Comments on
Some Remarks by a Critic

You have asked me to comment on your friend Mendonça’s comments on my poetry and especially on Savitri. But, first of all, it is not usual for a poet to criticise the criticisms of his critics though a few perhaps have done so; the poet writes for his own satisfaction, his own delight in poetical creation or to express himself and he leaves his work for the world, and rather for posterity than for the contemporary world, to recognise or to ignore, to judge and value according to its perception or its pleasure. As for the contemporary world he might be said rather to throw his poem in its face and leave it to resent this treatment as an unpleasant slap, as a contemporary world treated the early poems of Wordsworth and Keats, or to accept it as an abrupt but gratifying attention, which was ordinarily the good fortune of the great poets in ancient Athens and Rome and of poets like Shakespeare and Tennyson in modern times. Posterity does not always confirm the contemporary verdict, very often it reverses it, forgets or depreciates the writer enthroned by contemporary fame, or raises up to a great height work little appreciated or quite ignored in its own time. The only safety for the poet is to go his own way careless of the blows and caresses of the critics; it is not his business to answer them. Then you ask me to right the wrong turn your friend’s critical mind has taken; but how is it to be determined what is the right and what is the wrong turn, since a critical judgment depends usually on a personal reaction determined by the critic’s temperament or the aesthetic trend in him or by values, rules or canons which are settled for his intellect and agree with the viewpoint from which his mind receives whatever comes to him for judgment; it is that which is right for him though it may seem wrong to a different temperament, aesthetic intellectuality or mental viewpoint. Your friend’s judgments, according to his own account of them, seem
to be determined by a sensitive temperament finely balanced in its own poise but limited in its appreciations, clear and open to some kinds of poetic creation, reserved towards others, against yet others closed and cold or excessively depreciative. This sufficiently explains his very different reactions to the two poems, Descent and Flame-Wind, which he unreservedly admires and to Savitri. However, since you have asked me, I will answer, as between ourselves, in some detail and put forward my own comments on his comments and my own judgments on his judgments. It may be rather long; for if such things are done, they may as well be clearly and thoroughly done. I may also have something to say about the nature and intention of my poem and the technique necessitated by the novelty of the intention and nature.

Let me deal first with some of the details he stresses so as to get them out of the way. His detailed intellectual reasons for his judgments seem to me to be often arbitrary and fastidious, sometimes based on a misunderstanding and therefore invalid or else valid perhaps in other fields but here inapplicable. Take, for instance, his attack upon my use of the prepositional phrase. Here, it seems to me, he has fallen victim to a grammatical obsession and lumped together under the head of the prepositional twist a number of different turns some of which do not belong to that category at all. In the line,

Lone on my summits of calm I have brooded with voices around me,

there is no such twist; for I did not mean at all “on my calm summits”, but intended straightforwardly to convey the natural, simple meaning of the word. If I write “the fields of beauty” or “walking on the paths of truth”, I do not expect to be supposed to mean “in beautiful fields” or “in truthful paths”; it is the same with “summits of calm”, I mean “summits of calm” and nothing else; it is a phrase like “He rose to high peaks of vision” or “He took his station on the highest summits of knowledge”. The calm is the calm of the highest spiritual consciousness to which the soul has ascended, making those summits its own and looking down from their highest heights on all below: in spiritual
experience, in the occult vision or feeling that accompanies it, this calm is not felt as an abstract quality or a mental condition but as something concrete and massive, a self-existent reality to which one reaches, so that the soul standing on its peak is rather a tangible fact of experience than a poetical image. Then there is the phrase “A face of rapturous calm”: he seems to think it is a mere trick of language, a substitution of a prepositional phrase for an epithet, as if I had intended to say “a rapturously calm face” and I said instead “a face of rapturous calm” in order to get an illegitimate and meaningless rhetorical effect. I meant nothing of the kind, nothing so tame and poor and scanty in sense: I meant a face which was an expression or rather a living image of the rapturous calm of the supreme and infinite consciousness, — it is indeed so that it can well be “Infinity’s centre”. The face of the liberated Buddha as presented to us by Indian art is such an expression or image of the calm of Nirvana and could, I think, be quite legitimately described as a face of Nirvanic calm, and that would be an apt and live phrase and not an ugly artifice or twist of rhetoric. It should be remembered that the calm of Nirvana or the calm of the supreme Consciousness is to spiritual experience something self-existent, impersonal and eternal and not dependent on the person — or the face — which manifests it. In these two passages I take then the liberty to regard Mendonça’s criticism as erroneous at its base and therefore invalid and inadmissible.

Then there are the lines from the *Songs of the Sea*:

The rains of deluge flee, a storm-tossed shade,
Over thy breast of gloom.

“Thy breast of gloom” is not used here as a mere rhetorical and meaningless variation of “thy gloomy breast”; it might have been more easily taken as that if it had been a human breast, though even then, it could have been entirely defensible in a fitting context; but it is the breast of the sea, an image for a vast expanse supporting and reflecting or subject to the moods or movements of the air and the sky. It is intended, in describing the passage of the rains of deluge over the breast of the sea,
to present a picture of a storm-tossed shade crossing a vast gloom: it is the gloom that has to be stressed and made the predominant idea and the breast or expanse is only its support and not the main thing: this could not have been suggested by merely writing “thy gloomy breast”. A prepositional phrase need not be merely an artificial twist replacing an adjective; for instance, “a world of gloom and terror” means something more than “a gloomy and terrible world”, it brings forward the gloom and terror as the very nature and constitution, the whole content of the world and not merely an attribute. So also if one wrote “Him too wilt thou throw to thy sword of sharpness” or “cast into thy pits of horror”, would it merely mean “thy sharp sword” and “thy horrible pits”? and would not the sharpness and the horror rather indicate or represent formidable powers of which the sword is the instrument and the pits the habitation or lair? That would be rhetoric but it would be a rhetoric not meaningless but having in it meaning and power. Rhetoric is a word with which we can batter something we do not like; but rhetoric of one kind or another has been always a great part of the world's best literature; Demosthenes, Cicero, Bossuet and Burke are rhetoricians, but their work ranks with the greatest prose styles that have been left to us. In poetry the accusation of rhetoric might be brought against such lines as Keats’

Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!
No hungry generations tread thee down.

To conclude, there is the “swords of sheen” in the translation of Bande Mataram. That might be more open to the critic’s stricture, for the expression can be used and perhaps has been used in verse as merely equivalent to “shining swords”; but for anyone with an alert imagination it can mean in certain contexts something more than that, swords that emit brilliance and seem to be made of light. Mendonça says that to use this turn in any other than an adjectival sense is unidiomatic, but he admits that there need be no objection provided that it creates a sense of beauty, but he finds no beauty in any of these passages. But the beauty can be perceived only if the other sense is seen, and even
then we come back to the question of personal reaction; you
and other readers may feel beauty where he finds none. I do
not myself share his sensitive abhorrence of this prepositional
phrase; it may be of course because there are coarser rhetorical
threads in my literary taste. I would not, for instance, shrink
from a sentence like this in a sort of free verse, “Where is thy
wall of safety? Where is thy arm of strength? Whither has fled
thy vanished face of glory?” Rhetoric of course, but it has in it
an element which can be attractive, and it seems to me to bring
in a more vivid note and mean more than “thy strong arm” or
“thy glorious face” or than “the strength of thy arm” and “the
glory of thy face”.

I come next to the critic’s trenchant attack on that passage
in my symbolic vision of Night and Dawn in which there is
recorded the conscious adoration of Nature when it feels the
passage of the omniscient Goddess of eternal Light. Trenchant,
but with what seems to me a false edge; or else if it is a sword
of Damascus that would cleave the strongest material mass of
iron, he is using it to cut through subtle air, the air closes behind
his passage and remains unsevered. He finds here only poor and
false poetry, unoriginal in imagery and void of true wording and
true vision, but that is again a matter of personal reaction and
everyone has a right to his own, you to yours as he to his. I
was not seeking for originality but for truth and the effective
poetical expression of my vision. He finds no vision there, and
that may be because I could not express myself with any power;
but it may also be because of his temperamental failure to feel
and see what I felt and saw. I can only answer to the intellectual
reasonings and judgments which turned up in him when he
tried to find the causes of his reaction. These seem to me to
be either fastidious and unsound or founded on a mistake of
comprehension and therefore invalid or else inapplicable to this
kind of poetry. His main charge is that there is a violent and
altogether illegitimate transference of epithet in the expression
“the wide-winged hymn of a great priestly wind”. A transference
of epithet is not necessarily illegitimate, especially if it expresses
something that is true or necessary to convey a sound feeling
and vision of things: for instance, if one writes in an Ovidian account of the dénouement of a lovers’ quarrel

In spite of a reluctant sullen heart
My willing feet were driven to thy door,

it might be said that it was something in the mind that was willing and the ascription of an emotion or state of mind to the feet is an illegitimate transfer of epithet; but the lines express a conflict of the members, the mind reluctant, the body obeying the force of the desire that moves it and the use of the epithet is therefore perfectly true and legitimate. But here no such defence is necessary because there is no transfer of epithets. The critic thinks that I imagined the wind as having a winged body and then took away the wings from its shoulders and clapped them on to its voice or hymn which could have no body. But I did nothing of the kind; I am not bound to give wings to the wind. In an occult vision the breath, sound, movement by which we physically know of a wind is not its real being but only the physical manifestation of the wind-god or the spirit of the air, as in the Veda the sacrificial fire is only a physical birth, temporary body or manifestation of the god of Fire, Agni. The gods of the Air and other godheads in the Indian tradition have no wings, the Maruts or storm-gods ride through the skies in their galloping chariots with their flashing golden lances, the beings of the middle world in the Ajanta frescoes are seen moving through the air not with wings but with a gliding natural motion proper to ethereal bodies. The epithet “wide-winged” then does not belong to the wind and is not transferred from it, but is proper to the voice of the wind which takes the form of a conscious hymn of aspiration and rises ascending from the bosom of the great priest, as might a great-winged bird released into the sky and sinks and rises again, aspires and fails and aspires again on the “altar hills”. One can surely speak of a voice or a chant of aspiration rising on wide wings and I do not see how this can be taxed as a false or unpoetic image. Then the critic objects to the expression “altar hills” on the ground that this is superfluous as the imagination of the reader can very well supply this detail
for itself from what has already been said: I do not think this is correct, a very alert reader might do so but most would not even think of it, and yet the detail is an essential and central feature of the thing seen and to omit it would be to leave a gap in the middle of the picture by dropping out something which is indispensable to its totality. Finally he finds that the line about the high boughs praying in the revealing sky does not help but attenuates, instead of more strongly etching the picture. I do not know why, unless he has failed to feel and to see. The picture is that of a conscious adoration offered by Nature and in that each element is conscious in its own way, the wind and its hymn, the hills, the trees. The wind is the great priest of this sacrifice of worship, his voice rises in a conscious hymn of aspiration, the hills offer themselves with the feeling of being an altar of the worship, the trees lift their high boughs towards heaven as the worshippers, silent figures of prayer, and the light of the sky into which their boughs rise reveals the Beyond towards which all aspires. At any rate this “picture” or rather this part of the vision is a complete rendering of what I saw in the light of the inspiration and the experience that came to me. I might indeed have elaborated more details, etched out at more length but that would have been superfluous and unnecessary; or I might have indulged in an ampler description but this would have been appropriate only if this part of the vision had been the whole. This last line is an expression of an experience which I often had whether in the mountains or on the plains of Gujarat or looking from my window in Pondicherry not only in the dawn but at other times and I am unable to find any feebleness either in the experience or in the words that express it. If the critic or any reader does not feel or see what I so often felt and saw, that may be my fault, but that is not sure, for you and others have felt very differently about it; it may be a mental or a temperamental failure on their part and it will be then my or perhaps even the critic’s or reader’s misfortune.

I may refer here to Mendonça’s disparaging characterisation of my epithets. He finds that their only merit is that they are good prose epithets, not otiose but right words in their right place and
exactly descriptive but only descriptive without any suggestion of any poetic beauty or any kind of magic. Are there then prose epithets and poetic epithets and is the poet debarred from exact description using always the right word in the right place, the *mot juste*? I am under the impression that all poets, even the greatest, use as the bulk of their adjectives words that have that merit, and the difference from prose is that a certain turn in the use of them accompanied by the power of the rhythm in which they are carried lifts all to the poetic level. Take one of the passages I have quoted from Milton,

On evil days though fallen, and evil tongues . . .

or

Blind Thamyris, and blind Maeonides,
And Tiresias, and Phineus, prophets old,

here the epithets are the same that would be used in prose, the right word in the right place, exact in statement, but all lies in the turn which makes them convey a powerful and moving emotion and the rhythm which gives them an uplifting passion and penetrating insistence. In more ordinary passages such as the beginning of *Paradise Lost* the epithets “forbidden tree” and “mortal taste” are of the same kind, but can we say that they are merely prose epithets, good descriptive adjectives and have no other merit? If you take the lines about Nature’s worship in *Savitri*, I do not see how they can be described as prose epithets; at any rate I would never have dreamt of using in prose unless I wanted to write poetic prose such expressions as “wide-winged hymn” or “a great priestly wind” or “altar hills” or “revealing sky”; these epithets belong in their very nature to poetry alone whatever may be their other value or want of value. He says they are obvious and could have been supplied by any imaginative reader; well, so are Milton’s in the passages quoted and perhaps there too the very remarkable imaginative reader whom Mendonça repeatedly brings in might have supplied them by his own unfailing poetic verve. Whether they or any of them prick a hidden beauty out of the picture is for each reader to feel
or judge for himself; but perhaps he is thinking of such things as Keats’ “magic casements” and “foam of perilous seas” and “fairy lands forlorn”, but I do not think even in Keats the bulk of the epithets are of that unusual character.

I have said that his objections are sometimes inapplicable. I mean by this that they might have some force with regard to another kind of poetry but not to a poem like Savitri. He says, to start with, that if I had had a stronger imagination, I would have written a very different poem and a much shorter one. Obviously, and to say it is a truism; if I had had a different kind of imagination, whether stronger or weaker, I would have written a different poem and perhaps one more to his taste; but it would not have been Savitri. It would not have fulfilled the intention or had anything of the character, meaning, world-vision, description and expression of spiritual experience which was my object in writing this poem. Its length is an indispensable condition for carrying out its purpose and everywhere there is this length, critics may say an “unconscionable length” — I am quoting the Times’ reviewer’s description in his otherwise eulogistic criticism of The Life Divine — in every part, in every passage, in almost every canto or section of a canto. It has been planned not on the scale of Lycidas or Comus or some brief narrative poem, but of the longer epical narrative, almost a minor, though a very minor Ramayana; it aims not at a minimum but at an exhaustive exposition of its world-vision or world-interpretation. One artistic method is to select a limited subject and even on that to say only what is indispensable, what is centrally suggestive and leave the rest to the imagination or understanding of the reader. Another method which I hold to be equally artistic or, if you like, architectural is to give a large and even a vast, a complete interpretation, omitting nothing that is necessary, fundamental to the completeness: that is the method I have chosen in Savitri. But Mendonça has understood nothing of the significance or intention of the passages he is criticising, least of all, their inner sense — that is not his fault, but is partly due to the lack of the context and partly to his lack of equipment and you have there an unfair advantage over him which enables you to understand
and see the poetic intention. He sees only an outward form of words and some kind of surface sense which is to him vacant and merely ornamental or rhetorical or something pretentious without any true meaning or true vision in it; inevitably he finds the whole thing false and empty, unjustifiably ambitious and pompous without deep meaning or, as he expresses it, pseudo and phoney. His objection of _longueur_ would be perfectly just if the description of the night and the dawn had been simply of physical night and physical dawn; but here the physical night and physical dawn are, as the title of the canto clearly suggests, a symbol, although what may be called a real symbol of an inner reality and the main purpose is to describe by suggestion the thing symbolised; here it is a relapse into Inconscience broken by a slow and difficult return of consciousness followed by a brief but splendid and prophetic outbreak of spiritual light leaving behind it the “day” of ordinary human consciousness in which the prophecy has to be worked out. The whole of _Savitri_ is, according to the title of the poem, a legend that is a symbol and this opening canto is, it may be said, a key beginning and announcement. So understood there is nothing here otiose or unnecessary; all is needed to bring out by suggestion some aspect of the thing symbolised and so start adequately the working out of the significance of the whole poem. It will of course seem much too long to a reader who does not understand what is written or, understanding, takes no interest in the subject; but that is unavoidable.

To illustrate the inapplicability of some of his judgments one might take his objection to repetition of the cognates “sombre Vast”, “unsounded Void”, “opaque Inane”, “vacant Vasts” and his clinching condemnation of the inartistic inelegance of their occurrence in the same place at the end of the line. I take leave to doubt his statement that in each place his alert imaginative reader, still less any reader without that equipment, could have supplied these descriptions and epithets from the context, but let that pass. What was important for me was to keep constantly before the view of the reader, not imaginative but attentive to seize the whole truth of the vision in its totality, the ever-present
sense of the Inconscience in which everything is occurring. It is the frame as well as the background without which all the details would either fall apart or stand out only as separate incidents. That necessity lasts until there is the full outburst of the dawn and then it disappears; each phrase gives a feature of this Inconscience proper to its place and context. It is the entrance of the “lonely splendour” into an otherwise inconscient obstructing and unreceptive world that has to be brought out and that cannot be done without the image of the “opaque Inane” of the Inconscience which is the scene and cause of the resistance. There is the same necessity for reminding the reader that the “tread” of the Divine Mother was an intrusion on the vacancy of the Inconscience and the herald of deliverance from it. The same reasoning applies to the other passages. As for the occurrence of the phrases in the same place each in its line, that is a rhythmic turn helpful, one might say necessary to bring out the intended effect, to emphasise this reiteration and make it not only understood but felt. It is not the result of negligence or an awkward and inartistic clumsiness, it is intentional and part of the technique. The structure of the pentameter blank verse in *Savitri* is of its own kind and different in plan from the blank verse that has come to be ordinarily used in English poetry. It dispenses with enjambement or uses it very sparingly and only when a special effect is intended; each line must be strong enough to stand by itself, while at the same time it fits harmoniously into the sentence or paragraph like stone added to stone; the sentence consists usually of one, two, three or four lines, more rarely five or six or seven: a strong close for the line and a strong close for the sentence are almost indispensable except when some kind of inconclusive cadence is desirable; there must be no laxity or diffusiveness in the rhythm or in the metrical flow anywhere, — there must be a flow but not a loose flux. This gives an added importance to what comes at the close of the line and this placing is used very often to give emphasis and prominence to a key phrase or a key idea, especially those which have to be often reiterated in the thought and vision of the poem so as to recall attention to things that are universal
or fundamental or otherwise of the first consequence — whether for the immediate subject or in the total plan. It is this use that is served here by the reiteration at the end of the line.

I have not anywhere in *Savitri* written anything for the sake of mere picturesqueness or merely to produce a rhetorical effect; what I am trying to do everywhere in the poem is to express exactly something seen, something felt or experienced; if, for instance, I indulge in the wealth-burdened line or passage, it is not merely for the pleasure of the indulgence, but because there is that burden, or at least what I conceive to be that, in the vision or the experience. When the expression has been found, I have to judge, not by the intellect or by any set poetical rule, but by an intuitive feeling, whether it is entirely the right expression and, if it is not, I have to change and go on changing until I have received the absolutely right inspiration and the right transcription of it and must never be satisfied with any *à peu près* or imperfect transcription even if that makes good poetry of one kind or another. This is what I have tried to do. The critic or reader will judge for himself whether I have succeeded or failed; but if he has seen nothing and understood nothing, it does not follow that his adverse judgment is sure to be the right and true one, there is at least a chance that he may so conclude, not because there is nothing to see and nothing to understand, only poor pseudo-stuff or a rhetorical emptiness but because he was not equipped for the vision or the understanding. *Savitri* is the record of a seeing, of an experience which is not of the common kind and is often very far from what the general human mind sees and experiences. You must not expect appreciation or understanding from the general public or even from many at the first touch; as I have pointed out, there must be a new extension of consciousness and aesthesis to appreciate a new kind of mystic poetry. Moreover if it is really new in kind, it may employ a new technique, not perhaps absolutely new, but new in some or many of its elements: in that case old rules and canons and standards may be quite inapplicable; evidently, you cannot justly apply to the poetry of Whitman the principles of technique which are proper to the old metrical verse or the established laws of the
old traditional poetry; so too when we deal with a modernist poet. We have to see whether what is essential to poetry is there and how far the new technique justifies itself by new beauty and perfection, and a certain freedom of mind from old conventions is necessary if our judgment is to be valid or rightly objective.

Your friend may say as he has said in another connection that all this is only special pleading or an apology rather than an apologia. But in that other connection he was mistaken and would be so here too, for in neither case have I the feeling that I had been guilty of some offence or some shortcoming and therefore there could be no place for an apology or special pleading such as is used to defend or cover up what one knows to be a false case. I have enough respect for truth not to try to cover up an imperfection; my endeavour would be rather to cure the recognised imperfection; if I have not poetical genius, at least I can claim a sufficient, if not an infinite capacity for painstaking: that I have sufficiently shown by my long labour on Savitri. Or rather, since it was not labour in the ordinary sense, not a labour of painstaking construction, I may describe it as an infinite capacity for waiting and listening for the true inspiration and rejecting all that fell short of it, however good it might seem from a lower standard until I got that which I felt to be absolutely right. Mendonça was evidently under a misconception with regard to my defence of the wealth-burdened line; he says that the principle enounced by me was sound but what mattered was my application of the principle, and he seems to think that I was trying to justify my application although I knew it to be bad and false by citing passages from Milton and Shakespeare as if my use of the wealth-burdened style were as good as theirs. But I was not defending the excellence of my practice, for the poetical value of my lines was not then in question; the question was whether it did not violate a valid law of a certain chaste economy by the use of too many epithets massed together: against this I was asserting the legitimacy of a massed richness, I was defending only its principle, not my use of the principle. Even a very small poet can cite in aid of his practice examples from greater poets without implying that his poetry is on a par
with theirs. But he further asserts that I showed small judgment in choosing my citations, because Milton’s passage¹ is not at all an illustration of the principle and Shakespeare’s² is inferior in poetic value, lax and rhetorical in its richness and belongs to an early and inferior Shakespearean style. He says that Milton’s astounding effect is due only to the sound and not to the words. That does not seem to me quite true: the sound, the rhythmic resonance, the rhythmic significance is undoubtedly the predominant factor; it makes us hear and feel the crash and clamour and clangour of the downfall of the rebel angels: but that is not all, we do not merely hear as if one were listening to the roar of ruin of a collapsing bomb-shattered house, but saw nothing, we have the vision and the full psychological commotion of the “hideous” and flaming ruin of the downfall, and it is the tremendous force of the words that makes us see as well as hear. Mendonça’s disparagement of the Shakespearean passage on “sleep” and the line on the sea considered by the greatest critics and not by myself only as ranking amongst the most admired and admirable things in Shakespeare is surprising and it seems to me to illustrate a serious limitation in his poetic perception and temperamental sympathies. Shakespeare’s later terse and packed style with its more powerful dramatic effects can surely be admired without disparaging the beauty and opulence of his earlier style; if he had never written in that style, it would have been an unspeakable loss to the sum of the world’s aesthetic possessions. The lines I have quoted are neither lax nor merely rhetorical, they have a terseness or at least a compactness of their own, different in character from the lines, let us say, in the scene of Antony’s death or other memorable passages written in his great tragic style but none the less at every step packed with pregnant meanings and powerful significances which would not

¹ With hideous ruin and combustion down
To bottomless perdition, there to dwell
In adamantine chains and penal fire,

² Wilt thou upon the high and giddy mast
Seal up the ship-boy’s eyes, and rock his brains
In cradle of the rude imperious surge,
be possible if it were merely a loose rhetoric. Anyone writing such lines would deserve to rank by them alone among the great and even the greatest poets.

That is enough for the detail of the criticism and we can come to the general effect and his pronounced opinion upon my poetry. Apart from his high appreciation of *Flame-Wind* and *Descent, Jivanmukta* and *Thought the Paraclete* and his general approval of the mystic poems published along with my essay on quantitative metre in English, it is sufficiently damning and discouraging and if I were to accept his verdict on my earlier and latest poetry, the first comparatively valueless and the last for the most part pseudo and phoney and for the rest offering only a few pleasant or pretty lines but not charged with the power and appeal of true or great poetry, I would have to withdraw the *Collected Poems* from circulation, throw *Savitri* into the waste-paper-basket and keep only the mystical poems,—but these also have been banned by some critics, so I have no refuge left to me. As Mendonça is not a negligible critic and his verdict agrees with that of the eulogist of my philosophy in *The Times Literary Supplement*, not to speak of others less authoritative like the communist reviewer of Iyengar's book who declared that it was not at all certain that I would live as a poet, it is perhaps incumbent on me to consider in all humility my dismal position and weigh whether it is really as bad as all that. There are some especial judgments in your friend's comments on the *Collected Poems* but these seem to concern only the translations. It is curious that he should complain of the lack of the impulse of self-expression in the *Songs of the Sea* as in this poem I was not busy with anything of the kind but was only rendering into English the self-expression of my friend and fellow-poet C. R. Das in his fine Bengali poem *Sagar Sangit*. I was not even self-moved to translate this work, however beautiful I found it; I might even be accused of having written the translation as a pot-boiler, for Das knowing my impecunious and precarious condition at Pondicherry offered me Rs. 1,000 for the work. Nevertheless I tried my best to give his beautiful Bengali lines as excellent a shape of English poetry as I could manage. The poet
and littérateur Chapman condemned my work because I had made it too English, written too much in a manner imitative of traditional English poetry and had failed to make it Bengali in its character so as to keep its native spirit and essential substance. He may have been right; Das himself was not satisfied as he appended a more literal translation in free verse but this latter version does not seem to have caught on while some at least still read and admire the English disguise. If Mendonça is right in finding an overflow of sentiment in the Songs, that must be my own importation of an early romantic sentimentalism, a contribution of my own “self-expression” replacing Das’s. The sea to the Indian imagination is a symbol of life,— one speaks of the ocean of the samsāra and Indian Yoga sees in its occult visions life in the image of a sea or different planes of being as so many oceans. Das’s poem expresses his communing with this ocean of universal life and psychic intimacies with the Cosmic Spirit behind it and these have a character of grave emotion and intense feeling, not of mere sentimentality, but they come from a very Indian and even a very Bengali mentality and may seem in translation to a different mind a profuse display of fancy and sentiment. The Songs are now far away from me in a dim backward of memory and I will have to read them again to be sure, but for that I have no time.

Again, I am charged with modern nineteenth-century romanticism and a false imitation of the Elizabethan drama in my rendering of Kalidasa’s Vikramorvasie; but Kalidasa’s play is romantic in its whole tone and he might almost be described as an Elizabethan predating by a thousand years at least the Elizabethans; indeed most of the ancient Sanskrit dramas are of this kind, though the tragic note is missing, and the general spirit resembles that of Elizabethan romantic comedy. So I do not think I committed any fault in making the translation romantic and in trying to make it Elizabethan, even if I only achieved a “sapless pseudo-Elizabethan” style. One who knew the Sanskrit original and who, although an Indian, was recognised as a good critic in England as well as a poet, one too whose attitude towards myself and my work had been consistently adverse, yet
enthusiastically praised my version and said if Kalidasa could be translated at all, it was only so that he could be translated. This imprimatur of an expert may perhaps be weighed against the discouraging criticism of Mendonça. The comment on my translation of Bhartrihari is more to the point; but the fault is not Bhartrihari’s whose epigrams are as concise and lapidary as the Greek, but in translating I indulged my tendency at the time which was predominantly romantic: the version presents faithfully enough the ideas of the Sanskrit poet but not the spirit and manner of his style. It is comforting, however, to find that it makes “attractive reading”, — I must be content with small mercies in an adversely critical world. After all, these poems are translations and not original works and not many can hope to come within a hundred miles of the more famous achievements of this kind such as Fitzgerald’s splendid misrepresentation of Omar Khayyam, or Chapman’s and Pope’s mistranslations of Homer which may be described as first-class original poems with a borrowed substance from a great voice of the past. Mendonça does not refer specifically to *Love and Death*, to which your enthusiasm first went out, to *Poems*, to *Urvasie* and to *Perseus the Deliverer* though this last he would class, I suppose, as sapless pseudo-Elizabethan drama; but that omission may be there because he only skimmed through them and afterwards could not get the first volume. But perhaps they may come under his general remark that this part of my work lacks the glow and concentration of true inspired poetry and his further judgment classing it with the works of Watson and Stephen Phillips and other writers belonging to the decline of romantic poetry. I know nothing about Watson’s work except for one or two short pieces met by chance; if I were to judge from them, I would have to regard him as a genuine poet with a considerable elevation of language and metrical rhythm but somewhat thin in thought and substance; my poems may conceivably have some higher quality than his in this last respect since the reviewer in *The Times Literary Supplement* grants deep thought and technical excellence as the only merits of my uninspired poetry. It is otherwise with Stephen Phillips: I read *Marpessa* and *Christ in Hades*, the latter
in typescript, shortly before I left England and they aroused my admiration and made a considerable impression on me. I read recently a reference to Phillips as a forgotten poet, but if that includes these two poems I must consider the oblivion as a considerable loss to the generation which has forgotten them. His later poetry disappointed me, there was still some brilliance but nothing of that higher promise. The only other poet of that time who had some influence on me was Meredith, especially his *Modern Love* which may have helped in forming the turn of my earlier poetic expression. I have not read the other later poets of the decline. Of subsequent writers or others not belonging to this decline I know only A. E. and Yeats, something of Francis Thompson, especially the *Hound of Heaven* and the *Kingdom of God*, and a poem or two of Gerard Hopkins; but the last two I came across very late, Hopkins only quite recently, and none of them had any influence on me, although one English reviewer in India spoke of me in eulogistic terms as a sort of combination of Swinburne and Hopkins and some have supposed that I got my turn for compound epithets from the latter! The only romantic poets of the Victorian Age who could have had any influence on me, apart from Arnold whose effect on me was considerable, were Tennyson perhaps, subconsciously, and Swinburne of the earlier poems, for his later work I did not at all admire. Still it is possible that the general atmosphere of the later Victorian decline, if decline it was, may have helped to mould my work and undoubtedly it dates and carries the stamp of the time in which it was written. It is a misfortune of my poetry from the point of view of recognition that the earlier work forming the bulk of the *Collected Poems* belongs to the past and has little chance of recognition now that the aesthetic atmosphere has so violently changed, while the later mystical work and *Savitri* belong to the future and will possibly have to wait for recognition of any merit they have for another strong change. As for the mystical poems which your friend praises in such high terms, they are as much challenged by others as the rest of my work. Some reviewers have described them as lacking altogether in spiritual feeling and void of spiritual experience; they are,
it seems, mere mental work, full of intellectually constructed images and therefore without the genuine value of spiritual or mystic poetry.

Well, then, what is the upshot? What have I to decide as a result of my aesthetic examination of conscience? It is true that there are voices on the other side, not only from my disciples but from others who have no such connection with me. I have heard of individuals nameless or fameless in England who chanced to come across *Love and Death* and had the same spontaneous enthusiasm for it as yourself; others have even admired and discovered in my earlier work the beauty and the inspiration which Mendonça and the *Times* reviewer find to be badly lacking in it. It is true that they have differed in the poems they have chosen; Andrews cited particularly the *Rishi* and the epigram on Goethe as proof of his description of me as a great poet; an English critic, Richardson, singled out *Urvasie* and *Love and Death* and the more romantic poems, but thought that some of my later work was less inspired, too intellectual and philosophical, too much turned towards thought, while some work done in the middle he denounced altogether, complaining that after feeding my readers on nectar for so long I came later on to give them mere water. This critic made a distinction between great poets and good poets and said that I belonged to the second and not to the first category, but as he classed Shelley and others of the same calibre as examples of the good poets, his praise was sufficiently “nectarous” for anybody to swallow with pleasure! Krishnaprem, Moore and others have also had a contrary opinion to the adverse critics and these, both English and Indian, were men whose capacity for forming a true literary judgment is perhaps as good as any on the other side. Krishnaprem I mention, because his judgment forms a curious and violent contrast to Mendonça’s: the latter finds no overtones in my poetry while Krishnaprem who similarly discourages Harin’s poetry on the ground of a lack of overtones finds them abundant in mine. One begins to wonder what overtones really are, or are we to conclude that they have no objective existence but are only a term for some subjective personal reaction in the
reader? I meet the same absolute contradiction everywhere; one critic says about *Perseus* that there is some good poetry in it but it is not in the least dramatic except for one scene and that the story of the play is entirely lacking in interest, while another finds in it most of all a drama of action and the story thrilling and holding a breathless interest from beginning to end. Highest eulogy, extreme disparagement, faint praise, mixed laudation and censure — it is a see-saw on which the unfortunate poet who is incautious enough to attach any value to contemporary criticism is balanced without any possibility of escape. Or I may flatter myself with the idea that this lively variation of reaction from extreme eulogy to extreme damnation indicates that my work must have after all something in it that is real and alive. Or I might perhaps take refuge in the supposition that the lack of recognition is the consequence of an untimely and too belated publication, due to the egoistic habit of writing for my own self-satisfaction rather than any strong thirst for poetical glory and immortality and leaving most of my poetry in the drawer for much longer than, even for twice or thrice the time recommended by Horace who advised the poet to put by his work and read it again after ten years and then only, if he still found it of some value, to publish it. *Urvasie*, the second of the only two poems published early, was sent at first to Lionel Johnson, a poet and *littérateur* of some reputation who was the Reader of a big firm. He acknowledged some poetic merit, but said that it was a repetition of Matthew Arnold and so had no sufficient reason for existence. But Lionel Johnson, I was told, like the Vedantic sage who sees Brahman in all things, saw Arnold everywhere, and perhaps if I had persisted in sending it to other firms, some other Reader, not similarly obsessed, might have found the merit and, as romanticism was still the fashion, some of the critics and the public too might have shared your and Richardson’s opinion of this and other work and, who knows, I might have ranked in however low a place among the poets of the romantic decline. Perhaps then I need not decide too hastily against any republication of the *Collected Poems* or could even cherish the hope that, when the fashion of anti-romanticism has passed, it
may find its proper place, whatever that may be, and survive.

As regards your friend's appraisal of the mystical poems, I need say little. I accept his reservation that there is much inequality as between the different poems: they were produced very rapidly — in the course of a week, I think — and they were not given the long reconsideration that I have usually given to my poetic work before publication; he has chosen the best, though there are others also that are good, though not so good; in others, the metre attempted and the idea and language have not been lifted to their highest possible value. I would like to say a word about his hesitation over some lines in *Thought the Paraclete* which describe the spiritual planes. I can understand this hesitation; for these lines have not the vivid and forceful precision of the opening and the close and are less pressed home, they are general in description and therefore to one who has not the mystic experience may seem too large and vague. But they are not padding; a precise and exact description of these planes of experience would have made the poem too long, so only some large lines are given, but the description is true, the epithets hit the reality and even the colours mentioned in the poem, “gold-red feet” and “crimson-white mooned oceans”, are faithful to experience. Significant colour, supposed by intellectual criticism to be symbolic but there is more than that, is a frequent element in mystic vision; I may mention the powerful and vivid vision in which Ramakrishna went up into the higher planes and saw the mystic truth behind the birth of Vivekananda. At least, the fact that these poems have appealed so strongly to your friend’s mind may perhaps be taken by me as a sufficient proof that in this field my effort at interpretation of spiritual things has not been altogether a failure.

But how then are we to account for the same critic’s condemnation or small appreciation of *Savitri* which is also a mystic and symbolic poem although cast into a different form and raised to a different pitch, and what value am I to attach to his criticism? Partly, perhaps, it is this very difference of form and pitch which accounts for his attitude and, having regard to his aesthetic temperament and its limitations, it was inevitable.
He himself seems to suggest this reason when he compares this difference to the difference of his approach as between *Lycidas* and *Paradise Lost*. His temperamental turn is shown by his special appreciation of Francis Thompson and Coventry Patmore and his response to *Descent* and *Flame-Wind* and the fineness of his judgment when speaking of the *Hound of Heaven* and the *Kingdom of God*, its limitation by his approach towards *Paradise Lost*. I think he would be naturally inclined to regard any very high-pitched poetry as rhetorical and unsound and declamatory, wherever he did not see in it something finely and subtly true coexisting with the high-pitched expression,—the combination we find in Thompson’s later poem and it is this he seems to have missed in *Savitri*. For *Savitri* does contain or at least I intended it to contain what you and others have felt in it but he has not been able to feel because it is something which is outside his own experience and to which he has no access. One who has had the kind of experience which *Savitri* sets out to express or who, not having it, is prepared by his temperament, his mental turn, his previous intellectual knowledge or psychic training, to have some kind of access to it, the feeling of it if not the full understanding, can enter into the spirit and sense of the poem and respond to its poetic appeal; but without that it is difficult for an unprepared reader to respond,—all the more if this is, as you contend, a new poetry with a new law of expression and technique.

*Lycidas* is one of the finest poems in any literature, one of the most consistently perfect among works of an equal length and one can apply to it the epithet “exquisite” and it is to the exquisite that your friend’s aesthetic temperament seems specially to respond. It would be possible to a reader with a depreciatory turn to find flaws in it, such as the pseudo-pastoral setting, the too powerful intrusion of St. Peter and puritan theological controversy into that incongruous setting and the image of the hungry sheep which someone not in sympathy with Christian feeling and traditional imagery might find even ludicrous or at least odd in its identification of pseudo-pastoral sheep and theological human sheep: but these would be hypercritical
objections and are flooded out by the magnificence of the poetry. I am prepared to admit the very patent defects of *Paradise Lost*: Milton’s heaven is indeed unconvincing and can be described as grotesque and so too is his gunpowder battle up there, and his God and angels are weak and unconvincing figures, even Adam and Eve, our first parents, do not effectively fill their part except in his outward description of them; and the later narrative falls far below the grandeur of the first four books but those four books stand for ever among the greatest things in the world’s poetic literature. If *Lycidas* with its beauty and perfection had been the supreme thing done by Milton even with all the lyrical poetry and the sonnets added to it, Milton would still have been a great poet but he would not have ranked among the dozen greatest; it is *Paradise Lost* that gives him that place. There are deficiencies if not failures in almost all the great epics, the *Odyssey* and perhaps the *Divina Commedia* being the only exceptions, but still they are throughout in spite of them great epics. So too is *Paradise Lost*. The grandeur of his verse and language is constant and unsinking to the end and makes the presentation always sublime. We have to accept for the moment Milton’s dry Puritan theology and his all too human picture of the celestial world and its denizens and then we can feel the full greatness of the epic. But the point is that this greatness in itself seems to have less appeal to Mendonça’s aesthetic temperament; it is as if he felt less at home in its atmosphere, in an atmosphere of grandeur and sublimity than in the air of a less sublime but a fine and always perfect beauty. It is the difference between a magic hill-side woodland of wonder and a great soaring mountain climbing into a vast purple sky: to accept fully the greatness he needs to find in it a finer and subtler strain as in Thompson’s *Kingdom of God*. On a lower scale this, his sentence about it seems to suggest, is the one fundamental reason for his complete pleasure in the mystical poems and his very different approach to *Savitri*. The pitch aimed at by *Savitri*, the greatness you attribute to it, would of itself have discouraged in him any abandonment to admiration and compelled from the beginning a cautious and dubious approach; that soon turned to lack of appreciation or a
lowered appreciation even of the best that may be there and to depreciation and censure of the rest.

But there is the other reason which is more effective. He sees and feels nothing of the spiritual meaning and the spiritual appeal which you find in Savitri; it is for him empty of anything but an outward significance and that seems to him poor, as is natural since the outward meaning is only a part and a surface and the rest is to his eyes invisible. If there had been what he hoped or might have hoped to find in my poetry, a spiritual vision such as that of the Vedantin, arriving beyond the world towards the Ineffable, then he might have felt at home as he does with Thompson’s poetry or might at least have found it sufficiently accessible. But this is not what Savitri has to say or rather it is only a small part of it and, even so, bound up with a cosmic vision and an acceptance of the world which in its kind is unfamiliar to his mind and psychic sense and foreign to his experience. The two passages with which he deals do not and cannot give any full presentation of this way of seeing things since one is an unfamiliar symbol and the other an incidental and, taken by itself apart from its context, an isolated circumstance. But even if he had had other more explicit and clearly revealing passages at his disposal, I do not think he would have been satisfied or much illuminated; his eyes would still have been fixed on the surface and caught only some intellectual meaning or outer sense. That at least is what we may suppose to have been the cause of his failure, if we maintain that there is anything at all in the poem; or else we must fall back on the explanation of a fundamental personal incompatibility and the rule de gustibus non est disputandum, or to put it in the Sanskrit form nānāruciḥ lokah. If you are right in maintaining that Savitri stands as a new mystical poetry with a new vision and expression of things, we should expect, at least at first, a widespread, perhaps, a general failure even in lovers of poetry to understand it or appreciate; even those who have some mystical turn or spiritual experience are likely to pass it by if it is a different turn from theirs or outside their range of experience. It took the world something like a hundred years to discover Blake; it would not be improbable that there
might be a greater time-lag here, though naturally we hope for better things. For in India at least some understanding or feeling and an audience few and fit may be possible. Perhaps by some miracle there may be before long a larger appreciative audience.

At any rate this is the only thing one can do, especially when one is attempting a new creation, — to go on with the work with such light and power as is given to one and leave the value of the work to be determined by the future. Contemporary judgments we know to be unreliable; there are only two judges whose joint verdict cannot easily be disputed, the World and Time. The Roman proverb says, *securus judicat orbis terrarum*; but the world’s verdict is secure only when it is confirmed by Time. For it is not the opinion of the general mass of men that finally decides, the decision is really imposed by the judgment of a minority and élite which is finally accepted and settles down as the verdict of posterity; in Tagore’s phrase it is the universal man, *viśva mānava*, or rather something universal using the general mind of man, we might say the Cosmic Self in the race that fixes the value of its own works. In regard to the great names in literature this final verdict seems to have in it something of the absolute, — so far as anything can be that in a temporal world of relativities in which the Absolute reserves itself hidden behind the veil of human ignorance. It is no use for some to contend that Virgil is a tame and elegant writer of a wearisome work in verse on agriculture and a tedious pseudo-epic written to imperial order and Lucretius the only really great poet in Latin literature or to depreciate Milton for his Latin English and inflated style and the largely uninteresting character of his two epics; the world either refuses to listen or there is a temporary effect, a brief fashion in literary criticism, but finally the world returns to its established verdict. Lesser reputations may fluctuate, but finally whatever has real value in its own kind settles itself and finds its just place in the durable judgment of the world. Work which was neglected and left aside like Blake’s or at first admired with reservation and eclipsed like Donne’s is singled out by a sudden glance of Time and its greatness recognised; or what seemed buried slowly emerges or re-emerges; all finally settles into its
place. What was held as sovereign in its own time is rudely dethroned but afterwards recovers not its sovereign throne but its due position in the world’s esteem; Pope is an example and Byron, who at once burst into a supreme glory and was the one English poet, after Shakespeare, admired all over Europe but is now depreciated, may also recover his proper place. Encouraged by such examples, let us hope that these violently adverse judgments may not be final and absolute and decide that the waste-paper-basket is not the proper place for *Savitri*. There may still be a place for a poetry which seeks to enlarge the field of poetic creation and find for the inner spiritual life of man and his now occult or mystical knowledge and experience of the whole hidden range of his and the world’s being, not a corner and a limited expression such as it had in the past, but a wide space and as manifold and integral an expression of the boundless and innumerable riches that lie hidden and unexplored as if kept apart under the direct gaze of the Infinite, as has been found in the past for man’s surface and finite view and experience of himself and the material world in which he has lived striving to know himself and it as best he can with a limited mind and senses. The door that has been shut to all but a few may open; the kingdom of the Spirit may be established not only in man’s inner being but in his life and his works. Poetry also may have its share in that revolution and become part of the spiritual empire.

I had intended as the main subject of this letter to say something about technique and the inner working of the intuitive method by which *Savitri* was and is being created and of the intention and plan of the poem. Mendonça’s idea of its way of creation, an intellectual construction by a deliberate choice of words and imagery, badly chosen at that, is the very opposite of the real way in which it was done. That was to be the body of the letter and the rest only a preface. But the preface has become so long that it has crowded out the body. I shall have to postpone it to a later occasion when I have more time. 4 May 1947
The Mendonça letter [of 4 May 1947] was to be, as I suggested, “between ourselves”; there is too much that is private and personal in it for publicity. It is something that can be shown to those who can appreciate and understand, but to an ordinary reader I might seem to be standing on my defence rather than attacking and demolishing a criticism which might damage the appreciation of it in readers who are not sure of their own critical standard and reliability of their taste and so might be shaken by well-phrased judgments and plausible reasonings such as Mendonça’s: they might make the same confusion as Mendonça himself between an apology and an apologia. An idea might rise that I am not sure of the value of my own poetry especially the earlier poetry and accept his valuation of it. The humility you speak of is very largely a Socratic humility, the element of irony in it is considerable; but readers not accustomed to fineness of shades might take it literally and conclude wrongly that I accepted the strictures passed by an unfavourable criticism. A poet who puts no value or a very low value on his own writing has no business to write poetry or to publish it or keep it in publication; if I allowed the publication of the *Collected Poems* it is because I judged them worth publishing. Kishor Gandhi’s objection has therefore some value. On the other hand in defending I may seem to be eulogising my own work, which is not a thing that can be done in public even if a poet’s estimate of his achievement is as self-assured as that of Horace, *Exegi monumentum aere perennius*, or as magnificent as Victor Hugo’s. Similarly, the reply was not meant for Mendonça himself and I do not think the whole can be shown to him without omissions or some editing, but if you wish and if you think that he will not resent any strictures I have made you can show to him the passages relevant to his criticisms.