The English Language and The Indian Spirit

Correspondence between Kathleen Raine and K. D. Sethna

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INTRODUCTORY NOTE

These are extracts from a correspondence between the eminent English poet and critic, Kathleen Raine, and an Indian writer in English, K. D. Sethna, who has published several books of both prose and poetry. The discussion which the extracts are meant to set forth is, strictly speaking, on whether Indians can write genuine poetry in English and it was sparked off by a comment invited by Mr. Sethna on his own work. But, beyond the strict subject and the personal reference, it develops the broad lines of a thesis and antithesis touching on many areas of experience and poetic expression and fraught at a number of points with considerable significance for the literary future of India as well as of England. There are sidelights also on some other themes, with either a particular or a general bearing. And it may be mentioned that the correspondence from which the extracts are taken was initially on Blake's Tyger. *Mr. Sethna had written a long essay on this poem, which Sir Geoffrey Keynes was kind enough to read and then pass on to Miss Raine for detailed scrutiny. As that essay is still unpublished the lengthy discussion of its contents between her and the author would be out of place here and only a few remarks have been included to serve as a sort of* mise en scène.

Miss Raine's letters are published with her permission. On 11.12.1961 she wrote to Mr. Sethna: "I have no objection to your publishing extracts from our exchanges if you think they might be of interest."

Originally—except for a few slight revisions—the correspondence appeared in Mother India: Monthly Review of Culture, *published by the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry and edited by Mr. Sethna ever since its start years before. The series ran from September 1983 to January 1984.*

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From Kathleen Raine

I am truly sorry for this long silence—perhaps Sir Geoffrey Keynes has told you the reason for which I had to drop everything for two months... Blake had to be laid aside....

I think you have more insight into the poem than any other commentator has ever done, and I hope to see your Essay published soon, with or without the modifications I have suggested —some you may accept, others reject, of course....

Even now I write against time—in half-an-hour's time I am leaving Cambridge.... Please write to me

c/o Sherrard, Katounia, Limni, Euboeae, Greece.

I will be there for several months—a little nearer India but not so near as I would like to be. I will write again when I have had the pleasure of reading your poems—that too, like much else, had to be laid aside. (25.7.1961)

From K. D. Sethna

Katounia, Limni, Euboeae, Greece—how these names move me! Ever since I was at school the sense of Greece has been like a glow in my heart. Perhaps you would expect me to say "in my mind"—and indeed I have drawn a lot of joy and strength from Greece's "foundations" in "thought and its eternity", but my sense of her has been much more than intellectual. Even to get fully at her thought in its characteristic movement of beauty, shouldn't we combine the heart with the head? And there is that revealing bit of information that when Aristotle allotted specific functions to bodily organs he made the heart the centre of thought and considered the brain merely an equaliser of temperature! This would seem to indicate that even to Aristotle, who strikes us as full of "dry light", thinking came steeped in feeling and was indeed a special kind of feeling —a passionate perception of the shape of truth, as it were. No wonder the Greek thinkers called their speculative activity philosophy—"love of wisdom". And no wonder there was a balance in them between thought and life. I believe Aristotle

too must have felt and loved and lived his thought: not his thought but his language was dry—or perhaps the language looks so because what we have of his works is really a skeleton of notes kept by his pupils and not his own completely expressed and moulded system.

Unfortunately I have never been able to visit Greece. As a six-year old I was taken to England by my father (a doctor) for an operation on my left leg which had been affected by polio. After a couple of months in bed, I went with him (and my mother) to Ireland, France, Switzerland and Italy, and I have as vivid memories of Dublin, Paris, Marseilles, Geneva and Venice as of London (though, of course, restricted by a mere boy's interests). Greece was too out of the way. And later I never got the occasion to visit the West. I wanted to study at Oxford or Cambridge, but my father had died and my grandfather on whom I was dependent and who was orthodox in his views thought I might bring back an English wife and spoil the pure Parsi blood that had flown in his family from his ancestors who twelve hundred years earlier had fled the Arab persecution in Iran and brought the sacred fire safe to India! A little later, when he discovered that I had turned to Yoga he offered to send me to England: even marrying an Englishwoman was preferable to union with the Divine Beloved. But I was afraid of losing time: already at the age of twenty-three I felt I had waited overmuch in the ordinary life and always in my ears was the cry of Augustine: "Sero te amavi..."—"Too late have I loved Thee..." Yes, going places was no longer an attraction. But here in the Ashram at Pondicherry, under Sri Aurobindo's influence the world-shunning that has been inseparable from spirituality both eastern and western has never been encouraged and all the fine forces of the world's life past and present have remained alive in me and not the least has been ancient Athens. How could it be otherwise when Sri Aurobindo himself was deep-dyed in Classical culture and was a master of Greek and Latin?

Now, when Yoga is a settled course for me, the world outside Pondicherry does not seem a power that could alienate

me from the light concentrated here, and the idea of going to Greece is not a distraction and, though I doubt whether I would actually take the trouble of travelling so far, the idea starts quite an imaginative thrill.

I owe you a lot of thanks in connection with Blake's *Tyger:* you have helped me see things in a more precise and concrete way and you have said so many kind and encouraging things about my treatment of the poem. I also appreciate very much that you will be reading my poems and writing to me about them. If by any chance *The Secret Splendour* has not gone with you to Greece, please let me know, I shall send you another copy. (2.8.1961)

From Kathleen Raine

I too always wanted to go to Greece, but when I was a child such a possibility seemed unimaginable. But I lived in imagination in Greek mythology (the mythology I knew best, as all children in England did at one time) and the Gods were entirely real to me. Then I became diverted by the idea of becoming a botanist, and at Cambridge studied Natural Sciences. Then strangely Blake brought me back to the Platonic tradition by a road I never expected to discover; and now I am staying with Philip Sherrard, a Byzantine scholar who has done what your parents feared for you, married a Greek wife. They live here and Philip is determined not to return to England. It is not merely the beauty; but the people of Greece are still less corrupted by Westernisation and have not lost all participation in the living Byzantine Christian tradition. We are by the sea and each night see the sun set behind Parnassus, across the sound where the Argonauts sailed, and just a few miles above Chalcis where Agamemnon sacrificed Iphegenia. India could scarcely be hotter, and the cicadas chirp ceaselessly. But we bathe in the sea about twice a day; and in the evening sit outside under a trellis covered with vine and flowering creepers and eat our meal as Plato describes, communally (the little *Taverna* is kept by the gardener and his wife and two sons),

talking until midnight or long after. Sometimes boys dance on the dancing-floor, sometimes people sing. There is a monastery at the end of the valley, where the scent of jasmine and all kinds of fragrant flowers is overwhelming, and cool water flows from a marble lion's mouth into a marble basin....

I began too late to make spiritual progress in this life; but I know where the Way lies, and perhaps in some future life I may follow your own Way. There is time enough in eternity. How literally one is to accept the teaching on reincarnation I do not know, but if in this life I have got as far as Greece, I hope in some future state to reach India. I don't mean just by taking an aeroplane, because one cannot reach places in that way. However, I send you greeting from the country of Pythagoras and Plato—nor do I mean merely the earth and sea of this hot and arcadian Island. I was here first two years ago, but this time it seems that I have penetrated farther.

No, your poems were left in England—I had to pay excess on my luggage even so. But you must not send another copy —unless you have one to spare, and can do so conveniently.

(12.8.1961)

From K. D. Sethna

The moment I read your account of your days and nights in Katounia with your friends I felt I was there and I got a confirmation of the sense I have always had that the Greece of my youthful dreams, the Greece of golden antiquity, was secretly still alive and Byron's pang about the wonderful isles was not justified:

> Eternal summer gilds them yet,
> But all except their sun is set.

Certain ancient countries have lived with such a deep or fine intensity that their beings have somehow imparted a subtle substance of culture to physical things and the touch of these things evokes at once to the sensitive mind the presence of the past greatness and beauty. This is so with India and it is so

with Greece. What I mean is an experience more "occult" than a stir of the imagination among suggestive ruins. It is as if the very air, the very soil retained and conveyed, in the midst of all modernisation, the chiselled lucidity that was the soul of antique Hellas, the moulded mystery that was the soul of early India.

There is also a converse truth. Just as the air and the soil have been impregnated with the old cultural genius, so too the old culture has subtilised the air and the soil around it and, assimilating them into inner values, can communicate a vibration, a fragrance of their physical reality to the sensitive mind. When one comes into contact with the intense depth of India's intuitive thought or Greek philosophy's intense fineness of felt idea, one participates in a new material life. One does not merely turn the pages of a book: hills and rivers rise from the past, one walks into vanished forests and fields and towns: one breathes the breath and sees the light of the old marvellous world whose stuff went to the making of the hearts and brains that caught transcendental rhythms and visions.

Of course, without those rhythms and visions the heart, the brain and the world-stuff for all their marvellousness would have been but an elaborate futility. But, by a profound paradox, what is transcendental never reveals its final divinity unless caught and conveyed within a three-dimensional context. Nirvana is never so real as in the body of a Gautama and with its infinitude's centre marked by the Bo-Tree. For, I believe that, while beyond the earth are the vast liberating Silence and Absence, there is beyond them the earth again in a supreme sweetness and archetypal glory of the One at play with the Many.

I am afraid I am letting myself go a bit too rhapsodically and with too swift a transition from point to point....

I have sent you another copy of my poems because it has struck me that you will be more able to give your mind to them when you are in Greece, away from the poems of others—unless you have plunged into the endless Kazantzakis!

(27.8.1961)

From Kathleen Raine

Your letter which reached me yesterday makes me realise that to be in Greece is already half way to being in India. In England the soul of the nation is all but dead; while in Greece it is still as green and fragrant as their Basil (I shall enclose you a spray, for this is the scent of Greece—it is grown everywhere to commemorate the finding of the Holy Cross among a bed of Basil, and is used constantly in the churches). Someone always seems to be singing—in the morning the chanting of the Liturgy, in the evening folk-songs; the people are poor, and have few possessions, but they are rich in participating in the still living tradition of this most beautiful and ancient form of Christianity. I read (in English) a book of Plotinus every morning before breakfast, work and bathe in the day, talk through the warm night—as you must in India also, but as one cannot in England!

Yes, I see a little here what you try to convey of the mystery of India, where the silence beyond the earth plays in the manifestation of the Many. Greece is not quite like that—it is almost too beautiful to think of anything but the Many; but every stone, every olive tree and vine and person has a pure identity and a sense of dignity and freedom belongs even—perhaps not "even" but most of all—to the poorest and the oldest men and women. Alas that some form of westernisation will sooner or later enslave these people who retain what most of Europe has already lost....

I have been reading your poems, and everywhere the theme of the Divine Beloved blows through them like a breath. I like best of them all *Each Night*,[1] but in all I find the one theme—

[1] Dream not with gaze hung low
By love
That earthward calls—but know
The silver spaces move

Within your gaze when sleep
Brings gloom;
Then will your hush grow deep
As heaven's lofty room.

And in this chamber strange
With blue
A Love unmarred by change
Shall ever tryst with you.

So, build Her each calm night
A swoon
That bears on outer sight
The padlock of the moon.

(*The Secret Splendour*, Bombay 1941, p. 79)

the only theme. I am barely on the fringes of it myself, but once we turn our faces that way there is no possibility of return, one can love nothing less. Philip Sherrard here has gone farther than I on the Hesychastic path of prayer; and more and more it becomes impossible to communicate with people who do not share that knowledge, in some degree or form. That is why I hope some day (to use what is perhaps only a metaphor) to be born in India. Only one thing troubles me: why do you write in English? You write of the land of India, subtilised, in an almost physical sense, by the quality of life that has been lived there; is not the same thing true of language? Have you not, in using English, exiled your poetic genius from India, to which it must belong, without making it a native of England, for English learned as a foreign language can never nourish the invisible roots of poetry. I feel this even about Tagore, and so did Yeats. I do not believe that we can—or if we could, that we have the right to—write poetry in a language other than our own.

(5.8.1961)

From K. D. Sethna

What a delicately delightful surprise—the little spray of Basil enclosed by you! It would be too "theosophical" to say that I instantly had a memory of a Greek incarnation of mine: neophytes in the occult and the spiritual must beware of the subtle fancifulness into which the followers of Madame Blavatsky and Mrs. Annie Besant so easily fall. But there was certainly a thrill of strange communion as if by the touch not only of the living earth of Greece today but also of the Greece that can never die.

In this connection I may quote a question and an answer of many years ago when the topic of "past lives" came up between Sri Aurobindo and me in the course of the correspondence we were having almost daily. I wrote: "Certain poets very strongly appeal to me and their minds and characters seem to have strong affinities with mine in different ways. Have you any intuition in the matter of my past lives? The Mother has

told me nothing about myself except that she is positive I was an Athenian."

Sri Aurobindo replied: "A strong influence from one or more poets or all of them together is not sufficient to warrant a conclusion that one has been those poets or any of them in former lives. I have myself no intuition on the subject of your past lives, though from general impressions I would be inclined to wager that you were not only in Athens (that is evident) but in England during the Restoration time or thereabouts, in Renaissance Italy etc.: these, however, are only impressions."

Going by what, amidst "only impressions", is "evident" to both the Mother and Sri Aurobindo (confirming my own strong sense), it is not difficult for me to understand why Greece is always like a glow in my heart. Again, depending on what, though only "impressions", are yet the impressions of a Master Yogi like Sri Aurobindo, who had also a solid, sharp, humbug-proof intellect, I should find it easy to explain why I feel utterly at home in English literature, as if the prose and poetry from Malory and Chaucer to Charles Morgan and Kathleen Raine flowed in my inner being as my own blood flows in my body, a constant, intimate, natural rhythm of sustaining and creative life. And when I try to express myself in English it is to me never as though I were using a language learned by the tongue and acquired by the brain-cells—like my knowledge, for instance, of the terms and turns of mathematics. Six hundred years of England seem to tingle and incandesce in me. Of course, I do not expect others to realise this with any close approach to my own sensation, but perhaps many may feel that I employ the medium of English not by mere choice but by inner compulsion. To me who cannot escape the realisation of my own inmost "drives" and who see something of these "drives" in the light of Sri Aurobindo's certitudes or impressions, the vision of things from the externalities and accidents of place and race is bound to be limited and insufficient.

Even apart from the question of "past lives", there is the whole domain of the inner being which is infinitely wider than the complex of psychophysiology that is the outer self, a domain

of freedom and far-reaching response and subtle interchange and even fruitful identification. One who lays hold on a language through the omnipresent luminiferous ether of the inner mind-world can lose the sense of all foreignness and exceed if not expunge the small facts of local habitation and atmosphere. I do not say that it is a facile job to work through this ether, but almost all of us have some touch with it whenever a language and the soul that becomes sound in that language are studied, seized and employed with some passion and pleasure. And occasionally there is much more than mere touch. Then all that nourishes what you call "the invisible roots of poetry" can be felt as one's own. Poetry, no doubt, is written from the sheer soul of a language, and the soul is always difficult of access. But the soul is also unhindered by the divisions that are so rigid-seeming on the surface of life. And if one approaches the soul of a language through one's own soul, through the depths and widths beyond the brain-mind, there is no barrier except lack of intensity in oneself.

So, while I appreciate, from the many failures I see, the rarity of true poetic achievement in English by non-Englishmen, I can hardly agree with your dictum: "I do not believe that we can—or if we could, that we have the right to—write poetry in a language other than our own." Please don't understand me to say that I cocksurely claim genuine success in my own ventures. But if I have failed, it should be because I might not be poet enough: the possibility of an Indian succeeding is ever present and is bound to get actualised some time or other. All the more is this true in view of the way English has been learned in India. Rather, I should say that often it is not learned so much as lived with. People are apt to think that one learns English here as an Englishman sitting in London may study Hindi. You should think of a little England established in our ancient land. For over two hundred years the English mind and spirit have rooted themselves in the Indian consciousness. They are part of this country's soul-soil. From the first moment of our life many of us hear English side by side with the communal tongue. Particularly so is it in a

Parsi home. And we have mixed with men and women to whom English is native. English literature is an element in which we are bathed from our earliest years. The situation is somewhat analogous to that in Ireland where too, I believe, English as a common medium is a transplantation going back by a few centuries, though perhaps longer than in India and with greater facilities of reinforcement from the home country. It is because English is now one of the natural languages in India that the notion entertained by some xenophobiacs of expelling it is futile and artificial. I admit that not all Indians take to English with great ease of expression and that most are more truly articulate in their own dialects or in a semi-*lingua-franca* like Hindi but all educated people here break into English nearly every third minute of the day and some of us find it as apt as our dialects and a few of us are in the strange position of not knowing the dialect with even half as much intimacy as English!

I belong to the last category. You ask me why I write in English. Well, there is no other speech open to me. It is the only language I can use with some confidence: whenever I think a little below the surface it is English that serves spontaneously as the expressive or communicative body of the thought or feeling. You may consider it odd but if I were to give up English as my means of utterance I should be quite "mute, inglorious" even though I might not be "Milton" enough for the world to appreciate the loss. And—believe me—English is a language I find more suited to the deepest movements of the Indian soul than are any of the modern Indian languages. The only rival to it with regard to these movements is ancient Sanskrit which cannot in its full historical form be revived for common use today. I am not flashing out a paradox when I write that, together with the Sanskrit of the Rigveda, the Upanishads and the Gita, the English of Shakespeare, Milton, Vaughan, Donne, Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, Keats, Francis Thompson, Patmore (of *The Unknown Eros*), Whitman, Hopkins, AE and Yeats, is the most subtly, intensely, profoundly developed language in the world, and if a new and

modern Rigveda or Upanishad or Gita will be written it will first be in English! A further truth with the appearance of a paradox is that, since English is the language most subtly, intensely, profoundly developed and since India is still the country with the greatest spiritual experience, the spiritual fulfilment of English speech along the inward lines indicated or initiated by many English poets themselves will first come—if it already hasn't—through Indians and not Englishmen, Indians who have steeped themselves not only in the deepest culture of their own land by Yogic discipline but also in the finest essence of the English culture that has been diffused here for some centuries. The coming together, rather the love-affair, of India and the English language has on it the stamp of a divine destiny.

If you do not frown, you will perhaps smile sceptically and murmur, "What an incredible whimsy—this Indo-Anglian apocalypse!" But, apocalyptic or no, the Indo-Anglian consciousness is a fact in varied fertile ferment. Of course, it cannot be quite a "native of England", but English is no longer a native of England exclusively—and its very simplicity of basic syntax on the one hand and on the other its composite many-minded many-toned genius, wonderfully flexible and vastly assimilative, marks it out intrinsically for a multiple birth, an international orientation, a cosmopolitan development.

In any case, we are in front of a living and kicking phenomenon of diverse aspects and far-flung interests. Shall we judge its possibilities by doctrinaire considerations? Many failures on the one side and many prejudices on the other are bound to be there, but I see in the Indo-Anglian consciousness something that cannot be turned back and is fated to enrich both India and England.

Let me shift from all this prophesying to my own little present reality. I am very happy that you have gone through my book. From your remark—"I like best of them all *Each Night*" —I take it that you have read all the poems. I would very much wish you to read all; because though essentially the theme may be one—"the Divine Beloved", as you put it—I have

tried to include as great a variety as I could of treatment and technique. If you have picked out *Each Night*, will you do me the favour of telling me why exactly you have done so—what in its vision or style or structure has appealed to you? I should indeed value even a few words of expert appraisal.

I am enclosing for you a spray of the plant which is extremely common in India or rather wide-spread in the religious life here. It is called "Tulsi" and is sacred to the worshipper of Vishnu. It signifies *bhakti*, devotion. Actually it belongs to the same family as Basil: what you have sent me is Ocimum Basilicum, what I am sending you is Ocimum Sanctum. This spray was fragrant when I got it, but as it had to wait till my letter got finished it has somewhat dried up. But what should remain ever fragrant is the fact that it was taken by me from the Mother's own hands. She smelt it and finding it of good fragrance gave it to me for you. It is now Ocimum Sanctissimum! I wish you could keep it with you always. (14.9.1961)

From Kathleen Raine

This is my last day in Greece—or rather tomorrow is—and I take this last opportunity to answer your letter on hallowed soil. Mount Meru may be the summit of the world, but Delphi still remains its aged navel. And each night we see the sun set over Parnassus, sinking as it were into Delphi and its darkness. I was much moved by the herb blessed for me by the Holy Mother. Please thank her. I will keep it always God willing. It is now in my copy of the Upanishads (Radhakrishnan's edition) which I cannot of course read in the Sanskrit, but to have the words there is something. I thank you also. It was still faintly fragrant. I wonder if in this life I shall smell the soil of India and if its fragrance is comparable with the earth of Greece, which is unlike anything I have known.

I always thought I had been an Athenian too. Perhaps we met there. I think I was once a nun in France, and perhaps died young—at all events I knew as I remembered that I know more now, although I was happy in that life. But what these

sudden memories mean who knows?

What you feel about the English language interests me greatly. Perhaps it may as you say become a language again in India, and there produce work that unites the knowledge of Indian spirituality with the polymorphous potentialities of English. But that surely cannot happen for a very long time. I have read no poetry by an Indian that does not seem to an English reader to be written by a foreigner. This I find even with Tagore, certainly with Sri Aurobindo, and also with most of your poems. I think I like the poems of yours that I do like best simply because they seem least like poems written in a foreign idiom. The theme of all is the same, and of course the only theme—it is only a question of style. Perhaps if India is supreme in spirituality, the western sense of the embodied form is stronger, at the present time. Or maybe English occupation in India has left many problems, linguistic among others, that only time can sort out. You seem to have been influenced by AE at one time. I too admire him much, though chiefly as a writer of prose.

To return to your thoughts on the mysteries of these sympathies of our inner lives, it is all as you say profoundly mysterious. It may be that we are like instruments tuned, as it were, to a certain pitch so that we respond to certain other souls, present or past, without necessarily having been or even known them. We meet many people after all even in this life who remain alien however often we may meet them. To such communication there is perhaps no barrier, as you say, except lack of intensity in ourselves. Perhaps a perfect being—the Buddha or Jesus—can know what is in all souls. But certainly there are a few—even many—who seem even to us like other selves. Curiously enough I feel more identity—though less admiration —with Coleridge, Wordsworth and Dorothy than I do with our maker of the Tyger. If I was ever anyone I was Dorothy. In a manner of speaking, that is. I have also I think been often born in the Highlands of Scotland, perhaps also in Ireland, and once nobly born, and have from that incarnation retained the pride of greatness, even though this time I have not had

wealth or state to maintain it. But I hate and despise vulgarity, I love peasant people but detest the bourgeoisie, small and great. I feel most at ease and at home with the great, and with others seem always to be acting a part—going as it were incognito. I do not admit to being "there" necessarily because for the moment I am at a certain place or with certain people. I am like a caged animal, quite quiet and well behaved, but I belong to my own wild places, and they never knew me or I them. This must make me hard to understand or like, and I am constantly hearing of people I am supposed to have met, but I have no memory of having done so, and I feel in a curious way affronted by their notion that they "know" me. I seldom give very much of myself, never everything: therefore I am always outwardly patient and civil, even kind: why not? I am not THERE at all!

However, why give you this outline of my character? I wish it had been possible to meet you, I wish I had been able to visit India. No matter. (1.10.1961)

From K. D. Sethna

The Upanishads are indeed a fitting book to enshrine the "Tulsi" spray, particularly if the original Sanskrit words are there. I say "particularly" not only because those words are luminous and wide-winged, with their home in the same high ether that envelops all the movements of a person like the Mother. I say so also because much of the original Sanskrit is in a world quite different from the intellectual air in which most of the English translations float. I am afraid a rendering even by Radhakrishnan would be no exception. Not that the seizable mental meaning is devoid of spiritual suggestion in an English version, be it ever so inadequate: the Upanishads' spirituality cannot be buried anywhere, it will glow through. But there is a mighty difference between their substance getting seen by the mind in the mind's light and their revealing their own body by a self-shining that floods the mind with

White spaces of a knowledge beyond thought.

What makes this mighty difference is the quality and rhythm of the individual words, and the *ensemble* at once massive and intense of revelatory significance which the words make by conveying the inner vibration, the life-thrill of the spiritual state expressed. Unless something of the Upanishadic Mantra is caught in the translation, the self-shining of the Divine Body will be missed. Not the vision alone but the very language has to come from what Sri Aurobindo calls the "overhead planes": the form itself and not just the content must be brought from there. Where is that language, where that form in even the rendering by Yeats, in collaboration with Purohit Swami, of, say, those two famous *slokas* in the Mundaka Upanishad about the Transcendent Divine and the Cosmic Divine? Yeats gives us:

> Neither sun, moon, star, neither fire nor lightning lights Him. When He shines, everything begins to shine. Everything in the world reflects His light.
>
> Spirit is everywhere, upon the right, upon the left, above, below, behind, in front. What is the world but Spirit?

I suppose such a translation would serve pretty well for a text on which to write a philosophical thesis expounding deep truths—and one might justify it by pleading that it imitates the pithiness of the Upanishadic utterance. But the sound of the original has nothing of the clipped and the bare: a sonority accompanies the pithiness and there is a quality of intonation which communicates a vastness of depth that is plucked up into concentrated points. Not philosophical insight by itself but a surge of supra-intellectual experience which yet carries a philosophical vision in it: this we have to pass through the English rendering by a special skill in phrase-formation and sentence-construction in order to capture, without perpetrating bombast, the inner and outer resonance of the original. A certain degree of poetic re-creation is also required: one is then

faithful in essence but not uncouthly literal. I may illustrate in an indirect manner what I mean, by taking a couple of phrases from English poetry which have the ample breath of the Upanishadic Mantra, the full "overhead" afflatus, and comparing them to statements such as the Yeats-Purohit translation provides us with. Would you guess from the words "Thoughts which explore Eternity" the music of immeasurable overtones sweeping into us in Milton's

> Those thoughts that wander through Eternity?

Or would you be as affected by the turn "The World-Soul predicting the future in its dreams" as by the fathomless harmony of Shakespeare's

> the prophetic soul
> Of the wide world dreaming on things to come?

If we are to have a proper sense of what poetry-*cum*-philosophy lies at the back of the Yeats-Purohit product from the Mundaka Upanishad, we should set beside it Sri Aurobindo's version with its attempt to re-create in English something of the Overmind-symphony of the Sanskrit original:

> There the sun shines not and the moon has no splendour and the stars are blind. There these lightnings flash not nor any earthly fire. For all that is bright is but the shadow of His brightness and by His shining all this shineth.
>
> All is this eternal and immutable Brahman. The Eternal is before us and the Eternal is behind us and to the south and to the north of us and above and below and extended everywhere. All this magnificent universe is nothing but the Eternal.

Apart from the Mantric communication, there is also the question of proper exegesis. The Rishis of the Vedas and the

Upanishads lived in the realisation of certain truths which have got obscured or confused with the growth of the intellectual side of humanity, even Indian humanity. The climax of this confusion is in the latter-day attitude to the Vedas. The term "Veda" means "Knowledge" and the Vedic Rishis call themselves seers and hearers of the Truth that resides in the highest ether of being where all the Gods are seated. Rishi Dirghatamas clearly asks apropos of this ether a question which no commentator on the Vedas can afford to forget: "One who knows not That, what shall he do with the Mantras?" Yet most commentators have gone without knowledge of That, and so we have the ironical situation that the Rigveda, the Book of Knowledge, is considered the Book of Works, a manual of complicated primitive ritual designed to secure by praising and petitioning the Gods worldly goods—cattle, offspring, land, gold, victory in battle, etc. The high symbolism built by the psychological allusions and by the vibrant visionary tone has been quite covered up. European exegetists have sought to read archaic history and a fantasy-shot naturalistic religion behind the ritual: they see the Rishis as imaginative barbarian priests of Aryan invaders, worshipping the physical fire and sun and rain-clouds and rivers, and often in a state of bardic wrath against black flat-nosed broken-tongued aborigines figured as demons or their instruments. The Upanishads, as also the Gita, have suffered less ignobly at the hands of indigenous or foreign interpreters; but even great minds like Shankara and Ramanuja have done wrong to them by trying to run their seas of light, *divers et ondoyants*, into narrow channels of this or that particular kind of Yoga. Shankara and Ramanuja are not travesties of the Indian spirit but they are part of the later development of Indian spirituality, truly Indian according to this or that characteristic of their own ages yet hardly representative of the many-sided comprehensive vision the early scriptures had of the One who is multipresent and holds in Eternity the secret of Time and in Time the manifestation of Eternity. If you wish to get the precise significance of the ancient Indian wisdom you should read

the clear yet profound commentary by Sri Aurobindo on the Isha Upanishad. It is very easy to read and grasp, thanks to its simple and systematic mapping out of the more-than-Apollonian "realms of gold".

I felt extremely interested in what you have written about yourself. Especially, when you write in regard to certain people —"I am like a caged animal, quite quiet and well behaved, but I belong to my own wild places, and they never knew me or I them"—I cannot help having a strong sense of identity with you. But I may add that belonging to wild places does not preclude me (nor surely you) from living, on one side of the self, always with

> The silence that is in the starry sky,
> The sleep that is among the lonely hills.

If I didn't live thus and if you also didn't, neither of us could feel, as we do, the close sympathy with Wordsworth and Dorothy. More than Blake, or Keats, or even Shelley, it is Wordsworth of the time of *The Prelude* (mostly early version) who makes in the English language the poetic world in which I should like to live—next, of course, to the world which the poetry of Sri Aurobindo's *Savitri* makes. And this is so because actually—in the midst of his individual accent and the breath of his age and country (or countryside)—this Wordsworth who wrote *Three Years She Grew*, *Tintern Abbey*, the Immortality Ode, the great passages in *The Prelude* and several snatches of Nature-communion in other poems is perhaps the first clearly disengaged voice, in English verse, of the spirit most potent in the ancient Indian scriptures and therefore distinguishable as the Indian spirit. He is the authentic presage, in the English consciousness itself, of what I have called the destined Indo-Anglian apocalypse which I firmly believe has already taken place in the 23,812 lines of *Savitri* whose first impact on H.O. White of Trinity College, Dublin, led him to write, after examining for Ph.D., a thesis on the poem by Prema Nandakumar, daughter of the distinguished critic K. R. Srinivasa

Iyengar: "I... greatly appreciated the privilege... of making the acquaintance of *Savitri*, a truly remarkable poem... I may add that I was immensely impressed by the extraordinary combination of East and West in the poem, of ancient Indian lore with the thought and experience of the modern cosmopolitan world" (21 July, 1961). Herbert Read too is fairly complimentary, though a bit more overwhelmed than enthusiastic. He wrote to my friend Purani: "It is undoubtedly difficult to find readers for poems of the length and sustained creative power of *Savitri* and the fault must be in the nature of our present western civilisation" (June 5, 1958). The verdict, "sustained creative power", is rather significant.

Except for almost accidental phrases like the two I have quoted from Shakespeare and Milton, there is nothing in English poetry before Wordsworth—not even to any appreciable degree in Blake—like the sheer spiritual seerhood, the Upanishadic vision and word, embodied again and again in the so-called pantheistic expression of the young Wordsworth. Something of this strain lingered on in his later phase too: the two lines I have taken from *Brougham Castle* verge on the later period and one of the most astonishing in *The Prelude* was put in when he was well on in age. It is hardly an Englishman writing in the Immortality Ode:

> The Winds come to me from the fields of sleep.

English critics have either construed it to be a peculiar way of saying

> The Winds come to me from the fields asleep

or else boggled, sensing some wonderful visionary thing but themselves feeling out of their depth. And what is the general English mind to make of that other phrase—on a child—from another stanza:

> Thou, over whom thy Immortality
> Broods like the Day...?

The verse about the fields of sleep catches the precise life-sense of the superconscious Unknown (called Sushupti, "Sleep", in the Mandukya Upanishad) that is the hidden height of our secret inmost being and from whose expanses of eternal bliss and rapt truth-sight the most profoundly re-creative inspiration wafts into us. Note how well the suggestion of the high spiritual mystery pressing upon the poet from across in-drawn distances is prepared by the three preceding lines:

> 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...

The physical reality imaginatively caught up into the semi-symbolic meets us in the opening line. A subjective turn enters in the next, putting the poet's grief into relation with something living and vocal in the season, something evidently blissful, against whose presence all grief would be an ungrateful rebellion. Then the physical sounds from the steep, descending and spreading in space, are mentioned in a rarefied form as "Echoes" gathering in lofty places, hovering for the poet like a remote remembrance of some looming range and recess of existence, both without and within. Then we get the last movement with its subtle leap beyond all Nature-hints of the spiritual into pure mysticism and Mantra. Not that Nature is annulled: the fields of Cumberland on a "sweet May-morning" are still there, but the breath, simultaneously vague and powerful, of Supernature has broken out through them and wakened in the poet the thrill of some ultimate soulscape. The Mantra is not so rhythmically intense in the phrase about the brooding Immortality, yet a strong life-sense of the same Superconsciousness is again felt, now not in its secret inspiration so much as in its lordly and luminous revelation of the inherently Deathless poised on its "overhead" plane and silently nourishing, protecting, ruling, enlightening the child-soul which is still aware of its divine source and of that source's all-seeing immensity.

The old Rishis find voice in both the phrases, bearing Wordsworth beyond the European *Zeitgeist* at work through Rousseau or Schelling or even Coleridge. And perhaps these ancients are at their grandest in what I consider the most Wordsworthian flight of all—the fragment discovered by E. de Sélincourt in a *Prelude* MS:

> One interior life
> In which all beings live with God, themselves
> Are God, existing in the mighty whole,
> As indistinguishable as the cloudless east
> At noon is from the cloudless west, when all
> The hemisphere is one cerulean blue.

There, with a mounting Mantric intensity, a single-selfed Within is conveyed in its vastness as well as in its ultimate oneness with an illimitable Beyond of Spirit-space uniformly clear in its blissful beauty and swept by an All-light at once omnipresent and sovereignly centred. This is Indo-Anglian poetry in a prefigured self-consummation.

Less openly so in conception but essentially as climactic in its Indo-Anglianness is the passage whose great last line dates to Wordsworth's old age, the description of Newton in Roubiliac's sculpture of him at Cambridge:

> with his prism and silent face,
> The marble index of a mind for ever
> Voyaging through strange seas of Thought, alone.

Surely this is not quite the historical Newton, majestic and far-reaching intellect though he was, with a strong religious basis even to his scientific speculations. This is not merely the explorer of the secrets of the physical universe with a masterly mind. That Newton receives the highest panegyric, from a poetic vision which the normal Englishman responding to inspiration would immediately recognise as proper and intelligible, in Pope's famous transfiguration of wit with the Biblical "sublime" praised by Longinus—

> Nature and Nature's laws lay hid in night:
> God said, "Let Newton be!" and there was light.

The figure whom Wordsworth gives us is much more than a scientist of the physical cosmos: he is a disguised super-scientist of the In-world, turning within from without, plunging his masterly discoverer intellect into a spiritual trance—the In-world whose very vibration of wideness on mystic wideness starts faintly with the rhythm and vision of "silent face" and gathers momentum with "a mind for ever" and emerges in plenary force in the whole last line—once more the typical Mantra. I dare say something of the idea-substance of it may have come into English poetry long before Wordsworth (*e.g.*, Marlowe's "Still climbing after knowledge infinite"): I have the impression that a critic has shown several components of even the image-substance in a pre-Wordsworth versifier. But the fusion of all idea and image in a revelatory sight which gives to things a value and figure received direct from a superhuman plane of awareness—and, above everything else, a sound-substance filling both idea-substance and image-substance with an overtone and undertone of infinite suggestion as if the word-rhythm were a snatch from some fundamental creative movement by which Time was born out of Eternity—this is a new naturalness in English with the advent of Wordsworth's spontaneous Vedanta. Few Englishmen, in spite of the penetrating subtleties to which Shakespeare may have accustomed them, in spite of centuries of familiarity with "the rude imperious surge", would feel very much in their element here except in a general way. They would do no more than imaginatively enjoy some sort of sense of the unfathomable because it relaxes and soothes the too-questing mind and the too-palpitant heart of the modern Western individualist.

Wordsworth himself appears to have been not always at ease in his own Wordsworthianness—at least a part of him was rather qualmish and even apologetic about his pantheism no less than his sense of prenatal existence. I am not quite certain whether he realised in full the implications of his "Winds"-

line or his line on "strange seas". I even believe that on one occasion he thought he had written a heart-breaking "Lucy" lyric when actually he had expressed with a deep intimacy his own spiritual trance of identification with the earth's being, such as he can be conjectured to have had from phrases, either included or omitted, of the first version of *The Prelude*! This lyric is *A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal.* I have a mind to make a thorough thesis about it, demonstrating how a highly inspired poet may mistake the drift of his inspiration if all of him is not attuned to its mystic motive. Everybody knows how Wordsworth's somewhat ponderous, if not pompous, intellect interfered with his insights and exaltations: here his Dorothy-haunted heart has misread what his soul had really spoken. Either movement reflects a flaw in the rare kind of genius with which he was endowed. The flaw increased with the years and the marked egoistical streak in his nature deepened it until the Kohinoor of the ancient Indian consciousness, that was his genius, split. One reason why the flaw could increase was that the ancient Indian consciousness which from beyond his surface being was awakening or erupting was not sufficiently assimilated by the average Englishman in him.

A similar reason with a different slant of action was responsible, in my view, for the too dissolving flux of Shelley's poetry which was again the same consciousness, crossed with the Platonic mood, in a more colourful and impetuous form. While Wordsworth's defect was mainly an intellectual rigidity that did not let the higher light come through intensely enough, Shelley's was an emotional laxity that diffused this light too much. Neither the one poet nor the other could quite live up to the power of the In-world and Over-world pressing upon them from the ether in which the Mantras of the Vedas and the Upanishads beat eternally their starry wings. But wherever their work is successful in a novel ultra-"romantic" mode they show the marvellous possibility of the English language being charged with and moulded by a non-English and profoundly Indian spirit.

I may add that this spirit has operated also through other

poets after Wordsworth and Shelley—most markedly through two in two different manners. Whitman was its stormy oceanic medium under a large foam-fury of Americanism. AE was its quiet streamlike channel under a fine iridescent quiver of Celticism. AE, of course, is a much smaller poet than the other three—smaller because of a more limited range and a certain monotony of technical movement as well as a misty facility of expression. But with all deference to Yeats I am positive that —more often than the compiler of the *Oxford Book of Modern Verse* allowed—he wrote very subtle and original pieces, and they were essentially expressive of the Indian spirit, though, technically speaking, not quite with a Mantric ring. To write from an inner mystic source in affinity with this spirit is what would be natural to one who was the first poet in English doubled with a Yogi in the true sense.

All this brings me by a detour to your point that poems in English by Indians seem always to be written in a foreign idiom. But I have tried to indicate that there has been an undeniable preparation, by English poets, of a union of the Indian spirit and the English language and, according to me, this phenomenon is the reverse of the same thing whose obverse would be the writing of poetry in English by Indians who are moved by the deepest layer—the soul-layer—of the Indian consciousness. You would protest that after all Wordsworth, Shelley, Whitman and AE, whatever essential Indianness might have poetised itself through them, were singing in their own tongue, whereas Indians are using an acquired one and hence their treatment of it is always as by a foreigner. But what exactly is meant by writing as if in a foreign idiom? Is the English at fault? Is the idiom unnatural to a greater degree than it is in all poetry as contrasted to prose? Perhaps you mean, with Middleton Murry reviewing Manmohan Ghose's poems, that English words are being employed to express what they were never born for? But surely you have yourself spoken of the polymorphous potentialities of English? The only interpretation I can give to your phrase is that Indians don't know enough English to be able to write inwardly, as one must in poetry. But, granted that one

is poetically gifted, would not the literary inwardness come if one knew English, as spoken among Englishmen, from one's early childhood—as, for instance, did Sri Aurobindo no less than his elder brother Manmohan Ghose, both of whom hardly knew Bengali or any other Indian language until they came from England to India in their twenties? Or would you go so far as to assert that one who has English blood in his veins can alone have that literary inwardness? But then no pure Irishman can be a poet in English. And is there anything like pure English blood? "Normans and Danes and Saxons are we," sang Tennyson. There are other strains too—and quite convertible into the strains of poetry, as in the case of Dante Gabriel and Christina Rossetti who were Italian. Would you deny their achievement? If the former is felt as exotic, he still remains a genuine poet in English. And poetic exoticism did not begin or end in England with *The House of Life*. Spenser, Shelley, Keats, Francis Thompson, the early Yeats have all been charged with exoticism.

What evidently is necessary for poetic success in English is an intimacy somehow won with the language. And the way it may be won is itself a complex question. As I have tried to suggest in my last letter, there may be factors of the inner being which, in order that one may be a master of English, do not always call for the very conditions under which Englishmen learn their own language. Something within can transcend the accidents of race and place. If one can feel a mysterious sympathy, even a sense of identity, with people of other races and places, as you too admit, why not with the languages of those people? I think that in consideration of all that I had said in my letter you have allowed the theoretical possibility of successful Indo-Anglian poetry: else you would not grant that one day Indo-Anglian poetry that is both truly Indian and English might get written. So your criticism has to be taken as applying really to present practice: it simply finds that so far Indians have not composed authentic poetry in English because they have invariably written Indian English. But, if you didn't see an Indian name under a poem, would you

infallibly know that its English was not by an Englishman? Please forgive my queries if they appear a little impudent, but I am sincerely concerned to understand and learn.

Possibly what you mean is illustrated by Yeats's dealings with a prose-poem of Tagore's which, together with another, he included in the *Oxford Book of Modern Verse*. Two sentences of Tagore's—the last paragraph—are semi-reminiscent of one of the Upanishadic *slokas* I have quoted in this letter. The whole piece originally ran:

> Thou art the sky and thou art the nest as well.
>
> O thou beautiful, there in the nest it is thy love that encloses the soul with colours and sounds and odours.
>
> There comes the morning with the golden basket in her right hand bearing the wreaths of beauty, silently to crown the earth.
>
> And there comes the evening over the lonely meadows deserted by herds, through trackless paths, carrying cool draughts of peace in her golden pitcher from the western oceans of rest.
>
> But there, where spreads the infinite sky for the soul to take her flight in, reigns the stainless white radiance. There is no day nor night, nor form nor colour, and never, never a word.

Yeats touched up Tagore thus:

> Thou art the sky and thou art the nest.
>
> O Thou Beautiful! how in the nest thy love embraceth the soul with sweet sounds and colour and fragrant odours!
>
> Morning cometh there, bearing in her golden basket the wreath of beauty silently to crown the earth.
>
> And there cometh Evening, o'er lonely meadows deserted of the herds, by trackless ways, carrying in her golden pitcher cool draughts from the ocean-calms of the West.
>
> But where thine infinite sky spreadeth for the soul to take her flight, a stainless white radiance reigneth; where-

in is neither day nor night, nor form nor colour, nor ever any word.

Well, what do you say? In the very last paragraph a tightening up and a closer connectivity have been achieved; also a kind of adroitness of construction, and perhaps a more telling defunctive music at the end. But isn't there a slight artiness too, and a *soupçon* of stiffness in the phrase as a whole? And is Tagore's original couched as if in a foreign idiom? What strikes me is that in tone and structure the original Tagore in this paragraph is more or less like the early Yeats, and what Yeats has produced by his correction is in the same respect more or less like the later Yeats. As with several of Yeats's modifications of his own poems of the Celtic twilight, something of the spontaneity, something of the vague far cry that is of the essence of the expression, have been lost. To my mind, here is hardly a question of English English and Indian English. It is merely a question of technical tempers. And no Yeats was specially needed to make the change. Several Indian professors of Literature at St. Xavier's College, Bombay, where I studied, could have done the job equally well if asked to introduce a bit of tautness and a bit of semi-Biblicism. Even some of my fellow-students could have managed it. One cannot say, either, that Tagore himself was incapable of Yeats's close: "nor ever any word". At the end of another prose-poem in the same collection, *Gitanjali*, we read: "...and the joy that throws everything it has upon the dust, and knows not a word." If Tagore didn't write in this place, "and knows never, never a word", he knew that such an effect was out of tune with the mood and the motif. But in the other dying cadence he may have wanted a specific stressed suggestion of everlasting silence and he may have wanted the suggestion to stand out by itself and not be tagged on to the run of statements linked by "nor" 's.

As for the rest of the piece, the verbal turns seem to vary in Yeats from Tagore according to nothing else than personal preference and individual sense of style. In one or two places I feel that Yeats has overdone things and a certain chasteness

and reticence have been sacrificed. Take Tagore's

> O thou beautiful, there in the nest it is thy love that encloses the soul with colours and sounds and odours.

I think Yeats has brought in a rhetorical note as well as a grossness or obviousness in his version:

> O Thou Beautiful! how in the nest thy love embraceth the soul with sweet sounds and colour and fragrant odours!

Somehow I recoil just a trifle from that "how" and the "embraceth" and "sweet" and "fragrant." The Tagorean crystallinity has been tarnished. And isn't Yeats's nineteenth-century "o'er" in the fourth paragraph artificial? The repeated archaism of the "eth"-termination of verbs in nearly every paragraph jars again on my ear. I find also a shift of suggestion for the worse when Tagore's "western oceans of rest" are converted into "ocean-calms of the West", though possibly Tagore's "western" and "rest", are not a very happy marriage of sounds. On the other hand, the omission of the last two words from Tagore's "cool draught of peace" may be an improvement and perhaps the transposition of "in her golden pitcher", from after "cool draughts....", to before it, is a better sequence of ideas. Further, I can appreciate the skill with which the "there" has been diversely disposed in the different paragraphs, but I don't know whether it was quite required by the mood and movement of Tagore's rhapsodic ingenuousness as of a seer-child. Several other small strokes of conscious dexterity in the structure may similarly be unnecessary. In the case of "where" followed soon after by "wherein" in the final paragraph, one wonders whether it is actually dexterity or gaucherie. All in all, I can't say that the language has been manipulated with a more genuine sensitivity, a more appropriate literary inwardness, by Yeats. (11.10.1961)

From Kathleen Raine

I have a letter from you, and also Sri Aurobindo's Isha Upanishad for which I thank you. I have begun taking it a few pages at a time. It is very impressive and revealing.

I was most interested in all you had to say both about the Upanishads and about the movement in India towards writing in English. What you write about the *actual words* of the Upanishads, "the quality and rhythm of the individual words, and the *ensemble* at once massive and intense of revelatory significance which the words make by conveying the inner vibration, the life-thrill of the spiritual state expressed" is I am sure true. I have heard Arabinda Basu recite passages in Sanskrit, and I recognise—just faintly—that resonance which seems to fill everything and yet to be infinitely remote. Yes, sacred words indeed. Luminous words, from the "overhead planes". That sense of a deep mystery of which words are only an indication, but of which they are at the same time a part, has been almost lost in the West. I read lately a book on a Sufi saint (Ahmad al-'Alwai) that describes the Sufi mysticism of names and even of letters. It is clearly something we have lost.

I agree with you that the Aurobindo translation you quote does convey more of the sense of marvel than the Yeats, especially the second sentence. But the archaisms in the first sentence, "shines not", "flash not", and "shineth" are not really possible in modern English, and are "poetic" in a bad sense.

Your illustration of the resonance of Vedantic utterance from Wordsworth gave me great delight. Surely that is the very quality in him that is great, and I am glad you find in Wordsworth something of the Indian soul. You ought to publish something on Wordsworth on the lines of your most revealing letter. Believe me I love him enough to value what you have written.

Now as to my point about feeling that Indians write English as a foreign language. You write of the superb correspondence of Sanskrit words to meanings that are not so much defined by them as made resonant in them. In the case of Sanskrit

their precision is perhaps (I speak in ignorance) greatest in the metaphysical level, least in the natural. Now the English language is just the opposite; its beauty lies in its ability to convey the very nature of England, its woods and flowers and weather and animals and people with their peculiarly English attitudes. Take away this "local habitation and a name" and what is "the crow makes wing to the rooky wood" or "a violet by a mossy stone Half hidden from the eye, Fair as a star when only one Is shining in the sky", that conveys the precise cold spring twilight of the *north* of England? You may use English abstract terms, or such international and empty words as "telegraph-operator" or "bulldozer", but is that English? Yes, I mean exactly what Middleton Murry says, that Indian poets writing in English employ the words for uses they were never born for, since words cannot be separated from the particular group-soul, grown on a certain kind of earth, under certain skies, and conversing for centuries upon certain themes (Catholic Christianity up to the Renaissance, and other mentalities since then) with people of a certain shared kind and quality, class or caste. A world-language would be no language at all—at least to poets it would be no language at all. I have often day-dreamed of learning Gaelic in order to have a language more limited than modern English, now spread so very thin and shallow all over the world.

Oddly enough I have talked of this with Herbert Read, who expressed a view quite opposite to the one you quote. He said poetry is of all things the most localised speech.

But if the impulse in India to write poetry in English is really so strong, I suppose that in time a sort of "silver" English might be produced, comparable to Latin as a world-language. Even so, the world conditions are different; the Church needed hymns in a language understood in all countries; but nowadays it is the scientists and the imperialists and the press-mongers who want a world-language, and the advertisers of industrial products, and the power-seekers, and in a word the destroyers. Well, there it is. I see very little hope for the future of English poetry in any country, truth to say; and how much longer will the world itself last?

However, while we are here we must do our best.

Did I send you my *Collected Poems*? If not, please tell me and I will do so.

(1.11.1961)

From K. D. Sethna

Do send me your *Collected Poems*. I have read a bit of your poetry here and there, but I should like to have all of your work with me so that I may gather the full sense of your reading of life's beauty and terror both within and without, your soul's probing of

This world you with the flower and the tiger share.

Your letter shows that at the moment you are very much aware of the tiger—even outside Blake's poem. For you speak of "the destroyers" who are our masters today, and you ask: "How much longer will this world itself last?" But do you know why there is everywhere the feeling of the world's end? If I may speak as an aspirant of what Sri Aurobindo calls the Yoga of the Supermind, this feeling is not merely because of the threat of nuclear war. That threat has not created this feeling but only sharpened it to a sort of objective sensation. Really the feeling has been there for quite a time, born of subjective factors: it is due to an inner perception, vague and vast, that Man the Mind is played out. This perception reflects an evolutionary turning-point that is now upon us. If the earlier stages of evolution could have responded, with anything like our own self-consciousness, to the previous crises of God's unfoldment on earth, the same *Angst* as ours would have been there when Life was first about to break from Matter, and Mind from Life: the dust would have trembled with a sudden fear of dissolution of its inertia, the living cells would have been shot with a painful apprehension of deadly danger to their blind desire. But if they could have known that a greater birth was preparing in their depths in answer to a pressure from the

hidden heights of being, they would have realised that however intense their anxiety, their anguish, they really were not going to be destroyed but transformed. Man today is in such dire travail because Superman is being born: only he does not see what has descended from above to help the Divine Wonder break forth from below: hence the feeling of a return of chaos and old night.

Not that diabolical forces are absent, not that actual darkness is a mere illusion. There are always anti-evolutionary agencies eager to make the turning-points spell death instead of new birth. But they fall into their true proportions when viewed against the luminous Powers that are the ultimate lords of destiny. Europe does not see that the nuclear age is also the age of Sri Aurobindo and that human history seems at an end because it has served its full purpose and must give place to a golden tale on earth of the more-than-human. It is finished in both senses of the term: it has no further hope or meaning because it has reached its fulfilment and is no longer necessary. Even the presence of the atomic horror is but an inverted reflection of the Omnipotent's secret arrival. A German historian of atomic developments—I forget his name—has entitled his book: *Brighter than Ten Thousand Suns*: the title is a genuine flash of inspiration, for it comes to fit the nuclear conflagration from the Gita's phrase about the Supreme Reality that is the Inner Cosmos. The Transcendent Light has manifested with Sri Aurobindo, imprinting the Superman in earth's subtle spaces, and this Splendour of eternal life is imaged ignorantly in the Hydrogen Bomb Explosion which the adversary powers are threatening to make an instrument of eternal death.

I, small and insignificant in myself but blessed with the rare good fortune of having known Sri Aurobindo and the Mother intimately for years, make bold to assure you that all shall be well with the world these two have made their home and that in spite of the menacing destroyers you may gaze tranquilly into the future, for the future will never be theirs. I do not prophesy that everything will be smooth and safe in a short while. The time of a turning-point in evolution is never

a comfortable one, to say the least; but—also to put it mildly —a turning-point, that leads the Supermind in, cannot result in the "tiger" preventing the "flowers" from sharing "this world" in which you find yourself.

Now to our literary problem. I am glad you agree with me about the Sri Aurobindo translation of the Upanishads as compared to the Yeats. But I am surprised at your remarks: "The archaisms in the first sentence, 'shines not', 'flash not' and 'shineth' are not really possible in modern English and are 'poetic' in a bad sense." Of course I am aware—and most certainly was Sri Aurobindo also aware—that archaisms are to be avoided. But that is a rule for general practice and cannot apply to special occasions. If in the last part of my letter you look at what Yeats has made of Tagore you will observe that he has introduced archaisms galore of which I myself have expressed disapproval: "embraceth", "cometh" (twice), "spreadeth", "reigneth" and the absolutely gratuitous "o'er". Whether Yeats has used his archaisms well or ill, the fact that he thought fit to scatter them with a free hand proves that in his opinion they could be appropriate even today to a mood and manner like the *Gitanjali*'s. How then could you criticise a rare occurrence of them in a translation of the ancient hieratic Upanishads? At least at certain places they are bound to be congruous. Our judgment should depend on where and how and why they come in. We may note that Sri Aurobindo has not suddenly obtruded an archaism in "shineth": it has been prepared by "shines not" and "flash not". Besides, it is surely not put in for its own sake: there is a definite rhythmical necessity. The phrase "and by His shining all this shineth" has a run of sibilants where a further final *s* would be a distinct cacophony. As for "shines not" and "flash not", I feel they are demanded by the compact intensity of the revelatory movement. Wouldn't we have a thinning of the atmosphere of seerhood if one wrote: "There the sun does not shine" or "There these lightnings do not flash"? Sri Aurobindo's rendering is not positive prose, either: it is prose-poetry and its needs are different. Moreover, as far as I know, such expressions

are still a natural part of poetry. Why do you say they are "poetic" in a bad sense? Walter de la Mare employs them as well as the "eth"-ending:

> Speak not—whisper not—
> Here bloweth thyme and bergamot.

Edith Sitwell,[1] who in one place writes—

> And the Sun does not care if I live in holiness—

writes also in another:

> For the Sun cares not that I am a simple woman.

C. Day Lewis[2] gives us:

> Others may reap, though some
> See not the winter through,

and again:

> Though song, though breath be short,
> I'll share not the disgrace
> Of those that ran away
> Or never left the base.

You will mark that the archaisms are not only in the imperative mood where they may be thought to come more naturally: they are also in the indicative, and there they go indiscriminately with the first person or the third, the singular number or the plural. They occur even when the subject is much more commonplace and the speech far lower in intensity than in the Aurobindonian Mantra about the Transcendent Divine.

It strikes me that you tend at times—rare times—to be

[1] *An Old Woman.*
[2] *Tempt Me No More.*

somewhat rigid in your attitudes, not plastic enough to the diversity of fact or possibility. The position you take up about English poetry and Indian writers is once more too partial, too doctrinaire. Please forgive the rashness of a non-Englishman trying to set right an Englishwoman of genius pronouncing on her own tongue; but I can't help feeling you are so steeped in distinctive Englishness that you read it even where it is not there except in the most superficial sense. Thus all poetry written by Englishmen seems to you distinctively English just because it was written in England and in the tongue with which you have associated your own distinctive Englishness. But actually what you take to be the *differentia* of the group-soul that has formed in England does not tinge the whole of English poetry: it affects only a portion of it. The portion affected is perhaps a domain exclusive to English writers, but a far greater mass of expression is not typically English, separated from all other countries by the special psychological interchanges among Englishmen for centuries within a definite area of persistent scenery and climate. Outside a small stretch of their work English poets are not Englishmen packed with the sense of England but human beings and terrestrial watchers.

Much of the Englishness you speak of is merely a matter of certain national interests, historical habits, popular stock-responses, subtle temperamental "slants", sensitive mirror-moods. Fine examples of sensitive mirror-moods are the lines to which you have referred: Shakespeare's

> Light thickens and the crow
> Makes wing to the rooky wood,

and Wordsworth's

> A violet by a mossy stone,
> Half hidden from the eye!
> —Fair as a star, when only one
> Is shining in the sky.

Such lines breathe the atmosphere of English hours and seasons and occasions. The words catch with imaginative fidelity what is local and typical. But would you claim that English poetry cannot with equal effect mood-mirror what is exotic or what is universal? Can you point to anything locally and typically English about Shakespeare's

> There's husbandry in heaven;
> Their candles are all out,

or

> my way of life
> Is fallen into the sere, the yellow leaf,

or—still to draw upon *Macbeth* from which your own quotation came—

> After life's fitful fever he sleeps well?

And just as Wordsworth's English can convey "the precise cold spring twilight of the north of England" it can communicate the scenic posture of the Simplon Pass which has nothing to do with any part of the British Isles:

> The immeasurable height
> Of woods decaying, never to be decayed,
> The stationary blasts of waterfalls,
> And in the narrow rent, at every turn,
> Winds thwarting winds bewildered and forlorn,
> The torrents shooting from the clear blue sky,
> The rocks that muttered close upon our ears,
> Black drizzling crags that spake by the wayside
> As if a voice were in them, the sick sight
> And giddy prospect of the raving stream,
> The unfettered clouds and region of the heavens....

Here is superb poetry plucked from the heart of the thing described. I find no sign in it of all that you consider intrinsically bound up with the English language—"the very nature of

England, its woods and flowers and weather and animals and people with their peculiarly English attitudes." Of course, the passage has no description of animals or people, but if they had been there they would have had no more Englishness about them than the inanimate objects. As for the general attitude towards whose articulation the lines mount up, we may easily note that it is as far as possible from being peculiarly English, for the verses after those quoted run:

> Tumult and peace, the darkness and the light—
> Were all like workings of one mind, the features
> Of the same face, blossoms upon one tree,
> Characters of the great Apocalypse,
> The types and symbols of Eternity,
> Of first, and last, and midst, and without end.

This is the characteristic Wordsworthian speech that brought a new note into English poetry. I have already dwelt on its essential Indianness, its fundamentally Vedantic vision, and you have been kind enough to comment: "Your illustration of the resonance of Vedantic utterance from Wordsworth gave me great delight. Surely that is the very quality in him that is great, and I am glad you find in Wordsworth something of the Indian soul. You ought to publish something on Wordsworth on the lines of your most revealing letter. Believe me I love him enough to value what you have written." I may add that even when Wordsworth is not markedly Vedantic his attitude does not always express a recognisable English mind. If the lines about the violet by a mossy stone are of the English soil, surely the end of the Immortality Ode is rooted with all earth's little growths and in the depths of the wide world's dreaming heart?—

> To me the meanest flower that blows can give
> Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears.

And if the solitary star to which the fair Lucy is compared

shines in the dusk of a northern English sky, it is from every place on our globe at nightfall that we can find in the heavens Wordsworth's simile for Milton's sublimity of soul:

Thy soul was like a star and dwelt apart...

Evidently there are two kinds of English poetry—that which is charged with the sense of England and that which is independent of the country. Your letter says: "You write of the superb correspondence of Sanskrit words to meanings that are not so much defined by them as made resonant in them. In the case of Sanskrit their precision is perhaps (I speak in ignorance) greatest in the metaphysical level, least in the natural. Now the English language is just the opposite; its beauty lies in its ability to convey the very nature of England...." Aren't you overlooking the second kind of English poetry that I have illustrated—the second kind that has two varieties, one filling with a foreign air, the other belonging to the universal mind in this or that aspect? In Wordsworth, I may say, both the English countryside and foreign scenery get repeatedly washed in the Upanishadic light. And the universal mind too is strongest in its Indian aspect in which this mind is itself its own object of knowledge or enjoyment by an in-drawing of the consciousness to a sealed spirit-slumber or an open-eyed soul-wakefulness, enabling one to "see into the life of things". Wordsworth's poetry not only exceeds, as all great poets' work does, the group-soul: it also reveals how near England and India can be in the inspired sight and sound of English verse.

What then am I to make of your statement: "Yes, I mean exactly what Middleton Murry says, that Indian poets writing in English employ the words for uses they were never born for; since words cannot be separated from the particular group-soul, grown on a certain kind of earth, under certain skies, and conversing for centuries upon certain themes (Catholic Christianity up to the Renaissance, and other mentalities since then) with people of a certain shared kind and quality, class or caste"? Surely English words were never "born" for such Vedantic

uses as Wordsworth has put them to? This should show that Middleton Murry's dictum is inacceptable as it stands. The fact is that the words of a language are never born once for all with an aptness to just one type of outlook and attitude, character and temperament. The mentality of a group is itself an evolving phenomenon and words are constantly getting reborn. Their rebirth is not confined to the group's development, either; they take on new uses in the midst of novel patterns of experience under the "plastic press" of many an original individuality. Particularly is this true of English words, for the English group-soul itself is of a most diversified oneness. Thus there is such a heterogeneity in it that there is no persistent tradition of literary expression, of style. Style in English is a thousand different things; the personal element is rampant. English literature is not so much a nation speaking in a single recognisable voice as a crowd of men commingling their idiosyncratic accents. And some of these individuals are so uncommon that at first sight they hardly seem English in their expression, and yet they stand as genuine creators of English literature. Spenser was acknowledged to be a great English poet in his own day: his instrument, however, was so variegated and multi-turned with the obsolete, the rare, the coined, the foreign that he was accused by Ben Jonson of writing no language by writing too many. Milton is the supreme name in English poetry after Shakespeare, but the English language is said to have sunk under him. The English of Thomas Browne is a splendid freak. Carlyle's English, no less admirable, teems with Germanisms; and we may legitimately speak, though still with admiration, of Meredithese in prose and Hopkinsese in verse; and the glorious Henry James with his complicated qualifications and figurative proliferations builds his sentences as no other Englishman has ever dreamt of doing. Mind you, all of them are writing "naturally", not setting about their business with a theoretician's mania like Joyce.

One may suggest that English words were born anew and born different with each of these creative eccentrics. Nor is the reorientation to be defined in purely stylistic terms. It

is a mental change of colour that is mostly at work. The whole history of English literature is marked with such changes. To speak of English words as being English-minded in one clear seizable way—especially to speak of them thus in the realm of poetry—appears to miss their actual life-process. Has the English Muse one definite basic psychology? When the Romantic Movement caught English poets, did not all the hoary-headed classicists find the result un-English in temper as well as style? How bewildered was even Matthew Arnold by the un-English ethereality that ran riot in Shelley! And what about the pre-Romantic who called himself "English Blake"? Are his "embryo ideas" and "unevolved images" and "vague mystic grandeurs"—to quote Housman's well-known phrases—English in the Murryesque sense? To hark back to Wordsworth: is it English of him to poetise the exaltations of pantheism? Can we dub the exotic fantasy and kaleidoscopic symbolism of Coleridge's *Kubla Khan* typically English? Is the early Yeats English—Yeats of the dim poignancies and the rich obscurities? Nobody can affirm that the average Englishman has the foggiest notion of what AE is singing about; yet many of AE's poems have been praised by discerning critics like Ernest Boyd and Monk Gibbon—they are a living language, English written by an Irishman with the soul of an Indian. Can we or can we not stamp as English the Bible's poetic passages with their lavish oriental imagination, their gorgeous Hebraic religiosity? The English language is the most composite in the world—influences Celtic, Anglo-Saxon, Danish, French, Italian, Greek, Latin and Hebraic have gone into its making as well as its mind. It has a capacity to assimilate everything, it can take any hue of thought, shade of suggestion, glow of feeling, pattern of experience and turn them into truly English effects —that is, effects achieved with perfect adequacy by English words. What has happened in the past can happen again. If a notable command of the English language and a thorough knowledge of English poetical technique could be at the disposal of Indian inspiration, I see no reason why memorable English poetry should fail to be produced. Still less is failure to be

expected when already the Indian spirit has started moulding the words through English poets themselves.

"There ain't no sich person" as English poetry with one simple and uniform body and soul!

I believe Herbert Read is mistaken if he holds, in any seriously restrictive sense, the opinion you quote from him, that poetry is of all things the most localised speech. Were he dead right, it would be impossible for any man even to appreciate, leave aside compose, poetry in a foreign tongue—much more if that tongue belonged to antiquity. Gilbert Murray and C. M. Bowra would be Greek scholars to little purpose. They would be eternally shut off from the art of Homer and Sophocles not only because they were not born of Greek fathers and mothers but also because the Greek of Homer and Sophocles stopped being spoken centuries ago and is attached to no existing locality which a Hellenophile might adopt in the hope of being Hellenised. And what about Arberry with regard to Arabic and Persian, or Waley with regard to Chinese? I am sure a sensitive mind can get past all localities and penetrate any group-soul in at least its wide and deep human aspects. After all, a group-soul is not something dissociated from the world-soul out of which all group-souls emerge and in which all are one; nor is it so unique as not to share many a movement of sensation and reverie and speculation with the souls of other groups. Besides, individuals are at the same time part of a group-soul and entities on their own with a power to reshape the trend of the group to which they belong, a power also to overleap that group and vibrate in natural affinity with another or else hold together in one heart the life-rhythms of more than a single group. A speech is never so localised as to be hermetically sealed from the polymorphous potentialities of the individual mind anywhere on earth. And this for the simple reason, among many, that literary creation from whatever place breaks loose from its historico-geographical context and becomes a world in itself in which everything has been subtilised to imaginative values: a direct approach to it, independent of physical barriers and racial differences, is open to anyone's sympathetic

and artistic imagination. Even your "violet by a mossy stone" gets transplanted to a new soil common to all humanity's "inward eye" and, provided one knows the denotation of each of the three terms in the phrase, their combination can quicken sufficiently for the imaginative foreigner if he is not "duller"

> than the fat weed
> That rots itself in ease on Lethe wharf—

the weed that belongs to nobody's actual world and yet can spring into life for whoever is not dead to poetry. Similarly, the star sole-shining over Wordsworth's "untrodden ways/ Beside the springs of Dove" can strike home in its purely poetic setting to the non-Englishman who is capable of reflecting and enjoying even a glimpse from nowhere like Keats's

> Deep in the shady sadness of a vale
> Far sunken from the healthy breath of morn,
> Far from the fiery noon and eve's one star...

I may not be able to visit England again in a maturer state than when I did for three months at the age of six, much less be able to get domiciled there; I certainly cannot wangle an English parentage for myself! But I have lived so intensely in the floating and world-voyaging England that is English literature, shared so vividly the exultations and agonies of all its creative geniuses and known so intimately even the slightest genuine quiver and glimmer of the expressive urge in most poets from Langland to Vernon Watkins, that I have hardly ever met a cultured Englishman with whom I could not discuss on equal terms the niceties of substance and form in English prose or verse. I am sure there are many non-Englishmen who have known with a keen inwardness the language and literature of your country. Else how could a writer, some time back, in the *John O'London's Weekly*[1] say: "It is a curious fact that the best short history of the English language is written by a Dane,

[1] 28th August, 1960, p. 490, col. 1.

Dr. Otto Jesperson. It is still more curious that the most popular short history of English Literature is also of foreign authorship—in this case by the Frenchmen Cazamian and Legouis." And I have noted Harold Acton, in an issue last year of the *London Magazine*,[1] calling Professor Mario Praz "the author of some of the most illuminating criticism of our literature produced by a foreign scholar (*Poeti inglesi dell Otto Cento, Storia della letteratura inglese, Secentismo e marinismo in Inghilterra,* to which Mr. Eliot has paid tribute)." Well, if one could get into the very heart of a foreign work and appreciate its organic art no less than its intellectual content, the possibility is bound to arise that one may kindle up with that heart as from within oneself and start creating—the foreign tongue shooting forth from one's own fire. Should Herbert Read, by considering poetry the most localised speech, wish to be prohibitive and exclusive of the likes of me who venture to use English for creative ends, he would have to impute to us an inability to take even the first step which might, not unnaturally, lead us to be ourselves genuinely poetic. In other words, he would have to deny us any real appreciation of style and technique and artistic shape and verbal felicity and rhythmic suggestion in English: he would have to declare for ever beyond us the feel of the many-motioned fiery-blooded flesh of English poetry, the form that answers to the true voice of feeling, and concede us only the pleasure of licking the bare bones of thought abstracted from what must be for us the mere dead weight of the body's beauty. Is he prepared to go to such an extreme?

Perhaps he will have to go to another extreme also. To poetise his own speech to the utmost, he should completely localise it with the Yorkshire dialect instead of taking the creative edge off it with the standard idiom of South-eastern England. The blurred ground-bass of the Yorkshire articulation may make more appealing music, but I am sure he will not be sirened away by it from the less fascinating sound of the English which provides him with a greater range of intellectual gesture and which all his compatriots can follow with ease.

[1] May 1960, Vol. 7, No. 5, p. 70.

The sole legitimate sense in which I can think of poetry as the most localised speech is that in order to be a poet one should follow those turns of imaginative and emotional language which would be most natural to the life led in a certain place, for then this language would be at its most direct, at its keenest. But the piece of art should be, as far as possible, a self-contained fact, and the phrases should function to the full without leaning on any acquaintance in the reader with local psychology or scenery or linguistics. A reader acquainted with these things will get an extra tang out of the poem, but will it be of something intrinsic to the poem's art? And would not even its relevance in any way depend on whether the imaginative and emotional speech-turns natural to the place-life were concerned with that life itself rather than with broader visions and issues? To my mind the truer definition would be not that poetry is the most localised speech but that it is the speech most individualised and particularised in the midst of its appeal to the world-soul.

Herbert Read is a writer I have immensely admired, for his style as well as for his insight and his nobility of mind. One little book of his has become a special companion to me: *A Coat of Many Colours. The Meaning of Art* is also a valued possession. And I have crystallised many points for myself from his *English Prose Style.* But I am sorry that at one place in it he has let his Englishness run away with him. He sets out to illustrate how authors could be perfect in the formation of their sentences and yet neglect the wider all-embracing sweep of the paragraph. He suggests that Conrad and Santayana are particularly liable to this fault because of their foreign extraction. He brings up from Santayana a paragraph which appears to be just a series of good sentences instead of a sustained harmonious whole and he attributes the defect to the writer's being a Spaniard. Sensing that perhaps he has overstepped the limit he draws back a little and admits that even Emerson who was no foreigner in the strict sense has paragraphs lacking in rhythmical life. Evidently, apart from poor writing capacity, it is, as Read too realises, a certain type of thinking

—either a monotony or a jumpiness of idea-movement—that misses being a good paragraphist: an Englishman's writing English or a foreigner's doing it has no bearing on the matter, provided the foreigner is as accomplished a practitioner of English prose as the author of *The Last Puritan* or that of *The Mirror of the Sea.* In fact, another of Read's citations from Santayana is as competent in paragraphing as anything penned by Read himself—and that, too, in the rather difficult *genre* of the branching metaphor.

Please do not take me to mean that it is an easy job for a Pole or a Spaniard or an Indian to be a good writer in English; and where so subtle an art as poetry is concerned—an art in which even English aspirants mostly fall short—the successful foreigner is bound to be a rarity indeed. I, along with you and Read, would certainly advise a man to write poetry in his own native tongue; but I would hesitate to define "native tongue" always or merely in terms of his nationality. There are people who are very efficiently bilingual and a few who, though non-English, have so been educated that the English language has not only got under their skin but is their sole medium of exquisite or powerful or profound expression. Especially this last small company of Indians is, in my eyes, destined to form authentic part of the creators of English poetry and, contrary to what you are prepared to grant, their tones will not make only such "silver" as English might grow into as a world-language comparable to Latin in Europe's Middle Ages or to Greek in Western Asia at the beginning of the Christian Era. Not handled for merely practical interests, not revolved in the mouth for purely intellectual purposes, but held in the very heart and infused into the blood-stream, their English will flow as "golden" as it can be with

The light that never was on sea or land.

(9.11.1961)

From Kathleen Raine

I have asked Bowes & Bowes to post you my *Collected Poems* and I hope you will find some there that speak to you, as some of yours did to me.

On such a large question as the use of English in India I am obviously unqualified to speak, as it is very largely a political issue. Doubtless there were, and are, strong *political* forces at work that make the use of English as a common second language in India desirable. But alas the motives of politics are not those of poetry; power and commerce do not speak words as poets and the common people use them, with feeling and love. Besides the positive objection—that words are in their nature (except when abstract, or commercial) restricted to a tribe and its land and landscape and subtleties of feeling and observation—which of course does not prevent the poetry written by the bards of the tribe from reaching any depth of feeling or thought, as poets of all languages have proved, not only Wordsworth—there is a negative objection as well, i.e., the very desire to use an alien language reflects a break with tradition, in those who are infected with such a wish. The words of the ancestors come to us loaded with their experience of the earth as they have known it. In disowning our language, do we not disown ourselves?

Sri Aurobindo was uprooted, as I understand, and in any case doubtless wished to write in English for the instruction of English readers—whose need is certainly great, in philosophic matters, and who should therefore be grateful to him. But his poetry is certainly not on the same level as his philosophic writings.

To wish to write in an alien language, therefore, seems to me, for a poet, a failure to perceive and experience that which poetry is, the "minute particulars" of words in their feeling-content and their local sense-impression. There is involved, in such a wish, a separation of abstractions from words—the very antithesis of poetry. However, the course of history must go on, and India no doubt will lose its tradition as the modern West has all but lost its tradition, until our terrible civilisation

(one of the most barbarous there has ever been) destroys itself, or the world, or both. I do not know enough about Indian metaphysics, but both Christian and Moslem scriptures envisage a decline of the world towards its end and final destruction. However, even on the last day, those who can must bear witness to the divine. One must look up, not down, or we lose heart, hope, and courage. (22.11.1961)

I have no objection to your publishing extracts from our exchange if you think they might be of interest: I seem to remember writing some more in my last letter, saying that the use of a foreign language revealed a loss of the sense of our own words, as well as an inadequacy in the use of the adopted language. But, then, you see, I do not like this whole world tendency to reduce all differences to one uniform race and culture, which will have none of the treasures of any of its components, but only this mass tele-culture that infects the whole world now with its sub-humanity. Maybe the tendency is irresistible but if it is one may wonder if literacy of any kind will survive; communication will all be by newsreels and through the eye, and the human vocabulary be reduced to a few counters necessary for the exchange of such meagre ideas as can survive under the Dictatorship of the Proletariat, whether Russian or American style—for the differences are less great than the similarities, and even in the last three or four years "the filthy modern tide" has been rising fast in England. The social tendency is no longer a movement upwards from below, but an assimilation, in thought, dress, speech and manners, downwards to the lowest, as you may see in any play at the Royal Court Theatre, or in the *Observer* any Sunday. A remote language might be a positive protection against this tide. If you lived in England you would be aghast, as I am, at the eagerness of traditional civilisations where they remain (I saw it in Greece) to imitate and adopt a form of civilisation that has been disastrous to human values wherever it has spread, and which now seems to threaten the existence of the very earth itself. Perhaps that is the least serious aspect of its results. I know that Indians

are said to be fatalists—or at least you take views so very long that the waxing and waning of planets is of small account—but the Indian haste to exchange the Vedas for Dr. Leavis and the New Criticism, and the immemorial skill of humanity for the machines is incomprehensible to me; or for that matter knowledge of the true nature and destiny of the soul for social welfare.

But this is too like politics, about which I know little and care less. I only know the kind of ignorant ugliness that revolts my soul, and that is what you will inherit with "westernisation". But maybe it is inevitable and one should not waste emotion on it.

I hope my poems reach you for Christmas if not before. All my good wishes for the time of the Nativity. It is the most glorious of Christian symbols, and the only hope of our fallen and terrible world and our fallen and terrible humanity.

(11. 12. 1961)

From K. D. Sethna

Your letter dated November 22nd has just reached me—nearly a month and a half after posting. You appear to be still troubled by the war-menace. I am not surprised: it must be very difficult to live in Europe and not be haunted by thoughts of the end of the world. But I have the faith that the barbarism which you rightly see in our lop-sided and discordant civilisation will not get the better of all that on the other hand promises in certain elements of this same civilisation to serve as a stepping-stone to a sweeter and brighter future. What both Christian and Moslem scriptures envisage—as also do the Zoroastrian which are more ancient and, in this as well some other matters, must have influenced them—would most probably come true at least so far as the history of our particular civilisation is concerned if there were not a new Light, greater than any of the past, at work in its midst to counteract the catastrophic tendency. I believe that a small but sharp inner touch of this Light has restrained Père Teilhard de Chardin from the pessimism that has infected most Europeans: he brings, for all the mixing which as a Jesuit he couldn't help of the old with the new, a genuine little flash of the Aurobindonian

vision when he sees the future as leading progressively towards a luminous outbreak of God in a unified humanity. If this outbreak which he calls Omega Point is also a burning of the world, the end of history, the end is not a catastrophe but a going up in glory.

Apropos of the question of Indo-Anglian poetry, I quite understand the *a priori* force of what you have said. But I have already from my side written all that I can in theory against its unconditional acceptance. Your theoretical position goes very far and holds in great generality, but I think that the arguments in my previous letters should show how it falls short of absoluteness: room remains, even on *a priori* grounds, for brilliant exceptions. And, if I may judge both by what you have quoted Herbert Read as saying and by what we have from him in black and white on Sri Aurobindo's *Ilion*, an unfinished epic sequel of more than 4,000 lines to the *Iliad*, he agrees with you very strongly on the general rule but unmistakably grants—without the slightest reservation—at least one exception. His words are worth quoting: "It is a remarkable achievement by any standard and I am full of amazement that someone not of English origin should have such a wonderful command not only of our language as such, but of its skilful elaboration into poetic diction of such high quality." These words, occurring in the same letter (June 5, 1958) which spoke of *Savitri*'s "sustained creative power", convey that though theoretically he would regard an exception as impossible he cannot deny the actual amazing and overwhelming presence of it. For him, the *a priori* has stood at the bar of the empirical and found itself contradicted.

And, after all, is it not an empirical test that would finally settle the issue? The crucial question is: "Do competent Englishmen find any Indo-Anglian work authentic poetry?" The answer is: "Some Englishmen don't and some do." Interestingly enough, those who do are not recent ones only but date back to the very dawn of Indo-Anglian verse. One day, in 1876, Edmund Gosse strolled idly into the *Examiner*'s office. The Editor put in his hands a shabby little volume, *A Sheaf Gleaned from French Fields* by Toru and Arun Dutt. It had come all the

way from Calcutta. "There!" said the Editor, "see whether you can't make something of that." Gosse opened the book. His eyes fell on the lines translated from Hugo:

> Still barred thy doors! the far east glows,
> The morning wind blows fresh and free.
> Should not the hour that wakes the rose
> Awaken also thee?
>
> All look for thee, Love, Light and Song—
> Light in the sky deep red above,
> Song in the lark of pinions strong,
> And in my heart true Love.

Gosse was at once captivated. He could hardly believe that such verse in English could stream from an outlandish source like the Saptahik Sambad press at Bhowanipore. In spite of awkwardnesses of matter and grammar in some places he hailed the book with enthusiasm; and a few years later, when Toru, the more gifted of the two young poetesses, died at the age of 21, he wrote about her: "When the history of the literature of our country comes to be written, there is sure to be a page in it dedicated to this fragile exotic blossom of song." H. A. L. Fisher, another critic of the day, also welcomed her into "the great fellowship of English poets".

I am afraid Gosse as well as Fisher was too generous with Toru on the whole, but the possibility of true poetic expression in English by an Indian was certainly shown by her, though as yet on a very limited scale of notes. Sarojini Naidu soon followed with a subtler and more magical music and Gosse accepted her too as a genuine lyrist in the English language. Even Sarojini's expression lacked in sufficient range, but in addition to her success, in Gosse's opinion, within the small colourful field she covered, a fact of the greatest significance in relation to his attitude to her is what he told her apropos of her very early work which had many English associations. He said that she could hope to be a true English poet only if she wrote truly

with the Indian mind, expressing all that was most deeply or intensely alive to her. According to this pronouncement by an English critic who was fairly sensitive though not always very profound, there should be no bar in one's Indian birth or temperament or experience to using English poetically. And it was not only Gosse who, when Sarojini sang the iridescence and passion of oriental life, praised her inspiration: Arthur Symons, perhaps a finer critical touchstone, added his approval.

About Manmohan Ghose, Sri Aurobindo's elder brother who, like Sri Aurobindo, spent his most receptive years of youth in England—Oscar Wilde, reviewing the book *Primavera* in which some poems of Manmohan's had first appeared together with those of his English friends, remarked: "Mr. Ghose ought some day to make a name in our literature."[1] Laurence Binyon has found his work so genuinely charged with English moods and impressions, side by side with the Indian tone and temper, that he has wondered whether this poet would figure more as English or as Indian! His multi-faceted summing-up goes: "No Indian had ever before used our tongue with so poetic a touch, and he would coin a phrase, turn a noun into a verb with the freedom, often the felicity, of our own poets. But he remains an Indian. I do not think that an Indian reader would feel him as a foreign poet, for all his western tastes and allusions. Yet to us he is a voice among the great company of English singers; somewhat apart and solitary, with a difference in his note, but not an echo."[2]

Both Binyon and Symons—and, among lesser names, Fowler-Wright, editor of *Poetry and the Drama* in the 'thirties—welcomed and praised the work of Harindranath Chattopadhyaya, Sarojini Naidu's brother, whom, apart from Sri Aurobindo, I consider the most outstanding poetic genius from India to have written in English.

As for Sri Aurobindo himself, there is not only Read's comment on *Ilion*: there is also what Christopher Martin,

[1] *Songs of Love and Death* by Manmohan Ghose, edited with an Introduction by Laurence Binyon (Oxford): Introduction, p. 12.

[2] *Ibid.*: Introduction, p. 21.

Assistant Editor of *Encounter*, wrote to us of the same work: "I certainly am impressed by this masterly achievement in hexameters" (9.12.1959). And I have already quoted to you H. O. White of Trinity College, Dublin, on *Savitri*: "a truly remarkable poem." C. F. Andrews, a co-worker of Tagore, used to cite that long-short poem *The Rishi* as particular proof of his description of Sri Aurobindo as a great poet. Ronald Nixon, known in spiritual circles as Sri Krishna Prem and author of one of the best books in English on the Gita, admires Sri Aurobindo's poetry very much and finds in it abundantly the rare quality of overtones. Arthur Moore, who distinguished himself for years as editor of the Calcutta *Statesman*, is another admirer. Banning Richardson who reviewed Sri Aurobindo's *Collected Poems and Plays* at some length in *The Aryan Path* (March 1944) wrote: "These two volumes are rich in beauty and suggestiveness.... Though the works are by no means of uniform quality—indeed what poet's are?—they reveal a true poetic spirit, and sometimes ascend to heights of great beauty and power. What will strike the English-speaking reader is the amazing mastery of the English language that the writer has attained." We may note the word "amazing", the very one that Read has used, implying that actuality, the empirical fact, has given the lie to theoretical considerations. That gifted Irish poet and thinker, James H. Cousins, who has written a book of extraordinarily acute and condensed criticism, *New Ways in English Literature*, surveying a large field of modern verse in English up to 1919, refers to Sri Aurobindo's early publications and speaks of his "unimpeachable English" and, while calling some of the poetry "poor minted coin of the brain", speaks of the poem *Revelation* as "a wholly delightful thing... which stands self-existent in its own authenticity and beauty"[1] and points to "the veritable alchemy of the imagination in the first four stanzas of *In the Moonlight*"[2]—a passage about which he further remarks: "That, despite a couple of well-worn rhymes, is superlative. We look towards

[1] *New Ways in English Literature* (Ganesh & Co., Madras, 1919), p. 29.
[2] *Ibid.*, p. 30.

its author for more and more of its kind."[1]

One may be sure there was quite a lot of "more and more" by 1951 when Sir Francis Watson, discussing "English Poetry from India" in the B.B.C.'s "Third Progamme", spoke thus of Sri Aurobindo as well as Manmohan Ghose after a bit of diffidence about some other Indian poets. "With Manmohan Ghose we can at any rate forget all reservations, the question of thinking in one language and writing in another, the doubtful dichotomy of east and west. Oscar Wilde, Lionel Johnson and Ernest Dowson were among his companions, and Wilde remarked that he gave a welcome distinction to Christchurch. I do not know that I would call his poetry ninetyish, though some of it is mannered. It is entirely English, sophisticated, yet deeply suffused with the intimate love of nature, of the countryside, the English countryside, *his* countryside for eighteen formative years. He went back to India, but he had made up his mind to return to England, when he died. Many of his poems remain unpublished in the Calcutta University Library. Those that have appeared, notably in the selection made by his schoolfellow, Laurence Binyon, seem to me too good to be forgotten. Aurobindo Ghose, like his brother, shows a distinguished technical mastery: he was deeply interested in prosody. He is the one Indian poet whom Yeats singles out as writing creatively in English (although it was Manmohan for whom Yeats found a corner in the *Oxford Book of Modern Verse*). Aurobindo the poet has been overshadowed by Aurobindo the seer, the yogi, the transcendental philosopher—if indeed you can separate him into these two characters, which I doubt. The craftsmanship which he developed before he retired to the Pondicherry ashram has since been used as the most perfect instrument he could find for the communication of spiritual discovery; but unless you are prepared to respond to that discovery in some degree you will hardly enjoy the poetry. It is a message all right, but from a point so elevated that the sundering Suez Canal is invisible. It is the kind of message which most theories of poetry sanction, and which for Sri

[1] *Ibid.*, p. 31.

Aurobindo it is the poet's highest function to deliver."

What Sir Francis Watson says touches on several issues raised by you: *e.g.*, "Can an Indian employ English with the inwardness needed to write true poetry? Is not Sri Aurobindo the poet to be distinguished from Sri Aurobindo the philosopher? Can his poetry be at all considered to be on the same level as his philosophic writings?" Perhaps the most significant and momentous of Sir Francis's words are those in which he refers to Yeats's opinion of Sri Aurobindo's poetry. I remember your allusion to Yeats's scepticism about the ability of Indians to write poetry in English. And Sir Francis too is well aware of Yeats's general position. For, at almost the very beginning of his long broadcast he quotes an outburst wrung from Yeats by the submission to him, through a sympathetic party, of some English verses by a young Indian. Sir Francis tells us: "Yeats once exclaimed that the introduction of English for the higher education of Indians was Britain's greatest wrong, 'making a stately people clownish, putting indignity into their very souls'." So, when Sir Francis cites him on Sri Aurobindo, he knows very well and makes us also know to the same degree that Yeats's pronouncement was no facile or gracious patronage but an admission wrested from him in spite of himself.

I may stop now and close my muster of English opinions. No doubt, the critics I have mentioned differ sometimes among themselves, just as critics have differed even about English poets including names as eminent as Milton and Shelley; but their admiration or amazement constitutes a very positive body of evidence that by the empirical test Indo-Anglian poetry is indeed far from being a failure. Of course, there are not and there cannot be a large number of Indian poets with striking work in English to their credit. But the thinness or thickness of their ranks should make no odds to the essential point. And we may note that not all the critics subscribe even to a theoretical refusal.

I may add that the case I have presented would stand in its fundamentals no matter if we assumed that every favourable verdict quoted in it was somehow a mistake. For, still there

would be the fact that competent Englishmen have been *prepared* to see true poetic achievement in Indo-Anglian work. Thus at least the possibility, if not the actuality, of such achievement is whole-heartedly granted in practical criticism.

Would I then be in error to hold that when fine minds like you resist so strongly, it is because of some doctrinaire influence from an over-Englishness of temperament and an excessive sense of local tradition?

In closing, I may make a few remarks on your statement about Indian writers like me: "In disowning our language, do we not disown ourselves?" In my own case, there was no real question of disowning any language in order to adopt English as a medium for writing. As soon as I came to know English enough I found I could write no language better. And as time went on, I found it the most natural thing to use it for all significant purposes. Nor can I be said to have disowned myself by being different from my ancestors—though hardly from my own father—in the language I employed. I certainly am not all made by my ancestors: I am an individual soul with my own distinctive characteristics in the midst of many points in common and my inner affinities go beyond the nation or the country to which I belong by physical birth. However, in being such a soul I have not lost any basic national qualities: I have only reoriented them. And, if I use English in India not as a mere convenience but as a necessity of heart and mind and with a living communion with centuries of English literature, am I in a radically different situation from an Englishman born and bred in India, who has never had English sense-impressions? Perhaps a better comparison would be with an American of European extraction whose family has spent several generations in an English-speaking milieu and who has used English from childhood yet has had non-English local sense-impressions or feeling-responses. Has not such an American the possibility of being as mighty and profound a poet in English as Whitman or one as subtly intense as Emily Dickinson?

Can even an Indian writer like Sri Aurobindo, who in early life was "uprooted", be said to disown his Indianness?

Was he not a master of Sanskrit in which the very soul of India had been concentrated in the past? And is not his poetry no less than his philosophical prose charged with the mystic and spiritual light that was the soul of that soul? If the early uprooting which made English his "mother-tongue" could really mean an uprooting from what fundamentally consitutes the Indian consciousness, would he centre his Ashram of Integral Yoga in India instead of in England? What can be said rightly of Sri Aurobindo is that by being the truest embodiment of historical India he has in a supreme measure the splendid universalism which is organic to the original Indian genius and something of which India preserved even when in her decline she grew over-conservative and which was encouraged in a novel manner in Sri Aurobindo by his familiarity from boyhood with Greek, Latin, French, Italian, German and, above all, that most polymorphous, assimilative, multi-minded, subtle-toned, depth-evocative, mystic-suggestioned and therefore, in its inward reaches, that most Indian-souled of modern tongues, English. (4.1.1962)

I have received your *Collected Poems*. Several of them have "spoken" to me very intimately and I should like to write to you something about them as well as about your poetry in general. In none of the opinions cited on the back of the dust-jacket do I find any precise pointer to either the core of your poetic vision or the essence of your poetic art, nor is there any sign of discrimination between the various levels or ups and downs of your inspiration. Perhaps the opinions are too briefly represented to allow anything except broad sweeping statements, but I don't seem to remember having read a really penetrating review of your work. I have a faint recollection of a review in *The New Statesman and Nation* several years ago when your collection came out, a review which I rather liked, but I am not certain whether even it showed genuine insight into your insight. I am told by a professor at Annamalai University, my friend V. Seturaman, that a Scandinavian critic has written very perceptively and I shall soon be getting hold of his essay. I can't

claim to be able to say the last word on you, but I have a few impressions which I think come to some sort of grips with your substance as well as your form and it will be a pleasure to organise them and put them down. But what value can they have for you? From an old letter of yours to another friend of mine—Kishor Gandhi—I understand that to your mind no Indian, even if educated in English from very boyhood and possessed of rare cultural sensibility, is capable of responding to anything else than mere "ideas" in English poetry. To entertain such a notion seems rather fantastic, but logically it must lie at the back of the other belief that nobody except an Englishman can enter into the subtle spirit of the English language sufficiently to write genuine poetry. For, the moment one acknowledges that an Indian can have access to something more than the "ideas" in an English poem one will have to grant the possibility that the entry thus shown into the subtle spirit of the English language may lead him to sit within that spirit and become himself creative.

This point brings me to your second letter which came by surface mail. Yes, the world-tendency you deplore—to reduce all differences to one uniform race and culture—is really deplorable and I don't know why you think I favour it. Some kind of "one world" is both inevitable and desirable—as an outer reflex of the world's inner spiritual unity; but that does not at all mean a drastic and insensitive rubbing out of all vital and significant differences, racial and cultural. What is being done in either Russia or America is very far from what we Aurobindonians have in mind: surely it can't be even what Teilhard de Chardin predicts and hopes for. Sri Aurobindo laid as much emphasis on diversity as on unity and was extremely careful to distinguish unity from uniformity just as he was particular to draw a line between diversity and an exclusive narrowness of difference stewing in its own juice and ever on the boil to scald others. Even in the political field of India he was all for linguistic provinces, the development of numberless local cultures, each with its fine sharp individuality and uniqueness in the midst of a delicate basic communion with its fellows,

constituting ultimately with them that polyphonic harmony of life and spirit which is the true India. Within this harmony, and in tune with the native many-languaged moods of the country on the one hand and on the other with the many-mooded native language of England, there would be the novel adventure of Indo-Anglian prose and poetry arising from the fusion here of England and India for nearly two hundred and fifty years —an adventure which has nothing to do essentially with the sort of mass tele-culture which you rightly abhor. On the contrary, as I have repeatedly said, its most typical and fundamental character would be a highly spiritual literary efflorescence which would be farther away from all that you can associate with the Dictatorship of the Proletariat than even any traditional civilisation which seems to you worth preserving could be. This efflorescence would make for no exchange of the Vedas for Dr. Leavis and the New Criticism, or the knowledge of the true nature and destiny of the soul for social welfare. In fact, its influence would go a long way towards reversing the pernicious process which has been on of blind "westernisation" and even the West itself will be slowed down in its "ignorant ugliness". And need I add that the efflorescence I am speaking of will be no side-shoot merely repeating the creativity of the English genius but something rich and strange on its own in the English language, just as it will be a sharply individual and unique explosion of the soul's colour and odour in the midst of India's innumerable local cultures?

No doubt, it will have something more wide-spread and universal than they—by virtue of the English speech that is now all over India—spoken ill for the most part, spoken well enough among the literati, spoken amazingly well in a small group whose members are scattered everywhere in the country and which is "small" only in relation to the mass of nearly four hundred million Indians and would be quite substantial in relation to a considerably less teeming country like England. Yes, Indo-Anglian literature is necessarily more an all-India phenomenon than any other literary product of the Indian consciousness, but that cannot reduce its problems to purely

political terms, as you appear to believe. English in India has certainly an important political aspect, national as well as international; but it is also sought to be preserved and encouraged for ends much nobler. Its deepest *raison d'être* is, as Sir Francis Watson has noted, "a special sort of literature". Sir Francis says, in the broadcast to which I referred in my last letter: "In November 1945, when the Indian centre of the P.E.N. Club held its big conference at Jaipur, I was at first a little surprised by the prominence of English among the sixteen modern Indian literatures that were reviewed... English was treated as one of sixteen languages in which Indian literature was written—and let me add that there was and is no doubt about the vitality of many of the other languages." Whenever English is seriously considered in India, it is always as a literary medium and not as a plaything or a convenience of politics or else of salesmanship. So you need not fear, as you did in the letter before your last, that all that would come to us of this language would be words which power and commerce use. The language that is alive and dear to many Indians, through their education and reading, is the one which English poets and the common people of England have used with feeling and love and which these writers themselves mould to their own heart and sense with a linguistic empathy characteristic of the Indian genius at its keenest and almost unimaginable by the Englishman. In her *Anatomy of Prose*, Marjorie Boulton, after quoting a passage from Jawaharlal Nehru's *Autobiography*, gives a footnote (p. 91) aimed at the Englishman's lack of this "linguistic empathy". She says: "English people who will not trouble to write their own language well ought to be shamed by reading the English of such Indian writers as Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, his sister Krishna Nehru, Rabindranath Tagore, Mulk Raj Anand, D. F. Karaka, Professor Radhakrishnan, and a number of obscure Indians to be met with in British universities."

Let me thank you for your permission to publish extracts from our exchanges. Of course, I shall include all you have recently written. I should like very much to include the brief

but very effective and beautiful self-revelation you have made apropos of Wordsworth and Dorothy. But, of course, the self-revelation would fall short of its full effect and value if it were anonymous and not known to be Kathleen Raine, not recognised for what it is and in terms of its uncommon source—not recognised in its brief bright appearance to be something like what you touch upon in the first line of your poem, *A Strange Evening*:

A little rain falls out of amethyst sky...

(4.2.1962)

From Kathleen Raine

I write in Cumberland, looking over the Fells, with thick falling snow. I must thank you for your lovely Christmas card, and now for your letter on Anglo-Indian poetry. Of course if India is determined to adopt the English language nobody can stop you. The blame lies with the English, who as a "ruling race" for two hundred years impressed India with the power and prestige of our brief moment of material supremacy. Western civilisation = material power and prosperity, and who am I to say to any Indian, confronted with the desperate problems of feeding the multitude, and surviving in a mechanised world, that to be drawn into that vortex is disaster?

But, alas, your analogy with America is just what I feared. Yes, American immigrants from all races adopt the English language. They also adopt "the American way of life". In the streets, 'buses and subways of New York you see faces with the ethnic features of all the races of the world—Chinese, American Indian, German, Jewish, Italian, Puerto-Rican, Negro; and all wear the same expression—the soul is American, the racial memories of these people blotted out and replaced by whatever "Commercial" broadcasts, Planter's Pea-nut advertisements, work in some factory like the Ford motor-works I went over at River Rouge, absence of religion and belief in material progress and sending projectiles into outer space can write upon the faces of the lost. Yes, India could no doubt

absorb our language along with our mechanised barbarism. But for God's sake do not do so—for if all the surviving traditional civilisations renounce their heritage, the world will indeed be in darkness. The Indian young I meet here frighten me—they are worse than we are, because the most intelligent *here* see the dangers that the young Indians (Japanese, Turks, Ceylonese and many others) have not perceived as they blithely imitate us and are drawn into the vortex. One cannot sufficiently admire the instinctive, blind, intransigeant resistance of Catholic Ireland to the English Juggernaut. They would rather perish than be absorbed. I wish India could realise in time—or, rather, I hope you *do* realise.

No, I have no photographs, I was born in 1908, so you can imagine the rest.

With kindest wishes for the New Year. (14.1.1962)

From K. D. Sethna

It is now more than eight months since we last corresponded. As I wrote by air-mail and you by surface-mail, our letters crossed and both of us can grouse about a letter unanswered, yours of 14.1.62 from Cumberland and mine of 4.2.62 from Pondicherry as usual.

Well, I am at last breaking the spell of silent expectation. Let me say that I was, as ever, happy to hear from you. What you say about materialistic western civilisation, with English as its world-speech, is quite true and it would be a pity if India and the other Asiatic nations were drawn into the vortex. But surely modernism as such and the English language in itself are not evils, even if they come with scientific materialism? I should think that the English language, holding as it does the most deeply spiritual poetry of modern times, is just the power that could touch modernism to nobler and higher issues. In England itself and perhaps more in America, this power may be in danger of being stifled by the too loud and rampant materialism that has developed with the modern spirit. But here in India where the voice of the Vedic Rishis is still vibrant and

Ever we hear in the heart of the peril a flute go before us—

the flute of Sri Krishna sounding from an eternal Brindavan in the collective consciousness—and the revelatory rhythms of Sri Aurobindo's message,

Sight's sound-waves breaking from the soul's great deeps,

are about us stronger than the titan roar of the machine—here in India the language of Vaughan and Wordsworth, Blake and Coleridge, Shelley and Keats, Yeats and AE, coming with the Mechanical Age, comes as a guardian angel of the true mind of science which is not alien to the true mind of poetry, and enables us to take the best that both these minds have to give:

> And now I see with eye serene
> The very pulse of the machine....

Please don't judge us—especially us the Aurobindonian moderns—who write in English, by the Indian young "gone west" in wisdom whom you meet in England and whose blithe unconsciousness of the dangers of westernisation frightens you.

You have referred admiringly to "the instinctive, blind, intransigeant resistance of Catholic Ireland to the English Juggernaut". Well, Ireland is very close to the Modern Monster and the reactions of her soul are bound to be a little violent; but, if they are as extreme as you say, I think they are a trifle unhealthy. After all, Modernism has to be accepted in its essence which Sri Aurobindo defines as "an ever widening and deepening intellectual and imaginative curiosity, a passion for knowledge, a passion for finding, an eye of intelligence awakened to all the multiform possibilities of new truth and discovery." Its distortions and perversions are to be guarded against, but to shy away from its complex straining of free thought in a thousand directions is to miss the secret of the future. To be instinctive, blind, intransigeant is no solution of the problem. Even to be Catholic is not to find the way in

a world which has once for all broken away from the religious forms of the past. Nor, I may add, has the Catholic form of Christianity always kept Europe safe from

The Titan and the Demon and the Ghoul

lurking in our depths either in the Mediaeval Age or in the modern (Franco's Spain!). I am not condemning Catholicism, mind you. I know its beauties and exaltations with something of an inner acquaintance, for I have studied it well enough, prompted by my education from start to finish in a Catholic school and college at Bombay. But the Irish type of Catholicism is hardly quite what we need in our times. What can be a glorious part of the best of the modern *Zeitgeist* is the Catholicism of a Teilhard de Chardin, mystic and scientist of (according to my reading) a "pan-en-theistic" evolution, whom the Church has suppressed and whom, judging by the recent *Monitum*, she may ultimately put on the Index.

Now to more personal matters. Oh it's been such a weary wait for your book on Blake! Where is it? Why hasn't it come out? Surely you have finished lecturing in America months ago? (By the way, tell me something about your trip to the States.)

I have been reading your poems and making several notes. Would you like me to string them together for you?

(17.9.1962)

From Kathleen Raine

I cannot prove this, but in the last few days I had suddenly found myself thinking about you and wondering why you had not written for so long, and hoping that all was well. And this morning your letter arrived. I am very glad indeed to hear from you again. As you see I have now returned to London—the Square where I formerly lived for 16 years—and I am thankful to be again under a roof of my own—I am sharing the house with friends—and able to forget Academe and return, thanks to the Bollingen Foundation, to poetry. I have meanwhile been

planting my garden with flowers that I have great hopes of, *some* of which may be realised.

I think your letter says the last word on the English language question; history has made English a world-language, and all the world will be drawn in, more or less. Useless to resist, whether this be the last age of the world (as a Negro prophetess in New Orleans told me) or only the beginning of another. Perhaps language will in any case no longer play the part it once did in communicating ideas; perhaps telepathy will be perfected. Anything may happen. But decadence of English as a *literary* language is inevitable from the influx of so many races which have forgotten their own without perfectly mastering English (how can they, their history and landscape being different?) and of the barbarous illiterate populace produced in England and America by industrialisation. (Our own barbarians are the worst, having *no* past.) Modern "literary" English is stage-cockney, a language vulgar and inexpressive, like the writers who use it.

I was sorry that the Church turned down Teilhard, but there are certainly questions unanswered by his theory; such as the Fall, and Original Sin? But it does seem unlikely he will be placed on the Index; the Jesuits themselves are proud of him, and the Dominicans enthusiastic (with, of course, certain reservations). I myself found him imaginatively most stirring, somewhat like the poetry of St. Jean Perse (whom I saw a good deal of in U.S.A.)

Please do write again with anything you find to say about my poems *good or bad.* (21.9.1962)

From K. D. Sethna

"Perhaps telepathy will be perfected"—that's what you say in considering the future of communication of ideas. We seem to be already practising for the future, the way you started thinking about me at just the time I was doing it about you.

I am indeed glad you wrote your reply on the very day you got my letter. The gap of silence has been a little too wide,

though filled enough with friendly gesturing phantoms of the past. Now that it was bridged I wanted to follow up soon with notes on your poems. But one thing and another have come in the way of setting them in order and adding new ones. So I have decided not to wait too long but reply asking you to wait awhile.

It's extremely pleasant to picture you in my mind: a quiet gardener sowing the seeds of future poems in moods leaf-pricked and flower-scooped. What a relief it must be to walk in your own private garden at last after years of Academe and its loud groves! But how exactly did the Bollingen Foundation come to your aid? Was it as a result of your Blake lectures in the United States? Do tell me something about your visit there. Apart from a side-remark on St. Jean Perse you don't refer at all to it.

And this side-remark, I may say, didn't strike me as quite complimentary to Teilhard de Chardin in connection with whom you had made it. Of course, Teilhard would have been happy to learn that Kathleen Raine found him "imaginatively most stirring", but the spiritual scientist in him would have wanted another kind of response too than of a poet to poetry. Perhaps, in the deepest sense, a poet's response to poetry covers everything—it is what Teilhard himself calls "our resonance to the All"—but when a thinker, with no matter what profoundly stirred imagination, has written *The Phenomenon of Man* rather than *The Noumenon of Man* he wants a more intellectual response, particularly with a scientific discrimination.

Teilhard's vogue today is not simply because of his life-long "pan-en-theism" (as his vision may most naturally be labelled), though surely without it he would fail to touch the finer fibres in us. His vogue comes from the scientific shape his intuitions have taken—or, to put it more thoroughly, the organic form in scientific terms his feeling of the Cosmic Christ, "in whom we live and move and have our being", has created for itself. The many-sided scientific "incarnation" of his soul of mysticism, the brilliant clear-cut adjustment of this soul to concepts which draw their life from physics and biology—

these are the things that render him so momentous to the modern mind. Others have tried similar things—Lecomte du Noüy, for instance—but none before with such depth of inspiration accompanied by such self-steeping in the spirit of science at its most passionately modern. Not the rankest anti-religious materialist can outdo Teilhard in his passion for evolution, his whole-hearted commitment to the phenomenalist vision of development. He asks for no concession from the biology of the day and is quite sharp in oblique criticism of his fellow-religionists who accept its fundamental tenets with reservations. But at the same time he reveals possibilities in those tenets, which point far beyond science: he makes intellectually possible a "hyperbiology" as well as a "hyperphysics." And it is just because he speaks wholly from within science, at one with its most fervent followers, that his new interpretative concepts go home. Just in a few places, towards the end of his great book, he lets in a breath of religion from outside. These are his weak points, unwelcome though not quite ungraceful intrusions of the priest on the palaeontologist. But they do not spoil his book on the whole or twist the main lines of his thought. And I should say that it is to the credit of his book as a piece of scientific philosophy that it leaves unanswered such questions as the Fall and Original Sin.

These questions must seem to Teilhard rather meaningless from the standpoint of super-evolution that was his. An Original Sin implying a Fall irreparable in the natural scheme of things would rule out the spontaneous intrinsic movement Teilhard reads in Nature of an evolution towards and into the Omega Point, man's growth by the very drive of life and mind implicit in the Alpha Point into a universal consciousness, a totality of being, a supra-individualised but never depersonalised participation in the Cosmic Christ, a real organic fulfilment of the vague dream abroad today of "One World".

It seems to you unlikely that just because his theory takes little account of matters like the Fall and Original Sin he will be placed on the Index. But have you studied the recent *Monitum* of the Church against him? I have written, apropos

of this *Monitum* and of an excellent article in the *Times Literary Supplement* on Teilhard, a letter to this journal, discussing his future standing with the Church. I have explained why I think his official condemnation inevitable and also why I consider such an open condemnation good for the true import of his message. The Editor expressed his great interest in my letter, but for some reason or other the *T.L.S.* later seemed to fight shy of publishing it. If my letter does get shoved aside, I'll send you the copy I have of it with me. At the moment I may remark that what offends the Church most is perhaps the cosmic nature of Christ which Teilhard posits in addition to Christ's divine and human nature. The *Osservatore Romano*, the Vatican's mouthpiece in general, picked out this doctrine of Teilhard's to label it as "heresy". Do you think the Church can continue long to house a heretic? But, of course, she will find it extremely painful to thrust out so fine a soul, one truly devoted to Christ.[1]

Now a word about my immediate concerns. What has happened to your book on Blake? Why is it not published yet? Or have you forgotten to send me a copy? At least, you have forgotten to answer the inquiry I had made about it in my last letter. (17.10.1962)

[1] K.D.S.'s NOTE: The prophecy that Teilhard would be put on the Index did not come true, but this did not mean that the signs had been misread or Teilhard misjudged. The *Times Literary Supplement* itself, in a review on November 18, 1965 (p. 1027) of *The Appearance of Man* by Teilhard de Chardin and *The Faith of Teilhard de Chardin* by Henri de Lubac, said: "A place in the Index seemed inevitable, but the tide of official opinion has turned." By the turn in the tide Teilhard has actually been de-Teilhardianised in order to be fitted into orthodoxy. The Index has been avoided by means of a massive act of wishful thinking. And this hits us in the eye the moment we read another passage in the same English weekly: "There is, however, one deficiency in Teilhard's thought when measured by traditional Catholic theology which Fr. de Lubac is unable, and does not seek, to conceal. This is the relatively small place given to evil and sin. From his point of view, evil is an 'evolutionary by-product' resulting from 'resistances to the spiritual ascent inherent in matter'. This is startlingly different from, say, the centrality of the Fall of Man in such Christian doctors as St. Augustine." De Lubac tries to suggest that Teilhard fell short of orthodoxy because he never attempted a philosophical synthesis outside the points of view which he adopted, dictated by an objective science. Here is an assumption for which there is no basis in Teilhard. Teilhard wrote sufficiently, both by way of unpublished books and private

From Kathleen Raine

I am always glad when I find a letter from you. As to your friend Dr. Seturaman's article, it seems to me rather slight, but possibly it could be published in the Modern Languages Review, or The Aryan Path. I never publish in these or any other journals (I am not a professor, by the way, thank God) and I suggest Miss Coburn or Mr. Whalley could help him better than I about Canadian or American journals, if neither of these want it.

I hope Arabinda Basu will visit me soon, with news of you. Better still your own letters, of course.

(I hope you will write something on me.) (11.1.1963)

From K. D. Sethna

I am sorry I haven't replied to you yet. I must thank you for going through Dr. Seturaman's article. He was disappointed at your saying no more than that it seemed to you rather slight. He says he wanted a critical estimate so that he might improve its quality and also its size. He adds: "I should have felt happy even if she had called it fantastic or stupid." Could we know what exactly was connoted by your comment? Did you mean

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correspondence, to get a chance to elucidate his position. Nor was he invariably obliged to confine himself to "an objective science"'s dictation of viewpoints. There are intractable areas in his spiritual-scientific vision which cannot be assimilated into an Augustinian or else Thomist theology. A proper understanding of them has to come through another religious view of the universe than the Christian, an understanding which would be able to take Teilhardian evolutionism in its stride and not have to boggle at the notion of the material world as the self-concealed Divinity gradually self-revealed. Of course, an orthodox interpretation is possible of small sectors of Teilhard's scheme; but, on the whole, he must baffle his fellow-Christians on many scores, divided as he himself was between, on the one hand, his spiritual intuitive experience which became intellectually clarified through his science and, on the other, his dogmatically trained theology eager to Roman-Catholicise his new vision. Perhaps the religion which would best accommodate both the heterodox import of his philosophy and the Christian elements which too are there would be a Christified version of the Bhagawad Gita turned in the direction of Sri Aurobindo.

(January 1984)

that there was little substance in the thesis or that the substance was not properly brought out by the treatment?

Arabinda Basu must have visited you by now. Did you think it impertinent on my part to have given him a little quotation from Jung apropos of something he had said about your desire to return to the Roman Catholic tradition? I understood that what was troubling you was part of that very wide-spread modern illness, the neurosis of rootlessness as well as of what Wells in his last days called "the mind at the end of its tether". Perhaps Arabinda has lost the piece of paper on which I had scribbled Jung's words? Could I add to my impertinence by repeating them here?—"The neurotic is ill not because he has lost his old faith, but because he has not yet found a new form for his finest aspirations."

Possibly you will work out a new form through that exquisite exposure—which is the poetic consecration—of the dreaming mind to

> ...the noise of a nameless sea
> On an undiscovered isle.

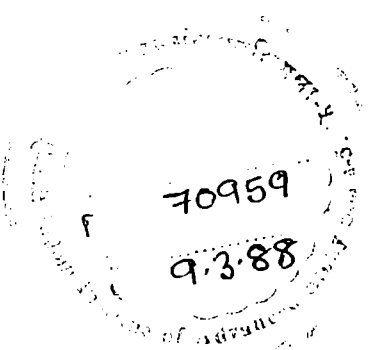
But how will you be the poet in Paulton's Square, you who have not been able to write poetry at all unless you are in Northumberland, Cumberland or Scotland? Have you succeeded sufficiently in subduing landscape to inscape?

I have not forgotten to write something on your poetry. My notes in your *Collected Poems* have increased, but I haven't been able yet to come to a fusion-point, so to speak. I'll certainly do something in the near future. But repeatedly I wonder why you want my views. Am I not, as an Indian whose mother-tongue is different from yours, unfitted in your eyes to appreciate a creation like English poetry, which is your language at its subtlest?

Of late I have been much at my typewriter—doing what must seem ridiculously opposite things: a long archaeologico-linguistico-historical book on the Harappa Culture and the Rigveda, and a short one on Wordsworth's famous "A slum-

ber did my spirit seal". The latter does not attempt a critical literary appraisal: I have simply called it "An Interpretation from India". It runs to 86 typed sheets. Do you think you could favour me with a reading of it? And would Sir Herbert Read who is a keen student of Wordsworth be kind enough to go through it after you? I don't think he has made any comment on this particular poem of Wordsworth's. Most probably he won't agree with what I have said, and you too will possibly not endorse it, but comments from both of you will be very welcome because both of you have deep Wordsworthian affinities though with the difference that yours are consciously acknowledged and are part of your spiritual life whereas his are inwardly felt just as authentically yet outwardly changed a little to suit an intellect whose activity on the surface is somewhat conditioned by a strange amalgam which I may label as Marxist individualism and Freudian idealism. Of course, apart from agreement or disagreement with my interpretation, there is the question whether I have argued my case well or ill. There is also the question whether I have used words to good effect as literature. Now it is a matter of prose and not poetry, but perhaps it is still relevant, on however lesser a scale, to the issue of the English language serving as a vehicle of the Indian spirit.[1]

(1.4.63)



[1] K.D.S.'s NOTE: The short book on "A slumber did my spirit seal" was for some reason or other not sent. And the correspondence lapsed, except for rare exchanges at great intervals and only on the subject of Blake's "Tyger."