Technique, Inspiration, Artistry

Inspiration and Technique

You do not need at all to afflict your inspiration by studying metrical technique — you have all the technique you need, within you. I have *never* studied prosody myself — in English, at least, — what I know I know by reading and writing and following my ear and using my intelligence. If one is interested in the technical study of prosody for its own sake, that is another matter — but it is not at all indispensable. 28 April 1934

Knowledge of Technique and Intuitive Cognition

As for the technique, there are two different things, the intellectual knowledge which one applies, the intuitive cognition which acts in its own right, even if it is not actually possessed by the worker. Many poets for instance have little knowledge of metrical or linguistic technique and cannot explain how they write or what are the qualities and elements of their success, but they write all the same things that are perfect in rhythm and language. Intellectual knowledge of technique helps of course, provided one does not make of it a mere device or a rigid fetter. There are some arts that cannot be done well without some technical knowledge, e.g. painting, sculpture. 14 May 1936

Artistry of Technique

I don’t know that Swinburne failed for this reason — before assenting to such a dictum I should like to know which were these poems he spoiled by too much artistry of technique. So far as I remember, his best poems are those in which he is most perfect in artistry, most curious or skilful, most subtle. I think
his decline began when he felt himself too much at ease and poured himself out in an endless waste of melody without caring for substance and the finer finenesses of form. Attention to technique harms only when a writer is so busy with it that he becomes indifferent to substance. But if the substance is adequate, the attention to technique can only give it greater beauty. Even devices like a refrain, internal rhymes, etc. can indeed be great aids to the inspiration and the expression — just as can ordinary rhyme. It is in my view a serious error to regard metre or rhyme as artificial elements, mere external and superfluous equipment restraining the movement and sincerity of poetic form. Metre, on the contrary, is the most natural mould of expression for certain states of creative emotion and vision, it is much more natural and spontaneous than a non-metrical form; the emotion expresses itself best and most powerfully in a balanced rather than in a loose and shapeless rhythm. The search for technique is simply the search for the best and most appropriate form for expressing what has to be said and once it is found, the inspiration can flow quite naturally and fluently into it. There can be no harm therefore in close attention to technique so long as there is no inattention to substance.

24 August 1935

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

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

2 November 1934
Art for Art’s Sake

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

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

There is a certain state of Yogic consciousness in which all things become beautiful to the eye of the seer simply because they spiritually are — because they are a rendering in line and form of the quality and force of existence, of the consciousness, of the Ananda that rules the worlds, — of the hidden Divine. What a thing is to the exterior sense may not be, often is not beautiful for the ordinary aesthetic vision, but the Yogin sees in it the something More which the external eye does not see, he sees the soul behind, the self and spirit, he sees too lines, hues, harmonies and expressive dispositions which are not to the first surface sight visible or seizable. It may be said that he brings into
the object something that is in himself, transmutes it by adding out of his own being to it — as the artist too does something of the same kind but in another way. It is not quite that however, — what the Yogin sees, what the artist sees, is there — his is a transmuting vision because it is a revealing vision; he discovers behind what the object appears to be the something More that it is. And so from this point of view of a realised supreme harmony all is or can be subject-matter for the artist because in all he can discover and reveal the Beauty that is everywhere. Again we land ourselves in a devastating catholicity; for here too one cannot pull up short at any given line. It may be a hard saying that one must or may discover and reveal beauty in a pig or its poke or in a parish pump or an advertisement of somebody’s pills, and yet something like that seems to be what modern Art and literature are trying with vigour and a conscientious labour to do. By extension one ought to be able to extract beauty equally well out of morality or social reform or a political caucus or allow at least that all these things can, if he wills, become legitimate subjects for the artist. Here too one cannot say that it is on condition he thinks of beauty only and does not make moralising or social reform or a political idea his main object. For if with that idea foremost in his mind he still produces a great work of art, discovering Beauty as he moves to his aim, proving himself in spite of his une aesthetic preoccupations a great artist, it is all we can justly ask from him — whatever his starting point — to be a creator of Beauty. Art is discovery and revelation of Beauty and we can say nothing more by way of prohibition or limiting rule.

But there is one thing more that can be said, and it makes a big difference. In the Yogin’s vision of universal beauty all becomes beautiful, but all is not reduced to a single level. There are gradations, there is a hierarchy in this All-Beauty and we see that it depends on the ascending power (vibhuti) of consciousness and Ananda that expresses itself in the object. All is the Divine, but some things are more divine than others. In the artist’s vision too there are or can be gradations, a hierarchy of values. Shakespeare can get dramatic and therefore aesthetic
values out of Dogberry and Malvolio, and he is as thorough a creative artist in his treatment of them as in his handling of Macbeth or Lear. But if we had only Dogberry or Malvolio to testify to Shakespeare's genius, no Macbeth, no Lear, would he be so great a dramatic artist and creator as he now is? It is in the varying possibilities of one subject or another that there lies an immense difference. Apelles' grapes deceived the birds that came to peck at them, but there was more aesthetic content in the Zeus of Phidias, a greater content of consciousness and therefore of Ananda to express and with it to fill in and intensify the essential principle of Beauty even though the essence of beauty might be realised perhaps with equal aesthetic perfection by either artist and in either theme.

And that is because just as technique is not all, so even Beauty is not all in Art. Art is not only technique or form of Beauty, not only the discovery or the expression of Beauty, — it is a self-expression of Consciousness under the conditions of aesthetic vision and a perfect execution. Or to put it otherwise there are not only aesthetic values but life-values, mind-values, soul-values, that enter into Art. The artist puts out into form not only the powers of his own consciousness but the powers of the Consciousness that has made the worlds and their objects. And if that Consciousness according to the Vedantic view is fundamentally equal everywhere, it is still in manifestation not an equal power in all things. There is more of the Divine expression in the Vibhuti than in the common man, prâkṛto janah; in some forms of life there are less potentialities for the self-expression of the Spirit than in others. And there are also gradations of consciousness which make a difference, if not in the aesthetic value or greatness of a work of art, yet in its contents value. Homer makes beauty out of man's outward life and action and stops there. Shakespeare rises one step farther and reveals to us a life-soul and life-forces and life-values to which Homer had no access. In Valmiki and Vyasa there is the constant presence of great Idea-Forces and Ideals supporting life and its movements which were beyond the scope of Homer and Shakespeare. And beyond the Ideals and Idea-Forces even there are other presences,
more inner or inmost realities, a soul behind things and beings, the spirit and its powers, which could be the subject-matter of an art still more rich and deep and abundant in its interest than any of these could be. A poet finding these and giving them a voice with a genius equal to that of the poets of the past might not be greater than they in a purely aesthetical valuation, but his art’s contents-value, its consciousness-values could be deeper and higher and much fuller than in any achievement before him. There is something here that goes beyond any considerations of Art for Art’s sake or Art for Beauty’s sake; for while these stress usefully sometimes the indispensable first elements of artistic creation, they would limit too much the creation itself if they stood for the exclusion of the something More that compels Art to change always in its constant seeking for more and more that must be expressed of the concealed or the revealed Divine, of the individual and the universal or the transcendent Spirit.

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

17 April 1933