities.

Is it not possible to recast a little the first half of that line?

“Immensities” was the proper word because it helped to give the whole soul-scape of those worlds — the immensities of space, the plateaus of fire, the oceans of bliss. “Infinities” could just replace it, but now something has to be sacrificed. The only thing I can think of now is

The calm immunity of spirit space.

22 May 1937

*

Why “immunity” — the singular — and not “immunities” to replace “immensities”?

“Immunities” in the plural is much feebler and philosophically abstract — one begins to think of things like “qualities” — naturally it suggested itself to me as keeping up the plural sequence, but it grated on the sense of spiritual objective reality and I had to reject it at once. The calm immunity was a thing I could at

once feel, with immunities the mind has to cavil: “Well, what are they?” 23 May 1937

*

As if the original Ukase still held back [*cf. p. 76*]

I have accented on the first syllable as I have done often with words like “occult”, “divine”. It is a Russian word and foreign words in English tend often to get their original accent shifted as far backward as possible. I have heard many do that with “ukase”. 20 May 1937

*

Resiled from poor assent to Nature’s terms, [*p. 77*]

It [*“resiled”*] is a perfectly good English word, meaning originally to leap back, rebound (like an elastic) — so to draw back from, recoil, retreat (in military language it means to fall back from a position gained or to one’s original position); but it is specially used for withdrawing from a contract, agreement, previous statement. It is therefore quite the just word here. Human nature has assented to Nature’s terms and been kept by her to them, but now Aswapati resiles from the contract and the assent to it made by humanity to which he belonged. Resiled, resilient, resilience are all good words and in use. 1937

*

The incertitude of man’s proud confident thought, [*p. 78*]

Is “incertitude” preferable to “uncertainty” — with “Infinitudes” so closely preceding it?

“Uncertainty” would mean that the thought was confident but uncertain of itself, which would be a contradiction. “Incertitude” means that its truth is uncertain in spite of its proud confidence in itself. I don’t think the repetition of the sound is objectionable in a technique of this kind. 12 November 1936

*

Aware of his occult omnipotent Source,
 Allured by the omniscient Ecstasy,
 He felt the invasion and the nameless joy. [p. 79]

I certainly won't have "attracted" [*in place of* "allured"] — there is an enormous difference between the force of the two words and merely "attracted" by the Ecstasy would take away all my ecstasy in the line — nothing so tepid can be admitted. Neither do I want "thrill" [*in place of* "joy"] which gives a false colour — precisely it would mean that the ecstasy was already touching him with its intensity which is far from my intention. Your statement that "joy" is just another word for "ecstasy" is surprising. "Comfort", "pleasure", "joy", "bliss", "rapture", "ecstasy" would then be all equal and exactly synonymous terms and all distinction of shades and colours of words would disappear from literature. As well say that "flashlight" is just another word for "lightning" — or that glow, gleam, glitter, sheen, blaze are all equivalents which can be employed indifferently in the same place. One can feel allured to the supreme omniscient ecstasy and feel a nameless joy touching one without that joy becoming itself the supreme Ecstasy. I see no loss of expressiveness by the joy coming in as a vague nameless hint of the immeasurable superior Ecstasy.

22 May 1937

*

But aren't there two tendencies in poetry — one to emphasise the shades, another to blend and blur them owing to technical exigencies? What poet would not use "gleam", "glow" and "sheen" indifferently for the sake of rhyme, rhythm or metre?

That might be all right for mental poetry — it won't do for what I am trying to create — in that one word *won't* do for the other. Even in mental poetry I consider it an inferior method. "Gleam" and "glow" are two quite different things and the poet who uses them indifferently has constantly got his eye upon words rather than upon the object.

23 May 1937

*

Across the soul's unmapped immensitudes. [*cf. p. 80*]

Whatever you have written, it is not "immensities".

The word is "immensitudes" as you have written. I take upon myself the right to coin new words. It is not any more fantastic than "infinitudes" to pair "infinity". 13 November 1936

*

Would you also use "eternitudes"?

Not likely! I would think of the French *éternuer* and sneeze.

The body and the life no more were all.⁵

Don't care to [*change the line*] — it says precisely what I want to convey and I don't see how I can say it otherwise without diminishing or exaggerating the significance.

14 November 1936

*

I still consider the line a very good one and it did perfectly express what I wanted to say — as for "baldness", an occasionally bare and straightforward line without any trailing of luminous robes is not an improper element. E.g. "This was the day when Satyavan must die", which I would not remove from its position even if you were to give me the crown and income of the Kavi Samrat for doing it. If I have changed here, it is because the alterations all around it made the line no longer in harmony with its immediate environment. 21 May 1937

*

Your line

The body and the life no more were all

is no doubt a very good line in itself but it seemed to be, in its context here, baldness for baldness' sake.

⁵ This line does not form part of the final version of Savitri. — Ed.

Not at all. It was bareness for expression's sake which is a different matter.

Even if not quite that, it did not appear to justify itself completely: if it had been so very *juste* you would have scorned the Kavi Samrat's crown and income resolutely for its sake also.

It was *juste* for expressing what I had to say then in a certain context. The context being entirely changed in its sense, bearing and atmosphere, it was no longer *juste* in that place. Its being an interloper in a new house does not show that it was an interloper in an old one. The colours and the spaces being heightened and widened this tint which was appropriate and needed in the old design could not remain in the new one. These things are a question of design; a line has to be viewed not only in its own separate value but with a view to its just place in the whole.

22 May 1937

*

What plane is spoken of by Virgil in these lines:

Largior hic campos aether et lumine vestit
purpureo, solemque suum, sua sidera norunt.

I don't know, but purple is a light of the vital. It may have been one of the vital heavens he was thinking of. The ancients saw the vital heavens as the highest and most of the religions also have done the same. I have used the suggestion of Virgil to insert a needed new line:

And griefless countries under purple suns. [p. 120]

17 November 1936

*

Here too the gracious mighty Angel poured
Her splendour and her swiftness and her thrill,
Hoping to fill this new fair world with her joy, [cf. p. 130]

Would not "pours" be better?

No, that would take away all meaning from "new fair world"

— it is the attempted conquest of earth by life when earth had been created, — a past event though still continuing in its sequel and result. 18 November 1936

*

The hopes that fade to drab realities [*cf. p. 159*]

“Dun” occurred to me as less common than “drab” with “realities”.

I need “dun” afterwards, besides “drab” gives the more correct colour. 20 November 1936

*

The Mask is mentioned not twice but four times in this opening passage [*Book Two, Canto Seven, pp. 202–03*] and it is purposely done to keep up the central connection of the idea running through the whole. The ambassadors wear this grey Mask, so your criticism cannot stand since there is no separate mask coming as part of a new idea but a very pointed return to the principal note indicating the identity of the influence throughout. It is not a random recurrence but a purposeful touch carrying a psychological meaning. 1948

*

And overcast with error, grief and pain

The soul’s native will for truth and joy and light. [*p. 203*]

The two trios are not intended to be exactly correspondent; “joy” answers to both “grief” and “pain” while “light” is an addition in the second trio indicating the conditions for “truth” and “joy”. 1948

*

All evil starts from that ambiguous face. [*p. 205*]

Here again the same word “face” occurs a second time at the end of a line but it belongs to a new section and a new turn of ideas. I am not attracted by your suggestion; the word “mien” here is an obvious literary substitution and not part of a straight

and positive seeing: as such it sounds deplorably weak. The only thing would be to change the image, as for instance,

All evil creeps from that ambiguous source.

But this is comparatively weak. I prefer to keep the “face” and insert a line before it so as to increase a little the distance between the two faces:

Its breath is a subtle poison in men's hearts.

1948

*

As to the two lines with “no man's land” [*in Book Two, Canto Seven, pages 206 and 211*] there can be no capital in the first line because there it is a description while the capital is needed in the other line, because the phrase has acquired there the force of a name or appellation. I am not sure about the hyphen; it could be put but the no hyphen might be better as it suggests that no one in particular has as yet got possession. 1948

*

The cliché you object to . . . “he quoted Scripture and Law” was put in there with fell purpose and was necessary for the effect I wanted to produce, the more direct its commonplace the better. However, I defer to your objection and have altered it to

He armed untruth with Scripture and the Law. [*p. 207*]

I don't remember seeing the sentence about

Agreeing on the right to disagree

anywhere in a newspaper or in any book either; colloquial it is and perhaps for that reason only out of harmony in this passage. So I substitute

Only they agreed to differ in Evil's paths. [*p. 208*]

1946

*

Oft, some familiar visage studying,
Discovered suddenly Hell's trademark there. [*cf. p. 215*]

It is a reference to the beings met in the vital worlds that seem like human beings but, if one looks closely, they are seen to be Hostiles, often assuming the appearance of a familiar face, they try to tempt or attack by surprise, and betray the stamp of their origin — there is also a hint that on earth also they take up human bodies or possess them for their own purpose.

11 January 1937

*

Bliss into black coma fallen, insensible. [*p. 221*]

Neither of your scansions can stand. The best way will be to spell “fallen” “fall'n” as is occasionally done and treat “bliss into” as a dactyl. 1948

*

Bliss into black coma fallen, insensible,
Coiled back to itself and God's eternal joy
Through a false poignant figure of grief and pain
Still dolorously nailed upon a cross
Fixed in the soil of a dumb insentient world
Where birth was a pang and death an agony,
Lest all too soon should change again to bliss. [*p. 221*]

This has nothing to do with Christianity or Christ but only with the symbol of the cross used here to represent a seemingly eternal world-pain which appears falsely to replace the eternal bliss. It is not Christ but the world-soul which hangs here. 1948

*

Performs the ritual of her Mysteries. [*p. 221*]

It is “Mysteries” with capital M and means mystic symbolic rites as in the Orphic and Eleusinian “Mysteries”. When written with capital M it does not mean secret mysterious things, but has this sense, e.g. a “Mystery play”. 1936

*

The passage running from “It was the gate of a false Infinite” to “None can reach heaven who has not passed through hell” [pp. 221–27] suggests that there was an harmonious original plan of the Overmind Gods for earth’s evolution, but that it was spoiled by the intrusion of the Rakshasic worlds. I should, however, have thought that an evolution, arising from the stark inconscient’s sleep and the mute void, would hardly be an harmonious plan. The Rakshasas only shield themselves with the covering “Ignorance”, they don’t create it. Do you mean that, if they had not interfered, there wouldn’t have been resistance and conflict and suffering? How can they be called the artificers of Nature’s fall and pain?

An evolution from the Inconscient need not be a painful one if there is no resistance; it can be a deliberately slow and beautiful efflorescence of the Divine. One ought to be able to see how beautiful outward Nature can be and usually is although it is itself apparently “inconscient” — why should the growth of consciousness in inward Nature be attended by so much ugliness and evil spoiling the beauty of the outward creation? Because of a *perversity* born from the Ignorance, which came in with Life and increased in Mind — that is the Falsehood, the Evil that was born because of the starkness of the Inconscient’s sleep separating its action from the secret luminous Conscience that was all the time within it. But it need not have been so except for the overriding Will of the Supreme which meant that the possibility of Perversion by inconscience and ignorance should be manifested in order to be eliminated though being given their chance, since all possibility has to manifest somewhere. Once it is eliminated the Divine Manifestation in Matter will be greater than it otherwise could be because it will gather all the possibilities involved in this difficult creation and not some of them as in an easier and less strenuous creation might naturally be. 15 January 1937

*

And the articles of the bound soul’s contract, [p. 231]

Liberty is very often taken with the last foot nowadays and

usually it is just the liberty I have taken here. This liberty I took long ago in my earlier poetry. 1948

*

Their slopes were a laughter of delightful dreams . . .

[*eight lines*]

There Love fulfilled her gold and roseate dreams

And Strength her crowned and mighty reveries.

[*two lines*]

Dream walked along the highway of the stars; . . .

[*cf. pp 234–35*]

“Gold and roseate dreams” cannot be changed. “Muse” would make it at once artificial. “Dreams” alone is the right word there. “Reveries” also cannot be changed, especially as it is not any particular “reverie” that is meant. Also, “dream” at the beginning of a later line departs into another idea and is appropriate in its place; I see no objection to this purposeful repetition. Anyway the line cannot be altered. The only concession I can make to you is to alter the first. 1948

*

All reeled into a world of Kali’s dance. [*p. 255*]

It is “world”, not “whirl”. It means “all reeling in a clash and confusion became a world of Kali’s dance”. 1948

*

Knowledge was rebuilt from cells of inference

Into a fixed body flasque and perishable; [*p. 267*]

“Flasque” is a French word meaning “slack”, “loose”, “flaccid” etc. I have more than once tried to thrust in a French word like this, for instance, “A harlot empress in a bouge” — somewhat after the manner of Eliot and Ezra Pound. 1946

*

To unify their task, excluding life
Which cannot bear the nakedness of the Vast, [p. 273]

I suppose the intransitive use of “unify” is not illegitimate,
though the Oxford dictionary gives only the transitive.

Quite possible to use a transitive verb in this way with an unexpressed object, things in general being understood.

31 March 1948

*

For Truth is wider, greater than her forms.
A thousand icons they have made of her
And find her in the idols they adore;
But she remains herself and infinite. [p. 276]

“They” means nobody in particular but corresponds to the French “On dit” meaning vaguely “people in general”. This is a use permissible in English; for instance, “They say you are not so scrupulous as you should be.” 1948

*

Would it be an improvement if one of the two successive “it”s
in

In the world which sprang from it it took no part [p. 283]

is avoided? Why not put something like “its depths” for the first “it”?

“Depths” will not do, since the meaning is not that it took no part in what came from the depths but did take part in what came from the shallows; the word would be merely a rhetorical flourish and take away the real sense. It would be easy in several ways to avoid the two “it”s coming together but the direct force would be lost. I think a comma at “it” and the slight pause it would bring in the reading would be sufficient. For instance, one could write “no part it took”, instead of “it took no part”, but the direct force I want would be lost. 1948

*

Travestied with a fortuitous sovereignty [p. 285]

I am unable to follow your criticism. I find nothing pompous or bombastic in the line unless it is the resonance of the word “fortuitous” and the many closely packed “t”s that give you the impression. But “fortuitous” cannot be sacrificed as it exactly hits the meaning I want. Also I fail to see what is abstract and especially mental in it. Neither a travesty nor sovereignty are abstract things and the images here are all concrete, as they should be to express the inner vision’s sense of concreteness of subtle things. The whole passage is of course about mental movements and mental powers, therefore about what the intellect sees as abstractions, but the inner vision does not feel them as that. To it mind has a substance and its energies and actions are very real and substantial things. Naturally there is a certain sense of scorn in this passage, for what the Ignorance regards as its sovereignty and positive truth has been exposed by the “sceptic ray” as fortuitous and unreal. 1948

*

That clasped him in from day and night’s pursuit, [p. 289]

I do not realise what you mean by “stickiness”, since there are only two hard labials and some nasals; is it that combination which makes you feel sticky, or does the addition of some hard dentals also help? Anyhow, sticky or not, I am unwilling to change anything.

I do not want to put “day’s” and “night’s”; I find it heavy and unnecessary. It ought to be clear enough to the reader that “day and night” are here one double entity or two hounds in a leash pursuing a common prey. 1948

*

Your line,

In a stillness of the voices of the world, [*cf.* p. 294]
is separated by twenty lines from

In the formless force and the still fixity. [p. 294]

So there is no fault here in “stillness”, but an added poetic quality might come if “stillness” were avoided and some such word as “lulling” used, especially as the line before runs:

And cradles of heavenly rapture and repose.

“Lulling” will never do. It is too ornamental and romantic and tender. I have put “slumber” in its place.

*

A Panergy that harmonised all life [p. 300]

I do not think the word “Panergy” depends for its meaning on the word “energies” in a previous line. The “Panergy” suggested is a self-existent total power which may carry the cosmic energies in it and is their cause but is not constituted by them. 1948

*

Your new objection to the line,

All he had been and all that still he was, [cf. p. 307]

is somewhat self-contradictory. If a line has a rhythm and expressive turn which makes it poetic, then it must be good poetry; but I suppose what you mean is fine or elevated poetry. I would say that the line even in its original form is good poetry and is further uplifted by rising towards its subsequent context which gives it its full poetic meaning and suggestion, the evolution of the inner being and the abrupt end or failure of all that had been done unless it could suddenly transcend itself and become something greater. I do not think that this line in its context is merely passable, but I admit that it is less elevated and intense than what precedes or what follows. I do not see how that can be avoided without truncating the thought significance of the whole account by the omission of something necessary to its evolution or else overpitching the expression where it needs to be direct or clear and bare in its lucidity. In any case the emended version [“*All he had been and all towards which he*”

grew”] cures any possibility of the line being merely passable as it raises both the idea and the expression through the vividness of image which makes us feel and not merely think the living evolution in Aswapati’s inner being. 1946

General Comments on Some Criticisms of the Poem

Now as to the many criticisms contained in your letter I have a good deal to say; some of them bring forward questions of the technique of mystic poetry about which I wanted to write in an introduction to *Savitri* when it is published, and I may as well say something about that here.

I am glad, however, that you have called my attention to some lapses such as the inadvertent substitution of “wideness” for “vastness” in the line about love and Savitri.⁶ In all these cases there was the same inadvertent and unintentional change. “A prophet cavern” should certainly have remained as “some prophet cavern”.⁷ Also, it should be “a niche for veiled divinity” and “of” is an obvious slip.⁸ Again, “still depths” is a similar inadvertent mistake for “sealed depths” which, of course, I have restored.⁹ Also “step twixt” instead of “link between” was a similar mistake.¹⁰

Now as to some other passages. You have made what seems to me a strange confusion as regards the passage about the “errant marvel”¹¹ owing to the mistake in the punctuation which is now corrected. You took the word “solicited” as a past participle passive and this error seems to have remained fixed in your mind so as to distort the whole building and sense of the passage. The word “solicited” is the past tense and the subject of this verb

⁶ *In her be met a wideness like his own, [cf. p. 16]*

⁷ *Moves in a prophet cavern of the gods, [cf. p. 15]*

⁸ *That seemed a niche of veiled divinity [cf. p. 15]*

⁹ *And, scattered on still depths, her luminous smile [cf. p. 4]*

¹⁰ *Air was a vibrant step twixt earth and heaven, [cf. p. 4]*

¹¹ *As if solicited in an alien world*

*With timid and hazardous instinctive grace,
Orphaned and driven out to seek a home*

is “an errant marvel” delayed to the fourth line by the parenthesis “Orphaned etc.” This kind of inversion, though longer than usual, is common enough in poetical style and the object is to throw a strong emphasis and prominence upon the line, “An errant marvel with no place to live”; that being explained, the rest about the “gesture” should be clear enough.

Your objection to the “finger” and the “clutch” moves me only to change “reminding” to “reminded” in the second line of that passage.¹² It is not intended that the two images “finger laid” and “clutch” should correspond exactly to each other; for the “void” and the “Mother of the universe” are not the same thing. The “void” is only a mask covering the Mother’s cheek or face. What the “void” feels as a clutch is felt by the Mother only as a reminding finger laid on her cheek. It is one advantage of the expression “as if” that it leaves the field open for such variation. It is intended to suggest without saying it that behind the sombre void is the face of a mother. The other two “as if”s¹³ have the same motive and I do not find them jarring upon me. The second is at a sufficient distance from the first and it is not obtrusive enough to prejudice the third which more nearly follows. In any case your suggestion “as though” [*for the third “as if”*] does not appeal to me: it almost makes a suggestion of falsity and in any case it makes no real difference as the two expressions are too much kin to each other to repel the charge of reiteration.

In the passage about Dawn¹⁴ your two suggestions I again find unsatisfying. “Windowing hidden things” presents a vivid

*An errant marvel with no place to live,
Into a far-off nook of heaven there came
A slow miraculous gesture’s dim appeal. [cf. p. 3]*

¹² *As if a childlike finger laid on a cheek
Reminding of the endless need in things*

*The heedless Mother of the universe,
An infant longing clutched the sombre Vast. [cf. p. 2]*

¹³ *As if a soul long dead were moved to live: . . .
As if solicited in an alien world . . . [p. 3]*

¹⁴ *One lucent corner windowing hidden things
Forced the world’s blind immensity to sight.
The darkness failed and slipped like a falling cloak. [cf. p. 3]*

image and suggests what I want to suggest and I must refuse to alter it; “visting” brings in a very common image and does not suggest anything except perhaps that there is a long line or wide range of hidden things. But that is quite unwanted and not a part of the thing seen. “Shroud” sounds to me too literary and artificial and besides it almost suggests that what it covers is a corpse which would not do at all; a slipping shroud sounds inapt while “slipped like a falling cloak” gives a natural and true image. In any case, “shroud” would not be more naturally continuous in the succession of images than “cloak”. As to this succession, I may say that rapid transitions from one image to another are a constant feature in *Savitri* as in most mystic poetry. I am not here building a long sustained single picture of the Dawn with a single continuous image or variations of the same image. I am describing a rapid series of transitions, piling one suggestion upon another. There is first a black quietude, then the persistent touch, then the first “beauty and wonder” leading to the magical gate and the “lucent corner”. Then comes the failing of the darkness, the simile used suggesting the rapidity of the change. Then as a result the change of what was once a rift into a wide luminous gap, — if you want to be logically consistent you can look at the rift as a slit in the “cloak” which becomes a big tear.¹⁵ Then all changes into a “brief perpetual sign”, the iridescence, then the blaze and the magnificent aura. In such a race of rapid transitions you cannot bind me down to a logical chain of figures or a classical monotone. The mystic Muse is more of an inspired Bacchante of the Dionysian wine than an orderly housewife.

As for other suggestions, I am afraid, “soil”¹⁶ must remain because that was what I meant, it cannot elevate itself even into a prostrate soul as that would be quite irrelevant. Your “barely enough”, instead of the finer and more suggestive “hardly”,¹⁷

¹⁵ *And through the pallid rift that seemed at first
Hardly enough for a trickle from the suns,
Outpoured the revelation and the flame.*

The brief perpetual sign recurred above. [cf. p. 3]

¹⁶ *Our prostrate soil bore the awakening ray. [p. 5]*

¹⁷ *Hardly enough for a trickle from the suns, [p. 3]*

falls flat upon my ear; one cannot substitute one word for another in this kind of poetry merely because it means intellectually the same thing; “hardly” is the *mot juste* in this context and, repetition or not, it must remain unless a word not only *juste* but inevitable comes to replace it. I am not disposed either to change “suns” to “stars” in the line about the creative slumber of the ignorant Force;¹⁸ “stars” does not create the same impression and brings in a different tone in the rhythm and the sense. This line and that which follows it bring in a general subordinate idea stressing the paradoxical nature of the creation and the contrasts which it contains, the drowsed somnambulist as the mother of the light of the suns and the activities of life. It is not intended as a present feature in the darkness of the Night. Again, do you seriously want me to give an accurate scientific description of the earth half in darkness and half in light so as to spoil my impressionist symbol¹⁹ or else to revert to the conception of earth as a flat and immobile surface? I am not writing a scientific treatise, I am selecting certain ideas and impressions to form a symbol of a partial and temporary darkness of the soul and Nature which seems to a temporary feeling of that which is caught in the Night as if it were universal and eternal. One who is lost in that Night does not think of the other half of the earth as full of light; to him all is Night and the earth a forsaken wanderer in an enduring darkness. If I sacrifice this impressionism and abandon the image of the earth wheeling through dark space I might as well abandon the symbol altogether, for this is a necessary part of it. As a matter of fact in the passage itself earth in its wheeling does come into the dawn and pass from darkness into the light. You must take the idea as a whole and in all its transitions

¹⁸ *Cradled the cosmic drowse of ignorant Force
Whose moved creative slumber kindles the suns
And carries our lives in its somnambulist whirl. [p. 1]*

¹⁹ *Athwart the vain enormous trance of Space,
Its formless stupor without mind or life,
A shadow spinning through a soulless Void,
Thrown back once more into unthinking dreams,
Earth wheeled abandoned in the hollow gulfs,
Forgetful of her spirit and her fate. [p. 1]*

and not press one detail with too literal an insistence. In this poem I present constantly one partial view of life or another temporarily as if it were the whole in order to give full value to the experience of those who are bound by that view, as for instance, the materialist conception and experience of life, but if any one charges me with philosophical inconsistency, then it only means that he does not understand the technique of the Overmind interpretation of life.

The line about “Wisdom nursing the child Laughter of Chance” [*cf. p. 41*] contained one of the inadvertent changes of which I have spoken; the real reading was and will remain “Wisdom suckling”. The verbal repetition of “nursing” and “nurse” therefore disappears, though there is the idea of nursing repeated in two successive lines and to that I see no objection. But for other reasons I have changed the two lines that follow as I was not altogether satisfied with them. I have changed them into

Silence, the nurse of the Almighty’s power,
The omnipotent hush, womb of the immortal Word. [*p. 41*]

As to the exact metrical identity in the first half of the two lines that follow,²⁰ it was certainly intentional, if by intention is meant, not a manufacture by my personal mind but the spontaneous deliberateness of the inspiration which gave the lines to me and an acceptance in the receiving mind. The first halves of the two lines are metrically identical closely associating together the two things seen as of the same order, the “still Timeless” and the “dynamic creative Eternity” both of them together originating the manifest world: the latter halves of the lines diverge altogether, one into the slow massiveness of the “still brooding face”, with its strong close, the other into the combination of two high and emphatic syllables with an indeterminate run of short syllables between and after, allowing the line to drop away into some unuttered endlessness rather than cease. In this rhythmical significance I can see no weakness.

²⁰ *And of the Timeless the still brooding face,
And the creative eye of Eternity. [p. 41]*

I come next to the passage which you so violently attack, about the Inconscient waking Ignorance. In the first place, the word “formless” is indeed defective, not so much because of any repetition but because it is not the right word or idea and I was not myself satisfied with it. I have changed the passage as follows:

Then something in the inscrutable darkness stirred;
 A nameless movement, an unthought Idea
 Insistent, dissatisfied, without an aim,
 Something that wished but knew not how to be,
 Teased the Inconscient to wake Ignorance. . . . [pp. 1–2]

But the teasing of the Inconscient remains and evidently you think that it is bad poetic taste to tease something so bodiless and unreal as the Inconscient. But here several fundamental issues arise. First of all, are words like Inconscient and Ignorance necessarily an abstract technical jargon? If so, do not words like consciousness, knowledge etc. undergo the same ban? Is it meant that they are abstract philosophical terms and can have no real or concrete meaning, cannot represent things that one feels and senses or must often fight as one fights a visible foe? The Inconscient and the Ignorance may be mere empty abstractions and can be dismissed as irrelevant jargon if one has not come into collision with them or plunged into their dark and bottomless reality. But to me they are realities, concrete powers whose resistance is present everywhere and at all times in its tremendous and boundless mass. In fact, in writing this line I had no intention of teaching philosophy or forcing in an irrelevant metaphysical idea, although the idea may be there in implication. I was presenting a happening that was to me something sensible and, as one might say, psychologically and spiritually concrete. The Inconscient comes in persistently in the cantos of the First Book of *Savitri*, e.g.

Opponent of that glory of escape,
 The black Inconscient swung its dragon tail
 Lashing a slumbrous Infinite by its force

Into the deep obscurities of form. [p. 79]

There too a metaphysical idea might be read into or behind the thing seen. But does that make it technical jargon or the whole thing an illegitimate mixture? It is not so to my poetic sense. But you might say, "It is so to the non-mystical reader and it is that reader whom you have to satisfy, as it is for the general reader that you are writing and not for yourself alone." But if I had to write for the general reader I could not have written *Savitri* at all. It is in fact for myself that I have written it and for those who can lend themselves to the subject-matter, images, technique of mystic poetry.

This is the real stumbling-block of mystic poetry and specially mystic poetry of this kind.²¹The mystic feels real and present, even ever-present to his experience, intimate to his being, truths which to the ordinary reader are intellectual abstractions or metaphysical speculations. He is writing of experiences that are foreign to the ordinary mentality. Either they are unintelligible to it and in meeting them it flounders about as in an obscure abyss or it takes them as poetic fancies expressed in intellectually devised images. That was how a critic in *The Hindu* condemned such poems as *Nirvana* and *Transformation*. He said that they were mere intellectual conceptions and images and there was nothing of religious feeling or spiritual experience. Yet *Nirvana* was as close a transcription of a major experience as could be given in language coined by the human mind of a realisation in which the mind was entirely silent and into which no intellectual conception could at all enter. One has to use words and images in order to convey to the mind some perception, some figure of that which is beyond thought. The critic's non-understanding was made worse by such a line as: "Only the illimitable Permanent, Is there". Evidently he took this as technical jargon, abstract philosophy. There was no such thing; I felt with an overpowering vividness the illimitability or at least

²¹ This and the next five paragraphs were published separately in 1946 in a slightly different form. They are reproduced in that form on pages 93–97 of the present volume. —Ed.

something which could not be described by any other term and no other description except the "Permanent" could be made of That which alone existed. To the mystic there is no such thing as an abstraction. Everything which to the intellectual mind is abstract has a concreteness, substantiality which is more real than the sensible form of an object or of a physical event. To me, for instance, consciousness is the very stuff of existence and I can feel it everywhere enveloping and penetrating the stone as much as man or the animal. A movement, a flow of consciousness is not to me an image but a fact. If I wrote "His anger climbed against me in a stream", it would be to the general reader a mere image, not something that was felt by me in a sensible experience; yet I would only be describing in exact terms what actually happened once, a stream of anger, a sensible and violent current of it rising up from downstairs and rushing upon me as I sat in the veranda of the guest-house, the truth of it being confirmed afterwards by the confession of the person who had the movement. This is only one instance, but all that is spiritual or psychological in *Savitri* is of that character. What is to be done under these circumstances? The mystical poet can only describe what he has felt, seen in himself or others or in the world just as he has felt or seen it or experienced through exact vision, close contact or identity and leave it to the general reader to understand or not understand or misunderstand according to his capacity. A new kind of poetry demands a new mentality in the recipient as well as in the writer.

Another question is the place of philosophy in poetry or whether it has any place at all. Some romanticists seem to believe that the poet has no right to think at all, only to see and feel. This accusation has been brought against me by many that I think too much and that when I try to write in verse, thought comes in and keeps out poetry. I hold, to the contrary, that philosophy has its place and can even take a leading place along with psychological experience as it does in the Gita. All depends on how it is done, whether it is a dry or a living philosophy, an arid intellectual statement or the expression not only of the living truth of thought but of something of its beauty, its light or its power.

The theory which discourages the poet from thinking or at least from thinking for the sake of the thought proceeds from an extreme romanticist temper; it reaches its acme on one side in the question of the surrealist, "Why do you want poetry to mean anything?" and on the other in Housman's exaltation of pure poetry which he describes paradoxically as a sort of sublime nonsense which does not appeal at all to the mental intelligence but knocks at the solar plexus and awakes a vital and physical rather than intellectual sensation and response. It is of course not that really but a vividness of imagination and feeling which disregards the mind's positive view of things and its logical sequences; the centre or centres it knocks at are not the brain-mind, not even the poetic intelligence but the subtle physical, the nervous, the vital or the psychic centre. The poem he quotes from Blake is certainly not nonsense, but it has no positive and exact meaning for the intellect or the surface mind; it expresses certain things that are true and real, not nonsense but a deeper sense which we feel powerfully with a great stirring of some inner emotion, but any attempt at exact intellectual statement of them sterilises their sense and spoils their appeal. This is not the method of *Savitri*. Its expression aims at a certain force, directness and spiritual clarity and reality. When it is not understood, it is because the truths it expresses are unfamiliar to the ordinary mind or belong to an untrodden domain or domains or enter into a field of occult experience; it is not because there is any attempt at a dark or vague profundity or at an escape from thought. The thinking is not intellectual but intuitive or more than intuitive, always expressing a vision, a spiritual contact or a knowledge which has come by entering into the thing itself, by identity.

It may be noted that the greater romantic poets did not shun thought; they thought abundantly, almost endlessly. They have their characteristic view of life, something that one might call their philosophy, their world-view, and they express it. Keats was the most romantic of poets, but he could write "To philosophise I dare not yet"; he did not write "I am too much of a poet to philosophise." To philosophise he regarded evidently

as mounting on the admiral's flag-ship and flying an almost royal banner. The philosophy of *Savitri* is different but it is persistently there; it expresses or tries to express a total and many-sided vision and experience of all the planes of being and their action upon each other. Whatever language, whatever terms are necessary to convey this truth of vision and experience it uses without scruple, not admitting any mental rule of what is or is not poetic. It does not hesitate to employ terms which might be considered as technical when these can be turned to express something direct, vivid and powerful. That need not be an introduction of technical jargon, that is to say, I suppose, special and artificial language, expressing in this case only abstract ideas and generalities without any living truth or reality in them. Such jargon cannot make good literature, much less good poetry. But there is a "poeticism" which establishes a sanitary cordon against words and ideas which it considers as prosaic but which properly used can strengthen poetry and extend its range. That limitation I do not admit as legitimate.

I have been insisting on these points in view of certain criticisms that have been made by reviewers and others, some of them very capable, suggesting or flatly stating that there was too much thought in my poems or that I am even in my poetry a philosopher rather than a poet. I am justifying a poet's right to think as well as to see and feel, his right to "dare to philosophise". I agree with the modernists in their revolt against the romanticist's insistence on emotionalism and his objection to thinking and philosophical reflection in poetry. But the modernist went too far in his revolt. In trying to avoid what I may call poeticism he ceased to be poetic, wishing to escape from rhetorical writing, rhetorical pretension to greatness and beauty of style, he threw out true poetic greatness and beauty, turned from a deliberately poetic style to a colloquial tone and even to very flat writing; especially he turned away from poetic rhythm to a prose or half-prose rhythm or to no rhythm at all. Also he has weighed too much on thought and has lost the habit of intuitive sight; by turning emotion out of its intimate chamber in the house of Poetry, he has had to bring in to relieve

the dryness of much of his thought, too much exaggeration of the lower vital and sensational reactions untransformed or else transformed only by exaggeration. Nevertheless he has perhaps restored to the poet the freedom to think as well as to adopt a certain straightforwardness and directness of style.

Now I come to the law prohibiting repetition. This rule aims at a certain kind of intellectual elegance which comes into poetry when the poetic intelligence and the call for a refined and classical taste begin to predominate. It regards poetry as a cultural entertainment and amusement of the highly civilised mind; it interests by a faultless art of words, a constant and ingenious invention, a sustained novelty of ideas, incidents, word and phrase. An unfailling variety or the outward appearance of it is one of the elegances of this art. But all poetry is not of this kind; its rule does not apply to poets like Homer or Valmiki or other early writers. The Veda might almost be described as a mass of repetitions; so might the work of Vaishnava poets and the poetic literature of devotion generally in India. Arnold has noted this distinction when speaking of Homer; he mentioned especially that there is nothing objectionable in the close repetition of the same word in the Homeric way of writing. In many things Homer seems to make a point of repeating himself. He has stock descriptions, epithets always reiterated, lines even which are constantly repeated again and again when the same incident returns in his narrative, e.g. the line,

doupēsen de pesōn arabēse de teuche' ep' autōi.

“Down with a thud he fell and his armour clangoured upon
him.”

He does not hesitate also to repeat the bulk of a line with a variation at the end, e.g.

bē de kat' Oulumpoio karēnōn chōomenos kēr.

And again the

bē de kat' Oulumpoio karēnōn aixasa.

“Down from the peaks of Olympus he came, wrath vexing his heart-strings” and again, “Down from the peaks of Olympus she came impetuously darting.” He begins another line elsewhere with the same word and a similar action and with the same nature of a human movement physical and psychological in a scene of Nature, here a man’s silent sorrow listening to the roar of the ocean:

bē d’akeōn para thina poluphloisboio thalassēs

“Silent he walked by the shore of the many-rumoured ocean.”

In mystic poetry also repetition is not objectionable; it is resorted to by many poets, sometimes with insistence. I may note as an example the constant repetition of the word *Ritam*, truth, sometimes eight or nine times in a short poem of nine or ten stanzas and often in the same line. This does not weaken the poem, it gives it a singular power and beauty. The repetition of the same key ideas, key images and symbols, key words or phrases, key epithets, sometimes key lines or half lines is a constant feature. They give an atmosphere, a significant structure, a sort of psychological frame, an architecture. The object here is not to amuse or entertain but the self-expression of an inner truth, a seeing of things and ideas not familiar to the common mind, a bringing out of inner experience. It is the true more than the new that the poet is after. He uses *āvṛtti*, repetition, as one of the most powerful means of carrying home what has been thought or seen and fixing it in the mind in an atmosphere of light and beauty. This kind of repetition I have used largely in *Savitri*. Moreover, the object is not only to present a secret truth in its true form and true vision but to drive it home by the finding of the true word, the true phrase, the *mot juste*, the true image or symbol, if possible the inevitable word; if that is there, nothing else, repetition included, matters much. This is natural when the repetition is intended, serves a purpose; but it can hold even when the repetition is not deliberate but comes in naturally in the stream of the inspiration. I see, therefore, no objection to the recurrence of the same or similar image such as sea and ocean, sky and heaven in one long passage provided each is the

right thing and rightly worded in its place. The same rule applies to words, epithets, ideas. It is only if the repetition is clumsy or awkward, too burdensomely insistent, at once unneeded and inexpressive or amounts to a disagreeable and meaningless echo that it must be rejected.

There is one place, perhaps two, where I am disposed to make some concession. The first is where the word “awake” occurs at the beginning of the poem, twice within six lines in the same prominent place at the end of a line.²² In neither line can the word be changed, for it is needed and to change would spoil; but some modification can be made by restoring the original order putting the lines about the unbodied Infinite first and pushing those about the fallen self afterwards. The other place was in the other long passage where the word “delight” occurs also twice at the end of a line but with a somewhat longer interval between;²³ here, however, I have not yet found any satisfying alternative.

I think there is none of your objections that did not occur to me as possible from a certain kind of criticism when I wrote or I re-read what I had written; but I brushed them aside as invalid or as irrelevant to the kind of poem I was writing. So you must not be surprised at my disregard of them as too slight and unimperative.

You have asked what is my positive opinion about your article. Well, it seems to me very fine both in style and substance, but as it is in high eulogy of my own writing, you must not expect me to say any more.

²² *It was the hour before the Gods awake. . . .*

[four lines]

A power of fallen boundless self, awake [cf. p. 1]

²³ *Her looks, her smile awoke celestial sense*

Even in earth-stuff, and their intense delight

Poured a supernal beauty on men's lives. . . .

As to a sheltering bosom a stricken bird

Escapes with tired wings from a world of storms,

In a safe haven of soft and splendid rest

One could restore life's wounded happiness,

Recover the lost habit of delight, [cf. p. 15]

P.S. I have just received your last letter of the 15th. I have maintained all the omissions²⁴ you had made except the new lines in the description of Savitri which we have agreed to insert. The critic has a right to include or omit as he likes in his quotations. I doubt whether I shall have the courage to throw out again the stricken and too explicit bird into the cold and storm outside;²⁵ at most I might change that one line, the first and make it stronger. I confess I fail to see what is so objectionable in its explicitness; usually, according to my idea, it is only things that are in themselves vague that have to be kept vague. There is plenty of room for the implicit and suggestive, but I do not see the necessity for that where one has to bring home a physical image. I have, of course, restored the original reading where you have made an alteration not approved by me, as in the substitution of the word "barely" for "hardly". On this point I may add that in certain contexts "barely" would be the right word, as for instance, "There is barely enough food left for two or three meals", where "hardly" would be adequate but much less forceful. It is the other way about in this line. I think I have answered everything else in the body of this letter.

19 March 1946

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What you have written as the general theory of the matter seems to be correct and it does not differ substantially from what I wrote. But your phrase about unpurposive repetition might carry a suggestion which I would not be able to accept; it might seem to indicate that the poet must have a "purpose" in whatever he writes and must be able to give a logical account of it to the critical intellect. That is surely not the way in which the poet or at least the mystic poet has to do his work. He does not himself deliberately choose or arrange word and rhythm but only sees it

²⁴ Lines omitted when passages from Savitri were reproduced in the article "Sri Aurobindo — A New Age of Mystical Poetry", by K. D. Sethna (see above, page 290, footnote 3). — Ed.

²⁵ As to a sheltering bosom a stricken bird
Escapes with tired wings from a world of storms, [cf. p. 15]

as it comes in the very act of inspiration. If there is any purpose of any kind, it also comes by and in the process of inspiration. He can criticise himself and the work; he can see whether it was a wrong or an inferior movement, he does not set about correcting it by any intellectual method but waits for the true thing to come in its place. He cannot always account to the logical intellect for what he has done; he feels or intuits, and the reader or critic has to do the same.

Thus I cannot tell you for what purpose I admitted the repetition of the word “great” in the line about the “great unsatisfied godhead” [*p.* 15], I only felt that it was the one thing to write in that line as “her greatness” was the only right thing in a preceding line; I also felt that they did not and could not clash and that was enough for me. Again, it might be suggested that the “high” “warm” subtle ether of love was not only the right expression but that repetition of these epithets after they had been used in describing the atmosphere of Savitri’s nature was justified and had a reason and purpose because it pointed and brought out the identity of the ether of love with Savitri’s atmosphere. But as a matter of fact I have no such reason or purpose. It was the identity which brought spontaneously and inevitably the use of the same epithets and not any conscious intention which deliberately used the repetition for a purpose.

Your contention that in the lines which I found to be inferior to their original form and altered back to that form, the inferiority was due to a repetition is not valid. In the line, “And found in her a vastness like his own” [*cf.* *p.* 16], the word “wideness” which had accidentally replaced “vastness” would have been inferior even if there had been no “wide” or “wideness” anywhere within a hundred miles and I would still have altered it back to the original word. So too with “sealed depths” and so many others. These alterations were due to inadvertence and not intentional; repetition or non-repetition had nothing to do with the matter. It was the same with “Wisdom nursing Chance”:²⁶ if “nursing” had been the right word and not a slip replacing the

²⁶ See page 313 above. — Ed.

original phrase I would have kept it in spite of the word “nurse” occurring immediately afterwards: only perhaps I would have taken care to so arrange that the repetition of the figure would simply have constituted a two-headed instead of a one-headed evil. Yes, I have changed in several places where you objected to repetitions but mostly for other reasons: I have kept many where there was a repetition and changed others where there was no repetition at all. I have indeed made modifications or changes where repetition came at a short distance at the end of a line; that was because the place made it too conspicuous. Of course where the repetition amounts to a mistake, I would have no hesitation in making a change; for a mistake must always be acknowledged and corrected.

26 April 1946

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I am afraid I shall not be able to satisfy your demand for rejection and alteration of the lines about the Inconscient and the cloak any more than I could do it with regard to the line about the silence and strength of the gods. I looked at your suggestion about adding a line or two in the first case, but could get nothing that would either improve the passage or set your objection at rest. I am quite unable to agree that there is anything jargonish about the line any more than there is in the lines of Keats,

“Beauty is truth, truth beauty,” — that is all

Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.

That amounts to a generalised philosophical statement or enunciation and the words “beauty” and “truth” are abstract metaphysical terms to which we give a concrete and emotional value because they are connected in our associations with true and beautiful things of which our senses or our minds are vividly aware. Men have not learnt yet to recognise the Inconscient on which the whole material world they see is built, or the Ignorance of which their whole nature including their knowledge is built; they think that these words are only abstract metaphysical jargon flung about by the philosophers in their clouds or laboured out in long and wearisome books like *The Life Divine*. But it

is not so with me and I take my stand on my own feeling and experience about them as Keats did about his own Truth and Beauty. My readers will have to do the same if they want to appreciate my poetry, which, of course, they are not bound to do.

Is it really a fact that even the ordinary reader would not be able to see any difference between the Inconscient and Ignorance unless the difference is expressly explained to him? This is not a matter of philosophical terminology but of common sense and the understood meaning of English words. One would say “even the inconscient stone” but one would not say, as one might of a child, “the ignorant stone”. One must first be conscious before one can be ignorant. What is true is that the ordinary reader might not be familiar with the philosophical content of the word Inconscient and might not be familiar with the Vedantic idea of the Ignorance as the power behind the manifested world. But I don’t see how I can acquaint him with these things in a single line, even with the most illuminating image or symbol. He might wonder, if he were Johnsonianly minded, how an Inconscient could be teased or how it could wake Ignorance. I am afraid, in the absence of a miracle of inspired poetical exegesis flashing through my mind, he will have to be left wondering. I am not set against adding a line if the miracle comes or if some vivid symbol occurs to me, but as yet none such is making its appearance.

In the other case also, about the cloak, I maintain my position. Here, however, while I was looking at the passage an additional line occurred to me and I may keep it:

The darkness failed and slipped like a falling cloak
From the reclining body of a god. [*p.* 3]

But this additional line does not obviate your objection and it was not put in with that aim. You have, by the way, made a curious misapplication of my image of the careful housewife²⁷; you attribute this line to her inspiration. A careful housewife is meticulously and methodically careful to arrange everything in a perfect order, to put every object in its place and see that there

²⁷ See page 311 above — Ed.

is no disharmony anywhere; but according to you she has thrust a wrong object into a wrong place, something discordant with the surroundings and inferior in beauty to all that is near it; if so, she is not a careful housewife but a slattern. The Muse has a careful housewife, — there is Pope's, perfect in the classical or pseudo-classical style or Tennyson's, in the romantic or semi-romantic manner, while as a contrast there is Browning's with her energetic and rough-and-tumble dash and clatter.

You ask why in these and similar cases I could not convince you while I did in others. Well, there are several possible explanations. It may be that your first reaction to these lines was very vivid and left the mark of a *samskāra* which could not be obliterated. Or perhaps I was right in the other matters while your criticism may have been right in these, — my partiality for these lines may be due to an unjustified personal attachment founded on the vision which they gave me when I wrote them. Again, there are always differences of poetical appreciation due either to preconceived notions or to different temperamental reactions. Finally, it may well be that my vision was true but for some reason you are not able to share it. For instance, you may have seen in the line about the cloak only the objective image in a detailed picture of the dawn where I felt a subjective suggestion in the failure of the darkness and the slipping of the cloak, not an image but an experience. It must be the same with the line,

The strength, the silence of the gods were hers. [*p.* 16]

You perhaps felt it to be an ordinary line with a superficial significance; perhaps it conveyed to you not much more than the stock phrase about the “strong silent man” admired by biographers, while to me it meant very much and expressed with a bare but sufficient power what I always regarded as a great reality and a great experience. 1946

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I have seen your letter to Nolini and considered the points you raised. The reading of the mistyped line should run

His self-discovery's flaming witnesses; [p. 97]

the error was only of a single letter. I do not agree with you that the two lines you stigmatise are not poetic. The first, however, I had already thought of altering, because it did not fully express what ought to have been said; so please change it to

All he had been and all towards which he grew. [p. 307]

The second line, though good enough as poetry, might perhaps be improved upon and you may change it to

Grew near to him, his daily associates. [p. 96]

As to the repetitions, the second one, I think, must remain as it is. As to the repetition of "peace", I was of course aware of it, but I have left it as it was because I found nothing that would not spoil one or other of the lines, but perhaps it might be altered to

Passionless, wordless, absorbed in its fathomless hush [p. 308]

without altogether losing its force. In the other repetition passage I notice that in one line in the manuscript "nearness-self" has been written which is incorrect; in your letter you write it correctly "nearness' self".

15 October 1946

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In the two passages ending with the same word "alone"²⁸ I think that there is sufficient space between them and neither ear nor mind need be offended. The word "sole", I think, would flatten the line too much and the word "aloof" would here have no atmosphere and it would not express the idea. It is not distance and aloofness that has to be stressed but unaccompanied solitude.

²⁸ *There knowing herself by her own termless self,*

Wisdom supernal, wordless, absolute

Sat unaccompanied in the eternal Calm,

All-seeing, motionless, sovereign and alone.

[and, after 61 lines:]

The superconscient realms of motionless Peace

Where judgment ceases and the world is mute

And the Unconceived lies pathless and alone. [pp. 32, 33–34]

The line you object to on account of forced rhythm “in a triumph of fire” has not been so arranged through negligence. It was very deliberately done and deliberately maintained. If it were altered the whole effect of rhythmic meaning and suggestion which I intended would be lost and the alterations you suggest would make a good line perhaps but with an ordinary and inexpressive rhythm. Obviously it is not a “natural” rhythm, but there is no objection to its being forced when it is a forcible and violent action that has to be suggested. The rhythm cannot be called artificial, for that would mean something not true and genuine or significant but only patched up and insincere: the rhythm here is a turn of art and not a manufacture. The scansion is iamb, reversed spondee, pyrrhic, trochee, iamb. By reversed spondee I mean a foot with the first syllable long and highly stressed and the second stressed but short or with a less heavy ictus. In the ordinary spondee the greater ictus is on the second syllable while there are equal spondees with two heavy stresses, e.g. “vast space” or in such a line as

He has seized life in his resistless hands.²⁹

In the first part of the line the rhythm is appropriate to the violent breaking in of the truth while in the second half it expresses a high exultation and exaltation in the inrush. This is brought out by the two long and highly stressed vowels in the first syllable of “triumph” and in the word “fire” (which in the elocution of the line have to be given their full force), coming after a pyrrhic with two short syllables between them. If one slurs over the slightly weighted short syllable in “triumph” where the concluding consonants exercise a certain check and delay in the voice, one could turn this half line into a very clumsy double anapaest, the first a glide and the second a stumble; this would be bad elocution and contrary to the natural movement of the words.

I have wholly failed to feel the prosaic flatness of which you accuse the line

²⁹ *This line does not form part of the final version of Savitri. — Ed.*

All he had been and all that now he was. [*cf. p. 307*]

No doubt, the diction is extremely simple, direct and unadorned but that can be said of numberless good lines in poetry and even of some great lines. If there is style, if there is a balanced rhythm (rhyme is not necessary) and a balanced language and significance (for these two elements combined always create a good style), and if the line or the passage in which it occurs has some elevation or profundity or other poetic quality in the idea which it expresses, then there cannot be any flatness nor can any such line or passage be set aside as prosaic.

By the way, I think you said in a letter that in the line

Our prostrate soil bore the awakening light [*cf. p. 5*]

“soil” was an error for “soul”. But “soil” is correct; for I am describing the revealing light falling upon the lower levels of the earth, not on the soul. No doubt, the whole thing is symbolic, but the symbol has to be kept in front and the thing symbolised has to be concealed or only peep out from behind, it cannot come openly into the front and push aside the symbol.

As to the title of the three Cantos about the Yoga of the King,³⁰ I intended the repetition of the word “Yoga” to bring out and emphasise the fact that this part of Aswapati’s spiritual development consisted of two yogic movements, one a psycho-spiritual transformation and the other, a greater spiritual transformation with an ascent to a supreme power. The omission which you suggest would destroy this significance and leave only something more abstract. In the second of these three Cantos there is a pause between the two movements and a description of the secret knowledge to which he is led and of which the results are described in the last Canto, but there is no description of the Yoga itself or of the steps by which this knowledge came. That is only indicated, not narrated; so to bring in “The Yoga of the King” as the title of this Canto would not be very apposite.

³⁰ Book I. Canto 3: *The Yoga of the King: The Yoga of the Soul’s Release.*

Canto 4: *The Secret Knowledge.*

Canto 5: *The Yoga of the King: The Yoga of the Spirit’s Freedom and Greatness.*

Aswapati's Yoga falls into three parts. First, he is achieving his own spiritual self-fulfilment as an individual and this is described as the Yoga of the King. Next, he makes the ascent as a typical representative of the race to win the possibility of discovery and possession of all the planes of consciousness and this is described in the second book: but this too is as yet only an individual victory. Finally, he aspires no longer for himself but for all, for a universal realisation and new creation. That is described in the Book of the Divine Mother.

As to the Nirvana poem, I have said that the poem announces no metaphysical philosophy but is only the description of a spiritual experience. So how can any metaphysics be derived from it true or false — if you mean truly or falsely derived? If you want to ask whether the metaphysics you derived is in itself true or false, well, I don't remember what it was; so I would have to read your letter again before I could answer, and for that you may have to wait for some time.

As regards the other points you have drawn attention to, they have all been set right in the original version but your typescript seems to have been sent without making these changes. The "bird" passage has been changed thus:

As might a soul fly like a hunted bird,
Escaping with tired wings from a world of storms,
And a quiet reach like a remembered breast,
In a haven of safety and splendid soft repose
One could drink life back in streams of honey-fire,
Recover the lost habit of happiness,
Feel her bright nature's glorious ambience etc. etc. [*p.* 15]

29 October 1946

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I am not at all times impervious to criticism; I have accepted some of yours and changed my lines accordingly; I have also though not often accepted some adverse criticisms from outside and remoulded a line or a passage from here and there. But your criticisms are based upon an understanding appreciation of the

poem, its aim, meaning, method, the turn and quality of its language and verse technique. In your friend's judgments I find an entire absence of any such understanding and accordingly I find his criticisms to be irrelevant and invalid. What one does not understand or perceive its meaning and spirit, one cannot fruitfully criticise.

1947

Comments on Some Remarks by a Critic

You have asked me to comment on your friend Mendonça's comments on my poetry and especially on *Savitri*. But, first of all, it is not usual for a poet to criticise the criticisms of his critics though a few perhaps have done so; the poet writes for his own satisfaction, his own delight in poetical creation or to express himself and he leaves his work for the world, and rather for posterity than for the contemporary world, to recognise or to ignore, to judge and value according to its perception or its pleasure. As for the contemporary world he might be said rather to throw his poem in its face and leave it to resent this treatment as an unpleasant slap, as a contemporary world treated the early poems of Wordsworth and Keats, or to accept it as an abrupt but gratifying attention, which was ordinarily the good fortune of the great poets in ancient Athens and Rome and of poets like Shakespeare and Tennyson in modern times. Posterity does not always confirm the contemporary verdict, very often it reverses it, forgets or depreciates the writer enthroned by contemporary fame, or raises up to a great height work little appreciated or quite ignored in its own time. The only safety for the poet is to go his own way careless of the blows and caresses of the critics; it is not his business to answer them. Then you ask me to right the wrong turn your friend's critical mind has taken; but how is it to be determined what is the right and what is the wrong turn, since a critical judgment depends usually on a personal reaction determined by the critic's temperament or the aesthetic trend in him or by values, rules or canons which are settled for his intellect and agree with the viewpoint from which his mind receives whatever comes to him for judgment; it is that which is right for him though it may seem wrong to a different temperament, aesthetic intellectuality or mental viewpoint. Your friend's judgments, according to his own account of them, seem

to be determined by a sensitive temperament finely balanced in its own poise but limited in its appreciations, clear and open to some kinds of poetic creation, reserved towards others, against yet others closed and cold or excessively depreciative. This sufficiently explains his very different reactions to the two poems, *Descent* and *Flame-Wind*, which he unreservedly admires and to *Savitri*. However, since you have asked me, I will answer, as between ourselves, in some detail and put forward my own comments on his comments and my own judgments on his judgments. It may be rather long; for if such things are done, they may as well be clearly and thoroughly done. I may also have something to say about the nature and intention of my poem and the technique necessitated by the novelty of the intention and nature.

Let me deal first with some of the details he stresses so as to get them out of the way. His detailed intellectual reasons for his judgments seem to me to be often arbitrary and fastidious, sometimes based on a misunderstanding and therefore invalid or else valid perhaps in other fields but here inapplicable. Take, for instance, his attack upon my use of the prepositional phrase. Here, it seems to me, he has fallen victim to a grammatical obsession and lumped together under the head of the prepositional twist a number of different turns some of which do not belong to that category at all. In the line,

Lone on my summits of calm I have brooded with voices around me,
there is no such twist; for I did not mean at all “on my calm summits”, but intended straightforwardly to convey the natural, simple meaning of the word. If I write “the fields of beauty” or “walking on the paths of truth”, I do not expect to be supposed to mean “in beautiful fields” or “in truthful paths”; it is the same with “summits of calm”, I mean “summits of calm” and nothing else; it is a phrase like “He rose to high peaks of vision” or “He took his station on the highest summits of knowledge”. The calm is the calm of the highest spiritual consciousness to which the soul has ascended, making those summits its own and looking down from their highest heights on all below: in spiritual

experience, in the occult vision or feeling that accompanies it, this calm is not felt as an abstract quality or a mental condition but as something concrete and massive, a self-existent reality to which one reaches, so that the soul standing on its peak is rather a tangible fact of experience than a poetical image. Then there is the phrase "A face of rapturous calm": he seems to think it is a mere trick of language, a substitution of a prepositional phrase for an epithet, as if I had intended to say "a rapturously calm face" and I said instead "a face of rapturous calm" in order to get an illegitimate and meaningless rhetorical effect. I meant nothing of the kind, nothing so tame and poor and scanty in sense: I meant a face which was an expression or rather a living image of the rapturous calm of the supreme and infinite consciousness, — it is indeed so that it can well be "Infinity's centre". The face of the liberated Buddha as presented to us by Indian art is such an expression or image of the calm of Nirvana and could, I think, be quite legitimately described as a face of Nirvanic calm, and that would be an apt and live phrase and not an ugly artifice or twist of rhetoric. It should be remembered that the calm of Nirvana or the calm of the supreme Consciousness is to spiritual experience something self-existent, impersonal and eternal and not dependent on the person — or the face — which manifests it. In these two passages I take then the liberty to regard Mendonça's criticism as erroneous at its base and therefore invalid and inadmissible.

Then there are the lines from the *Songs of the Sea*:

The rains of deluge flee, a storm-tossed shade,
Over thy breast of gloom.

"Thy breast of gloom" is not used here as a mere rhetorical and meaningless variation of "thy gloomy breast"; it might have been more easily taken as that if it had been a human breast, though even then, it could have been entirely defensible in a fitting context; but it is the breast of the sea, an image for a vast expanse supporting and reflecting or subject to the moods or movements of the air and the sky. It is intended, in describing the passage of the rains of deluge over the breast of the sea,

to present a picture of a storm-tossed shade crossing a vast gloom: it is the gloom that has to be stressed and made the predominant idea and the breast or expanse is only its support and not the main thing; this could not have been suggested by merely writing “thy gloomy breast”. A prepositional phrase need not be merely an artificial twist replacing an adjective; for instance, “a world of gloom and terror” means something more than “a gloomy and terrible world”, it brings forward the gloom and terror as the very nature and constitution, the whole content of the world and not merely an attribute. So also if one wrote “Him too wilt thou throw to thy sword of sharpness” or “cast into thy pits of horror”, would it merely mean “thy sharp sword” and “thy horrible pits”? and would not the sharpness and the horror rather indicate or represent formidable powers of which the sword is the instrument and the pits the habitation or lair? That would be rhetoric but it would be a rhetoric not meaningless but having in it meaning and power. Rhetoric is a word with which we can batter something we do not like; but rhetoric of one kind or another has been always a great part of the world’s best literature; Demosthenes, Cicero, Bossuet and Burke are rhetoricians, but their work ranks with the greatest prose styles that have been left to us. In poetry the accusation of rhetoric might be brought against such lines as Keats’

Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!
No hungry generations tread thee down.

To conclude, there is the “swords of sheen” in the translation of *Bande Mataram*. That might be more open to the critic’s stricture, for the expression can be used and perhaps has been used in verse as merely equivalent to “shining swords”; but for anyone with an alert imagination it can mean in certain contexts something more than that, swords that emit brilliance and seem to be made of light. Mendonça says that to use this turn in any other than an adjectival sense is unidiomatic, but he admits that there need be no objection provided that it creates a sense of beauty, but he finds no beauty in any of these passages. But the beauty can be perceived only if the other sense is seen, and even

then we come back to the question of personal reaction; you and other readers may feel beauty where he finds none. I do not myself share his sensitive abhorrence of this prepositional phrase; it may be of course because there are coarser rhetorical threads in my literary taste. I would not, for instance, shrink from a sentence like this in a sort of free verse, "Where is thy wall of safety? Where is thy arm of strength? Whither has fled thy vanished face of glory?" Rhetoric of course, but it has in it an element which can be attractive, and it seems to me to bring in a more vivid note and mean more than "thy strong arm" or "thy glorious face" or than "the strength of thy arm" and "the glory of thy face".

I come next to the critic's trenchant attack on that passage in my symbolic vision of Night and Dawn in which there is recorded the conscious adoration of Nature when it feels the passage of the omniscient Goddess of eternal Light. Trenchant, but with what seems to me a false edge; or else if it is a sword of Damascus that would cleave the strongest material mass of iron, he is using it to cut through subtle air, the air closes behind his passage and remains unsevered. He finds here only poor and false poetry, unoriginal in imagery and void of true wording and true vision, but that is again a matter of personal reaction and everyone has a right to his own, you to yours as he to his. I was not seeking for originality but for truth and the effective poetical expression of my vision. He finds no vision there, and that may be because I could not express myself with any power; but it may also be because of his temperamental failure to feel and see what I felt and saw. I can only answer to the intellectual reasonings and judgments which turned up in him when he tried to find the causes of his reaction. These seem to me to be either fastidious and unsound or founded on a mistake of comprehension and therefore invalid or else inapplicable to this kind of poetry. His main charge is that there is a violent and altogether illegitimate transference of epithet in the expression "the wide-winged hymn of a great priestly wind". A transference of epithet is not necessarily illegitimate, especially if it expresses something that is true or necessary to convey a sound feeling

and vision of things: for instance, if one writes in an Ovidian account of the *dénouement* of a lovers' quarrel

In spite of a reluctant sullen heart
My willing feet were driven to thy door,

it might be said that it was something in the mind that was willing and the ascription of an emotion or state of mind to the feet is an illegitimate transfer of epithet; but the lines express a conflict of the members, the mind reluctant, the body obeying the force of the desire that moves it and the use of the epithet is therefore perfectly true and legitimate. But here no such defence is necessary because there is no transfer of epithets. The critic thinks that I imagined the wind as having a winged body and then took away the wings from its shoulders and clapped them on to its voice or hymn which could have no body. But I did nothing of the kind; I am not bound to give wings to the wind. In an occult vision the breath, sound, movement by which we physically know of a wind is not its real being but only the physical manifestation of the wind-god or the spirit of the air, as in the Veda the sacrificial fire is only a physical birth, temporary body or manifestation of the god of Fire, Agni. The gods of the Air and other godheads in the Indian tradition have no wings, the Maruts or storm-gods ride through the skies in their galloping chariots with their flashing golden lances, the beings of the middle world in the Ajanta frescoes are seen moving through the air not with wings but with a gliding natural motion proper to ethereal bodies. The epithet "wide-winged" then does not belong to the wind and is not transferred from it, but is proper to the voice of the wind which takes the form of a conscious hymn of aspiration and rises ascending from the bosom of the great priest, as might a great-winged bird released into the sky and sinks and rises again, aspires and fails and aspires again on the "altar hills". One can surely speak of a voice or a chant of aspiration rising on wide wings and I do not see how this can be taxed as a false or unpoetic image. Then the critic objects to the expression "altar hills" on the ground that this is superfluous as the imagination of the reader can very well supply this detail

for itself from what has already been said: I do not think this is correct, a very alert reader might do so but most would not even think of it, and yet the detail is an essential and central feature of the thing seen and to omit it would be to leave a gap in the middle of the picture by dropping out something which is indispensable to its totality. Finally he finds that the line about the high boughs praying in the revealing sky does not help but attenuates, instead of more strongly etching the picture. I do not know why, unless he has failed to feel and to see. The picture is that of a conscious adoration offered by Nature and in that each element is conscious in its own way, the wind and its hymn, the hills, the trees. The wind is the great priest of this sacrifice of worship, his voice rises in a conscious hymn of aspiration, the hills offer themselves with the feeling of being an altar of the worship, the trees lift their high boughs towards heaven as the worshippers, silent figures of prayer, and the light of the sky into which their boughs rise reveals the Beyond towards which all aspires. At any rate this "picture" or rather this part of the vision is a complete rendering of what I saw in the light of the inspiration and the experience that came to me. I might indeed have elaborated more details, etched out at more length but that would have been superfluous and unnecessary; or I might have indulged in an ampler description but this would have been appropriate only if this part of the vision had been the whole. This last line is an expression of an experience which I often had whether in the mountains or on the plains of Gujarat or looking from my window in Pondicherry not only in the dawn but at other times and I am unable to find any feebleness either in the experience or in the words that express it. If the critic or any reader does not feel or see what I so often felt and saw, that may be my fault, but that is not sure, for you and others have felt very differently about it; it may be a mental or a temperamental failure on their part and it will be then my or perhaps even the critic's or reader's misfortune.

I may refer here to Mendonça's disparaging characterisation of my epithets. He finds that their only merit is that they are good prose epithets, not otiose but right words in their right place and

exactly descriptive but only descriptive without any suggestion of any poetic beauty or any kind of magic. Are there then prose epithets and poetic epithets and is the poet debarred from exact description using always the right word in the right place, the *mot juste*? I am under the impression that all poets, even the greatest, use as the bulk of their adjectives words that have that merit, and the difference from prose is that a certain turn in the use of them accompanied by the power of the rhythm in which they are carried lifts all to the poetic level. Take one of the passages I have quoted from Milton,

On evil days though fallen, and evil tongues . . .

or

Blind Thamyras, and blind Maeonides,
And Tiresias, and Phineus, prophets old,

here the epithets are the same that would be used in prose, the right word in the right place, exact in statement, but all lies in the turn which makes them convey a powerful and moving emotion and the rhythm which gives them an uplifting passion and penetrating insistence. In more ordinary passages such as the beginning of *Paradise Lost* the epithets “forbidden tree” and “mortal taste” are of the same kind, but can we say that they are merely prose epithets, good descriptive adjectives and have no other merit? If you take the lines about Nature’s worship in *Savitri*, I do not see how they can be described as prose epithets; at any rate I would never have dreamt of using in prose unless I wanted to write poetic prose such expressions as “wide-winged hymn” or “a great priestly wind” or “altar hills” or “revealing sky”; these epithets belong in their very nature to poetry alone whatever may be their other value or want of value. He says they are obvious and could have been supplied by any imaginative reader; well, so are Milton’s in the passages quoted and perhaps there too the very remarkable imaginative reader whom Mendonça repeatedly brings in might have supplied them by his own unfailing poetic verve. Whether they or any of them prick a hidden beauty out of the picture is for each reader to feel

or judge for himself; but perhaps he is thinking of such things as Keats' "magic casements" and "foam of perilous seas" and "fairy lands forlorn", but I do not think even in Keats the bulk of the epithets are of that unusual character.

I have said that his objections are sometimes inapplicable. I mean by this that they might have some force with regard to another kind of poetry but not to a poem like *Savitri*. He says, to start with, that if I had had a stronger imagination, I would have written a very different poem and a much shorter one. Obviously, and to say it is a truism; if I had had a different kind of imagination, whether stronger or weaker, I would have written a different poem and perhaps one more to his taste; but it would not have been *Savitri*. It would not have fulfilled the intention or had anything of the character, meaning, world-vision, description and expression of spiritual experience which was my object in writing this poem. Its length is an indispensable condition for carrying out its purpose and everywhere there is this length, critics may say an "unconscionable length" — I am quoting the *Times*' reviewer's description in his otherwise eulogistic criticism of *The Life Divine* — in every part, in every passage, in almost every canto or section of a canto. It has been planned not on the scale of *Lycidas* or *Comus* or some brief narrative poem, but of the longer epical narrative, almost a minor, though a very minor *Ramayana*; it aims not at a minimum but at an exhaustive exposition of its world-vision or world-interpretation. One artistic method is to select a limited subject and even on that to say only what is indispensable, what is centrally suggestive and leave the rest to the imagination or understanding of the reader. Another method which I hold to be equally artistic or, if you like, architectural is to give a large and even a vast, a complete interpretation, omitting nothing that is necessary, fundamental to the completeness: that is the method I have chosen in *Savitri*. But Mendonça has understood nothing of the significance or intention of the passages he is criticising, least of all, their inner sense — that is not his fault, but is partly due to the lack of the context and partly to his lack of equipment and you have there an unfair advantage over him which enables you to understand

and see the poetic intention. He sees only an outward form of words and some kind of surface sense which is to him vacant and merely ornamental or rhetorical or something pretentious without any true meaning or true vision in it: inevitably he finds the whole thing false and empty, unjustifiably ambitious and pompous without deep meaning or, as he expresses it, pseudo and phoney. His objection of *longueur* would be perfectly just if the description of the night and the dawn had been simply of physical night and physical dawn; but here the physical night and physical dawn are, as the title of the canto clearly suggests, a symbol, although what may be called a real symbol of an inner reality and the main purpose is to describe by suggestion the thing symbolised; here it is a relapse into Inconscience broken by a slow and difficult return of consciousness followed by a brief but splendid and prophetic outbreak of spiritual light leaving behind it the "day" of ordinary human consciousness in which the prophecy has to be worked out. The whole of *Savitri* is, according to the title of the poem, a legend that is a symbol and this opening canto is, it may be said, a key beginning and announcement. So understood there is nothing here otiose or unnecessary; all is needed to bring out by suggestion some aspect of the thing symbolised and so start adequately the working out of the significance of the whole poem. It will of course seem much too long to a reader who does not understand what is written or, understanding, takes no interest in the subject; but that is unavoidable.

To illustrate the inapplicability of some of his judgments one might take his objection to repetition of the cognates "sombre Vast", "unsounded Void", "opaque Inane", "vacant Vasts" and his clinching condemnation of the inartistic inelegance of their occurrence in the same place at the end of the line. I take leave to doubt his statement that in each place his alert imaginative reader, still less any reader without that equipment, could have supplied these descriptions and epithets from the context, but let that pass. What was important for me was to keep constantly before the view of the reader, not imaginative but attentive to seize the whole truth of the vision in its totality, the ever-present

sense of the Inconscience in which everything is occurring. It is the frame as well as the background without which all the details would either fall apart or stand out only as separate incidents. That necessity lasts until there is the full outburst of the dawn and then it disappears; each phrase gives a feature of this Inconscience proper to its place and context. It is the entrance of the "lonely splendour" into an otherwise inconscient obstructing and unreceptive world that has to be brought out and that cannot be done without the image of the "opaque Inane" of the Inconscience which is the scene and cause of the resistance. There is the same necessity for reminding the reader that the "tread" of the Divine Mother was an intrusion on the vacancy of the Inconscience and the herald of deliverance from it. The same reasoning applies to the other passages. As for the occurrence of the phrases in the same place each in its line, that is a rhythmic turn helpful, one might say necessary to bring out the intended effect, to emphasise this reiteration and make it not only understood but felt. It is not the result of negligence or an awkward and inartistic clumsiness, it is intentional and part of the technique. The structure of the pentameter blank verse in *Savitri* is of its own kind and different in plan from the blank verse that has come to be ordinarily used in English poetry. It dispenses with enjambement or uses it very sparingly and only when a special effect is intended; each line must be strong enough to stand by itself, while at the same time it fits harmoniously into the sentence or paragraph like stone added to stone; the sentence consists usually of one, two, three or four lines, more rarely five or six or seven: a strong close for the line and a strong close for the sentence are almost indispensable except when some kind of inconclusive cadence is desirable; there must be no laxity or diffusiveness in the rhythm or in the metrical flow anywhere, — there must be a flow but not a loose flux. This gives an added importance to what comes at the close of the line and this placing is used very often to give emphasis and prominence to a key phrase or a key idea, especially those which have to be often reiterated in the thought and vision of the poem so as to recall attention to things that are universal

or fundamental or otherwise of the first consequence — whether for the immediate subject or in the total plan. It is this use that is served here by the reiteration at the end of the line.

I have not anywhere in *Savitri* written anything for the sake of mere picturesqueness or merely to produce a rhetorical effect; what I am trying to do everywhere in the poem is to express exactly something seen, something felt or experienced; if, for instance, I indulge in the wealth-burdened line or passage, it is not merely for the pleasure of the indulgence, but because there is that burden, or at least what I conceive to be that, in the vision or the experience. When the expression has been found, I have to judge, not by the intellect or by any set poetical rule, but by an intuitive feeling, whether it is entirely the right expression and, if it is not, I have to change and go on changing until I have received the absolutely right inspiration and the right transcription of it and must never be satisfied with any *à peu près* or imperfect transcription even if that makes good poetry of one kind or another. This is what I have tried to do. The critic or reader will judge for himself whether I have succeeded or failed; but if he has seen nothing and understood nothing, it does not follow that his adverse judgment is sure to be the right and true one, there is at least a chance that he may so conclude, not because there is nothing to see and nothing to understand, only poor pseudo-stuff or a rhetorical emptiness but because he was not equipped for the vision or the understanding. *Savitri* is the record of a seeing, of an experience which is not of the common kind and is often very far from what the general human mind sees and experiences. You must not expect appreciation or understanding from the general public or even from many at the first touch; as I have pointed out, there must be a new extension of consciousness and aesthesis to appreciate a new kind of mystic poetry. Moreover if it is really new in kind, it may employ a new technique, not perhaps absolutely new, but new in some or many of its elements: in that case old rules and canons and standards may be quite inapplicable; evidently, you cannot justly apply to the poetry of Whitman the principles of technique which are proper to the old metrical verse or the established laws of the

old traditional poetry; so too when we deal with a modernist poet. We have to see whether what is essential to poetry is there and how far the new technique justifies itself by new beauty and perfection, and a certain freedom of mind from old conventions is necessary if our judgment is to be valid or rightly objective.

Your friend may say as he has said in another connection that all this is only special pleading or an apology rather than an apologia. But in that other connection he was mistaken and would be so here too, for in neither case have I the feeling that I had been guilty of some offence or some shortcoming and therefore there could be no place for an apology or special pleading such as is used to defend or cover up what one knows to be a false case. I have enough respect for truth not to try to cover up an imperfection; my endeavour would be rather to cure the recognised imperfection; if I have not poetical genius, at least I can claim a sufficient, if not an infinite capacity for painstaking: that I have sufficiently shown by my long labour on *Savitri*. Or rather, since it was not labour in the ordinary sense, not a labour of painstaking construction, I may describe it as an infinite capacity for waiting and listening for the true inspiration and rejecting all that fell short of it, however good it might seem from a lower standard until I got that which I felt to be absolutely right. Mendonça was evidently under a misconception with regard to my defence of the wealth-burdened line; he says that the principle enounced by me was sound but what mattered was my application of the principle, and he seems to think that I was trying to justify my application although I knew it to be bad and false by citing passages from Milton and Shakespeare as if my use of the wealth-burdened style were as good as theirs. But I was not defending the excellence of my practice, for the poetical value of my lines was not then in question; the question was whether it did not violate a valid law of a certain chaste economy by the use of too many epithets massed together: against this I was asserting the legitimacy of a massed richness, I was defending only its principle, not my use of the principle. Even a very small poet can cite in aid of his practice examples from greater poets without implying that his poetry is on a par

with theirs. But he further asserts that I showed small judgment in choosing my citations, because Milton's passage¹ is not at all an illustration of the principle and Shakespeare's² is inferior in poetic value, lax and rhetorical in its richness and belongs to an early and inferior Shakespearean style. He says that Milton's astounding effect is due only to the sound and not to the words. That does not seem to me quite true: the sound, the rhythmic resonance, the rhythmic significance is undoubtedly the predominant factor; it makes us hear and feel the crash and clamour and clangour of the downfall of the rebel angels: but that is not all, we do not merely hear as if one were listening to the roar of ruin of a collapsing bomb-shattered house, but saw nothing, we have the vision and the full psychological commotion of the "hideous" and flaming ruin of the downfall, and it is the tremendous force of the words that makes us see as well as hear. Mendonça's disparagement of the Shakespearean passage on "sleep" and the line on the sea considered by the greatest critics and not by myself only as ranking amongst the most admired and admirable things in Shakespeare is surprising and it seems to me to illustrate a serious limitation in his poetic perception and temperamental sympathies. Shakespeare's later terse and packed style with its more powerful dramatic effects can surely be admired without disparaging the beauty and opulence of his earlier style; if he had never written in that style, it would have been an unspeakable loss to the sum of the world's aesthetic possessions. The lines I have quoted are neither lax nor merely rhetorical, they have a terseness or at least a compactness of their own, different in character from the lines, let us say, in the scene of Antony's death or other memorable passages written in his great tragic style but none the less at every step packed with pregnant meanings and powerful significances which would not

¹ *With hideous ruin and combustion down
To bottomless perdition, there to dwell
In adamant chains and penal fire,*

² *Wilt thou upon the high and giddy mast
Seal up the ship-boy's eyes, and rock his brains
In cradle of the rude imperious surge,*

be possible if it were merely a loose rhetoric. Anyone writing such lines would deserve to rank by them alone among the great and even the greatest poets.

That is enough for the detail of the criticism and we can come to the general effect and his pronounced opinion upon my poetry. Apart from his high appreciation of *Flame-Wind* and *Descent*, *Jivanmukta* and *Thought the Paraclete* and his general approval of the mystic poems published along with my essay on quantitative metre in English, it is sufficiently damning and discouraging and if I were to accept his verdict on my earlier and latest poetry, the first comparatively valueless and the last for the most part pseudo and phoney and for the rest offering only a few pleasant or pretty lines but not charged with the power and appeal of true or great poetry, I would have to withdraw the *Collected Poems* from circulation, throw *Savitri* into the waste-paper-basket and keep only the mystical poems,—but these also have been banned by some critics, so I have no refuge left to me. As Mendonça is not a negligible critic and his verdict agrees with that of the eulogist of my philosophy in *The Times Literary Supplement*, not to speak of others less authoritative like the communist reviewer of Iyengar's book who declared that it was not at all certain that I would live as a poet, it is perhaps incumbent on me to consider in all humility my dismal position and weigh whether it is really as bad as all that. There are some especial judgments in your friend's comments on the *Collected Poems* but these seem to concern only the translations. It is curious that he should complain of the lack of the impulse of self-expression in the *Songs of the Sea* as in this poem I was not busy with anything of the kind but was only rendering into English the self-expression of my friend and fellow-poet C. R. Das in his fine Bengali poem *Sagar Sangit*. I was not even self-moved to translate this work, however beautiful I found it; I might even be accused of having written the translation as a pot-boiler, for Das knowing my impecunious and precarious condition at Pondicherry offered me Rs. 1,000 for the work. Nevertheless I tried my best to give his beautiful Bengali lines as excellent a shape of English poetry as I could manage. The poet

and *littérateur* Chapman condemned my work because I had made it too English, written too much in a manner imitative of traditional English poetry and had failed to make it Bengali in its character so as to keep its native spirit and essential substance. He may have been right; Das himself was not satisfied as he appended a more literal translation in free verse but this latter version does not seem to have caught on while some at least still read and admire the English disguise. If Mendonça is right in finding an overflow of sentiment in the *Songs*, that must be my own importation of an early romantic sentimentalism, a contribution of my own “self-expression” replacing Das’s. The sea to the Indian imagination is a symbol of life, — one speaks of the ocean of the *samsāra* and Indian Yoga sees in its occult visions life in the image of a sea or different planes of being as so many oceans. Das’s poem expresses his communing with this ocean of universal life and psychic intimacies with the Cosmic Spirit behind it and these have a character of grave emotion and intense feeling, not of mere sentimentalism, but they come from a very Indian and even a very Bengali mentality and may seem in translation to a different mind a profuse display of fancy and sentiment. The *Songs* are now far away from me in a dim backward of memory and I will have to read them again to be sure, but for that I have no time.

Again, I am charged with modern nineteenth-century romanticism and a false imitation of the Elizabethan drama in my rendering of Kalidasa’s *Vikramorvasie*; but Kalidasa’s play *is* romantic in its whole tone and he might almost be described as an Elizabethan predating by a thousand years at least the Elizabethans; indeed most of the ancient Sanskrit dramas are of this kind, though the tragic note is missing, and the general spirit resembles that of Elizabethan romantic comedy. So I do not think I committed any fault in making the translation romantic and in trying to make it Elizabethan, even if I only achieved a “sapless pseudo-Elizabethan” style. One who knew the Sanskrit original and who, although an Indian, was recognised as a good critic in England as well as a poet, one too whose attitude towards myself and my work had been consistently adverse, yet

enthusiastically praised my version and said if Kalidasa could be translated at all, it was only so that he could be translated. This imprimatur of an expert may perhaps be weighed against the discouraging criticism of Mendonça. The comment on my translation of Bhartrihari is more to the point; but the fault is not Bhartrihari's whose epigrams are as concise and lapidary as the Greek, but in translating I indulged my tendency at the time which was predominantly romantic: the version presents faithfully enough the ideas of the Sanskrit poet but not the spirit and manner of his style. It is comforting, however, to find that it makes "attractive reading", — I must be content with small mercies in an adversely critical world. After all, these poems are translations and not original works and not many can hope to come within a hundred miles of the more famous achievements of this kind such as Fitzgerald's splendid misrepresentation of Omar Khayyam, or Chapman's and Pope's mistranslations of Homer which may be described as first-class original poems with a borrowed substance from a great voice of the past. Mendonça does not refer specifically to *Love and Death*, to which your enthusiasm first went out, to *Poems*, to *Urvasie* and to *Perseus the Deliverer* though this last he would class, I suppose, as sapless pseudo-Elizabethan drama; but that omission may be there because he only skimmed through them and afterwards could not get the first volume. But perhaps they may come under his general remark that this part of my work lacks the glow and concentration of true inspired poetry and his further judgment classing it with the works of Watson and Stephen Phillips and other writers belonging to the decline of romantic poetry. I know nothing about Watson's work except for one or two short pieces met by chance; if I were to judge from them, I would have to regard him as a genuine poet with a considerable elevation of language and metrical rhythm but somewhat thin in thought and substance; my poems may conceivably have some higher quality than his in this last respect since the reviewer in *The Times Literary Supplement* grants deep thought and technical excellence as the only merits of my uninspired poetry. It is otherwise with Stephen Phillips: I read *Marpessa* and *Christ in Hades*, the latter

in typescript, shortly before I left England and they aroused my admiration and made a considerable impression on me. I read recently a reference to Phillips as a forgotten poet, but if that includes these two poems I must consider the oblivion as a considerable loss to the generation which has forgotten them. His later poetry disappointed me, there was still some brilliance but nothing of that higher promise. The only other poet of that time who had some influence on me was Meredith, especially his *Modern Love* which may have helped in forming the turn of my earlier poetic expression. I have not read the other later poets of the decline. Of subsequent writers or others not belonging to this decline I know only A. E. and Yeats, something of Francis Thompson, especially the *Hound of Heaven* and the *Kingdom of God*, and a poem or two of Gerard Hopkins; but the last two I came across very late, Hopkins only quite recently, and none of them had any influence on me, although one English reviewer in India spoke of me in eulogistic terms as a sort of combination of Swinburne and Hopkins and some have supposed that I got my turn for compound epithets from the latter! The only romantic poets of the Victorian Age who could have had any influence on me, apart from Arnold whose effect on me was considerable, were Tennyson perhaps, subconsciously, and Swinburne of the earlier poems, for his later work I did not at all admire. Still it is possible that the general atmosphere of the later Victorian decline, if decline it was, may have helped to mould my work and undoubtedly it dates and carries the stamp of the time in which it was written. It is a misfortune of my poetry from the point of view of recognition that the earlier work forming the bulk of the *Collected Poems* belongs to the past and has little chance of recognition now that the aesthetic atmosphere has so violently changed, while the later mystical work and *Savitri* belong to the future and will possibly have to wait for recognition of any merit they have for another strong change. As for the mystical poems which your friend praises in such high terms, they are as much challenged by others as the rest of my work. Some reviewers have described them as lacking altogether in spiritual feeling and void of spiritual experience; they are,

it seems, mere mental work, full of intellectually constructed images and therefore without the genuine value of spiritual or mystic poetry.

Well, then, what is the upshot? What have I to decide as a result of my aesthetic examination of conscience? It is true that there are voices on the other side, not only from my disciples but from others who have no such connection with me. I have heard of individuals nameless or fameless in England who chanced to come across *Love and Death* and had the same spontaneous enthusiasm for it as yourself; others have even admired and discovered in my earlier work the beauty and the inspiration which Mendonça and the *Times* reviewer find to be badly lacking in it. It is true that they have differed in the poems they have chosen; Andrews cited particularly the *Rishi* and the epigram on Goethe as proof of his description of me as a great poet; an English critic, Richardson, singled out *Urvashi* and *Love and Death* and the more romantic poems, but thought that some of my later work was less inspired, too intellectual and philosophical, too much turned towards thought, while some work done in the middle he denounced altogether, complaining that after feeding my readers on nectar for so long I came later on to give them mere water. This critic made a distinction between great poets and good poets and said that I belonged to the second and not to the first category, but as he classed Shelley and others of the same calibre as examples of the good poets, his praise was sufficiently "nectarous" for anybody to swallow with pleasure! Krishnaprem, Moore and others have also had a contrary opinion to the adverse critics and these, both English and Indian, were men whose capacity for forming a true literary judgment is perhaps as good as any on the other side. Krishnaprem I mention, because his judgment forms a curious and violent contrast to Mendonça's: the latter finds no overtones in my poetry while Krishnaprem who similarly discourages Harin's poetry on the ground of a lack of overtones finds them abundant in mine. One begins to wonder what overtones really are, or are we to conclude that they have no objective existence but are only a term for some subjective personal reaction in the

reader? I meet the same absolute contradiction everywhere; one critic says about *Perseus* that there is some good poetry in it but it is not in the least dramatic except for one scene and that the story of the play is entirely lacking in interest, while another finds in it most of all a drama of action and the story thrilling and holding a breathless interest from beginning to end. Highest eulogy, extreme disparagement, faint praise, mixed laudation and censure — it is a see-saw on which the unfortunate poet who is incautious enough to attach any value to contemporary criticism is balanced without any possibility of escape. Or I may flatter myself with the idea that this lively variation of reaction from extreme eulogy to extreme damnation indicates that my work must have after all something in it that is real and alive. Or I might perhaps take refuge in the supposition that the lack of recognition is the consequence of an untimely and too belated publication, due to the egoistic habit of writing for my own self-satisfaction rather than any strong thirst for poetical glory and immortality and leaving most of my poetry in the drawer for much longer than, even for twice or thrice the time recommended by Horace who advised the poet to put by his work and read it again after ten years and then only, if he still found it of some value, to publish it. *Urvasie*, the second of the only two poems published early, was sent at first to Lionel Johnson, a poet and *littérateur* of some reputation who was the Reader of a big firm. He acknowledged some poetic merit, but said that it was a repetition of Matthew Arnold and so had no sufficient reason for existence. But Lionel Johnson, I was told, like the Vedantic sage who sees Brahman in all things, saw Arnold everywhere, and perhaps if I had persisted in sending it to other firms, some other Reader, not similarly obsessed, might have found the merit and, as romanticism was still the fashion, some of the critics and the public too might have shared your and Richardson's opinion of this and other work and, who knows, I might have ranked in however low a place among the poets of the romantic decline. Perhaps then I need not decide too hastily against any republication of the *Collected Poems* or could even cherish the hope that, when the fashion of anti-romanticism has passed, it

may find its proper place, whatever that may be, and survive.

As regards your friend's appraisal of the mystical poems, I need say little. I accept his reservation that there is much inequality as between the different poems: they were produced very rapidly — in the course of a week, I think — and they were not given the long reconsideration that I have usually given to my poetic work before publication; he has chosen the best, though there are others also that are good, though not so good; in others, the metre attempted and the idea and language have not been lifted to their highest possible value. I would like to say a word about his hesitation over some lines in *Thought the Paraclete* which describe the spiritual planes. I can understand this hesitation; for these lines have not the vivid and forceful precision of the opening and the close and are less pressed home, they are general in description and therefore to one who has not the mystic experience may seem too large and vague. But they are not padding; a precise and exact description of these planes of experience would have made the poem too long, so only some large lines are given, but the description is true, the epithets hit the reality and even the colours mentioned in the poem, "gold-red feet" and "crimson-white mooned oceans", are faithful to experience. Significant colour, supposed by intellectual criticism to be symbolic but there is more than that, is a frequent element in mystic vision; I may mention the powerful and vivid vision in which Ramakrishna went up into the higher planes and saw the mystic truth behind the birth of Vivekananda. At least, the fact that these poems have appealed so strongly to your friend's mind may perhaps be taken by me as a sufficient proof that in this field my effort at interpretation of spiritual things has not been altogether a failure.

But how then are we to account for the same critic's condemnation or small appreciation of *Savitri* which is also a mystic and symbolic poem although cast into a different form and raised to a different pitch, and what value am I to attach to his criticism? Partly, perhaps, it is this very difference of form and pitch which accounts for his attitude and, having regard to his aesthetic temperament and its limitations, it was inevitable.

He himself seems to suggest this reason when he compares this difference to the difference of his approach as between *Lycidas* and *Paradise Lost*. His temperamental turn is shown by his special appreciation of Francis Thompson and Coventry Patmore and his response to *Descent* and *Flame-Wind* and the fineness of his judgment when speaking of the *Hound of Heaven* and the *Kingdom of God*, its limitation by his approach towards *Paradise Lost*. I think he would be naturally inclined to regard any very high-pitched poetry as rhetorical and unsound and declamatory, wherever he did not see in it something finely and subtly true coexisting with the high-pitched expression, — the combination we find in Thompson's later poem and it is this he seems to have missed in *Savitri*. For *Savitri* does contain or at least I intended it to contain what you and others have felt in it but he has not been able to feel because it is something which is outside his own experience and to which he has no access. One who has had the kind of experience which *Savitri* sets out to express or who, not having it, is prepared by his temperament, his mental turn, his previous intellectual knowledge or psychic training, to have some kind of access to it, the feeling of it if not the full understanding, can enter into the spirit and sense of the poem and respond to its poetic appeal; but without that it is difficult for an unprepared reader to respond, — all the more if this is, as you contend, a new poetry with a new law of expression and technique.

Lycidas is one of the finest poems in any literature, one of the most consistently perfect among works of an equal length and one can apply to it the epithet "exquisite" and it is to the exquisite that your friend's aesthetic temperament seems specially to respond. It would be possible to a reader with a depreciatory turn to find flaws in it, such as the pseudo-pastoral setting, the too powerful intrusion of St. Peter and puritan theological controversy into that incongruous setting and the image of the hungry sheep which someone not in sympathy with Christian feeling and traditional imagery might find even ludicrous or at least odd in its identification of pseudo-pastoral sheep and theological human sheep: but these would be hypercritical

objections and are flooded out by the magnificence of the poetry. I am prepared to admit the very patent defects of *Paradise Lost*: Milton's heaven is indeed unconvincing and can be described as grotesque and so too is his gunpowder battle up there, and his God and angels are weak and unconvincing figures, even Adam and Eve, our first parents, do not effectively fill their part except in his outward description of them; and the later narrative falls far below the grandeur of the first four books but those four books stand for ever among the greatest things in the world's poetic literature. If *Lycidas* with its beauty and perfection had been the supreme thing done by Milton even with all the lyrical poetry and the sonnets added to it, Milton would still have been a great poet but he would not have ranked among the dozen greatest; it is *Paradise Lost* that gives him that place. There are deficiencies if not failures in almost all the great epics, the *Odyssey* and perhaps the *Divina Commedia* being the only exceptions, but still they are throughout in spite of them great epics. So too is *Paradise Lost*. The grandeur of his verse and language is constant and unsinking to the end and makes the presentation always sublime. We have to accept for the moment Milton's dry Puritan theology and his all too human picture of the celestial world and its denizens and then we can feel the full greatness of the epic. But the point is that this greatness in itself seems to have less appeal to Mendonça's aesthetic temperament; it is as if he felt less at home in its atmosphere, in an atmosphere of grandeur and sublimity than in the air of a less sublime but a fine and always perfect beauty. It is the difference between a magic hill-side woodland of wonder and a great soaring mountain climbing into a vast purple sky: to accept fully the greatness he needs to find in it a finer and subtler strain as in Thompson's *Kingdom of God*. On a lower scale this, his sentence about it seems to suggest, is the one fundamental reason for his complete pleasure in the mystical poems and his very different approach to *Savitri*. The pitch aimed at by *Savitri*, the greatness you attribute to it, would of itself have discouraged in him any abandonment to admiration and compelled from the beginning a cautious and dubious approach; that soon turned to lack of appreciation or a

lowered appreciation even of the best that may be there and to depreciation and censure of the rest.

But there is the other reason which is more effective. He sees and feels nothing of the spiritual meaning and the spiritual appeal which you find in *Savitri*; it is for him empty of anything but an outward significance and that seems to him poor, as is natural since the outward meaning is only a part and a surface and the rest is to his eyes invisible. If there had been what he hoped or might have hoped to find in my poetry, a spiritual vision such as that of the Vedantin, arriving beyond the world towards the Ineffable, then he might have felt at home as he does with Thompson's poetry or might at least have found it sufficiently accessible. But this is not what *Savitri* has to say or rather it is only a small part of it and, even so, bound up with a cosmic vision and an acceptance of the world which in its kind is unfamiliar to his mind and psychic sense and foreign to his experience. The two passages with which he deals do not and cannot give any full presentation of this way of seeing things since one is an unfamiliar symbol and the other an incidental and, taken by itself apart from its context, an isolated circumstance. But even if he had had other more explicit and clearly revealing passages at his disposal, I do not think he would have been satisfied or much illuminated; his eyes would still have been fixed on the surface and caught only some intellectual meaning or outer sense. That at least is what we may suppose to have been the cause of his failure, if we maintain that there is anything at all in the poem; or else we must fall back on the explanation of a fundamental personal incompatibility and the rule *de gustibus non est disputandum*, or to put it in the Sanskrit form *nānārucirhi lokah*. If you are right in maintaining that *Savitri* stands as a new mystical poetry with a new vision and expression of things, we should expect, at least at first, a widespread, perhaps, a general failure even in lovers of poetry to understand it or appreciate; even those who have some mystical turn or spiritual experience are likely to pass it by if it is a different turn from theirs or outside their range of experience. It took the world something like a hundred years to discover Blake; it would not be improbable that there

might be a greater time-lag here, though naturally we hope for better things. For in India at least some understanding or feeling and an audience few and fit may be possible. Perhaps by some miracle there may be before long a larger appreciative audience.

At any rate this is the only thing one can do, especially when one is attempting a new creation, — to go on with the work with such light and power as is given to one and leave the value of the work to be determined by the future. Contemporary judgments we know to be unreliable; there are only two judges whose joint verdict cannot easily be disputed, the World and Time. The Roman proverb says, *securus judicat orbis terrarum*; but the world's verdict is secure only when it is confirmed by Time. For it is not the opinion of the general mass of men that finally decides, the decision is really imposed by the judgment of a minority and élite which is finally accepted and settles down as the verdict of posterity; in Tagore's phrase it is the universal man, *viśva mānava*, or rather something universal using the general mind of man, we might say the Cosmic Self in the race that fixes the value of its own works. In regard to the great names in literature this final verdict seems to have in it something of the absolute, — so far as anything can be that in a temporal world of relativities in which the Absolute reserves itself hidden behind the veil of human ignorance. It is no use for some to contend that Virgil is a tame and elegant writer of a wearisome work in verse on agriculture and a tedious pseudo-epic written to imperial order and Lucretius the only really great poet in Latin literature or to depreciate Milton for his Latin English and inflated style and the largely uninteresting character of his two epics; the world either refuses to listen or there is a temporary effect, a brief fashion in literary criticism, but finally the world returns to its established verdict. Lesser reputations may fluctuate, but finally whatever has real value in its own kind settles itself and finds its just place in the durable judgment of the world. Work which was neglected and left aside like Blake's or at first admired with reservation and eclipsed like Donne's is singled out by a sudden glance of Time and its greatness recognised; or what seemed buried slowly emerges or re-emerges; all finally settles into its

place. What was held as sovereign in its own time is rudely dethroned but afterwards recovers not its sovereign throne but its due position in the world's esteem; Pope is an example and Byron, who at once burst into a supreme glory and was the one English poet, after Shakespeare, admired all over Europe but is now depreciated, may also recover his proper place. Encouraged by such examples, let us hope that these violently adverse judgments may not be final and absolute and decide that the waste-paper-basket is not the proper place for *Savitri*. There may still be a place for a poetry which seeks to enlarge the field of poetic creation and find for the inner spiritual life of man and his now occult or mystical knowledge and experience of the whole hidden range of his and the world's being, not a corner and a limited expression such as it had in the past, but a wide space and as manifold and integral an expression of the boundless and innumerable riches that lie hidden and unexplored as if kept apart under the direct gaze of the Infinite, as has been found in the past for man's surface and finite view and experience of himself and the material world in which he has lived striving to know himself and it as best he can with a limited mind and senses. The door that has been shut to all but a few may open; the kingdom of the Spirit may be established not only in man's inner being but in his life and his works. Poetry also may have its share in that revolution and become part of the spiritual empire.

I had intended as the main subject of this letter to say something about technique and the inner working of the intuitive method by which *Savitri* was and is being created and of the intention and plan of the poem. Mendonça's idea of its way of creation, an intellectual construction by a deliberate choice of words and imagery, badly chosen at that, is the very opposite of the real way in which it was done. That was to be the body of the letter and the rest only a preface. But the preface has become so long that it has crowded out the body. I shall have to postpone it to a later occasion when I have more time. 4 May 1947

The Mendonça letter [of 4 May 1947] was to be, as I suggested, “between ourselves”; there is too much that is private and personal in it for publicity. It is something that can be shown to those who can appreciate and understand, but to an ordinary reader I might seem to be standing on my defence rather than attacking and demolishing a criticism which might damage the appreciation of it in readers who are not sure of their own critical standard and reliability of their taste and so might be shaken by well-phrased judgments and plausible reasonings such as Mendonça’s: they might make the same confusion as Mendonça himself between an apology and an apologia. An idea might rise that I am not sure of the value of my own poetry especially the earlier poetry and accept his valuation of it. The humility you speak of is very largely a Socratic humility, the element of irony in it is considerable; but readers not accustomed to fineness of shades might take it literally and conclude wrongly that I accepted the strictures passed by an unfavourable criticism. A poet who puts no value or a very low value on his own writing has no business to write poetry or to publish it or keep it in publication; if I allowed the publication of the *Collected Poems* it is because I judged them worth publishing. Kishor Gandhi’s objection has therefore some value. On the other hand in defending I may seem to be eulogising my own work, which is not a thing that can be done in public even if a poet’s estimate of his achievement is as self-assured as that of Horace, *Exegi monumentum aere perennius*, or as magnificent as Victor Hugo’s. Similarly, the reply was not meant for Mendonça himself and I do not think the whole can be shown to him without omissions or some editing, but if you wish and if you think that he will not resent any strictures I have made you can show to him the passages relevant to his criticisms.

7 July 1947

On the Publication of His Poetry

The Question of Publication

I do not attach much importance to the publication or non-publication of my poetry and never have done. Most of it (the published part) appeared five, ten, fifteen or even thirty or more years after they were written. The few recently published in magazines (not all of them new, e.g. the sonnets) owed their fate to Nolini's eagerness and not to my initiative. But the vast bulk of what I have written (long poems mostly) lies on shelf and in drawer, most of it for more than a decade, awaiting either dissolution or an interminable revision or total recasting which at the present rate may well retain them there a decade or two more. But that is my own idiosyncrasy — it cannot be a rule or example for others. However, for those that are "circulated" Nolini and Doraiswami have found a trick which — I hope — will prevent any farther push for premature publication in the future — i.e. printing them as they come and letting them pile up for private circulation hereafter.

8 January 1935

On an Early Publication Proposal

Here are my selections from your shorter poems. Dara wants me to send it to you so that you may judge whether I have selected rightly and whether it is what may be printed, as he suggests, by the Aligarh or Osmania University. But please tell me: is this Aligarh or Osmania University business a possible scheme? . . .

What about *Love and Death* and *Baji Prabhou*? Are they to be printed *in toto* or in part?

I have not the least notion whether it is possible; I suppose that ordinarily no University in India would accept as text-book the (English) poems of a writer not yet consecrated (*qua* poet) by

European fame. It is Dara's idea; I don't know if the Osmania or Aligarh Universities are really so original and unconventional as to do such a thing. I thought however that a selection of the kind might prove useful, if not for this, for some other purpose, and it would not be a bad thing to have one ready; for Dara's idea of a selection is in itself a happy one. And I have often seen that circumstances arise and, because one is not ready with the materials, a chance is lost of getting something done.

Love and Death is too long for inclusion in a book of selections; passages would be sufficient. For *Baji Prabhau* that holds still more, since it has not so much poetic value as *Love and Death*.

As to your selections, it *seems* to me that you have chosen with judgment and taste; but the comparative judgment of a poet on his own writings is so often at fault that outside voices are needed for confirmation—even though I fancy I have a sufficient attitude of detachment towards my past work. But perhaps detachment is not enough.

P.S. I have altered the passage about Paris in two or three places where the rhythm is clumsy. At that time I had not evolved the "perfect hexameter".

22 July 1932

A Selection of Short Poems

- 1 Transformation
- 2 Bird of Fire ✓
- 3 Rose of God ✓
- 4 Who?
- 5 Revelation
- 6 To the Sea
- 7 God
- 8 Invitation
- 9 Epigram on Goethe
- 10 Renewal
- 11 Descent
- 12 Estelle (I find this is not a translation)

I think these may be sent for his own selection of six. No translation or extracts from dramas or long poems are included, only short poems and small lyrics.

The mark √ means that we think these two ought to be included in any selection made.

On Two Proposals to Publish *Love and Death* in England

By the way, the copy of your *Love and Death* is ready to go to England. I wonder how the critics will receive the poem.

You expect . . . *Love and Death* to make a sensation in England — I don't expect it in the least: I shall be agreeably surprised if it gets more than some qualified praise, and if it does not get even that, I shall be neither astonished nor discomfited. I know the limitations of the poem and its qualities and I know that the part about the descent into Hell can stand comparison with some of the best English poetry; but I don't expect my contemporaries to see it. If they do, it will be good luck or divine grace, that is all.

2 February 1932

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I am afraid you are under an illusion as to the success of *Love and Death* in England. *Love and Death* dates, — it belongs to the time when Meredith and Phillips were still writing and Yeats and A.E. were only in bud if not *in ovo*. Since then the wind has changed and even Yeats and A.E. are already a little high and dry on the sands of the past, while the form, manner, characteristics of *Love and Death* are just the things that are anathema to the post-war writers and literary critics. I fear it would be, if not altogether ignored which is most likely, regarded as a feeble and belated Indian imitation of an exploded literary model dead and buried long ago. I don't regard it in that light myself, but it is not my opinion that counts for success but that of the modern highbrows. If it had been published when it was written, it might have been a success — but now! Of course, I know that there are many people still in England, if it got into their hands, who

would read it with enthusiasm, but I don't think it would get into their hands at all. As for the other poems, they could not go with *Love and Death*. When the time comes for publication, the sonnets will have to be published in a separate book of Sonnets and the others in another separate book of (mainly) lyrical poems — so it cannot be now. That at least is my present idea. It is not that I am against publication for all time, but my idea was to wait for the proper time rather than do anything premature.

One thing however could be done. Prithwi Singh could send his friend *Love and Death* and perhaps the *Six Poems* and sound the publishers as to whether the publication, in their eyes, would be worthwhile from their point of view. That would at least give a clue.

24 October 1934

On Two Other Publication Proposals

I have seen the opinion of the publisher consulted by Amiya Chakrabarty: Dilip's friend, the novelist Thompson, has also written to him offering to get a small selection of my poems published. Both opinions agree that poetry has very little chance of success nowadays. Thompson says that poetry is out of fashion; the publisher also indicates that new and original poetry has very little chance with the public. I believe they are both right. I also agree that if anything is to be published in Europe, it should be something in prose rather than in poetry. But I do not feel inclined to be in any haste in either direction; when anything of the kind ought to happen — I mean "ought" from the inner truth of things, I suppose it will arrange itself. You will remember that when I consented to let your friend show my poems to some publishers there, it was more to know what they would say and how they would take such poetry of an entirely new kind (I speak of course of the six poems and the sonnets) and not with an idea of immediate publication. Neither mere selling nor having the books in good print and in a good and pleasing form seems to me a sufficient justification for the expenditure. If publication agrees with an inner truth and serves

a deeper purpose, then it will be worth while. I hope my decision will not disappoint you too much; it seems to me from my point of view the right one.

16 June 1935

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I wish a volume could be prepared containing either the complete poetical works of Sri Aurobindo or selections from his poetry. One or the other will certainly be very popular and invite an interest or bring things like the Nobel Prize etc.

You are mistaken. Nobody in England now reads poetry except for a very small circle of readers and in India poetry in English does not command a public. The time has not come.

Section Two

On Poets and Poetry

Great Poets of the World

The World's Greatest Poets

Goethe certainly goes much deeper than Shakespeare; he had an incomparably greater intellect than the English poet and sounded problems of life and thought Shakespeare had no means of approaching even. But he was certainly not a greater poet; I do not find myself very ready to admit either that he was Shakespeare's equal. He wrote out of a high poetic intelligence, but his style and movement nowhere come near the poetic power, the magic, the sovereign expression and profound or subtle rhythms of Shakespeare. Shakespeare was a supreme poet and, one might almost say, nothing else; Goethe was by far the greater man and the greater brain, but he was a poet by choice, his mind's choice among its many high and effulgent possibilities, rather than by the very necessity of his being. He wrote his poetry, as he did everything else, with a great skill and effective genius and an inspired subtlety of language, but it was only part of his genius and not the whole. There is too a touch mostly wanting in spite of his strength and excellence, — the touch of an absolute, an intensely inspired or revealing inevitability; few quite supreme poets have that in abundance, in others it comes only by occasional jets or flashes.

When I said there were no greater poets than Homer and Shakespeare, I was thinking of their essential poetic force and beauty — not of the scope of their work as a whole, for there are poets greater in their range. The Mahabharata is from that point of view a far greater creation than the Iliad, the Ramayana than the Odyssey, and either spreads its strength and its achievement over a larger field than the whole dramatic world of Shakespeare; both are built on an almost cosmic vastness of plan and take all human life (the Mahabharata all human thought as well) in

their scope and touch too on things which the Greek and Elizabethan poets could not even glimpse. But as poets — as masters of rhythm and language and the expression of poetic beauty — Vyasa and Valmiki are *not inferior*, but also not greater than the English or the Greek poet. We can leave aside for the moment the question whether the Mahabharata was not the creation of the mind of a people rather than of a single poet, for that doubt has been raised also with regard to Homer.

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You once spoke of Goethe as not being one of the world's absolutely supreme singers. Who are these, then? Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, Valmiki, Kalidasa? And what about Aeschylus, Virgil and Milton?

I suppose all the names you mention except Goethe can be included; or if you like you can put them all including Goethe in three rows — e.g.:

1st row Homer, Shakespeare, Valmiki
2nd row Dante, Kalidasa, Aeschylus, Virgil, Milton
3rd row Goethe

and there you are! To speak less flippantly, the first three have at once supreme imaginative originality, supreme poetic gift, widest scope and supreme creative genius. Each is a sort of poetic Demiurge who has created a world of his own. Dante's triple world beyond is more constructed by the poetic seeing mind than by this kind of elemental demiurgic power — otherwise he would rank by their side; the same with Kalidasa. Aeschylus is a seer and creator but on a much smaller scale. Virgil and Milton have a less spontaneous breath of creative genius; one or two typical figures excepted, they live rather by what they have said than by what they have made.

31 March 1932

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Is the omission of Vyasa deliberate?

It was you who omitted Vyasa, Sophocles and others — not I.

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Yes, I plead guilty. But that, I hope, will be no reason why Vyasa and Sophocles should remain unclassified by you. And “the others” — they intrigue me even more. Who are these others? Saintsbury as good as declares that poetry is Shelley and Shelley poetry — Spenser alone, to his mind, can contest the right to that equation. (Shakespeare, of course, is admittedly *hors concours*.) Aldous Huxley abominates Spenser: the fellow has got nothing to say and says it with a consummately cloying melodiousness! Swinburne, as is well known, could never think of Victor Hugo without bursting into half a dozen alliterative superlatives, while Matthew Arnold it was, I believe, who pitied Hugo for imagining that poetry consisted in using “divinité”, “infinité” “éternité”, as lavishly as possible. And then there is Keats, whose *Hyperion* compelled even the sneering Byron to forget his usual condescending attitude towards “Johnny” and confess that nothing grander had been seen since Aeschylus. Racine, too, cannot be left out — can he? Voltaire adored him, Voltaire who called Shakespeare a drunken barbarian. Finally, what of Wordsworth, whose Immortality Ode was hailed by Mark Pattison as the *ne plus ultra* of English poetry since the days of *Lycidas*? Kindly shed the light of infallible *viveka* on this chaos of jostling opinions.

I am not prepared to classify all the poets in the universe — it was the front bench or benches you asked for. By others I meant poets like Lucretius, Euripides, Calderon, Corneille, Hugo. Euripides (*Medea*, *Bacchae* and other plays) is a greater poet than Racine whom you want to put in the first ranks. If you want only the very greatest, none of these can enter — only Vyasa and Sophocles. Vyasa could very well claim a place beside Valmiki, Sophocles beside Aeschylus. The rest, if you like, you can send into the third row with Goethe, but it is something of a promotion about which one can feel some qualms. Spenser too, if you like; it is difficult to draw a line.

Shelley, Keats and Wordsworth have not been brought into consideration although their best work is as fine poetry as any written, but they have written nothing on a larger scale which would place them among the greatest creators. If Keats had finished *Hyperion* (without spoiling it), if Shelley had lived, or

if Wordsworth had not petered out like a motor car with insufficient petrol, it might be different, but we have to take things as they are. As it is, all began magnificently, but none of them finished, and what work they did, except a few lyrics, sonnets, short pieces and narratives, is often flawed and unequal. If they had to be admitted, what about at least fifty others in Europe and Asia?

The critical opinions you quote are, many of them, flagrantly prejudiced and personal. The only thing that results from Aldous Huxley's opinion, shared by many but with less courage, is that Spenser's melodiousness cloyed upon Aldous Huxley and that perhaps points to a serious defect somewhere in Spenser's art or in his genius but this does not cancel the poetic value of Spenser. Swinburne and Arnold are equally unbalanced on either side of their see-saw about Hugo. He might be described as a great but imperfect genius who just missed the very first rank because his word sometimes exceeded his weight, because his height was at the best considerable, even magnificent, but his depth insufficient and especially because he was often too oratorical to be quite sincere. The remarks of Voltaire and Mark Pattison go into the same basket.

2 April 1932

Epic Greatness and Sublimity

How do you differentiate between epic power and the Aeschylean sublime? Into what category would the grandeur, at its best, of Marlowe and Victor Hugo fall?

I don't know how I differentiate. Victor Hugo in the *Légende des siècles* tries to be epic and often succeeds, perhaps even on the whole. Marlowe is sometimes great or sublime, but I would not call him epic. There is a greatness or sublimity that is epic, there is another that is not epic, but more of a romantic type. Shakespeare's line

In cradle of the rude imperious surge

is as sublime as anything in Homer or Milton, but it does not seem to me to have the epic ring, while a very simple line can have it, e.g. Homer's

Bē de kat' Oulumpoio karēnōn chōomenos kēr

“He went down from the peaks of Olympus wroth at heart”

or Virgil's

Disce, puer, virtutem ex me verumque laborem,

Fortunam ex aliis.

or Milton's

Fallen Cherub, to be weak is miserable.

What is there in these lines that is not in Shakespeare's and makes them epic (Shakespeare's of course has something else as valuable)? For the moment at least, I can't tell you, but it is there. A tone of the inner spirit perhaps, expressing itself in the rhythm and the turn of the language.

As regards epic and non-epic sublimity, it strikes me that the former has a more natural turn of imagination — that is to say, it is powerfully wide or deep or high without being outstandingly bold, it also displays less colour.

Dante has the epic spirit and tone, what he lacks perhaps is the epic élan and swiftness. The distinction you draw applies, no doubt, but I do not know whether it is the essence of the thing or only one result of a certain austerity in the epic Muse. I do not know whether one cannot be coloured provided one keeps that austerity which, be it understood, is not incompatible with a certain fineness and sweetness.

19 May 1937

Remarks on Individual Poets

The Author of the *Bhagavad Gita*

Sri Krishna is not supposed to have written anything. The Gita is part of the Mahabharata which is attributed to the sage Vyasa, the contemporary of Krishna. But in its present form the Mahabharata seems to be of later origin and many scholars say that the Gita was composed afterwards by someone and put into the Mahabharata.

In any case whoever wrote it was a great Yogi and certainly received his inspiration from Krishna.

Catullus and Horace

You prefer Catullus [*to Horace*] because he was a philosopher? You have certainly rolled Lucretius here into Catullus — Lucretius who wrote an epic about the “Nature of Things” and invested the Epicurean philosophy with a rudely Roman and most unepicurean majesty and grandeur. Catullus had no more philosophy in him than a red ant. He was an exquisite lyrist — much more spontaneous in his lyristism than the more sophisticated and well-balanced Horace, a poet of passionate and irregular love, and he got out of the Latin language a melody no man could persuade it to before him or after. But that was all. Horace on the other hand knew everything there was to be known about philosophy at that time and had indeed all the culture of the age at his fingers’ ends and carefully put in its place in his brain also — but he did not make the mistake of writing a philosophical treatise in verse. A man of great urbanity, a perfectly balanced mind, a vital man with a strong sociability, faithful and ardent in friendship, a *bon vivant* fond of good food and good wine, a lover of women but not ardently passionate

like Catullus, an Epicurean who took life gladly but not superficially — this was his character. As a poet he was the second among the great Augustan poets, a great master of phrase — the most quoted of all the Roman writers, — a dexterous metrist who fixed the chief lyric Greek metres in Latin in their definitive form, with a style and rhythm in which strength and grace were singularly united, a writer also of satire¹ and familiar epistolary verse as well as a master of the ode and the lyric — that sums up his work.

June or July 1933

Virgil

I don't think Virgil would be classed by you as a psychic poet, and yet what is the source of that "majestic sadness" and that word-magic and vision which make his verse, more than that of almost any other poet, fill one with what Belloc calls the sense of the Unknown Country?

I don't at all agree that Virgil's verse fills one with the sense of the unknown country — he is not in the least a mystic poet, he was too Latin and Roman for that. Majestic sadness, word-magic and vision need not have anything to do with the psychic; the first can come from the higher mind and the noble parts of the vital, the others from almost anywhere. I do not mean to say there was no psychic touch at all anywhere in Virgil. And what is this unknown country? There are plenty of unknown countries (other than the psychic worlds) to which many poets give us some kind of access or sense of their existence behind much more than Virgil. But if when you say verse you mean his rhythm, his surge of word music, that does no doubt come from somewhere else, much more than the thoughts or the words that are carried on the surge.

31 March 1932

¹ Yes, he wrote a series of satires in verse — he ranks among the greatest satirists, but without malice or violence, his satire is good-humoured but often pungent criticism of life and men.

Dante

Somehow Dante's verse as well as his life-story move me so much: it is I think mainly because of Beatrice — his conception of her gives him that excellence and that appeal. Will you please write also a few words on the real truth and significance of his devotion to her?

I am afraid I know very little about it.

*

As regards Beatrice, I have never thought about the matter. Outwardly, it was an idealisation, probably due to a psychic connection of the past which could not fulfil itself in that life. But I do not see how his conception of her gives him his excellence — it was only one element in a very powerful and complex nature.

10 July 1932

Dante and Milton

Would it be correct to call Dante a mystic poet? And how would you compare the inspiration-sources of Dante and Milton? Both the poets have a metaphysical background and a strong religious fervour.

I don't think either can be called mystic poets — Milton not at all. A religious fervour or metaphysical background belongs to the mind and vital, not to a mystic consciousness. Dante writes from the poetic intelligence with a strong intuitive force behind it.

18 October 1936

Marlowe

To me he seems an experiment wherein the occult voices were conceiving an epic drama with the central conception bodied forth a little loosely in semi-dissolving scenes.

What about *Edward II*? Marlowe had already moved towards the well-built drama.

Shakespeare's *Hamlet*

Would you take, as many critics do, Hamlet as typically a mental being? How would you characterise his essential psychology?

Hamlet is a Mind, an intellectual, but like many intellectuals a mind that looks too much all round and sees too many sides to have an effective will for action. He plans ingeniously without coming to anything decisive. And when he does act, it is on a vital impulse. Shakespeare suggests but does not bring out the idealist in him, the man of bright illusions.

Donne

Donne is very much in the limelight these days. How far can we regard the present high estimate of him as justified?

It seems to me that Donne falls between two stools. The Elizabethan ingenuities pass because of the great verve of the life force that makes them attractive; Donne's ingenuities remain intellectual and do not get alive except at times, the vital fire or force is not there to justify them and make them alive and lively. On the other hand he keeps to an Elizabethan or semi-Elizabethan style, but the Elizabethan energy is no longer there — he does not launch himself as Milton did into a new style suitable for the predominant play of the poetic intelligence. Energy and force of a kind he has, but it is twisted, laboured, something that has not found itself. That is why he is not so great a poet as he might have been. He is admired today because the modern mind has become like his — it too is straining for energy and force without having the life-impulse necessary for a true vividness and verve nor that higher vision which would supply another kind of energy — its intellect too is twisted, laboured, not in possession of itself.

28 February 1935

Blake

Blake stands out among the mystic poets of Europe. His occasional obscurity, — he is more often in his best poems lucid and crystal clear, — is due to his writing of things that are not familiar to the physical mind and writing them with fidelity instead of accommodating them to the latter. In reading such writing the inner being has to feel first, then only the mind can catch what is behind.

27 July 1936

*

You said that Blake put down with fidelity whatever came down.

I didn't mean that he never altered. I don't know about that. I meant he did not let his mind disfigure what came by trying to make it intellectual. He transcribed what he saw and heard.

29 July 1936

Wordsworth

I am rather astonished at your finding Wordsworth's realisation, however mental and incomplete, to be abstract and vague or dictated by emotional effervescence. Wordsworth's was hardly an emotional or effervescent character. As for an abstract realisation, it sounds like a round square; I have never had one myself and find it difficult to believe in it. But certainly a realisation in its beginning can be vague and nebulous or it can be less or more vivid. Still, Wordsworth's did not make that impression on me and to him it certainly came as something positive, wonderfully luminous, direct, powerful and determinative. He stayed there and went no farther, did not get to the source, because more was hardly possible in his time and surroundings, at least to a man of his mainly moral and intellectual temper.

In a more deep and spiritual sense a concrete realisation is that which makes the thing realised more real, dynamic, intimately present to the consciousness than any physical thing can be. Such a concrete spiritual realisation whether of the personal

Divine or of the impersonal Brahman or of the Self does not, except in rare cases, come at or anywhere near the beginning of a sadhana, in the first years or for many years: one has to go deep to get it and deeper to keep it. But a vivid and very personal sense of a spirit or infinite in Nature can very well come in a flash and remain strongly behind a man's outlook on the universe.

June 1934

Wordsworth and Keats

It is better to be as simple and direct as possible in one's writing.

One can't make rigid rules like that. Wordsworth is as simple and direct as possible (not always though). Keats aims at word-magic. One can't say Wordsworth is a greater poet than Keats. Whatever style is poetically successful, is admissible.

21 December 1935

Keats and Shelley

As regards Keats and Shelley why attach so much importance to fluency? Keats besides produced enough in his few years of productivity and enough besides of a high excellence to rank him among the greater English poets. What might he not have done if he had lived to fifty? But I don't believe he had any dramatic genius in him. None of these poets had. Shelley's *Cenci* is a remarkable feat of dramatic construction and poetic imagination, but it has no organic life like the work of the Elizabethans or the Greeks or like such dramas as the *Cid* or Racine's tragedies.

7 February 1935

*

With regard to Keats, is it not rather difficult to deny a great poet a possibility when his whole ambition is set towards acquiring it? If we didn't have *Hyperion*, would we have thought it possible for him to strike the epic note? None of the poets round him had the least epical gift.

It can easily be seen from Keats' earlier work. And with ripeness he could do great things in the narrative form. His dramatic attempt is rubbish. All these poets — Shelley, Wordsworth, Keats had the gift which if sublimated leads to epic power — none had the dramatic gift. The ambition to do a thing is not a proof that he can do it — now and here.

8 February 1935

Tennyson

I suppose you know that I have no great consideration for Tennyson. I read him much and admired him when I was young and raw, but even then his *In Memoriam* style seemed to me mediocre and his attempts at thinking insufferably second-rate and dull. These lines [“*An infant crying in the night . . .*”] are better than others, but they are still Tennyson.

12 September 1931

*

Crossing the Bar was considered when I was in England as the *ne plus ultra* of modern lyrical beauty; but that modern is now today's antiquated and out of date. It is so far off from me in memory that it is difficult to say how I would now estimate it. It should have a place, I suppose — but a really high place? Perhaps.

23 January 1935

Tennyson and Wilde

I could never swallow *In Memoriam* even in the days when I admired him — very early days! It has been well described as “sorrow in kid gloves”. I suppose he was sincere, but he failed to make his expression sincere. The thought is perfectly shallow and conventional for the most part and there is no depth or strength of feeling. As for Wilde, there was always a strain of insincerity somewhere, he posed even over his sufferings — but he was a marvellous artist of speech and his imagination and his colouring are superb. In spite of the touch of insincerity,

of overstress, [*De Profundis*] remains one of the greatest things [written in] English prose.²

Browning

My opinion of Browning has been expressed, I think, in *The Future Poetry*. I had a fervent passion for him when I was from seventeen to eighteen, after a previous *penchant* for Tennyson; but like most calf-love both these fancies were of short duration. While I had it, I must have gone through most of his writings (*Fifine at the Fair* and some others excepted) some half-dozen times at least. There is much stuff of thought in him, seldom of great depth, but sometimes unexpected and subtle, a vast range not so much of character as of dramatic human moods, and a considerable power and vigour of rough verse and rugged language. But there is very little of the pure light of poetry in him or of sheer poetic beauty or charm and magic; he gets the highest or finest inspiration only in a line or two here and there. His expression is often not only rough and hasty but inadequate; in his later work he becomes tiresome. He is not one of the greatest *poets*, but he is a great *creator*.
5 December 1931

Baudelaire

It is a pity that Baudelaire could not allow the Spirit in him to find tongue in the highest key possible to his consciousness.

But what on earth did you expect from Baudelaire beyond what he has written. Baudelaire had to be Baudelairean just as Homer had to be Homeric.
7 November 1934

*

Herbert said yesterday that though Baudelaire is a great poet, he is considered an immoral one.

That is not anything against his greatness — only against his

² One corner of the manuscript of this letter has been lost. The words printed within square brackets are conjectural reconstructions. — Ed.

morality. Plenty of great people have been “immoral”.

I had just a glance at Baudelaire's *Flowers of Evil* and I found this:

The moon more indolently dreams tonight
Than a fair woman on her couch at rest,
Caressing, with a hand distraught and light,
Before she sleeps, the contour of her breast.

What a queer imagination, but vulgar or immoral?

What is there vulgar in it or immoral? It is as an indolent distraught gesture that he puts it. How does it offend against morality?

31 January 1937

*

Baudelaire was never vulgar — he was too refined and perfect an artist to be that. He chose the evil of life as his frequent subject and tried to extract poetic beauty out of it, as a painter may deal with a subject that to the ordinary eye may be ugly or repellent and extract artistic beauty from it. But that is not the only stuff of his poetry.

22 July 1936

Mallarmé

Blake is Europe's greatest mystic poet and Mallarmé turned the current of French poetry (one might almost say of all modernist poetry) into a channel of which his poems were the opening.

Mallarmé's works are, in one word, “unintelligible”.

Then why did they have so much influence on the finest French writers and why is modernist poetry trying to burrow into the subliminal in order to catch something even one quarter as fine as his language, images and mystic suggestions?

Is it really true that he wrote with a set determination to make his works unintelligible?

Certainly not. The French language was too clear and limited to express mystic truth, so he had to wrestle with it and turn it this way and that to arrive at a mystic speech. Besides he refused to be satisfied with anything that was a merely intellectual or even at all intellectual rendering of his vision. That is why the surface understanding finds it difficult to follow him. But he is so great that it has laboured to follow him all the same.

14 December 1936

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Please read pages 19–21 of this book.³ The editor speaks of Mallarmé as an acknowledged master and of his great influence on contemporary poetry.

He can't deny such an obvious fact, I suppose — but he would like to.

He says, “A purely intellectual artist, convinced that sentiment was an inferior element of art, Mallarmé never evokes emotion, but only thought about thought; and the thoughts called forth in his mind by the symbol are generally so subtle and elliptical that they find no echo in the mind of the ordinary mortal.” [pp. 19–20] Do you agree?

Certainly not — this man is a mere pedant; his remarks are unintelligent, commonplace, often perfectly imbecile.

He continues: “Obscurity was part of his doctrine and he wrote for the select few only and exclusively . . .” [p. 20]

Rubbish! His doctrine is perfectly tenable and intelligible. It is true that the finest things in art and poetry are appreciated only by the few and he chose therefore not to sacrifice the truth of his mystic (impressionist, symbolist) expression in order to be easily understood by the multitude, including this professor.

³ L. E. Kastner, ed., *A Book of French Verse: From Marot to Mallarmé* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1936).

“Another cause of his obscurity is that he chose his words and phrases for their evocative value alone, and here again the verbal sonorities suggested by the tortuous trend of his mind make no appeal except to the initiated.” [p. 20] (I suppose here he means what you meant about the limitedness of the French language?)

Not only that — his will to arrive at a true and deep, instead of a superficial and intellectual language. I gave two reasons for Mallarmé’s unusual style and not this one of the limitedness of the French language only.

“His life-long endeavour to achieve an impossible ideal accounts for his sterility (he has left some sixty poems only, most of them quite short) and the darkness of his later work, though he did write, before he had fallen a victim to his own theories, a few poems of great beauty and perfectly intelligible.” [p. 20]

60 poems if they have beauty are as good as 600. It is not the mass of the poet’s work that determines his greatness. Gray and Catullus wrote little; we have only seven plays of Sophocles and seven of Aeschylus (though they wrote more), but these seven put them still in the front rank of poets.

He says that “Mallarmé’s verse is acquired and intricate” i.e. a thing not of spontaneity, but of intellectualisation. Saying that Verlaine is an inspired poet, he seems to imply the contrary about Mallarmé.

If these two magnificent poems (the last two)⁴ are not inspired, then there is no such thing as inspiration. It is rubbish to say of a man who refused to limit himself by intellectual expression, that he was an intellectual artist. Symbolism, impressionism go beyond intellect to pure sight — and Mallarmé was the creator of symbolism.

⁴ “*Le vierge, le vivace et le bel aujourd’hui*” (see page 404 below), and *Les fleurs*. — Ed.

Nolini says that in poetry simplicity leads to beauty. Applied to Mallarmé, would this mean that due to his acrobatics with words, his poems are not beautiful.

Only Nolini can say what he meant, but to refuse beauty to Mallarmé's poetry would be itself an acrobacy of the intellect. For what then is beauty? Simplicity and beauty are not convertible terms, there can be a difficult beauty. What about Aeschylus then? or Blake?

“According to Mallarmé's own definition, the poet's mission is either ‘to evoke gradually an object in order to suggest a mood, or, inversely, to choose an object as a symbol and disengage from it a mood by a series of decipherments’.” [p. 19]

It is a very good description of the impressionist method in literature. Verlaine and others do the same, even if they do not hold the theory.

I do not understand what Mallarmé means here, but it seems different from what Housman says, that the poet's mission is to transfuse emotion — of which Mallarmé had none!

I do not know what you mean by emotion. If you mean the surface vital joy and grief of outer life, these poems of Mallarmé do not contain it. But if emotion can include also the deeper spiritual or inner feeling which does not weep or shout, then they are here in these two poems. The Swan [*in* “*Le vierge . . .*”] is to my understanding not merely the poet who has not sung in the higher spaces of the consciousness, which is already a fine idea, but the soul that has not risen there and found its higher expression, said poet being, if Mallarmé thought of that specially, only a signal instance of this spiritual frustration. There can be no more powerful, moving and formidable expression of this spiritual frustration, this chilled and sterile greatness, than the image of the frozen lake and the imprisoned Swan as developed by Mallarmé.

I do not say that the spiritual or the occult cannot be given an easier expression or that if one can arrive at that without

minimising the inner significance, it is not perhaps the greatest achievement. (That is, I suppose, Nolini's contention.) But there is room for more than one kind of spiritual or mystic poetry. One has to avoid mere mistiness or vagueness, one has to be true, vivid, profound in one's images; but, that given, I feel free to write either as in *Nirvana* or *Transformation*, giving a clear mental indication along with the image or I can suppress the mental indication and give the image only with the content suggested in the language but not expressed so that even those can superficially understand who are unable to read behind the mental idea — that is what I have done in *The Bird of Fire*. It seems to me that both methods are legitimate.

16 December 1936

Heredia and Swinburne

I don't think Heredia and Swinburne go very well together; one is a passionate and chaotic imperfection and the other is a passionless perfection, but it is a passion of the music of words only and a perfection of word and rhythm only; for they resemble each other only in one thing, an excess of the word over the substance.

19 August 1932

Michael Madhusudan Dutt

I had once the regret that the line of possibility opened out by Michael [Madhusudan Dutt] was not carried any farther in Bengali poetry; but after all it may turn out that nothing has been lost by the apparent interruption. Magnificent as are the power and swing of his language and rhythm, there was a default of richness and thought-matter, and a development in which subtlety, fineness and richness of thought and feeling could learn to find a consummate expression was very much needed. More mastery of colour, form and design was a necessity as well as more depth and wealth in the thought-substance — and this has now been achieved and, if added to the *ojas*, can fulfil what Madhusudan left only half done.

14 June 1932

Rabindranath Tagore

Of course Tagore's worshippers will go for Prabodh Sen, what did you expect? Literary nature (artistic generally, or at least very often) is human nature at its most susceptible — *genus irritabile vatum*. And besides where is the joy of literature if you cannot use your skill of words in pummelling some opposite faction's nose? Man is a reasoning animal (perhaps), but a belligerent reasoning animal and must fight with words if he cannot do it with fists, swords, guns, or poison gas. All the more, I applaud your decision not to pursue farther the ত্রৈরথ.

24 November 1932

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I am afraid his powers are very much on the wane, but let us not whisper it too loud. The setting of a great genius and one that, after all, created on a very high level for a very long time!

10 October 1933

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Tagore, I think, is substantially right in dubbing his spiritual poems imaginative rather than spiritual.

Well, yes, he mentalises, aestheticises, sentimentalises the things of the spirit — but I can't say that I have ever found the expression of a concrete spiritual realisation in his poetry — though ideas, emotions, ideal dreamings in plenty. That is something, but —

23 March 1934

*

Tagore has been a wayfarer towards the same goal as ours in his own way — that is the main thing, the exact stage of advance and putting of the steps are minor matters. His exact position as a poet or a prophet or anything else will be assigned by posterity and we need not be in haste to anticipate the final verdict. The immediate verdict after his departure or soon after it may very well be a rough one, — for this is a generation that seems to take a delight in trampling with an almost Nazi rudeness on

the bodies of the Ancestors, especially the immediate ancestors. I have read with an interested surprise that Napoleon was only a bustling and self-important nincompoop all whose great achievements were done by others, that Shakespeare was “no great things” and that most other great men were by no means so great as the stupid respect and reverence of past ignorant ages made them out to be! What chance has then Tagore? But these injustices of the moment do not endure — in the end a wise and fair estimate is formed and survives the changes of time.

Tagore, of course, belonged to an age which had faith in its ideas and whose very denials were creative affirmations. That makes an immense difference. Your strictures on his later development may or may not be correct, but this mixture even was the note of the day and it expressed a tangible hope of a fusion into something new and true — therefore it could create. Now all that idealism has been smashed to pieces by the immense adverse Event and everybody is busy exposing its weakness, but nobody knows what to put in its place. A mixture of scepticism and slogans, “Heil-Hitler” and the Fascist salute and Five-Year Plan and the beating of everybody into one amorphous shape, a disabused denial of all ideals on one side and on the other a blind shut-my-eyes and shut-everybody’s-eyes plunge into the bog in the hope of finding some firm foundation there, will not carry us very far. And what else is there? Until new spiritual values are discovered, no great enduring creation is possible.

24 March 1934

Comments on Some Examples of Western Poetry (up to 1900)

Catullus

Quaenam te mala mens, miselle Ravide,
agit praecipitem in meos iambos?
quis deus tibi non bene advocatus
vecordem parat excitare rixam?
an ut pervenias in ora vulgi?
quid vis? qualubet esse notus optas?
eris, quandoquidem meos amores
cum longa voluisti amare poena.

Unless *meos amores* is purposely vague, at least two objects of Catullus's affections must be in question? Would you say that this piece is in a vein of good-humoured banter?

I do not think *meos amores* necessarily alludes to more than one love affair. I think it is more than good-humoured banter; there seems to me to be a note of careless scorn in it, but no serious anger. I suppose with Catullus one cannot take either his self-depreciation or his self-assertion as a poet very seriously — like most poets of his power he must have been aware of his genius, but expressed it half humourously as one would expect from a well-bred man of the world. I don't know either about his scurrilous attacks — literary invective perhaps, but is there not a little more to it than that? He puts the lash with something more than a whimsical violence in many places — the verses he wrote after the rupture leave a terrible mark. 11 January 1937

Disertissime Romuli nepotum,
 quot sunt quotque fuere, Marce Tulli,
 quotque post aliis erunt in annis,
 gratias tibi maximas Catullus
 agit pessimus omnium poeta,
 tanto pessimus omnium poeta,
 quanto tu optimus omnium patronus.

Would you not say that Catullus was bound to have looked upon Cicero the man as a pompous ass, however sincerely he may have admired Cicero the man of letters?

I am not sure how his contemporaries regarded Cicero — were they not hypnotised by his eloquence, scholarship, literary versatility, conversational and epistolatory powers, overflowing vitality? One would think that men like Catullus and Caesar would see through him, though. There is certainly a note that sounds very like irony in the last three lines, but it is very subtle and others than Cicero may have regarded it as a graceful eulogy enhanced by the assumption of extreme humility (though only a courteous assumption) in the comparison between the *poeta* and the *patronus*.

Virgil, Shakespeare, Hugo

I think what Belloc meant in crediting Virgil with the power to give us a sense of the Unknown Country [*see page 373*] was that Virgil specialises in a kind of wistful vision of things across great distances in space or time, which renders them dream-like, gives them an air of ideality. He mentions as an instance the passage (perhaps in the sixth book of the Aeneid) where the swimmer sees all Italy from the top of a wave

prospexsi Italiam summa sublimis ab unda.

I dare say —

Sternitur infelix alieno volnere caelumque
 aspicit et dulcis moriens reminiscitur Argos

as well as

tendebantque manus ripae ulterioris amore.

belong to the same category. To an ordinary Roman Catholic mind like Belloc's, which is not conscious of the subtle hierarchy of unseen worlds, whatever is vaguely or remotely appealing — in short, beautifully misty — is mystical, and “revelatory” of the native land of the soul. Add to this that Virgil's rhythm is exquisitely euphonious, and it is no wonder Belloc should feel as if the very harps of heaven were echoed by the Mantuan.

He couples Shakespeare with Virgil as a master of (to put it in a phrase of Arjava's) “earth-transforming gramarye”. The quotations he gives from Shakespeare struck me as rather peculiar in the context: I don't exactly remember them but something in the style of “Night's tapers are burnt out and jocund day” etc. seems to give him a wonderful flash of the Unknown Country! He also alludes to the four magical lines of Keats about Ruth “amid the alien corn” and Victor Hugo's at-least-for-once truly delicate, unrheterical passage on the same theme in *La légende des siècles*. I wonder if you recollect the passage. Its last two stanzas are especially enchanting:

Tout reposait dans Ur et dans Jérimadeth;
 Les astres émaillaient le ciel profond et sombre;
 Le croissant fin et clair parmi ces fleurs de l'ombre
 Brillait à l'occident, et Ruth se demandait,

 Immobile, ouvrant l'oeil à moitié sous ses voiles,
 Quel dieu, quel moissonneur de l'éternel été,
 Avait, en s'en allant, négligemment jeté
 Cette faucille d'or dans le champ des étoiles.

What do you think of them?

If that is Belloc's idea of the mystic, I can't put much value on his Roman Catholic mind! Shakespeare's line and Hugo's also are good poetry and may be very enchanting, as you say, but there is nothing in the least deep or mystic about them. Night's tapers are the usual poetic metaphor, Hugo's *moissonneur* and *faucille d'or* is an ingenious fancy — there is nothing true behind it, not the least shadow of a mystical experience. The lines quoted from Virgil are exceedingly moving and poetic, but it is pathos

of the life planes, not anything more — Virgil would have stared if he had been told that his *ripae ulterioris* was revelatory of the native land of the soul. These sentimental modern intellectuals are terrible: they will read anything into anything; that is because they have no touch on the Truth, so they make up for it by a gambolling fancy. 1 April 1932

Shakespeare

From what plane are the substance and rhythm of this from Shakespeare? —

the prophetic soul

Of the wide world, dreaming on things to come.

Are they really from his usual plane — the vital?

The origin of the inspiration may be from anywhere, but in Shakespeare it always comes through the vital and strongly coloured by it as in some others it comes through the poetic intelligence. What play or poem is this from? I don't remember it. It sounds almost overmental in origin. 19 February 1935

*

The phrase occurs in Sonnet CVII, beginning

Not mine own fears, nor the prophetic soul
Of the wide world, dreaming on things to come,
Can yet the lease of my true love control,
Supposed as forfeit to a confined doom.

What I should like to know is whether the *rhythm* of the words I have picked out is a fusion of the overmental and the vital; or is only the substance from the overmind?

There is something from the Above in the rhythm also, but it is rather covered up by the more ordinary rhythm of the first half line and the two lines that follow. It is curious that this line and a half should have come in as if by accident and have nothing really to do with the restricted subject of the rest. 19 February 1935

*

Is there something definitely in the rhythm or language of a line of poetry which would prove it to be from a certain plane? From what you wrote some days back [*see the previous page*] I gather that the quotation from Shakespeare I sent has an Overmind movement as well as substance coming strongly coloured by the vital. But where and in what lies the vital colour which makes it the highest Shakespearean and not, say, the highest Wordsworthian — the line inspired by Newton?

It is a question of feeling, not of intellectual understanding; to distinguish the vital or psychic or any other element one must have the feeling for its presence — an intellectual definition is of little value. Take these lines from Shakespeare —

Eternity was in our lips and eyes,
Bliss in our brows' bent; none our parts so poor
But was a race of heaven —

they are plainly vital in their excited thrill, for only the vital can speak with that thrill and pulse of passion — the rhythm also has the vital undulation and surge so common in Shakespeare.

I have given an instance elsewhere of Shakespeare's thought-utterance which is really vital, not intellectual —

Life is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.

Here is a "thought", a judgment on life, and its origin would naturally be assigned to the intellect, but as a matter of fact it is a throw-up from Macbeth's vital being, an emotional or sensational, not an intellectual judgment and its whole turn and rhythm are strongly vital in their vibration and texture. But yet in this passage there is a greater power that has rushed down from above and taken up the vital surge into its movement — so much so that if it had been a spiritual experience of which the poet was speaking, we could at once have detected an action of the illumined spiritual Mind taking up the vital love and soaring into spiritual greatness.

Or take the quotation —

the prophetic soul
Of the wide world dreaming on things to come.

Here both style and language come ultimately from a higher above-mind level, but still it is quite different from Wordsworth's line on Newton which also has altogether an above-head vision and utterance — and the difference comes because the vision of the “dreaming soul” is felt through the vital mind and heart before it finds expression; in the lines of Wordsworth the vision of the lone voyager through strange seas of thought has not that peculiar thrill but rather remains in an exaltation of light between the mind and some vastness above it. It is this constant vitality, this magnificent vital surge in Shakespeare's language which makes it a sovereign expression, but of life and, so far as it is also a voice of mind or knowledge, not of pure intellectual thought but of life-mind and of life-knowledge.

27 February 1935

*

Our revels now are ended. These our actors,
As I foretold you, were all spirits, and
Are melted into air, into thin air:
And, like the baseless fabric of this vision,
The cloud-capp'd towers, the gorgeous palaces,
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,
Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve,
And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,
Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff
As dreams are made on; and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep.

The meaning, on the surface, is that for each of us life will pass away as if it were a dream and what will remain is the sleep of death, an undetailed everlasting rest. . . . But from the fourth line onward the language and the rhythm serve to evoke by a certain large and deep suggestiveness an intuition of some transcendental God-self . . . We are reminded of the Upanishad's description of the mystic trance in which the whole world fades like an illusion and the individual soul enters the supreme

Spirit's unfeatured ecstasy of repose. Shakespeare's intuition is not pure Upanishad, the supreme Spirit is not clearly felt and whatever profundity is there is vague and unintentional; still, a looming mystic light does appear, stay a little, find a suggestive contour before receding and falling away to a music sublimely defunctive.

I don't think Shakespeare had any such idea in his mind. What he is dwelling on is the insubstantiality of the world and of human existence. "*We* are such stuff" does not point to any God-self. "Dream" and "sleep" would properly imply Somebody who dreams and sleeps, but the two words are merely metaphors. Shakespeare was not an intellectual or philosophic thinker nor a mystic one. All that you can say is that there comes out here an impression or intimation of the illusion of Maya, the dream-character of life but without any vision or intuition of what is behind the dream and the illusion. There is nothing in the passage that even hints vaguely the sense of something abiding — all is insubstantial, "into air, into thin air", "baseless fabric", "insubstantial pageant", "*we* are such stuff as dreams are made on". "Stuff" points to some inert material rather than a spirit dreamer or sleeper. Of course one can always read things into it for one's own pleasure, but —

8 March 1935

*

I admit that Shakespeare was not a philosophic or mystic thinker. . . . What, however, surprises me is your saying that there is not the vaguest hint of something abiding. In the magic performance which Prospero gave to Ferdinand and Miranda . . . Prospero reminded them of what he had said before — namely, that "these our actors . . . were all spirits". They melt into thin air but do not disappear from existence, from conscious being of some character however unearthly: they just become invisible and what disappears is the visible pageant produced by them, a seemingly material construction which yet was a mere phantom. From this seeming, Prospero catches the suggestion that all that looks material is like a phantom, a dream, which must vanish, leaving no trace. . . .

One can read anything into anything. But Shakespeare says nothing about the material world or there being a base somewhere else or of our being projected into a dream. He says “we *are* such stuff.” The spirits vanish into air, into thin air, as Shakespeare emphasises by repetition, which means to any plain interpretation that they too are unreal, only dream-stuff; he does not say that they disappear from view but are there behind all the time. The whole stress is on the unreality and insubstantiality of existence, whether of the pageant or of the spirits or of ourselves — there is no stress anywhere, no mention or hint of an eternal spiritual existence. Shakespeare’s idea here as everywhere is the expression of a mood of the vital mind, it is not a reasoned philosophical conclusion. However if you like to argue that, logically, this or that is the true philosophical consequence of what Shakespeare says and that therefore the Daemon who inspired him must have meant that, I have no objection. I was simply interpreting the passage as Shakespeare’s transcribing mind has put it. 9 March 1934

*

Just a word more about that passage. If it is taken *in vacuo*, there is no internal justification for my idea which turns on the survival of the spirits after the pageant has faded. But almost immediately after the stage indication: “. . . *to a strange, hollow and confused noise, they heavily vanish*”, occurs this aside on the part of Prospero: “(*To the Spirits*) Well done; avoid; no more.” The quoted passage follows a little later. Then again Prospero says after Ferdinand and Miranda are gone: “Come with a thought: — I thank you: — Ariel, come.” Thereupon Ariel enters:

ARIEL: Thy thoughts I cleave to. What’s thy pleasure?
 PROSPERO: Spirit,
 We must prepare to meet with Caliban.

What do you make of all this? And when Ariel reports how he has lured Prospero’s enemies into a “foul lake”, Prospero commends him:

This was well done, my bird.

Thy shape invisible retain thou still.

Still later, comes another stage-direction: “*A noise of hunters heard. Enter divers Spirits, in shape of dogs and hounds . . . ; Prospero and Ariel setting them on.*” Even if this is taken to refer to Spirits other than those who produce that masque, the previous quotations are sufficient to prove that only the visible shapes and formations vanished — the entities themselves remained behind all the time.

I don't see what all that has to do with the meaning of the passage in question which plainly insists that nothing endures. Obviously Ariel had an invisible shape — invisible to human eyes, but the point of the passage is that all shapes and substances and beings disappear into nothingness. We are concerned with Prospero's meaning, not with what actually happened to the spirits or for that matter to the pageant which we might conceive also of having an invisible source or material. He uses the total disappearance of the pageant and the spirits as a base for the idea that all existence is an illusion — it is the idea of the illusion that he enforces. If he had wanted to say, “we disappear, all disappears to view but the reality of us and of all things persists in a greater immaterial reality”, he would surely have said so or at least not left it to be inferred or reasoned out by you in the twentieth century. I repeat however that this is my view of Shakespeare's meaning and does not affect any possibility of reading into it something that Shakespeare's outer mind did not receive or else did not express.

10 March 1935

Milton

And they bowed down to the Gods of their wives . . . ¹

Burnt after them to the bottomless pit . . .

Certainly, Milton in the passages you quote had a rhythmical effect in mind; he was much too careful and conscientious a

¹ This is apparently a misquotation of Milton's line: “*And made him bow, to the gods of his wives*”. — Ed.

metrist and much too consummate a master of rhythm to do anything carelessly or without good reason. If he found his inspiration stumbling or becoming slipshod in its rhythmical effects, he would have corrected it. 22 April 1947

Coleridge

May I say a word about the four lines of Coleridge which you bash in your essay? —

He prayeth best who loveth best,
All things both great and small:
For the dear God, who loveth us,
He made and loveth all.

The sentimentalism of the “dear God” is obviously extra child-like and sounds childish even. If it had been written by Coleridge as his own contribution to thought or his personal feeling described in its native language it would have ranked him very low. But Coleridge was a great metaphysician or at any rate an acute and wide-winged thinker, not a sentimental prattling poet of the third order. Mark that the idea in the lines is not essentially poor; otherwise expressed it could rank among great thoughts and stand as the basis of a philosophy and ethics founded on bhakti. There are one or two lines of the Gita which are based on a similar thought, though from the Vedantic, not the dualist point of view. But throughout the *Ancient Mariner* Coleridge is looking at things from the point of view and the state of mind of the most simple and childlike personality possible, the Ancient Mariner who feels and thinks only with the barest ideas and the most elementary and primitive emotions. The lines he writes here record the feeling which such a mind and heart would draw from what he had gone through. Are they not then perfectly in place and just in the right tone for such a purpose? You may say that it lowers the tone of the poem. I don't know — the tone of the poem is deliberately intended to be that of an unsophisticated ballad simplicity and ballad mentality — it is not the ideas but the extraordinary beauty of rhythm and vividness of vision and

fidelity to a certain mystic childlike key that makes it such a wonderful and perfect poem. This is of course only a point of view; but it came to me several times as an answer that could be made to your criticism, so I put it on paper. 4 February 1935

*

In Shelley's *Skylark* my heart does not easily melt towards one simile —

Like a high-born maiden
 In a palace-tower,
 Soothing her love-laden
 Soul in secret hour
 With music sweet as love, which overflows her bower.

Sometimes I am inclined even to feel this is an atrocity. Then I wonder whether the sentimental stuff shouldn't be cut out and replaced by something deeper although in Shelley's style as much as possible — something like:

Like a child who wanders
 In an ancient wood
 Where the strange glow squanders
 All its secret mood
 Upon her lilting soul lost in that solitude.

The attempt to rewrite Shelley better than Shelley himself is a rash and hopeless endeavour. Your proposed stanza is twentieth century mysticism quite out of place in the *Skylark* and has not the simple felicity and magic and music of Shelley's verse. I fail to see why the high-born maiden is an atrocity — it expresses the romantic attitude towards love which was sentimental and emotional, attempting to lift it out of the coarseness of life into a mental-vital idealism which was an attempt to resuscitate the attitude of chivalry and the troubadours. Romantic and unreal, if you like, but not atrocious. 8 November 1934

*

I objected to your criticisms and cutting up of the *Skylark*, because the whole of it seems to me to proceed from a wrong

starting point altogether. You seem to start with the assumption that the poem ought to be an intellectual whole with coherent parts, a logical structure. Your contention is that the main idea, consistent in other stanzas, is of a spiritual something, an incorporeal joy etc., and the stanzas you condemn as not consistent with the idea and tone of the rest come from an inferior less spiritual inspiration and lower the level of the poem. Accordingly you propose to cut out these excrescences and insert some manipulations which would make the amended whole the perfect poem the *Skylark* should be.

I do not deny that from that standpoint your deductions are logical. The poem arranged as you want it, without these too earthly verses, would be a single ethereal impalpable shining tissue. It would be more subtly ethereal (not more spiritual), far from the earth, winging between the rainbow and the lightnings and ignorant of anything less brilliant and unearthly. Only it would be Shelley with something of himself left out, the *Skylark* incomplete with part of its fullness of tone vanished and a big hole in the middle — a beautiful poem, but no longer so worthy of its place among the few supreme English lyrics. That at least is what I feel. One thing more — even if these stanzas are an imperfection, I do not think it wise to meddle with them either by elimination or re-doing. To interfere with the imperfections of the great poets of the past is a hazardous business — their imperfections as well as their perfections are part of themselves. Imagine a drama of Shakespeare with all the blots scratched out and all the scoriae done over and smoothed to a perfect polish! It would be Shakespeare no longer. And this is Shelley whose strange and sweet and luminous magic of lyrical rhythm and language, when he is at his best and here he is at his best, in the impugned stanzas as well as in the others, is his own secret and no other shall ever recover it. To meddle here is inevitably to mar. Things as great or greater in another kind may be done, but not with this unique and inimitable note. To omit, to change words or lines, to modify rhythms seems to me inadmissible.²

² The result is bound to be like Landor's rewriting of Milton — very good Landor but very bad Milton.

I do not altogether appreciate your references to Mrs. Shelley and the firefly and your cynical and sarcastic picture of the high-born maiden as she appears to you — all that has nothing to do with Shelley's poetic conception which is alone relevant to the matter. I could draw a realistic picture of the poet "singing hymns unbidden" and unwanted and asking occasionally as he wrote whether dinner was ready — with hopes, but also with fears that he might not get it, his butcher's bill being unpaid for a long time. Or I might cavil scientifically about the nature of sunsets and sunrise and rainbow drops and ask what was the use of all this romantic flummery when there are real things to write about. Or I might quote the critic — I don't remember who he was — who said that Shelley certainly did not believe that the skylark was a spirit and not a bird and so the whole conception of the poem is false, insincere, ethereal humbug and therefore not true poetry because poetry must be sincere. Such points of view are irrelevant. Shelley is not concerned with the real life of the high-born maiden or the poet any more than with the ornithology of the skylark or with other material things. His glow-worm is something more than a material glow-worm. He is concerned with the soul love-laden, with the dreams of the poet, with the soul of beauty behind the glow-worm's light and the colour and fragrance of the rose. It is that he is feeling and it is linked in his vision with the essential something he has felt behind the song of the skylark. And because he so felt it he was not only entitled but bound to make place for it in his inspired lyrical theme.

I may observe in passing that the ethereal and impalpable are not more spiritual than the tangible and the concrete — they may seem more easily subtle and ideal to the idealising and abstracting mind, but that is a different affair. One can feel the spiritual through the embodied and concrete as well as through its opposite. But Shelley was not a spiritual poet and the *Skylark* is not a spiritual lyric. Shelley looked, it is true, always towards a light, a beauty, a truth behind the appearance of things, but he never got through the idealising mind to the spiritual experience. What he did get was something of the purest emotional or aesthetic feeling or purest subtle mind-

touch of an essence behind the appearance, an essence of ideal light, truth or beauty. It is that he expresses with a strange aerial magic or a curious supersensuously sensuous intensity in his finest lyrics. It is that we must seek in the *Skylark* and, if we find it, we have no right to claim something else. It is there all through and in abundance — it is its perfection that creates the sustained perfection of the poem. There is not and there ought not to be an intellectual sequence, a linked argument, a logical structure. It is a sequence of feeling and of ideal perceptions with an occult logic of their own that sustains the lyric and makes it a faultless whole. In this sequence the verses you condemn have an indefeasible right of place. Shelley was not only a poet of other worlds, of *Epipsychidion* and of *The Witch of Atlas*; he was passionately interested in bringing the light, beauty and truth of the ideal super-world from which he came into the earth life — he tried to find it there wherever he could, he tried to infuse it wherever he missed it. The mental, the vital, the physical cannot be left out of the whole he saw in order to yield place only to the ethereal and impalpable. As he heard the skylark and felt the subtle essence of light and beauty in its song, he felt too the call of the same essence of light and beauty elsewhere and it is the things behind which he felt that he compares to the hymn of the skylark — the essence of ideal light and beauty behind things mental, the poet and his hymn, behind things vital, the soul of romantic love, behind things physical, the light of the glow-worm, the passionate intensity of the perfume of the rose. I cannot see an ordinary glow-worm in the lines of Shelley's stanza — it is a light from beyond finding expression in that glimmer and illumining the dell of dew and the secrecy of flowers and grass, that is there. This illumination of the earthly mind, vital, physical with his super-world light is a main part of Shelley; excise that and the whole of Shelley is no longer there, there is only the ineffectual angel beating his wings in the void; excise it from the *Skylark* and the true whole of the *Skylark* is no longer there.

18 November 1934

Swinburne

I want to make a short series of notes according to some responses to great poetry — and what I am sending tonight is meant to be the opening section:

No better example, perhaps, of a certain style of great poetry can be produced than these lines from Swinburne:

Take thy limbs living, and new-mould with these
A lyre of many faultless agonies.

Considered thus separately, they have a suggestion richer than in their context, and convey on their passionate music a stimulus towards an idealistic discipline and high ascetic transport. . . .

Does it all sound a stale old story?

It is not new — but it is difficult to say anything new in these matters. It is well written. I don't know though that there is any "aching idealism" or "high ascetic transport" in these lines of Swinburne. An acceptance of suffering for oneself may have it — an infliction of suffering from one's own perversely passionate pleasure on another can hardly have it. 23 December 1934

*

I don't understand how it is possible to take objection to my reading, for the vision is certainly of the acceptance of the suffering inflicted.

I cannot accept this "certainly". I do not see that any acceptance of the suffering is implied, still less a rapturous acceptance. If I remember right, the supposed recipient of the pain is made to object that it is cruel — she is not supposed to reply "Oh how exquisite!" 24 December 1934

*

Don't you think the idea of the infliction of suffering must be kept apart from the point made by you in your first note that the infliction was for a perversely passionate pleasure — and also from the question whether in Swinburne's poetry it

is objected to by the recipient or not, since the lines are now
taken by themselves?

Why should the lines be taken by themselves as if they were not a part of Swinburne's poem? I cannot see any idealistic discipline or high ascetic transport in a sadistic desire however poetically expressed. An erotic perversity is neither ideal nor a discipline.

25 December 1934

*

If I took the lines *in vacuo* and stopped there, you might object, but I have not done that in my notes. What I have done, after saying that the lines are great poetry, is to catch their suggestion, first supposing one had come across them by themselves and did not know their original context, and, then, taking them in their proper context. If one saw them separately, would not one be inclined to read in them the suggestion I have submitted, owing to the image-word "lyre" and the adjective "faultless" applied to "agonies"? What harm can there be in using such an illustrative device?

I am unable to see what there is in the lines, whether taken separately or in the context or both that is anything more than what Swinburne meant to put it, a rhapsodic glorification and *enthusiasmos* of sadistic passion — just as the other passage³ is a magnificent outburst of the magnified ego. But one is no more ascetic or ideal or a discipline than the other — unless you mean the ideal of sadistic passion or the ideal of the magnified ego. The poetry is superb, but I do not see what the passion in them transfigures or into what it is transfigured — it is sublimated into its own extreme expression or figure, if you like — but that is all. To make somebody else's body into a "lyre"

³ *Yea, thou shalt be forgotten like spilt wine,
Except these kisses of my lips on thine
Brand them with immortality; . . .
But in the light and laughter, in the moan
And music, and in grasp of lip and hand
And shudder of water that makes felt on land
The immeasurable tremour of all the sea,
Memories shall mix and metaphor of me.*

of agonies does not transfigure the fact itself, the erotic side on which it expresses. Or if it does, what is this something high of which it is a glimmer? When one meets one's own suffering with fortitude, there is an ascetic discipline, an ideal of self-mastery — but to meet somebody else's pain caused by oneself with an ecstasy of pleasure in it is not quite the same thing. Or if one can turn one's own pain into a sort of ecstasy of Ananda, not of perverse masochistic pleasure, so that pain disappears from one's existence, then that is some kind of transfiguration — but can the same be said of turning somebody else's agony into a subject for one's own rapture? It may be a transfiguration, but a very Asuric transfiguration.

26 December 1934

*

Your explanation has convinced me that the lines in their context had better be considered without any idealising ingenuity; so I shall recast that portion and send it to you.

It does not seem to me legitimate to turn the meaning of lines in a poem upside down like that by lopping the syntax and giving it a twist which turns into something else — *une autre histoire*. But even so, it only turns an acme of perverse sadism into an acme of perverse masochism. To make one's body a lyre of agonies, faultless (?) or not — I don't know quite what is meant by a faultless agony — is not an ascetic discipline or a spiritual sacrifice. One has to bear pain with fortitude when it comes, but to inflict it wantonly on oneself is not spiritual. I am aware of the austerities of the Tapaswis of old, but these, condemned by the Gita as Asuric tapasya, had at least for their motive a mastery over the physical consciousness and might therefore be called a discipline, but to torture oneself or allow oneself to be tortured either for the joy of it or the beauty of it was not their idea — be it either the victim's joy or the torturer's; for I don't quite know to whom is the fierce sacrifice here supposed to be dedicated. An extremity of pain has nothing in it that is ideal or spiritual.

27 December 1934

Mallarmé

Le vierge, le vivace et le bel aujourd'hui
 Va-t-il nous déchirer avec un coup d'aile ivre
 Ce lac dur oublié que hante sous le givre
 Le transparent glacier des vols qui n'ont pas fui!

Un cygne d'autrefois se souvient que c'est lui
 Magnifique mais qui sans espoir se délivre
 Pour n'avoir pas chanté la région où vivre
 Quand du stérile hiver a resplendi l'ennui.

Tout son col secouera cette blanche agonie
 Par l'espace infligé à l'oiseau qui le nie,
 Mais non l'horreur du sol où le plumage est pris.

Fantôme qu'à ce lieu son pur éclat assigne,
 Il s'immobilise au songe froid de mépris
 Que vêt parmi l'exil inutile le Cygne.

I tried to break this nut of Mallarmé's . . . but, *pardi*, it was a hard nut. Really what a tortuous trend and how he has turned the images! "The transparent glacier of flights haunting the hard lake under the frost"! The frost or snow has become the glacier (icefield) and the icefield composes the lake — that's what I imaged.

How does hoar-frost or rime become the glacier? "Givre" is not the same as "glace" — it is not ice, but a covering of hoar-frost such as you see on the trees etc., the congealed moisture of the air — that is the "blanche agonie" which has come down from the insulted Space on the swan and on the lake. He can shake off that but the glacier holds him; he can no more rise into the skies, caught in the frozen cold mass of the failures of the soul that refused to fly upward and escape.

What do you think of the sonnet?

One of the finest sonnets I have ever read.

Magnificent line, by the way, "*Le transparent glacier des vols qui n'ont pas fui!*" This idea of the denied flights (impris-

oned powers) of the soul that have frozen into a glacier seems to me as powerful as it is violent. Of course in French such expressions were quite new — in some other languages they were already possible. You will find lots of kindred things in the most modern poetry which specialises in violent revelatory (or at least would-be revelatory) images. You disapprove? Well, one may do so, — classical taste does; but I find myself obliged here to admire.

16 December 1936

Heredia

Comme un vol de gerfauts hors du charnier natal,
Fatigués de porter leurs misères hautaines,
De Palos de Moguer, routiers et capitaines
Partaient, ivres d'un rêve héroïque et brutal.

Ils allaient conquérir le fabuleux métal
Que Cipango mûrit dans ses mines lointaines,
Et les vents alizés inclinaient leurs antennes
Aux bords mystérieux du monde Occidental.

Chaque soir, espérant des lendemains épiques,
L'azur phosphorescent de la mer des Tropiques
Enchantait leur sommeil d'un mirage doré;

Ou penchés à l'avant des blanches caravelles,
Ils regardaient monter en un ciel ignoré
Du fond de l'Océan des étoiles nouvelles.

Many Frenchmen regard Heredia's "Les Conquérants" as the eighth wonder of the world. Flecker says of Heredia that he was "the most perfect poet that ever lived (Horace not in it)".

I cannot say that I find Heredia's sonnet to be either an eighth wonder or any wonder. Heredia was a careful workman in word and rhythm and from that point of view the sonnet is faultless. If that is all that is needed for perfection, it is perfect. But otherwise, except for the image in the first two lines and the vigour of the fourth, I find it empty: Horace, at least, was seldom that. These extravagant estimates of minor poets are only the self-

assertive challenge put forth by a personal preference they have.

24 June 1932

Samain and Flecker

I am sending you two poems — one is Albert Samain's famous *Pannyre aux talons d'or* and the other is Flecker's much-praised translation of it. I shall be very much interested in your comparison of the two. Here is Samain:

Dans la salle en rumeur un silence a passé...
 Pannyre aux talons d'or s'avance pour danser.
 Un voile aux mille plis la cache tout entière.
 D'un long trille d'argent la flûte la première,
 L'invite; elle s'élançe, entre-croise ses pas,
 Et, du lent mouvement imprimé par ses bras,
 Donne un rythme bizarre à l'étoffe nombreuse,
 Qui s'élargit, ondule, et se gonfle et se creuse,
 Et se déploie enfin en large tourbillon...
 Et Pannyre devient fleur, flamme, papillon!
 Tous se taisent; les yeux la suivent en extase.
 Peu à peu la fureur de la danse l'embrase.
 Elle tourne toujours; vite! plus vite encor!
 La flamme éperdument vacille aux flambeaux d'or!...
 Puis, brusque, elle s'arrête au milieu de la salle;
 Et le voile qui tourne autour d'elle en spirale,
 Suspendu dans sa course, apaise ses longs plis,
 Et, se collant aux seins aigus, aux flancs polis,
 Comme au travers d'une eau soyeuse et continue,
 Dans un divin éclair, montre Pannyre nue.

Here is Flecker:

The revel pauses and the room is still:
 The silver flute invites her with a trill,
 And, buried in her great veils fold on fold,
 Rises to dance Pannyra, Heel of Gold.
 Her light steps cross; her subtle arm impels
 The clinging drapery; it shrinks and swells,
 Hollows and floats, and bursts into a whirl:

She is a flower, a moth, a flaming girl.
All lips are silent; eyes are all in trance:
She slowly wakes the madness of the dance,
Windy and wild the golden torches burn;
She turns, and swifter yet she tries to turn,
Then stops: a sudden marble stiff she stands.
The veil that round her coiled its spiral bands,
Checked in its course, brings all its folds to rest,
And clinging to bright limb and pointed breast
Shows, as beneath silk waters woven fine,
Pannyra naked in a flash divine!

“All here,” says a critic, “is bright and sparkling as the jewels on the dancer’s breast, but there is one ill-adjusted word — *pointed* breast — which is perhaps more physiological than poetic.” Personally I don’t somehow react very happily to the word “girl” in line 8.

Samain’s poem is a fine piece of work, inspired and perfect; Flecker’s is good only in substance, an adequate picture, one may say, but the expression and verse are admirable within their limits. The difference is that the French has vision and the inspired movement that comes with vision — all on the vital plane, of course, — but the English version has only physical sight, sometimes with a little glow in it, and the precision that comes with that sight. I do not know why your critical sense objects to “girl”. This line [*She is a flower, a moth, a flaming girl*] and one other, “Windy and wild the golden torches burn” are the only two that rise above the plane of physical sight.

But both these poems have the distinction of being perfectly satisfying in their own kind. . . .

P.S. “Flaming girl” and “pointed breast” might be wrong in spirit as a translation of the French — but that is just what Flecker’s poem is not, in spite of its apparent or outward fidelity, it is in spirit quite a different poem.

23 June 1932

Hopkins and Kipling

I should like to have a few words from you on the poetic style and technique of these two quotations. The first is an instance of Gerard Manley Hopkins' polyphony "at its most magnificent and intricate":

Earnest, earthless, equal, attuneable, | vaulty, voluminous,
. . . stupendous
 Evening strains to be tíme's vást, | womb-of-all, home-of-all,
hearse-of-all night.
 Her fond yellow hornlight wound to the west, | her wild
hollow hoarlight hung to the height
 Waste; her earliest stars, earlstars, | stárs principal, overbend
us,
 Fíre-féaturing heaven. For earth | her being has unbound;
her dapple is at an end, as-
 tray or aswarm, all throughther, in throngs; | self ín self
steepèd and páshed — quíte
 Disremembering, dísmémbering | áll now. Heart, you round
me right
 With: Óur évening is over us; óur night | whélms, whélms,
ánd will end us . . .

The next quotation illustrates Kipling's Tommy-Atkins-music at its most vivid and onomatopoeic — lines considered by Lascelles Abercrombie to be a masterly fusion of all the elements necessary in poetic technique:

'Less you want your toes trod off you'd better get back at
once,
 For the bullocks are walking two by two,

The *byles* are walking two by two,
 And the elephants bring the guns.
 Ho! Yuss!
 Great — big — long — black — forty-pounder guns.
 Jiggery-jolty to and fro,
 Each as big as a launch in tow —
 Blind — dumb — broad-breached — beggars o'
 battering-guns.

My verdict on Kipling's lines would be that they are fit for the columns of *The Illustrated Weekly of India* and nowhere else. I refuse to accept this journalistic jingle as poetry. As for Abercrombie's comment, — unspeakable rubbish, unhappily spoken!

Hopkins is a different proposition; he is a poet, which Kipling never was nor could be. He has vision, power, originality; but his technique errs by excess; he piles on you his effects, repeats, exaggerates and in the end it is perhaps great in effort, but not great in success. Much material is there, many new suggestions, but not a work realised, not a harmoniously perfect whole.

30 December 1932

George Santayana

There we live o'er, amid angelic powers,
 Our lives without remorse, as if not ours,
 And others' lives with love, as if our own;
 For we behold, from those eternal towers,
 The deathless beauty of all wingèd hours,
 And have our being in their truth alone.

. . . and I knew

The wings of sacred Eros as he flew
 And left me to the love of things not seen.
 'T is a sad love, like an eternal prayer,
 And knows no keen delight, no faint surcease.
 Yet from the seasons hath the earth increase,
 And heaven shines as if the gods were there.

Had Dian passed there could no deeper peace
Embalm the purple stretches of the air.

George Santayana, the writer of these, is a Spaniard who has a post at Harvard — English is not his mother tongue. In spite of traditionalism and lack of any very individual or developed technique, is there not some arresting quality in the above extracts?

It [*the two extracts considered as a unit*] has a considerable beauty of thought and language in it. It is a great pity that it is so derivative in form as to sound like an echo. With so much mastery of language and ease of rhythm it should have been possible to find a form of his own and an original style. The poetic power and vision are there and he has done as much with it as could be done with a borrowed technique. If he had found his own, he might have ranked high as a poet.

Fiona Macleod

Would you please comment on the passages from Fiona Macleod?

- 1) So through the grey dune-grasses
Not the wind only cries,
But a dim sea-wrought Shadow
Breathes drownèd sighs.
- 2) . . . with trampling sounds
As of herds confusedly crowding gorges? — . . .
The gloom that is the hush'd air of the Grave, . . .
- 3) As the bird of Brigid, made of foam and the pale moonwhite
wine
Of dreams, flits under the sombre windless plumes of the
pine.
- 4) . . . the wheeling cry
Where in the dusk the lapwing slips and falls
From ledge to ledge of darkness.

1) There is a very distinct charm about it. I am not sure of the entire success.

2) I could not pronounce on this without seeing the poem as a whole or at least more of it. It depends on how it comes into the general scheme of the rhythm.

3) Very fine and original and authentic in rhythm, it is absolutely the native rhythm of what she expresses.

4) This I think magnificent.

Twentieth-Century Poetry

Georgian Poetry

The stanzas are not quite successful. [*Certain lines*] have too much a stamp of what I think was called Georgian poetry — though I suppose it would more properly be called late-Victorian-Edwardian-early-Georgian. The defect of that poetry is that it has a fullness of language which fails to go home — things that ought to be very fine, but miss being so; so much of the poetry of Rupert Brooke as I have seen, for instance, always gives me that impression. In our own language I might say that it is an inspiration which tries to come from the higher mind but only succeeds in inflating the voice of the poetic intelligence.

1 November 1936

Early Twentieth-Century English Poetry

About modern English poetry of the early part of this century Livingston Lowes, writing in 1918, remarks in his *Convention and Revolt in Poetry*: “That which does allure it in the East is an amazing tininess and finesse — the delicacy, that is to say, and the deftness, and the crystalline quality of the verse of China and Japan. . . .

The strange, the remote, in its larger, more broadly human aspects . . . — all this has been gradually losing its hold upon poetry. Instead, when we fly from the obsession of the familiar, it is growingly apt to be to the more recondite, or precious, or quintessential, or even perverse embodiments of the strange or far — to ‘the special, exquisite perfume’ of Oriental art, . . . to the exceptional and the esoteric, in a word, rather than to the perennial and universal.”

The remark of Livingston Lowes is no doubt correct. Even now and even where it is the external, everyday, obvious that is being

taken as theme, we see often enough that what the mind is trying to find is some recondite, precious or quintessential aspect of the everyday and obvious — something in it exceptional or esoteric. But while in the East, the way to do it is known, the West does not seem yet to have found it. Instead of going inside, getting intimate with what is behind, and writing of the outside also from that inside experience, they are still trying to stare through the surface into the inner depths with some X-ray of mental imagination or “intuition” and the result is not the quintessence itself, but a shadow-picture of the quintessence. That is perhaps why there is so much feeling of effort, artifice, “even perverse embodiment” in much of this poetry — and no very definitive success as yet. But, I suppose, the way itself, the endeavour to leave the obvious surfaces and get deeper is the only road left for poetry, otherwise it can but repeat itself in the old modes with slight alterations till exhaustion brings decadence. On the road that is being now followed there is also evident danger of decadence, through an excess of mere technique and artifice or through a straining towards the merely out-of-the-way or the perverse. But there seems to be no other door of progress than to make the endeavour.

10 October 1932

Housman, Watson, Hardy, Bridges

I hear from Nolini that you want two books (reviewed in the *New Statesman*) representing the achievement of the seventeenth-century “Metaphysicals”, in order to add something about them to your *Future Poetry*. . . . There is another gap also, perhaps as serious: there is nothing about Coventry Patmore, Francis Thompson and Alice Meynell. And one other name — not belonging to either group but verging on the mystical domain — is worth inclusion: Christina Rossetti. Perhaps something on Gerard Manly Hopkins wouldn't be uninteresting, too. Among non-mystical poets there are some omissions also: Chapman, for instance — and in the recent group, William Watson, Thomas Hardy, A.E. Housman and Robert Bridges.

I did not deal with all these poets because it was not in the scope of my idea to review the whole literature, but to follow only the main lines. But the main difficulty was that at the time I had no books and could only write from memory. I have read nothing of Housman — what I had read of Watson or Hardy did not attract me and these are anyhow not central figures nor near the centre. Bridges was also a side figure at the time I wrote, it is only after his Laureateship that he came much forward. I had read only his *Eros and Psyche* and a few other things, and he did not give me the impression of being on one of the main lines. But I feel now that before the book can be published it has to be brought more up to date and the place of the poets who attempted spiritual poetry more fully indicated.

23 January 1934

Chesterton

I have not read Chesterton's poetry as a whole, but what I have seen of it does not attract me. Scott no longer ranks as a poet; Chesterton's verse struck me as a modernisation of Scott. I have told you I do not share contemporary enthusiasms. As for the "best war-scenes since Homer", that is exactly the phrase that was used for a long time about Scott.

1932

*

I am sending you the first pages of an essay on Chesterton.
I hope you will wait till you have finished the whole before
declaring that the case is not proven.

You have made good to a certain extent — but are these striking-nesses all that there is in Chesterton? Something more is needed to make a poet of rank.

I do not think the comparison with Coleridge can hold if it is intended to indicate anything like equality. Coleridge's poetry tells by its union of delicate and magical beauty with exquisite simplicity and straightness. Chesterton never loses the rhetorician. Even in these passages there is something of the rhetorician's brazen clang, an excited violence, a forced note however striking. It rises into sheer poetry, so far as I can see,

only in three of the passages quoted, the Wessex dog simile,¹ that of the illumined manuscripts² and finally the description of the Dark Ages and the fall of Rome.³ The last in spite of haunting ghosts of Kipling and Macaulay pursuing it is fine in vision and expression and substance. Chesterton however exceeds his ghosts — he has something of the racer in him and not merely of the prancing cart-horses they were.

*

If Chesterton is noble, grand style, epic (Chapman also) — it becomes difficult to deny these epithets to many others also. Even Kipling and Macaulay can put in a claim. What then is the difference between them and Homer, Milton etc.? Only that Homer is polysyllabic (he is not really) and Chesterton monosyllabic?

31 January 1935

Yeats and the Occult

The perfection here of Yeats' poetic expression of things occult is due to this that at no point has the mere intellectual or thinking mind interfered — it is a piece of pure vision, a direct sense, almost sensation of the occult, a light not of earth flowing through without anything to stop it or to change it into a product of the terrestrial mind. When one writes from pure occult vision there is this perfection and direct sense though it may be of different kinds, for the occult world of one is not that of another. But when there is the intervention of the intellectual mind in a poem this intervention may produce good lines of another power, but

¹ *And Wessex lay in a patch of peace,
Like a dog in a patch of sun —*

² *It was wrought in the monk's slow manner,
From silver and sanguine shell,
Where the scenes are little and terrible
Keyholes of heaven and hell.*

³ *When Caesar's sun fell out of the sky
And whoso hearkened right
Could only hear the plunging
Of the nations in the night.*

they will not coincide in tone with what is before them or after — there is an alternation of the subtler occult and the heavier intellectual notes and the purity of vision becomes blurred by the intrusion of the earth-mind into a seeing which is beyond our earth-nature.

But these observations are valid only if the object is as in Yeats' lines to bring out a veridical and flawless transcript of the vision and atmosphere of faeryland. If the object is rather to create symbol-links between the seen and the unseen and convey the significance of the mediating figures, there is no obligation to avoid the aid of the intellectualising note. Only, a harmony and fusion has to be effected between the two elements, the light and beauty of the beyond and the less remote power and interpretative force of the intellectual thought-links. Yeats does that, too, very often, but he does it by bathing his thought also in the faery light; in the lines quoted [*from The Stolen Child and The Man Who Dreamed of Faeryland*], however, he does not do that, but leaves the images of the other world shimmering in their own native hue of mystery. There is not the same beauty and intense atmosphere when a poem is made up of alternating notes. The finest lines [*of these poems*] are those in which the other-light breaks out most fully — but there are others also which are very fine too in their quality and execution.

November 1934

Yeats and A. E.

I do not think I have been unduly enthusiastic over Yeats, but one must recognise his great artistry in language and verse in which he is far superior to A. E. — just as A. E. as a man and a seer was far superior to Yeats. Yeats never got beyond a beautiful mid-world of the vital *antariksa*, he has not penetrated beyond to spiritual-mental heights as A. E. did. But all the same, when one speaks of poetry, it is the poetical element to which one must give the most importance. What Yeats expressed, he expressed with great poetical beauty, perfection and power and he has, besides, a creative imagination. A. E. had an unequalled profundity of

vision and power and range in the spiritual and psychic field. A. E.'s thought and way of seeing and saying things is much more sympathetic to me than Yeats' who only touches a brilliant floating skirt-edge of the truth of things — but I cannot allow that to influence me when I have to judge of the poetic side of their respective achievements.

*

The depths of A. E. are greater than those of Yeats, assuredly. His suggestiveness must therefore be profounder. In this poem [*Sibyl*] which you have translated very beautifully, his power of expression, always penetrating, simple and direct, is at its best and his best can be miraculously perfect.

A. E.

The substance of A. E.'s poetry is always very good — he is one of the two or three whose poetry comes nearest to spiritual knowledge and experience. He has too a very fine and subtle perception of things — a little more vital *élan* (of which he seems to have had abundance in his *life* but not so much in his poetry) and he would have been not only a fine but a very great poet.

11 February 1932

Abercrombie

I have the Abercrombie extracts. I am sorry that I cannot participate in the general admiration for these great poets; I suppose it must be my fault, though at the request of an earlier [*disciple named*] Chandrasekhar I read some of Abercrombie's dramas and tried to give him the benefit of the doubt. I have had no time as yet to write anything about his blank verse. I shall make a last attempt at admiration when I am free.

Lawrence

To continue about Lawrence's poetry from where I stopped.⁴

The idea is to get rid of all over-expression, of language for the sake of language, of form for the sake of form, even of indulgence of poetic emotion for the sake of the emotion, because all that veils the thing in itself, dresses it up, prevents it from coming out in the seizing nudity of its truth, the power of its intrinsic appeal. There is a sort of mysticism here that wants to express the inexpressible, the concealed, the invisible — reduce expression to its barest bareness and you get nearer the inexpressible, suppress as much of the form as may be and you get nearer that behind which is invisible. It is the same impulse that pervaded recent endeavours in Art. Form hides, not expresses the reality; let us suppress the concealing form and express the reality by its appropriate geometrical figures — and you have cubism. Or since that is too much, suppress exactitude of form and replace it by more significant forms that indicate rather than conceal the truth — so you have “abstract” paintings. Or, what is within reveals itself in dreams, not in waking phenomena, let us have in poetry or painting the figures, visions, sequences, designs of dreams — and you have surrealist art and poetry. The idea of Lawrence is akin; let us get rid of rhyme, metre, artifices which please us for their own sake and draw us away from the thing in itself, the real behind the form. So suppressing these things let us have something bare, rocky, primally expressive. There is nothing to find fault with in the theory provided it does lead to a new creation which expresses the inner truth in things better and more vividly and directly than with rhyme and metre the old poetry, now condemned as artificial and rhetorical, succeeded in expressing it. But the results do not come up to expectation. Take the four lines of Lawrence⁵ — in what do they differ from the

⁴ Sri Aurobindo wrote this letter a day after one published on pages 561 under the heading “Lawrence's Letters” — Ed.

⁵ *Just a few of the roses gathered by the Isar
Are fallen, and their bloodred petals on the cloth
Float like boats on a river, waiting
For a fairy wind to wake them from their sloth.*

old poetry except in having a less sure rhythmical movement, a less seizing perfection of language? It is a fine image and Keats or Thompson would have made out of it something unforgettable. But after reading these lines one has a difficulty in recalling any clear outline of image, any seizing expression, any rhythmic cadence that goes on reverberating within and preserves the vision forever. What the modernist metreless verse does is to catch up the movements of prose and try to fit them into varying lengths and variously arranged lengths of verse. Sometimes something which has its own beauty or power is done — though nothing better or even equal to the best that was done before, but for the most there is either an easy or a strained ineffectiveness. No footsteps hitting the earth? Footsteps on earth can be a walk, can be prose; the beats of poetry can on the contrary be a beat of wings. As for the bird image, well, there is more lapsing than flying in this movement. But where is the bareness, the rocky directness — where is the something more real than any play of outer form can give? The attempt at colour, image, expression is just the same as in the old poetry — whatever is new and deep comes from Lawrence's peculiar vision, but could have been more powerfully expressed in a closer-knit language and metre.

Of course, it does not follow that new and freer forms are not to be attempted or that they cannot succeed at all. But if they succeed it will be by bringing the fundamental quality, power, movement of the old poetry — which is the eternal quality of all poetry — into new metrical or rhythmic discoveries and new secrets of poetic expression. It can't be done by reducing these to skeletal bareness or suppressing them by subdual and dilution in a vain attempt to unite the free looseness of prose with the gathered and intent paces of poetry.

29 June 1936

*

I have been glancing at odd times at *Pansies*. Flashes of genius, much defiant triviality of revolt-stuff, queer strainings after things not grasped, a gospel of "conscientious sensuality" rushing in at favourable opportunities — all in a formless deliberate disorder, that is the impression up till now — I shall wait to see

if there is something else.

9 February 1933

*

I am sending you *Pansies*. Before sending I opened it at random and found this —

I can't stand Willy Wet-leg,
can't stand him at any price.
He's resigned, and when you hit him
he lets you hit him twice.

Well, well, this the bare, rockily, direct poetry? God help us!

P.S. I think Dara could do the companion of that in his lighter moments! This is the sort of things to which theories lead even a man of genius.

2 July 1936

*

What I have written [*about modern poetry*] is too slight and passing and general a comment, such as one can hazard in a private letter; but for a criticism that has to see the light of day something more ample and sufficient would be necessary. Lawrence's poetry, whatever one may think of his theory or technique, has too much importance and significance to be lightly handled and the "modernism" of contemporary poetry is a *fait accompli*. One can refuse to recognise as legitimate the *fait accompli*, whether in Abyssinia or in the realms of literature, but it is too solid to be met with a mere condemnation in principle.

*

Please take a look at this — form *perfect* as against its *imperfect* model. The formal perfection justifies my faith in rhyme, rhythm, etc. as against Lawrence's free verse.

There can be no doubt of that. Lawrencists however would say that the question is not between imperfect and perfect metrical work, but between metrical rhythm in poetry and poetry stripped bare of metre and presented with a bare elemental energy of language, vision and movement. Theory for theory

it can stand, but in the practice and result the effects seem to me to be against Lawrence's theory. 1936

*

What a pity that Lawrence did not give his poetry a rhythmic form, that would have given it its full sound and sense-value and made it sure of immortality.

The Poetry of the 1930s and 1940s

I admit I have not read as much of "modern" (contemporary) poetry as I should have — but the little I have is mostly of the same fundamental quality. It is very carefully written and versified, often *recherché* in thought and expression; it lacks only two things, the inspired phrase and inevitable word and the rhythm that keeps a poem for ever alive. . . . Speech carefully studied and made as perfect as it can be without reaching to inspiration, verse as good as verse can be without rising to inspired rhythm — there seem to be an extraordinary number of poets writing like that in England just now. . . . It is not the irregular verses and rhymes that matter, one can make perfection out of irregularity — it is that they write their poetry from the cultured striving mind, not from the elemental soul-power within. Not a principle to accept or a method to imitate! June 1931

*

The things you will see him [*a critic in the New Statesman and Nation*] assuming . . . may be more widely prevalent, to the exclusion of more catholic tastes and liberal views, than I have hitherto believed. In which case there perhaps could be no sort of public in England for poetry which is mystical or spiritual.

I imagine it is only one dominant tendency of the day that is represented by these autocrats; the other is precisely the "mystic" tendency — and I don't think it will be so easily snuffed out as that. 23 June 1932

*

It is probably modern (contemporary) English poetry of which your friend is thinking. Here I am no expert; but I understand that the turn there is to suppress emotion, rhetoric, colouring, sentiment and arrive at something very direct, vivid, expressive, recording either the thing exactly as it is or some intimate essential truth of the thing without wrapping it up in ideas and sentiments, superfluous images and epithets. It does not look as if all contemporary English poetry were like that, it is only one strong trend; but such as it is, it has not as yet produced anything very decisive, great or successful. Much of it seems to be mere flat objectivity or, what is worse, an exaggerated emphatic objectivity; emotion seems often to be replaced by an intensified vital-physical sensation of the object. You will perhaps understand what I mean if you read the poem quoted on pages 316–17 of the *Parichay* (also made much of in a book on English modernistic poetry sent to me by Arjava) — “red pieces of day — hills made of blue and green paper — Satanic and blasé — black goat lookingly wanders”, images expressing vividly an impression made on the nerves through the sight by the described objects. Admittedly it is — at least when pushed to such a degree, — a new way of looking at things in poetry, but not essentially superior to the impressions created on the heart or the mental imagination by the object. All the same there is behind, but still not successfully achieved, something real, an attempt to get away from ornate mental constructions about things to the expression of the intimate truth of the things themselves as directly seen by a deeper sight within us. Only it seems to me a mistake to theorise that only by this kind of technique and in this particular way the thing can be done. I have to form my idea more fully when I have finished Arjava’s book, but this is what impresses me at present. 1 October 1932

*

The latest craze in England is either for intellectual quintessence or sensations (not emotions) of life, while any emotional and ideal element in poetry is considered as a deadly sin. But beautiful poetry remains beautiful poetry even if it is not in the current

style. And after all Yeats and A. E. are still there in spite of this new fashion of the last one or two decades. 8 October 1934

*

Please give me a few names of poets — especially modern poets, whom I should study.

I have very little familiarity with the names of modern poets subsequent to A. E. and Yeats and De la Mare, all of whom you know. There are about a hundred of them moderns, Spender + $x + y + z + p^2$ etc. Before that there were Hopkins and Flecker and others and before that Meredith and Hardy and Francis Thompson. You can tackle any of them you can lay your hands on in the library. Watson and Brooke and other Edwardians and Georgians would not be good for you. 16 October 1938

*

Originality is all right, but if you become so original that nobody can follow you and all fall behind gasping for breath, that is an excess of virtue. The modernist poets do that with the result that nobody has the least idea what they mean, not even themselves, and the farther result that, as it has been said “there are more people now who write poetry than read it”. 8 June 1938

*

Somebody once said of modernist poetry that it could be understood only by the writer himself and appreciated by a few friends who pretended to understand it. That is because the ideas, images, symbols do not follow the line of the intellect, its logic or its intuitive connections, but are pushed out on the mind from some obscure subliminal depth or mist-hung shallow; they have connections of their own which are not those of the surface intelligence. One has to read them not with the intellect but with the solar plexus, try not to understand but feel the meaning. The surrealist poetry is the extreme in this kind — you remember our surrealist Baron’s question: “Why do you want poetry to have a meaning?” Of course, you can put an intellectual explanation on the thing, but then you destroy its poetical appeal. Very great

poetry can be written in that way from the subliminal depths, e.g. Mallarmé, but it needs a supreme power of expression, like Blake's or Mallarmé's, to make it truly powerful, convincing, and there must be sincerity of experience and significant rhythm.

2 August 1943

Surrealism

What the deuce is this Surrealism? I gather Baudelaire was its father, and Mallarmé his son.

Surrealism is a new phrase invented only the other day and I am not really sure what it conveys. According to some it is a dream poetry making a deeper truth, a deeper reality than the surface reality. I don't know if this is the whole theory or only one side or phase of the practice. Baudelaire as a surrealist is a novel idea, nobody ever called him that before. Mallarmé, Verlaine and others used to be classed as impressionist poets: sometimes as symbolists. But now the surrealists seem to claim descent from these poets.

12 February 1937

*

I really can't tell you what surrealism is, because it is something — at least the word is — quite new and I have not read either the reliable theorists of the school nor much of their poetry. What I picked up on the way was through reviews and quotations, the upshot being that it is a poetry based on the dream consciousness, but I don't know if this is correct or merely an English critic's idea of it. The inclusion of Baudelaire and Valéry seems to indicate something wider than that. But the word is of quite recent origin and nobody spoke formerly of Baudelaire as a surrealist or even of Mallarmé. Mallarmé was supposed to be the founder of a new trend of poetry — impressionist and symbolist, followed in varying degrees and not by any means in the same way by Verlaine, Rimbaud, — both of them poets of great fame. Verlaine is certainly a great poet and people now say Rimbaud also, but I have never come across his poetry except in extracts — and developing in Valéry and other noted writers

of today. It seems that all these are now claimed as part of or the origin of the surrealist movement. But I cannot say what are the exact boundaries or who comes in where. I suppose if Baron communicates to you books on the subject or more precise information, we shall know more clearly now. In any case surrealism is part of an increasing attempt of the European mind to escape from the surface consciousness (in poetry as well as in painting and in thought) and grope after a deeper truth of things which is not on the surface. The Dream Consciousness as it is called — meaning not merely what we see in dreams, but the inner consciousness in which we get into contact with deeper worlds which underlie, influence and to some extent explain much in our lives, what the psychologists call the subliminal or the subconscious (the latter a very ambiguous phrase) offers the first road of escape and the surrealists seem to be trying to force it. My impression is that there is much fumbling and that more often it is certain obscure and not always very safe layers that are tapped. That accounts for the note of diabolism that comes in in Baudelaire, in Rimbaud also, I believe, and in certain ugly elements in English surrealist poetry and painting. But this is only an impression.

Nirod's poetry (what he writes now) is from the Dream Consciousness, no doubt about that. It has suddenly opened in him and he finds now a great joy of creation and abundance of inspiration which were and are quite absent when he tries to write laboriously in the mental way. This seems to indicate either that the poet in him has his real power there or that he has opened to the same Force that worked in poets like Mallarmé. My labelling him as surrealist is partly — though not altogether — a joke. How far it applies depends on what the real aim and theory of the surrealist school may be. Obscurity and unintelligibility are not the essence of any poetry and — except for unconscious or semi-conscious humorists like the Dadaists — cannot be its aim or principle. True dream-poetry (let us call it so for the nonce) has and must always have a meaning and a coherence. But it may very well be obscure or seem meaningless to those who take their stand on the surface or "waking" mind

and accept only its links and its logic. Dream poetry is usually full of images, visions, symbols, phrases that seek to strike at things too deep for the ordinary means of expression. Nirod does not deliberately make his poems obscure, he writes what comes through from the source he has tapped and does not interfere with its flow by his own mental volition. In many modernist poets there may be labour and a deliberate posturing, but it is not so in his case. I interpret his poems because he wants me to do it, but I have always told him that an intellectual rendering narrows the meaning — it has to be seen and felt, not thought out. Thinking it out may give a satisfaction and an appearance of mental logicity, but the deeper sense and sequence can only be apprehended by an inner sense. I myself do not try to find out the meaning of his poems, I try to feel what they mean in vision and experience and then render into mental terms. This is a special kind of poetry and has to be dealt with according to its kind and nature. There is a sequence, a logic, a design in them, but not one that can satisfy the more rigid law of the logical intelligence.

About Housman's theory; it is not merely the appeal to emotion that he posits as the test of pure poetry — he deliberately says that pure poetry does not bother about intellectual meaning at all — it is to the intellect nonsense. He says that the interpretations of Blake's famous poem rather spoil them — they appeal better without being dissected in that way. His theory is questionable but that is what it comes to; he is wrong in using the word "nonsense" and perhaps in speaking of pure and impure poetry. All the same, to Blake and to writers of the Dream Consciousness, his rejection of the intellectual standard is quite applicable.

12 February 1937

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About your points:

(1) If the surrealist dream-experiences are flat, pointless or ugly, it must be because they penetrate only as far as the "subconscious" physical and "subconscious" vital dream layers which are the strata nearest to the surface. Dream-consciousness is a vast world in which there are a multitude of provinces

and kingdoms, but ordinary dreamers for the most part penetrate consciously only to these first layers which belong to what may properly be called the subconscious belt. When they pass into deeper sleep regions, their recording surface dream-mind becomes unconscious and no longer gives any transcript of what is seen and experienced there; or else in coming back these experiences of the deeper strata fade away and are quite forgotten before one reaches the waking state. But when there is a stronger dream-capacity, or the dream-state becomes more conscious, then one is aware of these deeper experiences and can bring back a transcript which is sometimes a clear record, sometimes a hieroglyph, but in either case possessed of a considerable interest and significance.

(2) It is only the subconscious belt that is chaotic in its dream-sequences — for its transcriptions are fantastic and often mixed, combining a jumble of different elements; some play with impressions from the past, some translate outward touches pressing on the sleep-mind; most are fragments from successive dream-experiences that are not really part of one connected experience — as if a gramophone record were to be made up of snatches of different songs all jumbled together. The vital dreams, even in the subconscious range, are often coherent in themselves and only seem incoherent to the waking intelligence because the logic and law of their sequences is different from the logic and law which the physical reason imposes on the incoherences of physical life. But if one gets the guiding clue and if one has some dream-experience and dream-insight, then it is possible to seize the links of the sequences and make out the significance, often very profound or very striking, both of the detail and of the whole. Deeper in, we come to perfectly coherent dreams recording the experience of the inner vital and inner mental planes; there are also true psychic dreams — the latter usually are of a great beauty. Some of these mental or vital plane dream-experiences, however, are symbolic, very many in fact, and can only be understood if one is familiar with or gets the clue to the symbols.

(3) It depends on the nature of the dreams. If they are of the

right kind, they need no aid of imagination to be converted into poetry. If they are significant, imagination in the sense of a free use of mental invention might injure their truth and meaning — unless of course the imagination is of the nature of an inspired vision coming from the same plane and filling out or reconstructing the recorded experience so as to bring out the Truth held in it more fully than the dream transcript could do, — for a dream record is usually compressed and often hastily selective.

(4) The word *psyche* is used by most people to mean anything belonging to the inner mind, vital or physical, — though the true *psyche* is different from these things. Poetry does come from these sources or even from the superconscient sometimes; but it does not come usually through the form of dreams — it comes either through word-vision or through conscious vision and imagery whether in a fully waking or an inward-drawn state: the latter may go so far as to be a state of *samādhi* — *svapna samādhi*. In all these cases it is vision rather than dream that is the imaging power. Dreams also can be made a material for poetry; but everyone who dreams or has visions or has a flow of images cannot by that fact be a poet. To say that a predisposition and discipline are needed to bring them to light in the form of written words is merely a way of saying that it is not enough to be a dreamer, one must have the poetic faculty and some training — unless the surrealists mean by this statement something else than what the words naturally signify. What is possible, however, is that by going into the inner (what is usually called the subliminal) consciousness — this is not really subconscious but a veiled or occult consciousness — or getting somehow into contact with it, one not originally a poet can awake to poetic inspiration and power. No poetry can be written without access to some source of Inspiration. Mere recording of dreams or images or even visions could never be sufficient, unless it is a poetic inspiration that records them with the right use of words and rhythm bringing out their poetic substance. On the other hand, I am bound to admit that among the records of dream-experiences even from people unpractised in writing I have met with a good many that read like a brilliant and colourful poetry

which does hit — satisfying Housman's test — the solar plexus. So much I can concede to the surrealist theory; but if they say on that basis that all can with a little training turn themselves into poets — well, one needs a little more proof before one can accept so wide a statement. 13 February 1937

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Now I find that in spite of your long letters, I haven't yet grasped what this blessed surrealism is.

I wrote very clearly in my letter to Dilip [*published on pages 424–26*] that I did not know myself what Surrealism is since I have not studied either surrealist theory or surrealist literature. I gathered from what I have read — reviews, citations — that it was dream-consciousness of a lower type (therefore incoherent and often ugly). I also explained at great length in another letter that there was a Dream Consciousness of a higher type. Are these distinctions really so difficult to understand?

19 February 1937

Comments on Examples of Twentieth-Century Poetry

W. B. Yeats

DECTORA:

No. Take this sword
And cut the rope, for I go on with Forgael. . . .
The sword is in the rope —
The rope's in two — it falls into the sea,
It whirls into the foam. O ancient worm,
Dragon that loved the world and held us to it,
You are broken, you are broken. The world drifts away,
And I am left alone with my beloved,
Who cannot put me from his sight for ever.
We are alone for ever, and I laugh,
Forgael, because you cannot put me from you.
The mist has covered the heavens, and you and I
Shall be alone for ever. We two — this crown —
I half remember. It has been in my dreams.
Bend lower, O king, that I may crown you with it.
O flower of the branch, O bird among the leaves,
O silver fish that my two hands have taken
Out of the running stream, O morning star,
Trembling in the blue heavens like a white fawn
Upon the misty border of the wood,
Bend lower, that I may cover you with my hair,
For we will gaze upon this world no longer.

FORGAEL [*gathering Dectora's hair about him*]:

Beloved, having dragged the net about us,
And knitted mesh to mesh, we grow immortal;

And that old harp awakens of itself
To cry aloud to the grey birds, and dreams,
That have had dreams for father, live in us.

Forgael might be the Yogin in the act of the irrevocable and immediately effectual renunciation of a life in the world and entering into his kingdom, having found and been accepted by the individual divine within him.

It is certainly a very beautiful passage and has obviously a mystic significance; but I don't know whether we can put into it such precise meaning as you suggest. Yeats' contact, unlike A.E.'s, is not so much with the sheer spiritual Truth as with the hidden intermediate regions, from the faery worlds to certain worlds of larger mind and life. What he has seen there, he is able to clothe rather than embody in strangely beautiful and suggestive forms, dreams and symbols. I have read some of his poems which touch these behind-worlds with as much actuality as an ordinary poet would achieve in dealing with physical life — this is not surprising in a Celtic poet, for the race has the key to the occult worlds or some of them at least — but this strange force of suggestive mystic life is not accompanied by a mental precision which would enable us to say, it is this or that his figures symbolise. If we could say it, it might take away something of that glowing air in which his symbols stand out with such a strange unphysical reality. The perception, feeling, sight of Yeats in this kind of poetry are remarkable, but his mental conception often veils itself in a shimmering light — it has then shining vistas but no strong contours.

1 September 1932

Edward Shanks

I am sending you a sonnet by Edward Shanks, considered to be "one of our best younger poets":

O dearest, if the touch of common things
Can taint our love or wither, let it die.
The freest-hearted lark that soars and sings
Soon after dawn amid a dew-brushed sky

Takes song from love and knows well where love lies,
 Hid in the grass, the dear domestic nest,
 The secret, splendid, common paradise.
 The strangest joys are not the loveliest;
 Passion far-sought is dead when it is found,
 But love that's born of intimate common things
 Cries with a voice of splendour, with a sound
 That over stranger feeling shakes and rings.
 The best of love, the highest ecstasy
 Lies in the intimate touch of you and me.

I do not know whether you intended me to comment on the sonnet of Shanks — Phoebus, what a name!! I am not in love with it, though it is smoothly and musically rhythmed. The sentiment is rather namby-pamby, some of the lines weak, others too emphatic, e.g. the twelfth. It just misses being a really good poem, or is so, like the curate's egg, in parts. E.g. the two opening lines of the third verse are excellent, but they are immediately spoiled by two lines that shout and rattle. So too the last couplet promises well in its first line, but the last disappoints, it is too obvious a turn and there is no fusion of the idea with the emotion that ought to be there — and isn't. Still, the writer is evidently a poet and the sonnet very imperfect but by no means negligible.

12 June 1931

Richard Hughes

. . . The air stands still: the very roots
 Of all the trees lie still and cold:
 — What is it gallops in the dark?
 Gallops around that chapel old?
 “We are those limber horses
 That round your graveyard go:
 Can you hear our feet crackle,
 See our blue eyes glow?
 “We are those limber horses;

Our bending necks are steel,
 Our mighty flanks swing all like bells,
 Chiming together as we wheel . . .

By the way, I read the poem in that paper, *The Limber Horses*. It is evidently inspired from the vital world — from a certain part of it which seems to be breaking out in much of today’s literature and art. All that comes from this source is full of a strange kind of force, but out of focus, misshaped in thought or vision or feeling, sometimes in the form too, ominous and perverse. For that matter, the adverse vital world is very much with us now, — the War was the sign of its descent on the earth and the After-war bears its impress. But from another point of view that is not a cause for alarm or discouragement — for it has always been predicted from occult sources that such a descent would be the precursor of the Divine Manifestation. 1931

W. H. Auden

I so often fail to detect the poetry in modern “poems” that the enclosed piece (by a quite young man), was a welcome exception — also it hints at an unusual warmth of interest in England. But neither grammar nor sense is plain to me in the opening line and elsewhere.

O Love, the interest itself in thoughtless Heaven
 Make simpler daily the beating of man’s heart; within
 There in the ring where name and image meet

 Inspire them with such a longing as will make his thought
 Alive like patterns a murmur of starlings
 Rising in joy over wolds unwittingly weave;

 Here too on our little reef display your power
 This fortress perched on the edge of the Atlantic scarp
 The mole between all Europe and the exile-crowded sea;

 And make us as Newton was who in his garden watching
 The apple falling towards England became aware
 Between himself and her of an eternal tie.

. . . and Glamorgan hid a life
 Grim as a tidal rock-pool's in its glove-shaped valleys,
 Is already retreating into her maternal shadow
 Leaving the furnaces gasping in the impossible air . . .

The cluster of mounds like a midget golf-course, graves
 Of some who created these intelligible dangerous marvels;
 Affectionate people, but crude their sense of glory

Far-sighted as falcons, they looked down another future,
 For the seed in their loins were hostile, though afraid of
 their pride,
 And tall with a shadow now, inertly wait . . .

Consider the years of the measured world begun
 The barren spiritual marriage of stone and water.
 Yet, O, at this very moment of our hopeless sigh

When inland they are thinking their thoughts but are
 watching these islands . . .

Some dream, say yes, long coiled in the ammonite's slumber
 Is uncurling, prepared to lay on our talk and kindness
 Its military silence, its surgeon's idea of pain.

And called out of tideless peace by a living sun
 As when Merlin, tamer of horses, and his lords to whom
 Stonehenge was still a thought, the Pillars passed

And into the undared ocean swung north their prow,
 Drives through the night and star-concealing dawn
 For the virgin roadsteads of our hearts an unwavering keel.

It took me all these three days to overcome the obscurity of the phrasing and the uncouthness of some of the lines; even so I do not know whether I can give a very decided answer to your question. The poetical quality of much of the piece is undoubted, though very uneven; for some of the lines, as those about Newton, seem to me to be quite prosaic whether in expression or rhythm; at other places even where the expression is strong and poetic, the movement falls short of an equal excellence. All

the same, there is a rhythm and there is a power of thought and poetic speech, rising to a climax in the nine or ten lines of the close. What seems most to contribute is the skilful and happy vowellation and consonantal assonances, — the rhythmic form of the lines is not always so happy, — and on the side of expression the concise power of much of the phrasing at once clear-cut in line and full in significance — in spirit though not in manner akin to the Dantesque turn of phrase. I mean such lines and expressions as

- (1) a murmuration of starlings
- (2) This fortress perched on the edge of the Atlantic scarp
The mole between all Europe and the exile-crowded sea;
- (3) a life
Grim as a tidal rock-pool’s in its glove-shaped valleys,
- (4) gasping in the impossible air

(this is quite Dante; (3) also)

- (5) these intelligible dangerous marvels;
- (6) Far-sighted as falcons, they looked down another future,

(and the two lines that follow)

- (7) the years of the measured world
- (8) The barren spiritual marriage of stone and water.
- (9) Its military silence, its surgeon’s idea of pain.
- (10) And called out of tideless peace by a living sun
- (11) And into the undared ocean swung north their prow
Drives through the night and star-concealing dawn

(These two lines again very Dantesque)

It is a pity he did not take pains to raise the whole to the same or a similar equal level — and more still that he did not think it worth while to make the underlying meaning of the whole as clear and powerfully precise as are in themselves these phrases.

15 September 1932

Stephen Spender

Here is a poem by Stephen Spender, one of the most promising of the young modernist poets, in *The New Statesman and Nation* of November 4, 1933:

Perhaps

the explosion of a bomb
 the submarine — a burst bubble filled with water —
 the chancellor clutching his shot arm (and that was Perhaps
 a put-up job for their own photographers)
 the parliament their own side set afire
 & then our party forbidden
 & the mine flooded, an accident I hope . . .

In his skidding car he wonders
 when watching landscape attack him
 “is it rushing? (I cannot grasp it) or is it
 at rest with its own silence I cannot touch?”

Was that final when they shot him? did that war
 lop our dead branches? are my new leaves splendid?
 is it leviathan, that revolution
 hugely nosing at edge of antarctic?

only Perhaps. Can be that we grow smaller
 donnish and bony shut in our racing prison:
 headlines are walls that shake and close
 the dry dice rattled in their wooden box.

Can be deception of things only changing. Out there
 perhaps growth of humanity above the plain
 hangs: not the timed explosion, oh but Time
 monstrous with stillness like the himalayan range.

Aren't the emotion and the rhythm all in a rather subdued
 key — but that appears to be universal among up-to-date
 poets?

It seems to me they are so subdued as hardly to be there except at
 places. A certain subdued force of statement getting less subdued

and more evidently powerful at the close — this there is, but it is the only power there.

How did the poem impress you?

I am afraid it made no impression on me — no poetical impression. I cannot persuade myself that this kind of writing has any chance of survival once the mode is over.

On consideration I should say that whatever merits there are in *Perhaps* lie in the last four stanzas. The first three seem to me distinguishable from a strong prose only by the compression of the language and the stiffness of the movement — too stiff for prose, in quite another way too stiff for the fineness and plasticity there should be in poetic rhythm — especially needed, it seems to me, in free verse. From the fourth line of the fourth stanza I begin to find what seems to me the real poetic touch. The fifth and seventh have the substance and diction of very fine poetry — what I miss is the rhythm that would carry it home to the inner consciousness and leave it with its place permanently there. There seems to be in this technique an unwillingness to get too far away from the characteristic manner of prose rhythm, an unwillingness either to soar or run, as if either would be an unbecoming and too ostentatious action — in three or four lines only the poet is just about to let himself go. Or perhaps there is the same tendency as in some modern painting and architecture, a demand for geometric severity and precision? But the result is the same. It may be that this kind of writing cuts into the intellect — it touches only the surface of the vital, the life-spirit which after all has its rights in poetry, and does not get through into the soul. That at least is the final impression it leaves on me. 1933

W. J. Turner

The Word made Flesh?

How often does a man need to see a woman?

Once!

Once is enough, but a second time will confirm if it be she,

She who will be a fountain of everlasting mystery,
 Whose glance escaping hither and thither
 Returns to him who troubles her. . . .

No light travelling through space-time immeasurable
 Has leapt so great a distance as their eyes;
 Naked together their spirits commingling
 Stir the seed in their genitals —
 Like a babe never to be born that leaps up crying,
 A voice crying in the wilderness. . . .

The head of Satan is curled
 Close, crisp, like the Gorgon;
 They are the serpents of the spirit
 Curled like the hair of the chaste body,
 Emblem of the God who is not creative,
 Who has not made the heavens and the earth,
 Nor from an Adam of dust
 Took that white bone, woman. . . .

This it is to be excluded from the bliss
 Of the angels of God,
 And of the men and women that He made in His image;
 The joy of making images in the image of his maker is not his,

But his are the children of the spirit:
 Sweeter and fairer are they than the children of the flesh,
 But they are born solitary
 And agony is their making-kiss.

Is there any justification for my impression that this was a ghost of the nineties (the meretricious “diabolism”, cult of the bizarre etc.) that had gone to a Fancy Dress Ball in the clothes of 1934? There seemed to be a certain *slickness* in achieving the fashionable formula of today — and of course the inevitable sop to the anti-Victorian Cerberus, the introduction of something to offend the conventions of last century.

But I did not feel any inevitability behind it all. Some “modern” verse is perverse but powerful; these lines seemed just built up by an adroit mind that knows how to tickle the modern fancy.

I think your criticism is very much to the point. The writer is a very clever manipulator of words, but he is dressing up an idea so as to catch the surface mind — there is no sincerity and therefore no power or conviction or poetical suggestion. Such made-up stuff as

The head of Satan is curled

and the rest of it has no real significance and is therefore rhetorical, not poetic. The rest is no better — there is no single line that carries conviction, not an image or a phrase or a movement of rhythm that is inevitable.

There is room for sex poetry if it is felt as truth and rendered either with beauty or power, but this crude braggadocio of the flesh is not telling nor attractive. The diabolism and cult of the bizarre in the nineties had a certain meaning, — it was at least a revolt against false conventions and an attempt to escape from the furbished obviousness of much that had gone before. But now it has itself become the obvious and conventional — not it exactly in its old form but the things it attempted to release and these are now trying to escape from their own obviousness by excess, the grotesque, the perverse. The writer brings in or brings back Satan (for whom there is no longer any need) to give, I suppose, a diabolical thrill to that excess — but, as poetry at least, it is not successful. Satan and sexual realism (e.g. the “spirit stirring the genitals”) do not match together. 1934

Edwin Muir

Who curbed the lion long ago
And penned him in this towering field
And reared him wingless in the sky?
And quenched the dragon's burning eye,
Chaining him here to make a show,
The faithful guardian of the shield?

A fabulous wave far back in time
Flung these calm trophies to this shore

That looks out on a different sea.
 These relics of a buried war,
 Empty as shape and cold as rhyme,
 Gaze now on fabulous wars to be.

So well the storm must have fulfilled
 Its work of perfect overthrow
 That this new world to them must seem
 Irrecognizably the same,
 And looking from the flag and shield
 They see the selfsame road they know.

Here now heraldic watch them ride
 This path far up the mountainside
 And backward never cast a look;
 Ignorant that the dragon died
 Long since and that the mountain shook
 When the great lion was crucified.

Very good indeed — admirable throughout. It is refreshing to read a poem with such a good form, build, depth of suggested meaning amidst so much that is so freakish and uncertain as to take away half the value of what is attempted. Here the writer has something to say and knows how to say it. 1934

Robert Frost, William Plomer, Roy Campbell

Something inspires the only cow of late
 To make no more of a wall than an open gate,
 And think no more of wall-builders than fools.
 Her face is flecked with pomace and she drools
 A cider syrup. Having tasted fruit
 She scorns a pasture withering to the root.
 She runs from tree to tree where lie and sweeten
 The windfalls spiked with stubble and worm-eaten.
 She leaves them bitten when she has to fly.
 She bellows on a knoll against the sky.
 Her udder shrivels and the milk goes dry.

— Robert Frost

Now the edge of the jungle rustles. In a hush
The crowd parts. Nothing happens. Then
The dancers totter adroitly out on stilts,
Weirdly advancing, twice as high as men.

Sure as fate, strange as the mantis, cruel
As vengeance in a dream, four bodies hung
In cloaks of rasping grasses, turning
Their tiny heads, the masks besmeared with dung;

Each mops and mows, uttering no sound,
Each stately, awkward, giant marionette,
Each printed shadow frightful on the ground
Moving in small distorted silhouette. . . .

— Williams Plomer

Through the mixed tunnels of whose angry brain
Creeps the slow scolopendra of the Train!

— Roy Campbell

Have you seen the “Golden Cowboy and Others” in the *New Statesman*? Gives a good idea of modernist poetry, I think. Frost is a rather elaborate frost. Plomer is a “terrible” contortionist, but Roy Campbell is really amusing — I like his “slow scolopendra” immensely. He has at least the courage of his images. Evidently poetry is following the same gallop into extravagance as painting. And yet there is an attempt behind it which looks like a seeking after the “Future Poetry” gone astray. 1937

Indian Poetry in English

Writing in a Learned Language

I was surprised last night how *les mots justes* sprang ready to the pen's call. Alas I can't say the same thing for my English poetry, where I always fumble so.

One cannot expect to seize in poetry the finer and more elusive tones, which are so important, in a learned language, however well-learned, as in one's native or natural tongue. Unless of course one succeeds in making it natural, if not native.

5 December 1935

*

What do you think of Yeats' letter to Purohit Swami, in which he says: "Write in your mother tongues. Choose that smaller audience. You cannot have style and vigour in English. You did not learn it at your mother's knee. . . . It is not your fault that you are under a curse. It is the fault of wicked policy. Defeat this policy. Write and speak Marathi, Hindi, Bengali, Tamil. . . ."

All very well for those who can write in some language of India and don't know English intimately. But what of those who think and write naturally in English? Why didn't Yeats write in Gaelic?

17 September 1936

*

It is not true in all cases that one can't write first-class things in a learned language. Both in French and English people to whom the language was not native have done remarkable work, although that is rare. What about Jawaharlal's autobiography? Many English critics think it first-class in its own kind; of course he was educated at an English public school, but I suppose he

was not born to the language. Some of Toru Dutt's poems, Sarojini's, Harin's have been highly placed by good English critics, and I don't think we need be more queasy than Englishmen themselves. Of course there were special circumstances, but in your case also there are special circumstances; I don't find that you handle the English language like a foreigner. If first-class excludes everything inferior to Shakespeare and Milton, that is another matter. I think, as time goes on, people will become more and more polyglot and these mental barriers will begin to disappear.

1 October 1943

Indo-English Poetry

I suppose our oriental way of expression, which is as luxuriant as oriental nature itself, is unappealing to Westerners.

What you say may be correct, but on the other hand it is possible that the mind of the future will be more international than it is now. In that case the expression of various temperaments in English poetry will have a chance.

If our aim is not success and personal fame, but to arrive at the expression of spiritual truth and experience of all kinds in poetry, the English tongue is the most widespread and is capable of profound turns of mystic expression which make it admirably fitted for the purpose; if it could be used for the highest spiritual expression, that is worth trying.

10 December 1935

*

As for Conrad, according to Thompson, he is a Westerner, and surely there is a greater difference in tradition, expression, feeling between an Easterner and an Englishman than between an Englishman and another European.

In other words, any Western tradition, expression, feeling—even Polish or Russian—can be legitimately expressed in English, however unEnglish it may be, but an Eastern spirit, tradition or temper cannot? He differs from Gosse who told Sarojini Naidu that she must write Indian poems in English

— poems with an Indian tradition, feeling, way of expression, not reproduce the English mind and turn, if she wanted to do something great and original as a poet in the English tongue.

I think that however much we try, we shan't be able to enter the subtleties of a foreign tongue.

Who is this we? Many Indians write better English than many educated Englishmen.

Is there any chance of our being able to express spirituality in English poetry?

I put forward four reasons why the experiment could be made. (1) The expression of spirituality in the English tongue is needed and no one can give the real stuff like Easterners and especially Indians. (2) We are entering an age when the stiff barriers of insular and national mentality are breaking down (Hitler notwithstanding), the nations are being drawn into a common universality with whatever differences, and in the new age there is no reason why the English should not admit the expression of other minds than the English in their tongue. (3) For ordinary minds it may be difficult to get over the barrier of a foreign tongue, but extraordinary minds (Conrad etc.) can do it. (4) In this case the experiment is to see whether what extraordinary minds can do, cannot be done by Yoga. *Sufficit* — or as Ramchandra eloquently puts it “’Nuff said!” 28 February 1936

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The doctrine that no one who is not a born and bred Englishman, especially no Oriental, should try to write or can really write English poetry because the traditions, sentiments, expressions of the English language — or of any language — are so different from others and so peculiar to itself that a foreigner cannot acquire them, is no new discovery; it is a statement that has been often made. But it fails at one point — birth does not matter. A pure Italian by blood like Rossetti or his sister Christina, a Pole like Conrad, a Spaniard like Santayana (I am speaking of prose

also, however,) can do as well in English as born English writers. It is said however that this applies only to Europeans, — for their native tradition, sentiments, expressions are not entirely alien to those of the English tongue and by education or adaptation they can acquire, but the Indian mind is of too alien a character, too far off and cut away by a gulf from the English to be able to write in that language. It may be said also that an Indian may succeed in writing correct English, but can never write great English prose, still less perfect or enduring poetry. I doubt whether this is true — I remember having read some extracts from letters by Sarojini Naidu in her youth that seemed to be very perfect and beautiful English prose. But let us keep to poetry which has no doubt a special language or a special spirit and turn in its language and it is true of it that no one who cannot acquire that spirit and turn can succeed in writing English poetry. But in the first place I do not see why an Indian bred in England or an Indian to whom English has become his natural tongue should be any more disqualified [*incomplete*]¹ 28 February 1936

On Some Indian Writers of English

I should very much value *your* assurance that, scant though my stock is, I need not feel inferior to the other Indian poets who have written in English — Manmohan Ghose and Harindranath and Sarojini.

I don't altogether appreciate your request for being declared by me "not inferior" to other "Indo-English" poets. What have you to do with what others have achieved? If you write poetry, it should be from the stand-point that you have something of your own which has not yet found full expression, a power within which you can place at the service of the Divine and which can help you to grow — you have to get rid of all in it that is merely mental or merely vital, to develop what is true and fine in it and leave the rest until you can write from a higher

¹ Sri Aurobindo wrote this passage on the back of a typed copy of the letter of 28 February 1936 printed above. It appears to be the draft of a letter that was not completed or sent. — Ed.

level of consciousness things that come from the deepest self and the highest spiritual levels. Your question is that of a *littérateur* and not in the right spirit. Besides, even from a mental point of view, such comparisons are quite idle. Sarojini Naidu has at best a strange power of brilliant colour and exquisite melody which you are not likely ever to have; on the other hand she is narrowly limited by her gift. Harindranath has an unfailing sense of beauty and rhythm (or had before he became a Bolshevik and Gandhist) — while your writing is very unequal — but I do not suppose he will ever do much better than he has done or produce anything that will put him in the first rank of poets, unless he changes greatly in the future. As for my brother, I do not know enough of his poetry to judge; I knew he had a better knowledge of technique than any of these poets, but my impression was that life and enduring quality were not there. How am I to compare you in these things with them? You have another turn and gift and you have in the resources of Yoga a chance of constant progression and growth and of throwing all imperfections behind you. Measure what you do by the standard of your own possible perfection; what is the use of measuring it by the achievement of others?

1931

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The idea that Indians cannot succeed in English poetry is very much in the air just now but it cannot be taken as absolutely valid. Toru Dutt and Romesh of the same ilk prove nothing; Toru Dutt was an accomplished verse-builder with a delicate talent and some outbreaks of genius and she wrote things that were attractive and sometimes something that had a strong energy of language and a rhythmic force. Romesh was a smart imitator of English poetry of the second or third rank. What he wrote, if written by an Englishman, might not have had even a temporary success. Sarojini is different. Her work has a real beauty, but it has for the most part only one highly lyrical note and a vein of riches that has been soon exhausted. Some of her lyrical work is likely, I think, to survive among the lasting things in English literature and by these, even if they are fine rather than great, she

may take her rank among the immortals. I know no other Indian poets who have published in English anything that is really alive and strong and original.² The test will be when something is done that is of real power and scope and gets its due chance. Tagore's *Gitanjali* is not in verse, but the place it has taken has some significance. For the obstacles from the other side are that the English mind is apt to look on poetry by an Indian as a curiosity, something exotic (whether it really is or not, the suggestion will be there), and to stress the distance at which the English temperament stands from the Indian temperament. But Tagore's *Gitanjali* is most un-English, yet it overcame this obstacle. For the poetry of spiritual experience, even if it has true poetic value, the difficulty might lie in the remoteness of the subject. But nowadays this difficulty is lessening with the increasing interest in the spiritual and the mystic. It is an age in which Donne, once condemned as a talented but fantastic weaver of extraordinary conceits, is being hailed as a great poet, and Blake lifted to a high eminence; even small poets with the mystic turn are being pulled out of their obscurity and held up to the light. At present many are turning to India for its sources of spirituality, but the eye has been directed only towards yoga and philosophy, not to the poetical expression of it. When the full day comes, however, it may well be that this too will be discovered, and then an Indian who is at once a mystic and a true poet and able to write in English as if in his mother-tongue (that is essential) would have his full chance. Many barriers are breaking; moreover both in French and English there are instances of foreigners who have taken their place whether as prose-writers or poets.

P.S. About decadence: a language becomes decadent when the race decays, when life and soul go out and only the dry intellect and the tired senses remain. Europe is in imminent peril of decadence and all its literatures are attacked by this malady, though it is only beginning and energy is still there which may

² This was written some years ago and does not apply to more recent work in English by Indian poets.

bring renewal. But the English language has still several strings to its bow and is not confined to an aged worn-out England. Moreover, there are two tendencies active in the modern mind, the over-intellectualised, over-sensualised decadent that makes for death, and the spiritual which may bring rebirth. At present the decadent tendency may be stronger, but the other is also there.

24 January 1935

Manmohan Ghose

I have not read much of my brother's poetry except what he wrote in England and in the early years in India before we ceased to meet. That was very cultured poetry and good in form, but it seemed to me to lack the inner force and elemental drive which makes for successful creation. I don't know whether his later work had it. My brother was very intimate with Oscar Wilde, but, if I remember right, none of the singing birds except Phillips and Binyon went very far. But I think Manmohan published very little in his lifetime — nothing ever came my way.

25 January 1935

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You write in your note to Harin [*of 24 January 1935*] about Toru Dutt and "Romesh of the same ilk" and Sarojini Naidu that you know of no other Indian than Sarojini to have published in English anything that is really alive and strong and original. I can understand your forgetting your own work, but how is it that you have omitted Harin himself? Surely he has published things that are bound to remain? Also, how was it that Oscar Wilde and Laurence Binyon could give praise to Manmohan Ghose? Has he done nothing that could touch Sarojini's level, though in another way?

I did not speak of Harin because that was a separate question altogether — besides, whether in criticising or in paying compliments, present company is always supposed to be excepted unless they are specially mentioned, and for this purpose Harin and myself are present company. About Manmohan I said that I knew very little of his later work. As for his earlier work

it had qualities which evoked the praise of Wilde. I do not know what Binyon has written, but he is a fine poet and an admirable critic, not likely to praise work that has not quality. (Wilde and Binyon were both intimate friends of my brother, — at a time Manmohan was almost Wilde's disciple. If I were inclined to be Wildely malicious I might say that even Oscar's worst enemies never accused him of sincerity of speech, so if he liked someone very much he would not scruple to overpraise his poetry; but I think he considered my brother's poems to carry in them a fine promise. Binyon and Manmohan had almost the relations of Wordsworth and Southey in the first days, strongly admiring and stimulating each other.) Let me say then that my opinion was a personal one, perhaps born of brotherly intimacy — for if familiarity breeds contempt, fraternity may easily breed criticism — and based on insufficient data. I liked Manmohan's poetry well enough, but I never thought it to be great. He was a conscientious artist of word and rhyme almost painfully careful about technique. Virgil wrote nine lines every day and spent the whole morning rewriting and rerewriting them out of all recognition. Manmohan did better. He would write five or six half lines and quarter lines and spend the week filling them up. I remember the sacred wonder with which I regarded this process — something like this:

The morn ... red ... sleepless eyes
.....lilacrest.

Perhaps I exaggerate, but it was very much like that! That seemed to me to indicate an inspiration not very much on fire or in flood. But I suppose he became more fluent afterwards and I am ready to change my opinion if I have materials for doing so. I made no comparison with Sarojini. The two poets are poles asunder in their inspiration and manner. Sarojini has a true originality whatever its limits; even if she does not live for ever, she deserves to live. My brother was perhaps a finer artist, but has Manmohan's poetry similarly an unique and original power?

26 January 1935

I suppose you have read this poem of Manmohan's:

Augustest! dearest! whom no thought can trace,
 Name, murmuring out of birth's infinity,
 Mother! like heaven's great face is thy sweet face,
 Stupendous with the mystery of me.
 Eyes, elder than the light; cheek, that no flower
 Remembers; brow, at which my infant care
 Gazed weeping up and saw the skies enshower
 With tender rain of vast mysterious hair!
 Thou at whose breast the sunbeams sucked, whose arms
 Cradled the lisping ocean, art thou she,
 Goddess, at whose dim heart the world's deep charms,
 Tears, terrors, sobbing things, were yet to be?
 She, from whose tearing pangs in glory first
 I and the infinite wide heavens burst?

Each line is wonderfully inspired; but is there in the total effect a sense of construction rather than creation, a splendid confusion instead of a supreme luminosity?

The poem has a considerable elevation of thought, diction and rhythm. It is certainly a fine production and, if all had been equal to the first three lines which are pure and perfect in inspiration, the sonnet might have stood among the finest things in the English language. But somehow it fails as a whole. The reason is that the intellectual mind took up the work of transcription and a Miltonic rhetorical note comes in, all begins to be thought rather than seen or felt; the poet seems to be writing what he thinks he ought to write on such a subject and doing it very well — one admires, the mind is moved and the vital stirred, but the deeper satisfying spiritual thrill which the first lines set out to give is no longer there. Already in the fourth line there is the touch of poetic rhetoric. The original afflatus continues to persist behind, but can no longer speak itself out in its native language, there is a mental translation. It tries indeed to get back —

Eyes, elder than the light; cheek, that no flower
 Remembers —

then loses hold almost altogether — what follows is purely mental. Another effort brings the eighth line which is undoubtedly very fine and has sight behind it. Then there is a compromise; the spiritual seeing mind seems to say to the thinking poetic intellect, “All right, have it your own way — I will try at least to keep you up at your best”, and we have the three lines that follow those two others that are forcible and vivid poetic (very poetic) rhetoric — finally a close that goes back to the level of the stupendous mystery. No, it is not a “splendid confusion” — the poem is well-constructed from the point of view of arrangement of the thought, so there can be no confusion. It is the work of a poet who got into touch with some high level of spiritual sight, a living vision of some spirit Truth, but, that not being his native domain, could not keep its perfect voice throughout and mixed his inspiration — that seems to me the true estimate. A very fine poem, all the same.

5 November 1935

Remarks on Minor Indian Writers

I don't remember [Jehangir] Vakil's poems very well, but they gave me the impression, I think, of much talent not amounting to genius, considerable achievement in language and rhythm but nothing that will stand out and endure. But how many can do more in a foreign language? Here the poem certainly attempts and almost achieves something fine — there are admirable lines and images — but the whole gives an impression of something constructed by the mind, a work built up by a very skilful and well-endowed intelligence.

12 September 1931

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The poetry of your friend is rather irritating, because it is always just missing what it ought to achieve, — one feels a considerable poetic possibility which does not produce work of some permanence because it is not scrupulous enough or has not a true technique. The reasons for the failure can be felt, but are not easy to analyse. Among them there is evidently the misfortune of having passed strongly under the influence of poets who are quite

out of date and learned a poetic style and language full of turns that smell of the schoolroom and the bookworm's closet. Such awful things as "unsoughten", "a-journeying", "a-knocking", "strayèd gift" and the constant abuse of the auxiliary verb "to do" would be enough to damn even the best poem. If he would rigorously modernise his language, one obstacle to real poetic success would perhaps disappear, — provided he does not, on the contrary, colloquialise it too much — e.g. "my dear", etc. But the other grave defect is that he is constantly composing out of his brain, while one feels that a pressure from a deeper source is there and might break through; if only he would let it. Of course, it is a foreign language he is writing and very few can do their poetic best in a learned medium; but still the defect is there.

22 June 1931

Poets of the Ashram

Some General Remarks

I fear I don't approve of any article on the "Ashram poets" — least of all a dithyramb of this too splendiferous kind. I shall give my reasons when I have had time to look at it again — at present I am slowly recovering from the electric shock it gave me.

11 September 1934

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Prithwi Singh was telling me that cultivation of literature here hasn't much sense, since none will be able to get first class, or outclass Tagore. He must always remain the only brilliant star in literature. Others won't even get a chance to shine by his side, not to speak of outshining him. Only Dilip can be somehow given a second class privilege, but that too for his prose, and not for poetry. He further asserts that Yoga has no power to bring any pursuit — literature, painting, etc. to a height of perfection.

I don't agree with Prithwi Singh. If a man has a capacity for poetry or anything else, it will certainly come out and rise to greater heights than it would have done elsewhere. Witness Dilip who was unable to write poetry till he came here though he had the instinct and the suppressed power in him, Nishikanta whose full flow came only here, Arjava, Punjalal whose recent poems in Gujarati seem to me to have an extraordinary beauty — though I admit that I am no expert there. Harin wrote beautifully before but the sovereign excellence of his recent poetry is new. There are others who are developing a power of writing they had not before. All that does not show that Yoga has no power to develop capacity. I myself have developed many capacities by Yoga. Formerly I could not have written a line of philosophy —

now people have started writing books about my philosophy to my great surprise. It is not a question of first class or second class. One has to produce one's best and develop — the "class" if class there must be will be decided by posterity. Tagore himself was once considered second class by any number of people and the nature of his poetry was fiercely questioned — until the Nobel prize and consequent fame ended their discussions. One has not to consider fame or the appreciation of others, but do whatever work one can do as an offering of one's capacity to the Divine.

11 November 1934

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I look at these things from a more impersonal or, if you like, a personal-impersonal point of view. There is on one side my effort at perfection, for myself and others and for the possibility of a greater perfection in a changed humanity: on the other side there is a play of forces some favouring it but more trying to prevent it. The challenge I speak of comes from these forces. On one side it is a pressure from the pro-forces saying "Your work is not good enough; learn to do better"; on the other it is a pressure from the contrary forces saying "Your work? It is a delusion and error, — a poor mediocre thing, and we will trample and break it to pieces." Part of the work was an attempt to inspire a poetry which would express first the aspiration and labour towards the spiritual or divine and afterwards its realisation and manifestation. There are many who write poetry in the Ashram under this impulse but in the languages which I know best (English perfectly — at least I hope so — Bengali a little), there were four here whose work seemed to me to contain already in a fairly ample way the ripe possibility of the thing I wanted — yourself [*Dilip Kumar Roy*], Arjava, Amal, Harin. (I do not speak of Nishikanta and others because they are new or emergent only). There are some Gujarati poets but I do not know the poetic language and technique in that tongue well enough to form an indubitable judgment. These four then I have encouraged and tried to push on towards a greater and richer expression: I have praised but there was nothing insincere in my

praise. For some time however I have received intimations from many quarters that my judgment was mistaken, ignorant, partial and perhaps not wholly sincere. It began with your poetry even at the time of *Anami* and the forces at play spoke through some literary coteries of Bengal and reached here through reviews, letters etc. There has been much inability to appreciate Arjava's poetry, Yeats observing that he had evidently something to say but struggled to say it with too much obscurity and roughness. Amal's work is less criticised, but A.E.'s attitude towards it was rather condescending as to an Indian who writes unexpectedly well in English. Finally, there is the ignoring or rejection of Harin's work by this array of authorities — there are as good authorities on the other side, but that is irrelevant. That makes the issue complete and clear. If I have made so big a mistake, then the whole thing is a hallucination — I am an incompetent critic of poetry, at least of contemporary poetry, and my pretension to inspire cannot stand for a moment. Personally that would not matter to me, for personally I have my own feeling of these things and what it may be in the eyes of others makes no difference — just as it makes no difference to me if my own poetry is really no poetry, as Anandashanker and so many others think and may from their own viewpoint — there are a million possible viewpoints in the world — be justified in thinking. But for my work it does matter. I recognise in it the challenge of the forces and, once I recognise that in whatever field, I never think myself entitled to ignore it. If it is a challenge to do better (from the favourable forces), I must see that and get it done. If it is a challenge from the other forces, I must see that too and know how far it is justifiable or else what can be put against it. That is what I have always done both in my own Yoga looking carefully to see what was imperfect in the instrumentation of my own consciousness as a vehicle of the manifestation and working to set it right or else maintaining what was right against all challenge. So I began to do it here. Instead of reading rapidly through Harin's poems every day, I began to weigh and consider looking to see what could be justly said from Krishnaprem's viewpoint and what could be fairly said

from mine. I took Krishnaprem's criticism because it is the only thing I have that is definite and, though his technical strictures are obviously mistaken, the general ones have to be weighed even though they are far from conclusive. But this is a work for my personal use, — its main object is not a weighing of Harin's work but of my own capacity and judgment and that is too personal in scope for me to lay before others. That is why I said I was not writing it to circulate.

I have written all this to explain to you that you have not pained or hurt or displeased me, nor has Krishnaprem either. It would be childish to be displeased with someone because his opinions on literature or a particular piece of literature are not identical with my own at every point. I may also say that I was not displeased with you for your letter. I was a little disappointed that you should have gone back to mental doubts or to vital feelings after you had started so well for something else. But these temporary reversions are too common on the path to the Divine for me to be displeased or discouraged. The work I have to do for myself or for the world or for you or others can only be achieved if I have love for all and faith for all and go firmly on till it is done. It is why I urge you to do the same, because I know that if one does not give up, one is sure to arrive. That is the attitude you had started to take, to go quietly on and give time for the right development however slow. I want you to return to that and keep to it.

By the way, what I have written about the poetry is just for yourself, because it is too personal to me to be made general.

December 1934

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It was not with any intention of bringing in personal matters that I mentioned names and examples in my letter. The personal merits or demerits of the external human instrument — the frail outer man — are irrelevant and have no importance when one considers the value or power of the Word. What matters is the truth of the Inspiration and the power of what it utters. I was not saying either that this poetry — I try to avoid names this

time — appeals to everybody; I was referring to those whom it did touch and especially to certain incidents within my personal observation and knowledge.

I am keeping Krishnaprem's letter. I don't know that it is very advisable for me to give my view: if I do so I will try to restrict myself to general considerations about poetry and literature. I will only say that my opinions about this poetry or yours or Amal's or Arjava's are personal to myself and nobody need attach any value to them if his own do not agree. As they are personal, what others think, however eminent they may be, cannot make any difference. I experience a certain beauty, power or charm, an expression of things I feel and know in the occult or spiritual province with what seems to me a great or a sufficient breath of poetry in it. I do not expect all or many to share my feeling and I do not need it. I can understand Krishnaprem's strictures or his reservations (without endorsing, refuting or qualifying them) but I have had the same view about very great poets like Shelley or Spenser at one time, so that does not seriously touch my feeling that this is poetry of beauty and value. Also I do not make comparisons — I take it by itself as a thing apart in its own province. I know of course that my old schoolfellow Binyon and others in England have spoken in this connection of Keats and Shelley; but I do not myself feel the need of that comparative valuation. After all one can only give one's own view of contemporary poetry, — we must leave it to Tagore's *viśva-mānava* (posterity?) to decide. 29 December 1934

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Amal is rather fond of high notes in his criticism, (an essay he sent long ago on the "Ashram poets" — what a phrase! — made me aghast with horror at its Pindaric — or rather Swinburnean — tone, it gave me an impression that Homer and Shakespeare and Valmiki had all been beaten into an insignificant jelly by our magnificent creations.) He is also sometimes too elaborately ingenious in his hunt for detail significances. But what he says is usually acute and interesting and, when he drives his pen instead of letting it gallop away with him, he can write exceedingly well.

His selection from your poems is not so surprising. Everyone reacts to poetry in his own way and except with regard to long-established favourites from the classics few would make the same choice. Give ten good critics the task of selecting the best lines of Shakespeare, avoiding stock passages, and the ten will each make a different list — and probably Shakespeare himself would disagree with all the ten. That must be still more the case with a “contemporary” poet where all is new stuff with no indications except one’s own personal reactions. I myself do not agree with your condemnation of these pieces to the W. P. B.

30 January 1935

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Take this Poetry business. It has always been rare for me to write any poetry without a heavy dose of mental exercise. I have not, except once or twice, felt some force coming down and delivering a poem out of me, even a worthless one, in a second. . . . You yourself had to concentrate for 4 or 5 hours a day for so many years, after which everything flowed in a river. But I am not Sri Aurobindo! I am not born with such a will and determination. . . . Since I can’t spend so much labour, I have to conclude that such big things are not for me.

As there are several lamentations today besieging me, I have very little time to deal with each separate Jeremiad. Do I understand rightly that your contention is this, “I can’t believe in the Divine doing everything for me because it is by my own mighty and often fruitless efforts that I write or do not write poetry and have made myself into a poet”? Well, that itself is *épatant*, magnificent, unheard of. It has always been supposed since the infancy of the human race that while a verse-maker can be made or self-made, a poet cannot. “*Poeta nascitur non fit*”, a poet is born not made, is the dictum that has come down through the centuries and millenniums and was thundered into my ears by the first pages of my Latin Grammar. The facts of literary history seem to justify this stern saying. But here in Pondicherry we have tried, not to manufacture poets, but to give them birth, a spiritual, not a physical birth into the body.

In a number of instances we are supposed to have succeeded — one of these is your noble self — or if I am to believe the man of sorrows in you, your abject, miserable, hopeless and ineffectual self. But how was it done? There are two theories, it seems — one that it was by the Force, the other that it was done by your own splashing, kicking, groaning Herculean efforts. Now, sir, if it is the latter, if you have done that unprecedented thing, made yourself by your own laborious strength into a poet (for your earlier efforts were only very decent literary exercises), then, sir, why the deuce are you so abject, self-depreciatory, miserable? Don't say that it is only a poet who can produce no more than a few poems in many months. Even to have done that, to have become a poet at all, a self-made poet is a miracle over which one can only say Sabash! Sabash! without ever stopping. If your effort could do that, what is there that it can't do? All miracles can be effected by it and a giant self-confident faith ought to be in you. On the other hand if, as I aver, it is the Force that has done it, what then can it not do? Here too faith, a giant faith is the only logical conclusion. So either way there is room only for Hallelujahs, none for Jeremiads. Q.E.D.

By the way what is this story about my four or five hours' concentration a day for several years before anything came down? Such a thing never happened, if by concentration you mean laborious meditation. What I did was four or five hours a day pranayam — which is quite another matter. And what flow do you speak of? The flow of poetry came down while I was doing pranayam, not some years afterwards. If it is the flow of experiences, that did come after some years, but after I had stopped the Pranayam for a long time and was doing nothing and did not know what to do or where to turn once all my efforts had failed. And it came as a result not of years of Pranayam or concentration, but in a ridiculously easy way, by the grace either of a temporary guru (but it wasn't that, for he was himself bewildered by it) or by the grace of the eternal Brahman and afterwards by the the grace of Mahakali and Krishna. So don't try to turn me into an argument against the Divine; that attempt will be perfectly ineffective.

I am obliged to stop — if I go on, there will be no Pranam till 12 o'clock. So send your Jeremiad back tonight and I will see what else to write. Have written this in a headlong hurry — I hope it is not full of *lapsus calami*.

I send you back the "Jeremiad", Sir. My observations are reserved.

To continue. The fact that you don't feel a force does not prove that it is not there. The steam-engine does not feel a force moving it, but the force is there. A man is not a steam-engine? He is very little better, for he is conscious only of some bubbling on the surface which he calls himself and is absolutely unconscious of all the subconscious, subliminal, superconscious forces moving him. (This is a fact which is being more and more established by modern psychology though it has got hold only of the lower forces and not the higher, so you need not turn up your rational nose at it.) He twitters intellectually (= foolishly) about the surface results and attributes them all to his "noble self", ignoring the fact that his noble self is hidden far away from his own vision behind the veil of his dimly sparkling intellect and the reeking fog of his vital feelings, emotions, impulses, sensations and impressions. So your argument is utterly absurd and futile. Our aim is to bring the secret forces out and unwallled into the open so that instead of getting some shadows or lightnings of themselves out through the veil or being wholly obstructed they may "pour down" and "flow in a river". But to expect that all at once is a presumptuous demand which shows an impatient ignorance and inexperience. If they begin to trickle at first, that is sufficient to justify the faith in a future downpour. You admit that you once or twice felt a "force coming down and delivering a poem out of me" (your opinion about its worth or worthlessness is not worth a cent, that is for others to pronounce). That is sufficient to blow the rest of your Jeremiad into smithereens; it proves that the force was and is there and at work and it is only your sweating Herculean labour that prevents you feeling it. Also it is the trickle that gives assurance of the possibility of the downpour. One has only to go on and by one's patience deserve

the downpour or else, without deserving, stick on till one gets it. In Yoga itself the experience that is a promise and foretaste but gets shut off till the nature is ready for the fulfilment is a phenomenon familiar to every Yogin when he looks back on his past experience. Such were the brief visitations of Ananda you had some time before. It does not matter if you have not a leechlike tenacity — leeches are not the only type of Yogins. If you can stick anyhow or get stuck that is sufficient. The fact that you are not Sri Aurobindo (who said you were?) is an inept irrelevance. One needs only to be oneself in a reasonable way and shake off the hump when it is there or allow it to be shaken off without clinging to it with a “leechlike tenacity” worthy of a better cause.

All the rest is dreary stuff of the tamasic ego. As there is a rajasic ego which shouts “What a magnificent powerful sublime divine individual I am, unique and peerless” (of course there are gradations in the pitch,) so there is a tamasic ego which squeaks “What an abject, hopeless, worthless, incapable, unluckily unendowed and uniquely impossible creature I am, — all, all are great, Aurobindos, Dilips, Anilkumars (great by an unequalled capacity of novel-reading and self-content, according to you), but I, oh I, oh I!” That’s your style. It is this tamasic ego (of course it expresses itself in various ways at various times, I am only rendering your present pitch) which is responsible for the Man of Sorrows getting in. It’s all bosh — stuff made up to excuse the luxury of laziness, melancholy and despair. You are in that bog just now because you have descended faithfully and completely into the inert stupidity and die-in-the-mudness of your physical consciousness which, I admit, is a specimen! But so after all is everybody’s, only there are different kinds of specimens. What to do? Dig yourself out if you can; if you can’t, call for ropes and wait till they come. If God knows what will happen when the Grace descends, that is enough, isn’t it? That you don’t know is a fact which may be baffling to your — well, your intelligence, but is not of great importance — any more than your supposed unfitness. Who ever was fit, for that matter — fitness and unfitness are only a way of speaking; man is unfit and a

misfit (so far as things spiritual are concerned) — in his outward nature. But within there is a soul and above there is Grace. “This is all you know or need to know” and, if you don’t, well, even then you have at least somehow stumbled into the path and have got to remain there till you get haled along it far enough to wake up to the knowledge. Amen. 20–21 January 1936

*

How is it that people find my poetry difficult? Dilip used to say that it usually passed a little over his head. I suspect that only Nolini and Arjava get the hang of it properly. Of course many appreciate when I have explained it to them — but otherwise they admire the beauty of individual phrases without grasping the many-sided whole the phrases form. This morning Prem-anand, Vijayrai and Nirod read my *Agni*. None of them caught the precise relevances, the significant connections of the words and phrases of the opening lines:

Not from the day but from the night he’s born,
 Night with her pang of dream — star on pale star
 Winging strange rumour through a secret dawn.
 For all the black uncanopied spaces mirror
 The brooding distance of our plumbless mind.

In the rest of the poem too they generally failed to get the true point of felicity which constitutes poetic expression. My work is not surrealist: I put meaning into everything, not intellectualism but a coherent vision worked out suggestively in various detail. Is there some peculiarity in my turn of imagination or in my English, which baffles Indian readers especially?

It is precisely because what you put in is not intellectualism or a product of mental imagination that your poetry is difficult to those who are accustomed to a predominantly mental strain in poetry. One can grasp fully only if one has some clue to what you put in, either the clue of personal experience or the clue of a sympathetic insight. One who has had the concrete experience of the consciousness as a night with the stars coming out and the sense of the secret dawn can at once feel the force of these two lines, as one who has had experience of the mind as a wide

space or infinity or a thing of distances and expanses can fathom those that follow. Or even if he has had, not these experiences, but others of the same order, he can feel what you mean and enter into it by a kind of identification. Failing this experience, a sympathetic insight can bring the significance home; certainly, Nolini and Arjava who write poems of the inner vision and feeling must have that, moreover their minds are sufficiently subtle and plastic to enter into all kinds of poetic vision and expression. Premanand and Vijayrai have no such training; it is natural that they should find it difficult. Nirod ought to understand, but he would have to ponder and take some trouble before he got it; night with her labour of dream, the stars, the bird-winging, the bird-voices, the secret dawn are indeed familiar symbols in the poetry he is himself writing or with which he is familiar; but his mind seeks usually at first for precise allegories to fit the symbols and is less quick to see and feel by identification what is behind them — it is still intellectual and not concrete in its approach to these things, although his imagination has learned to make itself their transcribing medium. That is the difficulty, the crux of imaged spiritual poetry; it needs not only the fit writer but the fit audience — and that has yet to be made.

But what about Dilip? Arjava's poems simply frighten him but mine too he finds difficult. Everybody feels at home in Harin's poetry, though I am sure that often, if I catechised them, I would find the deepest felicities missed. Perhaps my tendency to pack too much meaning into my words becomes a difficulty in others, but would they have the same difficulty with Bengali poetry?

Dilip wrote to me in recent times expressing great admiration for Arjava's poems and wanting to get something of the same quality into his own poetic style. But in any case Dilip has not the mystic mind and vision — Harin also. In quite different ways they receive and express their vision or experience through the poetic mind and imagination — even so because it expressed something not usual, Dilip's poetry has had a difficulty in getting itself recognised except by people who were able to give the right

response. Harin's poetry deals very skilfully with spiritual ideas or feelings through the language of the emotion and the poetic imagination and intelligence — no difficulty there. As regards your poetry, it is indeed much more compressed and carefully packed with substance and that creates a difficulty except for those who are alive to the language or have become alive to subtle shades, implications, depths in the words. Even those who understand a foreign language well in the ordinary way, find it sometimes difficult to catch these in its poetry. Indications and suggestions easy to catch in one's own tongue are often missed there. So probably your last remark is founded.

14 March 1937

*

I hope people won't misunderstand what you have remarked about the mystic mind [*in the above letter*]. One's not having the mystic mind and vision does not reflect upon one's poetic excellence, even as a singer of the Spirit. As regards Harin, you had said long ago that he wrote from several planes [*see page 476*]. And surely his *Dark Well* poems come from a source beyond the poetic intelligence?

I used the word "mystic" in the sense of a certain kind of inner seeing and feeling of things, a way which to the intellect would seem occult and visionary — for this is something different from imagination and its work with which the intellect is familiar. It was in this sense that I said Dilip had not the mystic mind and vision. One can go far in the spiritual way, have plenty of spiritual experiences, spiritual knowledge, spiritual feelings, significant visions and dreams even without having this mystic mind and way of seeing things. So too one may write poetry from different planes or sources of inspiration and expressing spiritual feelings, knowledge, experiences and yet use the poetic intelligence as the thought medium which gives them shape in speech; such poems are not of the mystic type. One may be mystic in this sense without being spiritual — one may also be spiritual without being mystic; or one may be both spiritual and mystic in one. Poems ditto.

I had not in view the *Dark Well* poems when I wrote about Harin. I was thinking of his ordinary way of writing. If I remember right, the *Dark Well* poems came from the inner mind centre, some from the Higher Mind — other planes may have sent their message to his mind to put in poetic speech, but the main worker was the poetic intelligence which took what was given and turned it into something very vivid, coloured and beautiful, — but surely not mystic in the sense given above.

15 March 1937

On Bengali Poetry Written in the Ashram

I am not competent in respect to the technique of Bengali poetry. I can only follow my feeling, what I call the inner ear — so in this point I can say nothing beyond my own feeling. In your first poems written here I thought that your rhythmic movement departed sometimes from the norm — I suppose that is what they mean by ছন্দভঙ্গ? — but on a second reading my impression was, more often than not, that there was a (rhythmic) justification for the departure. I do not know whether Buddhadeva is referring to these poems or to others written before the opening of your poetic faculty here, which were poor both in expression and in rhythm. In any case, there can surely be no exception taken to your rhythm now; your mastery seems to me complete. I suppose in this province Tagore's verdict can be taken as final.

4 January 1932

*

It is a great mystery to me. Comparing Jyotirmayi's original turn, expressions, speed with her past work — what a miraculously rapid development!

But, my dear sir, it often happens like that. I believe you were not here when Dilip's poetry blossomed; but it was quite as sudden. Remember Tagore's description of him as the cripple who suddenly threw away his crutches and began to run and his astonishment at the miracle. Nishikanta too came out in much

the same way, a sudden Brahmaputra of inspiration. The only peculiarity in Jyoti's case is the source she struck — the pure mystic source.

23 August 1936

Comments on the Work of Poets of the Ashram

Dilip Kumar Roy

...যে-বারিধার ভরে তড়াগ-নদী হ্রদ,
তারেই ফিরায়া বারিদ-রূপে ধরাতল;
যে-রশ্মিটি বক্ষে ধরে কোকনদ
ফুটায় তারেই গন্ধরূপে সমুচ্ছল ।

ধন্য হব প্রাণটি আজি ঢেলে তাই,
তোর-দেওয়া-দান তোর পদে সমর্পণে,
আর কিসে বল পূজতে পারি?—সর্বদাই
গঙ্গাপূজা গঙ্গাজলের তর্পণে ।

It is again a beautiful poem that you have written,¹ but not better than the other. Why erect mental theories and suit your poetry to them whether your father's or Tagore's? I would suggest to you not to be bound by either, but to write as best suits your own inspiration and poetic genius. I imagine that each of them wrote in the way suited to his own inspiration and substance and, as is the habit of the human mind, put that way forward as a general rule for all. You have developed an original poetic turn of your own, quite unlike your father's and not by any means a reflection of Tagore's. Besides, there is now as a result of your sadhana a new quality in your work, a power of expressing with great felicity a subtle *psychic* delicacy and depth of thought and emotion which I have not seen elsewhere in modern Bengali verse. If you insist on being rigidly simple and direct as a mental rule, you might spoil something of the subtlety of the expression, even if the delicacy of the substance remained. Obscurity, artifice, rhetoric have to be avoided, but for the rest follow the inner movement. . . .

¹ Gangāpūjā Gangājāle, a poem of twenty-one stanzas, the last two of which are reproduced above. —Ed.

I think I prefer the original form of your penultimate verse. I did not myself find it ambiguous and it has a native glow of colour in it which the second version misses — at least, so it seems to me on a comparative reading.²

*

I have just finished hearing the second act of your drama on Chaitanya;³ there is much fine poetry in it and the dramatic interest of the dialogue and of the presentation of character seems to me considerable. We have not had time yet to read the last act; we shall do that tomorrow and then I can write about your drama with more finality, but it is already turning into a fine play. As for the historical question, I do not consider that any objections which might be raised from that standpoint would have much value. Poetry, drama, fiction also are not bound to be historically accurate; they cannot indeed develop themselves successfully unless they deal freely with any historical material they may choose to include or take for their subject. One can be faithful to history if one likes but even then one has to expand and deal creatively with characters and events, otherwise the work will come to nothing or little. In many of his dramas Shakespeare takes names from history or local tradition, but uses them as he chooses; he places his characters in known countries and surroundings, but their stories are either his own inventions, or the idea only is borrowed from facts and the rest is of his own making; or else he indulges in pure fantasy and cares nothing even for geographical accuracy or historical possibility. It is true that sometimes he follows closely the authorities he had at his disposal, such as Holinshed or another and in plays like *Julius Caesar* he sticks to the main events and keeps many of the details, but not so as to fetter the play of his imagination. So I don't think you need worry at all about either historians or biographers, even if *Chaitanya Charitamrita* could be regarded as a

² These are the first and last paragraphs of a letter that was subsequently revised. The revised version is published on page 568. — Ed.

³ Dilip Kumar Roy, *Sri Chaitanya: A Drama in Three Acts* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1950).

biography. That is all, I think, for the present. I shall write again after hearing the third act of your drama. 21 January 1950

*

We have finished reading your *Chaitanya*. The third act which is the most remarkable of the three confirms the impression already made by the other two of a very fine and successful play well-written and constructed with many outbursts of high poetry and outstanding in its dramatic interest and its thought substance. The third is original in its design and structure, especially its idea, admirably conceived and worked out, of a whole scene of action with many persons and much movement shown in the vision of a single character sitting alone in her room; it was difficult to work out but it has fitted in extremely well. It has also at the same time a remarkable combination of the three unities of the Greek drama into which this distant scene, though not too distant, manages to dovetail very well, — the unity of one place, sometimes one spot in the Greek play or a small restricted area, one time, one developing action completed in that one time and spot, an action rigorously developed and unified in its interest. Indeed, the play as a whole has this unity of action in a high degree.

Advocates of the old style drama might object to the great length of the discussions as detrimental to compactness and vividness of dramatic interest and dramatic action and they might object too that the action, — though this does not apply to the Jagai Madhai episode, — is more subjective and psychological than the external objective succession of happenings or interchanges represented on a stage would seem to demand; this was the objection made to Shaw's most characteristic and important play. But where the dramatic interest is itself of a subjective and psychological character involving more elaboration of thought and speech than of rapid or intensive happenings and activities, this kind of objection is obviously invalid; what matters is how the subjective interest, the play or development of ideas, or if high ideals are involved that call to the soul, is presented and made effective. Here it is great spiritual ideals and their action on the mind and lives of human beings that are put

before us and all that matters is how they are presented and made living in their appeal. Here there is, I think, full success and that entirely justifies the method of the drama.

For the rest I have only heard once rapidly read the play in three acts and it is not possible with that short reading to pass judgment on details of a purely literary character, so on that I can only give my general impression. A drama has to accommodate itself to different levels and intensities of expression proper to the circumstances and different characters, moods and events; but here too, I think, the handling is quite successful. I believe the verdict must be, from every point of view, an admirable *Chaitanya*.
23 January 1950

Harindranath Chattopadhyaya

I can understand very well what Suhrawardy objects to in Harin's poetry, though his expression of it is absurdly exaggerated ("trash"), and he may be right in thinking it an exotic in English literature; but I am under the impression that Harin will stand in spite of that, though he has still to write something so sovereign in its own kind as to put all doubt out of court; but, even as it is, the poetic quality of his work appears to me undeniable.
1 October 1932

*

Harin's new poems are a little difficult to follow sometimes because they render a special form of experience — but they are very powerful and genuine. He has the eye of one who can *see* in the occult sense.
3 September 1933

*

Do poets like Harin feel more than others or is it rather that they simply express themselves better?

It depends on the poet. Harin expresses what he sees through feeling, perception or actual vision — he was strongly impressed and he wrote. But it is quite possible that the word written may

bring a stronger feeling or more vivid and extended experience to some reader than anything the poet actually felt.

21 September 1933

*

The following lines from one of Harin's poems seem to indicate an overmind view of the worlds:

Whatever I contact I sum
Up in an instant as my own, —
All life around me I become:
A rarified immense Alone. . . .

And slowly in myself I seem
Infinitudes of worlds and men.

Yes, it is the overmind view — but it can be felt in any of the higher planes (intuition, illumined or higher mind); something of it can be thrown by reflection even into the liberated mind and vital—I mean when there comes into them the sense of the cosmic Self, the cosmic Mind and vital etc. and they are no longer shut up within individual limits.

9 July 1934

*

It appears that Thompson, the English Sannyasi, told Jaswant that Harin's poetry was all of the old kind and that now people in England were doing marvels and wonders which left all such old fashioned stuff in the shade. So far as I know this modern poetry in English, it is mostly second rate decadent stuff without form or true rhythm or else without greatness or emotion, seeking only to be new and not seeking to be great or true. There are exceptions but few in number.

17 July 1934

*

Harmony

. . . What ways shall baulk
These feet that have with Thee begun to walk
The only Way, the shining lonely Way
Leading out of the darkness and the clay

Into the sweet invulnerable bliss
Of inevitable [*changed to irrevocable*] apotheosis?

The defect you point to in the last lines of *Harmony* was an obvious flaw and the change was necessary. In any case “irrevocable” is better than “inevitable” — it has more depth and power of significance. These poems mark a very distinct advance on the earlier ones in the “Rose of God”;⁴ those carried a slight sense of seeking and uncertainty, a new inspiration still feeling after its right diction, force of expression, rhythmic movement, finding them on the whole but not altogether. Here there is in all these respects an assured handling and full values. The new manner is very different from the “Bird of Fire”⁵s — in place of the rush and volume there is a subdued but very full richness of substance and subtlety of expression and a much more deliberately felicitous choice of word and phrase. This creates a quite different colour, tone and atmosphere.

18 January 1935

*

Reverie

. . . Then my heart within me cries
To the skies:

“Art thou jealous, God above!
Of our love?”

“Dost Thou grieve to see us stand
Hand in hand,

“On the painted shore of life,
Man and wife,

“Full of dreaming, full of fire
And desire?”

Blossomed His immaculate voice:
“I rejoice

⁴ *The name of the series of poems in which Harmony occurs. This and an earlier series, “The Bird of Fire”, were named after poems written by Sri Aurobindo. Neither series was published. — Ed.*

“In the sorrow of the sod,
I am God! . . .

Desert

Floated noontides of spirit-austerities nakedly
burning on every side
While I stand like a straight tall tree in the
centre of Time, a desert bare,
High up, suspended, the full sun seems an image of One
who is golden-eyed,
With shimmering beams for arrowy lashes which pierce
like liquid points through the air. . . .

I shall see about “The Jealous God” [*published as Reverie*]; I remember to have read some poems in which you “trifled with Divinity” with great poetic effect, but the suggestions were quite extreme enough to startle A.E. into remonstrance; I imagine the Divinity himself read them with much aesthetic pleasure and a gracious smile. 30 January 1935

*

I have seen the poems marked by you — they are certainly among the best you have written before you came here. I have looked carefully at the “Jealousy of God”; it has much poetic beauty throughout. The idea of the Divine jealousy is a very apt imagination and serves to carry the meaning of the poem beyond the earth-limits to the beyond — as such it is striking and legitimate. But it has to be taken as a God constructed out of universal appearances by the lover’s mood — it is evidently not A. E.’s Divinity, so A. E. need not have been in pain for him — and as such any objections (I don’t know precisely what they may be) are out of court. I should like to read *Forgiveness* again before I pronounce as between Binyon and Amal. There is no bathos in the *Desert*; it has not the sustained level of some other poems, but throughout there is much imagination and colour and many fine lines, not only at the close.

P.S. I have looked again at *Forgiveness* [*text of poem not avail-*

able], — both Binyon and Amal have some foundation for their opinions. It is an exceedingly fine poem and quite perfect in its expression of the underlying idea or rather psychic perception of an occult truth hidden from the surface mind. I don't see anything fanciful in it or discern what is according to Amal fancy and what genuine imagination — if you look at it with the surface intellect the whole thing is a mere fancy or else a fine imagination, but if you look at it with the psychic perception there is neither, only a truth of behind the veil. *But* — it is here that Amal is right, the two closing lines are a terrible anticlimax; they spoil the perfection altogether. 31 January 1935

*

Harin has sent me your remarks about his *Forgiveness* and *Reverie* . . . *Forgiveness* seems to suffer by an omission of a line or two which might give its psychic perception a force even in the domain of the outer mind. Harin perhaps tried to give this force in the “clod” – “God” conclusion, but the words there are not only bathetic but also insufficiently suggestive — they do not suggest however crudely that it is the *Divine* who is “forgiving” man *through* everything, or better still, that it is the Divine in everything who is forgiving man. What do you think?

I do not at all agree with what you say. For the truth of the poem it is not necessary to bring in the Divine — the two last lines are quite unnecessary — it is sufficient to know that there is a consciousness in things even the most material. There is no question of imagination — except in the reader who ought to have sufficient imagination to feel the profundities behind — it is a deep perception of an occult truth. I find the expression of it perfect.

Now *Reverie*. Is there any indication in the poem that the God spoken of is not the *sole* Divinity? . . . For the time being there is no God but the jealous God — all Godhead is seen as a jealousy directed against human love and happiness. It was this that drew from A.E. that remark: he could find nowhere in the poem the distinction you make between the time and essential Godhead and a construction out of universal appearances. . . .

Do you wish me to drop the sentence altogether?

If Harin had indicated that the God spoken of was not the sole Divinity, he would have spoiled the poem. For the purposes of the poem he has to be spoken of as the sole Divinity. Why must we take the poem as an exercise in philosophy? A poem is a poem, not a doctrine. It expresses something in the poet's mind or his feeling. If it agrees with the total truth or the highest truth of the Universe, so much the better, but we cannot demand that of every poet and every poem. I do not ask you to expunge the sentence, if it expresses your feeling with regard to the *Reverie*. Much is given from the purely aesthetic standpoint even if a poet were to assert a false doctrine such as a malevolent God creating a painful universe. That is, if it were a fine poem, I would enjoy and praise it — although it would be there too an appearance of the universe but approached by putting it forward as a doctrine.

1 February 1935

*

Look at Harin's poetry. We're so ecstatic over it here, but outside he hardly gets a good audience; not even Krishnaprem seems to like his poetry.

I don't think I can put as much value on Krishnaprem's literary judgments as on his comments on Yoga etc. Some of his criticisms astonished me. For instance he found fault with Harin for using rhymes which Shelley uses freely in his best poems.

You must remember also that Harin's poetry has been appreciated by some of the finest English writers like Binyon and De la Mare. But anyway all growing writers (unless they are very lucky) meet with depreciation and criticism at first until people get accustomed to it. Perhaps if Harin had published his poems under the name let us say of Harry Chatto he would have succeeded by this time and no one would have talked of Oriental ineptness.

10 December 1935

*

When he was here, Harin wrote things full of psychic perception, like

Infinitude in form!
 Illimitable Power and Love conjoint!
 Thy utter peace takes all the world by storm!

Now he has gone back to his old ways and seems to have forgotten the great visions he had. Do you think the poetry he wrote here was not really his, but was prepared by beings of a higher plane and Harin simply wrote it down?

Yes — that is, Harin was a medium, the poetry came in to him from a plane which he did not possess; also whatever visions or experiences he had were poured into him by the Mother. But his personal being remained without any radical uplifting or alteration.

29 October 1936

The Sources of Inspiration of Harin and of Arjava

We were wondering from what plane Harin gets his poetry. We should also like to know from what plane Arjava has his source of inspiration. And is it possible to tell us in brief what peculiarity of vision and style each of us has?

I doubt whether I can enter into all that just now or whether it would be useful — it would mean a critical appreciation of all of you for which I have no time (I have some poems to finish and some things to write on Yoga which are waiting for a long time, so I cannot deviate into anything like that). All I can say is that Arjava writes most often from the plane of inner thought and occult vision (the plane indicated in Yoga by the forehead centre). As for Harin, I can't say, he varies and most often writes from several planes at a time — so it is impossible to define.

2 December 1933

Arjava (J. A. Chadwick)

An Afternoon

Earth-fashioned hush, dream-woken trees becalmed
 On fields entranced, on sea of frozen sound

Rimmed by faint watchers billowing haze-embalmed,
Whose legions vast our dream-like raft surround.
Nature looks strange. Strange that, e'en so, she's found
Closer to man. The dumb do voiceless meet,
Babel avoiding. See, — the very ground
Is silence-drenched — untrodden by earth's feet.
On such a stillness might leap forth the Word,
On such sink down to rest Creative Power:
All those six days through which the Work occurred
Revolved round Rest, enshrined a silent bower.
Earth's many melodies all are on Silence weaved.
Sleep foretells dawn's fanfare. And peace is toil achieved.

You have a beginning of power of poetic speech, but it is quite unfinished and the technique is not there.

There are three defects in your verses —

(1) Failure of rhythm. In this poem the rhythm is laboured and heavy; there are often too many ponderous syllables packed together — especially the last line, first half, — it is so heavy with packed long syllables that it can hardly move. What rhythm there is is too staccato, not varied enough or varied in the wrong way, sometimes a conventional ineffective way, sometimes by adopting an impossible metrical movement (this last more in the other poem than here).

(2) The style in this poem is too laboured, as if you had tried to pack the expression overmuch, and gives a slow heavy movement to the sense as well as to the verse. There is an occasional tendency to obscurity of expression (more in the other poem than here) due probably to the same reason or sometimes to a rather recondite allusiveness as if you expected the reader to understand the thoughts passing in you — without your either expressly stating them or else suggesting them by some perfectly significant word or sound.

(3) A certain habit of prose-structure in the form given to the thought comes up from time to time, e.g. in the fifth and eleventh lines of this poem, and sometimes in the choice of words e.g. “occurred” in the latter line.

At the same time there is not only the potency of speech at least in promise, but some promise also of a rhythmical faculty struggling to be born. April 1931

*

Lift the Stone

Before the chronicles of time began
 Or sundering space her canopy unfurled,
 The uncreated Over-Thought had plan
 Itself to lose — self-offered, form a world.
 Smooth as untrodden snow the gleaming Host,
 Fraught with all history, ringed by opal pyx,
 Shone through eternity rays innermost
 'Pon⁵ all symbolic forms that intermix
 Silence of Heaven with lispings speech. God takes
 His very substance that from Beauty came;
 Then with world-urging power He freely breaks
 The bread that builds the fabric of His Name.
 Seven great realms the fragments make; and we
 In meanest dust may touch Divinity.

You seem to me to have acquired already the three most important elements of poetic excellence.

(1) Mastery of the rhythmic form — at any rate of the right rhythm and building of the sonnet form you are using.

(2) A just felicity and firm construction of the thought architecture proper to the sonnet.

(3) A very considerable power of harmonious and effective poetic diction and suggestive image.

The last seven lines are truly very fine poetry — but the whole sonnet is remarkable in form and power. 6 May 1931

*

⁵ Why not "On"; it would be more euphonious.

The Valley of the Fleece

A windless eve in a quiet coomb;
Rock-rose yellow and golden broom.
Sandmartins wheel aloft
Watching day's goblet quaffed
By the priestess, Venus-adorned, rising from eastern tomb.

A dream-laden wind from the sky escorts
The starry ships of the Argonauts.
Sandmartin stirs in the hole;
Peeps out one guardian troll —
“Will they carry our golden fleece back to the day-break
ports?”

It is a very beautiful and exquisite lyric; I would not dream of spoiling it by suggesting any change.

*

Your scansion of the poem *The Valley of the Fleece* is on the whole correct, I think, although in one or two places — especially the two you select — there *might* be a difference of opinion. But it seems to me the classical short long \sim — is not a sufficient notation for the intricate stress + quantity system of the English rhythm. There are several syllable values intermediate between the long and the short and these count very much in the management of a line or a series of lines. Much of the subtler effects in the beauty of rhythm of an English poem is due to a skilful though often not quite intellectually conscious handling of these intermediate values — it is often in the hands of a born harmonist more an instinctive or an inspired than a deliberately purposeful skill. But for a conscious handling I should like to see a system of weightage (to take a word from current politics) allowed for syllables that are not pure longs and shorts or are not used as such in the line. One could possibly invent three additional signs \sim , \sim , ∞ , the first for longer, the second for shorter intermediates, the third for pure shorts weighted by a meeting of several consonants after them. To give some examples from your poem — *rōckrōse* and *wheel ā*(loft), present two

different cases, both trochees, equal in *metrical*, but not equal in *rhythmic* value. Again *sāndmārtin* has the same metrical but a different rhythmical value from *bāck tō thē* (day-break); the second is a pure dactyl, the first I would call an impure, mixed or weighted dactyl. Again *ēāstern* marked by you as a trochee, I would almost mark as a spondee — certainly even, if I had to use it in one of my hexameters; but we can compromise the difference by marking it in my proposed notation as an impure or weighted trochee. The most striking example however is in the line,

Wāchīng dāy's | gōblēt | quāffed, |

so marked by me, not to complicate too much, but it could also be notated:

Wāchīng dāy's | gōblēt | quāffed. |

Here most people would take the first foot as a dactyl and I did so myself when I read it, assuming it to be identical in metrical, though not in rhythmic value with the preceding line. But your scansion also is defensible and legitimate; it depends upon the intonation one gives to the line. For that is another (very useful and valuable) complication of English rhythm, the part intonation plays in varying lines with an identical metre or even modifying the metre. All these differences (and the multiple possibilities that go with them) arise from the play of the language with these weighted syllables which can be made long or short according to the distribution of the voice — this foot being at will a dactyl or anapaest but a very impure dactyl or a very impure anapaest. I don't know if I have made myself clear, — perhaps more examples would be needed to justify my system, — but I lay stress on it because I have found the recognition of these weighted syllables and their importance for rhythmic variation, an indispensable aid (not the notation but the mental feeling of them) in evolving in my later (unpublished) poetry a new distinct individuality in blank verse and the very possibility of a successful English hexameter. It is their non-recognition and the clumsy use or misuse of weighted dactyls and false spondees

that seems to me to have been at the root of the failure to evolve a sound English hexameter; all that has been achieved is a make-believe or a clumsy makeshift.

To return to your poems — I may say that *The Valley* is a very remarkable poem from the rhythmical point of view, quite apart from the exact scansion one gives to it, by the free and always felicitous use of the many elements of variation possible in the language, metrical variation, intonation, weightage, with others more unnameable and subtle. I find that in lyrical poems your *inner* ear which determines these things, seems to be — at least has been in the poems you have yet written — most felicitously infallible. It is only in the less lyrical metres that you have a less inborn gift and made mistakes at the beginning. Even if you do not find models, I imagine that this inner ear in you will find its way if you go on experimenting under its guidance.

Incidentally, I quite approve of your first suggestion about “ā dreām-lā|dēn wīnd.” I have often thought, why not make some more liberal use of classical feet like the cretic, dochmiac combination etc. (I have tried to do so occasionally to vary my latest type of blank verse.) Here to speak of the first foot as a spondee is to force things a little. To treat it as a dochmiac movement at once puts it on the true footing — or so it seems to me.

I have written nothing about the other poem yet, because I was perplexed a little by the choice between two systems of scansion. In the old style metrics it would be:

Red̄ lā|dybird, | black lā|dybird,
 Ladybird | sablē and | gold,
 Lowly you | swing, | flutter your | wing,
 And | fare to the | fete on the | wold.

Yours is more new and in consonance with the modern way of looking at lyrical movement. But whichever way you take it, the melody is exquisite — and the language and substance also.

17 December 1931

New-Risen Moon's Eclipse

Harsh like the shorn head high of a gaunt grey-hooded friar
 Who fears the beauty and use of sculptured limbs
 (Branding the sculptor-archetype a liar),
 O moon but lately risen from the foam where the seamew
skims —
 Form that a wan light cassocks, grace that a tonsure dims.
 Joy that the leaden curse is rolled away to leave the golden
 Tresses of earth-transforming gramarye
 Whereby our wildered flesh-fret is enfolden —
 O fair as the foam-fashioned goddess that awoke from the
wondering sea,
 Love with the earth-shroud lifted, star from the shade set free!

The poem is, on the contrary, a very good one. The one thing that can be said against it is that you need to go through it twice or thrice before the full beauty of the thought, rhythm and imagery comes to the surface, — but is that a demerit? Poems that are too easily read, as a French critic puts it, are not always the best. I myself doubted a little at first reading about the rhythm of the three first lines of the second verse, but that was because I was listening with the outer ear, my attention having been dulled by much dealing with miscellaneous correspondence before I turned to the poem; but as soon as it got inside to the inner ear, I felt the subtlety and rareness of the movement. There is a great beauty and significant force in the imagery and a remarkably successful fusion of the supporting object (physical symbol) into the revealing or transmuting image and the image into the object, which is part of the highest art of symbolic or mystic poetry. Heard before? If you refer to elements of the rhythm, words or phrases here and there, or images used before though not in the same way, where is the poetry in so old and rich a literature as the English that altogether escapes this suspicion of “heard before”? Absolute originality in that sense is rare, almost non-existent; we are all those who went before us with something new added that is ourselves, and it is this something new added that transfigures and is the real originality. In this sense there is a

great impression of original power in the beauty of the first verse and hardly less in the second. It seems to me very successful, and “triviality” is the description that can be least applied to it while it could lack interest only to those who have no mind for poetry of this character. March 1932

*

Does not a compound like “flesh-fret” recall such typically Hopkinsian compounds as “bugle-blue”, “cuckoo-call”, “fast-flying” or “dapple-dawn-drawn”?

Surely, one cannot be accused of being Hopkinsian, merely because of a successfully copious alliteration and an alliterative compound? These things have happened before Hopkins and will go on happening after him even if he is no longer read. It may be that these turns came to Arjava because of the influence of Hopkins, — to that only he can plead Yes or No. What I say is that the way he uses them is *not* Hopkinsian, not Swinburnian, but Arjavan. “Flesh-fret” has not the least resemblance to “bugle-blue” or “cuckoo-call” or “fast-flying”, still less to “dapple-dawn-drawn” except the mere external fact of the alliterative structure; its spiritual quality is quite different. To take an idea or a formation or anything else from a former poet — as Molière took his “bien” wherever he found it, — is common to every maker of verse; we don’t write on a blank slate virgin of the past. Indian sculpture or architecture may have taken this form from the Greeks or that form from the Persians; but neither is in the least degree Achaemenian or Hellenistic. 1 April 1932

*

Twilight Hush

A forest | of shadows | gliding fast,
Magnetwise, | as drawn on | by the sun
For wester|ly cōnvergīng | sunset-goal —
Zenith past, | how eeri|ly they run!

Ō̄n p̄aths that | meander | 'cross the sky,
 Cloudy-maned | the centaurs | bend afar
 Moon-bow that | is aiming, | silver-taut,
 Arrows made | of silence | at a star.

This seems to me successful. The last stanza especially is very beautiful in idea and expression and rhythm. 19 October 1933

*

The second stanza has “that” repeated in the first and third lines in the same metrical place; is this not a defect?

It is a slight defect, but it is a defect.

Though *in practice* I am still a long way from your subtly balanced rhythm, I think I see *in theory* one at least of the secrets. There must be very little partition of *words* between two feet — and still less of feet between two successive *rhythmic phrases*; that is to say, the pauses between successive rhythmic phrases must mark the ending of a complete foot, and in almost all cases the foot must end with the syllable at the end of a word.

Yes, you have seen the main principle.

Does the modulation in the second foot of line 3 (a third paeon in place of an amphibrach) interfere with the metrical movement I am in quest of?

It depends on the character of the rhythm you want to embody. If it is the purely lyrical as in the *Trance*, then it interferes — if it is a graver and slower movement, then not.

The whole difficulty of transferring classical metres or the classical quantitative system into English seems to me to hinge on this great difference that quantities and quantitative feet in Greek and Latin are clear-cut settled unmistakable things — while in English quantity is loose, uncertain, plastic. How to

solve the problem? If we try to follow the same unmistakably exact quantitative system in English (which means a coincidence of feet and rhythmic phrases), will not monotony be inevitable? On the other hand if we allow plasticity, free modulations, etc., will not there be a metrical chaos and the absence of all clear character in the rhythm? It is the problem that has to be solved — how to get through between Scylla and Charybdis. My own line of approach is to try and reproduce the classical metres as exactly as possible in English *first* and then see what plasticity, what modulations, what devices to avoid monotony can be discovered — and how far they can be used without destroying the fundamental character of the metre. In *Trance* I avoided all experiments, using the pure form only — and the sole device used to prevent the effect of an unrelieved monotone was the use of rhyme. I tried even to accept the monotone and make it a part of the charm of the rhythm, by suiting it to the treatment of the subject — a single tone thrice repeated. This involved a purely lyrical treatment — the brevity was also essential. I not only observed the principle of equating the rhythmic phrases with the feet, but I was careful to use unmistakably short quantities for the classic shorts. Thus my closing anapaest was a true unmistakable anapaest in all the six lines where it came. In your last attempt (*Twilight Hush*) you have done the first and third lines perfectly and the effect is very good, but in the second line of the second stanza your “bend afar” does not give the effect of an anapaest because it comes after an unaccented syllable and one inevitably reads it as a cretic. There were many of these doubtful feet — doubtful on the classic principle — in your first two attempts. I state simply what has happened — and the problem underlying it. How to solve the problem completely I shall yet have to see. It can only come by experiment and observation — *ambulando*.

*

Across triumphant acres of the night
Slow-swung pinions of the unborn dream
To the hidden daybreak pursue primeval flight.

Chartless unfrontiered aeons of the dark,
 On their lonely silence breaks no morning theme,—
 Our dreams have held the Promethean spark.

But half descried, the dawn-lit peaks of joy,—
 There, living hues shall blend in a rainbow stream,
 And there no sundering thought can enter or destroy.

I feel rather oppressed by the contrast between the genuineness and depth and strength of the feeling in my experience, and the surely very inadequate means of conveying any of it to the reader. Words like “triumphant . . . night”, “hidden daybreak”, “lonely silence”, “sundering thought” are surely being entrusted with a task which can never be carried out with a reader who does not go out far more than half way to meet the emotional significance?

It is always the difficulty of expression that words can only suggest these deeper things though they can suggest them with a certain force — even a creative force — but there must be the receptivity in the reader also. Your phrases “triumphant acres of the night” etc. have a considerable power in them; all the lines indeed are such that the significance could hardly be better conveyed, but still the full significance (the suggestion not merely of the idea, but of the experience behind it) can only be got if the reader listens not only with the mind, but with the inner sense and feeling.

8 January 1935

*

Totalitarian

Night was closing on the traveller
 When he came
 To the empty eerie courtyard
 With no name.
 Loud he called; no echo answered;
 Nothing stirred:
 But a crescent moon swung wanly,
 White as curd.
 When he flashed his single sword-blade

Through the gloom,
None resisted — till he frantic,
Filled with doom,
Hurled his weapon through the gloaming.
Took no aim;
Saw his likenesses around him
Do the same:
Viewed a thousand swordless figures
Like his own —
Then first knew in that cold starlight
Hell, alone.

Exceedingly original and vivid — the description with its economy and felicity of phrase is very telling. 11 October 1936

*

My appreciation of the effect of Arjava's poem, especially its first eight lines, was a little staled by the memory of De la Mare's *Listeners*.

De la Mare's poem has a delicate beauty throughout and a sort of daintily fanciful suggestion of the occult world. I do not know if there is anything more. The weakness of it is that it reads like a thing imagined — the images and details are those that might be written of a haunted house on earth which has got possessed by some occult presences. Arjava must no doubt have taken his starting point from a reminiscence of this poem, but there is nothing else in common with De la Mare — his poem is an extraordinarily energetic and powerful vision of an occult world and every phrase is intimately evocative of the beyond as a thing vividly seen and strongly lived — it is not on earth, this courtyard and this crescent moon, we are at once in an unearthly world and in a place somewhere in the soul of man and all the details, sparing, with a powerful economy of phrase and image and brevity of movement but revelatory in each touch as opposed to the dim moonlight suggestiveness supported by a profusion of detail and long elaborating development in De la Mare — of course that has its value also — make us entirely feel ourselves

there. I therefore maintain my description “original” not only for the latter part of the poem but for the opening also. It is not an echo, it is an independent creation. Indeed the difference of the two poems comes out most strongly in these very lines.

. . . the faint moonbeams on the dark stair,
 That goes down to the empty hall,
 . . . the dark turf,
 'Neath the starred and leafy sky

are a description of things on earth made occult only by the presence of the phantom listeners. But

. . . the empty eerie courtyard
 With no name

or

. . . the crescent moon swung wanly,
 White as curd

are not earthly, they belong to a terrible elsewhere, while the later part of the poem carries this elsewhere into a province of the soul. That is the distinction and makes the perfect successfulness of Arjava's poem. 13 October 1936

*

The Flower of Light

This whiteness has no withering;
 When petals fall,
 Miraculous swan's-down through the air,
 A hundred petals build the crowning flower
 Still, nor all
 Dissevering gusts can make that stateliness less fair.
 The bee can settle in its heart of light —
 O wingèd soul;
 But we with fettered feet and soiled with clay
 Gaze through bewildered tears
 At that quintessenced goal,
 Craving one prized petal-touch may light on our dismay.

I have been long an admirer of Nolini's poems in free verse. Does this experiment of mine fall between two stools, creating expectations of regularity which it then disappoints — and sounding more like a metrical medley or "salad" than one piece of rhythmic movement?

Well, it is not free verse as people understand it. But it is verse which the usual thing is not and at the same time it is free. I find it fascinating — the rhythm is subtle, delicate and faultless. I don't know enough of modern (contemporary) poetry to be sure that it is a new form you have found, but at any rate it is one well worth following out. It enables one to vary the length and movement, form and distribution of rhymes as the thought and feeling need without falling into the formlessness of a prose movement — it has, that is to say, the quality of metrical poetry without its fetters. As for the poem itself, it is magnificently beautiful; it has that psychic quality — here the expression of a psychic sorrow — which is so rare and the language is luminous and felicitous all through.

1 November 1936

*

The High-flashing Fountains of Song

Subdued the light at the gray evenhush,
As the shadowy helmets of night's vague host
Make dim the East and the North and the South.
Spendthrift day keeps but a dwindling heap of gold
Low on the westward margins of the sky.
Spirit with wings of light and darkness
Sail through the fast-closing gates of the West
And bear me out of the world;
The world that is frozen music (but the performers were
faulty).

Haply the high-flashing fountains of song
Play still in Supernal Eden
And the air is a diamond undimmed by Time's
misadventures.

The unchanging light of the One, enmeshed in the
murmuring spray,

Builds all the colours of the soul.
And the speechless telling of mysteries
Leaves them in the song-hidden heart of Light.

I find this superb — in every line. The thought and language and imagery are very beautiful, but most I find that its rhythmic achievement solves entirely for the first time (it was partly done in some former poems) the problem of free verse. The object of free verse is to find a rhythm in which one can dispense with rhyme and the limitations of a fixed metre and yet have a poetic rhythm, not either a flat or an elevated prose rhythm cut up into lengths. I think this poem shows how it can be done. There is a true poetic rhythm, even a metrical beat, but without any fixity, pleasant and verging with the curve or sweep of the thought and carrying admirably its perfect poetic expression. It may not be the only way in which the problem can be solved, but it is one and a very beautiful way.

27 February 1937

Jyotirmayi

কোন	গোপন মায়ায়	তিমির-ছায়ায়
	গ্রহ শশী নীড় বাঁধে —	
নিশি	আলো-ফুল	মালা গাঁথে!
ঘন	যামিনীর কোলে	সুর-সম দোলে
	কোটি তারা —	যিরি' চাঁদে!
ওগো	স্বপন-তিরির	গীতি-দীপালির
	যে পথে পরাণ খোলে,	
কেন	প্রথর দিবসে	গগন-সরসে
	আঁখি সেই পথ ভোলে!	
কেন	কমলা লুকায়ে	ব্যথা-বীথিছায়ে
	অলকা রাগিণী সাধে!	
বুঝি	উজল প্রহরে —	সে সুখা শিহরে,
	কৌমুদী-হিয়া কাঁদে!	

I find no difficulty in the last stanza of Jyotirmayi's poem nor any in connecting it with the two former stanzas. It is a single

feeling and subjective idea or vision expressing itself in three facets. In the full night of the spirit there is a luminosity from above in the very heart of the darkness — imaged by the moon and stars in the bosom of the Night. (The night-sky with the moon (spiritual light) and the stars is a well-known symbol and it is seen frequently by sadhaks even when they do not know its meaning.) In that night of the spirit is the Dream to which or through which a path is found that in the ordinary light of waking day one forgets or misses. In the night of the spirit are shadowy avenues of pain, but even in that shadow the Power of Beauty and Beatitude sings secretly and unseen the strains of Paradise. But in the light of day the mystic heart of moonlight sorrowfully weeps, suppressed, for, even though the nectar of it is there behind, it falters away from this garish light — because it is itself a subtle thing of dream, not of conscious waking mind-nature. That is how I understand or rather try mentally to express it. In this kind of poetry it is a mistake to fix a very intellectual or a very abstract sense on what should be kept vague in outline but vivid in feeling — by mentalising one puts at once too much and too little in it.

10 June 1936

Nirodbaran

What do you say to today's poem?

দিনান্তে কল্পনাময়ী কনকদুহিতা
একাকী বসিয়া ওই বিটপী-তলায়,
সমুখিত স্বরূপের সরসী দোলায়
চেয়ে থাকে নির্নিমেষ; অতল-প্রোথিতা
নিব্বরিণী-বিদ্যুতের বিলাপ-কাহিনী
— ধমনী-শোণিতে যেন স্তম্ভিত বিষাদ —
ঢালে আলোক ঠ হ'তে সে অভিসম্পাত |
গন্ধহারা পবনের তরঙ্গবাহিনী
নিয়ে যায় তারি মন্ত্ররশ্মির ভূষণ
নিঃশব্দ উষার নীল স্বয়ম্ভু সাগরে;
নিহিত রবির লিখা অসাস্প স্পন্দন
সৃষ্টি করে ইন্দ্রজাল-মন্দ্রিত অন্তরে

অলোক রহস্য-ছবি; সে প্রোজ্জ্বল হাসি
বিধাতার মর্মঝরা স্বগন্ধিত বাঁশি |

Very fine, this time.

Well, let us put it in English — without trying to be too literal, turning the phrases to suit the English language. If there are any mistakes of rendering they can be adjusted.

At the day-end behold the Golden Daughter of Imaginations —
She sits alone under the Tree of Life —
A form of the Truth of Being has risen before her rocking there like a
lake
And on it is her unwinking gaze. But from the unfathomed Abyss
where it was buried, upsurges
A tale of lamentation, a torrent-lightning passion,
A melancholy held fixed in the flowing blood of the veins, —
A curse thrown from a throat of light.
The rivers of a wind that has lost its perfumes are bearing away
On their waves the Mantra-rays that were her ornaments
Into the blue self-born sea of a silent Dawn;
The ceaseless vibration-scroll of a hidden Sun
Creates within her, where all is a magic incantation,
A picture of the transcendent Mystery; — that luminous laughter
(Or, A mystery-picture of the Transcendent?)
Is like the voice of a gold-fretted flute flowing from the inmost heart
of the Creator.

Now, I don't know whether that was what you meant, but it is the meaning I find there. Very likely it has no head or tail, but it has a body and a very beautiful body — and I ask with Baron, why do you want to understand? why do you want to cut it up into the dry mathematical figures of the Intellect? Hang it all, sir! In spite of myself you are making me a convert to the Housman theory and Surrealism. No, Sir — feel, instand, overstand, interstand, but don't try to understand the creations of a supra-intellectual Beauty.

It is enough to feel and grasp without trying to “understand” the creations of a supra-intellectual Beauty. 17 February 1937

~~The growing~~ **A glowing** heart of day⁶
~~Is lily white~~⁷ **Woke diamond-white,**
~~Rising out of the~~ **From its prison-bed** of clay⁸
Clothed with the night.

Silent and slow and dim
~~Are its hidden~~ **Its infant** beat:
~~On its~~ **But in the** invisible rim
~~Various~~ **Worlds on worlds** meet⁹ met

And flowed upon a high
Current of thought
To an unknown ~~destiny~~ **ecstasy**
Transparence-~~shot~~ **wrought.**

Behind ~~an~~ **the** emptiness
Of light and shade
~~Dreams of a heaven-~~ **Heaven's intimate** caress
~~Are secretly laid~~ **Secretly played**

And ~~the~~ **luminous wings** eyes of stars
~~Come out of~~ **Looked from** the deep
And its Engulfing darkness bars¹⁰
~~With its~~ **Of** passion-sleep,

|| ~~Then~~ **And** voices ~~can~~ **could** be heard
|| Across the sky,
|| ~~Falling like a~~ **Calling the white** sun-word
|| ~~From~~ **Of** infinity.

|| ~~They are the~~ **Transient** voices of time
|| Fading away
|| ~~Beyond~~ **Around** the mystic chime
|| Of the heart of day.

⁶ Here and in several other places in this section, the poem as submitted to Sri Aurobindo is printed in roman type, words cancelled by him are printed in ~~strike-out~~ mode, and words added by him are printed in bold type. — Ed.

⁷ Not only cheap but gratis.

⁸ It doesn't usually.

⁹ Terribly prosaic.

¹⁰ I don't think bars ever engulf, but as it is surrealistically appropriate —

This again is a riddle! I absolutely surrendered. To whom?
Can you tell me and solve the mystery?

Not very cogent, whether realistically or surrealistically. But see how with a few alterations I have caged it. (Excuse the word, it is surrealistic). I don't put double lines as I don't want to pay too many compliments to myself. I don't say that the new version has any more meaning than the first. But significance, sir, significance! Fathomless!

As for the inspiration it was a very remarkable source you tapped — super-Blakish, but your transcription is faulty, e.g. lily-white, rising out of the clay, that horrible “various”, and constant mistakes in the last four stanzas. Only the third came out altogether right — subject to the change you yourself made of “destiny” to “ecstasy” and “shot” to “wrought”. But obviously the past tense is needed instead of the present so as to give the sense of something that has been seen. 7 July 1938

*

I have seen how your little touches have “caged” the poem.
Does it then show that if my transcription becomes perfect
some day, the whole thing will drop perfectly O.K.?

Of course. At present the mind still interferes too much, catching at an expression which will somehow approximate to the thing meant instead of waiting for the one true word. This catching is of course involuntary and the mind does it passively without knowing what it is doing — a sort of instinctive haste to get the thing down. In so doing it gets an inferior layer of inspiration to comb for the words even when the substance is from a higher one.

I didn't get the time to revise it. But even if I had revised it, do you think I could have made it better?

Not necessarily.

When a thing is not at all comprehended, how to correct? By inner feeling?

No; by getting into touch with the real source. The defects come from a non-contact or an interception by some inferior source as explained above.

Wherever alternatives came, I put them and in two places they stuck. If I try to understand the thing every bit seems ridiculous.

Because you are trying to find a mental meaning and your mind is not familiar with the images, symbols, experiences that are peculiar to this realm. Each realm of experience has its own figures, its own language, its own vision and the physical mind not catching the link finds it all absurd. At the same time the main idea in yesterday's is quite clear. The heart of day evolving from clay and night is obviously the upward luminous movement of the awakened spiritual consciousness covering the intermediate worlds (vital, mental, psychic) in its passage to the supreme Ananda (unknown ecstasy, transparence-wrought, the transparence being that well-known-to-mystics experience of the pure spiritual consciousness and existence). In the light of the main idea the last four stanzas should surely be clear — the stars and the sun being well-known symbols.

What "remarkable source", please? Inner or over?

Can't specify — as these things have no name. Inner — over also in imagery, but not what I call the overhead planes. These belong to the inner mind or inner vital or to the intuitive mind or anywhere else that is mystic. 8 July 1938

*

The breath of life is a ~~flaming~~ flame-mystery!,
It That circles ~~round~~ towards a hidden altitude,
~~Each~~ A spark, a movement ~~being a spark~~ of eternity
And every its occult seed a veiled God-hood.

Creation is a shadow child of God-delight;
Born from ~~the~~ illimitable ~~hush~~ seas of sound

~~And gains~~ It turns to its ~~primal state~~ tranquil source in the
Infinite
~~Like a wave freed from time's monotonous round.~~
 Escaping from the monotone of Time's round.
 The mystic hues Light that shines in every heart
 II Climbs towards ~~the an~~ unknown solitary Sun
~~Where they are joined to their~~ And joins its own immortal
counterpart
~~And grows into a~~ Accomplished in that timeless union.
~~Everything~~ Thus all things born passes into a divine
 Nothingness and ~~begins to bear~~ reach that single Bliss again
 III Whence they sprang like stars ~~out of~~ on a nebulous sky-line,
 IIII A fathomless beauty ~~with~~ in a sphere of pain.

This is really disappointing! Oh, the time it took! I am sure you will find plenty of hurdles.

There are indeed very difficult hurdles but I have leaped them all — only in the process the poem has got considerably reshaped. So, I don't put lines except for the few that have remained almost as they were. The last line is magnificent — the others mostly needed a revision which they don't seem to have got.

Day by day things are getting difficult, more than yoga, sir!
 My head will break one day! Be prepared, please!

Well, well, when the head is broken, a passage for a superior light is often created — so either way you gain, a safe head or an illumined one.

31 August 1938

*

In yesterday's poem you hurdled very well indeed. Your comment about the last line has comforted me very much. When I wrote it, it came like a shot; but I didn't feel its magnificence. The rhythm, word-music, etc. are not that striking. Perhaps you find some inner truth behind these things that magnifies them to you?

Well, have you become a disciple of Baron and the surrealists? You seem to suggest that significance does not matter and need not enter into the account in judging or feeling poetry! Rhythm and word music are indispensable, but are not the whole of poetry. For instance lines like these

In the human heart of Heligoland
A hunger wakes for the silver sea;
For waving the might of his magical wand
God sits on his throne in eternity,

has plenty of rhythm and word music — a surrealist might pass it, but I certainly would not. Your suggestion that my seeing the inner truth behind a line magnifies it to me, i.e. gives it a false value to me which it does not really have as poetry, may or may not be correct. But, certainly, the significance and feeling suggested and borne home by the words and rhythm are in my view a capital part of the value of poetry. Shakespeare's lines "Absent thee from felicity awhile And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain" have a skilful and consummate rhythm and word combination, but this gets its full value as the perfect embodiment of a profound and moving significance, the expression in a few words of a whole range of human world-experience. It is for a similar quality that I have marked this line. Coming after the striking and significant image of the stars on the skyline and the single Bliss that is the source of all, it expresses with a great force of poetic vision and emotion the sense of the original Delight contrasted with the world of sorrow born from it and yet the deep presence of that Delight in an unseizable beauty of things. But even isolated and taken by itself there is a profound and moving beauty in the thought, expression and rhythm of the line and it is surprising to me that anyone can miss it. It expresses it not intellectually but through vision and emotion. As for rhythm and word music, it is certainly not striking in the sense of being out of the way or unheard of, but it is perfect — technically in the variation of vowels and the weaving of the consonants and the distribution of longs and shorts, more deeply in the modulated rhythmic movement and

the calling in of overtones. I don't know what more you want
in that line.

1 September 1938

Amal Kiran (K. D. Sethna)

Out of the Unknown

Out of the Unknown, like meteor-rain
~~Glimmered across~~ **Fell glimmering on** my dark despair
 The syllables of a prophetic tongue:
 “~~O thou whose heart is~~ **O heart disconsolate,**
beauty-wrung,
~~And roams~~ **Wanderer** unsated, — not in vain
 The ~~winged~~ **floating** shadow of a melody
~~Floating in~~ **Winging through** heavenly air
~~Fell Was cast~~ on thy human happiness
 And dimmed ~~its~~ **the** eyes ~~to~~ **with** longing pain
~~With~~ **And** Brindavun's immortal memory!
 Thy life's ~~a quest~~ **quest** is not meaningless
 Though Jumuna's banks are ~~wild~~ **void** and bare;
~~For hark,~~ **Now too** a spirit-flute
~~Now wafts~~ **Conveys** again ~~such holy~~ **so holy** a calm abroad,
 That ~~on the lips of anguish~~ **even on misery's lips fall'n** mute
~~With~~ **In** unaccompanied throes
 Pale silence blossoms like a rose
 Deep-rooted in the soul's eternity.
 Rest not till thou find sanctuary
 Where Brindavun has gone behind its God.
~~There the red~~ **For there the** veil shall draw aside,
 Which hangs between thy inturned gaze
 And Him of the irradiant face:
 His musical tranquillity
 Shall once more in thy ear abide
 And all the heart-beats of thy life's increase
 Count but the starlike moments of His peace.”

[*Sri Aurobindo wrote the paragraphs published, in revised form, on pages 5 to 7 above, and continued:*]

Your present effort is slightly improved, but most of it comes from or through the outer intelligence. Only in the closing passage are there five lines from your highest source, and the rest is reasonably like what the creative intelligence in you wanted to transmit. But the “red” veil with its splash of pseudo-colour comes from the brain, not from the true source. All the opening part is an attempt of the outer intelligence to put into its own language something it did not catch in its pure form. It is in a quite different tone and speech from the close; for that is either grave and deep or of a high elevation and illumined power, but this opening is all imitative intellect stuff—romantic pseudo-colour, Shelley-Byronic, fairly well done in its own kind of stuff, but not the thing at all. I have suggested some alterations—supposing you want to give to this opening too the same tone or nearly the same—grave and deep—as the major part of the close. The alterations may seem slight to you, but in all writing, prose or poetry, indeed in all art, a few slight alterations, a touch here and a touch there can alter the whole tone and quality of a work or a passage. My alterations are meant either to set right verbal poverties or awkwardnesses or to wipe out false vital colour and give instead the gravity of the higher poetic source.

2 June 1931

*

This sonnet was more or less suggested by one written by Edward Shanks [*see pages 431–32*]. I should like to ascertain whether the seed fell on really fruitful soil or not. The form, I must admit, is not perfect, because while the sestet is Italian the octet does not correspond to the necessary abba abba.

Not only with the voice of mighty things,
 Exultant rain or swift importunate sea,
But even on the unnoticeable wings
 Of nameless birdsong I shall quest for Thee.
No fragmentary passion I aspire
 To consecrate, howe'er magnificent:
 But one glad life of mingling hours intent
Upon thy beauty, touched with self-same fire.

For, what avail great moments if their flight
 Leave the familiar day a soulless din;
 Nor give their glory a true antiphonal note
 Each wandering wind-lark; nor the common night
 Find the inward eye a placid mere wherein
 Worship holds argently the heavens afloat?

(1) This can hardly be called a sonnet; fantasy of form is inconsistent with the severe building of a sonnet. If you want a new form and wish to make it by combining the Shakespearean rhyme sequence in the octet with the Miltonic in the sestet, you *can* make that venture, but in that case you will have to transpose the fifth and sixth lines

To consecrate, howe'er magnificent, —
 No fragmentary passion I aspire,
 But one glad life of mingling hours intent
 Upon thy beauty, touched with self-same fire.

That would, to my mind, be an improvement in expression as well as in form. But the present *khichadi* is impossible.

(2) “Nor give their glory a true antiphonal note”

with its double anapaest is too jerky a movement. Anapaests and dactyls can be thrown into a modern pentameter, but they must be managed more skilfully than that. I would suggest

Nor give their glory's true antiphonal note
 Each wanderer wind-lark

(3) “Find the inward eye” is again rhythmically clumsy; especially amid so many lines of a smooth liquid movement it brings one up with a jerk like the sudden jolt of a smoothly running car.

Find the soul's gaze a placid mere wherein

or something like that would do much better.

(4) Why semi-colons after “din” and “wind-lark” instead of the expected commas?

Apart from these defects of detail, the poem is a good one; once they are mended, it becomes a fine work. 12 June 1931

*

Is this poem nearer perfection now?

“O thou who wast enamoured of earth’s bloom
And intimate fragrance and charmed throbbing voice
Of mutable pleasure now disdained by Thee —
Far-visaged wanderer, dost thou rejoice
Straining towards the empty-hearted gloom
To kiss the cold lips of Eternity?”

“Fruitless and drear has proved each carnal prize
When he who strove could bring no face of flame,
And¹¹ wild magnificence of youth’s caress...
Not with sage calm, but thrilled vast hands, I claim
The unfathomed dark which round my spirit lies —
And touch undying, rapturous Loveliness!”

The second verse is slightly better, but it is not at all equal to the first. Poetry that arrives at its aim gives the reader a sense of satisfying finality in the expression (even when the substance is insignificant); it is like an arrow that hits the target in the centre. Poetry that passes by the target or hits only the outside of it, either fails or gets a partial success, but in any case it does not carry that sense of satisfying finality. This is the difference between the two verses. 10 July 1931

*

This errant life is dear although it dies;
And human lips are sweet though they but sing
Of stars estranged from us; and youth’s emprise
Is wondrous yet, although an unsure thing.

Cloud-lucent Bliss untouched by earthiness!
I fear to soar lest tender bonds grow less

¹¹ Better repeat the “No”; it will strengthen a little these two lines, which are rather weak compared with the rest.

Beyond the waving verdure of our sighs.¹²
 If Thou desirest my weak self to outgrow
 Its mortal longings, lean down from above,
 Temper the unborn light no thought can trace,
 Suffuse my mood with a familiar glow!
 For 'tis with mouth of clay I supplicate;
 Speak to me heart to heart words intimate,
 And all Thy formless glory turn to love
 And mould Thy love into a human face!

But for this one unfortunate line a beautiful poem, one of the very best you have written. The last six lines, one may say even the last eight, are absolutely perfect. If you could always write like that, you would take your place among English poets and no low place either.¹³

July 1931

*

I was wondering whether a second such burst of quintessential romantic poetry as Coleridge's *Kubla Khan* was not possible. The day before yesterday I got some kind of inspiration and wrote the first draft of these lines that form a fragment on the same theme as that of Coleridge. But can it come anywhere near that gem?

Kubla Khan

“For thy unforgettable sake
 See my royal passion wake
 Marmoreal sleep to towering dreamery,
 In wide felicitous splendour hazed,
 With echoes magic, numberless, that throng
 Through blossoming vales, an ever-vigilant song
 Of naked waters tremulously embraced
 By shadows of my shining ecstasy! . . .

“ . . . The moon enkindles in the eyes
 A lonely virginal surprise —

¹² This line is terribly fanciful in expression. Green sighs? Sighs with branches?

¹³ For Sri Aurobindo's opinion of the final version of this poem, see pp. 203–04. — Ed.

O hasten while the warm blood runs,
To odorous gardens born for thy delight!
What memories that oppose the charm of night
Allure towards unseen magnificence
The inaccessible beauty of thy face?
Must Kubla ever in thy silence trace
The strange voice of the sacred river flowing
Beyond the lustrous hours of Xanadu
And the sweet foison of their passionate sowing,
Down to cold caverns hidden from his view,
In search of some unpathed phantasmal sea's
Remote profundities?"

I fear your inspiration has played you false — far from the quintessence, I do not find even the essence of romantic poetry here. It is not inspiring either. I do not know why this fancy has seized on you to follow in the trace of others, improving on Abercrombie, “rivalling” Coleridge, — and if to improve on Abercrombie is easy (though why anyone should try it, I don’t know), to rival Coleridge is not such an easy job, I can assure you. In any case, no good work is likely to come out of such a second-hand motive.

Let me add that this poem of Coleridge is a masterpiece, not because it is the quintessence of romantic poetry, but because it is a genuine supraphysical experience caught and rendered in a rare hour of exaltation with an absolute accuracy of vision and authenticity of rhythm. Farther, romantic poetry could be genuine in the early nineteenth century, but the attempt to walk back into it in the year of grace 1931 is not likely to be a success, it can only result in an artificial literary exercise. You have a genuine vein of poetic inspiration somewhere above your intellect which comes through sometimes when the said intellect can be induced to be quiet and the lower vital does not meddle. If I were you, I should try to find that always and make the access to it free and the transcriptions from it pure (for then your writing becomes marvellously good); that would be a truer line of progress than these exercises.

21 August 1931

Do you think my poem *Kubla Khan* will be much improved if I give it a conclusion improvised from an early, unequal, effort of mine, so that it ends:

That longing of mysterious tears
From infinite to infinite?

I write “mysterious” because Kubla, though not quite innocent of spiritual things, would not exactly agree to calling the “tears” ecstatic and thus weaken his appeal.

There is nothing more dangerous — I was going to say criminal — than to alter a perfect line or passage of poetry, especially when it is done from a mere intellectual motive. If Kubla cannot have a longing of ecstatic tears, let him go to the devil where he belongs, his limitations are no reason for spoiling a perfect thing. With “ecstatic” these two lines are authentic, inspired, inevitable — suggestive of a deep spiritual experience, — with “mysterious” they become falsely romantic and commonplace, with nothing true or genuine behind the pretentiousness of the words.

21 August 1931

*

O Grace that flowest from the Master's Will,
How fondly Thou dost mitigate the power
Of utter summit for our valleyed sake,^{1*}
That like a wondrous yet familiar hour
Eternity may claim soul's countryside!² . . .
On heights Thou hast Thy ancient dwelling, still
From the majestic altitudes to us
Thou com'st with gifts a beauty riverine,³
Of all Thy aerial secrets rumourous,
So we may find the glimmering crests that make
Signal of ultimate destiny, not chill, —
Nor godhead Thou hast planned to make us quest,
A dizzy strangeness, — we who now wind rest,
From mortal coils, with the white rapturous wine

* *The numbers 1–6 refer to the corresponding numbers on the next page. — Ed.*

Of Thy prophetic cadence, and inhale
The mountain coolness in Thy streaming hair!⁴ . . .
Beauteous, divine, whose mercies never fail,⁵
O Ganga of the in-world! From life's care
Freed by Thy love, our hearts are fortified
To seek the stainless fountain of Thy tide
And contemplate the illimitable form
Of Shiva silent like a frozen storm.⁶

1. “for our valleyed sake” is a locution that offers fascinating possibilities but fails to sound English. One might risk “Let fall some tears for my unhappy sake” in defiance of grammar or, humourously, “Oh, shed some sweat-drops for my corpulent sake”, but “valleyed sake” carries the principle of the “*Arṣa prayog*” (Rishi’s license) beyond the boundaries of the possible.

2. When an image comes out from the mind not properly transmuted in the inner vision or delivered by the alchemy of language, it betrays itself as coin of the fancy or the contriving intellect and is then called a conceit. These two lines sound very much like a conceit; transmuted it might have been a fine image.

3. I first missed this adjective in a search in Chambers, but now I find it. Even so I cannot reconcile myself to it — it sounds Vanagramic (to invent an adjective not found in Chambers!).

4. I am obliged to say that I cannot make anything very lucid or coherent or effective out of these seven lines; I fail possibly to follow the turns of your thought — or its connections. Or is it the images that are thrust into each other rather than fused into a whole?

5. [*In answer to the question: “should I say ‘superb’ instead? Or something else?”*] “Beauteous, divine” is terribly flat and commonplace; but superb would make bad worse.

6. These last lines could be very fine if they were recast under a more powerful and magic-working inspiration.

As a whole, this poem is one of those that can have a *succès d’estime* by reason of its ideas and a certain talent in the form and the language, but seems to be rather strongly constructed than inspired. The transmutation, the alchemy of language I

have already spoken of are missing. Certain turns of the style in this poem suggest an (perhaps subconscious) imitation of the liberties (not in correction, but bold or contracted terms) which Arjava occasionally takes with the English language, but Arjava's audacities are saved and justified by the abounding poetic energy of his diction and rhythm. I do not think you can afford to follow in that line — for that energy is not yours (otherwise you would write better blank verse than you do); your possibility rather lies in a combination of refined elevation and subtle elegance, the Virgilian not the Aeschylean manner, with which an attempt at over-terse compactness of thought does not agree.

26 August 1931

*

The Temple-Girl of Mo-Hen-Jo-Daro

Behold her face: unto that glorious smile
 All sorrow was an ecstasy of gloom
 Fragrant with an invisible flame of flowers.
 And never but with startling loveliness
 Like the white shiver of breeze on moonlit water
 Flew the chill thought of death across her dream. . .

A far cry fades along her kindled curves
 To beauty ineffable: shameless and pure,
 The rhythm of adoration her sole vesture,
 Upon the wayward heart of time she dawns —
 A passion wedded to some glowing hush
 Beyond the world, in tense eternity!

Your poem has colour and grace and vision in it, but its rhythm is a colourless monotone. Each line is a good blank verse line by itself — except

Like the white shiver of breeze on moonlit water

which has no rhythm at all, — but together they are flat and ineffective. In blank verse of this type, with few enjambements and even these hardly seem to *enjamber* at all, it is essential to see to two things.

(1) each line must be a thing of force by itself—it is the Marlowesque type and, although you cannot always command a mighty line, either an armoured strength or a clear-cut beauty must be the form of each decasyllable;

(2) each line must be different from the other in its metrical build so as to give the utmost variety possible—otherwise monotony is inevitable.

It is possible to use either of these methods by itself, but the two together are more effective.

I suppose I ought to give an illustration of what I mean and I can do it best by altering slightly your lines to make them conform to the first rule. I am not suggesting substitutes for them, for these would not be in your style; I only want to make my meaning clear.

Behold her face; unto that glorious smile
All sorrow was an ecstasy of gloom,¹⁴
A rapturous devastating flame of flowers.
Seldom with a rare startling loveliness,
A white shiver of breeze in moonlit waters,
Death flew chill winds of thought across her dream.

A far cry fades along those kindled curves
Into ineffable beauty; shameless-pure,
A rhythm of adoration her sole vesture,
She dances on the wayward heart of time,
And is passion-wedded to some glowing hush,
And is the world caught by eternity.

You will see that the movement of each line is differentiated from that of almost every other and yet there is a sufficient kinship in the whole.

I have done it of course in my own way; yours tends to a more harmonious and coloured beauty and you achieved what was necessary in your *Shakuntala's Farewell*, where each line was a cut gem by itself and there was sufficient variation of movement or at least of rhythmic tone; but here the materials of

¹⁴ These two lines satisfy the rule, so I don't change them.

a good poem are there but the effect fails, the chief fault lying in the defect of rhythm which denies the poetry the value to which it has a right.

8 July 1933

*

Men dreamed of her strange hair; ~~and~~ they saw it fall
 A cataract of nectar through their sleep,
 Crushing the soul with sweetness; ~~+~~ ~~and~~ they woke ~~a~~ ~~from~~ dread,¹⁵
~~In~~ **With** all their limbs a speechless heaven of pain!

Her voice ~~reached~~ **soared**¹⁶ to Creation's highest peak,
 And ~~though a music~~ **that** most delicate ~~its~~ **music with its** rapture
 Swept ~~peeping~~ through ~~the~~ seven worlds ~~and~~ found **out** the gods
 Helpless like flames swaying in a huge wind!

A ~~terror~~ beautiful ~~were~~ **terror** were those dark **conscious** eddies,
 Her ~~fathomless~~ **pure** vague-glimmering ~~pure~~ **and fathomless** eyes,
~~Wherein~~ **Therein** the spirits that rashly plunged their love
 Fell ~~Whirled~~ through ~~a~~ lifetimes of bewildering bliss!

But all in vain, her voice and gaze and hair
 Before the snowy ~~calm~~ **-pale and immutable calm**
 Of Shiva's meditation, a frozen fire
 Of lone omnipotence ~~alone with its~~ **locked in self-splendour light!**

His far face glowed ~~Like an immortal death: his far face glowed~~ —¹⁷
~~The~~ **In**audible disclosure of some white
 Eternity, ~~some of~~¹⁸ unperturbed dream-vast,
~~Behind~~ **It** slew the colour and passion of time's heart-beat!

It looks as if you were facing the problem of blank verse by attempting it under conditions of the maximum difficulty. Not content with choosing a form which is based on the single-line¹⁹ blank verse (as opposed to the flowing and freely enjambed variety) you try to unite flow-lines and single-line and farther

¹⁵ "A-dread" seems to me rather feeble.

¹⁶ "Reached" is very weak.

¹⁷ Why this inversion? It spoils the power and directness of the line.

¹⁸ The double "of" is very awkward and spoils both force and flow.

¹⁹ I mean, of course, each line a clear-cut entity by itself.

undertake a form of blank verse quatrains! I have myself tried the blank verse quatrain; even, when I attempted the single-line blank verse base on a large scale in *Savitri*, I found myself falling involuntarily into a series of four-line movement. But even though I was careful in the building, I found it led to a stiff monotony and had to make a principle of variation — one line, two line, three line, four line or longer passages (paragraphs as it were) alternating with each other; otherwise the system would be a failure.

In attempting the blank verse quatrain one has to avoid like poison all flatness of movement — a flat movement immediately creates a sense of void and sets the ear asking for the absent rhyme. The last line of each verse especially must be a powerful line acting as a strong satisfying close so that the rhyming close-cadence is missed no more. And, secondly, there must be a very careful building of the structure. A mixture of sculpture and architecture is indicated — there should be plenty of clear-cut single lines but they must be built into a quatrain that is itself a perfect structural whole. In your lines it is these qualities that are lacking, so that the poetic substance fails in its effect owing to rhythmic insufficiency. One closing line of yours will absolutely not do — that of the fourth stanza — its feminine ending is enough to damn it; you may have feminine endings but not in the last line of the quatrain, and its whole movement is an unfixed movement. The others would do, but they lose half their force by being continuations of clauses which look back to the previous line for their sense. They can do that sometimes, but only on condition of their still having a clear-cut wholeness in themselves and coming in with a decisive force. In the structure you have attempted to combine the flow of the lyrical quatrain with the force of a single-line blank verse system. I suppose it can be done, but here the single-line has interfered with the flow and the flow has interfered with the single-line force.

In my version I have made only minor changes for the most part, but many of them, — in order to secure what I feel to be the missing elements. I have indicated, in the places where my reasons for change were of another kind, what those reasons

were; the rest are dictated by the two considerations of rhythmic efficiency and quatrain structure. In the first verse this structure is secured by putting two pauses in the middle of lines, each clause taking up the sense from there and enlarging into amplitude and then bringing to a forceful close. In the second verse and in the fourth I have attempted a sweeping continuous quatrain movement, but taken care to separate them by a different structure so as to avoid monotony. The third is made of two blank verse couplets, each complementary in sense to the other; the fifth is based on a one-line monumental phrase worked out in sense by a three-line development with a culminating close-line. The whole thing is not perhaps as perfect as it needs to be, but it is in the nature of a demonstration, to show on what principles the blank verse quatrain can be built, if it has to be done at all — I have founded it on the rule of full but well-sculptured single lines and an architectural quatrain structure: others are possible, but I think would be more difficult to execute.

I had half a mind to illustrate my thesis by quotations from *Savitri*, but I resist the temptation, worried by the scowling forehead of Time — this will do.

P.S. I don't consider the proximity of the closing words "light" and "white" in the last stanzas an objection since the quatrains stand as separate entities — so I did not alter; of course in continuous blank verse an objection would be called for.

18 July 1933

*

Would you describe the following poem of mine as "coin of the fancy"? What is the peculiarity of poetic effect, if any, here?

Night

No more the press and play of light release
 Thrilling bird-news between high columned trees.
 Upon the earth a blank of slumber drops:
 Only cicadas toil in grassy shops —
 But all their labours seem to cry "Peace, peace."
 Nought travels down the roadway save the breeze;

And though beyond our gloom — throb after throb —
Gathers the great heart of a silver mob,
There is no haste in heaven, no frailty mars
The very quiet business of the stars.

It is very successful — the last two lines are very fine and the rest have their perfection. I should call it a mixture of inspiration and cleverness — or perhaps ingenious discovery would be a better phrase. I am referring to such images as “thrilling bird-news”, “grassy shops”, “silver mob”. Essentially they are conceits but saved by the note of inspiration running through the poem — while in the last line the conceit “quiet business” is lifted beyond itself and out of conceitedness by the higher tone at which the inspiration arrives there. 20 August 1936

*

Pharphar

Where is the glassy gold of Pharphar, —
Or its echoing silver-gray
When the magic ethers of evening
Wash one the various day?

I have travelled the whole earth over,
Yet never found
The beautiful body of Pharphar
Or its soul of secret sound.

But all my dreams are an answer
To Pharphar’s blind career;
And the songs that I sing are an image
Of quiets I long to hear.

For, only this beauty unreachèd
No time shall mar —
This river of infinite distance,
Pharphar.

Very beautiful indeed, subtle and gleaming and delicate. The sound-suggestions are perfect. I suppose it comes from some

plane of intuitive inspiration.

15 October 1936

*

I wonder whether you would indicate the resemblances and differences between De la Mare's *Arabia* — a charming poem — and this one written by myself [*Pharphar*] which was partially influenced by his.

It is indeed charming — De la Mare seems to have an unfailing beauty of language and rhythm and an inspired loveliness of fancy that is captivating. But still it is fancy, the mind playing with its delicate imaginations. A hint of something deeper tries to get through sometimes, but it does not go beyond a hint. That is the difference between his poem and the one it inspired from you. There is some kinship though no sameness in the rhythm and the tone of delicate remoteness it brings with it. But in your poem that something deeper is not hinted, it is caught — throughout — in all the expression, but especially in such lines as

When the magic ethers of evening
Wash one the various day

or

The beautiful body of Pharphar
Or its soul of secret sound

or

This river of infinite distance,
Pharphar.

These expressions give a sort of body to the occult without taking from it its strangeness and do not leave it in mist or in shadowy image or luminous silhouette. That is what a fully successful spiritual or occult poetry has to do, to make the occult and the spiritual real to the vision of the consciousness, the feeling. The occult is most often materialised as by Scott and Shakespeare or else pictured in mists, the spiritual mentalised as in many attempts at spiritual poetry — a reflection in the mind is

not enough. For success in the former Arjava's *Totalitarian* with the stark occult reality of its vision is a good example; for the latter there are lines both in his poems and yours that I could instance, but I cannot recall them accurately just now, — but have you not somewhere a line

The mute unshadowed spaces of her mind?

That would be an instance of the concrete convincing reality of which I am speaking — a spiritual state not hinted at or abstractly put as the metaphysical poets most often do it but presented with a tangible accuracy which one who has lived in the silent wideness of his spiritualised mind can at once recognise as the embodiment in word of his experience.

I do not mean for a moment to deny the value of the exquisite texture of dream in De la Mare's representation, but still this completer embodiment achieves more. 16 October 1936

*

Why this relapse on my part? Will this gift of expression be always so treacherously fluctuating?

It is not a relapse, but an oscillation which one finds in almost every poet. Each has a general level, a highest level and a lower range in which some defects of his poetical faculty come out. You have three manners: (1) a sort of decorative romantic manner that survives from your early days, — this at a lower pitch turns to too much dressiness of an ornamental kind, at a higher to post-Victorian, Edwardian or Georgian rhetoric with a frequent saving touch of Yeats; (2) a level at which all is fused into a fine intuitive authenticity and beauty, there is seldom anything to change; (3) a higher level of grander movement and language in which you pull down or reach the influences of the Higher Mind, Illumined Mind, Overmind Intuition. This last you have not yet fully mastered so as to write with an absolute certainty and faultlessness except by lines and stanzas or else as a whole in rare moments of total inspiration, but you are moving towards mastery in it. Sometimes these inspirations get mixed up together. It is this straining towards greater height that creates

the difficulty, yet it is indispensable for the evolution of your genius. It is not surprising therefore that inspiration comes with difficulty often, or that there are dormant periods or returns of the decorative inspiration. All that is part of the day's work and dejection is quite out of place.

20 April 1937

*

Seated Above

Seated above in a measureless trance of truth —
 A thunder wearing the lightning's streak of smile,
 A lonely monolith of frozen fire,
 Sole pyramid piercing to the vast of the One —
 Waits Shiva throned on an all-supporting void.
 Wing after wing smites to the cosmic sky.
 Gathering flame-speed out of their own wild heart —
 That tunnel of dream through the body's swoon of rock —
 They find their home in this sweet silent Face
 With the terrible brain that bursts to a hammer of heaven
 And deluges hell with mercies without end.
 The abysmal night opens its secret smile
 And all the world cries out it is the dawn!

Seated Above is a striking poem but its violent connections and disconnections — I am not condemning them — have somehow awakened the Johnsonian critic in me and I give voice to his objections here without supporting them. His first objection is to “streak of smile” and he wants to know how thunder can wear a smile, because thunder is a sound, not a visible object. The next three lines are very fine, he admits though he wriggles a little at the frozen fire. He would like to know how a wing can have a heart and wants also to know whether it is the heart that is a tunnel of dream and whether it is the tunnel that finds a home and what can be meant by the home of a tunnel. He is startled by the deluge from Shiva's brain and his own brain is ready to burst at the idea that Shiva's brain is being knocked out of his head by the hammer of heaven. The last two lines elicit his first unquestioning approval; that, he says, is the right union

of poetry and common-sense expression.

I don't ask you to take these Johnsonianisms seriously; I have only been taking a little exercise in a field foreign to me; but I am not sure this is not how some critics will grumble and groan under this particular hammer of heaven.

12 November 1948

A. E. on Amal Kiran — Sri Aurobindo on A. E.

A. E. has made some interesting remarks about some of my poems — remarks curious in some places, while finely critical in others. He is puzzled by an unrhythmical line — due really to a typographical error.

To the inexhaustible vastness that lure.

It occurs in the poem which you thought could rank with *This errant life*. Of course it should be “vastnesses”. In “A madrigal to enchant her” only the phrase “the song-impetuous mind” seems to have struck his fancy. About *This Errant Life*, which pleased you so much, he has nothing to say. Isn't it strange? What do you think is the reason? Is it that his poetic criterion differs absolutely from yours?

Not strange at all. Simply, there was nothing in him that answered to the emotion and vision of the lines.

*

Your letter suggested a more critical attitude on A. E.'s part than his actual appreciation warrants. His appreciation is, on the contrary, sufficiently warm; “a genuine poetic quality” and “many fine lines” — he could not be expected to say more. The two quotations he makes²⁰ certainly deserve the praise he gives them, and they are moreover of the kind A. E. and Yeats also, I think, would naturally like. But the poem I selected for especial praise had no striking expressions like these standing out from

²⁰ *The song-impetuous mind . . .*
The Eternal Glory is a wanderer
Hungry for lips of clay

the rest, just as in a Greek statue there would be no single feature standing out in a special beauty (eyes, lips, head or hands), but the whole has a perfectly modelled grace of equal perfection everywhere, like, let us say, the perfect charm of a statue by Praxiteles. This apart from the idea and feeling, which goes psychically and emotionally much deeper than the ideas in the lines quoted by A. E. which are poetically striking but have not the same strong spiritual appeal; they touch the mind and vital strongly, but the other goes home into the soul.

It is strange that A. E. should say that the line about “inexhaustible vastnesses” could not scan; of course, “as it stands”, there is no possibility of scanning it; but he says “even so”, even supposing it is only a typographical error. Perhaps, he is not inclined to tolerate the two anapaests or rather the initial tribrach and medial anapaest in the line? But that would be strange — for it is precisely this kind of freedom that the poetry of today is supposed to effect even in the pentameter. So at least I understood from a review in the *Nation* and from the example of poets like Abercrombie and others. Besides an opening tribrach (one could justify it as an iamb by the elision of the *e* in “the”) and a medial anapaest of this kind are, it seems to me, permissible even in fairly regular pentameters. And what of Shakespeare’s freedoms in blank verse or Swinburne’s or Webster’s famous line

Cover|her face; | my eyes daz|zle; she | died young. |

I only read A. E.’s poetry once and had no time to form a reliable impression; but I seem to remember a too regular and obvious rhythm, not sufficiently plastic, which did not carry the remarkable vision and thought-substance of the poet entirely home. That, however, may be a mistaken memory, and the rest is speculation. I cannot make out why he should say “it is not a verse rhythm”. It is a strong rather than a melodious rhythm, but it is as good a verse rhythm as the others. 5 February 1932

*

I don’t think I can consent to sending the letter [of 5 February 1932] to A. E. — unasked-for criticism is the last thing I would

dream of sending to someone personally unknown to me — especially to a man of A.E.'s standing and value. Besides, I can express casual *dicta* of that kind to you or Dilip or Arjava, because our minds are in sufficiently close communication to throw out an isolated point without balancing it by the other things that would have to be said if I were writing for a distant mind or for the public. My remarks, even about his rhythm, are quite incomplete and based on an uncertain remembrance — I read his poems hastily in a volume brought from a library and kept only for a short time — and it was at least seven or eight years ago — more, for I must have been writing *The Future Poetry* at the time. For that reason, too, I would rather like to have a more leisurely glance at your selections [*from A.E.'s poetry*], if you can spare them for some time. 6 February 1932

Nishikanta

বহিধারা

তুমি মোর সঙ্গোপন-উৎস হ'তে
উচ্ছলিয়া দিলে বহিধারা;
ফুটে ওঠে বিহঙ্গের গোলাপের গভীর প্রবাল;
চন্দ্র-লোভী বাসনার মর্ম-পথে
দেখা দেয় অগ্রদূত-তারা,
দীর্ণ করি' অঙ্কুরের জলদ-জঙ্গাল | . . .
ছিন্নকরে তিমির-গ্রস্থিলা;
স্বপনের তীরে তীরে তরণীর স্পর্শমণি লাগে | . . .
মাতঙ্গের শুভ্র শির বহি' আনে
বস্তুহীন বৈদূর্য-কমল;
তুরঙ্গ যে দেয় দিশা উর্ধ্বপানে . . .
পূর্ণশশী আদিত্যের আসঙ্গ-সন্ধ্যায় |

The separate images are very usual symbols of the inner experience, but they have been combined together here in a rather difficult way. The fire of course is the psychic fire which wells up from the veiled psychic source. The bird is the soul and the flower is the rose of love and surrender. The moon is the symbol of spirituality. As the star is within it is described as

piercing through the knots of the inner darkness and worsting the vital growths that are like clouds enwrapping it. The boat also is a usual symbol in the inner visions. The elephant is the spiritual strength that removes obstacles and the horse the force of tapasya that gallops to the summits of the spiritual realisation. The sun is the symbol of the higher Truth. The lotus is the symbol of the inner consciousness.

February 1937

*

স্বর্ণশিশু

... রহস্যময় মাঠে	হঠাৎ পড়ল বা'রে	চাঁদের রূপোর বল ...
একটা গাছের তলের	ছুটেতে ছুটেতে এলো	সোনার বরণ ছেলে ...
আমি তখন ছুটে...	সবুজ কালো জলের	চাঁদটি হল হারা
অমনি সে-জল থেকে	ডুবের মধ্যে ডুবে	ডুবল সোনার ছেলে
স্বচ্ছ দীপ্ত তোয়া-	ধরেছি সেই শিশুর	স্বর্ণ-কেশেররাজি ...
সোনার শিশুর তনুর	ওঠে বিপুল বেগে	উজল উৎসখানি ...
তখন দেখি ছেলের	সাতটি স্বচ্ছ-ধারার	পথচিহ্নগুলি ...
আমায় শুধুই বলে	উৎসে হল ধোয়া	মায়ের কাছেই যাবো
বলেই দোলায় পাখা	কাজল জলের কালো	যেন সোনার স্বপন
	দুই কাঁধে দুই ডানা	
	“যাবো যাবো যাবো”...	
	যায় সে উড়ে উড়ে	

I suppose the golden child is the Truth-Soul which follows after the silver light of the spiritual. When it plunges into the black waters of the subconscious, it releases from it the spiritual light and the sevenfold streams of the Divine Energy and, clearing itself of the stains of the subconscious, it prepares its flight towards the supreme Divine (the Mother). It is a very beautiful and significant poem.

Philosophers, Intellectuals, Novelists and Musicians

Western Notions of the History of Philosophy

It is very strange that in books on philosophy by European writers, even in standard textbooks like Alfred Weber's *History of Philosophy*,¹ there is no mention of any of the Indian philosophies. To the Western writer philosophy means only European philosophy — they begin with the Greek Thales and Anaximander, as if human thinking began with them.

That is the old style European mind. It used to be the same in Art and other matters. Now Chinese and Japanese art is recognised and to a less degree the art of India, Persia and the former Indian colonies in the Far-East, but in philosophy the old ideas still reign. "From Thales to Bergson" is their idea of the History of Philosophy.

2 May 1936

Plato

Plato says [*according to Weber, p. 86*]: "The world of sense is the copy of the world of Ideas, and conversely, the world of ideas resembles its image; it forms a hierarchy. . . . In our visible world there is a gradation of beings. . . . The same holds true of the intelligible realm or the pattern of the world; the Ideas are joined together by means of other Ideas of a higher order; . . . the Ideas constantly increase in generality and force, until we reach the top, the last, the highest, the most powerful Idea or the Good, which comprehends, contains or summarizes the entire system." I think he is nearly on the verge of a mental understanding of the Overmind.

He was trying to express in a mental way the One containing the

¹ Alfred Weber, *History of Philosophy* (London: Longmans, Green, 1904).

multiplicity which is brought out (created) from the One — that is the Overmind realisation. Plato had these ideas not as realisations but as intuitions which he expressed in his own mental form.

There are many such thoughts in Plato's philosophy. Did he get them from Indian books?

Not from Indian books — something of the philosophy of India got through by means of Pythagoras and others. But I think Plato got most of these things from intuition. 8 October 1933

*

Paul Brunton in his book *A Search in Secret Egypt* repeatedly speaks of Atlantis. I always thought that belief in Atlantis was only an imagination of the Theosophists. Is there any truth in the belief?

Atlantis is not an imagination. Plato heard of this submerged continent from Egyptian sources and geologists are also agreed that such a submersion was one of the great facts of earth history.

22 June 1936

*

In his book *Plato*, Taylor says that “the standing Academic definition of ‘man’ ” is “Soul *using* a body” and that “the soul *is* the man”.² But it is not clear whether the soul is the mental being or something which uses the mind also.

The European mind, for the most part, has never been able to go beyond the formula of soul + body — usually including mind in soul and everything except body in mind. Some occultists make a distinction between spirit, soul and body. At the same time there must be some vague feeling that soul and mind are not quite the same thing, for there is the phrase “this man has no soul”, or “he is a soul” meaning he has something in him beyond

² A.E. Taylor, *Plato, The Man and His Work* (London: Methuen, 1926), p. 27. Taylor bases his discussion on passages from Plato's Alcibiades I and Euthydemus. — Ed.

a mere mind and body. But all that is very vague. There is no clear distinction between mind and soul and none between mind and vital and often the vital is taken for the soul. 30 June 1936

*

Taylor [*Plato*, p. 27] writes: “The first condition of enjoying real good and making a real success of life is that a man’s soul should be in a good or healthy state”, that is, his soul should have the wisdom or knowledge “which ensures that a man shall make the right use of his body and of everything else which is his”. This clearly indicates that by “soul” he means the vital and the mental being. Otherwise how can the soul be not “in good or healthy state”? Can we even say that the mental Purusha is or is not “in good or healthy state”?

Of course not. It is obvious that they are thinking of the mental and vital Prakriti or that part of the being which is involved in Prakriti, not of the Purusha.

The idea that the soul has to get “knowledge” at all would seem to us to be without meaning unless we take it in the sense that one has to develop the intuition as an instrumental faculty.

Yes, all these phrases are loose. At most one could say that the soul must bring out or develop the inner knowledge — that which is already there within or that the lower nature must receive the higher knowledge, — but not that the soul must get knowledge. I believe Plato himself held that all knowledge already was there within, — so even from that point of view this expression would be inaccurate. 2 July 1936

*

Plato’s book *The Banquet* is said to be about Love and Beauty. Is it a kind of philosophy?

Not much philosophy there, more poetry.

Shelley has translated *The Banquet* into English. Could I read it?

If you want to read it as a piece of literature, it is all right.

2 January 1937

*

I did not find so much poetry in the book. Perhaps you have read it in the original Greek?

Even in a good translation the poetry ought to come out to some extent. Plato was a great writer as well as a philosopher — no more perfect prose has been written by any man. In some of his books his prose carries in it the qualities of poetry and his thought has poetic vision. That is what I meant when I said it was poetry.

3 January 1937

*

How do you find Plato's ideas about philosophy, about Nature, existence of the soul, etc.?

I don't know what are his ideas about philosophy or Nature. He believes in the soul and immortality and that is of course true.

4 January 1937

Aristotle

I tried to read Aristotle but found him dry and abstract.

I always found him exceedingly dry. It is a purely mental philosophy, unlike Plato's.

9 October 1933

Plotinus

I find Plotinus very interesting.

Yes. Plotinus was not a mere philosopher, — his philosophy was founded on yogic experience and realisation.

11 October 1933

*

Plotinus says [*according to Weber, p. 171*]: "Intelligence is the first divine emanation. . . . Creation is a fall, a progressive degeneration of the divine. In the intelligence, the absolute

unity of God splits up into intelligence proper . . . and the intelligible world.” Does he mean the separation that begins to take place at Overmind or the Para and Apara Prakriti?

He was speaking of the cosmic mind, I suppose. In these philosophies there is no distinction made between different grades of mind or between intellect and the consciousness beyond the intellectual.

Plotinus says [according to Weber, p. 173]: “The intelligence, too, is creative. . . . Its emanation or radiation is the soul. . . . The soul is not, like the intellect, endowed with immediate and complete intuition: it is restricted to the discursive thought, or analysis. . . .

“It is subordinate to the intellect. . . . There is, at the bottom of all individual souls, but one single soul manifesting itself infinitely in different forms: the soul of the world.” What does Plotinus mean by soul and intelligence in this passage?

I think simply Plotinus in speaking of soul has made a jumble of vital (*prāna*), *manas* and soul (ψυχή) — while by intelligence he means *buddhi* (cosmic), but endows the *buddhi* with the qualities proper to the Intuition and Overmind.

12 October 1933

Shankaracharya on the *Bhagavad Gita*

On this shloka in the second chapter of the *Gita*:

एषा ब्राह्मी स्थितिः पार्थ नैनां प्राप्य विमुह्यति ।
स्थित्वाऽस्यामन्तकालेऽपि ब्रह्मनिर्वाणमृच्छति ॥

Shankara says:

सैषा ज्ञाननिष्ठा स्तूयते । यथोक्ता . . . ब्राह्मी स्थितिः सर्वं कर्म संन्यस्य ब्रह्मरूपेणैवावस्थानमिति . . .

Where is there even in the preceding shlokas the idea of सर्वं कर्म संन्यस्य?

But the final stroke comes here:

अन्ते वयस्यपि . . . मोक्षमृच्छति . . . किमु वक्तव्यं ब्रह्मचर्यादेव संन्यस्य यावज्जीवं . . . ब्रह्मण्येवावतिष्ठते स ब्रह्मनिर्वाणमृच्छति ॥

This is pure insinuation. Nowhere in the whole of the Gita can there be found the idea of ब्रह्मचर्यादेव संन्यस्य!

How can a commentator do without insinuation? He has to make the Gita (or the Upanishads) mean what he teaches; if it doesn't actually say what he teaches, he has to explain that it meant that all the same. If the Gita doesn't teach what he teaches, it would be teaching something that is not the Truth, and how can the Gita teach untruth?

In Krishna's time were there any Sannyasis at all? Rishis there were, but few, and not the sort to promote ब्रह्मचर्यादेव संन्यस्य.

Perhaps at the time of Krishna there were no Sannyasis; but the Gita speaks of Sannyasa and Sannyasis, it even speaks of कर्म संन्यस्य but it says मयि कर्माणि संन्यस्य and declares फलत्याग to be the true Sannyasa. Arjuna is supposed to remain in the ब्रह्मी स्थिति and fight, so that would be hardly consistent with the other kind of Sannyasa — not to speak of enjoying राज्यं समृद्धम् also.

25 March 1936

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In Shankara's Bhashya on the Gita it seems he takes any opportunity to thrust in the ideas of कर्मसंन्यास and ज्ञाननिष्ठा. For example, in the famous shloka कर्मण्येवाधिकारस्ते, the Bhashya speaks of ज्ञाननिष्ठा though it seems quite irrelevant.

Of course. There is nothing about ज्ञाननिष्ठा in the text, only in Shankara's thrust.

Shankara considers all *karma* useful only as preparation for *jñāna*. According to him even the object of the Gita is परं निःश्रेयसं संसारस्य अत्यन्तोपरमलक्षणम्.

The object of the Gita was to make Arjuna act, i.e. fight and it is only when he consented to do so that Krishna stopped the discourse. If it had been as Shankara says he would not have stopped until he had got Arjuna well-started for a cave in the

Himalayas far away from the noise of the battle.

26 March 1936

Intellectual Capacity of Mystics

A great scientist has written that mystics and spiritual men the world over have in general always been men of very average intelligence, a handful of rare instances excepted.

As for your great scientist I wonder who he had in mind as spiritual men — so far as I know history both in the East and the West there have been any number of spiritual men and mystics who have had a great or fine intellectual capacity or were endowed with a great administrative and organising ability implying a keen knowledge of men and much expenditure of brain-power. With a little looking up of the records of the past I think one could collect some hundreds of names — which would not include of course the still greater number not recorded in history or the transmitted memory of the past.

Augustus Caesar and Leonardo da Vinci

Augustus Caesar organised the life of the Roman Empire and it was this that made the framework of the first transmission of the Graeco-Roman civilisation to Europe — he came for that work and the writings of Virgil and Horace and others helped greatly towards the success of his mission. After the interlude of the Middle Ages, this civilisation was reborn in a new mould in what is called the Renaissance, not in its life-aspects but in its intellectual aspects. It was therefore a supreme intellectual, Leonardo da Vinci, who took up again the work and summarised in himself the seeds of modern Europe.

29 July 1937

Leonardo and Einstein

I do not know if by chance Einstein's theory of relativity may also be found in one of the yet undeciphered books of Leonardo.

Not likely. The age of art and science which Leonardo set in motion was that which closed with the nineteenth century. Relativity belongs to a new movement of knowledge.

11 December 1935

René Descartes

I have three letters of yours before me and all three require some elucidation. I think and think but can't get anywhere. Perhaps you will say, "Make the mind silent"! But Descartes says, "Je pense, donc je suis."

Descartes was talking nonsense. There are plenty of things that don't think but still are — from the stone to the Yogi in samadhi. If he had simply meant that the fact of his thinking showed that he wasn't dead, that of course would have been quite right and scientific.

9 September 1935

William James

James' book [*on psychology*] is certainly a very interesting one. I read it a long time ago and do not remember it very well except that it was very interesting and not at all an ordinary book in its kind, but full of valuable suggestions.

1 July 1933

Henri Bergson

Bergson writes that the progress of Life is marked by tensions succeeded by flowerings. What do you think of that, since the great philosopher too agrees with our way of marching to Beatitude through struggles and sufferings?

Humph! Such a method is all very well, but one has so much of it in life and in this Ashram that I rather yearn for some other unBergsonian evolution. Even if the Lord God and Bergson planned it together, I move an amendment.

11 December 1935

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In his latest book, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*,

Bergson says that the imagelessness or blankness of mind is a pure myth and an impossibility. As a Vedantist, I have always cherished the imagelessness of mind as the highest ideal. But I must admit that I have not made any appreciable advance in this direction, even after many years' practice.

European scientists and thinkers have no authority in the matter, as they are perfectly ignorant of even the rudiments of these things. It is certainly impossible for any man to have experience of such a condition without practice of Yoga, or alternatively, a state of Grace. But among Yogis it is a well-known state; they can attain to this state and keep it at will or if they allow any external activity, it does not touch the inner silence and they can always have the complete silence at will. You [*Sri Aurobindo's secretary*] can refer him to the *Bases of Yoga*, but also say that it is best to prepare oneself first. Usually it does not come except after a long discipline of self-purification etc. — it can be called down, but that is not always safe, if the outer nature is not yet ready.

6 March 1938

Sigmund Freud

You had once written that things rejected from the conscious parts go down into the subconscious physical. Is Freud's theory of suppression somewhat similar to this?

Freud has observed the fact, but he has built on it a number of theories that are either unsound or exaggerated.

2 August 1933

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It seems Freud's discovery centres round this idea: “. . . underlying the closeness of the bond between mother and child, there exists in infancy on the part of the child . . . a wish . . . for re-entrance into the comfort and security of the mother's womb”, and this persists in maturity and adolescence till death.³ How does he know the wish of the child?

³ *John M. Thorburn, Art and the Unconscious (London: Kegan Paul & Co., 1925), p. 50.*

God knows. It seems a wild idea. For a psychologist to talk about the child remembering his stay in the womb — surely, it is an extravagance.

How does he know that there *was* comfort and security in the womb?

I have not the least idea. Perhaps it is his own “complex” from which he generalises.

Why, then, does man not seek only comfort and security in life — why does he make much attempt for other things?

He says he does seek. The wish to get back into that wonderful womb, he says, “persists in maturity and adolescence till death”. I suppose he would say that when man is attempting other things, he is really though without quite knowing it trying to get back into his mother’s womb, e.g. Mussolini getting into Abyssinia, it was a straight drive for his mother’s womb.

The extreme of ridiculousness is reached when Freud analyses Leonardo da Vinci to show how he was pathological, how he failed disastrously in his adaptation to life, how his artistic imagination was an aberration and a maladaptation. All poets, all imaginative people, all geniuses, all religious people were to Freud the result of aberration and maladaptation.

Well, his own theory is very clearly that, the result of aberration and maladaptation.

1 June 1936

Carl Gustav Jung

Jung [*according to Thorburn, pp. 58–59*] accepts Freud’s view, and considers religion as something to be escaped from. “The primal desire for re-entrance to the womb, never expressing itself nakedly, but veiling itself as Freud had supposed under all kinds of symbolism, gives us in this very symbolism what history has called religion.” This is what I should call “mental aberration and encephalitis” as a result of biological psychology.

It is part of the general “aberration” that has beset the modern world owing to the descent of the vital world into the physical — cubist and surrealist painting, modernist poetry, Nazi politics, psycho-analysis — the more extravagant the thing, the greater its reputation and success. 1 June 1936

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What is it that makes the intellectual world believe without scrutinising ideas such as Freud’s? Is it a force which acts as a sort of “prestidigitation” on the brains even of great men like Jung? There would be several objections to Freud’s idea about the child’s wish to re-enter the mother’s womb, yet Jung accepts it as a premise and builds upon it his theories of religion and God and gods. According to Jung [*as presented by Thorburn, p. 59*] : “The idea of God . . . or of the gods, is such a bondage in so far as it is supposed that God exists or that there are gods.” It would, thus, be very ignominious to believe that God or the gods exist — much more ignominious than believing a hypothesis (and an absurdity) which has no historical or biological basis — whereas the fact of God existing can be found in all the literature of the past and the present! It seems it is less the correctness of an idea than the novelty and extravagance that appeals to the modern mind.

At present in the European world it is novelty and extravagance in ideas that are run after.

I don’t know anything first-hand about Jung but the two extracts from him you have given do not encourage me to make acquaintance.⁴ Why on earth should the idea of God or gods be a bondage? I suppose it is the Semitic idea (common in Europe) of God as a terrible gentleman upstairs, emperor, law-maker, judge and policeman who sends you to Hell at his pleasure. To the Indian mind the gods are friends and helpers. 2 June 1936

⁴ *The correspondent did not make it clear that the extracts he quoted were from Thorburn’s book and not from the works of Jung and Freud. — Ed.*

Loves Dickinson

What would you say on the contrast between Loves Dickinson's *Modern Symposium* (1905) and his post-war dialogue, *On the Discovery of Good*?

The pre-war and the post-war Dickinson are indeed a contrast. This appreciation of human life is not without the force of a half-truth, but it is just the other half that he misses when he sweeps idealism out of the field. Man's utopias may be the projection of his hopes and desires, but he has to go on building them on pain of death, decline or collapse. As for the gospel of pleasure, it has been tried before and always failed—Life and Nature after a time weary of it and reject it, as if after a surfeit of cheap sweets. Man has to rush from his pursuit of pleasure, with all its accompaniment of petrifying shallowness, cynicism, hardness, frayed nerves, *ennui*, dissatisfaction and fatigue, to a new idealism or else sink towards a dull or catastrophic decadence. Even if the Absolute Good were a high spiritual or ideal chimera, the pursuit of it is rooted in the very make of humanity and it is one of the main sources of the perennial life of the race. And that it is so would seem to indicate that it is not a chimera—something still beyond man, no doubt, but into which or towards which he is called by Nature to grow.

Bertrand Russell

About Russell—I have never disputed his abilities or his character,—I am concerned only with his opinions and there too only with those opinions which touch upon my own province—that of spiritual Truth. In all religions, the most narrow and stupid even, and in all non-religions also there are great minds, great men, fine characters. I know little about Russell, but I never dreamed of disputing the greatness of Lenin, for instance, merely because he was an atheist—nobody would unless he was an imbecile. But the greatness of Lenin does not debar me from refusing assent to the credal dogmas of Bolshevism, and the beauty of character of an atheist does not prove that spirituality

is a lie of the imagination and that there is no Divine. I may add that if you can find the utterances of famous Yogis childish when they talk about marriage or on other mental matters, I cannot be blamed for finding the ideas of Russell about spiritual experience, of which he knows nothing, very much wanting in light and substance. You have not named the Yogis in question, and till you do, I am afraid I shall cherish a suspicion about either the height or the breadth of their spiritual experience.

1932

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I have not yet found a moment's time to go through Russell's book [*Why I Am Not a Christian*]; as soon as I can do so I will let you know if I have anything to say about him. I have already said that I have no objection to anybody admiring Russell or Lowes Dickinson or any other atheist. Genius or fine qualities are always admirable in whomever they are found; all that has nothing to do with the turn of a man's opinions or the truth or untruth of atheism or of spiritual experience. Neither for that matter is the fact that there are people who believe out of fear or desire a valid argument against the existence of the Divine. I will read the book as soon as I can, but I do not expect to find anything very much in it, as I am perfectly familiar with European atheism and it is for the most part a shallow and rather childish reaction against a shallow and childish religionism — that of orthodox exoteric Christianity as it was believed and practised in Europe. Not much food on either side of the controversy either for the intellect or the spirit!

18 October 1932

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I seized a few moments to run through Russell [*Why I Am Not a Christian*]; a few moments were enough. It is just as I expected it to be. I have no doubt that Russell is a competent philosophic thinker, but this might have been written by an ordinary tract-writer of the Rationalists Publications Society (I don't remember the proper name any longer). The arguments of

the ordinary Christian apologists to prove the existence of God are futile drivel and Russell in answering them has descended to their level. He was appealing to the mass mind, I suppose, but that is enough to deprive the book of any real thought-value. And yet the questions raised are interesting enough if treated with true philosophic insight or from the standpoint of true spiritual experience. It is queer that the European mind, capable enough in other directions, should sink to so much puerility when it begins to deal with religion and spiritual experience. All the same I shall see if there is anything that can be said in the matter. 1932

Russell, Eddington, Jeans

I don't understand why Amal expects me to bow to the criticism of Bertrand Russell.⁵

(1.) Russell's opinions are as much determined by his upbringing, temperament etc. as those of Jeans or Eddington. He was born in the heyday of the most uncompromising materialism; he is unwilling to change the ideas which have got embedded in his nature. It is this that determines his view of the result of the recent developments of science, it is not a clear infallible logic; logic can serve any turn proposed to it by the mind's preferences. Nor is it a dispassionate impersonal view of facts dictated by unbiassed reason as opposed to Eddington's personal outlook, imaginative fancies and idealistic prejudices. This idea of pure mental impersonality in the human reason is an exploded superstition of the rationalist mind; psychology in its recent inquiries has shown that this supposed impersonal observation of pure objective facts and impartial conclusion from them, an automatic writing of truth on the blank paper of the pure mind is a myth; it has shown that the personal factor is inevitable; we think according to what we are.

(2.) Russell is not, I believe, a great scientist or preeminent in any field of science. Eddington is, I am told, one of the finest

⁵ *This is an incomplete draft of a letter that was never sent. — Ed.*

authorities in astrophysics. Jeans and Eddington, though not great discoverers, are otherwise in the front rank. Russell ranks as a great mathematician, but there too Eddington has one superiority over him; he is supposed to be the only one, so say some, one of the only five, say others, who have a complete understanding of Einstein's mathematical formulation; Russell is not counted among them and that perhaps disables him from understanding the full consequences of Relativity. Russell, however, is an eminent philosopher, though not one of the great ones. I would count him rather as a strong and acute thinker on philosophy and science. Here he has an advantage, for Jeans and Eddington are only amateur philosophers with a few general ideas for their stock in trade.

(3.) As for their general intellectual standing Russell is a clear and strong materialistic intellect with a wide and general play of its own kind and range; the others are strong in their own field, trained in scientific knowledge and judgment, outside that they do not count: Eddington's mind is more intuitive and original in its limits but often shooting beyond the mark. Russell, when he goes outside his limits, can flounder and blunder. Well, then where is there any foundation for exalting the authority of Russell at the expense of the other two? I disagree with the conclusions of all three; I am neither a mentalist nor a vitalist nor a materialist. Why then throw Russell at me? I am not likely to change my decision in the matter in deference to his materialistic bias. And to what does his judgment or his argument amount to? He admits as against Amal that there has been a "revolution" in science; he admits that the old materialistic philosophy has no longer even half a rotten leg to stand upon; its dogmatic theory of Matter has been kicked out God knows where. But still, says Russell, Matter is there and everything in this world obeys the laws of physical science. This is merely a personal opinion on a now very doubtful matter: he is fighting a rearguard action against what he feels to be the advanced forces of the future; his gallant but tremulous asseveration is a defensive parade not an aggressive blow; it lacks altogether the old assured self-confidence.

As for Russell's logic, a dry and strong or even austere logic is not a key to Truth; an enthusiastic vision often reaches it more quickly. The business of logic is to give order to a thinker's ideas, to establish firm relations between them and firm distinctions from other people's ideas, but when that is done, we are no nearer to indisputable truth than we were before. It is vision that sees Truth, not logic — the outer vision that sees facts but not their inner sense, the inner vision that sees inner facts and can see the inner sense of them, the total vision (not belonging to mind) that sees the whole. A strong and clear and powerful intellect, Russell, but nothing more — not certainly an infallible authority whether in science or anything else. Jeans and Eddington have their own logical reasoning; I do not accept it any more than I accept Russell's.⁶

Let us, however, leave the flinging of authorities, often the same authority for opposing conclusions, Russell quoted against Russell and Darwin against Darwin, and let us come to the point [*incomplete*]

Shaw

I do not think Harris' attack on Shaw as you describe it can be taken very seriously any more than can Wells' jest about his pronunciation of English being the sole astonishing thing about him. Wells, Chesterton, Shaw and others joust at each other like the *kabiwālās* of old Calcutta, though with more refined weapons, and you cannot take their humorous sparrings as considered appreciations; if you do, you turn exquisite jests into solemn nonsense. Mark that their method in these sparrings, the turn of phrase, the style of their wit is borrowed from Shaw himself with personal modifications; for this kind of humour, light as air and sharp as a razor-blade, epigrammatic, paradoxical, often flavoured with burlesque seriousness and urbane hyperbole, good-humoured and cutting at once, is not English in origin; it was brought in by two Irishmen, Shaw and Wilde. Harris'

⁶ *This paragraph was written separately. It has been inserted here by the editors.*

stroke about the Rodin bust and Wells' sally are entirely in the Shavian turn and manner; they are showing their cleverness by spiking their guru in swordsmanship with his own rapier. Harris' attack on Shaw's literary reputation may have been serious, there was a sombre and violent brutality about him which makes it possible; but his main motive was to prolong his own notoriety by a clever and vigorous assault on the mammoth of the hour. Shaw himself supplied materials for his critic, knowing well what he would write, and edited this damaging assault on his own fame,⁷ a typical Irish act at once of chivalry, shrewd calculation of effect and whimsical humour. I should not think Harris had much understanding of Shaw the man as apart from the writer; the Anglo-Saxon is not usually capable of understanding either Irish character or Irish humour, it is so different from his own. And Shaw was Irish through and through; there was nothing English about him except the language he wrote and even that he changed into the Irish ease, flow, edge and clarity — though not bringing into it, as Wilde did, Irish poetry and colour.

Shaw's seriousness and his humour, real seriousness and mock seriousness, run into each other in a baffling inextricable *mélange*, thoroughly Irish in its character — for it is the native Irish turn to speak lightly when in deadly earnest and to utter the most extravagant jests with a profound air of seriousness, — and it so puzzled the British public that they could not for a long time make up their mind how to take him. At first they took him for a jester dancing with cap and bells, then for a new kind of mocking Hebrew prophet or Puritan reformer! Needless to say, both judgments were entirely out of focus. The Irishman is, on one side of him, the vital side, a *passioné*, imaginative and romantic, intensely emotional, violently impulsive, easily impelled to poetry or rhetoric, moved by indignation and suffering to a mixture of aggressive militancy, wistful dreaming and sardonic extravagant humour: on another side he is keen in intellect, positive, downright, hating all loose foggy sentimentalism and

⁷ *Harris's biography of Shaw, edited and published by Shaw himself after Harris's death.* — Ed.

solemn pretence and prone, in order to avoid the appearance of them in himself, to cover himself with a jest at every step; it is at once his mask and his defence. At bottom he has the possibility in him of a modern Curtius leaping into the yawning pit for a cause, an Utopist or a Don Quixote, — according to occasion a fighter for dreams, an idealistic pugilist, a knight-errant, a pugnacious rebel or a brilliant sharp-minded realist or a reckless but often shrewd and successful adventurer. Shaw has all that in him, but with it is a cool intellectual clearness, also Irish, which dominates it all and tones it down, subdues it into measure and balance, gives an even harmonising colour. There is as a result a brilliant tempered edge of flame, lambent, lighting up what it attacks and destroys, and destroying it by the light it throws upon it, not fiercely but trenchantly — though with a trenchant playfulness — aggressive and corrosive. An ostentation of humour and parade covers up the attack and puts the opponent off his defence. That is why the English mind never understood Shaw and yet allowed itself to be captured by him, and its old established ideas, “moral” positions, impenetrable armour of commercialised Puritanism and self-righteous Victorian assurance to be ravaged and burned out of existence by Shaw and his allies. Anyone who knew Victorian England and sees the difference now cannot but be struck by it and Shaw’s part in it, at least in preparing and making it possible, is undeniable. That is why I call him devastating, — not in any ostentatiously catastrophic sense, for there is a quietly trenchant type of devastatingness, — because he has helped to lay low all these things with his scythe of sarcastic mockery and lightly, humorously penetrating seriousness — effective, as you call it, but too deadly in its effects to be called merely effective.

That is Shaw as I have seen him and I don’t believe there is anything seriously wrong in my estimate. I don’t think we can complain of his seriousness about pacifism, Socialism and the rest of it; it was simply the form in which he put his dream, the dream he needed to fight for, needed by his Irish nature. Shaw’s bugbear was unreason and disorder, his dream was a humanity delivered from vital illusions and deceptions, organising the life-

force in obedience to reason, casting out waste and folly as much as possible. It is not likely to happen in the way he hoped; the reason has its own illusions and, though he strove against imprisonment in his own rationalistic ideals, trying to escape from them by the issue of his mocking critical humour, he could not help being their prisoner. As for his pose of self-praise, — no doubt he valued himself, — the public fighter like the man of action needs to do so in order to act or to fight. Most, though not all, try to veil it under an affectation of modesty; Shaw on the contrary took the course of raising it to a humorous pitch of burlesque and extravagance. It was at once part of his strategy in commanding attention and a means of mocking at himself — I was not speaking of analytical self-mockery, but of the whimsical Irish kind — so as to keep himself straight and at the same time mocking his audience. It is a peculiarly Irish kind of humour to say extravagant things with a calm convinced tone as if announcing a perfectly serious proposition — the Irish exaggeration of the humour called by the French *pince-sans-rire*; his hyperboles of self-praise actually reek with this humorous savour. If his extravagant comparison of himself with Shakespeare had to be taken in dull earnest without any smile in it, he would be either a witless ass or a giant of humourless arrogance, — and Bernard Shaw could be neither.

As to his position in literature, I have given my opinion; but, more precisely, I imagine that he will take some place but not a very large place, once the drums have ceased beating and the fighting is over. He has given too much to the battles of the hour, perhaps, to claim a large share of the future. I suppose some of his plays will survive for their wit and humour and cleverness more than for any higher dramatic quality, like those of three other Irishmen, Goldsmith, Sheridan, Wilde. His prefaces *may* be saved by their style and force, but it is not sure. At any rate, as a personality he is not likely to be forgotten, even if his writings fade. To compare him with [Anatole] France is futile — they were minds too different and moving in too different domains for comparison to be possible.

3 February 1932

I would be obliged if you would tell me your opinion of the apostrophe of Caesar to the Sphinx in Shaw's *Caesar and Cleopatra*. I find it very fine, but Dilip says he is not thrilled by it.

I am not thrilled by the speech either; it is a creation of the intellect, eloquent and on the surface. I do not see how you are going to manufacture a mystic out of Shaw with these scanty materials: he has a very clear and incisive intelligence, independent and unconventional rather than original and creative, but beyond the intellect he does not go. The speculative imaginations of which you speak and the feelings in the aesthetic vital which accompany them sometimes are common enough in men with some reach of mind, but they do not constitute either a mystic feeling or a mystic experience.

6 May 1932

Was Shaw a Mystic?

It is, of course, difficult to manufacture a mystic out of Shaw in the Yogic sense of the word, but in the philosophic sense I think it can be said that his conception of the universal life-force and his vision of man's future are prompted by a keen sense of the infinite, divine potencies of the human consciousness and of the secret urge towards godhead which is the motive power behind all evolution. . . . What Shaw claims to be is an artist-philosopher — that is to say, a man with a constructive as well as critical vision of life, who is able to express that vision in a spirited and cogently attractive form by means of his literary gift. So the real question is whether his vision is great enough, inspired enough, and he brings a sufficient power of interpretation to render his insight compellingly intelligible and valuable.

Your reasoning seems to proceed by abolishing the necessary distinctions and running different things into each other.

1st equation. Philosopher (artist kind) = a man with a constructive as well as a critical vision of life = Shaw. I may add = all poets, if Matthew Arnold's equation about poetry and criticism of life is correct. Hundreds of others also can at this rate be called philosophers.

2nd equation. Mystic = mystic philosopher = philosopher who has notions about supraphysical entities or forces, e.g. Life-Force = Shaw. But a mystic is currently supposed to be one who has mystic experience, and a mystic philosopher is one who has such experience and has formed a view of life in harmony with his experience. Merely to have metaphysical notions about the Infinite and Godhead and underlying or overshadowing forces does not make a man a mystic. One would never think of applying such a term to Spinoza, Kant or Hegel: even Plato does not fit into the term though Pythagoras has a good claim to it. Hegel and other transcendental or idealistic philosophers were great intellects, not mystics. Shaw is a keen and forceful intellect (I cannot call him a great thinker⁸) but his ideas about the Life-Force certainly do not make him a mystic. And do you really call that a constructive vision of life — a vague notion about a Life-Force pushing towards an evolutionary manifestation and a brilliant *jeu d'esprit* about long life and people born out of eggs and certain extraordinary operations of mind and body in these semi-immortals who seem to have been very much at a loss what to do with their immortality? I do not deny that there are keen and brilliant ideas and views everywhere (that is Shaw's wealthy stock-in-trade), even an occasional profound perception; but that does not make a man either a mystic or a philosopher or a great thought-creator. Shaw has a sufficiently high place in his own kind — why try to make him out more than he is? Shakespeare is a great poet and dramatist, but to try to make him out a great philosopher also would not increase but rather imperil his high repute.

May 1932

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I admit that in the real, experiential sense Shaw is not a mystic, though definitely religious at the core — in an unconventional way of his own. Nor does he belong to the company of the

⁸ An admirable many-sided intelligence and an acute critic discussing penetratingly or discoursing acutely or constructively on many problems or presenting with force or point many aspects of life, he is not a creator or disseminator of the great illuminating ideas that leave their mark on the centuries.

giant abstractionists. He is a philosopher only in as much as his outlook on basic realities is, unlike as in poets, sufficiently argued and interpreted by him in relation to general issues of philosophy and life, and a mystic philosopher only from the western view-point.

At that rate anybody is a mystic or a philosopher and these two words have no longer any value. I do not admit that Shaw has a reasoned theory about basic realities; the only realities he or his characters have argued about are the things of the surface; even his Life-Force is only a thing of the surface or, at the most, just under the surface.

The right of Plato [*to be considered a mystic*] is regarded as beyond question; Spinoza with his "amor intellectualis Dei" is, outside the Catholic Church, also hailed as such; and even Kant I have found looked upon in the same light. In our own day it is common, I believe, to refer to Bergson or Bradley as mystical.

Regarded, looked upon by whom? It was not so in my time at least in Europe. Plato was never called a mystic then; Hegel was regarded as a transcendentalist but no mystic; if you had called Kant or Spinoza mystics people would have stared. To believe in the Absolute or something metaphysical or supraphysical does not make one a mystic philosopher, nor does belief in the *élan vital* or a dry and geometric *amor intellectualis Dei*. The Neo-Platonists and the Neo-Hegelians stand on the border. If all these are the Western view-point packed in one mystic box, it is a very new Western view-point, a new language of confusion in this age of confusion, I suppose. It must be like the idea of spirituality in the minds of many people in the West in which mind and spirit are the same thing and to have a fine feeling or an idealistic thought is the very height of spirituality.

I should like to know whether, in your opinion, Shaw comes off badly in comparison with Wells or Chesterton or Russell as a thinker. And do you mind expatiating on Shaw as a dramatist and a writer of prose?

I refuse to accept the men you name, with the exception of Russell, as serious thinkers. Wells is a super-journalist, super-pamphleteer and story-teller. I imagine that within a generation of his death his speculations will cease to be read or remembered; his stories may endure longer. Chesterton is a brilliant essayist who has written verse too of an appreciable brilliance and managed some good stories. Unlike Wells he has some gift of style and he has caught the trick of wit and constant paradox which gives a fictitious semblance of enhanced value to his ideas. These are men of contemporary fame; Shaw has more chance of lasting, but there is no certain certitude, because he has no atom of constructive power. He has constructed nothing large, but he has criticised most things. At every page he shows the dissolvent critical mind and it is a dissolvent of great power; beyond that, he has popularised the ideas of Fabian Socialism and other constructive view-points caught up by him from the surrounding atmosphere, but with temperamental qualifications and variations, for the inordinately critical character of his mind prevents him from entirely agreeing with anybody. Criticism is also a great power and there are some purely critical minds that have become immortals, Voltaire for instance; Shaw on his own level may survive — only his thinking is more of a personal type and not classic and typical of a fundamental current of the human intellect like Voltaire. His personality may help him, as Johnson was helped by his personality to live.

Shaw is not a dramatist; I don't think he ever wrote a drama; *Candida* is perhaps the nearest he came to one. He is a first-class play-writer, — a brilliant conversationalist in stage dialogue and a manufacturer of speaking intellectualised puppets made to develop and represent by their talk and carefully wire-pulled movements his ideas about men, life and things. He gives his characters minds of various quality and they are expressing their minds all the time; sometimes he paints on them some striking vital colour, but with a few exceptions they are not living beings like those of the great or even of the lesser dramatists. There *are*, however, a few exceptions, such as the three characters in *Candida*, and as a supremely clever playwright with a strong

intellectual force and some genius he may very well survive. He has a very striking and cogent and incisive style admirably fitted for its work, and he sometimes tries his hand at eloquence, but “heights of passionate eloquence” is a very unreal phrase. I never found that in Shaw anywhere; whatever mental ardours he may have, his mind as a whole is too cool, balanced, incisive to let itself go in that manner. May 1932

Shaw's Personality and Place in Literature

The Shavian assertiveness is not offensive (as the Hugoesque tends to be) because it is full also of a smiling self-mockery, an irony that out of a form of deliberate self-praise cuts at itself and the world in one lump. It is curious that so many people seem to miss this character of Shaw's self-assertiveness and self-praise, its essential humour. 28 August 1932

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I do not agree that Wells and others are more serious than Shaw — if by seriousness is meant earnestness of belief in one's ideals and sincerity in the intelligence. These can exist very well behind a triple breast-plate of satire and humour. Shaw's merits are surely greater than you seem disposed to admit in your letter. The tide is turning against him after being strongly for him — under compulsion from his own power and will, but nothing can alter the fact that he was one of the keenest and most powerful minds of the age with an originality in his way of looking at things which no one else could equal. If what was original in him has become the common stock of contemporary thought, it was his power and forcefulness that made it so — it is no more to be counted against him than the deplorable fact that *Hamlet* is only “a string of quotations” is damaging to Shakespeare! I do not share your exasperation against Shavianism — I find in it a delightful note and am thankful to Shaw for being so refreshingly different from other men that to read even an ordinary interview with him in a newspaper is always an intellectual pleasure. As for his being one of the most original personalities of the age, there

can be no doubt of that. All that I deny to him is a constructive and creative mind — but his critical force, in certain fields at least, as a critic of man and life was very great and in that field he can in a sense be called creative — in the sense that he created a singularly effective and living form for his criticism of life. It is not great tragic or comic drama, but it is something original and strong and altogether of its own kind — so, up to that limit, I qualify my statement that Shaw was no creator.

As to the other writers about whom you ask for my judgment, I do not feel inclined to be drawn at present; I would have to say too much, if I started saying anything at all. Galsworthy I have not read — all I can say of the rest is that I do not share the contemporary idea about them — so far as I have read their work. Contemporary fame, contemporary opinion are creations of the hour and can die with the hour. I fail to see in many of these much-praised writers of the time either the power of style or the power of critical mind or creative imagination that ensures survival. There is plenty of effective writing or skilful workmanship, but that is not enough to make literary immortals.

8 September 1932

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Why do you want Shaw to be tied to some intellectual dogma and square all his acts, views and sullies to it? He is too penetrating and sincere a mind to be a stiff partisan — when he sees something which qualifies the “ism” — even that on whose side he is standing — he says so; that need not weaken the ideal behind, it is likely to make it more plastic and practicable. However, enough of Shaw; I have to answer Amal’s question and that ought to finish with him. I will only add that whatever his manner, it does not appear to me that he writes merely to shock but to expose in a vivid way the stupidity of the human mind in taking established things and ideas for granted. If he does it in a striking and amusing way, why so much the livelier and the better!

9 September 1932

Kipling

No use of success unless it is deserved. Can't forget that Kipling for whose poetry I have a Noble contempt (his prose has value, at least the *Jungle Book* and some short stories) was illegitimately Nobelised by this confounded prize. Contemporary "success" of fame is a deceit and a snare. 12 September 1938

Lawrence

I have not read anything of Lawrence, but I have recently seen indications about him from many quarters; the impression given was that of a man of gifts who failed for want of vital balance — like so many others. The prose you have turned into verse — very well, as usual, — has certainly quality, though there is not enough to form a definite judgment. A seeker who missed the issue, I should imagine — misled by the vitalistic stress to which the mind of today is a very harassed captive. 16 June 1932

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As far as the photograph of which you speak can be taken as showing the man — it is that of a nature of which the chief character is intensity, but in a very narrow range. There is here no wide range of ideas or feelings; a few ruling ideas, a few persistent and keenly acute feelings. The face of a man whose vital is also intense, but without strength and therefore oversensitive. There may well be a strong idealistic tendency — but there is not likely to be much power to carry out the ideals. This is the character; as for the genius, if there is any, it will depend on other things which may not find positive expression in the outward appearance; for the external man is often the medium of a Power that is beyond him.

I shall keep the book for a few days — if you don't need it, — just to glance through it; it is too big to read in detail. I know nothing of Lawrence; I shall see if I can pick up something from here. 25 September 1932

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I must read Huxley's preface [to *The Letters of D. H. Lawrence*] and glance at some letters before venturing on any comments — like the reviewers who frisk about, a page here and a page there, and then write an ample or devastating review. Anyhow it seems to me Lawrence must have been a difficult man to live with, even for him it must have been difficult to live with himself. His photograph confirms that view. But a man at war with himself can write excellent poetry — if he is a poet; often better poetry than another, just as Shakespeare wrote his best tragedies when he was in a state of chaotic upheaval; at least so his interpreters say. But one needs a higher and more calm and poised inspiration to write poems of harmony and divine balance than any Lawrence ever had. I stick to my idea of the evil influence of theories on a man of genius. If he had been contented to write things of beauty instead of bare rockies and dry deserts, he might have done splendidly and ranked among the great poets.

3 July 1936

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All great personalities have a strong ego of one kind or another — for that matter it does not need to be a big personality to be ego-centred; ego-centricity is the very nature of life in the Ignorance, — even the sattwic man, the philanthropist, the altruist live for and round their ego. Society imposes an effort to restrain and when one cannot restrain at least to disguise it. Morality's highest business is to control or widen, refine or sublimate it so that it shall be able to exceed itself or use itself in the service of things bigger than its own primary egoism. But none of these things enables one to escape from it. It is only by finding something deep within or above ourselves and making *laya* (dissolution) of the ego in that that it is possible. It is what Lawrence saw and it was his effort to do it that made him "other" than those who associated with him — but he could not find out the way. It was a strange mistake to seek it in sexuality; it was also a great mistake to seek it at the wrong end of the nature.

What you say about the discovery of the defects of human nature is no doubt true. Human nature is full of defects and can-

not be otherwise, but there are other elements and possibilities in it which, although never quite unmixed, have to be seen to get a whole view. But the discovery of the truth about human beings need not lead to cynicism; it may lead to a calm aloofness and irony which has nothing disappointed or bitter in it; or it may lead to a large psychic charity which recognises the truth but makes all allowances and is ready to love and to help in spite of all. In the spiritual consciousness one is blind to nothing, but sees also that which is within behind these coverings, the divine element not yet released, and is neither deceived nor repelled and discouraged. That inner greater thing that was in Lawrence and which he sought for is in everybody: he may not have found it and his defects of nature may have prevented its release, but it is there.

I do not know about the lovableness; what you say is partly true, but lovableness may exist in spite of ego and all kinds of defects and people may feel it. 3 July 1936

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Lawrence had the psychic push inside towards the Unseen and Beyond at the same time as a push towards the vital life which came in its way. He was trying to find his way between the two and mixed them up together till at the end he got his mental liberation from the tangle though not yet any clear knowledge of the way — for that I suppose he will have to be born nearer the East or in any case in surroundings which will enable him to get at the Light. 9 July 1936

Sri Aurobindo and Criticism of Fiction

It is true I read through Aldous Huxley's monster, but it took me several months to finish it. This is not because I object to "light" literature, but because I had only an occasional quarter of an hour in three or four days to glance at it. If Sarat Chatterji does not mind my treating his book to the same tortoise dharma, I will undertake to read it; but I can make no promise as to time etc. Possibly it will take less time than the Round Table

Conference. As to giving him a new turn, that, I fear, is beyond me; besides, in this field I was once a voracious reader, but never a critic or creator. 8 June 1931

*

As to the novel, perhaps I simply meant that I was unwilling to exercise my critic's scalpel on a living master of the art. In poetry it is different because I am there both a critic and a creator. 22 June 1931

Great Novelists

The great novelists like the great dramatists have been usually men who lived widely or intensely and brought a world out of the combination of their inner and their outer observation, vision, experience. Of course if you have a world in yourself, that is another matter. 22 September 1936

Bankim Chandra Chatterji

Depreciation of Bankim is absurd; he is and will always rank as one of the great creators and his prose stands among the ten or twelve best prose-styles in the world's literature.

December 1932

Great Prose Stylists

I stand rather aghast at your summons to stand and deliver the names of the ten or twelve best prose styles in the world's literature. I had no names in mind and I used the incautious phrase only to indicate the high place I thought Bankim held among the great masters of language. To rank the poets on different grades of the Hill of Poetry is a pastime which may be a little frivolous and unnecessary, but possible if not altogether permissible. I would not venture to try the same game with the prose-writers who are multitudinous and do not present the same marked and unmistakable differences of level and power.

The prose field is a field, it is not a mountain. It has eminences, but its high tops are not so high, the drops not so low as in poetical literature.

Then again there are great writers in prose and great prose-writers and the two are by no means the same thing. Dickens and Balzac are great novelists, but their style or their frequent absence of style had better not be described; Scott attempts a style, but it is neither blameless nor has distinguishing merit. Other novelists have an adequate style and a good one but their prose is not quoted as a model and they are remembered not for that but as creators. You speak of Meredith, and if Meredith had always written with as pure a mastery as he did in *Richard Feverel* he might have figured as a pre-eminent master of language, but the creator and the thinker played many tricks on the stylist in the bulk of his work. I was writing of prose styles and what was in my mind was those achievements in which language reached its acme of perfection in one manner or other so that whatever the writer touched became a thing of beauty — no matter what its substance — or a perfect form and memorable. Bankim seemed to me to have achieved that in his own way as Plato in his or Cicero or Tacitus in theirs or in French literature, Voltaire, Flaubert or Anatole France. I could name others, especially in French which is the greatest store-house of fine prose among the world's languages — there is no other to match it. Matthew Arnold once wrote a line something like this:

France great in all great arts, in none supreme,

to which someone very aptly replied, "And what then of the art of prose-writing? Is it not a great art and who can approach France there? All prose of other languages seems beside its perfection, lucidity, measure almost clumsy."

There are many remarkable prose-writers in English, but that perfection which is almost like a second nature to the French writers is not so common. The great prose-writers in English seem to seize by the personality they express in their styles, rather than by its perfection as an instrument — it is true at least of the earliest and I think too of the later writers. Lamb

whom you mention is a signal example of a writer who erected his personality into a style and lives by that achievement — Pater and Wilde are other examples.

As for Bengali we have had Bankim and have still Tagore and Sarat Chatterji. That is sufficient achievement for a single century.

I have not answered your question — but I have explained my phrase and I think that is all you can expect from me.

15 September 1933

Saratchandra Chatterji

What is stamped on Saratchandra's work everywhere is a large intelligence, an acute and accurate observation of men and things and a heart full of sympathy for sorrow and suffering. Too sensitive to be quite at ease with the world and also perhaps too clear-sighted. Much fineness of mind and refinement of the vital nature.

March 1935

*

Novels deal with the vital life of men, so necessarily they bring that atmosphere. Saratchandra is a highly emotional writer with a great power of presenting the feelings and movements of the human vital.

13 March 1936

Alexander Dumas

Dumas' "history" is all slap and dash adventure — amusing, rather than solidly interesting. But it is all the history known to many people in France — just as many in England gather their history from Shakespeare's plays.

2 December 1934

Victor Hugo

When I said to Pavitra that *Les Misérables* was one of the great works of art he replied "Faugh! What a shallow thing." But I believe I heard from Amrita that you used to regard it as one of the world's great novels.

It is not one of the masterpieces of “art”, but I regard it as the work of a powerful genius and certainly one of the great novels. It is certainly not philosophically or psychologically deep, but it is exceedingly vivid and powerful. 25 April 1937

*

People have different tastes — some regard Hugo as a childish writer, a rhetorician without depth — others regard him as a great poet and novelist. One has to form one’s own judgment and leave others to hold theirs. 26 April 1937

*

I should like to know whether, in criticising novels, one has a right to depreciate a work because it is not very deep.

That is again a matter of opinion. There is the position that plot and character-presentation are sufficient and for the rest a large or great theme — one of the well-recognised human situations or a picture of life largely dealt with — and no more is necessary. Most famous English novels of the past are like that. There is another position that subtle psychology, deep and true presentation (not merely imaginative or idealistic) of the profounder problems or secrets of life and nature are needed. Hugo’s characters and situations are thought by many to be melodramatic or superficial and untrue. His novels like his dramas are “romantic” and the present trend is against the romantic treatment of life as superficial, childishly over-coloured and false. The disparagement of what was formerly considered great is common on that ground. “Faugh!” expresses the feeling. 27 April 1937

Dickens and Balzac

For literary creation and effective expression, who will deny that style has a great force?

Of course; without style there is no literature — except in fiction, where a man with bad style like Dickens or Balzac can make up by vigour and the power of his substance. 29 October 1933

*

Charles Dickens says, that is, makes a character speak (seriously): “My eyes stood staring above his head”!

Dickens is the most slipshod of all English writers — his English style is not worth a cuss. This sentence is the proof. The character’s “eyes stood above somebody else’s head staring” no doubt at their own position in astonishment at his English.

His merit lies in his stories and characters (some of them) not in his language which is bad. The same may be said of Balzac who is the greatest of French novelists but the worst of French writers.

13 June 1938

Romain Rolland

Somnath was drawn to the spiritual life through reading novels like *Jean Christophe*.

I have not read *Jean Christophe*, but Rolland is an idealist who takes interest in spiritual mysticism — not himself a man of spiritual experience. It is quite natural that such a man’s writings should produce an effect on an intellectual man more easily than a religious or spiritual work. Somnath was not religious-minded, so a religious work would not move him because it would be too far from his own way of thinking and turn of seeing. A spiritual book would not reach him, for he would not understand or feel the spiritual experiences or knowledge contained in it, they being quite foreign to his then consciousness. On the other hand a book by an intellectual idealist with an intellectual turn towards spirituality would suit his own temperament and outlook and draw his thoughts that way.

26 October 1935

French “Psychic” Romances

If and when chemistry advances and enters the supraphysical regions it will try to bring down peace in a vacuum bottle and analyse and synthetise it in some way.

If you read the French romances about “psychic” matters you will find that their highest imagination is machinery, — machines

for registering peoples' thoughts, machines for storing up the psychic energy of "a living Buddha" (a Buddha, by the way, with some hundred concubines) into which he puts his will-force so that when it is turned on millions of soldiers will march in a hypnotised trance to battle performing manoeuvres according to silent orders from the machine, etc. etc. So your suppositions are not unlikely. One of the reasons why many Americans want Yoga is that it may make them successful in all they undertake, professors, businessmen etc. 29 April 1935

Contemporary Detective Stories

The detective stories of today are much better than those of the Sherlock Holmes time. This kind of writing has been taken up by men with imagination and literary talent who would not have touched it before. 30 September 1935

On Some Musicians

As to Sahana's question, I am unable to say much — I have no special competence in this sphere of music and do not know on what aesthetic ground she stands in this matter. These things are mysterious in their origin and so it is said "*De gustibus non est disputandum*" — "There can be no disputing about tastes." Some connoisseurs of music exalt Wagner as a god or a Titan, others speak of him with depreciation and celebrate the godhead of Verdi who is disclaimed by their opponents. Yet I suppose the genius of neither can be disputed. So far as I can make out from her statement, Sahana does not dispute your genius or the aesthetic quality of your music, but something in her does not respond — if so, it is either a matter of temperament or it is that she is looking for something else, some other vibration than that given by your music. If it is only conservatism and an unwillingness to admit new forms or new laws of creation, that is obviously a mental limitation and can disappear only with more plasticity of mind or a change of the angle of vision — I don't know that I can say anything more — or more definite.

As for Sahana's singing, she seems to succeed when she can forget herself in her singing and to fail when she has to think of her audience or of success and failure. That would mean that she is in a certain stage of inner development where the inner state makes all the difference. I would hazard the conclusion that her future as a singer on the old psychological lines hardly exists, but she has to find fully her soul, her inner self and with it the inner singer.

8 September 1937

Beethoven

There can be no doubt that Beethoven's music was often from another world; so it is quite possible for it to give the key to an inwardly sensitive hearer or to one who is seeking or ready for the connection to be made. But I think it is very few who get beyond being aesthetically moved by a sense of greater things; to lay the hand on the key and use it is rare.

Bhatkhande

Yes, I have read your article on Bhatkhande. Very interesting; the character came home to me as a sublimation of a type I was very familiar with when in Baroda. Very amusing his encounters with the pundits — especially the Socratic way of self-depreciation heightened almost to the Japanese pitch. His photograph you sent me shows a keen and powerful face full of genius and character.

February 1937

Comments on Some Passages of Prose

Anatole France's Irony

I so much enjoyed Anatole France's joke about God in the mouth of the arch-scoffer Brotteaux in his book *Les dieux ont soif* that I must ask you to read it.

Ou Dieu veut empêcher le mal et ne le peut, ou il ne peut et ne le veut, ou il ne le peut ni ne le veut, ou il le veut et le peut. S'il le veut et ne le peut, il est impuissant; s'il le peut et ne le veut, il est pervers; s'il ne le peut ni ne le veut, il est impuissant et pervers; s'il le peut et le veut, que ne le fait-il, mon Père?¹

I wonder what God might answer to it, supposing he should ever feel inclined to?

Anatole France is always amusing whether he is ironising about God and Christianity or about that rational animal, man or Humanity (with a big H), and the follies of his reason and his conduct. But I presume you never heard of God's explanation of his non-interference to Anatole France when they met in some Heaven of Irony, I suppose — it can't have been in the heaven of Karl Marx, in spite of France's conversion before his death. God is reported to have strolled up to him and said, "I say, Anatole, you know that was a good joke of yours; but there was a good cause too for my non-interference... Reason came along and told me, 'Look here, why do you pretend to exist? you know you don't exist and never existed or, if you do, you have made such a mess of your creation that we can't tolerate you any longer. Once we have got you out of the way, all will be right upon earth, tip-top, A-1: my daughter Science and I have

¹ *Anatole France, Les dieux ont soif (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1965), p. 146. — Ed.*

arranged that between us. Man will raise his noble brow, the head of creation, dignified, free, equal, fraternal, democratic, depending upon nothing but himself, with nothing greater than himself anywhere in existence. There will be no God, no gods, no churches, no priestcraft, no religion, no kings, no oppression, no poverty, no war or discord anywhere. Industry will fill the earth with abundance, Commerce will spread her golden reconciling wings everywhere. Universal education will stamp out ignorance and leave no room for folly or unreason in any human brain; man will become cultured, disciplined, rational, scientific, well-informed, arriving always at the right conclusion upon full and sufficient data. The voice of the scientist and the expert will be loud in the land and guide mankind to the earthly paradise. A perfected society; health universalised by a developed medical science and sound hygiene; everything rationalised; science evolved, infallible, omnipotent, omniscient; the riddle of existence solved; the Parliament of Man, the Federation of the world; evolution, of which man, magnificent man, is the last term, completed in the noble white race, a humanitarian kindness and uplifting for our backward brown, yellow and black brothers; peace, peace, peace, reason, order, unity everywhere.' There was a lot more like that, Anatole, and I was so much impressed by the beauty of the picture and its convenience, for I would have nothing to do or to supervise, that I at once retired from business, — for, you know that I was always of a retiring disposition and inclined to keep myself behind the veil or in the background at the best of times. But what is this I hear? — it does not seem to me from reports that Reason even with the help of Science has kept her promise. And if not, why not? Is it because she would not or because she could not? or is it because she both would not and could not, or because she would and could, but somehow did not? And I say, Anatole, these children of theirs, the State, Industrialism, Capitalism, Communism and the rest have a queer look — they seem very much like Titanic monsters. Armed too with all the power of Intellect and all the weapons and organisation of Science. And it does look as if mankind were no freer under them than under the Kings and the Churches. What has happened —

or is it possible that Reason is *not* supreme and infallible, even that she has made a greater mess of it than I could have done myself?" Here the report of the conversation ends; I give it for what it is worth, for I am not acquainted with this God and have to take him on trust from Anatole France. 1 August 1932

Croce's Aesthetics

"Knowledge has two forms: it is either *intuitive* knowledge or *logical* knowledge; knowledge obtained through the imagination or knowledge obtained through the intellect; knowledge of the individual or knowledge of the universal; of individual things or of the relations between them; it is the production either of images or of concepts." [B. Croce, *Esthetic*, 1902, p. 1.] The origin of art, therefore, lies in the power of forming images. "Art is ruled uniquely by the imagination. Images are its only wealth. It does not classify objects, it does not pronounce them real or imaginary, does not qualify them, does not define them; it feels and presents them — nothing more." [In Carr, *The Philosophy of Benedetto Croce*, London, 1917, p. 35.] Because imagination precedes thought, and is necessary to it, the artistic, or image-forming, activity of the mind is prior to the logical, concept-forming, activity. Man is an artist as soon as he imagines, and long before he reasons.

The great artists understood the matter so. "One paints not with the hands but with the brain," said Michelangelo; and Leonardo wrote: "The minds of men of lofty genius are most active in invention when they are doing the least external work." Everybody knows the story told of da Vinci, that when he was painting the "Last Supper", he sorely displeased the Abbot who had ordered the work, by sitting motionless for days before an untouched canvas; and revenged himself for the importunate Abbot's persistent query — When would he begin to work? — by using the gentleman as an unconscious model for the figure of Judas.

The essence of the esthetic activity lies in this motionless effort of the artist to conceive the perfect image that

shall express the subject he has in mind; it lies in a form of intuition that involves no mystic insight, but perfect sight, complete perception, and adequate imagination. The miracle of art lies not in the externalization but in the conception of the idea; externalization is a matter of mechanical technique and manual skill.

“When we have mastered the internal word, when we have vividly and clearly conceived a figure or a statue, when we have found a musical theme, expression is born and is complete, nothing more is needed. If, then, we open our mouth, and speak or sing, . . . what we do is to say aloud what we have already said within, to sing aloud what we have already sung within. If our hands strike the keyboard of the pianoforte, if we take up pencil or chisel, such actions are willed” (they belong to the practical, not to the aesthetic, activity), “and what we are then doing is executing in great movements what we have already executed briefly and rapidly within.” [*Esthetic*, p. 50.]

— Will Durant, presenting the aesthetics of Benedetto Croce in *The Story of Philosophy*

I have not read Croce but it seems to me that Durant must have taken something of their depth out of them in his presentation. At any rate, I cannot accept the proposition that there are only two forms of knowledge, imaginative and intellectual, — still less if these two are made to coincide with the division between knowledge of the individual and that of the universal and again with image-production and concepts. Art can be conceptual as well as imaginative — it may embody ideas and not merely produce images. I do not see the relevancy of the Da Vinci story — one can sit motionless to summon up concepts as well as images or a concept and image together. Moreover what is this intuition which is perfect sight and adequate imagination, i.e., production of an image: is it empty of all “idea”, of all conception? Evidently not, — for immediately it is said that the miracle of art lies in the conception of an idea. What then becomes of the division between the production of images and the production of concepts; and how can it be said that Art is ruled only by the image-producing power and images are its only

wealth? All this seems to be very contradictory and confusing. You cannot cut up the human mind in that way — the attempt is that of the analysing intellect which is always putting things as trenchantly divided and opposite. If it had been said that in art the synthetic action of the idea is more prominent than the analytic idea which we find most prominent in logic and science and philosophical reasoning, then one could understand the statement. The integrating or direct integral conception and the image-making faculty are the two leading powers of art with intuition as the driving force behind it — that too would be a statement that is intelligible.

Still more strange is the statement that the externalisation is outside the miracle of art and is not needed; beauty, he says, is adequate expression, but how can there be expression, an expressive image without externalisation? The inner image may be the thing to be expressed, it may itself be expressive of some truth, but unless it is externalised how can the spectator contemplating beauty contemplate it at all or get into unity of vision with the artist who creates it? The difference between Shakespeare and ourselves lies only in the power of inwardly forming an image, not in the power of externalising it? But there are many people who have the power of a rich inner imaging of things, but are quite unable to put them down on paper or utter them in speech or transfer them to canvas or into clay or bronze or stone. They are then as great creative artists as Shakespeare or Michael Angelo? I should have thought that Shakespeare's power of the word and Michael Angelo's of translating his image into visible form is at least an indispensable part of the art of expression, creation or image-making. I cannot conceive of a Shakespeare or Michael Angelo without that power — the one would be a mute inglorious Shakespeare and the other a rather helpless and ineffective Angelo.

P.S. This is of course a comment on the statement as presented — I would have to read Croce myself in order to form a conception of what is behind his philosophy of Aesthetics.

19 December 1936

Russell's Introvert

We are all prone to the malady of the introvert, who, with the manifold spectacle of the world spread out before him, turns away and gazes only upon the emptiness within.²

I have not forgotten Russell, but I have neglected him, first, for want of time, second because for the moment I have mislaid your letter, third because of lack of understanding on my part. What is the meaning of taking interest in external things for their own sake? And what is an introvert? Both these problems baffle me.

The word introvert has come into existence only recently and sounds like a companion of pervert. Literally, it means one who is turned inwards. The Upanishad speaks of the doors of the senses that are turned outwards absorbing man in external things (for their own sake, I suppose) and of the rare man among a million who turns his vision inwards and sees the Self. Is that man an introvert? And is Russell's ideal man, interested in externals for their own sake, Cheloo the day-labourer, for instance, or Joseph the chauffeur, *homo externalis Russellius*, an extrovert? Or is an introvert one who has an inner life stronger, more brilliant, more creative than his external life, — the poet, the musician, the artist? Was Beethoven in his deafness bringing out music from within him an introvert? Or does it mean one who measures external things by an inner standard and is interested in them not for their own sake but for their value to the soul's self-development, its psychic, religious, ethical or other self-expression? Are Tolstoy and Gandhi examples of introverts? Or in another field Goethe? Or does it mean one who cares for external things only as they touch his own mind or else concern his own ego? But that I suppose would include 999,999 men out of every million.

What are external things? Russell is a mathematician. Are mathematical formulae external things — even though they exist here only in the World-Mind and the mind of Man? If not, is

² Bertrand Russell, *The Conquest of Happiness* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1943), p. 160.

Russell as mathematician an introvert? Again, Yajnavalkya says that one loves the wife not for the sake of the wife, but for the self's sake and so with other objects of interest or desire — whether the self be the inner self or the ego.³ Who desires external things for their own sake and not for some value to the conscious being? Even Cheloo is not interested in a two-anna piece for its own sake, but for some vital satisfaction it can bring him; even with the hoarding miser it is the same. It is his vital being's passion for possession that he satisfies and that is something not external but internal, part of his inner make-up, the unseen personality that moves inside behind the veil of the body. What then is meant by Russell's for their own sake? If you will enlighten me on these points, I may still make an effort to comment on the *mahāvākya* of your former guru.

More important is his wonderful phrase about the emptiness within — on that at least I hope to make a comment one day or another.

27 December 1930

Lawrence's Letters

I write to let you know what is occupying me — Yoga meditation alternating with Lawrence's engrossing letters,⁴ of which I give you some lines that I liked very much.

Why are you so sad about your life? Only let go all this will to have things in your own control. We must all submit to be helpless and obliterated, quite obliterated, destroyed, cast away into nothingness. There is something will rise out of it, something new, that now is not. This which we are must cease to be, that we may come to pass in another being. Do not struggle, with your will, to dominate your conscious life — do not do it. Only drift, and let go — let go, entirely, and become dark, quite dark — like winter which mows away all the leaves and flowers, and lets only the dark underground roots remain. . . .

³ In Yoga it is the valuing of external things in the terms of the desire of the ego that is discouraged — their only value is their value in the manifestation of the Divine.

⁴ Aldous Huxley, ed., *The Letters of D. H. Lawrence* (London: William Heinemann, 1934).

I tell this to you, I tell it to myself—to let go, to release from my will everything that my will would hold, to lapse back into darkness and unknowing. There must be deep winter before there can be spring. [pp. 285–86]

I suppose Lawrence was a Yogi who had missed his way and come into a European body to work out his difficulties. “To lapse back into darkness and unknowing” sounds like the Christian mystic’s passing into the “night of God”, but I think Lawrence thought of a new efflorescence from the subconscious while the mystic’s night of God was a stage between ordinary consciousness and the Superconscious Light.

26 June 1936

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The passage you have quoted certainly shows that Lawrence had an idea of the new spiritual birth. What he has written there could be a very accurate indication of the process of the change, the putting away of the old mind, vital, physical consciousness and the emergence of a new consciousness from the now invisible Within, not an illusory periphery like the present mental, vital, physical ignorance but a truth-becoming from the true being within us. He speaks of the transition as a darkness created by the rejection of the outer mental light, a darkness intervening before the true light from the Invisible can come. Certain Christian mystics have said the same thing and the Upanishad also speaks of the luminous Being beyond the darkness. But in India the rejection of the mental light, the vital stir, the physical hard narrow concreteness leads more often, not to a darkness, but to a wide emptiness and silence which begins afterwards to fill with the light of a deeper greater truer consciousness, a consciousness full of peace, harmony, joy and freedom. I think Lawrence was held back from realising because he was seeking for the new birth in the subconscious vital and taking that for the Invisible Within—he mistook Life for Spirit; whereas Life can only be an expression of the Spirit. That too perhaps was the reason for his preoccupation with a vain and baffled sexuality.

Did you like the Ajanta frescos? I *loved* them: the pure

fulfilment — the pure simplicity — the complete, almost perfect relations between the men and the women — the most perfect things I have *ever* seen. Botticelli is vulgar beside them. They are the zenith of a very lovely civilisation, the crest of a very perfect wave of human development. . . . [pp. 299–300]

His appreciation of the Ajanta paintings must have been due to the same drive that made him seek for a new poetry as well as a new truth from within. He wanted to get rid of the outward forms that for him hide the Invisible and arrive at something that would express with bare simplicity and directness some reality within. It is what made people begin to prefer the primitives to the developed art of the Renaissance. That is why he depreciates Botticelli as not giving the real thing, but only an outward grace and beauty which he considers vulgar in comparison with the less formal art of old that was satisfied with bringing out the pure emotion from within and nothing else.

It is the same thing which makes him want a stark bare rocky directness for modern poetry.⁵ 28 June 1936

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In one of his letters, Lawrence says: “You see one can only write creative stuff when it comes — otherwise it’s not much good.” [p. 89]

All statements are subject to qualification. What Lawrence states is true in principle, but in practice most poets have to sustain the inspiration by industry. Milton in his later days used to write every day fifty lines; Virgil nine which he corrected and recorrected till it was within half way of what he wanted. In other words he used to write under any other conditions and pull at his inspiration till it came.

To go by my own experience, the first part of the statement doesn’t seem always to be true. But perhaps the best creations

⁵ A letter of 29 June 1936 containing Sri Aurobindo’s comments on Lawrence’s poetry is published on pages 418–19 above. — Ed.

are those which come in that way.

Yes. Usually the best lines, passages etc. come like that.

10 November 1936

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Every time I complain of great difficulty, no inspiration, you quote the names of Virgil, Milton, etc. Same in Yoga — you say 10 years, 12 years — pooh!

I thought you were honestly asking for the truth about inspiration according to Lawrence and effort; and I answered to that. I did not know that it was connected purely with your personal reactions. You did not put it like that. You asked whether Lawrence's ideas were correct and I was obliged to point out that they were subject to qualification since both great and second class and all kinds of poets have not waited for a fitful inspiration but tried to regularise it.

13 November 1936

Section Three

Practical Guidance for Aspiring Writers

Guidance in Writing Poetry

Three Essentials for Writing Poetry

I have gone through your poems. For poetry three things are necessary. First, there must be emotional sincerity and poetical feeling and this your poems show that you possess. Next, a mastery over language and a faculty of rhythm perfected by a knowledge of the technique of poetic and rhythmic expression; here the technique is imperfect, some faculty is there but in the rough and there is not yet an original and native style. Finally, there must be the power of inspiration, the creative energy, and that makes the whole difference between the poet and the good verse-writer. In your poems this is still very uncertain, — in some passages it almost comes out, but in the rest it is not evident.

I would suggest to you not to turn your energies in this direction at present. Allow your consciousness to grow. If when the consciousness develops, a greater energy of inspiration comes, not out of the ordinary but out of the Yogic consciousness, then you can write and, if it is found that the energy not only comes from the true source but is able to mould for itself the true transcription in rhythm and language, can continue.

6 June 1932

Suggestions for Indians Writing English Poetry

If you want to write English poetry which can stand, I would suggest three rules for you to observe:

1. Avoid rhetorical turns and artifices and the rhetorical tone generally. An English poet can use these things at will because he has the intimate sense of his language and can keep the right proportion and measure. An Indian using them kills his poetry and produces a scholastic exercise.

2. Write modern English. Avoid frequent inversions or turns of language that belong to the past poetic styles. Modern English poetry uses a straightforward order and a natural style, not different in vocabulary, syntax, etc., from that of prose. An inversion can be used sometimes, but it must be done deliberately and for a distinct and particular effect.

3. For poetic effect rely wholly on the power of your substance, the magic of rhythm and the sincerity of your expression — if you can add subtlety so much the better, but not at the cost of sincerity and straightforwardness. Do not construct your poetry with the brain-mind, the mere intellect — that is not the source of true inspiration; write always from the inner heart of emotion and vision.

17 November 1930

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Why erect mental theories and suit your poetry to them?¹ I would suggest to you not to be bound by either [*of two models*], but to write as best suits your own inspiration and poetic genius. I imagine that each poet should write in the way suited to his own inspiration and substance; it is only a habit of the human mind fond of erecting rules and rigidities that would like to put one way forward as a general law for all. If you insist on being rigidly simple and direct as a mental rule, you might spoil something of the subtlety of the expression you now have, even if the delicacy of substance remained with you. Obscurity, artifice, rhetoric have to be avoided, but for the rest follow the inner movement.

I do not remember the precise words I used in laying down the rule to which you refer, — I think I advised sincerity and straightforwardness as opposed to rhetoric and artifice. In any case it was far from my intention to impose any strict rule of bare simplicity and directness as a general law of poetic style. I was speaking of “twentieth century” English poetry and of what was necessary for an Indian writing in the English tongue.²

¹ This is the revised version of a letter that is printed in its unrevised form (with the omission of one paragraph) on pages 467–68. — Ed.

² Sri Aurobindo is referring here to the advice he gave in the letter of 17 November 1930 published on pages 567–68. — Ed.

English poetry in former times used inversions freely and had a law of its own — at that time natural and right, but the same thing nowadays sounds artificial and false. English has now acquired a richness and flexibility and power of many-sided suggestion which makes it unnecessary for poetry to depart from the ordinary style and form of the language. But there are other languages in which this is not yet true. Bengali is in its youth, in full process of growth and has many things not yet done, many powers and values it has still to acquire. It is necessary that its poets should keep a full and entire freedom to turn in whichever way the genius leads, to find new forms and movements; if they like to adhere to the ordinary norm of the language to which prose has to keep and do what they can in it, they should be free to do so; but also they should be free to depart from it, if it is by doing so that they can best liberate their souls in speech. At present it is this that most matters. 8 December 1930

Help to Young Poets

Yes, of course, I have been helping Jyotirmayi. Always when somebody really wants to develop the literary power, I put some force to help him or her. If there is faculty and application, however latent the faculty, it always grows under the pressure and can even be turned in this or that direction. Naturally, some are more favourable *ādhāras* than others and grow more decisively and quickly. Others drop off, not having the necessary power of application. But on the whole it is easy enough to make this faculty grow, for there is cooperation on the part of the recipient and only the *tamas* of the *apavr̥tti* and *aprakāśa* in the human instrument to overcome which are not such serious obstacles in the things of the mind as a vital resistance or non-cooperation of the will or idea which confronts one when there is a pressure for change or progress in other directions. 10 June 1935

*

[X's] poems are only attempts — good attempts for his age — so I encourage him by telling him that they are good attempts. It

is his English poems I correct, as he has talent, but his mastery of the language is still naturally very imperfect. The other three are masters of language and [Y] is a poet of a very high order. I give my general opinion only when they want it. I never make suggestions. It is in English poetry that I give my opinions or correct or make suggestions. 22 November 1933

Criticism of Bengali Poetry

I do not know that I can suggest any detailed criticisms of Bengali poetry, as I have to rely more on what I feel than on any expert knowledge of language and metre.

Sri Aurobindo's Force and the Writing of Poetry

You give me Force for English poetry — some lines come all right, others are jumbled, wrong, etc., and these things you correct by outer guidance, i.e. by correcting, checking, etc. till I become sufficiently receptive and then only a few changes will be necessary.

I do so in your English poetry because I am an expert in English poetry. In Bengali poetry I don't do it. I only select among alternatives offered by yourself. Mark that for Amal I nowadays avoid correcting or changing as far as possible — that is in order to encourage the inspiration to act in himself. Sometimes I see what he should have written but do not tell it to him, leaving him to get it or not from my silence. 10 April 1937

*

I can understand your yogic success in Dilip's Bengali poetry, because the field was ready, but the opening of his channel in English has staggered me. I can't understand whether it is your success or his.

What do you mean by Yoga? There is a Force here in the atmosphere which will give itself to anyone open to it. Naturally it will work best when the native tongue is used — but it can do big things through English if the channel used is a poetic

one and if that channel offers itself. Two things are necessary — no personal resistance and some willingness to take trouble about understanding the elementary technique at least so that the transcription may not meet with too many obstacles. Nishikanta has a fine channel and with a very poetic turn in it — he offers no resistance to the flow of the force, no interference of his mental ego, only the convenience of his mental individuality. Whether he takes the trouble for the technique is another matter.

I had written to you that Nishikanta bows in front of your photograph before he sits down to write, and that I am ready to bow a hundred times, if that is the trick. You answered that it depends on how one bows. Methinks it does not depend on that. Even if it did I don't think Nishikanta knows it. Or was it in his past life that he knew it?

Well, there is a certain faculty of effacing oneself and letting the Universal Force run through you — that is the way of bowing. It can be acquired by various means, but also one may have the capacity for doing it in certain directions by nature.

10 December 1935

*

We feel that your Force gives us the necessary inspiration for poetry, but I often wonder if you send it in a continuous current.

Of course not. Why should I? It is not necessary. I put my Force from time to time and let it work out what has to be worked out. It is true that with some I have to put it often to prevent too long stretches of unproductivity, but even there I don't put a continuous current. I have not time for such things.

If it were so, we would not write 15 to 20 lines at a stretch and then go on for days together producing only 3 or 4 lines.

That depends on the mental instruments. Some people write freely — others do so only when in a special condition.

Had your special Force been constantly acting, why should we have this difficulty? We should be able to feel the inspiration as soon as we sit down with pen and paper, shouldn't we?

No. At least I myself don't have continuous inspiration at command like that in poetry.

I don't think a latent faculty brought out by Yogic Force would achieve such a height of perfection as a faculty which manifests in the natural way.

Of course, not so long as it is latent or not fully emerged. But once it is manifested and settled, there is no reason why it should not achieve an equal perfection. All depends on the quality of the inspiration that comes and the response of the instrument.

12 June 1935

*

When the current of inspiration comes to a stop, I think sometimes that perhaps you have forgotten me in your busy moments.

It does not depend on that at all. It depends on a certain state of receptivity — an opening of the channel between the inner plane where the inspiration comes and the outer through which it has to pass.

27 March 1934

*

As regards the "opening of the channel", can it be done sooner by more concentration, meditation, etc., disregarding the literary side for the time being?

One can get the power of receptivity to inspiration by concentration and meditation making the inner being stronger and the outer less gross, tamasic and insistent.

29 March 1934

*

I tried to write a poem, but failed in spite of prayer and call. Then I wrote to you to send me some Force. Before the letter had reached you, lo, the miracle was done! Can you explain

the process? Was it simply the writing that helped establish the contact with the Grace?

The call for the Force is very often sufficient, not absolutely necessary that it should reach my physical mind first. Many get as soon as they write — or, (if they are outside), when the letter reaches the atmosphere.

Yes, it is the success in establishing the contact that is important. It is a sort of hitching on or getting hold of the invisible button or whatever you like to call it.

When you send the Force, is there a time limit for its functioning or does it work itself out in the long run or get washed off after a while, finding the *ādhāra* unreceptive?

There is no time limit. I have known cases in which I put a Force for getting a thing done and it seemed to fail damnably at the moment; but after two years everything carried itself out in exact detail and order just as I had arranged it, although I was thinking no more at all of the matter. You ought to know but I suppose you don't that "Psychic" Research in Europe has proved that all so-called "psychic" communications can sink into the consciousness without being noticed and turn up long afterwards. It is like that with the communication of Force also.

21 May 1936

Opening to the Force

All I can say is that opening is a mysterious business!

Who says it is not? Some people have the trick of always opening to a Force (e.g. Dilip, Nishikanta for creative literary activity), some have it sometimes, don't have it sometimes (you, Arjava, myself). Why make it a case of kicks and despair?

19 September 1936

Sending Inspiration

But what precisely do you mean by sending the inspiration?

The inspiration comes from above, — through your inner being who, very evidently, is not only a Yogin and a bhakta but a poet of Yoga and bhakti. The Yoga-force which woke up the power in you came from me. It was when you were translating my poems that you got into touch and the power woke in you because you came inwardly into my Light. Since then I have been acting on you to develop this poetic power, and as there is a large opening there it has been an easy matter. As for the Power itself that works, that gives you words and rhythms, you ought to know or at least your inner being knows very well that all divine powers are the powers of the Mother. But the way in which these things work is the occult and not the physical (not the crudely mediumistic) way, and it works in each according to his nature and the material and capacities, actual or latent, it finds there.

8 September 1931

*

Please send me some inspiration to complete my *Triumph of Dante*. What is the best way of receiving it? I'll be thankful if you'll teach me how to be able to fill up those gaps.

Good Lord! it is not a thing that can be taught. As for the best way — well, silence of the mind, relative silence if one can't get the absolute.

6 November 1936

*

You give inspiration only for supramental poetry? Startling news, Sir!

Where have I said that I give inspiration for supramental poetry either only or at all? You said that your inspirer for this or for any other poem of yours was my supramental self. I simply said that it can't be, because a supramental self would produce or inspire supramental poetry — and yours is not that, nor, I may add, is Jyoti's or Dilip's or my own or anybody's.

We fondly believe that you give inspiration, set apart a time for it, and now you say that you are not the Inspirer?

I say that my supramental Self is not the inspirer — which is a very different matter.

Pray explain the mystery to me. Why shirk the responsibility now, because a surrealist poem has come out? You are responsible for it, I think.

Excuse me, no. As the Gita says, the Lord takes not on himself the good or the evil deeds (or writings) of any. I may send a force of inspiration, but I am not responsible for the results.

19 January 1937

The Necessity and Nature of Inspiration

I hope to be able to write not only good but very good and very fine poems as a part of Yoga.

To write such poetry, one must first be open to a high or strong or beautiful source of inspiration and secondly one must not be too facile — one must be careful of the quality. 30 May 1934

*

I am doubting if there is even one drop of poetical faculty in me.

There is evidence of literary talent in your poems — what has not yet come is the inspiration that vivifies the writing. It may come hereafter. 20 September 1934

*

As for the “urge”, if you resist the inspiration, the chances are that you will lose both the urge and your meditation. So it is better to let the flood have its way — especially in this case, of course, for there is no harm in *this* kind of urge.

7 February 1931

*

But that happens to everybody who is in the habit of writing. The suggesting forces write in the mind without regard to outward

opportunity and it is also quite usual for a line to come without any sequel.

3 April 1936

*

Would you suggest a way to increase thought-power in poetry?

There is no device for that. You have to open from within to a deeper or higher source of inspiration or grow from within into a deeper or higher consciousness — there is no other way for it.

4 May 1934

*

Today another poem by Jyoti. I'm staggered by her speed in writing. She says lines, *chanda*, simply drop down, and she jots them down. She feels as if somebody is writing through her.

But that is how inspiration always comes when the way is clear and the mind sufficiently passive. Something drops or pours down; somebody writes through you.

I don't know that by one's mind one can write such things.
What do you say?

Not possible. There would be something artificial or made up in them if it were the mind that did it.

How has she opened to the mystic plane? Something akin to her nature or one just opens?

It may be either.

Even when a thing drops down, isn't it rather risky to accept it as it comes, specially the *chanda* part of it?

If anything is defective, it can be only by a mistake in the transcription.

Does the *chanda* also come down with inspiration or has one to change it afterwards?

Yes, it comes and is usually faultless — if the mind is passive and the source a high, deep or true one. Of course metre as the Supraphysicals understand it!

I shall illustrate my point. Jyoti says she sometimes rejects lines because she doesn't understand their meaning. But since they repeatedly throw themselves on her, she accepts them. When the poem is completed the meaning becomes clear.

The mind ought to be quiet till all is written. Afterwards one can look and see if there is anything to be altered. 27 July 1936

*

Isn't it a fact that the best poetry almost always comes down without any resistance at all?

Usually the best poetry a poet writes, the things that make him immortal, come like that. 28 July 1936

*

After reading Jyoti's whole poem, I realised it would have been impossible to write it simply from facility. It is an inspiration-poem.

Of course it is impossible. There must be inspiration. The value of the poem does not rise from the labour or difficulty felt in writing it. Shakespeare, it is said, wrote at full speed and never erased a line. 29 July 1936

Inspiration and Understanding

Everything depends on the inspiration. But then I can't change any line or word since I don't understand what I am writing.

From your explanations you seem to understand all right. The question is about the inspiration itself. It is sometimes more successful, sometimes less — for various reasons. What one has to see is whether what has come through is quite satisfactory in language, image, harmonious building, poetic force. If not, one

can call a farther inspiration to emend what is deficient. At first one allows the inspiration to come through without interference, to establish the habit of free flow. But that does not mean one must not afterwards alter or improve — only it should be done not by the mind but by a fresh and better inspiration. If in the course of writing itself, a correcting inspiration comes, that can be accepted — otherwise one does the perfecting afterwards.

23 February 1937

*

The poet herself says that, as far as she can tell, the sestet has no relationship to the previous lines.

What does that matter? Is she the intellectual creator of these poems or is she the medium of their transmission? If the latter it does not matter a penny damn that she does not intellectually understand her poem — provided she transmits it correctly.

7 December 1936

*

Does it help a writer to know the particular source of inspiration from where he or she writes?

Not at all necessary.

18 July 1936

*

Some poems that come are unintelligible to the mind. Why? Is it because they come from higher planes?

Yes, the mind is used as a medium: it may be an understanding — transcribing agent or it may be only a passive channel. If an agent, it transcribes what comes from above, understands but does not pass its opinion — only transmits. If it is only a channel, then it sees the words and passes them but knows no more.

If one could understand it when it comes, would that not help to improve the poem?

Not to improve — for that would mean the mind interfering, refusing to be a medium and trying to do better in its own active

account. But to understand is desirable. If the mind is watchful and awake to the symbols being used or the images it can acquire the habit or knack of understanding. 27 January 1937

*

But seriously, how can I write this surrealist sort of stuff better?
What is the trick?

The trick is to put your demand on the source for what you want. If you want to fathom (not understand) what you are writing, ask for the vision of the thing to come along with the word, a vision bringing an inner comprehension. If you want something mystic but convincing to the non-mystic reader, ask for that till you get it. 17 February 1937

*

So you are getting plenty of surrealist poets, eh? Happy at the prospect?

Not at all. Look here, sir, two are enough in all conscience, with an occasional Nishikantian outburst thrown in. If others cut in I will have to strike. I can't spend all my life from set to dawn explaining the inexplicable.

Inspiration and Effort

I have ceased even to aspire, believing that you will give me inspiration. I refuse to make even a mental effort.

Mental effort is one thing and aspiring and holding yourself in readiness is another. 10 May 1934

*

If I have discovered some lines I must not think of the next lines, but try instead to keep absolutely silent so that with a leap I find that the Greater Mind has simply dropped the necessary rhymed lines, like a good fellow, and I finish off excellently without a drop of black sweat on my wide forehead?

That is the ideal way; but usually there is always an activity of the

mind jumping up and trying to catch the inspiration. Sometimes the inspiration, the right one, comes in the midst of this futile jumping, sometimes it sweeps it aside and brings in the right thing, sometimes it inserts itself between two blunders, sometimes it waits till the noise quiets down. But even this jumping need not be a mental effort — it is often only a series of suggestions, the mind of itself seizing on one or eliminating another, not by laborious thinking and choice, but by a quiet series of perceptions. This is method no. 2. No. 3 is your Herculean way, quite the slowest and worst.

31 March 1936

*

Inspiration leaves one sometimes and one goes on beating and beating, hammering and hammering, but it comes not!
Inspiration failing to descend, perhaps.

Exactly. When any real effect is produced, it is not because of the beating and the hammering, but because an inspiration slips down between the raising of the hammer and the falling and gets in under cover of the beastly noise. It is when there is no need of effort that the best comes. Effort is all right, but only as an excuse for inducing the Inspiration to come. If it wants to come, it comes — if it doesn't, it doesn't and one is obliged to give up after producing nothing or an inferior mind-made something. I have had that experience often enough myself. I have also seen Amal after producing something good but not perfect, beating the air and hammering it with proposed versions each as bad as the other, — for it is only a new inspiration that can really improve a defect in the transcription of the first one. Still one makes efforts, but it is not the effort that produces the result, but the inspiration that comes in answer to it. You knock at the door to make the fellow inside answer. He may or he mayn't — if he lies mum, you have only to walk off swearing. That's effort and inspiration.

You proclaim the force and inspiration from the house-top,
but fail to see that one has to work hour after hour to get it.
What would you call this labour?

Hammering, making a beastly noise so that Inspiration may get excited and exasperated and fling something through the window, muttering “I hope that will keep this insufferable tinsmith quiet.”

6 March 1936

Mentalisation of Inspiration

You have spoken of the original inspiration becoming “mentalised”. Could you tell me how it gets mentalised?

This mentalisation is a subtle process which takes place unobserved. The inspiration, as soon as it strikes the mental layer (where it first becomes visible) is met by a less intense receptivity of the mind which passes the inspired substance through but substitutes its own expression, an expression stressed by the force of inspiration into a special felicity but not reproducing or transmitting the inspired beat itself.

6 April 1938

Capturing Lines and Expressions

As regards poetry, I am invaded by hazy ideas for two or three compositions and many lines seem to peep out.

What is the meaning of this “seem”? Do they peep or do they not peep?

But they seem more bent on tantalising me than meaning anything serious, because as soon as I sit down to transcribe them, they evaporate like ether or camphor.

What do you mean? Why should you sit down to transcribe them? Keep hold of the lines and expressions by the nose as soon as they peep out, jump on a piece of paper and dash them down for prospective immortality.

It appears so easy to catch all these amorphous beauties and put them into morphological Grecian statues! . . .

Why amorphous, if they are lines and expressions — lines and

expressions are either morphous or they don't exist. Explain yourself, please. 5 December 1935

*

You ask why "amorphous"? The lines, expressions, words that I feel swarming all around me, but I cannot put into form, what else shall I call them?

If you simply feel things swarming without a shape, then you can't call that lines and expressions — it is only the chaotic potentiality of them.

One begins with the morphous lines hoping that the amorphous chaos will sweep in ecstatically and help me build a splendidly original cosmos, and what do I find? Either they elude me or what comes is something commonplace.

That's another matter. It's like dreams in which one gets splendid lines that put Shakespeare into the shade and one wakes up and enthusiastically jots them down, it turns out to be "O you damned goose, where are you going While the river is flowing, flowing, flowing" and things like that.

Do you mean that I should scribble down all these expressions as soon as they hop in? Good Lord! there will be parts and pieces only. How shall I make a whole poem out of them?

Many poets do that — jot down something that comes isolated in the hope that some day it will be utilisable. Tennyson did it, I believe. You don't want to be like Tennyson? Of course it is always permissible for you to pick and choose among these divine fragments and throw away those that are only semi-divine.

Already words and lines of four or five poems in halves and quarters are lying in a comatose condition, without any hope of resurrection.

Well, well — all that shows you are a poet in the making with hundreds of poems in you also in the making, very much so. The mountains in labour, you know — what? 6 December 1935

Inspiration during Sleep

Of late my poetic inspiration has shifted from the waking to the sleep state. I often compose poetry in sleep but cannot remember exactly what I write.

Concentrate in the will to remember before going to sleep—when you wake remain quiet a little before moving and try to remember (not struggling to do it but leaving your mind open with a will that it should come back). You say sometimes a line remains. Of what kind? any good? Sometimes these subliminal compositions are pure rubbish. If so, it is not worthwhile making an effort to remember.

3 October 1933

*

This morning a little before 5.30 I got a poem which seemed to me grave and rich at the same time. Suddenly my eyes opened and the poem faded. But I had a very strong sense that it was really good. Is there any way to make good the loss?

These things do not come back. The feeling that it was very good is not reliable. Unless you remember the thing, it cannot be decided. I have more than once woken up with a line which seemed splendid to the subconscious, but which my waking mind found to be very flat. Of course it depends from what source it came.

October 1933

Variations in Inspiration

It is queer that one writes a few lines in no time and the rest perhaps at no time!

This is too cryptic for me. I may say however that inspiration for poetry is always an uncertain thing (except for a phenomenon like Harin). Sometimes it comes in a rush, sometimes one has to labour for days to get a poem right, sometimes it does not come at all. Besides each poet is treated by the Muse in a different way.

24 August 1935

*

You wrote that today's poem is only "good". Where is the progress?

No writer of poetry can count on keeping the same level of inspiration in all his poems. The results are sometimes good, sometimes better, sometimes at his best. There can be failures also so long as one is not perfectly mature in capacity.

11 July 1936

Writing and Concentration

Which of these two methods is better: to go on writing till one comes in contact with the original source of inspiration, or to concentrate first and get the contact?

Dhyana is perhaps the best way — for if you can get into the consciousness which makes all poetry which proceeds from it original, that is the best, even if it means postponement of the actual writing of poetry. The habit of writing no doubt increases the skill and mastery of verse, but then it might only be verse such as all good *littérateurs* can write. A higher inspiration is necessary. As for translation I don't know — if one has the translator's gift like Dilip or Nishikanta, then it is all right — but otherwise translation is more difficult than original writing.

*

I cannot come in touch with poetry or its source. My mind is full of the most ordinary things.

You must put aside these things when you write. Every writer has to do that, to put aside his ordinary self and its preoccupations and concentrate on his overhead inspiration.

18 July 1936

Receptivity and Silence

My mind does not know precisely how to silence itself. The same is true of Dilip. How then does he manage to receive from Above?

The difference is that as his mind has opened to the Above, the

Above can turn its activity into an activity of the Inspiration — its quickness, energy, activity enable it to transcribe quickly, actively, energetically what comes into it from the Above. Of course if one day it becomes silent also, it may probably become the channel of a still higher Inspiration.

Is silencing the mind to be done only at the time of writing or at other times too?

Silencing the mind at the time of writing should be sufficient — even not silencing it, but its falling quiet to receive.

31 March 1936

Difficulty and Ease of Production

The sentence “the reason is rather the seeking for new inspiration which has not yet come” in your letter to Jyoti is rather enigmatic or cryptic to us.

If one wants a new inspiration or development there may very well be during the period of transition or attempted transition a period of difficulty or suspension because the old feels itself no longer called for or not so much, while the new is not yet there. That is all I meant.

3 January 1937

*

The sense of difficulty made me feel an unwillingness and somehow I dread it even now.

If the inspiration comes, the sense of difficulty is not likely to remain and the poem will take the form and tone which is the right one for the subject.

26 January 1937

*

The same difficulty of transmission appears to hinder the proper finish. Will you tell me where the defect lies — insufficient mastery over language and style, or insufficient inspiration?

All writers have the difficulty — it is the *tamas* of the physical

mind which finds it difficult to transcribe the inspiration.

29 August 1933

Mind Fatigue

Jyoti wants to know why or how the mind-fag has come in and by what attitude or process it can quickly pass off.

There is nothing serious in it. Very often when the mind has been doing something for a long time (I mean of course the physical mind), something which demands intensity of work or action, not what can be done as a routine, it finds itself unable to do it well any longer. That means that it is strained, needs rest so that the force may gather again. Rest or a variation. A little rest given to it or a variation of work should set it right again.

I thought that one or two hours' work without undue effort might perhaps keep the channel open and at the same time produce no fatigue.

It is not a question of ordinary fatigue by overwork — but of a temporary inability to go on doing the same thing over and over any longer. That is what I mean by the mind-fag. It is not the mere writing of poetry of any kind but the intensity to bring down that kind of poetry that is in question. The channel in fact is not working because of the fag — it can work again only after rest, by not forcing oneself.

17 August 1936

The Poetic Influence and the Physical Consciousness

Sometimes *chandās* are at the tip of my tongue but I'm unable to express myself in verse. Is there no way for me to learn?

Any necessary power may come with the sadhana — but many get the poetic impulse from within, but are not able to transcribe it in really good poetic form — it depends on how it comes out through the physical consciousness.

22 December 1933

Aspiration

Jyoti says formerly she used to aspire for beautiful things, etc. instead of letting herself go. Now she remains passive — and this poem is the result. Any answer?

There is no incompatibility between aspiring and letting the thing come through. The aspiration gives the necessary intensity so that what comes has a better chance of being a true transcription. In this case probably the pain she felt in the neck etc. was a proof of some fatigue in the physical parts which spoiled the transmission. 30 July 1936

*

Dilip had to work in spite of your Grace. My aspiration for your Grace in this mental occupation is as great as for spiritual progress.

Aspire for the opening to the right plane of inspiration. You forget that Dilip got his opening by grace and never lost it — all his work only helps him to utilise and develop what is already there. 22 May 1934

Passivity of Mind

If I don't surrender more or less passively, all is spoilt, I cannot produce anything real. Yet the mind struggles and I feel depressed and heavy in the head.

Why should the mind struggle? In all these things the mind has to remain passive and only a witness consciousness behind watching what is passing. It can be seen afterwards if anything has to be altered, but the mind interfering can only hamper the inspiration or pervert it. 27 July 1936

*

I seem to force and hurry myself rather than surrender to the Force above. The result is annoyance, mental labour, headaches and nervous irritation. Also, the desire to write this and that, this way or that way.

The remedy is to draw back and let the inspiration flow, keeping the attitude of the instrument and witness not involved in the work. 19 December 1936

The Joy of Creation

I had a unique experience in the realm of poetry.

Last night the inspiration came and as I sat down to write the whole thing dropped, so to say. I simply let myself be led to see how and where it would end. Never before have I written a whole poem in this way. I was very joyous and recovered all lost hope.

Why is it that people get so much joy out of writing a poem?

It is the joy of creation partly, partly the joy or “*enthousiasmos*”, the sense of exaltation and Ananda which always comes when one is freely and powerfully used by a greater Force.

Does this spontaneous, automatic inpouring depend on some inner state?

It does not depend on any inner spiritual state, but on an opening to some supraphysical plane of inspiration. 21 April 1934

*

I will put in any amount of labour and that should be enough for things to pour down.

Labour is not enough for the things to pour down. What is done with labour only, is done with difficulty, not with a downpour. The joy in the labour must be there for a free outflow. You have very queer psychological ideas, I must say. 14 December 1936

Rapture and Application

Would you advise me to cease trying to write poetry for some time? The one or two recent failures (what you call “a good poem” falls for me more or less in the same category) perhaps shows that I am pumping when the well is dry? The poetry

I really want to write — miraculous and perfect — seems so impossible at present. I wonder and wonder whether I shall ever be able to offer you the rapture and the glory I dream of.

I don't see why you object to writing good poems or why you call them failures. The rapture and the glory are all right, but how are you to arrive at them if you don't write? 6 October 1934

Practice, Cultivation, Regularity

Dilip and others say I should practise writing, but can one write by practice?

Writing improves with practice — there comes a greater mastery over language, provided one has the faculty and you seem to have it. 5 February 1933

*

Am I a “writer by nature” and should I cultivate writing like Dilip?

Dilip got the power of writing poetry through the inspiration awaking, otherwise he might have laboured all his life and never produced anything of any value. It was the grace of a sudden opening of power that he got, it was not the fruit of cultivation.

Nirod writes as well or even better than I do, why then do you say he is not a writer by nature? Has he not the faculty?

I said that to Nirod because he wanted to do these things as part of his development in sadhana. Apart from that one can by cultivation learn to write well in an ordinary way, but inspiration and the power to write things worth writing do not come in that way.

As a help in the beginning Dilip suggests that I should write long letters to friends, translate others' poems and writings, read a lot of books etc. And Amal says I should write essays and criticism of poems and of others' writings. Please tell me if these are the right ways to begin.

Of course you can do all that. If you can really do it it will at least be a lesson in work and application and patience, if nothing else. 27 August 1933

*

What should I do in order to make everything perfect? Should I work hard and go on writing or rather sit and wait for the inclination to write?

There is no rule about these things — it acts differently with different people. Some acquire the capacity of writing regularly — others can only do it when the push comes. 31 March 1934

Silence and Creative Activity

It would be a mistake to silence the poetic flow on principle. Creative activity is a tonic to the vital and keeps it in good condition, and a strong and widening vital is helpful as a support to the practice of sadhana. There is no real incompatibility between the creative power and silence; for the real silence is something inward and it does not or at least need not cease when a strong activity or expression rises to the surface. 14 June 1932

Periods of Incubation

Do you think it better for me to stop writing for four or five days in order to be quiet?

You may stop for a few days. It is sometimes well to do so at times. 11 August 1936

*

My ballad seems to have fallen between two stools — it's neither true ballad nor pure poem. Has it no saving grace at all? What do you advise me to do with it? Limbo?

As to the sentence on your poem, I told you I could not pronounce even a definitive verdict. There was a recommendation by Horace or some other impossibly wise critic that when you

have written a poem the safest rule is to put it in your desk, leave it there for ten years and then only take it out and read and see whether it is worth anything. Perhaps with a mitigation of the segregation period, the rule could be applied here. 1932

*

What about my poem? I hope it is mentally quite clear.

Very fine indeed, very. You have suddenly reached a remarkable maturity of the poetic power. Which seems to suggest that the periods of sterility were not so sterile after all or were rather an incubation period, a work of opening going on in the inner being behind the veil before it manifested in the outer. Let us hope the same is going on in the direct sadhana. 7 August 1936

Labour and the Appearance of Ease

I can't, for the life of me, get new expressions or thoughts. What can be done? I break my head over them but they remain damn hard and unprofitable as the Divine! I am paying the penalty of trying to become an English poet and of facing a hard task-master.

What the deuce are you complaining about? You are writing very beautiful poetry with apparent ease and one a day of this kind is a feat. If the apparent ease covers a lot of labour, that is the lot of the poet and artist except when he is a damned phenomenon of fluency. "It is the highest art to conceal art" "The long and conscientious labour of the artist giving in the result an appearance of divine and perfect ease" — console yourself with these titbits. As for repetitions, they are almost inevitable when you are writing a poem a day. You are gaining command of your medium and that is the main thing. An inexhaustible original fecundity is a thing you have to wait for — when you are more spiritually experienced and mature.

7 September 1938

Dissatisfaction and Persistence

If one could express the Divine through poetry, it would have some value. Otherwise why should one bother?

There is a general tendency in the vital to get dissatisfied with everything. It is a restlessness that should not be encouraged. If one could be concentrated always on the Divine, then there would be no need of any admonitions, one would naturally do so. But until then it is no use dropping something that has opened in you.

If the poems do not turn out to be of the highest grade, should I write daily?

If one gives up writing whenever the writing is not always of the highest grade — it would not be possible for anybody to develop his poetical power. 30 July 1936

Writing and Self-criticism

I concentrate or meditate for some time before writing. Even then I have to pause after every expression.

Pause to do what? Think? You have to cultivate the power of feeling instinctively the value of what you write — either while writing or immediately you go over it when it is completed.

23 February 1937

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Nirod says my rhythm is sometimes not very smooth and spontaneous, and that I should read the poem aloud when it is finished. I prefer to read it silently. What is the right way: aloud or silently?

It is better always to read it aloud once so as to make sure of the rhythmic sound. 15 October 1933

*

I have scratched the whole poem out of existence! And yet

when I completed it, I was so happy thinking it was something great! Fool!

Every poet is such a fool. His work is done in an exalting excitement of the vital mind — judgment and criticism can only come when he has cooled down. 6 April 1937

Using Criticism from Others

I do not like to show my poems to others; I'm afraid their criticism will take away all impulse to write.

If you do not show them and face criticism how will you improve? 12 October 1933

Contact with Other Writers

I notice some queer things happening in the realm of poetry between Nishikanta and myself. I wrote a line:

চলছে ভেসে চাঁদের তরী ওই সুনীলের সাগরে³

and did not follow it up. Two days later I find Nishikanta writing a poem wherein occurs the line

কে ভাসালে চাঁদের তরী⁴

Some time back a similar thing happened. These are about expressions; similar things are happening about *chanda* also. Strange, isn't it?

Nothing queer about that. You dropped the inspiration and did not work it out; so it went off and prodded N who let it through. That often happens. 31 July 1936

*

I thought I have so far avoided taking any beautiful expressions used by others.

³ "The moon-boat is sailing on the ocean of the blue sky." — Ed.

⁴ "Who made it sail, the moon-boat?" — Ed.

As a rule it is better to avoid taking over special expressions used by others. 15 February 1937

Sameness and Variety

Harin has suns and moons in plenty in his poetry. A friend of Amal's has remarked that stars come in almost every one of his poems. This seems to be one point against spiritual poetry. Another is that spiritual poetry is bound to be limited in scope and lack *rasa vaicitrya*, to use Tagore's expression.

Ordinary poems (and novels) always write about love and similar things. Is it one point against ordinary (non-spiritual) poetry? If there is sameness of expression in spiritual poems, it is due either to the poet's binding himself by the tradition of a fixed set of symbols (e.g. Vaishnava poets, Vedic poets) or to his having only a limited field of expression or imagination or to his deliberately limiting himself to certain experiences or emotions that are clear to him. To readers who feel these things it does not appear monotonous. Those who listen to Mirabai's songs, don't get tired of them, nor do I get tired of reading the Upanishads. The Greeks did not tire of reading Anacreon's poems though he always wrote of wine and beautiful boys (one example of sameness in unspiritual poetry). The Vedic and Vaishnava poets remain immortal in spite of their sameness which is in another way like that of the poetry of the troubadours in mediaeval Europe, deliberately chosen. *Rasa vaicitrya* is all very well, but it is the power of the poetry that really matters. After all every poet writes always in the same style, repeats the same vision of things in "different garbs".

When Sahana sent some of her poems to Tagore, he replied that the poet's mind should not be confined to a single *preraṇā*, however vast it might be.

But Tagore's poetry is all from one প্রেরণা. He may write of different things, but it is always Tagore and his *preraṇā* repeating themselves interminably. Every poet does that.

He hints that a poet's creation should not be confined to spiritual inspiration dealing with things spiritual and mystic.

Well, and if a poet is a spiritual seeker what does Tagore want him to write about? Dancing girls? Amal has done that. Wine and women? Hafiz has done that. But he can only use them as symbols as a rule. Must he write about politics, — communism, for instance, like modernist poets? Why should he describe the outer aspects of world nature, বিশ্ব প্রকৃতি, for their own sake, when his vision is of something else within বিশ্ব প্রকৃতি or even apart from her? Merely for the sake of variety? He then becomes a mere *littérateur*. Of course if a man simply writes to get poetic fame and a lot of readers, if he is only a poet, Tagore's advice may be good for him.

15 May 1938

*

What the deuce is Yogic poetry, not to speak of too Yogic? Poetry is poetry, whatever the subject. If one can't appreciate the subject one can at least appreciate its poetical expression. One may not love wine-drinking yet appreciate the beauty of Anacreon's lyrics and one may be a pacifist and yet appreciate the poetic power of your father's war-song. However, perhaps since there is a conversion in other things, there may be an eleventh hour repentance here also.

Repetition

Words or phrases may be reiterated provided they acquire by their content a new colour each time. The word white has been fairly common of late in my work though perhaps the line in which it occurs, "A white word breaks the eternal quietude", is not so stale as the other.

Obviously, it is desirable not to repeat oneself or if one has to it is desirable to repeat in another language and in a new light. Still even that cannot be overdone. The difficulty about most writers of spiritual poetry is that they have either a limited field of experience or are tacked on to a limited inspiration though

an intense one. How to get out of it? The only recipe I know is to widen oneself (or one's receptivity) always. Or else perhaps wait in the eternal quietude for a new white word to break it — if it does not come, telephone. 30 August 1937

*

But why should not one repeat oneself sometimes — provided it is done with a difference? It is better, unless there is imperative need for change or unless a very striking improvement offers itself, not to make any small alterations in a thing that has come out well — for then the better one tries after tends to spoil the good that has already been achieved.

*

It is not possible always to say something quite new. If one has a subject old or new worth treating and treats it with originality, that is all that is essential. 18 August 1936

Spontaneity

All poetry is not necessarily spontaneous, and if all poetry that is not spontaneous were to be put aside, the stock of the world's poetic literature would be much reduced; so let the sonnet stand. 25 October 1934

Originality

It is a good poem; its rhythm and expression are sufficiently chaste and strong to convey an effect of restrained power and give a poetic body to the thought — and the thought itself is on a high level and has the emotion and truth of what comes from the higher mind. Judged independently, the one defect is that the style has not the note of perfect originality, the intensity of discovery in it; I find too much echo of my own poetry in *Abana*. But this derivativeness is inevitable when one is learning how to write — it is only when you have got a certain mastery of the medium that you can express in your own way. 6 December 1932

*

Once you wrote to me that the occasional failure of inspiration I experience is due to my mind having learned too much and being too ingenious [see page 12]. Has that characteristic given a subtly *réchauffé* turn to all my style? Do you find it at its best an inspired pastiche? I should be grateful to realise what particular influences I ought specially to outgrow. I sometimes doubt if I am not, except of course in the insight kindled by you, almost wholly derivative, full of traditional mannerisms.

No. I find no pastiche in your poems and I could not lay my hand on any special influence to be outgrown. What I meant was that the contriving mind (intellectual and ingenious) was too busy and blocked the way of the poetic intuitive inspiration too often. I did not mean at all that it was wholly derivative or full of traditional mannerisms. 10 September 1933

*

I feel Jyoti's poem is an exceedingly fine piece and some expressions are remarkably original, aren't they?

Yes, quite so. It is the freedom from the intellectual limitations which bring in these original expressions—as in many English poets. Ordinarily in French, or in Bengali, (French before Mallarmé and the Symbolists) there is too much lucidity and rationality to let these things get through. 29 October 1936

Poetry Writing and Fiction

Can I, without losing the force needed for fiction or poetry, carry on *both* at the same time?

There is no rule for these things. You must see for yourself, for with each person it is different. There is no general or necessary incompatibility between fiction and poetry. 28 March 1936

*

If a writer devoted part of the day to stories and part to poems, would the two sorts of writing come in each other's way?

One cannot say what will be the immediate effect. But it is not

likely that the poetic consciousness once opened will stop — though it may be suspended if the concentration is strongly to something else. 7 January 1937

Poetic Inspiration and Prose-Work

I am at present too much caught in the prose-work. No wonder poetry is impossible. I suppose the prose has to run its course before the poetic inspiration gets a chance to return?

Why the deuce should your poetic inspiration wait for the results of the prose canter? The ground being still cumbered ought to be no obstacle to an aerial flight. 16 March 1935

Literary Ambition and Aspiration

If a poem does not come up to expectation, all is dark.

That is a weakness that ought to be overcome.

I want to write in many ways and many forms; to write long poems as well as short ones; to write expressing many and various ideas; in the future to write books even — and so to prepare myself for this now by doing shorter works.

But surely you do not expect to do all that all at once? One has to grow in consciousness and ability before these things can be done. Because all that is not yet done, is not a ground for being dissatisfied with the present work done.

I hold before myself the example of Sri Aurobindo, Tagore, Kalidasa, Shakespeare — of all the great poets. I am afraid this is all ambition.

Ambition has to be outgrown, if one wants to succeed in sadhana. The will to use the energies for the best, not for ego but as a work for the Divine must replace it.

Something within wants to shake off this bondage to the old habits and old ways of writing, wants to soar higher, bring in newer, deeper, truer and more beautiful things: but I feel bound and full of despair.

There is no harm in such an aspiration, but despair is not the way to it. You have to aspire and grow into these new things — already there is a distinct progress, a new writing of a stronger kind.

A peculiar hopelessness now and then will not let me concentrate; how shall I be able to break into a newer region of inspiration by myself and my own aspiration and concentration?

You can't do it by hopelessness and the consequent inability to concentrate. It is precisely by aspiration and concentration that it can be done. Nor are you called upon to do it "by yourself".

I don't want to write poetry in the same forms and metres. But I cannot help myself; there seems to be a canal cut and things come in that way, that form, and no other.

One can try new forms and metres and they will come, but it is to be observed that the greatest poets have written in a few forms and metres — e.g. Shakespeare, dramatic blank verse, sonnet, short lyric. In narrative he was a failure. Milton, blank verse, narrative, sonnet, long meditative lyric, ode. His drama form is not dramatic. Kalidas, narrative epic, drama, one elegiac poem, one poem of nature description — not an inexhaustible variation of metres. Valmiki, Vyasa epic only — *anustubh* and *tristubh* metres. Dante, *terza rima* metre — little variation of kind in his poetic writing.

I am rejecting the impulse to do other literary work — stories, novels etc. — simply for the sake of producing maturer work in poetry, though novel-writing would have been easier.

I do not know that there is any reason why you should not

write other things. You have now a great mastery of poetry in its constituent parts of language, rhythm, building — it is only the variation that is needed. Perhaps by doing other work that variation might be assisted.

Lastly, I want to have your guidance, as when you told Nirod what were his drawbacks.

In your case I do not find any drawbacks of importance — except the one fact that you are bound within one channel or stream of poetry with always the same images and ideas as the base of your work. The construction in that base varies and is always fine. But the base and the kind are always the same.

Neither Arjava nor Amal are guided by anybody except you. Why should not that be the right thing for me?

Arjava and Amal write in English and I can guide or suggest things to them in detail as well as in general. I can't do that with Bengali poetry; I can only pass judgment on points put before me.

Consultation with Nolini might be useful — he has a different mind from Nirod's and can see things from another angle. Nirod's help is, I think, indispensable. As for Nishikanta, I do not think it advisable — he has a strong individuality of his own as a poet and at the same time a great assimilative power. With the first he would make suggestions which would be good poetry but not kin to your individuality; with the other he would absorb your poetry and produce Nishikantisations of that — I don't think you would like such drawings upon you. 20 March 1937

Ambition and the Desire for Fame

I cannot deny that along with my urge for acquiring a fine style etc., there is hiding some desire for fame as a good writer which, however, one can reject, at least one can hope to.

Better not force the inspiration. You have some literary gift and

can let it grow — but no desire for fame, if you please.

4 October 1933

*

There should be no “desire” to be a “great” writer. If there is a genuine inspiration or coming of a power to write, then it can be done but to use it as a means of service to the Divine is the proper spirit.

14 May 1934

*

Every artist almost (there can be rare exceptions) has got something of the public man in him in his vital-physical parts, which makes him crave for the stimulus of an audience, social applause, satisfied vanity, appreciation, fame. That must go absolutely if you want to be a yogi; your art must be a service not of your own ego, nor of anyone or anything else, but solely of the Divine.

14 September 1929

*

It is your aim to write from the Divine and for the Divine — you should then try to make all equally a pure transcription from the inner source and where the inspiration fails return upon your work so as to make the whole worthy of its origin and its object. All work done for the Divine, from poetry and art and music to carpentry or baking or sweeping a room, should be made perfect even in its smallest external detail, as well as in the spirit in which it is done; for only then is it an altogether fit offering.

11 November 1931

Public Exposure

With Dilip as a patron, the “poetess” will no longer remain unknown and unheard of.

Do you want fame? If one succeeds, it means much meaningless and insincere adulation on one side, on the other hatred, jealousy, backbiting, adverse criticism, attack and unjust depreciation. Are you ready for all that?

18 March 1937

Public Reception

I don't know how many people will understand Jyoti's poems. If they were published, I am sure people will howl at her. It will only be a century later that she will be appreciated, as in the case of Blake.

What you predict is extremely probable—unless she writes hereafter something they can understand. Then they will say these were her mystic amusements by the way. A great poetess, but with a queer side to her. 27 October 1936

Reading Things in Manuscript and in Print

It is curious but true that one can often get a more final judgment of a thing written when one surveys it in print or even typescript than in manuscript. Perhaps in the latter what is active but irrelevant in the personality of the writer comes in and evokes the personal response of the reader and so prevents detachment? 1932

Prefaces and Reviews

Is it good to have a preface, introduction or *bhūmikā* to one's book? I would prefer any appreciation to be published separately as a review or criticism.

It is not a question of principle but of feeling and circumstances. One can do either way. To do without anything of the kind (which seems like a recommendation or advertisement) seems the finer way—letting one's creation stand on its own merits. But the other is the fashion nowadays and I suppose there is something to be said for it. 28 October 1935

Some Metrical Matters

It is very necessary to learn metre and to arrange your thoughts— not have them pell-mell, as you yourself describe them— otherwise no amount of poetic substance or imagination will

make your poetry effective.

9 July 1935

*

After scanning this poem I showed it to Nolini. He has scanned some lines differently, I am quoting only three lines because I want to know which scansion is right:

My scansion: Flāme ǒf | ǎ tīme|lēss Sūn

Nolini's: Flāme | ǒf ǎ tīme|lēss Sūn

Mine: Rēcoil | frōm thē | leāst spārk

Nolini's: Rēcoil | frōm thē leāst | spārk

Mine: Ōf hēr | grēat lū|minous Blīss

Nolini: Ōf hēr grēat | lūmī|nōus Blīss

As the poem is intended to be in the orthodox iambic metre, your scansions are quite correct. At the present time there are many who write in less even metres and to this kind of writing Nolini's scansion would apply. But it is better for you to learn the regular scansion and metre first so as to have a firm base.

14 April 1936

*

It is absolutely necessary in order to learn the trochaic rhythm to write at first strictly regular trochaic metres with equal lines. There can be irregularities in the verse, but this type of metre least of all can bear a free licence — variations must be occasional, not altered about with a free hand. Such variations are an additional syllable at the beginning, an occasional dactyl — but these must be occasional only. . . . A word like glorious can be scanned either as a dactyl or a trochee, the two vowels in the latter case being run into each other as if *i* were *y*.

*

I understand that trochees are to be avoided in an iambic-anapaestic poem. But I may be wrong. I find in a metre-book

that the trochee is a common modulation for the iamb, especially in the first line.

Trochees are perfectly admissible in an iambic line as a modulation — especially in the first *foot* (not first line), but also occasionally in the middle. In the last foot a trochee is *not* admissible. Also these trochees must not be so arranged as to turn an iambic into a trochaic line.

In one of my poems you changed the line “Crystals at her feet” to “Is a crystal at her feet”, saying that “Cr̄ystals | at her | feet”, with two trochees, could not come in an iambic anapaestic poem. Does this mean then that in an iamb-anapaest poem every line must have at least one iambic-anapaest foot?

My dear sir, this is an instance of importing one's own inferences instead of confining oneself to the plain meaning of the statement. First of all the rules concerning a mixed iambic anapaestic cannot be the same as those that govern a pure iambic. Secondly what I objected to was the trochaic run of the line. Two trochees followed by a long syllable, not a single iamb or anapaest in the whole! How can there be an iambic line or an iambic anapaestic without a single iamb or anapaest in it? The line as written could only scan either as a trochaic, therefore not iambic line, or thus —|—|—|, that is a trochee followed by an anapaest. Here of course there is an anapaest, but the combination is impossible rhythmically because it involves three short syllables one after another in an unreadable collocation — one is obliged to put a minor stress on the “at” and that at once makes the trochaic line. In the iambic anapaestic line a trochee followed by an iamb can be allowed in the first foot; elsewhere it has to be admitted with caution so as not to disturb the rhythm. 22 December 1935

*

You have not got the metrical movement or the rhythm right. In English poetry one has to be careful about that — merely ideas or good writing will not make it poetry. The free verse was better. 1 October 1933

*

This is my first attempt to write a poem from imagination. I tried to give a vivid picture of Spring. I feel that the rhyme and metre is lacking.

It is true there is no rhyme and no metre. If you want rhyme and metre you must put them there — they don't come of themselves.

5 May 1933

*

Nishikanta wants to know how to get the right rhythm and the right poetic style. I said by reading English poetry.

Yes, reading and listening with the inner ear to the modulation of the lines.

12 December 1935

Comments on Some Experiments in Metre

I think you failed [*in an experiment to write in a classical metre*] not for any of the reasons you suggest but because you had no unwritten rhythm behind your mind when you started writing and none came through by accident — or what seems one — as sometimes happens. There is an inspiration of language and there is an inspiration of rhythm and the two must fuse together for poetic perfection to come. As it is, you set out to manufacture your rhythm and piece together its parts — that must be the cause of this result. Your failure does not predestine you to eventual failure. Most people fail at first when they try this kind of departure from the established norms — this rejuvenation of the old in the new. I do not remember my own previous attempts in the classical metres, but I feel sure they were failures of the kind I stigmatise. If I succeed now, it will be by the Grace of God, in other words the established Yoga consciousness, for in that consciousness things come through from behind the veil with ease, — so long as a veil exists at all. Of course with genius too in its moments of inspiration — surer than the layman imagines; but genius also is a kind of accidental Yoga, a contact, an opening into an occult Power.

25 November 1933

*

This liability to be read as an iambic pentameter is the pitfall of this metre [*quantitative trimeter*] — everything else is easy, this is the critical point in the movement. All the same, it seems to me that it is only the standing convention which imposes the iambic movement here. The reason why it can do so at all, is that in both the lines you keep up what one accustomed to the ordinary rhythms would take to be three successive trochees and would be irresistibly tempted to go on on the same lines. In order to get the right pace, the reader in dealing with these transplanted classic metres must be prepared to make the most of quantities and stresses (true ones) and then, if the verse is well executed, there should be no difficulty. One can help him sometimes by a crowding of stresses in the first part of the line and a refusal of all but the lightest sounds in the close with of course a strong stress at the end.

22 October 1933

Writing Poetry in French

If you want to write French poetry, the first thing you have to do is to learn the principles and rules of French prosody. Good verse is the first requisite and good rhythm.

10 July 1933

*

The point is that in French you must express yourself straightforwardly and clearly so that your meaning is at once apparent to the reader.

Some Questions of Diction

The diction of my poems is childish, too simple.

Good poetry can be written in a very simple style. Yours are quite good for a beginner.

Please do not forget to say something about why I do not succeed in poetry: also if I should devote my time more to the stories etc.

That is a matter for yourself to decide. It is always easier to succeed in one's own tongue than in a foreign language.

25 March 1936

*

These last two stanzas [*of a poem submitted by the correspondent*] have a very poor diction with commonplace and overworn expressions; it sounds like an imitation of Scott, Moore and other poets who have no style.

I would like to have your comments on the poetic quality of these poems.

There is an improvement, but the recurring fault is a diction that seems to be caught from the second-rate poets and made still more common and conventional in imitation — it becomes what anybody trying his hand at verse might write. When you escape this snare, your images and turns of language are very good, though not often quite perfect.

I am not intimate with the English tongue. What should I do in order to acquire the required delicacy of language?

Study the more subtle and delicate writers — their language, their rhythm; don't imitate, but draw into your mind their influence.

19 October 1933

*

I am reading what you wrote and shall send [it back] in a few days — it has merit, but the style needs chastening. English style cannot bear too much crowding of images as it creates a coloured mist and blurs the outline of the thought, the line of the thought has to be kept strong and clear, neither draped in too much diffuse wording nor blurred by excess of images. There are also some errors in the use of the language, but these are of less importance. If you read the best writers, observe their way of writing and absorb their influence, that might help you.

10 January 1936

*

The one stumbling block in the way of perfect poetic expression for you now is the difficulty in combining clear directness and lucidity with your turn for a richly packed and imaged thought. There is a tendency sometimes to put too many images together, shooting them into each other in a way which is not always easy to carry off — even the greatest masters of poetic style have sometimes stumbled in this kind of effort. And generally there is a tendency to pack the thought and clip the expression to the utmost and sometimes this goes to an excess of compression which makes it a little difficult to seize at once the significance. When you do combine the lucidity with the pressed thought, the result is often very fine.

20 May 1931

Rhetoric and Eloquence

The style of these two prayers is too rhetorical — the meditations — addresses to the mind — were better in this respect.

A rhetorical style fails to convey the impression of sincerity in the thoughts and feelings: it gives the opposite impression that phrases are being turned only for the sake of good writing. This should be avoided.

9 July 1932

*

I want to produce something Upanishadic. But I get no glimmering at all of the sovereignly spiritual-poetic. The poem, *Yoga*, which I am sending you, almost tells me what I should do to solve my difficulty; but the manner in which it tells seems to drive home the fact of my being so far from what I want — the sheer stupendous *mantra*.

I fear it is only eloquence — a long way from the *mantra*. From the point of view of a poetic eloquence there are some forceful lines and the rest is well done, but — there is too much play of the mind, not the hushed intense receptivity of the seer which is necessary for the *mantra*.

11 April 1933

*

This fineness in details is an imperative need for your poetry; you

have too often a false note (rhetorical) or a just adequate expression — every turn, all the minutiae must be fine if the whole is to be exquisite. Otherwise even a fine poem can miss its effect by the inequality of its movement — as a fine dance can be spoilt by even two or three false steps or stumbles. A few changes here and there in a poem, slight in themselves, can make all the difference between a tolerable and a perfect whole — as a touch or two with the brush can transform a picture. 4 September 1931

The Right Words in the Right Places

How I struggled with the line, and you, Sir, by just a touch here and there fixed it up! I wish I could do that.

It is a question of getting the right words in the right places instead of allowing them to wander haphazard. Naturally it depends on inspiration, not on any clever piecing together. One sits still (mentally), looks at the words and somebody flashes the thing through you. 24 May 1937

*

How can “anything” be used in a poem? A slight change makes all the difference between something forceful and a mere literary expression that misses its mark. 27 May 1936

*

I am sending you another weak poem. Please correct and tell me what you think of it.

The lines have poetic substance, but are imperfect in expression. A very slight refinement in these respects is enough to bring out the poetic substance. The exact word or turn, the exact rhythmic movement needed is all-important in poetry and a slight change makes a big difference.

*

In the poem I’ve sent you today, the first line of the third stanza should run:

With tones of fathomless joy we instil
instead of

Our tones of fathomless joy instil.

If you alter in that way, the whole beauty is gone. When a perfect inspiration comes, to alter it is a crime and usually carries its own punishment. The alteration you propose makes a deep and solemn psychic truth turn at once into an intellectual statement.

Some Questions of Word-Use

Is there any advantage in changing the phrase —

as though a press

Of benediction lay on me unseen —

to

as though the press

Of a benediction lay on me unseen?

No, no. The first was immeasurably better. “A press of benediction” is striking and effective; “the press of a benediction” is flat and means nothing. Besides it is not good English. You can say “a press of affairs”, “a press of matter”; you can say “the pressure of this affair”, but you cannot say “the press of an affair”. 1931

*

Here is a sonnet for your judgment. It deals with the massive spiritual light descending into the brain like an inverted pyramid. The final phrase has a historical allusion:

a conscious hill

Down-kindled by some Cheops of the skies

To monument his lordship over death.

You must have heard of Cheops, the Egyptian King who built the Great Pyramid at Gizeh?

Of course I have heard of Cheops, but did not expect to hear of him again in this context. Don't you think the limiting proper

name brings in an excessive touch of intellectual ingenuity, almost as if the poem were built for the sake of this metaphor and not for its subject? I would myself prefer a general term so as to prevent any drop from sublimity, e.g.

Down-sloped by some King-Builder of the skies.

But it is a good sonnet and there is certainly both vision and poetry in it.

25 September 1933

*

“Revealed her mateless beauty the (or their) true paradise” is not permissible in prose, but it is one of those contracted expressions which are allowed in poetry and it is quite intelligible. The other form “revealed their mateless love as their true paradise” seems to me rather tame and prosaic.

8 October 1934

*

And if great music rolled from his far mouth,

This doesn't sound right. Either “rolled” must be changed or it should be something like “A mighty music rolled”: that is to say, rolled is too sonant unless what precedes it is sonant also.

16 April 1937

*

Your remark about my fifth line [“And if great music . . .”] is liable to seem hypercritical but really there is a subtle truth in it. However, it is not possible to begin the line with an “A” — for then the connection with the rest of the stanza is not so direct nor will the balance between the two quatrains be very clear.

I do not agree about the hypercriticism — the reason I gave is of course a mental account, but the main test is the fall and feel of the words either on the “solar plexus” or on the receptive intuition and here a slight alteration makes all the difference. “a great music rolled” is obviously unconvincing whether as expression or rhythm. I had thought of “when” in view of the

intellectual construction of the lines, but dropped it because it lowered the rhythm and impressiveness of the line. If “when” however is to be there, I don’t know whether “mighty” is any longer the right word though better than “great”. For inevitability (of whatever height) everything depends on the combination of words and the suggestive sound rhythm. 17 April 1937

On Writing Sonnets

A sonnet is a poem of fourteen iambic pentameter lines arranged either in an octet and sestet with a particular arrangement of the rhyme-structure — two-rhymed octet (of eight lines) abba abba and the sestet (of six lines) three rhymed, the arrangement according to choice, except that a closing couplet is avoided — or else in three quatrains with alternate rhymes and a closing couplet. The building of the thought in the sonnet must be very carefully worked out. A thought is built up or prepared in the octet and its culmination or outcome expressed in the sestet — . Or else it is worked up in the three quatrains and the climax or culminating point reached in the closing couplet. The first is the Miltonic, the second the Shakespearean form of the sonnet. Other forms can be made but these are the two classic sonnet structures in English literature.

Shakespeare, Milton, Wordsworth, Keats are the greatest sonnet writers in English. You can find the best sonnets in the *Golden Treasury*. There are others also who have written sonnets of the highest quality e.g. Sidney, Shelley — you will find there these also. 17 April 1936

*

Has it struck you that these sonnets are rather simple as regards their rhythm? Should not there be variations in pauses and overflows, different rhymes, etc.?

It is the Shakespearean model, three quatrains each with alternate rhymes and a couplet. Pauses and overflows are not usual in this type. Variations — depends on what variations.

For example, the rhymes in the sestet could be CDE, CDE.

It would no longer be the Shakespearean model. In the Miltonic form the sestet is rhymed anyhow, the one you prefer being only one sequence, provided there are three rhymes and no couplet; but then the octet has to follow a fixed system of two rhymes only ABBA ABBA. Nowadays however people throw the sonnet into all sorts of irregular forms, I believe. 20 December 1936

The Ode

What is meant by an ode? Is it another name for an invocation?

No. It is a lyrical poem of some length on a single subject e.g. the Skylark (Shelley), Autumn (Keats), the Nativity (Birth of Christ) (Milton) working out a description or central idea on the subject. 14 June 1937

Lyric, Narrative, Epic

I am having much difficulty with the *akṣara-ṛtta* (*yaugika* as it is now called). I can manage *svara-ṛtta* and *mātra-ṛtta*, but not the other.

It is a question of the inspiration adopting the form proposed. At first there may be a little difficulty as it is the more lyric movements in which it has been accustomed to flow.

11 August 1936

*

It is quite natural that the narrative should flow less than the lyrical — it is a work that demands more strenuous qualities and a well-built preparation. But it is by overcoming the difficulties that the poetic capacity grows. If one is satisfied with the lyrical vein it is all right — but if one wants to do great work in more difficult forms, one must face the difficulties. 24 July 1937

*

Narratives then can be made or written very poetically, not like a mere fact-to-fact storytelling?

But what do you mean by poetically? A fact-to-fact storytelling can be very poetic. Poetry is poetic whether it is put in simple language or freely adorned with images and rich phrases. The latter kind is not the only "poetic" poetry nor is necessarily the best. Homer is very direct and simple, Virgil less so but still restrained in his diction; Keats tends always to richness; but one cannot say that Keats is poetic and Homer and Virgil are not. The rich style has this danger that it may drown the narration so that its outlines are no longer clear. This is what has happened with Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis* and *Lucrece*; so that Shakespeare cannot be called a great narrative poet. 13 July 1937

*

As narrative poetry and epic are not the same, why should the former give me a training in the latter?

It is necessary to be able to work out a subject at length in a clear well-built way — epic is usually of a narrative build — so narrative poetry is the best training for that. The narrative writers you speak of did not aspire to be epic poets. 6 June 1937

*

How may I learn the epic style of blank verse?

I suppose it is best done by reading the epic writers until you get the epic rush or sweep.

Is it too early for me to learn it?

Epic writing needs a sustained energy of rhythm and word which is not easy to get or maintain. I am not sure whether you can get it now. I think you would first have to practise maintaining the level of the more energetic among the lines you have been writing. 3 May 1937

*

Is your *Love and Death* an epic, and *Urvasie* and *Baji Prabhou*?

Love and Death is epic in long passages. *Urvasie* is written on the epic model. *Baji Prabhou* is not epic in style or rhythm.

Are your twelve recent poems too in the epic style?

No, they are lyrical, though sometimes there may come in an epic elevation.

Will reading *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained* help?

Paradise Lost, yes. In the other Milton's fire had dimmed.

Kindly mention all the epic writers in all the languages — it is good to know, at least.

In English *Paradise Lost* and Keats' *Hyperion* (unfinished) are the two chief epics. In Sanskrit Mahabharata, Ramayana, Kalidasa's Kumarsambhava, Bharavi's Kiratarjuniya. In Bengali Meghnadbodh. In Italian Dante's Divine Comedy and Tasso's (I have forgotten the name for the moment) are in the epic cast. In Greek of course Homer, in Latin Virgil. There are other poems which attempt the epic style, but are not among the masterpieces. There are also primitive epics in German and Finnish (Nibelungenlied, Kalevala) —

4 May 1937

*

This afternoon, in a kind of sleep, I read a whole passage of an epic in English. All fled like vapour on waking up. I caught only this:

Need we | our mor|tal blood. . . .

This is only part of a line, three feet — the blank verse line is five feet. As far as it goes, it is quite correct. Full lines could be something like this:

Need we | our mor|tal blood | to sprink|le earth

That man | may grow | by the | red sac|rifice|.

A foot in the pentameter blank verse is of two syllables; normally the accent is on the second syllable of the foot, but for variety's sake it can fall on the first. e.g. Need we|. Or there can be a foot without stress e.g. by the | followed sometimes by a foot of double stress as red sac|rifice. Sometimes an anapaest, very light, can be put in in place of the 2 syllable foot, e.g. In the sud|den fall|and tra|gic end | of things|. Other variations there can be, but they are more rare.

5 May 1937

*

Is there a difference between blank verse and poetry which is quite epic and blank verse and poetry which is written only in the epic style, model or manner?

I don't quite understand the point of the question. Poetry is epic or it is not. There may be differences of elevation in the epic style, but this seems to be a distinction without a difference.

Surely there must be some difference between an epic, true and genuine throughout and a poem which is only in the epic style or has the epic tone?

An epic is a long poem usually narrative on a great subject written in a style and rhythm that is of a high nobility or sublimity. But short poems, a sonnet for instance can be in the epic style or tone, e.g. some of Milton's or Meredith's sonnet on Lucifer or, as far as I can remember it, Shelley's on Ozymandias.

What are the qualities or characteristics that tell one "This is an epic"?

I think the formula I have given is the only possible definition. Apart from that, each epic poet has his own qualities and characteristics that differ widely from the others. For the rest one can feel what is the epic nobility or sublimity, one can't very well analyse it.

In Sanskrit epics, e.g. *Kumarsambhav*, what has made up the rhythm? And how does it sound so grave, lofty, wide and deep?

It is a characteristic that comes natural to Sanskrit written in the classical style.

How can one have all these qualities together?

Why not? they are not incompatible qualities.

English seems to have the necessary tone more easily, but is it possible in Bengali?

I don't know why it shouldn't be. Madhu Sudan's style is a lofty epical style; it is not really grave and deep because his mind was not grave or deep — but that was the defect of the poet, not necessarily an incapacity of the language.

11 May 1937

*

I would like my present poems to come in a few lines, but the epical tone to be more and more perfect every day.

The epic movement is something that flows; it may not be good to try to shut it into a few lines. There might be a danger of making something too compact. If that can be avoided, then of course it is better to write a few lines with a heightened epic tone than many with the lesser tone.

13 May 1937

*

One day after reading something you wrote about epics and epic poetry, a flaming aspiration entered my heart that one day I must write an epic. [*Details of the proposed epic given.*] Please tell me what an epic should consist of.

There must be a great subject — the one you propose is obviously a very big one; there must be what is called an architecture of the poem, each part of it clearly planned and in its right place so as to create a perfect harmony, like the noble or magnificent mass

and detail of a great building; there must be a perfect working out of the subject.

Will the study of the structure and characteristics of the great epics help me to learn about the building and technique?

It is not necessary to read all the epics — two or three if properly appreciated, i.e. if you see and feel the right things in it to learn from would be sufficient.

I shall wait till I hear from you whether you approve of the aspiration at all.

The idea you have given is a very vast one, but if the epic faculty develops in you there is no reason why you should not carry it out. Only there must be no impatience. Milton waited twenty years before he started the epic he had dreamt of. Also from the point of view and kind of style in which you want to write it, you will have not only to get the access to the inspiration of the overhead poetry but to be quite open to the flow of that consciousness — otherwise you would only do small poems in it like Amal's, such a vast work would be impossible. At present go on with your development — you have the epic flow but not as yet the epic building, that must come in small things before you can do it in large ones. It will come in time, but time is necessary.

21 May 1937

*

Please tell me why I often jump back to the sonnet source instead of steadily keeping to the epic source. The more I try to be “fine” the more I lose the epic source.

It is a matter of habit. Also the attempt to be “fine” is not good for epic writing. None of the great epic poets wrote “finely” — nobility or power or a clear and great strength of style and substance and spirit is their characteristic.

What shall I do in order to get access to the inspiration of overhead poetry? And more especially, “to be quite open to

the flow of that consciousness” [see letter of 21 May 1937, p. 618]? What is this over-consciousness? Will it come to me so early? Or were you speaking only with regard to the future?

I spoke of the future. This is a thing that can only be done by growth of consciousness through sadhana.

Why did Milton wait so long? To prepare himself?

If he had written it when he first conceived the idea, he would have written a beautiful and noble romance, but not an epic. He felt he was not ready. For a long time afterwards he was engaged in politics and wrote only a few sonnets. 27 May 1937

*

Were all the epic poets quite advanced in age when they began their work? Has age anything to do with one's best work?

At a more advanced age the mind is more mature and capable of a large and great subject. The greatest works in literature have usually been done at such an age. 14 June 1937

*

Must I wait till I am 48 or 50? By doing sadhana, may I not be ready between 35 and 38? Forty or after is too far.

There is no fixed age, but most work (great work) of that kind has been done at 40 or 50 or after. Sadhana is another matter, but as I have said sadhana cannot be done with the sole object of writing an epic. 29 June 1937

An Epic Line

Do you think the blank verse here [*in the poem Agni Jatavedas*] has any epical ring?

No — there are sometimes epic or almost epic lines, but the whole or most of it has not the epic ring. There is one epic line

An infinite rapture veiled by infinite pain.

Perhaps the first three lines are near the epic — there may be one or two others. 19 May 1937

The Line and the Poem

In English poetry it will not do only to string beautiful lines together — the subject must be thought out to the end — there is necessary a harmonious building, idea structure or feeling structure or vision structure. It is necessary to learn this also for the epic poetry. 29 May 1937

*

The first line [*in a poem sent for approval*] is one I have used before, but it didn't stir you so much, perhaps because the necklace of which it was one jewel was not harmoniously beautiful.

Naturally — poetry is not a matter of separate lines — a poem is beautiful as a whole — when it is perfect each line has its own beauty but also the beauty of the whole. 4 November 1938

Sri Aurobindo's Critical Comments on Poetry Written in the Ashram

You seem to demand a very rigid and academic fixity of meaning from my hastily penned comments on the poetry sent to me. I have no unvarying aesthetic standard or fixed qualitative criterion, — not only so but I hold any such thing to be impossible with regard to so subtle and unintellectual an essence as poetry. It is only physical things that can be subjected to fixed measures and unvarying criteria. Appreciation of poetry is a question of feeling, of intuitive perception, of a certain aesthetic sense, it is not the result of an intellectual judgment.

My judgment does differ with different writers and also with different kinds of writing. If I put “very good” on a poem of Shailen's, it does *not* mean that it is on a par with Harin's or Arjava's or yours. It means that it is very good Shailen, but

not that it is very good Harin or very good Arjava. "If 'very good' was *won* by them all," you write! But, good heavens, you write that as if I were a master giving marks in a class. I may write "good" or "very good" on the work of a novice if I see that it has succeeded in being poetry and not mere verse however correct or well rhymed—but if Harin or if Arjava or you were to produce work like that, I would not say "very good" at all. There are poems of yours which I have slashed and pronounced unsatisfactory, but if certain others were to send me that, I would say, "Well, you have been remarkably successful this time." I am not giving comparative marks according to a fixed scale. I am using words flexibly according to the occasion and the individual. It would be the same with different kinds of writing. If I write "very good" or "excellent" on some verses of Dara about his chair, I am not giving it a certificate of equality with some poem of yours similarly appreciated—I am only saying that as humorous easy verse in the lightest vein it is very successful, an entertaining piece of work. Applied to your poem it would mean something different altogether.

Coming from your huge P.S. to the tiny body of your letter, what do you mean by "a perfect success"? I meant that pitched in a certain key and style it [*a certain poem*] had worked itself out very well in that key and style in a very satisfying way from the point of view of thought, expression and rhythm. From that standpoint it is a perfect success. If you ask whether it is at your highest possible pitch of inspiration, I would say no, but it is nowhere weak or inadequate and it says something poetically well worth saying and says it well. One cannot always be writing at the highest pitch of one's possibility, but that is no reason why work of very good quality in itself should be rejected.

15 November 1934

*

I see no earthly use in producing something that is just "all right" when I am obsessed with an intuition of some hitherto unrevealed miraculous poetic creation existing on a plane I absolutely despair of reaching. . . . I beg to be excused, again,

for this much ado about nothing but I am awfully disgusted with myself.

You should get rid of the disgust. The sonnet in its amended form is fine enough — if I do not shoot up into enthusiasm about it, it is for two reasons — 1st because I am becoming cautious about the use of superlatives nowadays, not for poetical or critical but for other reasons and secondly because I expect you to do much better than your present best and if I use high expressions, what the devil shall I do when you rise to yet unexpected summits. So you need not be damped by my “all rights” etc. — on the contrary you should give full value to both the *all* and the *right*.

1 May 1934

*

Could you just mark for me the nuances of “very good”, “very fine” and “very beautiful”? Sometimes you write: “exceedingly fine and beautiful”.

But these remarks of mine are not intended to summarise a considered and measured criticism — they simply express the impression made on me at the time of reading. I shall be very badly embarrassed if you insist on my explaining the nuances of such very summary expressions. “Exceedingly” for instance does not convey that the poem was “inevitable”, it simply means that I was exceedingly pleased with it for some reason or another. If I wanted to pronounce a measured criticism or appreciation, I should do it in more precise language and at greater length than that.

17 September 1934

*

If I could be told what exactly to change in order that my recent lines might achieve full success and become “very fine”, I would be thankful.

I have told you once that I have become more subdued in my appreciations of poetry — so “fine” may very well be changed to “very fine”. The poem you wrote was without a flaw positive or negative — to alter it would be to spoil it. 11 October 1934

*

The word “fine” means not, of course, “full of flaws” but there is something, somehow, somewhere wrong — for the following reason. “Good” means some imperfection, some flaw. Now, when I asked you whether the terms “very good”, “very fine”, “very beautiful” indicated different levels of excellence or merely different kinds on the same level, you said different kinds rather than levels. This means, analogically, that “good” and “fine” indicate also the same level. Ergo, “fine” means, too, some imperfection, some *flaw*.

What an extraordinarily sinuous and fantastic knowledge! My language would indeed be peculiar if the words I use mean just their opposites — i.e. good = bad, fine = flawed, beautiful = ugly. A poem may be good poetry without being a complete success, but if it is very good then it is a complete success. Fine cannot possibly mean something that is not fine, as it always implies a high excellence. Naturally the kind of fineness may vary and the degree also. There is no new unprecedented superior shade or transvaluation of values. I mean just the same thing as when I speak of fine lines — i.e. lines reaching a high level of excellence. These words are only summary words giving the general impression.

11 October 1934

*

Originally you said [*of a certain poem*], “it is a fine poem” but when I asked whether that meant any inferiority to those you had designated as “very fine” or “very good” etc., you answered “No.” Does that imply that I might add “very” here also?

Really, I *don't* measure my appreciations or rather my impressions in the dreadfully professorial way you suggest. What is wrong with “fine”? A fine poem is not worth keeping?

11 May 1936

*

Now if one poem you have considered “very fine” and another only “fine”, is it illogical of me to suppose that there is some difference of quality between the two? Even if I keep the poem I cannot feel that I have done my best — but the situation

becomes strange if by “fine” and “very fine” you mean the same thing sometimes. Does it really amount to asking you to be “dreadfully professorial” if I beg you to let this distinction, created by “very” or some such expression, be clear?

But, again, what is wrong with fine? How is fineness a failure? — It is professorial because, when you insist on the curious distinction between very fine and “only” fine, it seems to be like an examiner giving marks, alpha class, beta class, gamma, delta class etc. Poetry can’t be marked in that way, that’s why I objected. If any of your poems is unsatisfactory, I generally say so and sharply enough too. May 1936

*

Jyotirmayi confided to me that when you call any of her poems “very successful” she feels quite depressed for not being able to write something “very fine” or “very beautiful”. I told her that as soon as she saw “very” anywhere she must shoot straight up to the seventh heaven of joy. But surely, surely, if that blessed word is pointedly omitted, even a pachyderm like me might feel a little pricked!

What an importance to give to an adverb! Fine by itself is quite equal to “very good” — shall I start other categories e.g. “very very” and “very very very”? 2 August 1936

*

It is a fact that “very good” doesn’t appeal as much as “very beautiful”, “very fine”.

There is some difference of course but the words must not be taken as exact weight measures. They simply record an impression. 6 August 1936

*

You’ve said that the poem now is “very fine”, but why is it so?

Why is a poem fine? By its power of expression and rhythm, I suppose, and its force of substance and image. As all these are there, I call it a fine poem. 5 December 1936

*

You all attach too much importance to the exact letter of my remarks of the kind as if it were a giving of marks. I have been obliged to renounce the use of the word “good” or even “very good” because it depressed Nirod — though I would be very much satisfied myself if I could always write poetry certified to be very good. I write “very fine” against work which is not improvable, so why ask me for suggestions for improving the unimprovable? As for rising superior to yourself that is another matter — one always hopes to do better than one has yet done, but that means not an avoidance of defects — I always point out ruthlessly anything defective in your work — but to rise higher, wider, deeper etc., etc. in the consciousness. Incidentally, even if my remarks are taken to be of mark-giving value, what shall I do in future if I have exhausted all adverbs? How shall I mark your self-exceeding if I have already certified your work as exceeding? I shall have to fall back on roars “Oh, damned fine, damned damned damned fine!”

15 May 1937

Sri Aurobindo’s Comments on Poetry Written Outside the Ashram

As to Suhrawardy, you can if you like send the complimentary portion of my remarks with perhaps a hint that I found his writing rather unequal, so that it may not be all sugar. But the phrases about “album poetry” and chaotic technique are too vivid — being meant only for private consumption — to be transmitted to the writer of the poems criticised; I would for that have expressed the same view in less drastic language. As I have already said once, I do not like to write anything disparaging or discouraging for those whom I cannot help to do better. I received much poetry from Indian writers for review in the *Arya*, but I always refrained because I would have had to be very severe. I wrote only about Harindranath because there I could sincerely, and I think justly, write unqualified praise.

25 May 1931

*

I hope Dilip is not sending Kshitish Sen my adverse criticism of

his translation — it was not meant for him. I do not like to discourage people uselessly, — that is to say, where I cannot show them how to do better; where I cannot encourage, I prefer to say nothing. For the rest (omitting the sentence about rhetorical flatness) he can do as he likes. 19 November 1930

*

I don't want to say anything [*about a certain book*], because when I cannot positively encourage a young and new writer, I prefer to remain mum. . . . Each writer must be left to develop in his own way. 31 May 1943

Guidance in Writing Prose

Suggestions for Writing Good English

I wonder what to do in order to bring my essay up to the mark. Could you please make some suggestions?

I am afraid I can't make suggestions. Just now I am too busy with other and more strenuous things to be very fit for literary suggestions. I can only say generally avoid over-writing; let all your sentences be the vehicle of something worth saying and say it with a vivid precision neither defective nor excessive. Don't let either thought or speech trail or drag or circumvolute. Don't let the language be more abundant than the sense. Don't indulge in mere clever ingenuities without a living truth behind them. I think that is all.

14 June 1935

*

Your English is already correct as a rule. If you want style and expression, that is another matter. The usual outward means is to read good styles and impregnate oneself with them; it has of itself an influence on the writing.

27 May 1934

*

This book, returned herewith, is not in my opinion suitable for the purpose. The author wanted to make it look like a translation of a romance in Sanskrit and he has therefore made the spirit and even partly the form of the language more Indian than English. It is not therefore useful for getting into the spirit of the English language. Indians have naturally in writing English a tendency to be too coloured, sometimes flowery, sometimes rhetorical and a book like this would increase the tendency. One ought to have in writing English a style which is at its base capable of going to the point, saying with a simple and energetic straightforwardness

what one means to say, so that one can add grace of language without disturbing this basis. Arnold is a very good model for this purpose. Emerson less, but his book will also do.

It is surely better to write your own thoughts. The exercise of writing in your own words what another has said or written is a good exercise or test for accuracy, clear understanding of ideas, an observant intelligence; but your object is, I suppose, to be able to understand English and express *yourself* in good English.

16 May 1932

Poetry and Novel

No need to put poetry against novel and make a case between them. Both can be given admission into the spiritual Parnassus — but not all poetry and all novels. All depends on the consciousness from which the thing is done. If it is done from the psychic or the spiritual consciousness and bears the stamp of its source, that is sufficient. Of course there are certain things that cannot be done from there, but neither poetry nor fiction is in that case. They can be lifted to a higher level and made the expression of the psychic or spiritual mind and vision. When that is said, all is said. I hope my brevity has been of the right kind — and not left the question mystically obscure.

9 June 1936

Tragedy in Fiction

I did not like the tragic ending of Jyotirmayi's story. The conditions of true tragedy are not fulfilled, so far as I can see. Why create sorrow in literature wantonly?

That depends on the work itself. If it involves inevitably a tragic end, that has to be allowed to come. It is only if the tragedy is dragged in unnaturally for the sake of a forceful ending that it is inartistic.

13 January 1936

Remarks on English Pronunciation

Monosyllables and Dissyllables

I wonder why you find fault with the rhythm of “A vision whose God-delight embraces all.” “Vision” is really a monosyllable, and I don’t suppose the frequent poetic dissyllabification of it precludes the use of its original sound-length.

You use your intellect too much and with too much ingenuity where you should train your ear. Another line with the same scansion might very well make an extremely good rhythm; this one does not. Its rhythm is at once flat and jerky. How is “vision” a monosyllable? You might just as well say that “omnibus” is a monosyllable. At any rate I get no thrill, subtle or other, no surprise, no revelation.

27 September 1934

*

The Oxford dictionary seems to leave me no choice as regards the number of syllables in the word “vision”. I quote below some of the words explained as monosyllables in the same way as “Rhythm” and “Prism”, which are given as Rhy·thm (-dhm); Pri·sm (-zm).

Fă·shion (-shn)
Passion (pă·shn)
Pri·son (-zn)
Scission (si·shn)
Trea·son (-ēzn)
Vi·sion (-zhn)

Chambers’s Dictionary makes “vision” a dissyllable, which is quite sensible, but the monosyllabic pronunciation of it deserves to be considered at least a legitimate variant when H. W. Fowler and F. G. Fowler — the name of Fowler is looked upon as a synonym for authority on the English language —

give no other. I don't think I am mistaken in interpreting their intention.¹ Take "realm", which they pronounce in brackets as "rělm"; now I see no difference as regards syllabification between their intention here and in the instances above.

You may not have a choice — but I have a choice, which is to pronounce and scan words like "vision" and "passion" and similar words as all the poets of the English language (those at least whom I know) have consistently pronounced and scanned them — as dissyllables. If you ask me to scan Shakespeare's line in the following way in order to please H. W. Fowler and F. G. Fowler

Īn māi|dēn mēd|itātīōn | fān|cȳ frēe,

I shall decline without thanks. Shakespeare wrote, if I remember right, "trēāsōns, strategems and spoils"; Shelley, Tennyson, any poet of the English language, I believe, would do the same — though I have no books with me to give chapter and verse. I lived in both northern and southern England, but I never heard vision pronounced "vizhn", it was always "vizhun"; "treason", of course, is pronounced "trez'n", but that does not make it a monosyllable in scansion because there is in these words a very perceptible slurred vowel sound in pronunciation which I represent by the ' — in "poison" also. If "realm", "helm" etc. are taken as monosyllables, that is quite reasonable, for there is no vowel between "l" and "m" and none is heard, slurred or otherwise in pronunciation. The words "rhythm" and "prism" are technically monosyllables, because they are so pronounced in French (i.e. that part of the word, for there is a mute e in French): but in fact most Englishmen take the help of a slurred vowel sound in pronouncing "rhythms" and it would be quite permissible to write in English as a blank verse line, "The unheard rhythms that sustain the world".

This is my conviction and not all the Fowlers in the world

¹ In fact, the correspondent was mistaken. The six words he listed, as well as "rhythm" and "prism", were marked in the third edition of *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English* (H. W. Fowler and F. G. Fowler, eds., 1934) to be pronounced as dissyllables. — Ed.

will take it away from me. I only hope the future lexicographers will not fowl the language any more in that direction; otherwise we shall have to write lines like this —

O vizhn! O pashn! O fashn! m'd'tashn! h'rr'p'lashn!
Why did the infern'l Etern'l und'take creash'n?
Or else, creat'ng, could he not have afford'd
Not to allow the Engl'sh tongue to be Oxford'd?

P.S. I remember a book (Hamer's? someone else's? I don't remember) in which the contrast was drawn between the English and French languages, that the English tongue tended to throw all the weight on the first or earliest possible syllable and slurred the others, the French did the opposite — so that when an Englishman pretends to say “strawberries”, what he really says is “strawb's”. That is the exaggeration of a truth — but all the same there is a limit!

27 September 1934

*

I should like to ask you a few questions suggested by your falling foul of the Fowlers. The poetic pronunciation of words cannot be accepted as a standard for current speech — can it? On your own showing, “treason” and “poison” which are monosyllables in prose or current speech are scanned as dissyllables in verse; Shelley makes “evening” three syllables and Harin has used even “realm” as a dissyllable, while the practice of taking “precious” and “conscious” to be three syllables is not even noticeable, I believe. All the same, current speech, if your favourite Chambers's Dictionary as well as my dear Oxford Concise is to be believed, insists on “evening”, “precious” and “conscious” being dissyllabic and “realm” monosyllabic. I am mentioning this disparity between poetic and current usages not because I wish “meditation” to be robbed of its full length or “vision” to lose half its effect but because it seems to me that Shelley's or Tennyson's or any poet's practice does not in itself prove anything definitely for English as it is spoken. And spoken English, very much more than written English, undergoes change; even the line you quote from Shakespeare was perhaps not scanned in his time as you would do it now, for “meditation” — as surely

“passion” and “fashion” also and most probably “vision” as well — was often if not always given its full vowel-value and the fourth foot of the line in question might to an Elizabethan ear have been very naturally an anapaest:

In mai|den me|dita|tion fan|cy free.

When, however, you say that your personal experience in England, both north and south, never recorded a monosyllabic “vision”, we are on more solid ground, but the Concise Oxford Dictionary is specially stated to be in its very title as “of Current English”: is all its claim to be set at nought? It is after all a responsible compilation and, so far as my impression goes, not unesteemed. If its errors were so glaring as you think, would there not have been a general protest? Or is it that English has changed so much in “word of mouth” since your departure from England? This is not an ironical query — I am just wondering.

P.S. Your exclamatory-interrogatory elegiacs illustrating the predicament we should fall into if the Fowlers were allowed to spread their nets with impunity were very enjoyable. But I am afraid the tendency of the English language is towards contraction of vowel sounds, at least terminal ones; and perhaps the Oxford Dictionary has felt the need to monumentalise — clearly and authoritatively — the degree to which this tendency has, in some cases more definitely, in others less but still perceptibly enough, advanced? The vocalised “e” of the suffix “-ed” of the Spenserian days is now often mute; the trisyllabic suffix “-ation” of the “spacious times” has shrunk by one syllable, and “treason” and “poison” and “prison”, all having the same terminal sound if fully vowelised as “-ation”, are already monosyllables in speech — so, if “passion” and “fashion” which too have lost their Elizabethan characteristic like “meditation” should contract by a natural analogy, carrying all “-ation”-suffixed words as well as “vision” and “scission” and the like with them, it would be quite as one might expect. And if current speech once fixes these contractions, they will not always keep outside the pale of poetry. What do you think?

Where the devil have I admitted that “treason” and “poison”

are monosyllables or that their use as dissyllables is a poetic licence? Will you please quote the words in which I have made that astounding and imbecile admission? I have said distinctly that they are dissyllables, — like risen, dozen, maiden, garden, laden, and a thousand others which nobody (at least before the world went mad) ever dreamed of taking as monosyllables. On my own showing, indeed! After I had even gone to the trouble of explaining at length about the slurred syllable “e” in these words, for the full sound is not given, so that you cannot put it down as pronounced maid-en, you have to indicate the pronunciation as maid’n. But for that to dub maiden a monosyllable and assert that Shakespeare, Shelley and every other poet who scans maiden as a dissyllable was a born fool who did not know the “current” pronunciation or was indulging in a constant poetic licence whenever he used the words garden, maiden, widen, sadden etc. is a long flight of imagination. I say that these words are dissyllables and the poets in so scanning them (not as an occasional licence but normally and every time) are much better authorities than any owl — or fowl — of a dictionary-maker in the universe. Of course the poets use licences in lengthening out words occasionally, but these are exceptions; to explain away their normal use of words as a perpetually repeated licence would be a wild wooden-headedness (5 syllables, please). That these words are dissyllables is proved farther by the fact that “saddened”, “maidenhood” cannot possibly be anything but respectively dissyllabic and trisyllabic, yet “saddened” could I suppose be correctly indicated in a dictionary as pronounced “saddnd”. A dictionary indication or a dictionary theory cannot destroy the living facts of the language.

I do not know why you speak of my “favourite” Chambers. Your attachment to Oxford is not balanced by any attachment of mine to Chambers or any other lexicographer. I am not inclined to swear by any particular dictionary as an immaculate virgin authority for pronunciation or a papal Infallible. It was you who quoted Chambers as differing from Oxford, not I. You seem indeed to think that the Fowlers are a sort of double-headed Pope to the British public in all linguistic matters and nobody could

dare question their dictates or ukases — only I do so because I am antiquated and am living in India. I take leave to point out to you that this is not yet a universally admitted catholic dogma. The Fowlers indeed seem to claim something of the kind, they make their enunciations with a haughty papal arrogance, condemning those who differ from them as outcasts and brushing them aside in a few words or without a mention. But it is not quite like that. What is current English? As far as pronunciation goes, every Englishman knows that for an immense number of words there is no such thing — Englishmen of equal education pronounce them in different ways, sometimes in more than two different ways. “Either” “neither” is a current pronunciation, so is “eether” “neether”. In some words the “th” is pronounced variably as a soft “d” or a soft “t” or as “th” — and so on. If the Oxford pronunciation of “vision” and “meditation” is correct current English, then the confusion has much increased since my time, for then at least everybody pronounced “vizhun”, “meditashun”, as I do still and shall go on doing so. Or if the other existed, it must have been confined to uneducated people. But you suggest that my pronunciation is antiquated, English has changed since then as since Shakespeare. But I must point out that you yourself quote Chambers for “vizhun” and following your example — not out of favouritism — I may quote him for “summation” = “summashun” — not “shn”. The latest edition of Chambers is dated 1931, and the editors have not thought themselves bound by the decisive change of the English language to change “shun” into “shn”. Has the decisive change taken place since 1931? Moreover in the recent dispute about the standard Broadcast pronunciation, the decisions of Bernard Shaw’s committee were furiously disputed — if Fowler and Oxford were “papal authorities” in England for current speech — it is current speech the Committee was trying to fix through the broadcasts — would it not have been sufficient simply to quote the Oxford in order to produce an awed and crushed silence?

So your P.S. has no solid ground to stand on since there is no “fixed” current speech and Fowler is not its Pope and there is no universal currency of his vizhn of things. Language is not bound

by analogy and because “meditation̄” has become “meditashun” it does not follow that it must become “meditashn” and that “tation” is now a monosyllable contrary to all common sense and the privilege of the ear. It might just as well be argued that it will necessarily be clipped farther until the whole word becomes a monosyllable. Language is neither made nor developed in that way — if the English language were so to deprive itself of all beauty and by turning vision into vizn and then into vzn and all other words into similar horrors, I would hasten to abandon it for Sanskrit or French or Bengali — or even Swahili.

P.S. By the way, one point. Does the Oxford pronounce in cold blood and so many set words that vision, passion (and by logical extension treason, maiden, madden, garden etc.) are monosyllables? Or is it your inference from “realm” and “prism”? If the latter, I would only say, Beware of too rigidly logical inferences. If the former, I can only say that Oxford needs some gas from Hitler to save the English mind from its pedants. This is quite apart from the currency of vizhns.

29 September 1934

*

I am sincerely sorry for mistaking you on an important point. But before my argumentative wooden-headedness gives up the ghost under your sledge-hammer it is bursting to cry a Themistoclean “Strike, but hear”. Please try to understand my misunderstanding. What you wrote was: “‘Treason’, of course, is pronounced ‘trez’n’, but that does not make it a monosyllable in scansion because there is in these words a very perceptible slurred vowel sound in pronunciation which I represent by the ’ — in ‘poison’ also.” I think it must have been the word “scansion” which led me astray — as if you had meant that these words were non-monosyllabic in poetry only. But am I really misjudging Chambers as well as the Fowlers when I draw the logical inference that, since a dictionary is no dictionary if it does not follow a coherent system and since these people absolutely omit to make any distinction between the indicated scansion of “prism”, “realm”, “rhythm” etc., and that of “treason” and “poison”, they definitely mean us to take all these words as monosyllables? If Chambers who

writes “vizhun” but “trezn” and “poizn” just as he writes “relm” and “rithm”, intends us to understand that there is some difference between the scansion of the latter pairs he, in my opinion, completely de-dictionaries his work by so illogical an expectation. He and the Fowlers may not say in cold blood and so many set words that “treason” and “poison” are monosyllables but it is their design, in most freezing blood and more eloquently than words can express, that they fall into the same category as “realm” and “rhythm”. Else, what could have prevented them from inventing some such sign as your ’ to mark the dissimilarity? My sin was to have loved logic not wisely but too well where logicity had been obstreperously announced in flaring capitals on the title page and throughout the whole book by a fixed system of spelling and pronunciation. My Othello-like extremity of love plunged me into abysmal errors, but oh the Iagoistic “motiveless malignity” of lexicographers!

It seemed to me impossible that even the reckless Fowler — reckless in the excess of his learning — should be so audacious as to announce that this large class of words accepted as dissyllables from the beginning of (English) time were really monosyllables. After all the lexicographers do not set out to give the number of syllables in a word. Pronunciation is a different matter. “Realm” cannot be a dissyllable unless you violently make it so, because “l” is a liquid like “r” and you cannot make a dissyllable of words like “charm”, unless you Scotchify the English language and make it “char’r’r’m” or vulgarise it and make it “charrum” — and even “char’r’r’m” is after all a monosyllable. “Prism”, the “ism” in “Socialism”, “pessimism”, “rhythm” can be made dissyllabic, but by convention (convention has much to do with these things) the “ism”, “rhythm” are treated as a single syllable, because of the etymology. But there is absolutely no reason to bring in this convention with “treason”, “poison”, “garden” or “maiden” (coming from French *trahison*, *poison* and some O.E. equivalent of the German *Garten*, *Mädchen*). The dictionaries give the same mark of pronunciation for “thm”, “sm” and the “den” (dn) of maiden and son (sn) of treason because they are practically the same. The French pronounce “rhythme” =

“reethm” (I use the English sound indications) without anything to help them out in passing from “th” to “m”, but the English tongue can’t do that, there is a very perceptible quarter vowel sound or one-eighth vowel sound between “th” and “m” — if it were not so the plural “rhythms” would be unpronounceable. I remember in my French class at St. Paul’s our teacher (a Frenchman) insisted on our pronouncing *ordre* in the French way — in his mouth “orrrrr”; I was the only one who succeeded, the others all made it *auder*, *orrder*, *audrer*, or some such variation. There is the same difference of habit with words like “rhythm”, and yet conventionally the French treatment is accepted so far as to impose rhythm as a monosyllable. Realm on the other hand is pronounced truly as a monosyllable without the help of any fraction of a vowel.

30 September 1934

Some Problems of Stress Accent

Why have you bucked at my “azùre” as a line-ending? And why so late in the day? Twice before I have used the same inversion and it caused no alarm. Simple poetic licence, Sir. If Wordsworth could write

What awful pèrspective! while from our sight . . .

and leave no reverberation of “awful” in the reader’s mind, and if Abercrombie boldly come out with

To smite the horny eyes of men
With the renown of our Heaven,

and our horny eyes remain unsmitten by his topsy-turvy “Heaven” — why, then, Amal need not feel too shy to shift the accent of “azure” just because the poor chap happens to be an Indian. Not that an alternative line getting rid of that word is not possible — quite a fine one can be written with “obscure”. But how does this particular inversion shock you? There is nothing un-English or unpoetic about it — so far as I can see, though of course such things should not be done often. What do you say?

I can swallow “pèrspective” with some difficulty, but if anybody

tried to justify by it a line like this (let us say in a poem to Miss Mayo):

O ^ˈinspector, why ^ˈsuggestive of drains?

I would buck. I disapprove totally of Abercrombie's bold wriggle with Heaven, but even he surely never meant to put the accent on the second syllable and pronounce it "hev^ˈenn". I absolutely refuse to pronounce "azure" as "az^ˈure". "Perspective" can just be managed by making it practically atonal or unaccented or evenly accented, which comes to the same thing. "Sapphire" can be managed at the end of a line, e.g. "str^ˈong sapphire", because "phire" is long and the voice trails over it, but the "ure" of "azure" is more slurred into shortness than trailed out into length as if it were "azyoo^ˈre". In any case, even if the somersault is admitted the line won't do.

P.S. It is not to the use of "azure" in place of an iambic in the last foot that I object but to your blessed accent on the last syllable. I will even, if you take that sign off, allow you to rhyme "az^ˈure" with "p^ˈure" and pass it off as an Abercrombiean acrobacy by way of fun. But not otherwise — the accent mark must go.

2 October 1936

*

In your sonnet *Man the Enigma* occurs the magnificent line:

His heart is a chaos and an empyrean.

But I am very much saddened by the fact that the rhythm of these words gets spoiled at the end by a mis-stressing in "empyrean". "Empyrean" is stressed in the penultimate syllable, thus: "empy^ˈrean". Your line puts the stress on the second syllable. It is in the adjective "empyrean" that the second syllable is stressed, but the noun is never stressed that way, so far as I know.

First of all let me deal with your charge against my "empy^ˈrean". I find in the Chambers Dictionary the noun "empyrean" is given two alternative pronunciations, each with a different stress, — first, "empy^ˈrean" and secondly, "empy^ˈrean". Actually in the

book the accent seems to fall on the consonant “r” instead of the vowel. That must be a mistake in printing; it is evident that it is meant to fall on the second vowel. If that is so, my variation is justified and needs no further defence. The adjective “empyre¹al” the dictionary gives as having the same alternative accentuation as the noun, that is to say, either “empyre¹al” with the accent on the long “e” or “empyre²al” with the accent on the second syllable, but the “e” although unaccented still keeps its long pronunciation. Then? But even if I had no justification from the dictionary and the noun “empyre²an” were only an Aurobindonian freak and a wilful shifting of the accent, I would refuse to change it; for the rhythm here is an essential part of whatever beauty there is in the line.

P.S. Your view is supported by the small Oxford Dictionary which, I suppose, gives the present usage, Chambers being an older authority. But Chambers must represent a former usage and I am entitled to revive even a past or archaic form if I choose to do so.

4 August 1949

Remarks on English Usage

Some Questions of Pronunciation and Usage

I am in general agreement with your answer to Mendonça strictures on certain points in your style and your use of the English language. His objections have usually some ground, but are not unquestionably valid; they would be so only if the English language were a fixed and unprogressive and invariable medium demanding a scrupulous correctness and purity and chaste exactness like the French; but this language is constantly changing and escaping from boundaries and previously fixed rules and its character and style, you might almost say, is whatever the writer likes to make it. Stephen Phillips once said of it in a libertine image that the English language is like a woman who will not love you unless you take liberties with her. As for the changeableness, it is obvious in recent violences of alteration, now fixed and recognised, such as the pronunciation of words like “nation” and “ration” which now sound as “gnashun” and “rashun”; one’s soul and one’s ear revolt, at least mine do, against degrading the noble word “nation” into the clipped indignity of the plebian and ignoble “gnashun”, but there is no help for it. As for “aspire for”, it may be less correct than “aspire to” or “aspire after”, but it is psychologically called for and it seems to me to be much more appropriate than “aspire at” which I would never think of using. The use of prepositions is one of the most debatable things, or at least one of the most frequently debated in the language. The Mother told me of her listening in Japan to interminable quarrels between Cousins and the American Hirsch on debatable points in the language but especially on this battlefield and never once could they agree. It is true that one was an Irish poet from Belfast and the other an American scholar and scientist, so perhaps neither could be

taken as an unquestionable authority on the English tongue; but among Englishmen themselves I have known of such constant disputes. Cousins had remarkably independent ideas in these matters; he always insisted that “infinite” must be pronounced “infighnight” on the ground that “finite” was so pronounced and the negative could not presume to differ so unconscionably from the positive. That was after all as good a reason as that alleged for changing the pronunciation of “nation” and “ration” on the ground that as the “a” in “national” and “rational” is short, it is illogical to use a different quantity in the substantive. “To contact” is a phrase that has established itself and it is futile to try to keep America at arm’s length any longer; “global” also has established itself and it is too useful and indeed indispensable to reject; there is no other word that can express exactly the same shade of meaning. I heard it first from Arjava who described the language of *Arya* as expressing a global thinking and I at once caught it up as the right and only word for certain things, for instance, the thinking in masses which is a frequent characteristic of the Overmind. As for the use of current French and Latin phrases, it may be condemned as objectionable on the same ground as the use of *clichés* and stock phrases in literary style, but they often hit the target more forcibly than any English equivalent and have a more lively effect on the mind of the reader. That may not justify a too frequent use of them, but in moderation it is at least a good excuse for it. I think the expression “bears around it a halo” has been or can be used and it is at least not worn out like the ordinary “wears a halo”. One would more usually apply the expression “devoid of method” to an action or procedure than to a person, but the latter turn seems to me admissible. I do not think I need say anything in particular about other objections, they are questions of style and on that there can be different opinions; but you are right in altering the obviously mixed metaphor “in full cry”, though I do not think any of your four substitutes have anything of its liveliness and force. Colloquial expressions have, if rightly used, the advantage of giving point, flavour, alertness and I think in your use of them they do that; they can also lower and damage the style, but

that danger is mostly when there is a set character of uniform dignity or elevation. The chief character of your style is rather a constant life and vividness and supple and ample abounding energy of thought and language which can soar or run or sweep along at will but does not simply walk or creep or saunter and in such a style forcible colloquialisms can do good service.

2 April 1947

*

Your "through whom" in place of my "wherethrough" is an improvement, but it is difficult to reject that word as a legal archaism inadmissible in good poetry. Your remark about "whereas" in my essay seemed to me just in pointing out the obscurity of connection it introduced between the two parts of my sentence, but the term itself has no stigma on it of obsolescence as does for instance "whenas": in poetry it would be rather prosaic, while "wherethrough" is a special poetic usage as any big dictionary will tell us, and in certain contexts it would be preferable to "through which", just as "whereon", "wherein", and "whereby" would sometimes be better than their ordinary equivalents. I wonder why you have become so ultra-modern: I remember you jibe also at "from out" a phrase which has not fallen into desuetude yet, and can be used occasionally even in a common context: e.g. "from out the bed".

I don't suggest that "whereas" was obsolete. It is a perfectly good word in its place, e.g. He pretended the place was empty, whereas in reality it was crowded, packed, overflowing; but its use as a loose conjunctive turn which can be conveniently shoved into any hole to keep two sentences together is altogether reprehensible. None of these words is obsolete, but "wherethrough" is rhetorically pedantic, just as "whereabout" or "wherewithal" would be. It is no use throwing the dictionary at my head — the dictionary admits many words which poetry refuses to admit. Of course you can drag any word in the D. into poetry if you like — e.g.:

My spirit parenthetically wise
 Gave me its *obiter dictum*; *à propos*
 I looked within with weird and brilliant eyes

And found in the pit of my stomach — the *juste mot*.

But all that is possible is not commendable. So if you seek a pretext wherethrough to bring in these heavy visitors, I shall buck and seek a means whereby to eject them. 2 October 1934

*

As between the forms — “with a view to express” and “with a view to expressing” — the Oxford Concise calls the former vulgar.

I don't agree with Oxford. Both forms are used. If “to express” is vulgar, “to expressing” is cumbrous and therefore inelegant.

On Three Words Used by Sri Aurobindo

I should like to know what exactly the meaning of the word “absolve” is in the following lines from your *Love and Death*.

But if with price, ah God! what easier! Tears
Dreadful, innumerable I will absolve,
Or pay with anguish through the centuries . . .

There is another passage a few pages later where the same word is used:

For late
I saw her mid those pale inhabitants
Whom bodily anguish visits not, but thoughts
Sorrowful and dumb memories absolve,
And martyrdom of scourged hearts quivering.

In the second passage it is used in its ordinary sense. “Absolution” means release from sins or from debts — the sorrowful thoughts and memories are the penalty or payment which procures the release from the debt which has been accumulated by the sins and errors of human life.

In the first passage “absolve” is used in its Latin and not in its English sense, = “to pay off a debt”, but here the sense is stretched a little. Instead of saying “I will pay off with tears” he says: “I will pay off tears” as the price of the absolution.

This Latinisation and this inversion of syntactical connections are familiar licences in English poetry — of course, it is incorrect, but a deliberate incorrectness, a violence purposely done to the language in order to produce a poetic effect. The English language, unlike the French and some others, likes, as Stephen Phillips used to say, to have liberties taken with it. But, of course, before one can take these liberties, one must be a master of the language — and, in this case, of the Latin also.

The word “reboant” occurs in *The Rishi*. Evidently it is a misprint. What ought to be in its place?

Why is it evidently a misprint? It is a recognised (though rare and poetic) English word, from Latin *reboans*. *Reboare* in Latin means “to cry aloud again and again”. 1931

*

What do you mean when you write of my poem, “It is very felicitous in expression and taking.”

I think Shakespeare wrote somewhere “Daffodils that come before the swallow dares and take the winds of March with beauty.” Charm or beauty that takes the mind like that, is taking.

26 September 1936

On Some Words and Expressions Used by Writers of the Ashram

Under the gloam, like a withdrawing wave
I heard some flute-soul's visionary woe . . .

If you can justify the word “gloam” I would suggest

I heard in gloam like a withdrawing wave
A visionary flute-soul's plumbless woe.

23 September 1934

*

What is wrong with “gloam”?

I have no personal objection to the word “gloom”, I find it perfect — I was only doubtful about its existence because I did not remember ever to have met it before. I thought it might be a gap in my knowledge, so I looked at Chambers and the Concise Oxford but they share my ignorance. Then I thought it might be Spenserian, archaic or dialect, like Arjava’s *trouvailles* and in that case I would welcome it not only with pleasure but with confidence; so I asked you whether you could justify it. Your answer sent me at once diving again into Chambers — you seemed to be so sure of this little gem of a word that I thought I must have looked at the wrong place or made some other frightful blunder. But no, there is “gloaming” marching at the head of the words beginning with “glo” in a proud precedence but with no gleam of a gloam before it. There is only glitter which is not the same thing at all, not at all at all. Of course the word ought to exist, it is full of charm and suggests other beauties like “gloamy”, “gloamful” etc., but none of these language people seem to know anything about it. Or perhaps it is in the less concise and longer-winded lexicographers? Anyhow my remark stands; if you can justify it, it is a beautiful phrase. I prefer “in gloam” to “at gloam” though that too has its merits. 24 September 1934

*

Of course the big dictionary in the library mentions “gloom” — and not just as an archaism or obsolescism: it does it the honour, which it more than deserves, of calling it a variant of “gloaming”. Etymologically too, there can be no objection: “gloaming” and “gloom” derive from the same Anglo-Saxon “glōm,” so if “gloom” is legitimate, “gloom” is *a fortiori* so.

Not necessarily — if one proceeded in that argument, the English language would soon be a chaos.

Besides, at least twice before it has passed under your eyes and you have never demurred: I used it over a year ago in *Pointers*:

From the sea rise up
Fingers of foam
Trying to pierce through

The veil of gloam

And I remember Harin's use of it:

In me, the timeless, time forgets to roam,
 Drunk with my poise, grown sudden unaware,
 Offering up its noontide and its gloam
 Withdrawn in a lost attitude of prayer.

If it were an obscure uglification, I could understand your objection; but as you admit its rare beauty and cannot doubt its sense nor its etymological coinability, and still reiterate your remark about the necessity of my justifying it I conjecture some solid principle behind your diffidence. Why should one hesitate to enrich the language?

It did not strike me in your poem. As for Harin, I never object to what he may invent in language or in grammar, because so much mastery of language carries with it a right to take liberties with it. But I am more severe with myself and others. However, if it is in the big dictionary, that is sufficient. Even if it had been an archaism, it would have been worth reviving. But if it had been a new invention, it would have been more doubtful — one could invent hundreds of beautiful words but the liberty to do so would end in a language like Joyce's which is not desirable.

25 September 1934

*

The English reader has digested Carlyle and swallowed Meredith and is not quite unwilling to REJOYCE in even more startling strangenesses of expression at the present day. Will his stomach really turn at my little novelties. "The voice of an eye" sounds idiotic, but "the voice of a devouring eye" seems to me effective. "Devouring eye" is then a synecdoche — isolating and emphasising Shakespeare's most remarkable quality, his eager multitudinous sight, and the "oral" epithet provides a connection with the idea of a voice, thus preventing the catachresis from being too startling. If Milton could give us "blind mouths" and Wordsworth

thou Eye among the blind,

That, deaf and silent, read'st the eternal deep,
is there very much to object to in this visioned voice?

Can't accept all that. "A voice of a devouring eye" is even more reJoycingly mad than a voice of an eye pure and simple. If the English language is to go to the dogs, let it go, but the Joyce cut by the way of Bedlam does not recommend itself to me.

The poetical examples have nothing to do with the matter. Poetry is permitted to be insane — the poet and the madman go together: though even there there are limits. Meredith and Carlyle are tortuous or extravagant in their style only — though they can be perfectly sane when they want. In poetry anything can pass — For instance, my "voice of a tilted nose":

O voice of a tilted nose,
Speak but speak not in prose!
Nose like a blushing rose,
O Joyce of a tilted nose!

That is high poetry, but put it in prose and it sounds insane.

5 May 1935

*

What about this: "It is the voice of an insatiable picturesque-ness . . . "

A voice of picturesqueness is less startling but hardly better English than "a voice of an eye". I can't stomach the two expressions because they are not English. You can't say "voice of a devouring eye" any more than you can say "voice of a tilted nose". To the English reader the expression would sound grotesque, incongruous, almost comic.

A voice of picturesqueness would also sound incongruous, for picturesqueness applies to visible things, not to things audible like a voice.

5 May 1935

*

In my lines —

This heart grew brighter when your breath's proud chill
Flung my disperse life-blood more richly in!

a terminal “d” will at once English that Latin fellow “disperse”,¹ but is he really objectionable? At first I had “Drove” instead of “Flung” — so the desire for a less dental rhythm was his *raison d'être*, but if he seems a trifle weaker than his English avatar, he can easily be dispensed with now.

I don't think “disperse” as an adjective can pass, — the dentals are certainly an objection but do not justify this Latin-English neologism. 12 June 1937

*

Why should that poor “disperse” be inadmissible when English has many such Latin forms — e.g. “consecrate”, “dedicate”, “intoxicate”?

I don't think people use “consecrate”, “intoxicate” etc. as adjectives nowadays — at any rate it sounds to me too scholastic. Of course, if one chose, this kind of thing might be perpetrate —

O wretched man intoxicate,
Let not thy life be consecrate
 To wine's red yell (spell, if you want to be “poetic”)
Else will thy soul be dedicate
 To Hell.

but it is better not to do it. It makes no difference if there are other words like “diffuse” taken from French (not Latin) which have this form and are generally used as adjectives. Logic is not the sole basis of linguistic use. I thought at first it was an archaism and there might be some such phrase in old poetry as “lids disperse”, but as I could not find it even in the Oxford which claims to be exhaustive and omniscient, I concluded it must be a neologism of yours. But archaism or neologism does

¹ Sri Aurobindo had written in the margin of a typed copy of this poem: “What is this Latin fellow “disperse” doing here?” — Ed.

not matter. “Dispersed life-blood” brings three d’s so near together that they collide a little — if they were farther from each other it would not matter — or if they produced some significant or opportune effect. I think “diffuse” will do. 13 June 1937

*

What do I find this afternoon? Just read:

Suddenly
 From motionless battalions as outride
 A speed disperse of horsemen, from that mass
 Of livid menace went a frail light cloud
 Rushing through heaven, and behind it streamed
 The downpour all in wet and greenish lines.

This is from your own *Urvasio!* Of course, it is possible that the printer has omitted a terminal “d” — but is that really the explanation?

I dare say I tried to Latinise. But that doesn’t make it a permissible form. If it is obsolete, it must remain obsolete. I thought at first it was an archaism you were trying on, I seemed to remember something of the kind, but as I could find it nowhere I gave up the idea — it was probably my own crime that I remembered.

29 June 1937

*

The noons of heart betray the lofts
 Which splendid strength of Truth enfurls.

Now, look here! What are these lofts? I read in the Dictionary “loft”: Attic; room over stable; pigeon-house; flock of pigeons; gallery in church or hall; (Golf) backward slope in clubhead, lofting strokes. Now if some of these things can be betrayed by the noons (at a pinch, but not of the heart), none of them, not even the last can be enfurled. Not even the most splendid strength has ever enfurled any loft in the world, not even if it be curled and whirled a hundred times over for the desperate effort.

27 December 1936

*

In my use of “loft” I follow its derivation from German “*Luft*” = the air, and Icelandic “*loft*” = sky, upper room.

Derivations are deprivations — even when they are right they are useless, — what matters is what the word means, not what something else meant which gave birth to the word.

Notes on Usage Apropos of a Translation of Sarat Chandra Chatterji's *Nishkriti*²

I have gone carefully through the proof of the first chapters of *The Deliverance*, but find most of these unexplained red marks totally unintelligible; sometimes I can make a guess, but most often not even that. What, for instance, is the objection to the use of “its” and “it” for a river?

There seems to be an objection to any metaphors or figures such as “the scales of public opinion” or “a river rejecting someone from its borders”. This seems to me astonishing; at any rate the figures are there in the original and one cannot suppress them in a translation or alter arbitrarily the author's substance.

Objections are made also against quite good and appropriate English words such as “beggared” and “quadrupled” or against perfectly correct phrases like “All that was now a history of the past” or “reaching” a figure or “dropping” some money or “he sat at home in his room” in the sense of remaining inactive. One can say, for instance, “He sat in his palace listening to the footsteps of approaching Doom”. So too there appears to be some objection to the phrase “neither X nor another”, a common English turn; to “started (in the sense of beginning an action or movement) a relentless insistence and importunity”.³ Vivid epithets, e.g., “rapid visits” or familiar and lively phrases such as “she was back again”, are found to be improper and objectionable. “Cares of her household” gets a red mark, though

² Above a typed copy of this letter, Sri Aurobindo wrote the jocular heading: “Note on the red marks in the proof of ‘*The Deliverance*’ ” — Ed.

³ One can say for instance, “He started an obstinate resistance which never flagged nor ceased”.

one speaks of “household cares”, “cares of State”, cares of all kinds. A fever (one must not refer to it as “it”) is allowed to throw a person down, but not to let him rise from his bed. Incomprehensible?

All these startling red-ink surprises are packed together in the short space of the first chapter. But in the second we meet with still bigger surprises. One is not allowed to “make time” for anything, a most common phrase, or to “leave” a responsibility to someone. A meal must not be “vegetarian” though a diet can be, and though one speaks in English of “a frugal vegetarian dinner”. One is not allowed to have a school task to do or to “prepare” a task; but unhappily that is done in England at least and in English.

“Today” is objected to because it is applied to past “time”; but it is put here as part of the tone of vivid remembered actuality, the past described as if still present before the mind, which is constant in the original. Similarly, a little later on, “the early dusk had fallen a couple of hours ago”; in strict narrative time it should be “before” and not “ago”, but though the author writes in the past tense, he is always suggesting a past which is passing immediately before our eyes. I do not see how else the translator is to keep this suggestion. One could use more correctly the historic present: “It is winter and the dusk has fallen a couple of hours ago”; but that would be to falsify the original.

All right of passage is refused to a humorous use of the phrase “give voice”, nor can one “retort” instead of merely replying. There is perhaps a syntactical objection to the use of “desperate” at the beginning of the sentence, on p. 6, but the objection is itself incorrect. One says “Pale and haggard, he rose from his bed”. One is not allowed to speak humorously of a “portion” instead of a “part” of a big bed so as to emphasise its bigness and the dividing of it into occupied regions by the “gang”. A heart is not allowed to “pound away”, still less to pound “dismally”. The objector seems to damn everything vividly descriptive, everything new in turn, phrase or image, everything in fact not said before by everyone else. A man lying

down is not allowed to “start up”, though the dictionary meaning of the word is just that, “to rise up quickly or suddenly”, e.g. “he started up from his bed” or “from his chair”. What again is meant by the objection to such recognised locutions as “to take away the (bad) taste” or “much she cares”, and why should there not be an “implacable pressure” or why is one forbidden to “get out money” from a box? These red marks are terribly mysterious.

The criticism of the sentences “How could you etc.” and the use of “today” is intelligible and to a certain extent tenable. I have tried to explain on the proof itself why the ordinary tense-sequence can be disregarded here. In the latter case it is not so much a question of grammar as of the use of the word “today” for a past time. If it can be so used in order to express more vividly the actual thought in the mind of a person at the time, the unusual tense-sequence follows as a matter of course. I have, however, yielded the point for the sake of Sarat Chatterji’s reputation which, we are told, is imperilled by our audacities of language.

Chapter III. The objector begins with a queer missing of the obvious sense in the use of “my” and “us”. He goes on to challenge the possibility of “entering into” explanations, discussions etc. though it is commonly done, e.g. “He entered into a long discussion” or “You needn’t enter into tedious explanations; a few words will be enough.”

Chapter IV continues the inexplicable chain and “implacable” series of red objections. I have written “a discussion was in process”, which is a quite permissible phrase, but alter it to “progress” just to soften the redness of the red mark. But why cannot Atul “hold forth” as every orator does and what is the matter with the “cut” of a coat, a phrase sacred to every tailor? People in England do, after all, “blurt out” things every day and they “laugh in the face” of others, though of course it may be considered rude; but “to laugh in the face” is not considered as bad grammar — or bad English. “To give *the* order” is wrong in the opinion of the objector; but since the purchase of particular things like coats or suits has just been talked about, it is quite

correct to say “*the* order” instead of “*an* order”.

One can’t “speak out”, apparently, (or perhaps “speak up” either, one can only just speak?), nor can one “see to the making of coats” for a family. Also it is wrong to ask “what is wrong”. It is wrong, it seems, to say “All in the room”; so an Englishman is mistaken when he says “Tell all at home that I am not coming”! So too you can’t speak “once more” or “seek for”⁴ anything! The use of the plural of “devotion”, common in English,⁵ is red marked as an error!

Chapter V. One can’t “labour” to get a result, or “cover up” anything in the sense of “hiding” or even try to do it; one can’t put somebody up⁶ to do something, though in English it is constantly done. There is an objection to such perfectly natural figures as “could not summon up any reply” or “the sharp edge of your tongue” or “smouldering secretly within herself”. The objector seems indeed to cherish a deadly grudge against figures and images; he is opposed also to colloquial expressions (e.g. “get” out money, “give it here”) even in dialogue. He objects to my putting straight into English the Bengali figure of “falling from the sky”. There is an almost identical phrase in French with exactly the same sense, “to fall from on high” or “to fall from the clouds”:⁷ so I do not see why it should not be done, since it ought to be at once intelligible to an English reader. I note also that words cannot “jump” to the tongue, but why not? they manage to do it every day. Poor Shaila cannot “need” a cup.⁸ Then what is wrong with the sentence “Do you think everybody is your sister” i.e. the speaker herself? It is simply a vivid way of

⁴ “For” and “after” *can* be used with “seek”. One can say “He sought for an excuse but found none”; one would not usually say “He sought an excuse”. So too you can say “He has long been seeking for spiritual light but in vain.”

⁵ E.g. “She was still at her devotions”.

⁶ Cf., in kindred but slightly different senses, “He has not acted on his own initiative, I know by whom he has been put up to do this”; “A straw candidate put up for the occasion by a small secret clique”; “This is a put up job; there is nothing sincere or spontaneous in the whole affair”.

⁷ “*tomber d’en haut*”, “*tomber des nuages*”.

⁸ One can say, “she needs help and sympathy in her trouble”, or “you need rest and a change of air”, or “for this I need scissors and paste, get them”. Then why not “I need the cup”?

saying "Do you think everybody will be as patient with you as myself", or, "Do you think you can speak to everybody as you do to me".

I have written at length because the publisher and perhaps others seem to have been upset by the vicious red jabs of this high authority. In most cases they seem to me to have no meaning whatever. If they have, we should be informed to some extent at least of their why and wherefore.

There are, too, a few doubtful points in half a dozen sentences, points on which Englishmen themselves differ or might differ. I am ready to go through the whole book if the proofs are sent here. But I cannot revise or alter phrases, locutions or figures which, so far as I know English, are either current or natural or permissible, — unless I am told why these are thought to be incorrect or improper.

I cannot altogether understand Professor Maniyar's criticism. What does he mean by irregular language? If he refers to the style and means that it is bad, unchaste, too full of familiar or colloquial terms, not sufficiently dignified, bookish, conventional in phrase, not according to precedent, he is entitled to his view, of course. If he and the objector represent the Indian English-reading public, then Dilip must consider the matter. For in that case it is clear the book will not be understood by that public, may be banged and bashed by the reviewers, or may for kindred reasons be a failure. The suggestion that Sarat Chandra's high reputation will be tarnished and lowered by Dilip's deplorable style and my bad English and horrible grammar, not from any fault of his own, is very alarming. In that case Dilip ought to have the book corrected by some University professor who knows what to write and what not to write and its style chastened, made correct, common and unnoticeable. I don't think Amal will do. He is too brilliant and might make the hair of the correct and timid reader rise on his head in horror; besides Amal does not know Bengali.

The question also arises whether an English reader (an English Englishman, not made in India) would equally fail to appreciate the book; he might find it too Bengali in character

and substance and — who knows? — agree that the style of the translation is unorthodox and “irregular”. But here we are helpless — we cannot make the experiment, for the war is on and England is far away and paper scarce there as here.

5 August 1944

Remarks on Bengali Usage

Laws and Caprices of Usage

It is not very clear why the dictum about বৎসর should not apply to হংপাত্রে and মৃৎপাত্রে. My own feeling is against this extra syllable in such words (দিক্‌প্রান্তে seems to me different, because দিক্ is a separate word in Bengali), but neither feeling nor logic can stand against usage. A language is like an absolute queen; you have to obey her laws, reasonable or unreasonable, and not only her laws, but her caprices — so long as they last, — unless you are one of her acknowledged favourites and then you can make hay of her laws and (sometimes) defy even her caprices provided you are quite sure of the favour. In this case, Tagore perhaps feels the absoluteness of some usage with regard to these particular words? But one can always break through law and usage and even pass over the judgment of an “arbiter of elegances”, — at one’s own risk.

26 January 1932

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Funny thing — this word-coinage! Sometimes people accept it, sometimes they reject.

After all when one coins a new word, one has to take the chance. If the word is properly formed and not ugly or unintelligible, it seems to me all right to venture.

If it is not accepted it will remain a blot in the poem. Tagore coined the word ভ্গাখিত but he laments that people have not accepted it.

Why a blot? There are many words in Greek poetry which occur only once in the whole literature, but that is not considered a defect in the poem. It is called a *hapax legomenon*, “a once-

spoken word” and that’s all. *ভ্গাখিত* for instance is a fine word and can adorn, not blot Tagore’s poetry even if no one else uses it. I think Shakespeare has many words coined by him or at least some that do not occur elsewhere. 16 January 1937

A Language Grows and Is Not Made

Will it be a narrowness on the part of the Calcutta University if it does not include foreign words for the enrichment of Bengali literature?

It is a matter of opinion and tastes differ. But I don’t see how a University can change the language. A language grows and is not made, except in so far as it is the great poets and prose writers who make it. 15 July 1937

Part Three

Literature, Art, Beauty and Yoga

Section One

Appreciation of Poetry and the Arts

Appreciation of Poetry

The Subjective Element

All criticism of poetry is bound to have a strong subjective element in it and that is the source of the violent differences we find in the appreciation of any given author by equally “eminent” critics. All is relative here, Art and Beauty also, and our view of things and our appreciation of them depends on the consciousness which views and appreciates. Some critics recognise this and go in frankly for a purely subjective criticism — “this is why I like this and disapprove of that, I give my own values”. Most labour to fit their personal likes and dislikes to some standard of criticism which they conceive to be objective; this need of objectivity, of the support of an impersonal truth independent of our personality or anybody else’s, is the main source of theories, canons, standards of art. But the theories, canons, standards themselves vary and are set up in one age only to be broken in another. Is there then no beauty of art independent of our varying mentalities? Is beauty a creation of our minds, a construction of our ideas and our senses, not at all existent in itself? In that case Beauty is non-existent in Nature, it is put upon Nature by our minds through mental imposition, *adhyāropa*. But this contradicts the fact that it is in response to an object and not independently of it that the idea of beautiful or not beautiful originally rises within us. Beauty does exist in what we see, but there are two aspects of it, essential beauty and the forms it takes. “Eternal beauty wandering on her way” does that wandering by a multitudinous variation of forms appealing to a multitudinous variation of consciousnesses. There comes in the difficulty. Each individual consciousness tries to seize the eternal beauty expressed in a form (here a particular poem or work of art), but is either assisted by the form or repelled by it, wholly attracted

or wholly repelled, or partially attracted and partially repelled. There may be errors in the poet's or artist's transcription of beauty which mar the reception, but even these have different effects on different people. But the more radical divergences arise from the variation in the constitution of the mind and its difference of response. Moreover there are minds, the majority indeed, who do not respond to "artistic" beauty at all—something inartistic appeals much more to what sense of beauty they have—or else they are not seeking beauty, but only vital pleasure.

A critic cannot escape altogether from these limitations. He can try to make himself catholic and objective and find the merit or special character of all he reads or sees in poetry and art, even when they do not evoke his strongest sympathy or deepest response. I have little temperamental sympathy for much of the work of Pope and Dryden, but I can see their extraordinary perfection or force in their own field, the masterly conciseness, energy, point, metallic precision into which they cut their thought or their verse, and I can see too how that can with a little infusion of another quality be the basis of a really great poetic style, as Dryden himself has shown in his best work. But there my appreciation stops; I cannot rise to the heights of admiration of those who put them on a level with or on a higher level than Wordsworth, Keats or Shelley—I cannot escape from the feeling that their work, even though more consistently perfect within their limits and in their own manner (at least Pope's), was less great in poetic quality. These divergences rise from a conception of beauty and a feeling for beauty which belongs to the temperament. So too Housman's exaltation of Blake results directly from his feeling and peculiar conception of poetic beauty as an appeal to an inner sensation, an appeal marred and a beauty deflowered by bringing in a sharp coating or content of intellectual thought. But that I shall not discuss now. All this however does not mean that criticism is without any true use. The critic can help to open the mind to the kinds of beauty he himself sees and not only to discover but to appreciate at their full value certain elements that make them beautiful or give them what is most characteristic or unique in their peculiar

beauty. Housman for instance may help many minds to see in Blake something which they did not see before. They may not agree with him in his comparison of Blake and Shakespeare, but they can follow him to a certain extent and seize better that element in poetic beauty which he overstresses but makes at the same time more vividly visible.

5 October 1934

Abiding Intuition of Poetic and Artistic Greatness

Yes, of course there is an intuition of greatness by which the great poet or artist is distinguished from those who are less great and these again from those who are not great at all. But you are asking too much when you expect this intuition to work with a mechanical instantaneousness and universality so that all shall have the same opinion and give the same values. The greatness of Shakespeare, of Dante, of others of the same rank is unquestioned and unquestionable and the recognition of it has always been there in their own time and afterwards. Virgil and Horace stood out in their own day in the first rank among the poets and that verdict has never been reversed since. The area of a poet's fame may vary; it may have been seen first by a few, then by many, then by all. At first there may be adverse critics and assailants, but these negative voices die away. Questionings may rise from time to time — e.g. as to whether Lucretius was not a greater poet than Virgil — but these are usually from individuals and the general verdict abides always. Even lesser poets retain their rank in spite of fluctuations of their fame. You speak of the discrediting of some and the rehabilitation of the discredited. That happened to Pope and Dryden. Keats and his contemporaries broke their canons and trampled over their corpses to reach romantic freedom; now there is a rehabilitation. But all this is something of an illusion — for mark that even at the worst Pope and Dryden retained a place among the great names of English poetic literature. No controversy, no depreciation could take that away from them. This proves my contention that there is an abiding intuition of poetic and artistic greatness.

The attempts at comparison of poets like Blake and Shakespeare or Dante and Shakespeare by critics like Housman and Eliot? It seems to me that these are irrelevant and otiose. Both Dante and Shakespeare stand at the summit of poetic fame, but each with so different a way of genius that comparison is unprofitable. Shakespeare has powers which Dante cannot rival; Dante has heights which Shakespeare could not reach; but in essence they stand as mighty equals. As for Blake and Shakespeare, that opinion is more a personal fantasy than anything else. Purity and greatness are not the same thing; Blake's may be pure poetry in Housman's sense and Shakespeare's not except in a few passages; but nobody can contend that Blake's genius had the width and volume and riches of Shakespeare's. It can be said that Blake as a mystic poet achieved things beyond Shakespeare's measure — for Shakespeare had not the mystic's vision; but as a poet of the play of life Shakespeare is everywhere and Blake nowhere. These are tricks of language and idiosyncrasies of preference. One has only to put each thing in its place, without confusing issues and one can see that Housman's praise of Blake may be justified but any exaltation of him by comparison with Shakespeare is not in accordance with the abiding intuition of these things which remains undisturbed by any individual verdict.

The errors of great poets in judging their contemporaries are personal freaks — they are failures in intuition due to the mind's temporary movements getting in the way of the intuition. The errors of Goethe and Bankim were only an overestimation of a genius or a talent that was new and therefore attractive at the time. Richardson's *Pamela* was after all the beginning of modern fiction. As I have said, the general intuition does not work at once and with a mechanical accuracy. Overestimation of a contemporary is frequent; underestimation also. But, taken on the whole, the real poet commands at first or fairly soon the verdict of the few whose eyes are open — and often the attacks of those whose eyes are shut — and the few grow in numbers till the general intuition affirms their verdict. There may be exceptions, for there is hardly a rule without exceptions, but this is, I think, generally true.

As for the verdict of Englishmen upon a French poet or *vice versa*, that is due to a difficulty in entering into the finer spirit and subtleties of a foreign language. It is difficult for a Frenchman to get a proper appreciation of Keats or Shelley or for an Englishman to judge Racine, — for this reason. But a Frenchman like Maurois who knows English as an Englishman knows it, can get the full intuition of a poet like Shelley well enough. These variations must be allowed for; the human mind is not a perfect instrument, its best intuitions are veiled by irrelevant mental formations; but in these matters the truth affirms itself and stands fairly firm and clear in essence through all changes of mental weather.

6 October 1934

Contemporary Judgment of Poetry

If you send your poems to five different poets, you are likely to get five absolutely disparate and discordant estimates of them. A poet likes only the poetry that appeals to his own temperament or taste, the rest he condemns or ignores. (My own case is different, because I am not primarily a poet and have made in criticism a practice of appreciating everything that can be appreciated, as a catholic critic would.) Contemporary poetry, besides, seldom gets its right judgment from contemporary critics.

Nothing can be more futile than for a poet to write in expectation of contemporary fame or praise, however agreeable that may be, if it comes: but it is not of any definitive value; for very poor poets have enjoyed a great contemporary fame and very great poets have been neglected in their time, their merit known only to a few and gathering very slowly a greater volume of appreciation around it. A poet has to go on his way, trying to gather hints from what people say for or against, when their criticisms are things he can profit by, but not otherwise moved (if he can manage it) — seeking mainly to sharpen his own sense of self-criticism by the help of others. Differences of estimate need not surprise him at all.

2 February 1932

It is quite true that all art and poetry is largely dependent on the vital for its activity and if there is no force of vitality in the poetry then it cannot be strong or great. But it does not follow that the vital element in poetry will appeal to everybody or a great number of people; it depends on the kind of vital movement that is there. The forceful but inferior sort of vital energy that you find in Kipling's ballads appeals to a large mass of people, — the vital element in Milton which is very powerful affects only a few in comparison — the rest take him on trust because he is a great classic but have not the true intense enjoyment of him as of Kipling. Yet Milton's greatness will endure — that cannot be said certainly of Kipling's ballads. The problem therefore remains where it was. Spiritual poetry also needs the vital force for expression; mere spiritual philosophy without the uplifting poetic force in its expression (which needs the vital energy for its action) cannot appeal to anybody. But all the same in spiritual poetry the vital element adopts a turn which may not go home to many, unless it takes a popular religious form which has a general appeal. There I do not follow quite Khagen Mitra's position — does he contend that one ought to suit one's poetry to the mentality of others so that it may have a general appeal, not keeping it to its natural purpose of expressing what is felt and seen by the poet according to the truth of the inspiration within him? Surely that cannot be recommended; but if it is not done, the possibility of reaching (at first, of course) only a few remains uneliminated. It is not that a poet deliberately sets out to be appreciated by a few only — he sets out to be himself in his poetry and the rest follows. But consider a poet like Mallarmé. In writing his strange enigmatic profound style which turned the whole structure of French upside down he cannot have expected or cared to be read and appreciated even by that part of the general public which is interested in and appreciative of poetry. Yet there is no one who has had more influence on modern French poets — he helped to create Verlaine, Valéry and a number of others who rank among the great ones in French literature and he himself too now ranks very high though he must still, I should think, be read only by a comparatively small though select audience;

yet he has practically turned the current of French poetry. So there is something to be said for writing for oneself even if that implies writing only for the few and not for the many.

As for the actor, that is quite a different art, meant for the public, depending on its breath of applause, ineffective if its public is not moved or captured. A poet publishes, but he can take his chance; if he does not succeed in commanding widespread attention, he can still continue to write; there is something in him which maintains its energy and will to create. If he seeks acknowledged greatness and success — though that is a secondary matter to the force that makes him write — he can still sustain himself on the hope of a future greatness with posterity — there are plenty of illustrious examples to console him. But an actor unappreciated is an actor already dead — there is nothing before him.

5 November 1936

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Valéry, whom you mention, is unintelligible to all but a very narrow coterie, and even they say that he is too intellectual and divorced from the life of the emotions. This makes his poetry admirable as a specimen of great workmanship, but it will not last.

Well, but did they not say the same thing about Mallarmé? And what of Blake? Contemporary opinion is a poor judge of what shall live or not live. The fact remains that the impressionist movement in poetry initiated by Mallarmé has proved to be the most powerful stream in France and its influence is not confined to that country. The whole thing is that it is a mistake to erect a mental theory and try to force into its narrow mould the infinite variety of the processes of Nature. Shakespeare may have so much vital force as to recommend himself to a large audience not so much for his poetry at first as for his dramatic vividness and power; it must be remembered that it was the German romantics two centuries later who brought about the apotheosis of Shakespeare — before that he had a much more limited circle of admirers. Other great poets have started with a more scanty recognition. Others have had a great popularity in

their lifetime and sunk afterwards to a much lower level of fame. What is important is to preserve the right of the poet to write for himself, that is to say, for the Spirit that moves him, not to demand from him that he should write down to the level of the general or satisfy even the established taste and standard of the critics or connoisseurs of his time. For that would mean the end or decay of poetry — it would perish of its own debasement. A poet must be free to use his wings even if they carry him above the comprehension of the public of the day or of the general run of critics or lead him into lonely places. That is all that matters.

Tolstoy's logic is out of place. Nobody says that the value of the poet must be measured by the scantiness of his audience any more than it can be measured by the extent of his contemporary popularity. So there is no room for his *reductio ad absurdum*. What is contended is that it cannot be measured by either standard. It is to be measured by the power of his vision, of his speech, of his feeling, by his rendering of the world within or the world without or of any world to which he has access. It may be the outer world that he portrays like Homer and Chaucer or a vivid life-world like Shakespeare or an inmost world of experience like Blake or other mystic poets. The recognition of that power will come first from the few who recognise good poetry when they see it and from those who can enter into his world; afterwards it can spread to the larger number who can recognise good poetry when it is shown to them; finally, the still larger public may come in who learn to appreciate by a slow education, not by instinct and nature. There was a sound principle in the opinion always held in former times that it is time alone that can test the enduring power of a poet's work, for contemporary opinion is not reliable.

There remains the case of the poets great or small or null who immediately command a general hearing. They have an element in them which catches at once the mind of the time: they are saying things which have a general appeal in a way that everybody can understand, in a language and rhythm that all can appreciate. As you say, there must be a vital element in the poetry of such a writer which gets him his public. The question

is, has he anything else and, again what is the value of this vital element? If he has nothing else or not much of any high value, his aureole will not endure. If he has something but not of the best and highest, he will sink in the eyes of posterity, but not set out of sight. If he has in him something of the very greatest and best, his fame will grow and grow as time goes on — some of the elements that caught him his contemporary public may fade and lose their value but the rest will shine with an increasing brightness. But even the vital and popular elements in the work may have different values — Shakespeare's vitality has the same appeal now as then; Tennyson's has got very much depreciated; Longfellow's is now recognised for the easily current copper coin that it always was. You must remember that when I speak of the vital force in a poet as something necessary, I am not speaking of something that need be low or fitted only to catch the general mind, not fit to appeal to a higher judgment, but of something that can be very valuable — from the highest point of view. When Milton writes

Fallen Cherub, to be weak is miserable,

or describes the grandeur of the fallen archangel, there is a vital force there that is of the highest quality, — so is that of Shakespeare; so is that of many pieces of Blake. This vital energy makes the soul stir within you. Nothing can be more high and sublime than the vital energy in Arjuna's description of the Virat Purusha in the Gita.

6 November 1936

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I remain convinced that fame is a fluke. Even a settled literary fame seems to be a very fluctuating affair. Who gave a thought to Blake or Donne in former times, when I was in England, for instance? But now they bid fair to be reckoned among the great poets. I see that Byron is in the depths, the quotations for Pope and Dryden are rising; it was very different in those days.

5 February 1932

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Dilip says, “If you want to publish your literary work, you must see that people understand it — not the public at large but, as Virginia Woolf says, a select public.”

What is not understood or appreciated by one select circle may be understood or appreciated by another select circle or in the future like Blake’s poetry. Nobody appreciated Blake in his own time — now he ranks as a great poet, — more poetic than Shakespeare, says Housman. Tagore wrote he could not appreciate Dilip’s poetry because it is too “Yogic” for him. Is Tagore unselect, one of the public at large?

I don’t agree at all with not publishing because you won’t be understood. At that rate many great poets would have remained unpublished. What about the unintelligible Mallarmé who had such a great influence on later French poetry? 24 July 1936

Housman’s Poetics

I have been waiting for a long time to take a look at A. E. Housman’s little book *The Name and Nature of Poetry*. It’s been with you for months now. Perhaps you could spare it for a while? How did you like it?

[*A few days later*] What has happened to my Housman letter?

Housed, man!

[*Still later*] Here is the book. I kept it with the hope of noting down my own ideas on Housman’s theory, but all this time has elapsed without my being able to do it. Apart from the theory, Housman, judging from the book, has a fine sense of true poetic quality — in others. For his own poetry, from the extracts I have seen, looks rather thin. I have read the book three or four times and always with satisfaction to my solar plexus.

22 September 1936

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Read the remarks of Housman on the magnificent poem of Blake he quotes in full [*“My Spectre around me night and day”*] and

the attempts of people to explain it. I quite agree with him there though not in his too sweeping theory of poetry. To explain that poem is to murder it and dissect the corpse. One can't explain it, one can only feel and live the truth behind it. 3 December 1936

Spiritual Poetry and Popular Taste

In a recently published lecture on art, Tagore writes [*in Bengali*]:

The question naturally arises, "Why has this [*mathematical delight*] not been made the subject of poetry?" The reason is that the experience of it is confined to very few people, it is out of the reach of the general public. The language through which it can be known is technical, it has not been made into a living material by contact with the hearts of the people.

Put "yogic poetry" in place of mathematics and you will at once understand why he cannot accept yogic poetry as poetry proper. Khagendra Mitra has echoed this identical view in his rather obscure term অনুভবের স্বাজাত্য.

Mathematical delight be blowed! What does he mean? that you can't write mathematics in verse? I suppose not, it was not meant to be. You can't start off

Oh, two by three plus four plus seven!
To add things is to be in heaven.

But all the same, if one thinks it worth while to take the trouble, one can express the mathematician's delight in discovery or the grammarian's in grammatising or the engineer's in planning a bridge or a house. What about Browning's *Grammarian's Funeral*? The reason why these subjects do not easily get into poetry is because they do not lend themselves to poetic handling, their substance being intellectual and abstract and their language also, not as the substance and language of poetry must be, emotional and intuitive. It is not because they appeal only to a few people and not to the general run of humanity. A good dinner appeals

not to a few people but to the general run of humanity, but it would all the same be a little difficult to write an epic or a lyric on the greatness of cooking and fine dishes or the joys of the palate and the belly. Spiritual subjects on the other hand can lend themselves to poetic handling because they can be expressed in the language of high emotion and radiant intuition. How many people will appreciate it is a question which is irrelevant to the merit of the poetry. More people have appreciated sincerely Macaulay's *Lays* or Kipling's *Barrack Room Ballads* than ever really appreciated *Timon of Athens* or *Paradise Regained* — but that does not determine the relative value or appropriateness of these things as poetry. Artistic or poetic value cannot be reckoned by the plaudits or the reactions of the greatest number. I am only just reading Khagen Mitra's স্বাজাত্য — this is only a splenetic comment on your quotation from Tagore. 2 November 1936

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Mystic poetry will ever remain for Tagore mystic and mysterious and occupy a second place.

That is another matter. It is a question of personal idiosyncrasy. There are people who thrill to Pope and find Keats and Shelley empty and misty. The clear precise intellectual meanings of Pope are to them the height of poetry — the emotional and romantic suggestions of the *Skylark* or the *Ode to the Nightingale* unsatisfactory. How the devil, they ask, can a skylark be a spirit, not a bird? What the hell has “a glow-worm golden in a dell of dew” to do with the song of the skylark? They are unable to feel these things and say Pope would never have written in that incoherent inconsequential way. Of course he wouldn't. But that simply means they like things that are intellectually clear and can't appreciate the imaginative connections which reveal what is deeper than the surface. You can, I suppose, catch something of these, but when you are asked to go still deeper into the concrete of concretes, you lose your breath and say “Lord! what an unintelligible mess. Give me an allegorical clue for God's sake, something superficial, which I can mentally formulate.” Same attitude as the Popists' — in essence. 8 December 1936

Appreciation of the Arts in General

Poetic and Artistic Value and Popular Appeal

I do not know why your correspondent puts so much value on *general* understanding and acceptance. Really it is only the few that can be trusted to discern the true value of things in poetry and art and if the “general” run accept it is usually because acceptance is sooner or later imposed or induced in their minds at first by the authority of the few and afterwards by the verdict of Time. There are exceptions of course of a wide spontaneous acceptance because something that is really good happens to meet a taste or a demand in the general mind of the moment. Poetic and artistic value does not necessarily command mass understanding and acceptance.

24 October 1936

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I do not find your argument from numbers very convincing. Your 999,999 people would also prefer a jazz and turn away from Beethoven or only hear him as a duty and would feel happy in a theatre listening to a common dance tune and cold and dull to the music of Tansen. They would also prefer (even many who pretend otherwise) a catching theatre song to one of Tagore’s lyrics — which proves to the hilt, I suppose, that Beethoven, Tansen, Tagore are pale distant highbrow things, not the real, true, human, joy-giving stuff. In the case of Yogic or divine peace, which is not something neutral, but intense, overwhelming and positive (the neutral quiet is only a first or prefatory stage,) there is this further disadvantage that your million minus one have never known Yogic peace, and what then is the value of their turning away from what they never experienced and could not possibly understand even if it were described to them? The man of the world knows only vital excitement and pleasure or

what he can get of it, but does not know the Yogic peace and joy and cannot compare, — but the Yogin has known both and can compare. I have never heard of a Yogin who got the peace of God and turned away from it as something poor, neutral and pallid, rushing back to cakes and ale. If satisfaction in the experience is to be the test, Yogic peace wins by a hundred lengths. However, you write as if I had said peace was the one and only thing to be had by Yoga. I said it was a basis, the only possible secure basis for all other divine experience, even for a fulfilled and lasting intensity of bhakti and Ananda. 29 October 1932

Art and Life

There are artists and artists. A real artist with the spirit of artistry in his very blood will certainly be artistic in everything. But there are artists who have no taste and there are artists who are not born but made. Your example of Tagore is a different matter. A mastery in one department of art does not give mastery in another — though there may be a few who excel equally in many arts. Gandhi's phrase about asceticism is only a phrase. You might just as well say that politics is an art or that cooking is the greatest of arts or apply that phrase to bridge or boxing or any other human field of effort. As for Tolstoy's dictum it is that of a polemist, a man who had narrowed himself to one line of ideas — and such people can say anything. There is the same insufficiency about the other quotations. An artist or a poet may be the medium of a great power but in his life he may be a very ordinary man or else a criminal like Villon or Cellini. All kinds go to make this rather queer terrestrial creation. 15 August 1933

Modern Art and Poetry

Not only are there no boundaries left in some arts (like poetry of the ultra-modern schools or painting) but no foundations and no Art either. I am referring to the modernist painters and to the extraordinary verbal jazz which is nowadays often put forward as poetry. . . .

Modern Art opines that beauty is functional! that is, whatever serves its function or serves a true purpose is artistic and beautiful — for instance, if a clerk produces a neat copy of an official letter without mistakes, the clerk and his copy are both of them works of art and beautiful!

March 1935

Unity of Idea and Design in the Arts

I would recommend that you send the architect Raymond to Hyderabad to observe the modernised Moghul style of some of the buildings. He could then make some improvements to his design: a big dome in the centre, for instance, and dome-like decorations in the corners.

Two quite different styles cannot be mixed together — it would make a horribly inartistic effect. A dome would be utterly out of place in the plan of this building. Unity of idea and design is the first requisite in architecture as in any other art.

Comparison of the Arts

Each Art Has Its Own Province

I fear I must disappoint you. I am *not* going to pass the Gods through a competitive examination and assign a highest place to one and lower places to others. What an idea! Each has his or her own province on the summits and what is the necessity of putting them in rivalry with each other? It is a sort of Judgment of Paris you want to impose on me? Well, but what became of Paris and Troy? You want me to give the crown or the apple to Music and enrage the Goddesses of Painting, Sculpture, Architecture, Embroidery, all the Nine Muses, so that they will kick at our publications and exhibitions and troop off to other places? We shall have to build in the future — what then shall we do if the Goddess of Architecture turns severely and says, “I am an inferior Power, am I? Go and ask your Nirod to build your house with his beloved music!”

Your test of precedence — universal appeal — is all wrong. I don't know that it is true, in the first place. Some kind of sound called music appeals to everybody, but has really good music a universal appeal? And, speaking of arts, more people go to the theatre or read fiction than go to the opera or a concert. What becomes then of the superior universality of music, even in the cheapest sense of universality? Rudyard Kipling's *Barrack Room Ballads* exercises a more universal appeal than was ever reached by Milton or Keats — we will say nothing of writers like Blake or Francis Thompson; a band on the pier at a seaside resort will please more people than a great piece of music with the orchestration conducted by Sir Thomas Beecham. In a world of gods it might be true that the highest made the most universal appeal but here in a world of beasts and men (you bring in the beasts — why not play to Bushy and try how she responds?) it

is usually the inferior things that have the more general if not quite universal appeal. On the other hand the opposite system you suggest (the tables turned upside down — the least universal and most difficult appeal makes the greatest art) would also have its dangers. At that rate we should have to concede that the cubist and abstract painters had reached the highest art possible, only rivalled by the up to date modernist poets of whom it has been said that their works are not at all either read or understood by the public, are read and understood only by the poet himself, and are read without being understood by his personal friends and admirers.

When you speak of direct appeal, you are perhaps touching something true. Technique does not come in — for although to have a complete and expert judgment or appreciation you must know the technique not only in music and painting where it is more difficult, but in poetry and architecture also, it is something else and not that kind of judgment of which you are speaking. It is perhaps true that music goes direct to the intuition and feeling with the least necessity of using the thinking mind with its strongly limiting conceptions as a self-imposed middleman, while painting and sculpture do need it and poetry still more. At that rate music would come first, architecture next, then sculpture and painting, poetry last. I am aware that Housman posits nonsense as the essence of pure poetry and considers its appeal to be quite direct — not to the soul but to somewhere about the stomach. But then there is hardly any pure poetry in this world and the little there is is still *mélangé* with at least a homeopathic dose of intellectual meaning. But again if I admit this thesis of excellence by directness, I shall be getting myself into dangerous waters. For modern painting has become either cubist or abstract and it claims to have got rid of mental representation and established in art the very method of music; it paints not the object but the truth behind the object by the use of pure line and colour and geometrical form which is the very basis of all forms or else by figures that are not representations but significances. For instance a modern painter wishing to make a portrait of you will now paint at the top a clock surrounded by three triangles,

below them a chaos of rhomboids and at the bottom two table castors to represent your feet and he will put underneath this powerful design, "Portrait of Nirod". Perhaps your soul will leap up in answer to its direct appeal and recognise at once the truth behind the object, behind your vanished physical self, — you will greet your psychic being or your Atman or at least your inner physical or vital being. Perhaps also you won't. Poetry also seems to be striving towards the same end by the same means — the getting away from mind into the depths of life or, as the profane might put it, arriving at truth and beauty through ugliness and unintelligibility. From that you will perhaps deduce that the attempt of painting and poetry to do what music alone can do easily and directly without these acrobatics is futile because it is contrary to their nature — which proves your thesis that music is the highest art because most direct in its appeal to the soul and the feelings. Maybe — or maybe not; as the Jains put it, *syād vā na syād vā*.

I have written so much, you will see, in order to say nothing — or at least to avoid your attempt at putting me in an embarrassing dilemma. Q.E.F. 6 January 1936

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I did not know what to make of your reply on art.

If you did know, it would mean I had committed myself, which was just what I did not want to do. Or shall we put it in this way "Each of the great arts has its own appeal and its own way of appeal and each in its own way is supreme above all others"? That ought to do. 7 January 1936

Music and Poetry

I do not know what to say on the subject you propose to me — the superiority of music to poetry, — for my appreciation of music is bodiless and inexpressible while about poetry I can write at ease and with an expert knowledge. But is it necessary to fix a scale of greatness between two fine arts when each has its own

greatness and can touch in its own way the extremes of aesthetic Ananda? Music, no doubt, goes nearest to the infinite and to the essence of things because it relies wholly on the ethereal vehicle, *śabda* (architecture by the by can do something of the same kind at the other extreme even in its imprisonment in mass); but painting and sculpture have their revenge by liberating visible form into ecstasy, while poetry though it cannot do with sound what music does, yet can make a many-stringed harmony, a sound-revelation winging the creation by the word and setting afloat vivid suggestions of form and colour, — that gives it in a very subtle kind the combined power of all the arts. Who shall decide between such claims or be a judge between these godheads?

26 April 1933

Appreciation of Music

On Music

Written words are pale and lifeless things when one has to express the feelings raised by superb music and seem hardly to mean anything — not being able to convey what is beyond word and mere mental form — that is, at least, what I have felt and why I always find it a little difficult to write anything about music.

20 March 1933

Musical Excellence and General Culture

I have not seen the remarks in question. I don't suppose all-round general culture has much to do with excelling in music. Music is a gift independent of any such thing and it can hardly be said that, given a musical gift in two people, the one with an all-round culture would go farther than the other in musical excellence. That would not be true in any of the arts. But something else was meant, perhaps, — that there is a certain turn or element in the excellence which an all-round culture makes possible? It is only in that sense that it could be true. Shakespeare's poetry for instance is that of a man with a vivid and many-sided response to life; it gives the impression of a multifarious knowledge of things but it was a knowledge picked up from life as he went; Milton's gets a certain colour from his studies and learning; in neither case is the genius or the excellence of the poetry due to culture, but there is a certain turn or colouring in Milton which would have not been there otherwise and is not there in Shakespeare. It does not give any superiority in poetic excellence to one over the other.

12 November 1936

Section Two
On the Visual Arts

General Remarks on the Visual Arts

Art and Nature

There is no incompatibility between the inspiration from within and the dependence on Nature. The essence of the inspiration always comes from within but the forms of expression are based on Nature though developed and modified by the selective or interpretative sight of the artist. 6 September 1933

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A painter can certainly bring home the aspects of the sea and the beauty of Nature, but he does it as an artist, in the way of Art. He does it by representation and suggestion, not by mere reproduction of the object. The question of Art or Nature being more beautiful therefore does not arise. 16 March 1936

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Art cannot give what Nature gives; it gives something else. 20 June 1934

On Nandalal Bose's Ideas on Art

Nandalal Bose says: "In art three points are essential. We may say that the top point of the triangle is inspiration and the two points of the base are the study of nature and the study of tradition."

Nandalal's saying is true; but the three have to be combined and developed and harmonised in their combination to a sufficient degree before they bear the fruit of finished or great art.

10 January 1936

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In a letter to me, Nandalal wrote of love as “the only thing for Art”.

It is a way of speaking, I suppose, in accordance with his own experience. It is the creative Force which he calls Love — others might call it by another name because they see it in another aspect.

4 November 1933

Inspiration and the Vital

For the last two or three days I have been getting inspirations for painting. But I have a question about that. Do these inspirations come from the vital world? Is this harmful?

It is of course vital. All art comes through the vital. But what manifests through it can only be said when one sees what it produces.

7 November 1933

Form and Colour

In order to get a significance through a picture there must be a definite form — form and colour are the essentials of painting and neither by itself is enough. Here [*in a painting sent to Sri Aurobindo*] there is colour but no form — or only a shapeless shape — as if you were trying to get rid of form and paint only forces or indefinite suggestions. But that is contrary to an art which depends on colour, line and design.

Cinema

I see no objection to your going for two or three days to Madras for this purpose [*to make a recording*]. I don't suppose you will paint the town red and the Cinema sounds harmless, though if the newspaper pictures are any guide, it is likely to be disappointing; I have yet to see anything that really suggested an artistic piece.

28 November 1936

Problems of the Painter

Nature and the Human Figure

The Mother had told you once that in your human figures you did not seem to be in contact with the right Influence and you had said that you felt the contact with an eternal Beauty in Nature but had not the same contact with regard to the human figure. It will be better then, now that you are practising the Yoga and to be in contact with right Influences only is very important, to avoid dealing with the human face and figure at present. In Yoga what may seem to the mind a detail may yet open the door to things that have strong effects on the consciousness, disturb its harmony or interfere with the sources of inspiration, vision and experience.

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Your relation with Nature has been much more psychic than your relation with human beings. You must have met the latter mainly on the vital plane and not come in close contact with the eternal Beauty behind. In Nature you have felt the touch of the eternal and infinite and entered therefore into a truer relation with her.

The influence that comes in the human figure is a force of disharmony and ugliness—a manifestation of ignorance in form.

13 January 1934

Portrait Painting

I would very much like to have instructions from the Mother on portrait painting: drawing, developing the features, finishing the details and bringing out the personality of the sitter.

For that each one must find his own technique. Only for you what you must find is a way to express the psychic instead of the vital. At present it is the vital you bring out. The psychic is the eternal character, the vital brings out only transient movements.

15 July 1935

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The failure to bring out the personality is not at all due to any defect in the technique. With any technique the personality can be brought out. But to get it one must come out from one's own personality, one's ego with its characteristic and limited look on things, and identify oneself with the person of the sitter — that is how one seizes it and can naturally bring it out in the painting.

14 December 1936

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The portrait does not seem to us to be successful. In the externals the long projection of the nose over the lips and the eyes close together modify the type of the face and give it another character. It is not a question of resemblance or external appearance, but the basis of character is affected. This however would not be so much of an objection — but for the inner expression as it comes out through the mouth and eyes. There is something introduced here from a vital world — undivine — which is not part of the Mother's vital. It has come in through that Influence of which the Mother spoke — it throws its own shadow and so changes the inner vision of the thing to be done, the face to be portrayed. There is no such element in your paintings of Nature, which catch very finely the inner truth of what you paint.

It was not with this portrait that we connected what I wrote about the wrong Influence that brought the obstruction and depression.

21 September 1933

Drawing from Nature

I have drawn four faces from my imagination, each with a different character and personality.

Drawing from imagination is useless.

I have the idea of drawing the pictures of Nandalal Bose.

You can copy Nandalal — but drawing from Nature is best.

23 April 1933

*

You said that studies of human figures should be done from nature. I would like to ask if this could be done other ways as well — from photographs and paintings, for instance.

They must be done from nature. It is impossible to do it properly from photographs and paintings.

6 September 1935

Mastery of Drawing

May I enlarge your photograph? This will help me in drawing the human figure.

You can try by copying human figures from drawings, not photographs.

12 March 1933

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I don't think I have succeeded in bringing out the resemblance in this sketch.

To get the resemblance, one must concentrate so much as to be identified with what you see — then it comes.

22 June 1933

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Again that clumsiness in the drawing. It is due to want of practice, I suppose.

Want of practice and some *tamas* of the body. It is when the consciousness comes in the body that the skill comes — when you shake off the *tamas*, there is no clumsiness in you.

17 May 1934

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An Artist's Temperament

I was surprised at Krishnalal's refusal to do the fresco.

These things are matters of temperament. It is not a question of mastery of technique only as with a craftsman. A craftsman can go on working regularly always for any amount of time. An artist is not the same. He depends on his temperament (whether he is poet, painter or sculptor) and its response to a certain flow of force. If anything in it gets dull or jaded or does not respond, he ceases working — or if anything else goes wrong or is not responsive in him. Copy or original makes no difference to his method — he brings the same temperamental attitude to both. Of course there are artists whose temperament is so buoyant that they keep the flow at command almost (like Harin with his poems), painting or working every day for hours together. Others cannot — they work sometimes more, sometimes less — sometimes after long intervals etc. 27 September 1934

Uncreative Periods

I have noticed that after doing some pictures, there comes a period when I do not feel like doing any painting, there is no inspiration.

It is very common with artists, poets and all creators. The usual reason is that the vital gets fatigued and needs some time to recuperate itself and get back the creative effort.

During such periods I have to deal with the impulses of the vital nature. Is it because of this that I cannot concentrate on painting?

It is more likely that the vital, fatigued of the effort, begins to have movements of other kinds which you have then to control.

I feel that I should go to deeper and higher sources of inspiration. Am I correct in having this feeling?

It is correct. There is a movement to get at deeper and higher sources.

18 March 1935

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Sometimes something comes in and my inspiration for writing and painting fails. What is this?

It is an obstruction to the natural action of the mind; that happens often enough. People who do creative work, writing or painting, are often stopped like that for a time — they do not feel the obstruction, only the result which they call a failure of inspiration.

Painting in the Ashram

A General Remark

What you write about the expression of beauty through painting and the limitations of the work as yet done here, is quite accurate. The painters here have capacity and disposition, but as yet the work done ranks more as studies and sketches, some well done, some less well, than as great or finished art. What they need is not to be easily satisfied because they have put their ideas or imaginations in colour or because they have done some good work, but always to see what has not been yet achieved and train vision and execution-power till they have reached a truly high power of themselves.

10 January 1936

On Some Artists of the Ashram

Anilkumar is still learning; he is very clever and ingenious, loves painting and works hard at it and recently he has been making remarkable progress in technique.

Nishikanta has already his own developed technique and a certain originality of vision — two things which must be there before a man can take rank as a painter. There are on the other hand certain defects and limitations. Power he has but not as yet any consummate harmony.

These observations of course are private and for you only. Mother does not want to pass any public judgment. Let each grow in his own way and to his own possible stature — with as little rivalry or vainglory as may be.

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It is true that Romen has an instinctive artistic sense but also he has spent much time in painting and given much attention to it,

so he has progressed fast. He has also great self-confidence.

The artistic sense can be had by training — the capacity you have, but it has to be brought out more and more and disciplined by study and practice. By development you will get self-confidence.

7 November 1935

The Need of Artistic Training

You can write to him that the Mother has seen his pictures. If he wants seriously to take up painting, it can't be done out of his own mind without help of competent teachers. He would have to undergo a complete and long training so as to train his eye as well as his hand; his eye to see things as they appear to the artistic vision and his hand to execute that vision with a sure technique. Technique cannot be acquired without a sound training. Also he must learn to know all that is necessary about the human body and its details; otherwise he will not be able to build faultlessly a human face or figure. For instance in his picture of the flowers he has a put a hand in which the thumb is in an impossible position and the fingers begin at the same level as the thumb and not far below. In art a taste for the art or even a faculty for it is not sufficient; there is necessary also a training.

8 September 1932

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Do you think that I shall be able to learn painting?

You can learn on condition you study and take pains. Painting is not like poetry which you can develop by the innate faculty and a growing inspiration with just a little knowledge of metrical technique. In painting you have to learn carefully any number of things — learn not by theory only but by practice with a good teacher, e.g. firm line and strong drawing, perspective, how to mix colours, how to use the right colours and what colours can go together and so on — all that goes by the name of technique. If you do not study that, no amount of inspiration will make you a good painter. You were progressing very well, but you must

learn these things carefully and you must take more pains about details.

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That is a great error of the human vital — to want compliments for their own sake and to be depressed by their absence and imagine that it means there is no capacity. In this world one starts with ignorance and imperfection in whatever one does — one has to find out one's mistakes and to learn, one has to commit errors and find out by correcting them the right way to do things. Nobody in the world has ever escaped from this law. So what one has to expect from others is not compliments all the time, but praise of what is right or well done and criticism of errors and mistakes. The more one can bear criticism and see one's mistakes, the more likely one is to arrive at the fullness of one's capacity. Especially when one is very young — before the age of maturity — one cannot easily do perfect work. What is called the juvenile work of poets and painters — work done in their early years — is always imperfect, it is a promise and has qualities — but the real perfection and full use of their powers comes afterwards. They themselves know that very well, but they go on writing or painting because they know also that by doing so they will develop their powers.

As for comparison with others, one ought not to do that. Each one has his own lesson to learn, his own work to do and he must concern himself with that, not with the superior or inferior progress of others in comparison with himself. If he is behind today, he can be in full capacity hereafter and it is for that future perfection of his powers that he must labour. You are young and have everything yet to learn — your capacities are yet only in bud, you must wait and work for them to be in full bloom — and you must not mind if it takes months and years even to arrive at something satisfying and perfect. It will come in its proper time, and the work you do now is always a step towards it.

But learn to welcome criticism and the pointing out of imperfections — the more you do so, the more rapidly you will advance.

1933

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If you work hard and patiently you can surely learn [*painting*] — but you must realise that you are very young and it takes years before an artist can learn to produce something really perfect.

Wanting to Learn

The difficulty with him [*a young painter of the Ashram*] is that he does not want to learn — it must all come by inspiration, as if such a thing were possible in things in which knowledge of technique and careful and long assiduous practice are needed, as in art and music. Besides he cannot bear to be criticised and [to have] his mistakes shown to him. All the talent in the world will not serve, if he does not change in these two things.

11 June 1934

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Someone who is learning to paint or play music or write and does not like to have his mistakes pointed out by those who already know — how is he to learn at all or reach any perfection of technique?

12 June 1934

Section Three

Beauty and Its Appreciation

General Remarks on Beauty

Beauty

Beauty is the way in which the physical expresses the Divine — but the principle and law of Beauty is something inward and spiritual which expresses itself through the form.

23 August 1933

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What is the meaning of Supramental Beauty? Is it the perception of the Divine as the All-Beautiful and All-Delight?

No, that you can get on any plane, and it becomes easy as soon as one is in contact with the higher Mind. Beauty is the special divine Manifestation in the physical as Truth is in the mind, Love in the heart, Power in the vital. Supramental beauty is the highest divine beauty manifesting in Matter. 19 February 1934

Supramental Action and Beauty

Is the work of supermind direct, as one sees in the lower grades of creation?

Yes — supermind action is direct, spontaneous and automatic like that of inframental Nature — the difference is that it is perfectly conscious. As there is no disagreement or strife within itself, it produces a perfect harmony and beauty.

19 September 1933

Art, Beauty and Ananda

Art is a thing of beauty and beauty and Ananda are closely connected — they go together. If the Ananda is there, then the

beauty comes out more easily — if not, it has to struggle out painfully and slowly. That is quite natural. 14 December 1936

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Beauty is Ananda taking form — but the form need not be a physical shape. One speaks of a beautiful thought, a beautiful act, a beautiful soul. What we speak of as beauty is Ananda in manifestation; beyond manifestation beauty loses itself in Ananda or, you may say, beauty and Ananda become indistinguishably one. 14 March 1933

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Your poem expresses very beautifully an aspect of beauty as it is circumstanced in this world. The lines of Keats also give one aspect only which it tries to generalise. In fact, Beauty is Ananda thrown into form — if it casts a shadow of pain, it is because the Divine Bliss which we mean by Ananda is watered down in the dullness of terrestrial consciousness into mere joy or pleasure and also because even that does not last for long and can easily have its opposite as a companion or a reaction. But if the consciousness of earth could be so deepened and strengthened and made so intensively receptive as not only to feel but hold the true Ananda, then the lines of Keats would be altogether true. But for that it would have to acquire first a complete liberation and an abiding peace. 16 February 1935

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Beauty is not the same as delight, but like Love it is an expression, a form of Ananda, — created by Ananda and composed of Ananda, it conveys to the mind that delight of which it is made. Aesthetically, the delight takes the appearance of Rasa and the enjoyment of this Rasa is the mind's and the vital's reaction to the perception of beauty. The spiritual realisation has a sight, a perception, a feeling which is not that of the mind and vital; — it passes beyond the aesthetic limit, sees the universal beauty, sees behind the object what the eye cannot see, feels what the emotion of the heart cannot feel and passes beyond Rasa and

Bhoga to pure Ananda — a thing more deep, intense, rapturous than any mental or vital or any physical rasa reaction can be. It sees the One everywhere, the Divine everywhere, the Beloved everywhere, the original bliss of existence everywhere, and all these can create an inexpressible Ananda of beauty — the beauty of the One, the beauty of the Divine, the beauty of the Beloved, the beauty of the eternal Existence in things. It can see also the beauty of forms and objects, but with a seeing other than the mind's, other than that of a limited physical vision — what was not beautiful to the eye becomes beautiful, what was beautiful to the eye wears now a greater, marvellous and ineffable beauty. The spiritual realisation can bring the vision and the rapture of the All-Beautiful everywhere.

26 October 1935

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The word “expression” [*in the first sentence of the preceding letter*] means only something that is manifested by the Ananda and of which Ananda is the essence. Love and Beauty are powers of Ananda as Light and Knowledge are of Consciousness. Force is inherent in Consciousness and may be called part of the Divine Essence. Ananda is always there even when Sachchidananda takes on an impersonal aspect or appears as the sole essential Existence; but Love needs a Lover and Beloved, Beauty needs a manifestation to show itself. So in the same way Consciousness is always there, but Knowledge needs a manifestation to be active, there must be a Knower and a Known. That is why the distinction is made between Ananda which is of the essence and Beauty which is a power or expression of Ananda in manifestation. These are of course philosophical distinctions necessary for the mind to think about the world and the Divine.

4 November 1935

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You say [*in the letter of 26 October 1935, pp. 700–701*], “Aesthetically, the delight takes the appearance of Rasa and the enjoyment of this Rasa is the mind's and the vital's reaction to the perception of beauty.” I find it hard to understand how beauty, Rasa and delight are connected with one another.

That can hardly be realised except by experience of Ananda. Ananda is not ordinary mental or vital delight in things. Rasa is the mind's understanding of beauty and pleasure in it accompanied usually by the vital's enjoyment of it (bhoga). Mental pleasure or vital enjoyment are not Ananda, but only derivations from the concealed universal Ananda of the Spirit in things.

7 November 1935

Universal Beauty and Ananda

There is a certain consciousness in which all things become full of beauty and Ananda — what is painful or ugly becomes an outward play, and becomes suffused with the beauty and Ananda behind. It is specially the Overmind consciousness of things — although it can be felt from time to time on the other planes also. A great equality and the view of the Divine everywhere is necessary for this to come fully.

10 March 1934

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As you say, there is a truth behind Tagore's statement.¹ There is such a thing as a universal Ananda and a universal beauty and the vision of it comes from an intensity of sight which sees what is hidden and more than the form — it is a sort of *viśvarasa* such as the Universal Spirit may have had in creating things. To this intensity of sight a thing that is ugly becomes beautiful by its fitness for expressing the significance, the *guna*, the *rasa* which it was meant to embody. But I doubt how far one can make an aesthetic canon upon this foundation. It is so far true that an artist can out of a thing that is ugly, repellent, distorted create a form of aesthetic power, intensity, revelatory force. The murder of Duncan is certainly not an act of beauty, but Shakespeare can use it to make a great artistic masterpiece. But we cannot go so far as to say that the intensity of an ugly thing makes it beautiful. It is the principle of a certain kind of modern caricature to make a face intensely ugly so as to bring out some side of the character more

¹ *It is not known to what "statement" Sri Aurobindo is referring here. — Ed.*

intensely by a hideous exaggeration of lines. In doing that it may be successful, but the intensity of the ugliness it creates does not make the caricature a thing of beauty; it serves its purpose, that is all. So too ugliness in painting must remain ugly, even if it gets out of itself a sense of vital force or expressiveness which makes it preferable in the eyes of some to real beauty. All that hits you in the midriff violently and gives you a sense of intense living is not necessarily a work of art or a thing of beauty. I am answering of course on the lines of your letter. I do not know what Tagore had precisely in view in thus defining beauty. 3 November 1936

Beauty and Truth

Is it not true that Beauty and Truth are always one — wherever there is Beauty there is Truth too?

In beauty there is the truth of beauty. What do you mean by Truth? There are truths of various kinds and they are not all beautiful. 10 September 1933

The Good and the Beautiful

In one of his recent essays, Rabindranath Tagore says that goodness and beauty are so intimately correlated that they are always found together. “The good is necessarily beautiful,” he says, and “Beauty is the picture of the good; goodness is the reality behind beauty.”

I can't say that I understand these epigrammatic sentences. What is meant by good? what is meant by beauty? The divine Good is no doubt necessarily beautiful, because on a higher plane good and beauty and all else that is divine in origin meet, coalesce, harmonise. But what men call good is often ugly or drab or unattractive. Human beauty is not always the picture of the good, it is sometimes the mask of evil — the reality behind that mask is not always goodness. These things are obvious, but probably Rabindranath meant good and beauty in their higher aspects or their essence. 9 September 1937

Experience of Beauty

In a recent poem, Harin makes the following observation on Beauty:

Beauty is not an attitude of sense
Nor an inherent something everywhere,
But keen reality of experience
Of which even beauty is all unaware,
Adding to it a living truth; intense
And ever living, that were else, not there.

How far is it correct to say that Beauty has no objective existence in itself and that it consists only of the subjective experience of the observer?

All things are creations of the Universal Consciousness, Beauty also. The “experience” of the individual is his response or his awakening to the beauty which the Universal Consciousness has placed in things; that beauty is not created by the individual consciousness. The philosophy of these lines is not at all clear. It says that the experience of beauty is a living truth added to beauty, a truth of which beauty is unaware. But if beauty is only the experience itself, then the experience constitutes beauty, it does not add anything to beauty; for such addition would only be possible if beauty already existed in itself apart from the experience. What is meant by saying that beauty is unaware of the experience which creates it? The passage makes sense only if we suppose it to mean that beauty is a “reality” already existing apart from the experience, but unconscious of itself and the consciousness of experience is therefore a living truth added to the unconscious reality, something which brings into it consciousness and life.

6 January 1937

Appreciation of Beauty

The Right Way of Appreciating Beauty

That is the right consciousness, not to desire or to be attached to the possession of anything for oneself, but to take the universal beauty etc. for a spiritual selfless Ananda. 6 November 1933

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There is nothing harmful in the thing [*aspiration for beauty*] itself — on the contrary to awake to the universal beauty and refinement of the Mahalakshmi force is good. It is not an expression of greed or lust — only into these things a perversion can always come if one allows it, as into the Mahakali experience there may come rajasic anger and violence, so here there may come vital passion for possession and enjoyment. One must look at the beauty as the artist does without desire of possession or vital enjoyment of the lower kind. 8 October 1933

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Is it possible to get rid of vital impurities without getting rid of vital enjoyment?

How can that be done? The enjoyment you speak of is vital-physical, while beauty has to be enjoyed with the aesthetic sense — either human or divinised. 6 April 1933

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It is usually a good rule for other inward things beside the appreciation of the beauty of Nature — to keep it for oneself or else to share it only with those who have the same sense or the same experience. 15 March 1934

Beauty in Women

In regard to beauty in women, is there something inherent in the body that we call beautiful, a well-formed shape, physiognomy, harmony of movements, etc. It seems to most men it is colour + skin + physiognomy. But there are some women who do not have these in the body and yet are attractive. Is it something in their vital that gives them this beauty?

It is something vital in some cases, something psychic in others that gives a beauty which appears in the body but is not beauty of shape, colour or texture.

Often the vital and mental character of persons who have physical beauty is not good, sometimes it is even repulsive. Many would refuse to recognise it as beautiful.

If it is vital in its origin, it need not come from beauty of mind or character; it is something in the life-force which may go with a good character but also with a bad one.

Indians hardly appreciate the beauty of the Chinese or Japanese; like Europeans, they cannot appreciate beauty in Negroes. Many Asiatics could not appreciate the beauty of European models or actresses, who are so lacking in modesty according to their conceptions.

Modesty is not part of physical beauty, that is a mental-vital element. As for physical beauty, different races have different conceptions. Indians and Europeans like curves, Chinese detest them in a woman.

An intellectual would find beauty only in an intellectual woman; an emotional person would call a woman beautiful only if she has refined tender feelings; for a Gandhian a woman would be beautiful only if she spins eight hours a day or works for Harijans.

That has nothing to do with beauty in the ordinary sense as it is beauty of intellect or beauty of character or beauty of spinning and Harijanising.

Perhaps at a certain stage of psychic development one could look at human beauty as one looks at beauty in cats or dogs — recognising the beauty without any attraction.

One can recognise and feel without any desire of possession or sexual feeling etc. That is how the artists look at beauty — they delight in it for its own sake.

Supposing people developed the faculty of seeing the layers below the skin, would not their whole conception of beauty crumble down?

Yes, probably, unless the mind reconstructed a new idea of it.

Does not the conception of beauty differ according to race, temperament and level of consciousness?

Yes.

Are not attractiveness and beauty different?

Yes.

Is there nothing constant called “beauty”?

There are two kinds of beauty. There is that universal beauty which is seen by the inner eye, heard by the inner ear etc. — but the individual consciousness responds to some forms, not to others, according to its own mental, vital and physical reactions. There is also the aesthetic beauty which depends on a particular standard of harmony, but different race or individual consciousnesses form different standards of aesthetic harmony.

18 October 1935

Physical Beauty and Sex-Sensation

Why should the pure sense of beauty have been so distorted by human beings as to be turned into desire for touch or sex?

It is part of the general degradation which things divine have

been subjected to in the evolution out of the material Inconscience under the pressure of the Powers of the Ignorance.

Are there people who have not been affected by this vital impurity and who appreciate beauty in a subtle aesthetic way only?

Yes, certainly. Artists who have trained their mind to a purely aesthetic look at beauty and beautiful things — for one instance. There are many others also, who have a sufficiently developed refinement of the aesthetic sense not to associate it with the crude vital wish for possession, enjoyment or sensual contact.

6 April 1933

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The aesthetic and impersonal vision of things can develop into the sight of the Divine Beauty everywhere which is in its nature entirely pure.

19 April 1933

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What is the difference between the artistic look and the vital look?

In the artistic look there is only the perception of beauty and the joy of it because it exists and one has seen and felt it. There is no desire to possess or enjoy in the vital way.

4 August 1933

Section Four

Literature, Art, Music and the Practice of Yoga

Literature and Yoga

Poetry and Sadhana

Can one gain as much profit (I mean spiritually) from writing poems, etc. as from devoting one's time to sadhana — meditation, etc. In other words, can literary activity be taken as part of one's sadhana?

Any activity can be taken as part of the sadhana if it is offered to the Divine or done with the consciousness or faith that it is done by the Divine Power. That is the important point.

29 March 1934

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It is obvious that poetry cannot be a substitute for sadhana; it can be an accompaniment only. If there is a feeling (of devotion, surrender etc.), it can express and confirm it; if there is an experience, it can express and strengthen the force of experience. As reading of books like the Upanishads or Gita or singing of devotional songs can help, especially at one stage or another, so this can help also. Also it opens a passage between the exterior consciousness and the inner mind or vital. But if one stops at that, then nothing much is gained. Sadhana must be the main thing and sadhana means the purification of the nature, the consecration of the being, the opening of the psychic and the inner mind and vital, the contact and presence of the Divine, the realisation of the Divine in all things, surrender, devotion, the widening of the consciousness into the cosmic Consciousness, the Self one in all, the psychic and the spiritual transformation of the nature. If these things are neglected and only poetry and mental development and social contacts occupy all the time, then that is not sadhana. Also the poetry must be written in the true spirit, not for fame or self-satisfaction, but as a means of contact

with the Divine through aspiration or of the expression of one's own inner being, as it was written formerly by those who left behind them so much devotional and spiritual poetry in India; it does not help if it is written only in the spirit of the Western artist or *littérateur*. Even works or meditation cannot succeed unless they are done in the right spirit of consecration and spiritual aspiration gathering up the whole being and dominating all else. It is the lack of this gathering up of the whole life and nature and turning it towards the one aim, which is the defect in so many here, that lowers the atmosphere and stands in the way of what is being done by myself and the Mother. 19 May 1938

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What I wrote to you about poetry was an entirely general answer to the question of the relation of poetry to sadhana. I wrote how poetry could be part of sadhana and under what conditions, what were its limitations and also that it could not be a substitute for sadhana. I made no personal application; I have not said or suggested anywhere that the ideas or bhakti expressed in your poetry were humbug or hypocrisy and I have not said or suggested anywhere that all our labour on you had been wasted and gone for nothing. These absurd ideas, like all the rest, are imaginations and inventions of the vital ego foisted by it on your mind in order to justify its pressure on you to leave Pondicherry and the Yoga.

I understood from what you had written and said before that you wanted to concentrate altogether on the sadhana — to do what I call “the gathering up of the *whole* life and nature and turning it towards the one aim”, and I wrote that the lack of this was the defect of the majority of the sadhaks here. What I wrote implied therefore an approval of your resolution. No doubt, it implied also that you had not yet made this total gathering up and turning; if you had, there would have been no need of this resolution of yours and no room for it. If your whole life and every part of your being has already been gathered up and entirely consecrated to the Divine, then you are on the perfect way and there is obviously no need of any change in your way

of life or your sadhana. But this can be said of very few in the Ashram. But that does not mean that all the people in the Ashram except a few are insincere and that all our work on them has been thrown away. What it means is that for our work to be fully done, for the decisive realisations and the complete inner and outer change, the entire gathering up and turning of the whole life and nature is indispensable and that if it is only partially done, it is a defect in the sadhana and stands in the way of a full working and decisive and total change of the consciousness. If your whole vital nature and all the movements of your outer life had been already gathered up and turned towards the Divine alone without any other aim or interest, how is it that this vital revolt came about? And how is it that it whirls furiously around such things as the refusal of an easy chair or an almirah or of a special room which the Mother has reserved for another purpose? Or around the gossip of sadhaks and what this one may have said or that one may have said or the attitude of sadhaks towards you? It is evident that the part of your vital which was concerned with these outward things or with the outward contacts with others was not yet turned solely towards the one aim, that it was still interested and affected by these things which have nothing to do with the realisation of the Divine or with Yoga.

It is quite true that when you first came, the Mother was not in favour of your staying and taking up the Yoga here, for you had then a very strong obscurity and impurity in your vital nature and this could easily make the Yoga too difficult for you and create serious trouble. When however you persisted in staying, we gave you your opportunity as we had done in similar cases before. For it is always possible for the psychic being to prevail, if it is determined to do so, over the difficulties of the vital nature, even though it may mean severe inner struggles for a time. This concession was justified by certain results; you opened in a remarkable way into the inner being by the poetic aspiration and you had experiences which strengthened the psychic call and created a psychic and mental basis for your sadhana. Even you were able to throw out from the vital the sexual obsession which

had been one of the chief difficulties there.¹

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It won't do to put excessive and sweeping constructions on what I write, otherwise it is easy to misunderstand its real significance. I said that there was no reason why poetry *of a spiritual character* (not any poetry like Verlaine's or Swinburne's or Baudelaire's) should bring *no realisation at all*. This did not mean that poetry was a major means of realisation of the Divine. I did not say that it would lead us to the Divine or that anyone had achieved the Divine through poetry or that poetry by itself can lead us straight into the sanctuary. Obviously if such exaggerations are put into my words, they become absurd and untenable.

My statement is perfectly clear and there is nothing in it against reason or common sense. The Word has power — even the ordinary written word has a power. If it is an inspired word it has still more power. What kind of power or power for what depends on the nature of the inspiration and the theme and the part of the being it touches. If it is the Word itself, — as in certain utterances of the great Scriptures — Veda, Upanishads, Gita, — it may well have a power to awaken a spiritual impulse, an uplifting, even certain kinds of realisation. To say that it cannot contradicts spiritual experience.

The Vedic poets regarded their poetry as *mantras*, they were the vehicles of their own realisations and could become vehicles of realisation for others. Naturally, these mostly would be illuminations, not the settled and permanent realisation that is the goal of Yoga — but they could be steps on the way or at least lights on the way. Many have such illuminations, even initial realisations while meditating on verses of the Upanishads or the Gita. Anything that carries the Word, the Light in it, spoken or written, can light this fire within, open a sky, as it were, bring the effective vision of which the Word is the body. In all ages spiritual seekers have expressed their aspirations or their experiences in poetry or inspired language and it has helped themselves and

¹ Sri Aurobindo broke off here. He did not send this incomplete letter in this form. It is reproduced from his manuscripts. — Ed.

others. Therefore there is nothing absurd in my assigning to such poetry a spiritual or psychic value and effectiveness to poetry of a psychic or spiritual character. 24 December 1934

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I have always told you that you ought not to stop your poetry and similar activities. It is a mistake to do so out of asceticism or with the idea of *tapasyā*. One can stop these things when they drop of themselves, because one is in full experience and so interested in one's inner life that one has no energy to spare for the rest. Even then, there is no rule for giving up; for there is no reason why the poetry, etc., should not be a part of sadhana. The love of applause, of fame, the ego-feeling have to be given up, but that can be done without giving up the activity itself.

16 April 1935

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It is perfectly true that all human greatness and fame and achievement are nothing before the greatness of the Infinite and Eternal. There are two possible deductions from that, first, that all human action has to be renounced and one should go into a cave; the other is that one should grow out of ego so that the activities of the nature may become one day consciously an action of the Infinite and Eternal. But it does not follow that one must or can grow out of ego and the vital absorption at once and, if one does not, that proves incapacity for Yoga. I myself never gave up poetry or other creative human activities out of *tapasyā*; they fell into a subordinate position because the inner life became stronger and stronger slowly: nor did I really drop them, only I had so heavy a work laid upon me that I could not find time to go on. But it took me years and years to get the ego out of them or the vital absorption, but I never heard anybody say and it never occurred to me that that was a proof that I was not born for the Yoga. . . .

As to the born Yogi what I said was that there was a born Yogi in you, and I very explicitly based it on the personality that showed itself in your earlier experiences in a vivid way which no

one accustomed to the things of Yoga or having any knowledge about them could fail to recognise. But I did not mean that there was nothing in you which was not “born Yogic”. Everyone has many personalities in him and many of them are not Yogic at all in their propensities. But if one has the will to Yoga, the born Yogi prevails as soon as he gets a chance of manifesting himself through the crust of the mind and vital nature. Only, very often that takes time. One must be prepared to give the time.

16 April 1935

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Of course when you are writing poems or composing you are in contact with your inner being, that is why you feel so different then. The whole art of Yoga is to get that contact and get from it into the inner being itself, for so one can enter directly into and remain in all that is great and luminous and beautiful. Then one can try to establish them in this troublesome and defective outer shell of oneself and in the outer world also. 10 November 1934

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Literature and art are or can be first introductions to the inner being — the inner mind and vital; for it is from there that they come. And if one writes poems of bhakti, poems of divine seeking etc., or creates music of that kind, it means that there is a bhakta or seeker inside who is supporting himself by that self-expression. There is also the point of view behind Lele’s answer to me when I told him that I wanted to do Yoga but for work, for action, not for Sannyasa and Nirvana, — but after years of spiritual effort I had failed to find the way and it was for that I had asked to meet him. His first answer was, “It should be easy for you as you are a poet.” But it was not from any point of view like that that Nirod put his question and it was not from that point of view that I gave my answer. It was about some special character-making virtue that he seemed to attribute to literature. 18 November 1936

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I don't understand why Lele told you that because you are a poet, sadhana will be easy to you through poetry.

Because I told him I wanted to do Yoga in order to get a new inner Yogic consciousness for life and action, not for leaving life. So he said that. A poet writes from an inner source, not from the external mind, he is moved by inspiration to write, i.e. he writes what a greater Power writes through him. So the Yogi karmachari has to act from an inner source, to derive his thoughts and movements from that, to be inspired and impelled by a greater Power which acts through him. He never said that sadhana will be easy for me through poetry. Where is "through poetry" phrase? Poetry can be done as a part of sadhana and help the sadhana — but sadhana "through" poetry is a quite different matter.

23 May 1938

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If poetic progress meant a progress in the whole range of Yoga, Nishikanta would be a great Yogi by this time. The opening in poetry or any other part helps to prepare the general opening when it is done under the pressure of Yoga, but it is at first something special, like the opening of the subtle vision or subtle senses. It is the opening of a special capacity in the inner being.

8 August 1936

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I do not think you need be anxious about the poetry; the power is sure to re-express itself as soon as you are ready for a progress. It has probably stopped working temporarily because the pressure is now for the inner self-creation more than for the outer expression — I am speaking, of course, of your case in particular. The expression in poetry and other forms must be, for the Yogi, a flowing out from a growing self within and not merely a mental creation or an aesthetic pleasure. Like that the inner self grows and the poetic power will grow with it.

9 December 1931

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What you say about the spontaneous development of the capacity in the metre after a silent and inactive incubation of over two years, is quite true. But it is not amazing; it often happens and is perfectly natural to those who know the laws of the being by observation and experience. In the same way one suddenly finds oneself knowing more of a language or a subject after returning to it subsequent to a short interim without study, problems which had been abandoned as unsolvable solving themselves spontaneously and easily after sleep or when they are taken up again; knowledge or ideas coming up from within without reading or learning or hearing from others. Sudden efflorescences of capacity, intuitions, wellings up of all sorts of things point to the same inner power or inner working. It is what we mean when we speak of the word, knowledge or activity coming out of the silence, of a working behind the veil of which the outer mind is unconscious but which one day bears its results, of the inner manifesting itself in the outer. It makes at once true and practical what sounds only a theory to the uninitiated,—the strong distinction made by us between the inner being and the outer consciousness. It is how also unexpected Yogic capacity reveals itself, sometimes no doubt as a result of long and apparently fruitless effort, sometimes as a spontaneous outflowing of what was concealed there all the time or else as a response to a call which had been made but at the time and for long seemed to be without an answer.

22 February 1935

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I like very much both the feeling and the form of your poem. Of course when you are writing poems or composing you are in contact with your inner being, that is why you feel so different then. The whole art of Yoga is to get that contact and get from it into the inner being itself, for so one can enter directly into and remain in all that is great and luminous and beautiful. Then one can try to establish them in this troublesome and defective outer shell of oneself and in the outer world also.

20 November 1934

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This poetry, even if it does not lead to any realisation, — though there is no reason why it should not, since it is not mundane, — is yet a link with the inner being and expresses its ideal. That is its value for the sadhana. 25 December 1934

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The use of your writing is to keep you in touch with the inner source of inspiration and intuition, so as to wear thin the crude external crust in the consciousness and encourage the growth of the inner being. 24 July 1938

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What do you wish me to be, an artist, a literary man, or a poet?

A sadhak — all these things can be included in sadhana.

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Why is my mind so wretchedly limited, my soul such a feeble flame?

It is not the question, for this is not a question of personal capacity but of the development of the receptivity and for that the sole thing necessary is an entire or at least a dominant will to receive. What you call your mind and your soul are only a small surface part of you, not your whole being. Personal capacity belongs to the temporary surface personality which you have put forward in this life and which is mutable, is already changing and can change much farther — e.g. the poems you are writing are certainly beyond what was your original capacity — they belong to a range of experience to the Word of which you have opened by a development beyond your old mental self — a farther development beyond not only your old mental self but also your old vital self is needed to get the concrete realisation of that range of experience.

What is standing in the way is something that is still attached to the limitations of the old personality and hesitates to take the plunge because by doing so it may lose these cherished

limitations. It stands back in apprehension from the plunge because it is afraid of being taken out of its depths — but unless one is taken out of the very shallow depth of this small part of the self, how can one get into the Infinite at all? Furthermore, there is no real danger in finding oneself in the Infinite, it is a place of greater safety and greater riches, not less; but this something in you does not like the prospect because it has to merge itself into a larger self-existence. You asked the Mother to press on you the lighting of the fire within and she has been doing so, but this is standing back with the feeling “Oh Lord! what will become of me if this flame gets lit.” You must get rid of this clinging to the past self and life, then you can have a fire which will not be feeble. You have not fallen between two stools, — you are hesitating between two consciousnesses, the old and the new, the small and the great, that is all.

As for the poetry, well — you have developed up to a point at which your work is of a very rare and unique quality — in no way inferior to that of the others of whom you speak, — the difficulty of intermittency of production is nothing, for all feel that except Nishikanta and Dilip who have no misgivings about their creative power. Yours rises probably from the fact that in order to have free command of the highest planes of poetry, you have to rise into them and not only open to the Word from them — it is therefore the same difficulty in another form. Otherwise, if you had the old self-satisfaction of which you draw so glowing a picture, you would have found your present poetry marvellous and gone on writing freely only oscillating between the different planes achieved and content to do so. This is not a proof of incapacity but of the will to greater things. Only that will must not be in the mind only but take full hold of the vital also and must be a will that what you write of shall be a part not only of thought but of life. Which comes back to what I have written above — get free from the obscure hesitation to open and let the force do its work.

One must either do that if one wants a rapid change or go

quietly and wait for the slower working from behind the veil to reduce and break the obstacle.

10 August 1937

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There is nothing definite that I can tell you. Mother finds no conscious opposition in your mind or will to surrender and transformation. But probably the difficulty lies in the vital (not mind) of the artist (the poet, painter etc. in you), because the vital of the artist is always accustomed to its independence, to follow its own way, to make and live in its own world and pursue the impulses of its nature. If that element changes then probably surrender and transformation could be more rapid, but it is not always easy for it to change at once, it usually goes by a gradual and almost unobserved change.

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I hesitate to write in this high tone: "I am the Light of the One," etc. It sounds too high and grand. Some don't like this tone at all. Dilip is one. They call it insincere. Is there no justification for a poet-sadhak to use this tone?

If such poems are put as a claim, or vaunted as a personal experience of Yoga, they may be objected to on that ground. But a poet is not bound to confine himself to his personal experience. A poet writes from inspiration or from imagination or vision. Milton did not need to go to Heaven or Hell or the Garden of Eden before he wrote *Paradise Lost*. Are all Dilip's bhakti poems an exact transcription of his inner state? If so, he must be a wonderful Yogi and bhakta.

14 April 1938

Poetry, Peace and Ananda

I seek for Ananda, it eludes me — Love, Peace are nowhere. If poetry doesn't give them, what's the use?

Poetry does not give love and peace, it gives Ananda, intense but not wide or lasting.

You will say that it is my mind that obstructs by its struggle.

Your mind has obstructed the free flow of the poetry — but what it has obstructed more is the real peace and Ananda that is “deep, great and wide”. A quiet mind turned towards the *ভূমি* is what you need. 28 July 1936

Literary Activity and Sadhana

I have no hesitation at all and feel very glad when I tell you of my aspiration to do the sadhana through literary activity.

Literary activity can be made a part of sadhana like other things, but sadhana through literary activity is a phrase whose meaning is not very clear. 29 June 1937

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What is the use of literature if the nature stays just the same?

Good heavens! where did you get this idea that literature can transform people? Literary people are often the most impossible on the face of the earth. 10 November 1936

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We may have progressed in literature, but the outer human nature remains almost the same.

Outer human nature can only change either by an intense psychic development or a strong and all-pervading influence from above. It is the inner being that has to change first — a change which is not always visible outside. That has nothing to do with the development of the faculties which is another side of the personality. That is another question altogether. But such sadhana means a slow laborious work of self-change in most cases, so why not sing on the way? 11 November 1936

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To be a literary man is not a spiritual aim; but to use literature as a means of spiritual expression is another matter. Even to

make expression a vehicle of a superior power helps to open the consciousness. The harmonising rests on that principle.

19 September 1936

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Literature like everything else can be made an instrumentation for the Divine Life. It can be made of some spiritual importance if it is taken up with that aim and, even so, it cannot have that importance for everybody. In ordinary life no particular pursuit or study can be imposed as necessary for everybody; it cannot be positively necessary for everybody to have a mastery of English literature or to be a reader of poetry or a scientist or acquainted with all the sciences (or encyclopaedia of knowledge). What is important is to have an instrument of knowledge that will apply itself accurately, calmly, perfectly to all that it has to handle.

29 December 1934

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Literature, poetry, science and other studies can be a preparation of the consciousness for life. When one does Yoga they can become part of the sadhana only if done for the Divine or taken up by the Divine Force, but then one should not want to be a poet for the sake of being a poet only, or for fame, applause, etc.

16 April 1935

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Has my writing any spiritual value?

No present value spiritually — it may have a mental value. It is the same with the work — it has a value of moral training, discipline, obedience, acceptance of work for the Mother. The spiritual value and result come afterwards when the consciousness in the vital opens upward. So with the mental work. It is a preparation. If you cannot yet do it with the true spiritual consciousness, it, the work as well as the mental occupation, must be done with the right mental or vital will in it.

14 May 1934

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Well, of course the first business of Yoga is not to make geniuses at all, but to make spiritual men — but Yoga can do the other thing also. 11 November 1934

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Am I right in feeling that the writing is doing me some good at present?

Yes, as it keeps you in the right frame of mind without the sinking into *tamas* and nervous troubles. 6 September 1934

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There is no incompatibility between spirituality and creative activity — they can be united.

Creative Activity Subordinate to One's Spiritual Life

Nirod, Nolini and Sahana are all wrong in laying down a rule of that kind for my conduct. I do not base my action on mental rules which have to be applied to every case. It is a still greater error to suppose that because I (or the Mother) do something in the case of one person or another, we are bound to do it for everybody and to complain of our not doing it as “making a difference”. All that belongs to the ignorance and clamour of the vital egoistic nature and has nothing to do with spiritual life.

I cannot allow myself to be drawn back into a preoccupation with the poetry of the *sadhaks*. I have much more serious things to deal with on which depends the whole work and Yoga. I have ceased to deal with Bengali poetry — if any is sent, which is no longer done, I send it back with or without a word of comment. But neither can I spend time in teaching beginners how to write English verse. Nirod's case is one in which for special reasons I have made an exception, nor is he any more a beginner. Neither on his own nor on Romen's poems have I need to spend a long time. Even so, I do it only because I have a few moments to dispose of; if they claimed it as a right, I would refuse.

The spiritual life and one's own inner psychic and spiritual

change should be the first preoccupation of a sadhak — poetry or painting is something quite subordinate and even then it should be done not to be a great poet or artist but as a help to the inner sadhana. It is time that everyone got away from the vital view of things to the psychic and spiritual on which alone can stand Yoga and the spiritual life.

Fiction-Writing and Sadhana

Will it do any harm to my sadhana if I attempt stories or a novel?

You can try, if you like. The difficulty is that the subject matter of a novel belongs mostly to the outer consciousness, so that a lowering or externalising can easily come. This apart from the difficulty of keeping the inner poise when putting the mind into outer work. If you could get your established peace within, then it would be possible to do any work without disturbing or lowering the consciousness.

21 August 1934

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Sahana once told me that she gave up writing because you thought it was doing harm to her sadhana.

What is necessary for one, need not be necessary for another.

6 September 1934

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We remembered that Sahana had said you stopped her writing a novel, because her mind or consciousness was being externalised.

That is when one is already in a steady stream of spiritual experience, living partly at least in an inner realisation, while the rest of the being is not yet in it. Writing a novel means then going out of the inner state of experience and stimulating the rest of the nature. If the writing is something in harmony with the inner consciousness, then there would be no necessity for one to stop. On the other hand if one has attained the full consciousness in

both the inner and the outer nature then also one could write anything one is moved by that consciousness to write, whatever it might be. In certain cases this rule may not hold. One may be strong enough to do all kinds of outward things without affecting the inner state of experience. But ordinarily this can be done freely only in the earlier stages before one is drawn inwards and kept there or in the later stages when one is fully conscious spiritually in the outer being also. It is simply a question of “spiritual tactics” not a hard and fast rule for all in all states and stages.

Why did Sahana find it necessary to stop?

Because she was losing hold of her inner experience and thinking only of her novel.

When I was writing that novel or even while busy with poems, I had often a curious experience. I used to feel an inclination to read a passage from Sri Aurobindo’s *Essays on the Gita*. . . . There I felt a depth which moved and inspired me and I could then sit down to write my novel. . . . What has a novel to do with the Gita or with Truth Supramental?

There is obviously nothing on their surface connecting the two. It may have been that the literary quality of the *Essays* and its depth of thought satisfied some ideal in your temperament and therefore put you into touch with the creative force behind you. A poet for instance can feel himself stimulated enough to creation after reading Homer, yet his own work may be quite different, not epic at all and dealing with quite another order of ideas and things. It is only that the reading stimulates his inner being to create, but according to its own quite different way and purpose.

26 October 1935

Reading and Sadhana

If I intend to take literature as a work to be done for sadhana, I must read all good stories, novels, poems, dramas etc., must I not?

No rule can be made, it differs with different people.

I felt that it will be a mistake to give up all that and to want to meditate all the time or to do only such things which do not hinder me from an inner concentration on you. I felt that all our faculties and capacities have to be given to you.

It is a question of the right consciousness — no unvarying mental rule can be made for these things.

All meditation and no work is not good and helpful to sadhana, I have heard; I don't know if it is true.

Writing and reading absorb the mind and fill it with images and influences; if the images and influences are not of the right kind they naturally turn one away from the true consciousness. It is only if one has the true consciousness well established already that one can read or write anything whatever without losing it or without any other harm.

17 May 1934

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To acquire a good style in prose I am reading any and every book in Bengali.

Any and every! That is more likely to spoil the style.

But I don't want to lose the peace and the joy I am in now. If you think that over-reading or reading anything will lower the consciousness I shall lessen the activity.

I do not know whether the peace and joy will stand over-reading. It may if it is very strong.

8 June 1934

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A "literary man" is one who loves literature and literary activity for their own separate sake. A Yogi who writes is not a literary man for he writes only what the inner Will and Word wants him to express. He is a channel and an instrument of something greater than his own literary personality.

Of course the literary man and the intellectual love reading — books are their mind's food. But writing is another matter. There are plenty of people who never write a word in the literary way, but are enormous readers. One reads for ideas, for knowledge, for the stimulation of the mind by all that the world has thought or is thinking.

Poetry, even perhaps all perfect expression of whatever kind, comes by inspiration; reading helps only to acquire for the outer instrument the full possession of a language or to get the technique of literary expression. Afterwards one develops one's own use of the language, one's own style, one's own technique. Reading and painstaking labour are very good for the literary man, but even for him they are not the cause of his good writing, only an aid to it. The cause is within himself.

If one lives in the inner consciousness, if the inner mind or higher mind become dynamic, all the ideas in the world and all sorts of knowledge come crowding in from within or from above; there is little or no need of outside food any longer. At most reading can be then an utility for keeping oneself informed of what is happening in the world — but not as food or one's own seeing of the world and Truth and things. One becomes an independent Mind in communion with the cosmic Thinker. It is a decade or two that I have stopped all but the most casual reading. Poetry too need no longer depend on any outer stimulus; the power of poetical and perfect expression can of itself increase tenfold; what was written with some difficulty, often great difficulty, comes with ease. There is a heightening of the consciousness and the greater inspiration that comes from the heightening.

11 September 1934

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Reading and study though they can be useful for preparing the mind, are not themselves the best means of entering the Yoga. It is self-dedication from within that is the means. It is with the consciousness of the Mother that you must unite, a sincere self-consecration in the mind and heart and the Will is the means for it. The work given by the Mother is always meant as field

for that self-consecration, it has to be done as an offering to her so that through the self-offering one may come to feel her force acting and her presence. 27 February 1935

*

I do not think you should stop reading so long as the reading itself does not, as a passion, fall away from the mind; that happens when a higher order of consciousness and experiences begins within the being. Nor is it good to force yourself too much to do only the one work of painting. Such compulsion of the mind and vital tends usually either to be unsuccessful and make them more restless or else to create some kind of dullness and inertia.

For the work simply aspire for the Force to use you, put yourself inwardly in relation with the Mother when doing it and make it your aim to be the instrument for the expression of beauty without regard to personal fame or the praise and blame of others. 8 October 1936

Reading and Real Knowledge

Does not the knowledge of yoga come by itself?

Yes. The real knowledge comes of itself from within, by the touch of the Divine.

If so, then isn't it better to have only that knowledge and not the knowledge obtained by reading?

Reading can be only a momentary help to prepare the mind. But the real knowledge does not come by reading. Some preparation for the inner knowledge may be helpful — but the mind should not be too superficially active or seek to know only for curiosity's sake. 6 July 1933

Novel-Reading and Sadhana

Reading novels is always distracting if you are deep in sadhana.
It is better to avoid it now. 12 May 1933

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If novels touch the lower vital or raise it, they ought not to be read by the sadhak. One can read them only if one can look at them from the literary point of view as a picture of human life and nature which one can observe, as the Yogi looks at life itself, without being involved in it or having any reaction.

28 March 1936

Religious and Secular Literature

How is it that sometimes secular literature moves one more, and gives a greater light and illumination than religious literature?

Religious literature inspires only the religious-minded, — and most religious literature, apart from the comparatively few great books, is poor stuff. Secular literature either appeals to the idealistic mind or to the emotions or to the aesthetic element in us, and all that has a much easier and more common appeal. As for spiritual light, it is another thing altogether. Spirituality is other than mental idealism and other than religion.

In literary expression, I think, it is the inner man that counts. But that would be tantamount to saying that an insincere man can't write things which will move readers with a genuine and concrete something.

Plenty of insincere men have written inspiring things. That is because something in them felt it, though they could not carry it out in life, and that something was used by a greater power behind. Very often in his art, in his writings, the higher part of a man comes out, while the lower dominates his life.

18 October 1935

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How is it that one person reads sacred books, yet is very far from the Divine, while another reads the most stupid so-called literary productions and remains in contact with the Divine?

It is not reading that brings the contact, it is the will and aspiration in the being that bring it. 11 August 1933

Development of the Mind and Sadhana

The development of the mind is a useful preliminary for the sadhak; it can also be pursued along with the sadhana on condition that it is not given too big a place and does not interfere with the one important thing, the sadhana itself. 1933

Language-Study and Yoga

Learning languages makes the mind active. Does not the Yoga mean to keep the mind quiet and turn it always to the Divine?

Do you mean to say that in order to have quietness of the mind one must do nothing? Then neither the Mother nor I nor anyone else here has a quiet mind. 6 April 1937

*

What is the need for so many here to learn French? Are you preparing them for giving lectures or opening centres in France or French-knowing countries?

Are life and mind to be governed only by material utility or outward practicality? Spiritual life would then be inferior even to ordinary mental life where people learn for the sake of acquiring knowledge and culturing the mind and not only for the sake of some outward utility. 24 March 1937

Reading Newspapers and Yoga

Is it very important in our sadhana to give up reading newspapers? I find that almost all the sadhaks including some of the best ones like Anilbaran read them. Moreover, since you also

read, there is an excuse that it is useful to read newspapers, otherwise one remains uninformed and blank.

These things depend on oneself and one's own conditions — there can be no general rule. It is true I read newspapers, but Mother never does unless her attention is called to a particular item. I dare say if Anilbaran stopped reading papers for a year, it might be very good for him. One has to see what is one's necessity for the sadhana. If the newspapers disperse the mind or externalise the consciousness too much, they should be avoided. If on the other hand one is dawdling over the sadhana and having no particular inner endeavour one can read newspapers — it is no worse than anything else. On the other hand if the newspapers do not affect the formed or forming inner consciousness in any way (by dispersion, lowering, externalisation etc.) one can read them. I read the newspapers mainly because I have to see what events are happening which might any day have an effect on my work etc. I don't read for the interest of reading. 9 July 1936

Painting, Music, Dance and Yoga

Yoga and the Arts

In the new creation would there not be great musicians, painters, poets, athletes etc. created from the Ashram?

All kinds that are needed for the work or the manifestation would, I suppose, come. 24 May 1933

Painting and Sadhana

Painting also is sadhana; so it is perfectly possible to make them one. It is a matter of dedicating the painting and feeling the force that makes you paint as the Mother's force. 4 September 1935

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Of course everybody is here for Yoga and not for painting. Painting or any other activity has to be made here a part of Yoga and cannot be pursued for its own sake. If it stands insuperably in the way, then it has to be given up; but there is no reason why it should if it be pursued in the proper spirit, as a field or aid for spiritual growth, or as a work done for the Mother.

18 January 1936

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You have painting and music in you and if you apply yourself they will develop in you. Only it is best to do it as an instrument of the Mother and as an offering to her, and not allow any personal desire for fame or appreciation by others or any personal pride to be the motives—for it is that that gives trouble. All work done as an offering is a great help and does not give trouble.

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Is it really possible to get anything simply by faith and surrender? I heard Mother said to Sanjiban that if one wants to be an artist one must work hard. What is true of art, is true of everything, isn't it?

For heaven's sake, don't be so universal in your rules. Art means a technique (especially painting, sculpture, etc., music also, poetry less), and technique has to be developed. But that does not mean that there is nothing that can come by simply faith and surrender.

6 April 1935

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Let Thy grace abide with me so that I may keep the right attitude towards Thee at the time of painting. Often I feel a vital atmosphere around me and a sort of vital excitement in me.

What do you mean by vital excitement? There is an intensity and enthusiasm of the vital without which it would be difficult to do any poem, picture or music of a creative kind. That intensity is not harmful.

7 October 1933

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The Mother finds the pictures of Tagore hideous and monstrous, she would not dignify them with the name of art. But it is not because they depart from tradition. The Mother does not believe in tradition — she considers that Art should always develop new forms — but still these must be according to a truth of Beauty which is universal and eternal — something of the Divine.

8 December 1933

Music and Sadhana

I quite understood your main point to which I shall answer, but there were many side-issues which obscure the main one in your letter and I took the occasion to try to get rid of one of them at once. For the moment I am answering only to your question about the music. Let me say at once that all of you seem to have too great an aptitude for making drastic conclusions on the

strength of very minor facts. It is always perilous to take two or three small facts, put them together and build upon them a big inference. It becomes still more dangerous when you emphasise minor facts and set aside or belittle the meaning of the main ones. In this case the main facts are (1) that the Mother has loved music all her life and found it a key to spiritual experience, (2) that she has given all encouragement to your music in special and to the music of others also. She has also made clear the relation of Art and Beauty with Yoga. It is therefore rather extraordinary that anyone should think she only tolerates music here and considers it inconsistent with Yoga. It is perfectly true that Music or Art are not either the first or the only thing in life for her, — any more than Poetry or Literature are with me, — the Divine, the divine consciousness, the discovery of the conditions for a divine life are and must be our one concern, with Art, Poetry or Music as parts or means only of the divine life or expression of the Divine Truth and the Divine Beauty. That does not mean that they are only “tolerated”, but that they are put in their right place.

Then the minor facts and their significance. The Mother limited the concerts to one hour because that was the utmost she could give to them in the afternoons for which they are fixed and that meant checking a very natural tendency to spread over a greater length of time. On this occasion she first wanted it to be a half an hour affair because the more important occasion was to be reserved for November. But it was found that certain very undesirable psychological movements were tending to appear which would turn the occasion not into a part of the preparation for true expression or a part of the Yoga, but an occasion for the exhibition of a very mundane, almost professional egoism, vanity, rivalry, anger and spite at one’s talent being “neglected” etc. It was decided that this anti-Yogic stuff should not be allowed to mix with the atmosphere of the 24th November and therefore the Sunday concert could be lengthened out and the November one dropped — and this was what was written to Venkataraman. It is not an objection to music that the decision represented, but an objection to bringing into music here these very undivine and unyogic and, if human, yet not very reputable human elements

and movements. The Mother said nothing to you about it because these things did not directly concern *you* and she did not besides care to make the causes of the change public.

Let us have music by all means; but also more rhythm and harmony in the atmosphere! 29 October 1932

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I don't think I can say anything about your non-appreciation of [X's] singing or rather your failure to feel it, for this is a matter of personality and its responses. [X] has put me the question as coming from you and I have made some kind of answer. His idea is that you have no appreciation of his music from the aesthetic point of view because it is new in its lines and you cling conservatively to the traditional music. If that is so, it is obviously a mental and aesthetic limitation. But what you say is that you admit his genius and the qualities of his singing — only you don't feel what you seek in his music. That is a different matter. Your interpretation may then be the right one. In any case what is important for you is to develop your inner realisation till it can take up all the feeling and outer action — whether for your own singing or for a new appreciation of music in general that is the one line opened to you and the one thing needful. 8 September 1937

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I meant exactly the same thing as when I wrote to you that the “famous singer” must disappear and the “inner singer” take her place. “The old psychological lines” means the mental and vital aesthetic source of the singing, the desire of fame or success, singing for an audience — the singing must come from the soul within and it must be for the Divine.

What I wrote about the conservative clinging to traditional music was in answer to Dilip's supposition about the source of your non-appreciation. I said if it were that it would be a mental limitation. I had written before that I gathered from what you had written that it was not that but a temperamental difference

or a seeking for another vibration than what his music could give. As to the newness of Dilip's music and how far he has been successful, I am not a musical expert and cannot pronounce. It was the Mother who gave him the advice and impulse to create something new. If Tagore's most recent verdict is sincere, he has succeeded in doing it, since Tagore speaks of him as a creator in music.

A new creation need not be on one line only, each creator follows his own line, otherwise he would be more of an imitator than a creator. There are many who receive inspiration from me in poetry but they do not all write on the same line. Nishikanta's poetry is different from Dilip's, Nirod's from Amal's.

As for your singing, I was not speaking of any new creation from the aesthetic point of view, but of the spiritual change — what form it takes must depend on what you find *within* you when the deeper basis is there.

I do not see any necessity for giving up singing altogether. I only meant, — it is the logical conclusion from what I have written to you not now only but before, — that the inner change must be the first consideration and the rest must arise out of that. If singing to an audience pulls you out of the inner condition, then you could postpone that and sing for yourself and the Divine until you are able, even in facing an audience, to forget the audience. If you are troubled by failure or exalted by success, that also you must overcome.

10 September 1935

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If Sahana gives up music, — I presume it is only a temporary step — I suppose it must be for a reason personal to her sadhana. There is no incompatibility in principle between music and sadhana.

28 June 1931

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You can learn the song and sing — do it as Mother's work without desire, such as even the wish to sing before her — but simply as something to be done for her service.

Only you must not allow it to interfere with your painting

which is your main work — that in which you are making much progress. That you must go on doing every day.

7 December 1933

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Can I take up the esraj when my hands get tired from practising the sitar?

One instrument is enough. If you feel tired so soon, it may be that the physical takes no pleasure in it, and then you should not trouble to learn.

10 October 1932

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When I first took up the sitar, I could practise only for ten minutes without exhaustion, then went on to half-an-hour. But Dilip says if I can't do it for at least three or four hours a day, I should give it up.

What Dilip says is not untrue. It is hard work if you want really to learn and otherwise it is not much use.

It is only for myself when I am alone and tired of other things that I want music. I really want to learn one instrument. I hope you will not forbid my asking Nirod or someone else for help.

I don't think it will be very helpful to your sadhana; but if you want to ask, you can do so.

28 January 1933

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Yesterday suddenly I felt a great desire or impulse to sing. The music seemed to come or rather pushed out from inside me by an automatic force. Something was felt — very tangibly so — to be doing it as if I was a mere instrument in its hold. Since then I had tried again to do it, but it won't come.

It is no use trying — it comes or it does not come. One must be open for its coming, that is all.

9 April 1933

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It is absurd to say that you have narrowed or deteriorated because one no longer sings erotic songs. One is not narrowed if

one loses taste for jazz and can hear with real pleasure only the great masters or music of a high or exquisite quality. It is not deterioration when one rises from a lower to a higher plane of thinking, feeling or artistic self-expression. Can one say of the man who has grown out of childishness and no longer plays with nursery toys that he has narrowed and deteriorated by the change?

26 August 1933

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I often catch myself acting as the great composer, musician, *littérateur* and all that sort of rot.

Well, that is an almost universal human weakness, especially with artists, poets, musicians and the whole splendid tribe — I have known even great Yogis suffer from just a touch of it! If one can see mentally the humour of it, it will fall off in the end.

19 July 1943

Dance and Sadhana

Dance alone with rhythm and significance can express something of the occult or of the Divine as much as writing or poetry or art — why should it not and why should there be anything in it condemnable?

17 July 1933

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To feel the vibration and develop from it the rhythm of the dance is the right way to create something true; the other way, to understand with the mind and work out with the mind only or mainly, is the mental way; it is laborious and difficult and has not the same spontaneous inspiration.

28 April 1932

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After seeing Udayshankar dance, I asked him for instructions and he showed me some exercises. May I know whether it is desirable for me to continue?

Dancing is a private thing — we can't deal with it as part of the

Yoga. So it depends on your choice.

Can dancing not become part of the yoga, like poetry, music and painting?

If it is done in the right spirit, it can. But we answered like that because Udayshankar's coming brought only the vital side with it and dancing in its vital side is a personal affair and cannot be part of Yoga. It would only raise the vital turn in the consciousness. 15 October 1934

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I know nothing about Udayshankar or his qualities; but if he was calm himself, his coming certainly did not create calm in the Ashram but much unnecessary excitement. I do not quite see how Udayshankar is to be useful to the Ashram. The visits of celebrities are not the means by which the work of the Ashram can be helped. These are ideas that belong to the ordinary external consciousness in which the coming of famous So and So creates an exultation and a flutter. 5 October 1934

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Appendixes

APPENDIX I

The Problem of the Hexameter

The perfection of the hexameter is one of the unsolved problems of English prosody. Either the problem is insoluble, the noble rhythm so satisfying in Greek and Latin unsuited to the brief Saxon vocables — or else the secret of a successful measure has not yet been discovered. Even were the solution found, there are many obstacles in the way of its acceptance. Yet a new metrical movement is felt to be a necessity and half-unconsciously strained after by the modern mind in poetry. If one could be found that, without admitting too wide a licence, without breaking down the mould of metre in which poetry by a wise instinct has always sought to restrain herself, yet provided a freer scope and a fuller mould for the more subtle and complex emotions and the vaster conceptions in which we have begun to live, the change might mean a new life and energy for a great literature now too much overburdened and fettered by its past successes and triumphs. The present poem is an experiment in this direction. No doubt the definite entry of the hexameter among the ordinary forms of English prosody must wait until it is chosen by a supreme poetical genius or a master rhythmist. But meanwhile something may possibly be done by a careful attempt founded on a clear and definite conception of the difficulties to be solved and a consistent method in their solution.

The poems of Clough and Longfellow are, I think, the only serious essays in the hexameter in English literature. Many have dallied with the problem, from the strange experiments of Spenser to the insufficient but carefully reasoned attempts of Matthew Arnold. But it is only by a long and sustained effort like *Evangeline* or the *Bothie* that the solution can really come. Longfellow in this connexion can be safely neglected,

but Clough's work is of a different order. Occasionally he really grappled with his task and for a moment [conquered] [.....]¹. But it is Clough's defect that he is unable ordinarily to combine force with harmony. Either he produces verse of a rough energy, like the general type of hexameter used by him in the *Bothie*, or, as in the pentameter experiments in the *Amours de Voyage*, the breath of life and power is wanting in a harmonious shell of sound. Yet once or twice he has surmounted every difficulty. Especially is there one verse with the right Homeric movement in the *Bothie*, —

He like a god came leaving his ample Olympian chamber
which gave to my mind the key to the just use of the hexameter.

¹ *Manuscript damaged. Two or three words missing. — Ed.*

APPENDIX II

An Answer to a Criticism

Milford accepts, (incidentally, with special regard to the word *frosty* in Clough's line about the Cairngorm¹), the rule that two consonants after a short vowel make the short vowel long, even if they are outside the word and come in another word following it. To my mind this rule accepted and generally applied would amount in practice to an absurdity; it would result, not indeed in ordinary verse where quantity by itself has no metrical value, but in any attempt at quantitative metre, in eccentricities like the scansion of Bridges. I shall go on pronouncing the *y* of *frōstȳ* as short whether it has two consonants after it or only one or none; it remains *frōstȳ* whether it is a *frosty scalp* or *frosty top* or a frosty anything. In no case does the second syllable assume a length of sound equivalent to that of two long vowels. My hexameters are intended to be read naturally as one would read any English sentence; stress is given its full metrical value, long syllables also are given their full metrical value and not flattened out so as to assume a fictitious metrical brevity; short vowels even with two consonants after them are treated as short, because they have that value in any natural reading. But if you admit a short syllable to be long whenever there are two consonants after it, then Bridges' scansion is perfectly justified. Milford does not accept that conclusion; he says Bridges' scansion is an absurdity and I agree with him there. But he bases this on his idea that quantitative length does not count in English verse. It is intonation that makes the metre, he says, high tones or low tones — not longs and shorts; obviously, stress is a high tone of the greatest importance and to ignore it is fatal to any metrical theory or metrical treatment of the language —

¹ "Found amid granite-dust on the frosty scalp of the Cairn-Gorm", Bothie of Tober-Na-Vuolich, Part I. — Ed.

and so far I agree. But on that ground he refuses to discuss my idea of weight or dwelling of the voice or admit quantity or anything else but tone as determinative of the metre; he even declares that there can be no such thing as metrical length; the very idea is an error. Perhaps also that is the reason why he counts *frosty* as a spondee before *scalp*; he thinks that it causes it to be intoned in a different way. I don't see how it does that; for my part, I intone it just the same before *top* as before *scalp*. The ordinary theory is, I believe, that the *sc* of *scalp* acts as a sort of stile (because of the opposition of the two consonants to rapid motion) which you take time to cross, so that *ty* must be considered as long because of this delay of the voice, while the *t* of *top* is merely a line across the path which gives no trouble. I don't see it like that; the delay of motion, such as it is and it is very slight, is not caused by any dwelling on the last syllable of the preceding word, it is in the word *scalp* itself that the delay is made; one takes longer to pronounce *scalp*, *scalp* is a slightly longer sound than *top* and there is too a slight initial impediment to the voice which is absent in the lighter vocable and this may have an effect for the rhythm of the line but it cannot change the metre; it cannot lengthen the preceding syllable so as to turn a trochee into a spondee. Sanskrit quantitation is irrelevant here (it is the same as Latin or Greek in respect to this rule); but both of us agree that the Classical quantitative conventions are not reproducible in English metre and it is for that reason that we reject Bridges' eccentric scansion. Where we disagree is that I treat stress as equivalent to length and give quantity as well as stress a metrical and not merely a rhythmic value.

This answers also your question as to what Milford means by "fundamental confusion" regarding *aridity*. He refuses to accept the idea of metrical length. But I am concerned with natural *metrical* as well as natural vowel (and consonantal) quantities. My theory is that natural length in English depends on the dwelling of the voice giving a high or strong sound value or weight of voice to the syllable; in quantitative verse one has to take account of all such dwelling or weight of the voice, both weight or sharp dwelling by ictus (= stress) and weight

by prolongation or long dwelling of the voice (ordinary syllabic length); the two are different, but at any rate for metrical purposes in a quantitative verse can rank as of equal value. I do not say that stress turns a short vowel into a long one, but that it gives a strong sound value (= metrical length) to the syllable it falls upon, even if that syllable has a short vowel and no extra consonants to support it. There is a heavier voice incidence on the first *i* of *aridity* than on the second: this incidence I call weight; the voice dwells more on it, sharply, and that dwelling gives it what I call metrical length and equates it to the long syllable, gives it an equal value.

Milford does not take the trouble to understand the details of my theory — he ignores the importance I give to modulations and treats cretics and antibacchii and molossi as if they were dactyls, whereas I regard them as only substitutes for dactyls; he ignores my objection to stressing short insignificant words like *and*, *with*, *but*, *the* — and thinks that I do that everywhere, which would be to ignore my theory. In fact I have scrupulously applied my theory in every detail of my practice. Take for instance

Art thou not | heaven-bound | even as | I with the | earth? Hast
 thou | ended.

Here *art* is long by natural quantity though *unstressed*,² which disproves Milford's criticism that in practice I never put an unstressed long as the first syllable of a dactylic foot or spondee, as I should do by my theory. I don't do it often because normally in English rhythm stress bears the foot — a fact on which I have laid emphasis in my theory as well as in my practice. That is the reason why I condemn the Bridgman disregard of stress in the rhythm, — still whenever it can come in quite naturally, this variation can occasionally be made. It is a question of the relations possible between stress value and unstressed quantitative

² I refuse to put an artificial stress here; if one wrote "Yes, thou art beautiful, but with a magical terrible beauty", the *art* is obviously unstressed, though long (creating an initial molossus); in the interrogative inversion it does not acquire any stress by its coming first in the sentence or in the line.

values in a quantitative metrical system, which is not the same as their relations in accentual or stress verse. My quantitative system, as I have shown at great length, is based on the natural movement of the English tongue, the same in prose and poetry, not on any artificial theory.

In stress hexameter only dactyls, spondees and trochees doing duty for spondees are counted; but in quantitative verse all feet have to take their natural value and to act as modulations of the dactyl and spondee while both in the opening foot and the body of the line amphibrachii and cretics abound, even molossi come in at times. Opening tribrachs are very frequent in my hexameter

Is he the first? was there none then before him? shall none come after?

Milford seems to think I have stressed the first short syllable in what would be naturally tribrachs and anapaests to make them into dactyls—a thing I abhor. Cf. also in *Ahana* initial anapaests:

In the hard | reckoning | made by the | grey-robed accountant at even

or

Yet survives | bliss in the | rhythm of our | heart-beats, | yet is
there | wonder

or again

And we go | stumbling, maddened and thrilled to his dreadful embraces

or in my poem *Ilion*

And the first | Argive fell | slain as he leaped on the Phrygian beaches.

There are even opening amphibrachs here and there

Illuminations, | trance-seeds of | silence, flowers of musing.

24 December 1942

APPENDIX III

Remarks on a Review²

[A]

Marginal Comments

The writer justly contends that Quantitative Verse has, hitherto, been misunderstood by English poets who have used it, because the constituent elements of such verse have not been correctly appreciated. These elements are accent, stress, and quantity. Accent is voice-weightage on a syllable; stress is voice-weightage on a one-syllable word (which may or may not be accented by itself) considered *hic et nunc* as a component part of a phrase, clause or sentence;

Not in my theory; stress occurs in English words of all lengths, not only in monosyllables.

quantity is this voice-weightage in poetry. The best (and the only true) Quantitative Verse is that in which accent, stress and quantity fall on the same syllable.

This is not part of my theory, where accent is disregarded for metrical purposes (though it counts in the intonation and rhythm) except when it coincides with stress. On the other hand unstressed long syllables count as long and here stress and quantity do *not* fall on the same syllable.

English being an accentual language, poets writing in English have a natural bias towards accentual verse. The result is, that

² In April 1943 a review of Sri Aurobindo's *On Quantitative Metre* by a certain F. J. Friend-Pereira was published by the *New Review of Calcutta*. Sri Aurobindo jotted down some comments in the margins of a copy of the journal, and also began a reply, which he abandoned after writing a single paragraph. Here, in [A], Sri Aurobindo's marginal comments are published, along with the relevant passages of the review. (Page references to *On Quantitative Metre* have been altered to agree with *THE COMPLETE WORKS OF SRI AUROBINDO* edition.) Sri Aurobindo's incomplete reply follows in [B].

they tend to regard quantity in verse as secondary, and by misplacing both accent and stress produce (when they venture into such fields) Quantitative Verse of unbelievable badness. This is written in a slipshod metre whose “tread-mill movement” (p. 346) has been charged against it as an incurable defect. . . .

All this is, assuredly, excellent in theory. But in practice, certain serious objections arise. If it be true, as the author asserts that it is true, that only certain heroic themes can be treated in English hexameter (the most practised of the numerous types of Quantitative Verse),

This has nowhere been said; epic, pastoral, epistle, satire, familiar speech, poems of reflection have all been admitted, — only there must be either power or beauty.

then the utility of the suggested adoption of verse based on quantity will be utility in name alone, since the just claim of poetry at present to give not only airy nothing, but everything, a local habitation and a name, would be effectively quashed.

This objection would arise if it were proposed to write quantitative verse *only*; that is not so.

If it be true, further, that because of the undactylic nature of English, the hexameter needs to be “modulated” by bacchius, by lighter cretic, by the first paeon, by the choriamb or double trochee (similar variations to be used in the other quantitative metres), what remains of the fundamental metric of the original form?

The ground given is not the undactylic nature of English, but the natural tendency of English poetry to resort to modulation for the sake of freedom and variety. I have said that this device should be adopted in transferring classical metres into English, so as to create a natural English quantitative verse — not a rigid imitation of Greek and Latin models.

The verse so written would, doubtless, be something rich and strange:

So much the better.

but would it be really hexameter, simply because it would (and then not always) have a dactyl in the 5th, and a spondee (or more likely a trochee) in the 6th?

Why not? All that is necessary is that it should be a six-foot verse with a sound and predominant dactylic basis.

Would sapphics, with the changes advocated as a relief to monotony, remain genuine sapphics?

Again, why not? The modulations are few and do not destroy the characteristic swing of the Sapphic verse.

And ionics, ionics? It would seem, then, that the learned author's scheme would amount merely to *some* sort of quantitative verse; this is native to English, as Langeland, Hopkins and others have shown, and shown most successfully.

If it is some sort of quantitative verse, rich and strange, and based on the recovery by quantity of its place in metre, that would be enough. Hopkins, I believe, wrote sprung verse — it is not entirely quantitative.

There are a number of other points, of more or less importance, to which attention must, in fairness, be drawn. The punctuation leaves something to be desired: on p. 322, line 13 from the bottom, there should be a colon or a fullstop instead of a comma; on p. 323, line 8 . . . a semi-colon instead of a comma.

No, that would disturb the connection and balance. The comma is intended to preserve the close connection of the two statements.

Grammar is also defective, as in the following:

(i) “. . . they can seldom intervene or only if *it* is done very carefully” (p. 362) where *it* lacks a true antecedent.

“It” refers to the intervention; there is an unexpressed or implied antecedent. This is a liberty, but one that can be taken. Literary style *can* take such liberties sometimes with schoolmaster’s grammar.

(ii) “All that is necessary is that artificial quantity . . . *must* be abandoned.” (p. 363) *Must* ought to be *should*.

“must” ought to remain “must”. It is meant to indicate the nature of the necessity and its imperativeness.

(iii) “A better statement may lead to a solution that *could* well be viable.” (p. 317) *May* or *might* instead of *could* would be an improvement.

No. “Could” has a different shade of meaning from “may” or “might”.

(iv) On p. 318, bottom line, “they” lacks an antecedent, unless it be “desire”!

Yes, there should be in the previous sentence “by many” after “vividly felt”.

(v) The order of words in “He perpetrates frequently lines that are wholly trochaic” (p. 355) could scarcely be more un-English. *Frequently* should be the first or, preferably, the second word in the sentence.

The word can be where it is to give a certain effect.

(vi) What, one wonders, is meant by “no insuperable impossibility”? (p. 363) If a thing is an impossibility, there is no necessity to say that it is insuperable; if it is not insuperable, then it cannot be an impossibility. What the author meant was either “no *apparently* insuperable impossibility” or “no insuperable difficulty”.

“insuperable impossibility” gives a single idea, something that is impossible and therefore insuperable; it is not meant that there are impossibilities that are not insuperable.

(vii) On p. 352, line 5, “verily evidently” is a misprint for “very evidently”.

These are, however, flaws of little importance. More serious is the claim, put forward on p. 321 that Spenser, Tennyson and Swinburne were great geniuses. It would be nearer the truth to say that they were poets whose technical ability was considerable.

New and strange opinions! “My opinion” would be preferable to “the truth”.

And in a treatise on metre, one hardly expects to find the following:

(i) “The way was long, the wind was cold” is referred to as iambic *pentameter*! (p. 324)

The “pentameter” is evidently a slip of the pen; it should be “iambic verse”.

(ii) We are told (p. 338) that the correct way to read the first line of the Aeneid is to place a stress on *que*.

That is obviously a misprint, quite as obvious as the “verily evidently”. The stress mark should be omitted.

(iii) In a detailed scanning of the speech beginning “The lunatic, the lover and the poet” from *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, one of the lines is quoted as

And as imagination bodies forth.

In all the editions of Shakespeare your reviewer has consulted, this line runs

And, as imagination bodies forth.

In the second form, it is clear that *And*, followed by a comma, must be stressed: the line then has 5 stresses; therefore is regular. But its irregularity (without the comma and hence with only 4 stresses) is pointed out by our author. (p. 326)

Even with the comma (is it Shakespeare's?) it is an accentual inflexion that I should put on "and" not a stress.

(iv) On p. 333, we find the following accentuations: *narrâtive*; *contemplâtive*, *incarnâte*, *swîft*, *abstrâct*. These are wrong; except the last, if it is a verb.

The signs do not indicate accentuations, but natural long quantities. Accentually these "a"s are short because unaccented, but in quantitative reckoning they should recover their native value. The second "a" in "abstract" is a short vowel, but the 4 consonants of the syllable can be taken as giving it quantitative force.

Moreover, when producing examples from prose to show that accent, stress and quantity do fall on the same syllables, and that therefore English "preserves the natural sound values", (p. 341), it might appear to some readers that the author is out-Jourdaining Monsieur Jourdain.

Why? The idea that English prose is capable of scansion is not at all new or absurd.

Nor is he quite certain whether poetic composition is conscious or unconscious (p. 348 and ff.)

Psychologically it is both, or let us say, partly conscious and partly subconscious.

and he sometimes mars the utility of his criticism by taking refuge in such phrases as "the rhythmic rendering of significance" (p. 360) and "the native utterance of things seen" which "conveys by significant sound its natural atmosphere." (p. 328)

Why? These are not phrases in which I took refuge, but express a recognised fact, both psychological and practical, of poetic technique. Is it denied that either in music or word-music sound can convey significance or reproduce the natural atmosphere of a thing seen? This is a constant experience of a sensitive reader of poetry.

The book is intended to show the possibility of writing in a metre that will “read as if it were a born English rhythm, not a naturalised alien.” (p. 363) The words that give the clue to the result, are, one feels, the words *as if*. Quantitative Verse, except what is written in Sprung Rhythm, will always masquerade in English *as if* it were in everyday garb: it will always be meretricious.

“As if” here refers to the fact that the hexameter is in origin an importation from Greek and Latin, but it must not read as such, it must not sound like a naturalised alien music; it must have a native English sound and for that it must follow the native rhythm of the English tongue. If it sounds “meretricious” the condition has not been satisfied. “As if” does not mean that it must be a false metre pretending to be a native one. The hexameter has not to pretend to be in everyday garb, for it is admittedly a new dress, but it has to fit perfectly the body of the English language. It may use the Sprung Rhythm which is also not an everyday garb, but a dress novel, reinvented and artistically fashioned. It seems to me that “meretricious” here means simply new and unfamiliar and therefore felt by the conservative mind to be foreign and artificial, just as blank verse first sounds when it is first brought into a language accustomed to rhymes; after a while it becomes quite natural, native, to the manner born — as has happened in French, in Bengali and other tongues.

Is this book, then, one of which “love’s labour’s lost” must be said? By no means. There is in it a great deal of illuminating criticism on Longfellow, Clough and Kingsley. There are some extremely wise remarks on poetry, of which these are samples:

It is evident that a crowding or sparseness of consonants will make a great difference to the total rhythm, it will produce a greater or less heaviness or lightness; but that is a rhythmic effect quite distinct from any imperative influence on the metre. (p. 339)

A great deal of free verse is nothing but prose cut up into lines to make it look like verse. (p. 348)

And one must admire the generous “expense of spirit” that went to the writing of *On Quantitative Metre*, and acknowledge that Sri Aurobindo’s poems are far more than mere illustrations of a poetic theory.

In spite of being written in a false and artificial rhythm? Queer!

[B]

Incomplete Reply

A criticism of my book *On Quantitative Metre* in the *Calcutta New Review* (*Pitfalls on Parnassus* by F. J. Friend-Pereira) attacks, not the principles of quantitative verse put forward by me, — these it holds excellent in theory, but the practice and even the possibility of putting them in practice. Unfortunately even the approval of the theory loses its value, as it seems to be based on a misconception. For the writer starts by thus describing the three constituent elements of quantitative verse, — accent, stress and quantity. “Accent is voice-weightage on a syllable; stress is voice-weightage on a one-syllable word (which may or may not be accented in itself) considered *hic et nunc* as a component part of a phrase, clause or sentence; quantity is this voice-weightage in poetry.” The reviewer evidently accepts the theory of voice-weightage as determining quantitative sound-value and accepts these three different weights, accent weight, stress weight, quantity weight. But the exact sense of the description of quantity is not clear to me and that of stress I find bewildering. In my own theory I have admitted two kinds of quantity, stress weight, weight of natural syllable quantity depending on vowel length or consonant weight, while accentual weight is disregarded as I accept it is a metrical length producer only when it coincides with stress and there its action is superfluous, since stress by itself is sufficient for the purpose. Other accentual pitches I disregard for metrical purposes and leave them only a rhythmic importance. Practically, then, in quantitative verse accent disappears as a quantity-determiner and takes a back place in the rhythm; just as does natural syllabic quantity in accentual verse.

Note on the Texts

Note on the Texts

LETTERS ON POETRY AND ART includes most of the letters on poetry, literature, art and aesthetics that Sri Aurobindo wrote between 1929 and 1950. During these years he was living in retirement in his ashram in Pondicherry and had no direct contact with others, but he carried on an enormous correspondence with the members of his ashram as well as outsiders. Most of the letters he wrote at this time were concerned with the recipients' practice of yoga and day-to-day life. But a significant number were about literary and artistic matters. The most important of such letters are published in the present volume.

Sri Aurobindo's letters on poetry, literature, art and aesthetics have been published previously in three different books: *Letters on Poetry, Literature and Art*; *Letters on "Savitri"*; and *On Himself*. (The literary letters in *On Himself* appeared in the section entitled "The Poet and the Critic".) The appropriate contents of these books, along with around five hundred letters that have not appeared in any previous collection of Sri Aurobindo's letters, are combined in the present volume under a new title.

Sri Aurobindo wrote most of the letters in this volume in reply to questions posed by his correspondents, and they deal for the most part with points the correspondents raised. As a result, the letters cannot be said to constitute a fully worked-out theory of poetics. (Such a theory is presented in Sri Aurobindo's major work of literary criticism, *The Future Poetry*, published as volume 26 of THE COMPLETE WORKS OF SRI AUROBINDO. This theory is elaborated in some of the letters.) Likewise, the critical judgments Sri Aurobindo made in the letters were confined largely to works that had been submitted to him by his correspondents. Many of these works were written by the correspondents themselves. Accordingly the poets and poems dealt with should not be taken as a catalogue of Sri Aurobindo's critical preferences, though they may be said to constitute a representative sampling of his literary interests.

The Writing of the Letters

Sri Aurobindo's correspondents wrote to him in notebooks or on loose sheets of paper that were sent to him in an internal "post" once or twice a day. He generally replied on the same sheet of paper as the question, below it or in the margin or between the lines. Sometimes, however, he wrote his answer on a separate sheet. In a few cases he had his secretary prepare a typed copy of a letter, which he revised before it was sent. All the letters were written between 1929 and 1950, the majority between 1931 and 1937. Sometimes Sri Aurobindo dated his answers, but most of the dates given at the end of the letters in this volume are those of the letter to which he was replying.

The present volume, excluding the appendixes, comprises 976 separate items, an "item" being defined as what is published here between one heading or asterisk and another heading or asterisk. Many items correspond precisely to individual letters; a good number, however, consist of portions of single letters, or (portions of) two or more letters that were joined together by earlier editors or typists and revised as such by Sri Aurobindo. A few of the items were not written as letters, but rather as comments on poems and articles that were submitted to him.

Sri Aurobindo wrote most of the letters in this volume to around a dozen correspondents, all of them members of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram. Seven of these recipients deserve special mention, since their names occur frequently in the correspondence, and their poems are discussed in letters reproduced in Part Two: Dilip Kumar Roy (1897–1980), Harindranath Chattopadhyaya (1898–1990), Arjava (J. A. Chadwick) (1899–1939), Jyotirmayi (1902–?), Nirodbaran (1903–), Amal Kiran (K. D. Sethna) (1904–), and Nishikanta (1909–1973).

The Revision of the Letters

As early as 1933, plans were made to bring out a printed collection of Sri Aurobindo's letters on poetry. Towards the end of that year, K. D. Sethna wrote to Sri Aurobindo asking whether portions of two letters he had received ought to be typed "for your book on art and literature, to be published after *The Riddle*". (*The Riddle of This*

World, published in November 1933, was the first collection of Sri Aurobindo's letters on yoga to be published.) Sri Aurobindo replied: "The best thing would be to type both the letters and send them to me so that I may put them into some possible form — of course only the general parts need be typed." The letters were duly typed, but Sri Aurobindo was unable to do much revision as there was, he wrote, "an ocean of paper drowning me". In 1935 and 1936, two further books of letters on yoga, *Lights on Yoga* and *Bases of Yoga*, were brought out. In February 1936, just before the publication of the latter volume, there was another push to bring out a collection of letters on poetry. Sri Aurobindo's secretary, Nolini Kanta Gupta, had by this time made a selection of literary letters, which he gave to Sethna for arrangement. On 25 February 1936, Sethna wrote to Sri Aurobindo asking him for advice on editorial categories and headings. Sri Aurobindo replied that he had no time to look into the matter, but remarked by the way that he could "not conceive how these stray letters can be classified under groups". He does however seem to have begun revising some of the letters around this time. He did his work on sheets that were typed from the originals or else from earlier typed or printed versions. Many of these copies had been typed immediately after the reception of the original letters, in order to be circulated among interested members of the ashram. Often minor errors crept in when the letters were typed. Moreover the recipients sometimes deliberately omitted passages that seemed to them to be of no general interest, or added words or phrases that were meant to make Sri Aurobindo's intentions more clear. As a result, the typed copies that Sri Aurobindo used for his revision did not always correspond exactly to the letters he had written.

The revision that Sri Aurobindo did during the middle and late thirties amounted sometimes to a full rewriting of the letter, sometimes to minor touches here and there. He normally removed personal references if this had not already been done by the typist. He also, when necessary, rewrote the openings or other parts of the answers in order to free them from dependence on the correspondent's question. As a result, many items now read more like brief essays than personal communications. A letter Sri Aurobindo wrote to Sethna in August 1937 reflects this approach to the revision:

I had no idea of the book being published as a collection of personal letters — if that were done, they would have to be published whole as such without a word of alteration. I understood the book was meant like the others [*i.e.*, like *Bases of Yoga, etc.*] where only what was helpful for an understanding of things Yogic was kept with necessary alterations and modifications. Here it was not Yoga, but certain judgments etc. about art and literature. With that idea I have been not only omitting but recasting and adding freely. Otherwise as a book it would be too scrappy and random for public interest. In the other books things too personal were omitted — it seems to me that the same rule must hold here — except very sparingly where unavoidable.

The work of revision seems to have gone on slowly until the end of 1938. It was discontinued in November of that year after Sri Aurobindo fractured his leg, and not resumed for almost a decade. (During the interval Sri Aurobindo was busy with the revision of his major works: *The Life Divine*, *The Synthesis of Yoga*, etc.) In 1947, the Sri Aurobindo Circle, Bombay, published a collection of Sri Aurobindo's letters on yoga under the title *Letters of Sri Aurobindo: First Series*. Around this time, Kishor Gandhi, the editor of the Circle's publications, began to collect material for a volume of letters on literature. His manuscript was sent to Sri Aurobindo in December 1948, and read out to him by his scribe, Nirodbaran, who took down Sri Aurobindo's dictated revisions. These were generally less extensive than the handwritten revisions of the 1930s.

The Publication of the Letters

The third series of Sri Aurobindo's correspondence, *Letters of Sri Aurobindo: Third Series (On Poetry and Literature)*, was published in 1949 by the Sri Aurobindo Circle, Bombay. It consisted of 162 items. Most of these were preceded by headings, which, with one or two exceptions, were provided by the editor. The manuscript of the book had been typed from various sources. Some items incorporated the revision work of the 1930s. More often, however, the basis of the text of the 1949 manuscript was the original handwritten letter

or a typed copy of it. At some point during the revision of 1948–49, parts of the earlier revision were uncovered, and an effort was made to incorporate some of this work in the final version. Editorial dilemmas sometimes resulted, since the two sets of revision were not always compatible.

Selections from Sri Aurobindo's letters on literature continued to be published after his passing in 1950. Sixty-two items dealing with his epic poem *Savitri* were issued as *Letters on "Savitri"* (1951). This book was meant to serve as a sort of introduction to that poem, which had been published in 1950–51. (Since 1954, these letters, along with some others, have been appended to most editions of *Savitri*.) In 1953, twenty-one items relating to Sri Aurobindo as poet and critic were included in *Sri Aurobindo on Himself and on the Mother*. During the 1950s, disciples of Sri Aurobindo began to publish their correspondences with him. K. D. Sethna brought out a collection of letters on various topics under the title *Life — Literature — Yoga* in 1952. Two years later, Nirodbaran released the first volume of his *Correspondence with Sri Aurobindo*. In both of these books, and in subsequent collections of letters from Sri Aurobindo to specific disciples, a summary of the disciple's question was often put before Sri Aurobindo's reply in order, as Sethna put it, "to give the utmost point to the replies, bring out best the personal touch in them and frame more definitely both their profundity and their humour".

In 1970–73, Sri Aurobindo's collected works were published as the *Sri Aurobindo Birth Centenary Library* (SABCL). Letters on poetry, literature and art appeared in three volumes of this set. The main series of letters, consisting of the 162 items published in *Letters of Sri Aurobindo: Third Series (On Poetry and Literature)*, along with 145 additional items from manuscript and printed sources, was published as the second part of SABCL volume 9, *The Future Poetry and Letters on Poetry, Literature and Art* (1972). The 21 items that had been published in *Sri Aurobindo on Himself and on the Mother*, along with 101 additional items, were reproduced in SABCL volume 26, *On Himself*, in a section entitled "The Poet and the Critic". Most of the additional items in this section were from *Life — Literature — Yoga*, and included the questions that had been published with them there. The 62 items from *Letters on "Savitri"*, along with 26 others, were

printed at the end of the second volume of *Savitri* (SABCL volume 29). Finally, five items dealing with some of Sri Aurobindo's lyrical poems were published after the poems in *Collected Poems* (SABCL volume 5). Summing up, 522 items of correspondence on literary and artistic matters were reproduced in four volumes of the Centenary Library. Around twenty of these items were duplicated in two or even three volumes. Thus a total of around five hundred letters on poetry and art were published in the SABCL.

The Present Edition

This edition, the first to be entitled *Letters on Poetry and Art*, includes almost all the letters on poetry, literature and art reproduced in volumes 5, 9, 26 and 29 of the SABCL, along with around five hundred items that have not appeared in any previous collection of Sri Aurobindo's letters (collections edited by recipients excepted). Most of the new items are relatively short; nevertheless the present volume contains 757 pages, as against the 492 pages devoted to letters on poetry and art in the four SABCL volumes. It is difficult to establish precise correspondences between the number of items published in the SABCL and the COMPLETE WORKS, because certain letters published as two or more items in the SABCL have been combined, while other letters published as single items in the SABCL have been split into separate items. These operations have been done in accordance with Sri Aurobindo's manuscripts, as explained below.

The 162 items in *Letters of Sri Aurobindo: Third Series (On Poetry and Literature)* (1949) were arranged by the editor in nine sections. When these and other items were reproduced in SABCL volume 9, a tenth section was added. In the present volume, owing to the large number of additional items, it proved impossible for the editors to preserve the earlier arrangement. The material is now placed in three parts, containing a total of eleven sections and fifty-five subsections.

The letters in Part One differ in kind and in manner of presentation from most of those published in the other two parts. As noted above, Sri Aurobindo revised a number of the letters, removing personal references and making it possible for them to stand independent of the questions that elicited them. Such letters are published here as

he revised them. For the sake of consistency, most unrevised letters placed by the editors in this part have been published without questions. If some contextual information was required for intelligibility, it has been given in footnotes. (Questions have been included in three sections of Part One, in which examples of specific passages of poetry are discussed.)

Many letters that appeared for the first time in volumes like K. D. Sethna's *Life — Literature — Yoga* and Nirodbaran's *Correspondence with Sri Aurobindo*, and later in *On Himself*, were published with the correspondent's question. These have been retained (often in modified form) by the present editors. When appropriate, the editors have included the questions of letters reproduced for the first time. They have also reproduced the questions of certain letters that have hitherto been published without them. The two types of presentation — without and with questions and personal references — are each appropriate for a certain sort of material. Statements about the nature of poetry and the elements of poetic technique, which make up the bulk of Part One, are best presented in the impersonal way. This keeps the discussion from getting tied down to the immediate context of the letter's creation. Comments on specific writers and their work, and advice intended for specific individuals, which make up the bulk of Parts Two and Three, are best presented along with their context. This prevents specific judgments and advice from being taken as universal dicta.

Most questions have been copy-edited and abbreviated. A few that reveal the correspondent's relationship with Sri Aurobindo in an interesting way have been reproduced at some length.

While preparing the present edition for publication, the editors have consulted every available state of every letter: handwritten manuscripts, revised typescripts, versions in the manuscript of *Letters of Sri Aurobindo* (1949), and printed versions. Special attention has been given to manuscript versions. In earlier editions many "letters" were actually extracts from single letters or (parts of) different letters published as one. In the present edition, single letters are generally printed in their entirety. The editors have sometimes restored parts of letters that have hitherto been omitted. This has not been done when (1) Sri Aurobindo's revision of the letter made restoration impossible,

(2) the letter was of the kind that was better off published without personal references, or (3) the omitted material was irrelevant to the topic under discussion. In a few of Sri Aurobindo's letters, different paragraphs or groups of paragraphs deal with subjects that are covered in different sections of the book. In some such cases, the passages are printed as separate items. Items composed of more than one letter that were typed as units and revised by Sri Aurobindo in that form have generally been retained as compound items in the present edition.

Portions of the original letters that do not deal with the subject under discussion have generally been omitted. If the omitted portion is from a part of the letter preceding or following the printed portion, the elision has not been indicated. If the omitted portion is from the midst of the printed portion, it has been indicated by ellipsis points (. . .). Ellipsis points at the end of an item indicate that the end of the letter has been lost.

Each letter or group of letters in volumes 9 and 26 of the SABCL had a heading. With one exception, these headings were the work of the editors. The exception, "Yeats and the Occult" (page 415 of the present volume) was written by Sri Aurobindo when he revised a typed copy of the letter in question.

The text of each of the items has been checked against all its available handwritten, typed and printed versions. The number of versions available varies greatly from letter to letter. For items published in the 1949 edition, there may be a handwritten manuscript, one or more typed copies, and the version in the typed manuscript of the book. In other instances, there may be only a single handwritten manuscript. In cases where no manuscript was available, the editors have used reliably produced typed or printed versions as the basis of the text.

In previous editions the names of individuals were represented by their initials or by "X", "Y", etc. In the present edition, names written by Sri Aurobindo in the manuscripts have been spelled out. (In two letters initials remain, because these letters are preserved only in the form of copies in which initials replaced the names.) In one or two cases Sri Aurobindo himself used initials. These have been preserved.

All quotations from poets and prose writers in the letters have been checked against the original texts as well as against Sri Aurobindo's manuscripts. If Sri Aurobindo misquoted a line, his version has been

allowed to stand, as his choice of words may be significant. If the misquotation was introduced by someone else (for example, the person who typed out a passage for Sri Aurobindo's opinion), it has been corrected against a reliable text of the original work. Following Sri Aurobindo's own preference, the editors have used modernised editions of sixteenth and seventeenth century poets. The Reference Volume of the COMPLETE WORKS includes a table that gives the source of all quotations, and the correct text of misquoted lines.