

Every year a distinguished writer and creative thinker who has studied Indian literature deeply is invited to give the Sahitya Akademi Samvatsar Lectures. Reflecting a deep concern for human values, the lectures open up new vistas of thinking regarding a literary movement, a current literary trend, some original thinking about a great writer or a new path in literary criticism or literary creation.

The first Samvatsar Lectures were given in 1986 by S.H. Vatsyayan and the subject was "Perspectives of Memory"; the second in 1987 by Annada Sankar Ray on "Renaissance in Bengal: In Retrospect", and the third by Umashankar Joshi in 1988 on "The Idea of Indian Literature".

The fourth Samvatsar Lectures were delivered by K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar (b. 1907) in 1989 and the theme was "The Man of Letters and the Doomsday Clock". Iyengar gave two lectures: the first on 18 February on "The Machine and the Clock"; the second on 19 February on "The Clock and the Man of Letters".

A father figure of Indian literature, Iyengar finds that "it is a new age we are living in, for mankind moved, on 16 July 1945, from Anno Domini to Anno Bombini, and we are in the 44th year of this age of delirious ambiguity." Outlining the nuclear peril he observes: "Either scenario is open to humanity today: the mad plunge into the abyss of pride and strife and racial suicide, or the long night's journey back to brotherhood and universal well-being. The man of letters turns his words into Spirit, the resulting revolution in thought and action will avert nuclear Doomsday, smother the Clock, and greet the Greater Dawn."



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, K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar

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The Man of Letters and the Doomsday Clock

K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar

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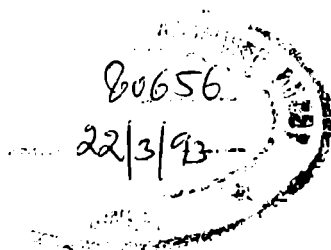
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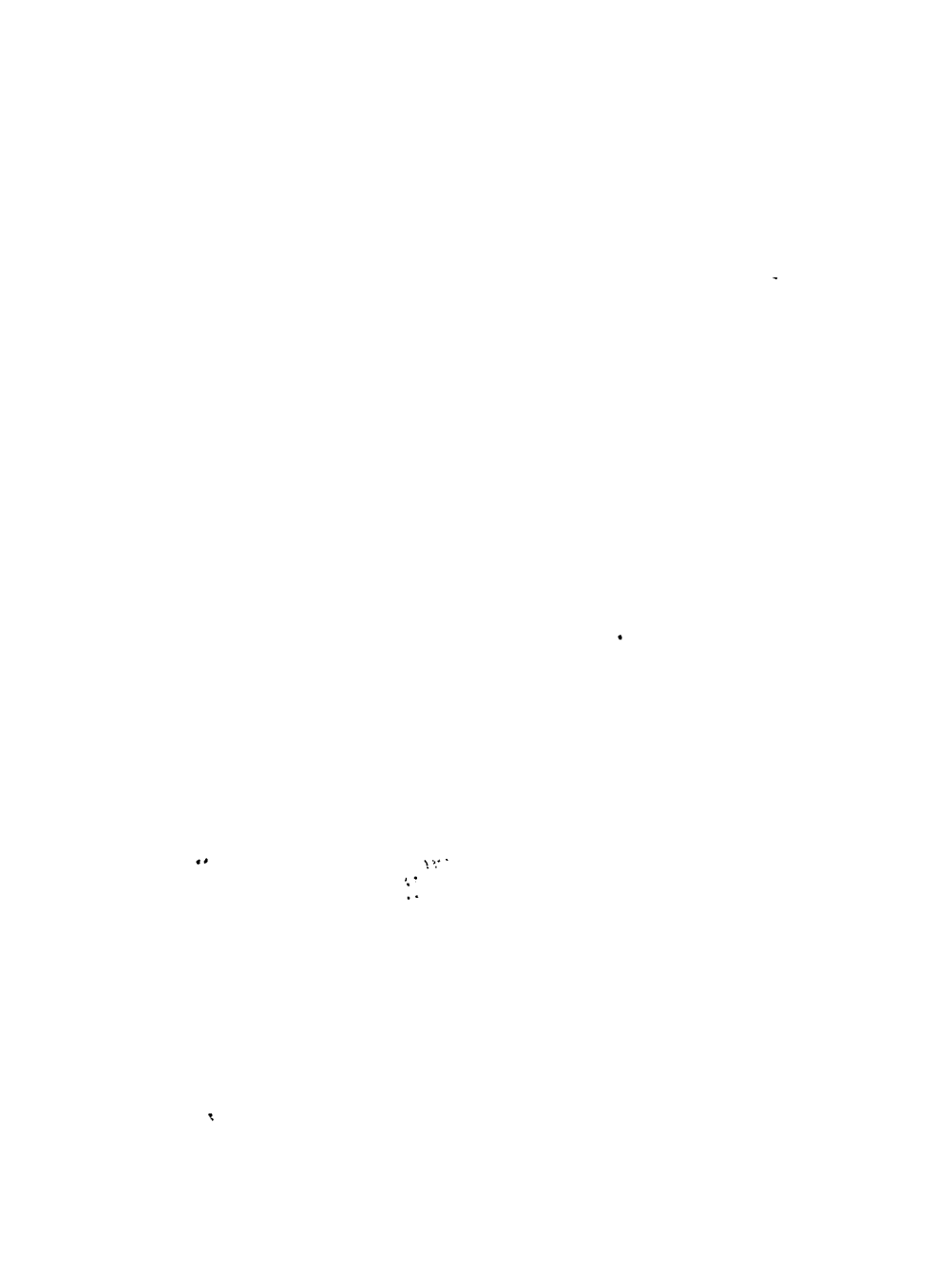
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Foreword to the Series

THE Executive Board of the Sahitya Akademi passed a resolution on 24 February 1985 accepting the recommendations of the Committee set up for the establishment of a series of lectures in literary criticism called the Samvatsar Lectures. A procedure was prescribed by the Board for the selection of the annual Samvatsar Lecturers. The Samvatsar lecturer is expected to deliver two or three lectures on a theme chosen by him. It has also been laid down that these Samvatsar lectures would be published after they are delivered. The crucial clauses in the resolution relating to the Samvatsar Lectures read as follows :—

These lectures should reflect a deep concern for values. They should open up new vistas of thinking regarding a literary movement, a current literary trend, some original thinking about a great writer or a great classic or a new path in literary criticism or literary creation, etc. The presentation should be from a larger perspective while the subject matter could be drawn from the regional or comparative sources within the speaker's experience.

I have great pleasure in writing this brief foreword.

New Delhi
1987

Vinayak Krishna Gokak
President
Sahitya Akademi

Lecture I

The Machine and the Clock

Those of us who have been alive for 70 years or more are sometimes visited with a strange impulse: to take the middle-aged and the young in a firm grip and urge them to listen to the stories of our lives. We feel ourselves driven to interrupt wedding feasts and other such happy occasions.

J.M. Cameron
(in the *New York Review of Books*, 17 March 1988)

We must confront the image that haunts us, making use of whatever models we can locate. Only then can we achieve those changes in consciousness that must accompany (if not precede) changes in public policy on behalf of a human future. We must look into the abyss in order to be able to see beyond it.

Robert Jay Lifton
(in *Death in Life*, 1984)

In the year of T.S. Eliot's birth centenary, it may not be inapt to begin my 'Samvatsar Lectures' with the opening lines of the first of his Four Quartets, *Burnt Norton*:

Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future,
And time future contained in time past.

We who are of the present, the notional 'present' that's neither the spill-over from the past nor yet the key to the future, we are helplessly entangled in the meshes of the memoried past and the blinding dazzle of the probable incendiary future. The 'past'—how far can we cast our glance backward? And the future—how far dare we look ahead? And already, chewed out of the future, the present is being gathered into the past!

Sixty years ago, writing on 'Kalki, or the Future of Civilisation', a former President of Sahitya Akademi, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, whose birth centenary also we are celebrating, spoke of "such a thing as the logic of history". He warned, after Lord Acton, that no philosophy could be founded on the observation of the previous four hundred years alone (that is, since the Renaissance), excluding the millennia that had gone before. And Radhakrishnan suggested that we should take a far

wider sweep of time to be able to draw any legitimate or worthwhile conclusions. Equating 100 years with one minute (Dr. Alexander Irvine's idea), Radhakrishnan took a backward glance of six thousand years, or an hour of sixty minutes. This meant starting with Egyptian and Babylonian civilisation at midnight 12 o'clock. Following the moving finger of Clio's Clock, it would be Cretan civilisation at five minutes past, Assyrian 10 minutes, Chaldean 15 minutes, Indian and Chinese 20 minutes, Persian 25 minutes, and Greek at 30 minutes past. Thus Alexander invaded India, perhaps 35 or more minutes past, and the Roman Empire attained its zenith a few minutes later. The rest of earth-history, the entire Christian era, and especially the rise of Western Europe, the expansion of the West, the American phenomenon, the two world wars and after, all covering less than 2000 years, almost—though not quite—bring us back to 12 o'clock or zero hour.

Sometimes, then, it is helpful to have a quickened or synoptic view of history so that, looking through the dense growth of the trees, you are able to view the lay-out of the woods, the sequence of hill and dale, the underlying pattern, and infer the sustaining life-force. It is not easy to read the hieroglyphs of history, for not all the relevant facts are known, and it is easy in our enthusiasm to forge the wrong generalisations. Think now, warns T.S. Eliot in *Gerontion*:

History has many cunning passages, contrived corridors
And issues, deceives with whispering ambitions,
Guides us by vanities.

But this fact seems to emerge clearly enough: of the several civilisations our Earth-Mother has fostered, the Asiatic alone—the Indian and the Chinese—seem to have survived with a strange tenacity or resilience the rages of the remorseless intervening ages, and this endurance and capacity for survival emboldened Radhakrishnan to offer this comment:

We see that those (civilisations) which devoted their energies to politics, patriotism and mutual extermination have destroyed them-

selves, either from within or without. . . The survival of the Asiatic civilisations shows the life-giving character of human and spiritual values.

(*Kalki*, 1956 edn., p. 36)

India and China have fought their wars too, any number of them and warrior-castes have made war a speciality and a birth-right. But a substantial population has never been wanting that made it its duty to safeguard and foster the humanities and the higher life of the spirit. The spiritual view that affirms the unity of spirit and matter in the cosmos, and therefore in Man as well, is the Truth-Power that harmonises, unifies and transcends the divisive, the distracting and the destructive. The Vedic chants of several thousand years ago that were the recordations of the Truth, the conduits of that Power, take life again today in our homes and holy places, and the Gayatri and like seminal Runes span the millennia and blaze forth the quintessential continuity in the tradition.

We now happen to live in this year of grace, Anno Domini, 1989. Hardly 12 years to go before we may hope to reach 12 o'clock again. And if 100 years make a minute in Clío's Clock, 12 years would mean about 7 seconds. We are thus very near indeed, a mere 7 seconds, to the New Dawn of the 21st century, when the clock-hand would start on its next round of 6000 years.

But not so fast, perhaps, for something else has recently and fatefully intervened in earth-affairs and upset our calculations and complacencies.

Nearly 44 years ago, on 16 July 1945 Anno Domini, at 5.30 a.m., a new contraption, named TRINITY in a mood of defiant blasphemy, was exploded over the Alamogordo desert in New Mexico, USA. The thunder that followed was heard from a distance of 50 miles, the lightning was visible for 250 miles, and the energy released was around 20,000 tons of TNT. Let me read the comment of one of those present on that 'historic' occasion, General James Farrell:

. . . a searching light with the intensity of many times that of the midday sun. It was golden, purple, violet, gray and blue. It lighted

every peak, crevasse, and ridge of the nearby mountain-range with a clarity and beauty that cannot be described. . .

After the explosion, the air blast: then the phenomenal roar that warned the beholders of prospective 'Doomsday', and made them feel that they were but petty things, yet "blasphemous to dare tamper with the forces heretofore reserved to the almighty". Another shocked witness, Kenneth Brainbridge, said succinctly and with brutal confessional candour: "Now we are all sons of bitches!"

Already the ominous word 'Doomsday', the surge of terror and shame, and a sin-consciousness reminiscent of old Adam's in the Garden of Eden. The Alamagordo explosion was certainly something akin to the 'fall' described by Milton—

Of Man's first disobedience and the fruit
Of the forbidden Tree whose mortal taste
Brought death into the world and all our woe. . .

Another witness, and perhaps the 'onlie true begetter' of the bomb, Dr. Robert Oppenheimer felt that the giddy Everest-peak of technological triumph was also the moment when Time the immitigable Destroyer had been provoked to reveal himself, and so recalled the words of the *Gita*:

I am become Death the Destroyer of the worlds.

Oppenheimer was honest enough to admit later that physicists like him sharing responsibility for the birth of the bomb "had known sin; and this is a knowledge that they cannot lose" (*Time*, Feb. 1948).

What next? Three weeks later, on 6 August, a uranium bomb christened 'Little Boy' was unleashed over the thickly populated Japanese city of Hiroshima. A minute or two after, the bomb exploded at a height of 18,000 feet in a ball of fire, perhaps 200 feet in diameter. This was the awaited dawn over the city, but let the poet, Robert Penn Warren, describe the event:

The city opens itself, offers itself,
As in breathless expectancy. . .

There
The apocalyptic blaze of
New dawn
Bursts
Temperature at heart of fireball:
50,000,000 degrees centigrade. . .

Of that brilliance beyond brilliance

Triumphal Beauty. . .
A plume, positive but delicate as a dream,
Of pure whiteness, unmoved by breath of any wind,
Mounts.
Above the dark mushroom,
It grows high—high, higher—
In its own triumphal beauty.

(*Writing in a Nuclear Age*,
ed. by Jim Schley, 1984, pp. 70-71)

Thus the poet, almost at a loss how to come to terms with his theme extraordinary. Let me turn to the Japanese writer, Hiroyuki Agawa, whose novel of 1953 has been translated into English as *Devil's Heritage* by John M. Maki. It is fiction, no doubt, but experientially sustained:

Simultaneously with the terrific explosion, a flame having a reddish-blue or brown colour spread out with lightning rapidity and smashed against the earth. . .about 40% of the city was made radioactive, and white smoke was immediately produced. . .it rose, twisting like a whirlpool cupped with white smoke, and shaped just like a sprouting mushroom. . .the atomic cloud carried radioactive matter, and 15 minutes later produced radioactive rain which began to pour down. . .the shock waves of the explosion levelled houses for a distance of about a mile and a half from the centre. . .about 20 minutes after the explosion, fires broke out everywhere and buildings were reduced to ashes. . .a tragedy unprecedented in history.

(pp. 62-63)

The dead numbered a few lakhs, and the wounded and the

infected some more. Again, in 'God's Fire', by William Rose Benet:

Raging inferno, consuming lava pit,
Fury of flame, with life's foundations split
Whether it change the world or God be mocked.
Time was, Time is! How fatefully the sound
Time shall be! tolls. Prometheus is unbound. . .

(*Writing in a Nuclear Age*, p. 75)

And R. J. Lifton reports a shop-assistant's recollections of the day, and these add up to a whole grammar of the reactions generated by the bombing: he woke up suddenly, and felt a great heat, and thought he was dying—that the world was dying—and felt overpowered by an end-of-the-world feeling—and thought it was God's judgement on Man's disobedience. Eerie images of sepulchral silence, diagrams from Death's Jest-Book, snaps of nightmares! A professor, climbing up a hill and looking down, saw that Hiroshima had ceased to exist. Walking through a hospital, a visitor felt he was in the Hell he had only read about. Yes, indeed, there were the new dimensions of horror for the first time witnessed in Hiroshima:

The grotesqueries of the new forms of death, the fantastic refinements of mutilation, and the savageness of the new ills of the flesh, born under the terrible flash and the lethal beauty of the bomb and its mushroom cloud, transcended the limits of the normal creative imagination. Nothing imagined, no horror. . . can match the reality experienced and recalled by those who lived through the holocaust.

(John M. Maki
in his Introduction to *Devil's Heritage*)

Alamagordo, Hiroshima and the third in the series was the detonation of the plutonium bomb 'Fat Man' over Nagasaki on 9 August 1945. And 'Fat Man' was as efficient an engine of destruction as 'Little Boy', and Nagasaki teamed with Hiroshima as stinging symbols of Man's cruelty to humanity. Such, then, were the beginnings of a new Age in human history—shall we call it Anno Bombini?

Starting with the isolation of the neutron in 1932 and its use in 1938-39 to split the uranium atom, release more neutrons, which in turn could do further atom-splitting and release yet more neutrons in a chain reaction, science was now on the threshold of ominous possibilities. In August 1939, Einstein wrote to President Roosevelt advising him to harness the newly accessible atomic power. But even before Roosevelt read and acted upon the letter, Yogi Sri Aurobindo, brooding in the silences of his Ashram at Pondicherry, saw the core of the problem of nuclear fission and its terrible possibilities, and wrote the sonnet 'A Dream of Surreal Science' (dated 26 September) in a mood of fierce but prophetic urgency:

Thus wagged on the surreal world till
A scientist played with atoms and blew out
The universe before God had time to shout.

Sri Aurobindo was not thinking of the splitting of a particular kind of atom (uranium, plutonium) alone, but of the possible shattering of the very foundations of matter, the infiltration into the innermost chamber of stability, thereby initiating the irrevocable dissolution of all matter and of earth as well.

In the Biblical account, Adam and Eve are given a free run of the Garden of Eden except for the fruit of a single tree. Their wanton transgression meant the sentence of inevitable individual death. In the wider Garden of our hospitable Earth, there was perhaps a similar implied prohibition relating to obsessive inquiry in the name of science and callous exploitation in the name of technology: "Little Man, here at the threshold of the atom is your journey's end: dare no farther!" But Man must stifle even the last breath of prudence, giving God himself no chance to redeem the disobedient. After the first 'fall', notwithstanding individual death some time or other, life went on, and the race endured, and even fared forward. Now after the second transgression, the collective end of the human race itself, and perhaps of all life on earth, have become grim possibilities, or near-certainties.

It is a new Age we are living in, for mankind moved, on 16

July 1945, from Anno Domini to Anno Bombini, and we are in the 44th year of this Age of delirious ambiguity. And what's the burden of human guilt today, and how far have we denied the Light, and cantered into the Darkness? After the atomic blasts over Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Edith Sitwell the English poetess was profoundly stirred, and she now spoke out in words dipped in acid or boiling oil. *The Shadow of Cain* is thus a resoundingly articulate poem, and nothing less than total ruin faces Homo Sapiens today since we have witnessed yet once again Adam's fall, Cain's crime and Judas' treachery. And Man in the pride born of his technological power and the spiritual blindness that's the consequence of such power has returned once more to his native transgressions:

But there came a roar as if the Sun and Earth had come
together—
The Sun descending and the Earth ascending
To take its place above. . . the Primal Matter
Was broken, the womb from which all life began.
Then to the murdered Sun a totem pole of dust arose in memory
of Man. . .
"I lie under what condemnation?"
"The same as Adam, the same as Cain, the same as Sodom,
the same as Judas. . ."

Under the changed conditions of today following the splitting of the atom, and the use of nuclear power for purposes of war as well as peace, and fuelled by the chronic rivalry between the superpowers—the United States and the Soviet Union—a giant uncertainty has been hovering over the people who inhabit our common homestead, our shared space-ship, our dear hospitable Earth. Since 9 August 1945, when 'Fat Man' exploded over Nagasaki, the world has somehow been spared the detonation of a nuclear bomb as an instrument of war. But a mad arms race has been going on, and the superpowers and the other nuclear States—Britain, France and China—have between them a total of 60,000 warheads, each with a vastly greater capacity for destruction than the first atomic devices of 1945. It is nevertheless a fact that, for almost 44 years, a nuclear war with its

catastrophic consequences has been avoided. Two cheers at least for this much prudence, this much residual sanity.

On the other hand, it is no less true that through accident, human error, sabotage, a sudden attack of madness disabling a key functionary, or of course deliberate enemy action, a nuclear war can start with unforeseeable consequences. And this could happen any time, any day, any hour, any minute. Such is the intolerable, and apparently unescapable, predicament in which the rival power blocs are caught—like two scorpions in a bottle, as Oppenheimer once described them, or two opposing hijackers aboard Earth the super aircraft, as Franklin C. Stark described them—that a precarious ‘balance of terror’ is being maintained with Pentagon and Kremlin playing at preparedness and deterrence, hoping for peace, yet poised for Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD). Too frightened to launch a nuclear war, equally frightened to disarm unilaterally, and too calculating and suspicious to achieve drastic disarmament, the current concert of distrust and deterrence goes on, to everybody’s exasperation. As the poet Galway Kinnell has said, today the fundamental project of technology—this, after the white flash over Hiroshima and Nagasaki—is to be ready for worse and worse to happen

Until the day flashes and no one lives

To look back and say, a flash, a white flash sparked.

(Writing in a Nuclear Age, p. 41)

The situation can be summed up best in the words of Terence des Pres:

We have fallen from the Garden, and the Garden itself—Nature conceived as an inviolate wilderness—is pocked with nuclear waste and toxic dumps . . . Nuclear threat, simply as threat, undermines all certainty, and things once absolute are now contingent. . . Nuclear wipe-out is possible, perhaps probable . . . no soul is free of that terror. . . (ibid., pp. 8-9)

It is thus hardly surprising that, in the post-1945 world, our sense of time and history, our retrospective sweeps of memory and prospective vistas of possibility, have alike suffered a distor-

tion that's both repulsive and demoralising. The familiar Clío's Clock—a minute for a century for all the 6000-year stretch of the familiar history of civilised man, the minute-hand serenely approaching 12 o'clock once more—has had to give place to quite a different kind of clock, stationary and spasmodic, reassuring and upsetting. Soon after the ushering in of Anno Bombini by the man-made split-second hell-fires at Alamagordo, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, a group of 46 scientists—eighteen of them Nobel Laureates—set up in 1947 what they called the Doomsday Clock. And their mouthpiece, the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, now in its 45th year, has been showing or warning how close indeed the world is to zero hour, the Doomsday tryst, the nuclear holocaust. In the pictured clock, the hand indicates where—exactly where—humankind is currently perched in its frenzied incertitude or its revived trembling hope for survival. World events, the see-saw of threats and counter-threats, the quest for one 'ultimate' weapon or 'final' deterrent after another, the mounting fury of rival suspicions and hysterical hallucinations, the fury of competitive nuclear stock-piling, and the progressive rumble of protest against the high-placed protagonists of massive homicide or global suicide, all are fed into the Atomic Scientists' master-computer, and the latest position—whether one of comparative hope or accelerated alarm—is broadcast on the Doomsday Clock.

Nay more, this Doomsday Clock is but an integral part of the Doomsday Machine that human hi-tech civilisation in the latter half of our century has perversely yet helplessly transformed itself to be. The 'machine' metaphor, once no more than a journalistic phrase, is now a weird actuality. While the hapless anonymous world community of perhaps 4 billion men, women and children slumber or address themselves to harmless occupations or the games that the carefree play, the privileged or assertive ones with their demented preoccupation with nuclear power for war and/or peace, and working through the war lords, politicians, bureaucrats, scientists, technologists and industrialists, have (as though unconsciously) turned civilisation itself into a super Doomsday Machine, with built-in triggers all over the Northern Hemisphere, and operational right now, and

all the time, to encompass world-wide annihilation.

The Machine is there all right, though not blatantly visible to the naked eye, and the Clock is there too, for all to see. In 1947, when it was set up by the Atomic scientists, the Doomsday Clock showed 7 minutes to midnight. Six years later, in 1953, when the Soviet Union had the Hydrogen Bomb as well (they had the A-bomb in 1949), the Clock showed 2 minutes to midnight, which meant perilously close to the brink. After many vicissitudes and the coming of the thaw in US-USSR relations, in 1972 the clock showed 12 minutes to midnight or doom-time. After this high-rise moment of peaceful co-existence, things were to worsen gradually in East-West postures, and the Clock showed on 22 December 1983, after the collapse of the US-USSR summit talks in Geneva, a mere 4 minutes to Doomsday. And President Reagan's obsession with the 'star wars' or the SDI (Strategic Defence Initiative) programme pushed the hand to 3 minutes in January 1984.

But a change came in 1987, and it was now 6 minutes to midnight. As the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* stated in its issue of January 1988:

For 16 years, the Bulletin Clock has moved steadily towards midnight. Since January 1984, it has stood at 3 minutes before the hour. But recent events—the US-Soviet Treaty to eliminate intermediate range nuclear forces (INF), the improvement in super-power relations, and the increase in international and non-governmental efforts to reverse the arms race—demonstrate that the world's dangerous course can be changed. In recognition of these developments, we now turn the clock hand to 6 minutes to midnight.

After 1945, the arms race had taken two fateful steps. First, the making of the H-bomb, so much more lethal than the A-bomb; and second, both sides going far beyond the safe number of warheads needed for deterrence. After the bombs, the inter-continental rockets, the guided missile submarine, and so on, a mad quest for more and more and worse and worse. In the result, both sides have achieved a competence "for raining down hundreds of thousands of Hiroshimas on the adversary"

(Bernard Brodie). But now, for the first time, the two super-powers have agreed to a reduction however small or notional. Certainly a change in direction and a determined step towards human survival and lasting world peace, and yet no more than a beginning: for even after the INF Treaty, there are more than 95% of the US-Soviet nuclear arsenals in tact, thus leaving the Doomsday Machine almost as inflammable as before. There is thus no room for complacency. Nuclear arms production remains the biggest, most prestigious and most hazardous industry in the world. Besides, with such a genie as nuclear power, it is idle to make a distinction between bombs for war and reactors for peace, especially after the Three Mile Island and Chernobyl disasters. Let there be no ambiguity about it: nuclear power is but a Faustian bargain, and sooner or later the price will have to be paid.

No room, then, for *tamasic* complacency, notwithstanding the Clock showing 6 minutes to zero hour. Accordingly the aim of all serious human endeavour at the present time should be to create conditions that will render the Doomsday Clock obsolete and unnecessary, by reducing and eventually eliminating the presence of nuclear power itself, whether in times of war or peace.

When the first atomic bomb was exploded over Alamagordo, among the viewers were James B. Conant, President of Harvard, and Dr. Vannevar Bush, Director of the American Office of Scientific Research and Development. On the instant the bomb exploded and all was over, as the *New York Times* reported, "these men leapt to their feet; the terrible tension ended, they shook hands, embraced each other and shouted in delight." Was this typical of the reaction of American intellectuals to the release of the nuclear genie from the atomic bottle? Or was it but an instance of 'the treason of the educated classes', as Julien Benda might have put it? President Truman himself thought that the bomb was 'the greatest thing in history', and it was only later, when the benumbing details of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki enormities of destruction and suffering became public knowledge, that he admitted, as reported by David Lilienthal: "You have to understand that this isn't a military weapon. It

is used to wipe out women, children and unarmed people” (*Journals*, Vol. 2, p. 391). And for this kind of blind handiwork, ‘holocaust’ is the right evocative word. For we now know that a nuclear weapon’s packed energies are released as blast, heat and radiation; and the mushroom-like fire-ball enacts the ruthless engine of instant devastation, and also initiates long-term biological and environmental consequences. Writing on ‘Nuclear War and Climatic Catastrophe’, Dr. Carl Sagan the noted Harvard psychiatrist says:

These four effects—obscuring smoke in the troposphere, obscuring dust in the stratosphere, the fall-out of radioactive debris, and the partial destruction of the ozone layer (ozonosphere) constitute the principal adverse environmental consequences that we know would occur after a nuclear war is ‘over’. There may be others about which we are still in ignorance.

(*The Long Darkness*,
ed. by Lester Grinspoon, 1986, p. 18)

Also possible is the shutting off of sunlight from the earth for as long as a week or more, and the onset of nuclear winter with its bitter cold. Agriculture may be adversely affected, and the food chain disrupted . . . In short, a total shambles instead of the old ruling order.

However unpleasant, it is necessary we should confront the end-of-the-world holocaust image that haunts us, for otherwise we will not know how serious the malady is and how best we may hope to master and transcend it with a holistic finality. There is the Himalayan stock-piling of arms, for instance, and we hear of more and more sophisticated and diabolical instruments of death and destruction. We read of the Trident submarine, but what is it? How vast is its striking power? The author of the epic, *Hard Country*, Sharon Doubiago, wrote this piece ‘Ground Zero’ on 25 March 1982:

Say the word Hiroshima.
Reflect on its meaning for one second.
Say and understand Hiroshima again . . .
two thousand and forty times.
That’s one Trident submarine

(*Writing in a Nuclear Age*, p. 16)

But to calculate the entire Trident fleet's destructive potentiality, "it will take you seventeen hours/devoting one second to each Hiroshima." Such is the arithmetic of the arms build-up of the nuclear Age.

Here is another nuclear scenario by Susan Griffin:

224 warheads destroy
every Soviet city with a population
over 100,000.
But once I begin writing
the figures do not stop.
A megaton bomb, a firestorm rages over
3,000 acres.
A 1,000 megaton bomb
destroys California,
Nevada, Utah, Oregon. (ibid., p. 136)

This is a forecast of what might happen with deterrence failing and both sides firing all the warheads available. Would there be any survivors? When the question was put some years ago to George Bush, his reply was:

You have survivability of command and control, survivability of industrial potential, protection of a percentage of your citizens, and you have a capability that inflicts more damage on the opposition than it can inflict on you.

As for the population, Bush could only say, in answer to a leading question, that more than "5 per cent" would certainly survive. Not a pretty picture, and things are in no better shape today. (*Nukespeak*, by Stephen Hilgartner & Others, 1982, p. 207)

It is doubtful if, as President of USA, George Bush will reiterate his earlier opinion of survivability in the event of a large scale nuclear war. Perhaps the 'star wars' (SDI) programme may encourage a more optimistic view all round. For the mass of world humanity, however, '6 minutes to midnight' is still a pretty alarming proposition. With tens of thousands of warheads in our nuclear arsenals ready to kill and kill again all

mankind many times over, a 5% or 10% or even 50% reduction in the world's nuclear weaponry is simply not enough. Increasingly as the days and months pass, and intimations get diffused about the possible carnage and other appalling results of an accidental or deliberate detonation of even one of the stockpile of nuclear warheads on either side, human perceptions and anticipations are being influenced beyond precedent. The challenge to human survival is serious indeed, for (as recently stated by Lord Zuckerman), "it is possible to pack sufficient destructive force into a single Hydrogen-Bomb to crush and burn to a frazzle all the inhabitants of Washington DC, even all those of the whole of Manhattan" (*New York Review of Books*, 31 March 1988). The revolutions in transport and communications have bridged all distances except the inches that still divide man and man. But living as we do in the comfortably shrunk Global Village, it is for individuals here—there—and everywhere—to assume something like world responsibility. As Jim Schley says in his preface to *Writing in a Nuclear Age*:

We live in a world impoverished by preparations for the ultimate war . . .

Just as the human race is the source of its own greatest peril, we are now the only source of any hope . . . Our determination to prevent a war must be as intense as our dread of the nuclear blast.

The earlier *tamasic* attitude of ignorance, indifference, craven fear, feeling of helplessness, the reign of icy fatality and feeling of futility and paralysing despair, should now give place to life-affirmation, responsibility, new thinking, robust hope and faith, and a concerted new information and education offensive, and resolute remedial action. Perhaps our mental constitutions and our staled sensibilities too need a measure of *perestroika* and *glasnost*, and if we can meet the challenge, Tomorrow will be ours still, and the cockroach may not take over, after all.

But this is still a dream and a hope, an aspiration and a prayer. As of today, the challenge to our sanity, our yet lingering capacity for hope, and our readiness to re-think our ends and means add up to a twyfold edge that's envenomed as well. First the near-certainty, the high probability, that a nuclear holo-

caust—however and wherever begun, and whatever our current structure of safeguards and contingent plans—must encompass all humanity, all living creatures, thus signalling with remorseless finality the end of the adventure of life on the earth. It is now generally accepted that more and still more lethal nuclear weapons do not mean more security; only a more criminally wasteful expenditure of the scarce resources of the earth, impoverishing yet further the quality of life of large sections of the disprivileged of the earth. It is authoritatively said that between 500 and 1000 nuclear warheads are enough to accomplish a global climatic catastrophe, and to exterminate all humankind. Yet Man has saddled himself with arsenals of bloated strength and killer-capacity. It makes no sense at all, for isn't this rather like a superlatively exaggerated readiness to break a live butterfly on a gigantic wheel, with a huge hammer poised precariously a couple of inches above! This bizarre image yet brings out best the dimensions of the world's aggregated nuclear arms and the frightened vainglory of the human warlords, with their unsure fingers near the crucial doomsday-triggering buttons.

The second, and even more tantalising, aspect of the crisis in human and earth history concerns the precise timing of the seemingly foredoomed catastrophe. Were all the available data about the arms race, the potential trouble-spots, the location and incendiary range of the 60,000 warheads, the illusions and egoisms of the concerned militarists, politicians, bureaucrats, scientists, technologists and armament-industrialists, were all this fed into an infallible computer for working out the possibilities of the future, the answer might be: "Doomsday? It is poised to happen, for the process has begun, the grinding is going on, and now or later it must explode by its own self-induced fury of momentum. There's perhaps—perhaps—some little grace-time still. Awake, puny and foolish Man, awake in time, draw back from the brink; and with a single, unique and definitive master-act immobilise the Machine, and achieve survival and the new Life!"

Permit me now to take a brief backward glance, sweep past a century, and invoke the final scene in *Ghosts* (1881), by the

great Norwegian dramatist, Henrik Ibsen, often called the creator of modern European drama. In the climactic scene, young Oswald tells his mother, Mrs. Alving, that doctors had diagnosed his ailment as a hereditary curse, a likely sudden but incurable softening of the brain any day, any moment. A case of the sins of the fathers being visited upon the children! And Oswald tells his mother that, should the thing happen indeed and whenever it did, she must at once administer the pill in his pocket that would instantly end his untenable life. She cries in her agony: "I, your mother?" "Yes, who has a better right?" is Oswald's answer.

The human predicament today is not unlike the wretched Oswald's in Ibsen's play. Should doctors promote voluntary pre-emptive deaths to save men, women and children from the sure effects of nuclear radiation? Should a mother prefer her child to die with a cyanide capsule in the mouth to braving the inevitable consequences of exposure to a radioactive environment? Isn't death preferable to inevitable malformation, disuse of limbs, cancerous growth and worse? These are the very questions that figure in Nevil Shute's famous novel, *On the Beach* (1957). Thinking men and women must ask the overpowering question, "When, when will this horror exceeding horror begin stalking the wide spaces of the earth?"

We are all familiar with the *Mahabharata* story of Savitri and Satyavan, rendered anew in our time as a symbolistic epic by Sri Aurobindo. The all-knowing sage, Narada, gives Savitri the pre-knowledge that her chosen lord, Satyavan, has but a year more of life in this world. She has this specified interim to prepare for the dread event, fight Yama in the worlds of Night and Twilight, effect the death of Death itself, and recover Satyavan the Soul of the World. In the largely computer-controlled world of the year Anno Bombini 44, the fate of the earth and of its inhabitants hangs, it would appear, by the slenderest of threads, and one can but recall and give anxious thought to the Message given in 1967 by the Mother of Sri Aurobindo Ashram:

Men, countries, continents!
The choice is imperative:
Truth or the Abyss.

Truth or the Abyss! Caught somewhere between the extremes of Everlasting Light and Eternal Night, present-day mankind is also a prey to the harrowing uncertainty of the 'when'—'when' exactly, if indeed it must, the blow will actually fall. An American poet, Sharon Olds, brings out the trembling uncertainty that poisons almost every moment in the life of the people who now feel they are already branded Doomsday's Children:

I wonder now only when it will happen,
when the young mother will hear
noise like somebody's pressure cooker
down the block, going off. She'll go out in the yard,
holding her small daughter in her arms,
and there, above the end of the street, in the
air above the line of the trees,
she will see it rising, lifting up
over our horizon, the upper rim of the
gold ball, large as a giant
planet starting to life up over ours . . .

(Writing in a Nuclear Age, p. 72)

It is as though, for innocent people like this mother—and there must be millions, millions, the world over—the ancient joy of life, the delight in the sheer fact of living, is gone for ever.

A hard, close, unblenching look at the world today will thus reveal the frightening contours of the ever alert Doomsday Machine well entrenched behind the mask of our familiar world of the so-called United Nations, the one hundred and fifty 'sovereign' nation-states, and all the glittering paraphernalia of our electronic consumerist demi-paradise. Again, overawing the old familiar Anno Domini calendar and the traditional but mini Clio's Clock to which Dr. Radhakrishnan referred while rapidly reviewing nearly 6000 years of the history of civilised Man, we see the grim, sinister, terrifying Anno Bombini calendar for the year 44, and the accusing finger of the ominous Dooms-

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day Clock showing 'Six minutes to Midnight', meaning and warning and almost decreeing 'Six minutes to Doomsday'! Which means it's any time from now for the holocaust, and the Clock seems to say: "Any time from now, and therefore awake, and pray and labour for the reprieve; and let it mean a determined and definitive retrieval from the brink of the Abyss and a happy and auspicious return to the Truth of human brotherhood, the motherhood of our green hospitable Earth, the exorcising away of the nuclear peril, and the reign of global peace and concord." Either scenario is open to humanity today: the mad plunge into the Abyss of pride and strife and racial suicide, *or* the long night's journey back to brotherhood and survival, and the tasks of peace and universal well-being. In this intriguing phoenix-hour, it is a matter for thankfulness that the issue—Truth or the Abyss—is open still.



Lecture II

The Clock and the Man of Letters

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Ah, poet. . .
On behalf of the one child in a hundred
who might some day read your poem
and the other ninety-nine who are that poem—

turn your ears to the wind of death,
your eyes to the derricks of death,
shout BEWARE! BEWARE! as if Ezekiel
stood again on his street-corner in Jerusalem.

Aaron Kramer (in *Writing in a Nuclear Age*, p. 77)

Night opened and vanished like a gulf of dream. . .
There poured a wide intimate and blissful Dawn,
Healed were all things that Time's torn heart had made
And sorrow could live no more in Nature's breast:
Division ceased to be. . .

Sri Aurobindo (in *Savitri*, II, viii)

Towards the sag-end of my first lecture, I recalled a New Year message of the Mother of Sri Aurobindo Ashram clinched by the billion billion dollar query, "TRUTH or the ABYSS?" In our present predicament, when the choice is between sanity and insanity, survival and omnicide, a determined ascent towards a planetary dispensation and a frenzied plunge into oblivion, the question I would like to pose is this: "What is the role of the Man of Letters at the present time of harrowing uncertainty about the future?" The writer has his work cut out for him, and this he has been doing at all times. Because of a unique endowment at the time of his nativity, the man of letters is sensitive above others to see into the truth of things, and he is gifted too with the power to articulate his findings for the benefit of his fellow-men:

He's Sahitya Purusha, come missioned
With Vāk-Shakti that's more than word and sound,
More potent than hi-tech Yantra-Shakti,
Or the cold cunning of Tantra-Shakti.

And the Man of Letters has a three-fold responsibility: to the

truth of things as perceived by him, to his audience to tell the truth as seen by him, and to his medium—the living language—that should admit neither weakening nor impurity, neither compromise nor escapism. Art for Art's sake, of course, and poetry for poetry's sake, in the sense the work of art or the poem should permit no infusion of the second-hand, the perverse or the irrelevant. But art or poetry is for Truth's sake too, life's sake, survival's sake, communication's sake, communion's sake, and for the tasks of conversion, redemption and transformation. As Allen Tate said (in his Phi Beta Kappa address at the University of Minnesota on 1 May 1952), the poet in our time must do what he had always done, that is, "recreate for his age the image of man"; propagate standards for the benefit of his readers, and make his writing the burning brazier of knowledge and enlightenment for intelligent human understanding and appropriate action:

What happens in one mind may happen as influence or coincidence, in another; when the same idea spreads to two or more minds of considerable power, it may eventually explode, through chain reaction, in a whole society; it may dominate a period or an entire epoch.
(*Collected Essays*, 1959, p. 380).

In other words, the fissional chain reaction in the world of matter has to be matched by an inner chain reaction—moral, religious, spiritual—that may in time arrest the Rake's Progress towards the Abyss, and bring about the needed revolution in our thought and action, and not only put back the hand of the Doomsday Clock, but dispense with it altogether.

Soon after the Chernobyl catastrophe that gave a massive demonstration of the terrible vulnerability of the entire 'atoms for peace' programme, an American bone marrow specialist, Dr. Robert Peter Gale, acquired before emplaning for Russia a copy of Tolstoy's famous short story 'The Death of Ivan Ilyitch' (1886). "It was", he said, "a way to re-examine death after all we had seen" (*New York Times Magazine*, 13 July 1986). Intrigued by this, I re-read the story. Lying on his death-bed, Ilyitch overhears the kind of talk that goes on around him. The medical specialists argue about blood and urine tests,

temperature charts, and diagnosis after diagnosis. "It was not a question of Ivan Ilyitch's life or death, but one between a floating kidney or appendicitis." Friends and relations chatter on, mingling the trivial with the serious with blithe unconcern. For Ilyitch, it's life or death; for the others, it's an occasion for a whole range of irrelevance, insensitivity and inconsequence. His little son's pure love is alone the saving grace! Even so, we now live in a world that is subsisting on borrowed time as it were, and half-petrified by the o'erhanging Damocles' Sword: average humanity finds it easier to follow the cricket scores, the stock exchange fluctuations, the unending ripples on the turbid stream of politics, and the perpetual small-talk and casual glitter of suburban social life, than to face the nuclear challenge in all its grim manifestations and ramifications, and mount a moral and spiritual offensive for sanity and survival. And 'summit talks' center round 5% or 10% reduction of warheads, laboratory or open-air testings, a 15-year or 50-year staggering: it is once more 'floating kidney or appendicitis'!

It is characteristic of our age of galloping science and technology, multiplication of physical aids and acceleration of the tempo of living, that individuals and aggregates today are more concerned with means than ends; the outer man of affairs than the inner psychic man, the thinker, the seer; and with speed and noise and doing, than with poise and silence and being. Society has been hypnotised to worship the dynamo and the electronic toy rather than the Virgin and the garden nightingale. The gadgets and engines of comfort and convenience multiply, but we have no idea of the ends, no sense of direction, no vision of the goals. It is for the man of letters to awaken, augment and give momentum to the native human intelligence, which otherwise is apt to be smothered by the seeming efficiency and drive of omnipresent technology. In our time of continuing crisis, it is his role—endowed as he is (to beg the question) with sharper, almost infallible, perceptions compared with those of the generality of mankind—to play the Physician of the Iron Age and tell us fearlessly and with crystalline clarity what the prevalent malady is, where Man has gone wrong, and how he may yet redeem the time and himself. The vast somnolent mass of man-

kind as well as the elect ones with warped minds and defective vision, all need to be stung to a recognition of the grim truth about the warning broadcast by the Doomsday Clock: Six minutes to midnight! No doubt, the man of letters has but a limited audience in the first instance. "Through recorded history," says Joseph Brodsky the Nobel Laureate, "the audience for poetry seldom amounted to more than 1% of the entire population." But a fit audience though few can start its own chain reaction, broaden, widen and deepen the salutary influence, and the critical strength so achieved can be the means of a new education, a cleansing illumination, arresting the seemingly inevitable drift to the Abyss, and effecting a retrieval, and a decisive reversal of direction. Confronting contemporary life steadily and boldly—even as Vyasa did describing the road to Kurukshetra—the man of letters today can state the truth, the whole integral truth about the current complex of terror and pity, and also spell out any possible route to a fair future.

The usual ineptitude of response to the nuclear peril is the pseudo-commonsense of dismissing all grave warnings as immature fright-talk. For instance, in their 1984 publication, *The Doomsday Myth*, Charles Maurice and Charles W. Smithson argue that the world has overcome economic crises for 10,000 years, and can be expected to do so in the future just by allowing market forces to work unfettered by Government intervention! Others ask: "The world has survived many eruptions of war and violence, why then all this new-fangled hysteria?" After all, didn't the Battle of the Somme in 1916, and the bombing of Tokyo that preceded the Hiroshima action, cause very heavy casualties? History has indeed known such orgies of decimation on the battle-field or through aerial bombing, and has also lived them down. Yet the nuclear brand of devastation does mean an apex dimension of horror. When an individual ceases to be, he still lives in his progeny, and in the works of art or the institutions he had helped to build. The individual, born of the race, sustaining and being sustained by the race, still lives in the race abiding. But the nuclear misadventure can destroy even this last consolation or flattering unction to human souls. Hence W.H. Auden's weirdly moving invocation of the old and the new horror:

These after all are our familiar tribulations. . .
From sword to ploughshare, coffin to cradle, war to work,
So that, taking the bad with the good, the pattern composed
By the ten thousand odd things that can possibly happen
Is permanent in a general way.

Till lately we knew of no other. . .

But things have changed now, and suddenly the Anno Bombini world is too much with us. We are seized with a twitch that's *not* headache or indigestion:

But this horror starting already to scratch Its way in?
Just how, just when It succeeded we shall never know:
We can only say that now It is there and nothing
We learnt before It was there is now of the slightest use,
For nothing like It has happened before.

(*Writing in a Nuclear Age*, pp, 1-2)

Another poet, William Dickey, after recalling the vaporisation of people by 'an unexpected Sun' and only their shadows being left burnt into the wall, turns to the present:

I asked a young man about twenty, my student, whether
the thought of this possibility was in his mind,
and he said yes, even at a loud noise
in the street he would think: now it is happening. . .

And he concludes with a reference to the Mushroom Cloud and the Doomsday Clock:

The mushroom cloud
ascending, the clock on the *Bulletin* cover
a minute from midnight. These images
we live under and among. The possibility of absence
so complete we will hardly have known what absence was. . .

(*ibid.*, p. 43)

With the knowledge we have of Hiroshima-Nagasaki, we are driven to the conclusion that the only remedy for the nuclear blast, the fire-ball mushroom and the nuclear winter—and the miscellany of infernos they evoke at once—can be, not evacu-

ation plans, shelters, rehabilitation blue-prints, nor the star wars programme either, but timely prevention through the total dismantling and destruction or neutralisation of nuclear power, whether packed in warheads or in potential Chernobyls. The handbook of scientists and technologists no doubt deserves to be held in high regard, but there can be reservations. For my purpose a single incident must suffice. On 3 July 1988, as you will recollect, a 177-ft long Iran Airbus carrying 290 civilians, on a regularly scheduled flight to Dubai, was hit by two missiles launched by USS *Vincennes*. If it was a genuine mistake, the question has to be posed: "How could so sophisticated and costly (\$600 million a copy) an intelligence-cum-weapons system, and the highly trained men who operate it, have gone so terribly wrong?" (*Time*, 18 July 1988). Commenting on this, George G. Church saw the disaster as an event "with dismaying implications for a nuclear-armed world":

The US, and by extension other countries using such high-tech weapons, may have become prisoners of technology so speedy and complex that it forces the fallible humans who run it into snap decisions that can turn into disaster.

The *Vincennes*, one of 11 US cruisers with the "most sophisticated battle-managing array of radars, sensors, computers and automatically guided weapons ever put together", nevertheless saw it all wrong, and destroyed an Airbus within 7 minutes after it was detected. The following comment, then, points directly at nuclear power as well:

The central problem is whether technology may be pushing the fallible humans who operate it beyond their ability to make wise judgements instantly on the basis of what, with even the most sophisticated systems, will often be ambiguous information. The question applies, not only in the Persian gulf, but wherever there are fingers on buttons that can launch deadly weapons.

Earlier, in 1983, the USSR had downed the Korean Air Lines Ft. 007, with heavy loss of life; and recently in September 1988, a range safety officer destroyed a properly functioning US Navy

Trident test missile (cost: \$40 million) in the mistaken belief that it was veering out of control. Thus, in Congressman Les Aspin's words, "there's always someone who doesn't get the word!"

Further, between 1971 and August 1984, two 'significant' and 149 'potentially significant' mishaps are said to have occurred in 14 industrial nations outside the two superpowers (Bennett Ramberg, 'Learning from Chernobyl', *Foreign Affairs*, Winter 86/87). And one has also to take note of acts of sabotage that might, by a series of misunderstandings, lead to a world conflict with predictable results. It is on record that, between 1970 and 1984, as many as 292 acts or threats of sabotage or diversion of nuclear materials took place. The threats from terrorists, of course, and their callousness towards loss of innocent life and spread of civil confusion give yet another twist to our frantic thinking about the unthinkable.

Consider, again, the nuclear wastes arising out of arms production or power generation. While emphatic assurances of safety aren't wanting, there's the other side too, the unsavoury one. For example, Robert Alvazar and Arjun Makhijani, in their article on 'Radio-active Waste', give a pretty grim picture of the problem as it affects USA. The Department of Energy (DOE) is immune from "outside oversight from either Congress or environmental agencies", with the result the buried wastes have begun "to threaten employees and the public". In one instance, whereas "experts predicted that plutonium waste would not reach the water table for one million years," actually it took only 20 years! (*Technology Review*, Aug./Sept. 1988). In India, Dr. M.R. Srinivasan, Chairman of the Atomic Power Commission, stated recently that "well-engineered solid-waste facilities were functioning at all major sites" (*Indian Express*, Madras, 25 September 1988). But how seriously are we to take such strident assurances from our hi-tech barons of omniscience? In subtle and not so subtle ways, amoral science is now making inroads into the human psyche and man's (woman's) quintessential personality, and it would be wise to heed the grave warning from Derek Bok, President of Harvard:

Modern science is capable of producing knowledge that can be used

to alter society in frightening ways, even to the point of endangering its existence. The atomic bomb is sufficient proof of that. Moreover, the social impact of new discoveries has grown much greater during this century because we can now put knowledge to use so rapidly that society has much less time to prepare for the consequences by adjusting its practices and adapting its institutions.

(*Beyond the Ivory Tower*, 1982, p. 177)

Whichever path, then, inquiry or speculation may take, starting with the continued acceptance of the omnipresence of the Doomsday Machine, with furtive frightened looks at the pitiless pointing hand of the Clock, all roads alas! seem to lead, not to the promise of a New Dawn, but stark Doomsday, with all its sombre implications. Nor is this, come to think of it calmly, an altogether new predicament for sundry human aggregates, though not (as in our time) for the human race as a whole. The *Iliad* of Homer itself has been described (by George Steiner, in his *Death of Tragedy*) as “the primer of tragic art. In it are set forth the motifs or images around which the sense of the tragic has crystallised during nearly 3000 years of Western poetry.” What, after all, is Homer’s epic but the poignantly memorable and monumental rendering of the circumstances leading to the fall of a great city, death on a vast scale, the vainglory of heroic postures, the poison of human lust and pride and hatred, the plight of the hapless old bereaved ones, and of the abandoned women and children! The walled and impregnable city of Troy, although built by the gods themselves, is a many-splendoured but doomed city; and the Trojans were likewise a gifted but doomed people. Even so, for the eventual victors, the Greeks, for them too ’twas a costly and largely a futile or pyrrhic victory. The Trojans in their beleaguered city, the Greeks in their camps outside: Ravana and the Rakshasa veterans in their well-defended Lanka, Rama and his Vanara hosts without: quiet reigning on the Western front in Europe during the first world war, with Germans and the Allies on either side, poised for an offensive at any time: tens of thousands of lethal missiles ready to be launched with push-button alacrity on both sides of the Iron Curtain – it is the classic confrontation, albeit with sinister variations down the corridors of time and history, indeed even unto the

present time of superpower cold war with its chilling global ramifications.

While such is the normal-abnormal stalemate set-up, there are not wanting the occasional fireworks, the reckless hit-and-run operations, sudden crackers spoiling the eerie 'quiet' on the extended front, and giving a jolt to complacency. And periodic attempts at peace-making are also a part of the whole illogic of warfare. Blessed are the peace-makers, although theirs is a thankless job, and they act generally with a premonition of fatality. Krishna's peace mission to the Kuru Court is, without doubt, the prototypical demonstration of the need for such exercises as also of their inbuilt futility. In Sri Aurobindo's unfinished Homeric epic, *Ili n* describing the last day of the Trojan War, Thalthybius takes a proposal for peace from Achilles to the Trojan Court, but the mission—like many a similar peace offensive in human history—is foredoomed to failure. For long dreary years Troy has been under siege, and the Trojans have hoped and despaired; but lately an overwhelming sense of Doom—of approaching Doomsday - has begun to colour all thoughts, all pastimes, all occupations, all routine pleasures, all spasmodic movements. It is on a collective scale but not unlike Oswald's fatalistic resignation and mood of feverish expectancy in Ibsen's play, to which I made reference. Sri Aurobindo evokes the mood and the mind of the Trojans in a powerfully reverberant passage in the opening Canto of his epic:

Slowly the shadow deepened on Ilion mighty and scornful:
 Dragging her days went by; in the rear of the hearts of her people
 Something that knew what they dared not know
 and the mind would not utter,
 Something that smote at her soul of defiance
 and beauty and laughter,
 Darkened the hours. For Doom in her sombre and giant uprising
 Neared, assailing the skies: the sense of her lived in all pastimes;
 Time was pursued by unease and a terror woke in the midnight
 Even the ramparts felt her. . .

(*Ilion*, 1957, p. 6)

The rich Hexameter rhythm hauntingly recaptures the subliminal

communal mind of the people of the besieged city (and of the leaguers too in their tents outside). But do not these lines, with an eerie mesmeric quality, evoke the contemporary global situation as well, the fears and forebodings of people everywhere? The opening Canto was finalised for publication in 1942, and doubtless Sri Aurobindo had the second world war between the Allies and the Axis Powers in mind. More significant still, Sri Aurobindo seems to have seen—seen with uncanny prophetic divination the contours of the latter-day ‘cold war’ between the NATO and the Warsaw Pact countries.

May I cite now a brief passage from a recent novel, *Yatra* by Nina Sibal, evocative of a similar sense of doom that dogged every movement of men and women during the partition tragedy in Punjab in 1947:

Palji got his nephews and their hangers-on out of his house, but could not rid himself of the fear of loot, rape and death which they had brought with them. It clung to the walls, springing out of corners when he climbed the stairs to the kitchen to eat, and lay like a long, sleeping animal under the bed when he made love to his wife. Towards the end, It even began to follow them to the well in the morning for their baths, to the Bhimber stream in the evening, and to sit under the *shisham* trees in the garden all day, chewing on the grains of wheat.

Auden in the poem that I read earlier also invokes with weird reiteration the nameless It, the uncanny Enemy, the wooden horse within the walled city. It – the nameless horror, It—the killer-microbe, It – the current spectre of Doom—It could be smelt, Its malevolent presence could be felt, for It was everywhere, an evil omnipresence. “This is the abomination,” says Auden; “This is the wrath of God.” No doubt, on a superficial view, everything seems to go on as before, as always: the bed-tea, the morning newspaper, the cacophonous telephone call, the welcome if unexpected guest, and so on; yet there’s this hovering spectre, this disturbing thought, this ‘floating kidney’, this atmospheric invasion that’s guilt and uneasiness and fatality at once. As it was once in Priam’s Troy, so it is in Moscow or New

York, Leningrad or Los Angeles today, or in Beijing, Islamabad, New Delhi, or wherever. . .

Again, like the *Iliad*, the *Mahabharata* was a Doomsday epic, and an exposure to it can be a warning (in Krishna Chaitanya's words) "against the mushroom cloud that can envelop the whole planet and render toxic to life what little it leaves undestroyed." It was on the field of Kurukshetra, with the rival armies ranged against each other, with the prospective large-scale killing of kinsmen and elders looming before him, that Arjuna felt compelled to initiate the dialectic with Krishna, who took his puzzled and demoralised friend step by step to the climactic affirmation that, as Kāla the Time-Spirit, the Lord of Creation and Sustenance was also the summary Destroyer of the worlds. And doesn't this ring a shift in time, and aren't we back at Alamagordo on the forenoon of 16 July 1945, and Dr. Oppenheimer's identification of the monster Mushroom following the flash and the explosion with Kāla, the shatterer of the worlds?

Homer in his time, Vyasa in his: even so other poets have projected the enactment of Doomsday whenever Evil with its progeny is on the ascendant and the verities seem ineffective. In the ancient Tamil epic, Ilango's *Silappadhikāram*, for example, the evil of greed in the goldsmith and of criminal haste in the Pandyan King inflame the injured and bereaved Kannaki to burn the city of Madurai. The social aggregate is but an extended family, and when evil erupts somewhere, it soon infects the whole fabric. In the eyes of religion, all men are brothers, since God is the Father of all. It follows that any war is but civil war. This Abel-Cain aspect of revolt against kinship and brotherhood is specially highlighted in the fateful Karna-Arjuna antagonism, and in the Kaurava-Pandava conflict generally. Again, in Shakespeare's History Plays, the theme is civil war and fratricidal strife. This acquires a peculiar poignancy in *Henry VI*, Part III (IV.v), and like the ineffective Henry himself, we too watch from a mole-hill the dismal spectacle of the shocked surprise of a son who has unknowingly killed his father, and a father who has killed his son, their identities having been masked during the fighting by the armour and visor. At the end of the Lancastrian and Yorkist tetralogies, most of the two warring families

are dead, and an apology for peace and normalcy limps back to life.

Dawn after the Day and Night After the holocaust—however weighted with memory and feeble in hope and marked by local variations—is a fresh beginning all the same. When the madness of killing and getting killed is over, the survivors all too few or bruised in mind—hopefully let the pulses of life beat again whether in Hastinapura after Kurukshetra; in England after the death of Richard III; in Europe on 8 May 1945, after the collapse of Hitler's Germany; or in Japan, after Hiroshima and Nagasaki, on 15 August 1945.

Here, then, is the challenge—or the challenging opportunity—that should sting the man of letters to action. Beyonding the endemic offensive of terror and pity, facing unblenched the whole horror of even the grim nuclear predicament, the Doomsday Machine and the Clock, can not the man of letters today venture to glance from earth to gaping hell, and back from the abyss to our green earth, and also steal a glance at a possible, plausible heaven; and armoured by hope and faith, dare to look at a post-nuclear world of human brotherhood and harmony? The 'sublime', says Terence des Pres (whom I have already cited earlier), "arises from terror"—

terror beheld and resisted, the terror of revolution for Wordsworth, of the abyss for Whitman, of nuclear annihilation for any poet today who would make a language to match our certainty.

(*Writing in a Nuclear Age*, p. 11)

Every revolution comes as a challenge to the immortal spirit of Man. The Copernican Revolution that shoved Man to an obscure corner of an infinitely vast universe posed the derisive question, "Little Man, what now?" The Darwinian Revolution queried: "Little Ape, what now?" The Freudian Revolution asked: "Iceberg Man, with a hidden Unconscious dominating your inner countries, what now?" After the Biological Revolution and the cracking of the genetic code, the taunt was, "Wretched little Man with your manipulable cells, what now?" And after the Nuclear Revolution and the menace to civilisation and life on earth, the dismissive question can be: "Doomsday

Man, what now?" All these Revolutions have tried in their several ways to endanger, diminish or destroy the human entity and the native power of his personality. Obscure location in the cosmos, blatant animal appearance, the lopsided structure of consciousness, the atomic build of the body, the vulnerable cellular constitution, the Medusa stare of the Doomsday Clock petrifying all hope of a future for man and his planetary home: these diverse shocks and set-backs do add up to something like total discomfiture. And yet there's one dimension left unaffected still, the soul, the ineluctable invincible human spirit. Who has said the last word about the cosmos, or Man the microcosmos? In the spiritual reckoning, isn't the centre of the universe everywhere, and the circumference nowhere? If the reserves of the fuming wastes of the Unconscious have their potentiality for misdirection and mischief, aren't there the spiralling plateaus of the above-mind Vijnāna regions which, when opened up and charted, could transcend current defeats and frustrations, and bring the higher superconscious powers to the earth-stage, redeem our envenomed time and annul even the nuclear abominations once and for all? By the mere fact of his being a man of letters, a seeing man among the blind and the myopic, he wields an authority that flows from his experiential—not experimental—knowledge and wisdom. And undaunted by the scenarios of the future projected by speculative thinkers about the unthinkable, by the dreamers of nightmares like the film 'The Day After' (1982), futurological fictional narratives like Nevil Shute's *On the Beach* and Andrew Sinclair's *The Project* (1960), and refusing to be paralysed into fatalistic resignation by even the well-informed prophets of Doom, our man of letters at this time should be true to his delegated Vision and faculty divine, and affirm without ambiguity or feebleness of conviction his faith in Man and his future in his planetary home, the Earth, and their endurance and survival and further evolution in the unfolding time spans of the future.

There is no need, however, to slur over the fact that the world is now at the cross-roads of its destiny; one path means a pull towards the abyss of Nuclear Doomsday, and the other holds fair promise of survival and global peace and concord,

the serried steps of ascent towards plateaus of realisation. The role of the man of letters today—as at all times—is to see the Truth, the deeper truths behind the half-truths and pseudo-truths of deceptive Appearance, and also to state the Truth without faltering or fear. It is his concern and commitment to Truth, his unshakable belief in the power of Truth to fulfil itself, that confers on the writer, the wizard of illumination and guide to right action, an authority that can be the means of averting the forewarned plunge into oblivion.

I cited Sri Aurobindo's 1939 sonnet 'A Dream of Surreal Science' which mentioned the scientist who "played with atoms and blew out the universe before God had time to shout." This nearly came true less than six years later with the atomic blasts over Alamogordo, Hiroshima and Nagasaki. It was also during the second world war that Sri Aurobindo revised the opening Canto of *Ilion* and wrote most of his symbolistic epic, *Savitri*. To all outward appearance, he was a recluse confined to his rooms in the Ashram at Pondicherry, but he was also a close follower of world affairs, perhaps even a participant on a plane of his own. It was hardly surprising therefore that, in a Postscript Chapter that he wrote for a 1950 reprint of his *The Ideal of Human Unity*, he included these seminal comments on the current world situation and the prospective development:

Two stupendous and world-devastating wars have swept over the globe and have been accompanied or followed by revolutions with far-reaching consequences . . . A third still more disastrous war with the prospect of the use of weapons and other scientific means of destruction far more fatal and of wider reach than any ever yet invented, weapons whose far-spread use might bring down civilisation with a crash and whose effects might tend towards something like extermination on a large scale, looms in prospect; the constant apprehension of which weighs upon the mind of the nations and stimulates them towards further preparations for war and creates an atmosphere of prolonged antagonism, if not yet of conflict, extending to what is called 'cold war' even in times of peace.

(SABCL, Vol. 15, p. 557)

The cruel mockery of the 'cold war' *even in times of peace!*
Germany divided, Poland divided, Palestine divided, Kashmir

divided, Korea divided, Pakistan divided, and the entire earth itself presenting the spectacle of division, escalating tension, as though ready for yet another chain-reaction! Sri Aurobindo wasn't unaware of the United Nations, the Security Council, and the groupings of the member-states within and without. With his Yogic vision, he nevertheless thought that, perhaps, a "third still more disastrous war" wasn't inevitable. As he put it with guarded optimism and almost in a tone of exhortation:

The indwelling deity who presides over the destiny of the race has raised in man's mind and heart the idea, the hope of a new order which will replace the old unsatisfactory order, and substitute for it conditions of the world's life which will in the end have a reasonable chance of establishing permanent peace and well-being.

(*ibid.*, p. 563)

And if such a firm ground of peace and harmony could be realised, there might be "even a free room for the realisation of the highest human dreams, for the perfectibility of the race, a perfect society, a higher upward evolution of the human soul and human nature."

Sri Aurobindo was, of course, fully aware of the 'cold war' confrontation, the steady rise in arms production, the clash of ideology and the reign of distrust and unreason. Criminal folly could no doubt precipitate total war and general indiscriminate destruction; but residual wisdom prevailing, there might emerge an agreement to prevent the military use of these nuclear weapons, and even a turning away from the so-called peaceful uses of nuclear energy. And above all, Sri Aurobindo felt, the instrumentality of Time should be used to advance rather than retard the efforts for peace and world union. "It is for men of our day," he cautioned, "and, at the most, of tomorrow to give the answer." Start, then, with 'a self-preserving first step': strengthen the UNO; think more and more with a planetary sweep of consciousness, a sense of belonging to our common home, our Global Village; and respond to "the drive of Nature, the compulsion of circumstance, and the present and future need of mankind"! (*ibid.*, p. 571).

Almost 40 years have passed since Sri Aurobindo gave his

message of retrieval from the brink and onward march of the race towards global human unity, and even a further step in evolution. Although the world came perilously close to a conflagration more than once (certainly at the time of the Cuban missile crisis in 1962), by the skin of the teeth perhaps, or more truly by Grace of "the indwelling deity" who governs and guides the destiny of the race, a thermo-nuclear war has been avoided; and the recent INF Treaty signed by Reagan and Gorbachev may be viewed as 'a self-preserving first step' that has forced the Clock's hand back by three minutes. But more, much more, remains to be done.

There is, however, the persistent smoke-screen of deceptive differentiation between the use of nuclear energy in war (now generally condemned) and its so-called legitimate use for 'peaceful purposes'—for instance, power generation. One would have thought that recent disastrous experiences on both sides of the Iron Curtain would have hardened public opinion against the 400 or more reactors ready at any time to do a 'Chernobyl' once more. With vested interests, vagabond vainglory and specious reasoning queering the pitch of the perverse argument, the right lead has to come from the Man of Letters committed to the well-being of the race and not to transient or peripheral advantages. In this context, permit me to refer to the play, *Temptation* by the Czech dissident Václav Havel, which had its premiere at Vienna's Akademietheater a month after Chernobyl. It is a fresh contemporaneous rendering of the Faust legend, and now Faust and Mephistopheles appear as Foustika a prestigious academic and Fistula an accommodating pensioner who really double-crosses his patron. And Foustika betrays all round too—his beloved, his ally Fistula, his official Socialist orthodoxy, and his secret adhesion to the occult. When the modern Faust makes a bargain with the demon 'hi-tech', in exchange for sophisticated gadgets and the luxurious comforts of careering consumerism, he barter away the opulence and harmony and health of environing Nature, Mother Prakriti's robust living body of green and gold. Marlowe's Dr. Faustus has his 20 years of enjoyment of what he considers the 'good' things of the world before the call for his soul's

perdition can come. But our latter-day Foustika, like Ibsen's Oswald, doesn't know when the blow will strike, and another Three Mile Island or Chernobyl will erupt and unleash a catastrophe. Prof. Erazim Kohak, writing in *Harper's Magazine* (May 1987), almost echoes Allen Tate's condemnation of our demented preoccupation with 'means' with no idea of the 'ends', and brilliantly sums up the meaning and message of Havel's play:

In our ambiguous commitment to both ecology and consumerism, we have not sold our soul to the devil. We have no soul to sell, having lost it, without even noticing it, in one compromise after another . . . It is the true Faustian crisis: a crisis of reason . . . reason seems to have done rather better at teaching us how to accomplish our ends than what those ends should be . . .

Hence the Faustian dilemma—for it is precisely this vision of the universe that has set us on the road to Chernobyl, a road on which only an ecological catastrophe might forestall a nuclear one.

The whole problem thus becomes, not so much a political or even economic, but a philosophical and spiritual one:

As long as we remain convinced, at the deepest level of our minds, that we, individual consumers, are the centre and the measure of all that is, and the world is no more than a store of raw materials for gratifying our whims, then there is no solution. Given a limitless consumption, there is no alternative to nuclear energy—and given nuclear energy, there is no alternative to disaster.

Simplify! Simplify! This was Thoreau's all-sufficing exhortation, and it is infinitely even more valid and urgent today than in his time. The words ring clear: "Simplify - or perish!" and "Truth — or the Abyss!"

A play like Václav Havel's that holds the mirror up to the unavoidable consequences of the soulless consumerism of our age, links it up with the nuclear threat, is informed by nuclear thought and feeling, and uses a diction aware of the complacencies and self-deceptions of our time; such a play—as also novels like *On the Beach* and *God's Fire*, and a whole range of poems and short stories evocative of the compulsions, psychological prevarications and the mindless optimisms of the nuclear age—can

be a more potent education than much of the learned jargon or abracadbra that fills the pages of the readily accessible journals. Reading the daily papers, like the rest of puzzled humanity the man of letters too may feel caught between the rival realms of inconceivable terror and inescapable banality, and find himself unequal to facing the terror and visualising a possible catharsis; and therefore he may try to find in the banality itself a viable escape from his predicament. But the Machine and the Clock cannot be exorcised away by our mere ignorance of the veiled yet very real global terror. It is, perhaps, understandable that people in India and the Third World countries should give little thought to the nuclear problem or the Doomsday Clock, for the nameless disprivileged millions in these countries merely subsist from day to day, and perhaps care not for tomorrow. But even in the advanced West, while the technical and economic aspects of the problem receive fair coverage, not many poems, plays, or stories seem boldly to confront the problem itself so as to be able to beyond it in ways moral and spiritual that may reach the deeper listening and comprehension of men and women trapped in the present. It looks as though the pressure of the nuclear menace is so overwhelming that men of letters are driven almost to assume an ignorance of the threat, and prefer to explore their own individual frustrations and flawed fulfilments. Can we not have, as a critic asks, "poems that issue from the vantage of a self that accepts its larger landscape, a poetic diction testing itself against the magnitude of the present plight?" Cannot the man of letters, with his uncanny mastery of Vāk-shakti, probe the contemporary human consciousness, and make everybody—from President and Prime Minister to farm hand and man in the street—ask himself/herself: "How has humanity landed itself in this mess? Is there a way out—or is it too late? Cannot something be done even now with a firm reliance on God's Grace?" Yes indeed, beyond the current grimness, may we not even now look for light and glory still? In his Templeton Address given in 1983, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn declared that the evil of our time is that "Men have forgotten God," and he added:

... we can propose only a determined quest for the warm hand of God, which we have so rashly and self-confidently spurned. Only in this way can our eyes be opened to the errors of this unfortunate twentieth century . . .
(*National Review*, July 22, 1983)

As Tolstoy's Ivan Ilyitch groaned that it was a matter of life or death for him, not just an occasion for debate between specialists or gossip among relations, now for humanity and the world too, it's extinction or survival, acceptance of evil or transcendence by power of human love and God's Grace. The poet, Aaron Kramer, thinks it strange that millions should scream for the victory of a favourite football team, while putting out of their minds the theme of a megaton flame "strong enough to melt granite"; and further

Is it love—that you dream of your grandchildren's fame
While betraying your grandchildren's planet?

(*Writing in a Nuclear Age*, p. 92)

While it is hardly desirable to turn literature into propaganda against the nuclear threat and all it involves, neither is it wise or even practicable for writers to shove it all into a corner, and act and write as though they are in the pre-atom Age of Innocence still. Rather should a straight confrontation of the Horror prove a prelude to a fullness of understanding, to *glasnost* and *perestroika*, openness of comprehension and restructuring of our attitudes. The man of letters should venture beyond Tragedy if he can, and seek something more and something else, a divine comedy, a Primer of Redemption, a grammar of movement, change, transformation, and splendour of fulfilment. What is at stake is verily the future of our planet itself, for it is now threatened by ecological defilement, weapons of mass destruction, amoral science and technology at the service of political power, economics geared to consumerist ends, petty nationalisms that deny the reality of the one common global homestead, and religious bigotries trying to snuff out the unifying light of the Spirit. It is necessary that the eternal spiritual power of Vak to see truly and utter boldly becomes manifest again in the significant work of our men of letters. We cannot look for light or

right action from our Kremlins, Pentagons, and the rest of the tribe. In Bernard Malamud's novel, *God's Grace* (1982), after a mutually annihilating thermo-nuclear war between the Djanks and the Druzhkies (i.e., the Americans and the Soviets), the solitary human survivor, Calvin Cohn, a paleontologist, tries to re-start human civilisation in collaboration with a few chimpanzees, but this too comes to grief. And God has his say:

They have destroyed my handiwork, the conditions of their survival: the sweet air I gave them to breathe; the fresh water I blessed them with, to drink and bathe in; the fertile green earth. They tore apart my ozone, carbonised my oxygen, and acidified my refreshing rain. Now they affront my cosmos. How much shall the Lord endure? . . .

Here is grim indictment and prophecy, for it is still—by Divine Grace—six minutes to zero hour. A nuclear war cannot be won, and it may not leave any survivors who can take up the tasks of reconstruction. Hurry up please for heaven's sake, when there is sometime left yet, as assured by the Clock!

The role-fulfilling man of letter today, like the seer-poet of *Savitri*, can face the supreme challenge of our times and articulate the Voice of Reason, the Voice of Hope and Light and Life and Love, even the Voice of supramental sight and power. The darkest hour can also be the Hour preceding the Dawn. "Our five continents are caught in a whirlwind," says Solzhenitsyn, but he also adds:

. . . it is during trials such as these that the highest gifts of the human spirit are manifested.

It can be Nadir now, and the next step, hyperbolic-asymptotic like, the Summit. The last 40-year build-up of suspicion, misunderstanding, recrimination, fear and listless resignation to the inevitable can be scattered like mist by the burst of sunrise. In Sri Aurobindo's epic, Aswapathy is at one moment overwhelmed by the breaking of the worlds:

There was a thunder as of worlds that fall:
Earth was o'errun with fire and the roar of death . . .

Isn't this like the beginning of a nuclear war? And yet, before the Doomsday Clock can strike, the decisive and timely intervention by "the Omnipotent's flaming pioneers" can end the lunacy of the ages and ordain a new dispensation.

We owe the precariousness of the present condition to the neutron chain reaction, and the coming of the nuclear age. But Allen Tate has spoken of the chain reaction that the man of letters can initiate, involving more in the tasks of peace and reconstruction. There is so much good will and anxious concern about the well-being of Homo Sapiens and the future of our spaceship, Earth. The right vision and Word from the man of letters acting as the guardian of the future can help to articulate and electrify the human aspiration and promote its early realisation. Rajaji had a mantric verse sung on 23 October 1966 by Smt. M.S. Subbulakshmi at the United Nations General Assembly:

The Good in every man is an atom too
of measureless potential;
let us learn to find it, and explode it,
into lasting Peace.

Atman against the Atom? But why not? And when the man of letters turns his words into winged squadrons of the Spirit, the resulting revolution in thought, feeling, conviction and action will avert nuclear Doomsday, smash the Machine and the Clock, and greet the Greater Dawn:

There poured a wide intimate and blissful Dawn,
Healed were all things . . .
Division ceased to be, for God was there.

(*Savitri*, II, viii)

While this is the seer-poet's apocalyptic vision, it can at least embody our aspiration, hope and faith, and also our ardent prayer for their realisation, exorcising away the terror of the Doomsday Machine and Clock alike.